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RELIGION - GOD AND SALVATION

By Harry Jivenmukta

The central religious question which is as old as time itself:

Is there a God?

All religions are not agreed on this point. Notably Buddhism and Jainism do not believe in a God, and Taoism talks of Tao (nature) rather than God. The oldest religions prayed to nature as God, including the Sun, Moon, and weather conditions, lightning, thunder, etc.

The idea of God is very difficult to understand. Most of the religions today do believe in God. The problem lies in describing Him/It. People use words like omnipotent, omnipresent, formless, energy. These descriptions are very inadequate because they do not let us form a picture in our minds. And that is precisely the problem with the idea of God. If there is a God we will never be able to see Him/It because God cannot be physical. God is a spiritual entity which can only be reached through spiritual activity. People who meditate or pray do claim not only to know of God but to have a personal relationship with Him/It.

The other problem with understanding the idea of God is that throughout history and in stories we have often been told that God is a man with a long beard sitting on a cloud surrounded by angels. We know this is not true because aeroplanes fly over the clouds every day. In the past, before modern technology, it was enough to point to the sky and say that God lived 'up there'. It was just another way of saying that God is far away.

God has also been consistently described as human in form, or more correctly, that we are made in the image of God. Many people still believe in that. A famous Buddhist criticism says:

**If horses were describing God they would describe a super horse,
if dogs were describing God they would describe a super dog,
if birds were describing God they would describe a super bird.**

The point is that we have only limited understanding. How can anyone describe God if God is bigger than us, all around us, and part of us? God is an idea that can only be reached spiritually, if at all.

Questions

1. Is there a God?
2. Is it inevitable that people will never be able to describe God adequately?
3. If horses were describing God would they describe a super horse? Why?

How can anyone believe in God? If I told you of something that I had seen on the news, you wouldn't believe me until you had seen it for yourself. Every day we rubbish what other people tell us because we have not known it for ourselves. But when it comes to God, the biggest, most important matter of all, we are prepared to believe on the basis of old texts which speak in 'thee' and 'thou' language.

What I really do not like, is people who believe in anything. We should always try to know things. Believing is lazy, knowing is hard. It is not that I am making a comment about God here, you understand, but I am making comments about believers.

People who don't believe in God are OK because at least they are consistent. They do not understand God so they deny him. That's fine. They do the same in all aspects of their life.

People who don't know are fine too because they are being honest. They are not lying about their ignorance.

People who say 'I believe in God' but then can tell you nothing about God are just unacceptable. These people go about their business of ripping people off, being unsociable, and generally self centred all week and then go the church on Sunday, sing a few hymns and tell the rest of us we are all sinners. They seem to buy off their sins by their regular Sunday insurance payment to God.

The people I like best are the ones who investigate and find out for themselves. Our religious convictions should be based on what we feel and understand about God. God cannot be understood by undertaking scientific experiments, but we can feel inside and be happy about what we understand God to be.

For example, I know that I am not on this earth by accident. I cannot prove it to someone else but I know for myself. I know that the universe didn't come about by accident. The Sun is 400 times bigger than the Moon and it is also 400 times further away. That is why a full eclipse of the Sun is possible. I cannot imagine how that happened by accident that the Sun looks exactly the same size as the Moon from Earth.

But I also know that Mary didn't have a virgin birth, that Adam and Eve couldn't have been the only two people on the Earth at the beginning, and that God didn't make the world in 6 days and rested on the seventh.

It's a question of understanding for yourself what is acceptable and what isn't.

Questions

1. What is belief?
2. Why do some people believe everything they hear in relation to their religion?
3. Is it possible to be selective in religion, or does it come as a complete 'take it or leave it' package?

All major religions accept that there is a heaven. The problem with understanding heaven is the same as understanding God. No one has been to heaven and returned to tell us about it, although Jesus claimed to know about heaven as well as many saints including Guru Gobind Singh of the Sikh religion. The problem with their descriptions is that they are very vague.

If Jesus did indeed know about heaven, his other problem would be how to explain to people who did not. Just try an experiment for yourself. Stand on a hill looking over the other side. Have your friends standing at the bottom of the hill. Try to explain to them exactly what you can see. Firstly, you will have to shout because they are far away. Secondly, you may not have the words to explain exactly the shade of certain colours or certain feelings which are aroused in you. Jesus and all the saints are also shouting even though we might be physically near, because spiritually we may be far away.

In order to encourage people to believe in God, many religions paint a very beautiful picture of heaven. But in order to make others understand, the details have to be in examples that everyone can picture:

- z rivers of honey,
- z sitting on thrones,
- z wild animals tamed,
- z angels,
- z beautiful music.

Buddhism does not talk much of heaven but of Nirvana. This is a state of emptiness. Imagine a cup which is filled with dirty water. You can pour as much fresh water into it as you want but the cup will take no more liquid and the water which does enter and displaces the original water will also become dirty. If you empty the cup it can be refilled easily with any liquid. The dirty water represents the mind. Buddhists try to empty themselves completely and this is the condition for nirvana. When they are empty they are then open to existence itself.

Questions

1. Why do all major religions accept the idea of heaven?
2. Why is it difficult to describe heaven?
3. What is Nirvana?

Islam

Heaven is described as a **beautiful garden** with plants and trees. It is like the Garden of Eden, but goes on forever. It is too beautiful to describe properly.

Zoroastrianism

After death, the soul of man must pass over the Bridge of the Requirer (Cinvat), which everyone looks upon with fear and anxiety. After judgment is passed by Ahura Mazda, the good enter the kingdom of **everlasting joy and light**, and the bad are consigned to the regions of horror and darkness.

Christianity

At the centre of Jesus' preaching on the Kingdom of God is the promise that the blessed would 'eat bread' with the exalted Messiah-Son of man (Luke 13:29). The Lord himself would serve the chosen community of the Kingdom at the messianic meal (Luke 12:37), which bears the features of a **wedding banquet**. The basic mood in the community gathered about him is thus one of nuptial joy over the inauguration of the promised end time, which Jesus emphasized in Matthew, chapter 9, verse 15: 'Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them?'

Sikhism

A person goes to heaven when he or she realises God, but heaven can be experienced on Earth when a person is lost in singing the praises of God. The experience of being one with God during prayer or singing is described as like being transported to another world of **love and light**.

Questions

1. Find out more about the Islamic Heaven.
2. Can there be more than one heaven or are all religions describing the same one in different ways?
3. Can there be 'Heaven on Earth'?

If there is a heaven for good people to go to there must be its opposite, hell, for the people who are bad. In religions where there is no heaven, there is also no hell. Many people dislike the religions which concentrate on heaven and hell because it sounds all too convenient. Do as you're told in this life, do not expect too much, be good and after your death you will go to heaven. But if you are bad you will go to hell. It sounds like social control.

Originally, heaven and hell were not expressed so forcefully except in Judaism which has a very angry God. The Jewish God would seemingly not hesitate to throw bad people into hell. But all religions must be studied in the context of the times in which they came about. At the time of the old testament life was very harsh and very harsh threats of hell had to be made in order to convince people to do good.

An example of how times affect thinking is when Jesus witnessed a woman about to be stoned for adultery. The Jewish law stipulated that the punishment for adultery was death by stoning. Jesus couldn't deny that law because he claimed to be the Messiah prophesied by the Jews and was a Jew himself. He said, 'let the one without sin cast the first stone'. Jesus was much more gentle than the Jews of the old testament. This did not stop him later on, however, painting a very horrific picture of hell.

Buddhists, Hindus and Sikhs often say that rebirth is the hell that God has created. Just having to be born again and again into different forms in this world is hell enough. And this hell continues until a person becomes free of all desires, realises God and then is free of rebirth, entering heaven.

All religions today seem to play down the hells in their religions because people do not accept these ideas as much. Today the emphasis seems to be more on persuasion to be religious rather than forcing people to be religious by frightening them.

Questions

1. Is hell the other side of the coin of heaven?
2. Find out what sort of things happen in hell in Christianity and Islam.
3. Why do people describe hell so explicitly?

Christianity

The Last Judgment will occur at the Parousia (the Second Coming, or Second Advent, of Christ in glory), when all men will stand before a judging God. In early Christian art the scene is one of Christ the judge, the resurrection of the dead, the weighing of souls, the separation of the saved and the damned, and representations of paradise and hell. Some artists produced a more terrible vision of the Last Judgment: Christ is shown as a stern judge, sometimes carrying a sword and surrounded by the four mystical beasts; eagle, lion, ox, and winged man of the apocalypse; the contrast between paradise and hell is between the awesome and the ferocious.

Islam

At doomsday all persons will die and then be resurrected to be judged according to the records kept in two books, one containing a person's good deeds, and the other his evil deeds. According to the weight of the book that is tied around a person's neck, he will be consigned to paradise or hell.

Ancient Egypt

A dead person's heart was judged by being placed on a balance held by the god Anubis. If the heart was light, thus indicating a person's comparative goodness, the soul was allowed to go to the blessed region ruled by Osiris, god of the dead. If the heart was heavy, the soul might be destroyed by a hybrid creature called the Devouress.

Questions

1. What is the Day of Judgement?
2. What happens in Islam on the Day of Judgement?
3. Do all religions believe in the Day of Judgement?

The perfect life is an idea that all religions propound. They all include the same or similar advice:

- z Do not be Greedy
- z Do not be self centred
- z Help others
- z Do not cheat people
- z Do not abuse other people
- z Do not kill
- z Love your neighbours

Some religions have rules which are written down; the ten commandments are one good example of this. Judaism and Islam have their own detailed laws of behaviour whilst religions like Sikhism advise rather than dictate good behaviour.

The idea behind the perfect life is simple. If a person lives a good life he or she will feel better about themselves and the community in which they live. By being religious and following religious laws a person will do good to others and they in turn will be good back to him or her.

All religions also accept that the perfect life is very hard, especially if everyone else is out to get as much as they can for themselves. Religious people are encouraged to persevere in the face of adversity and try their best to live according to the rules of their religion. In case of difficulties some religions have safety valves like Confession in the Roman Catholic tradition where people who have strayed from the path can be corrected by the priest by way of repeating certain prayers or doing penance.

Questions

1. Why do religions encourage people to live the perfect life?
2. Is it possible to live the perfect life?
3. What happens to people who live a nearly perfect life?

All religions have an ultimate goal towards which all people should venture. In most religions this ultimate is heaven; in Buddhism and Jainism this is Nirvana. In the early days of each religion, when the religions were just beginning to form themselves into organised beliefs, it was easier to become enlightened and get to heaven than it is today. This is because the goalposts of getting to heaven seem to have changed with time. A recent example illustrates the point below:

Only about 500 years ago Guru Nanak lived in India and started the religion of Sikhism. The religion was not organised in any real way, and the Guru's Sikhs met at some humble houses in Kartarpur where they listened to the Guru and helped to keep the place tidy, and fed themselves and other people in community kitchens. The teachings were simple; do good to others, help the poor, repeat the name of God and sing His praises. Life was simple, and there was no pressure on anyone. Each person simply had to do their best to be honest, and care for the other living things around them. Everyone trusted that God would look after them.

Today, in Sikhism, there are a myriad of rules and regulations which must be followed even before someone can call themselves a Sikh; do not cut your hair, wear a turban, rise before dawn to pray, pray at various times each day, give 10% of your earnings to charities, go to the Sikh Temple regularly, etc.

The point is that all religions change after their Guru or teacher leaves the world. When Jesus was alive there was no organised Christianity, but when he left this world, people started organising the religion. This is often because people feel unsure about what to do and therefore ritualise the religion, or set up systems so that they do not forget what they had been taught. Later saints also leave their imprint on a religion and add to the complication which is already developing.

Many very religious people in established religions, whilst observing the rules and regulations on the surface, actually 'follow their conscience' and select the parts which attract them most. Getting to heaven does not have anything to do with following rules made on Earth, but coming into line with the spiritual energy flowing from God. Other people have left organised religions altogether. They feel that looking for the spiritualism which is God is like looking for a needle in a haystack, (the haystack being all the rules and regulations, rituals, ceremonies etc.). They want to start anew and look for spiritualism for themselves or by mixing and matching parts of established religions which suit their needs.

Questions

1. Is it more difficult to get to heaven today than it was thousands of years ago? Why?
2. Why do religions seem to get more complicated as time passes?
3. What is the difference between a religion which exists during the lifetime of a Guru or teacher, and how it survives afterwards?

In order to increase our chances of getting to heaven, all religions agree that we should live a balanced life. This means not being too extreme in anything we do because an unbalanced person means a person who has less chance of being good, or doing good to others. Most religions also use the idea of balancing when describing how we are judged after death, either to go to heaven or hell, or on Judgement Day.

Some religions like Buddhism and Hinduism tell us that **all** our bad deeds will affect us in the future as will **all** our good deeds. This does not mean that the bad deeds are cancelled out by good deeds, but that we have to reconcile both the bad and the good at some point in the future.

In Sikhism, if a person becomes baptised, all good and all bad deeds are cancelled on that day, and the person starts with a completely clean account. This means that the person, who might have been ignorant of his or her deeds previously, can now make sure no bad deeds occur in future.

In Christianity, people often talk of a person being good or bad. This refers to their goodness in relation to the religion and also to the chances of their going to heaven or hell.

Going to church on Sunday is part of the balancing process. We all know we have done some bad things during the week, shouting at someone, cheating, taking advantage of someone's ignorance, so going to church is an attempt to balance out the bad with the good action.

Critics say that such balancing exercises are an easy way for society to control people. If people follow the law and don't 'rock the boat' they will go to heaven, but if they break the law or are different from everyone else they are going straight to hell. There is some truth in this opinion because the Churches of most religions are linked with political influences and the State. The Church of England was founded originally for political reasons and is one example of a close church and state linkage.

Questions

1. Why does religion use the idea of balancing?
2. How do you see yourself in the balance of;
 - z good and bad,
 - z potential heaven or hell material?

WHICH RELIGION IS BEST? OPINION

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Which religion is best? That is an easy question to answer.

If you were travelling from London to Glasgow, you could use any form of transport including; aeroplane, train, coach, car, motorbike, bicycle, walking. Depending on when you wanted to get there, where you wanted to stop on the way, what you wanted to see on the way, and how much time you had, you could choose any of these methods. The point is, you would get there in whatever way suited you.

Religion is like that. It does not matter whether you are a Buddhist or a Muslim, a Christian or a Jew, the point is to arrive at your destination. The only problem is that people tend to keep the same religion that they were brought up with and do not know much about other religions. But once you are on one route it should get you there.

All roads lead to the same place, some get there quicker, others enjoy the journey and get there a little later. It is not a race, just a wonderful experience. Remember, the holiday doesn't start when you arrive at your destination; it begins when you lock the front door and step out into the street.

I cannot see that any religion is better than another because they all fail in one key area. What is the purpose of religion? I don't mean 'do religions make you feel good' type of reasons; I mean what is the ultimate aim of every religion? I'll tell you. The ultimate aim of every religion is enlightenment.

Enlightenment means when you realise your true self, are the equivalent of a saint and are guaranteed a place in heaven. Sikhism says that an enlightened person is like God himself. The Christian equivalent would be a saint.

How many people do you know who are enlightened? If a religion was good at what it does, there should be lots of enlightened people all around. People who go to churches, temples, mosques, are just as unhappy and have lives full of problems just like anyone else. What difference is there between a religious person and someone who does not believe in God? It appears there is none!

So I say, all religions fail their ultimate test. All else is fairly irrelevant.

Questions

1. What do you think of the first opinion?
2. Is there one religion better than others or are they all the same? Why?
3. If you had to choose one religion (but not your present one) which would you choose? Explain why.
4. Do you agree with the second opinion expressed above? Why?

