

The Purpose of Life

Paul Rutherford looks at the purpose of life from his Christian perspective as well as Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Hollywood.

On a warm day recently I visited my alma mater. And between the hallowed halls of old, a chance encounter reconnected me with an old friend. Eager for news, she asked me what I'd done since graduating, and my easy reply included mission work and how much I enjoy it. She smiled and said, "That's great, as long as you're happy." Have you had this type of conversation before?



If you have, then perhaps you also understand my consternation at my friend's response. I don't do mission work to be happy. I do it to honor and please the Lord Jesus Christ. On some level I felt misunderstood. Yet, her response indicates, I think, a prominent view held in our culture that happiness is what really matters. As far as her response is concerned, I could just as well have taken a job at a coffee shop, so long as I was happy.

Her response, while not uncommon, demonstrates a prevailing value in our culture today—pluralism. Mankind's ultimate purpose can be attained through multiple acceptable means, be they religion, economics, or otherwise.

You might be saying to yourself, "How did you get from your friend's comment about your happiness to mankind's ultimate purpose?" Good question. I skipped a few steps. When my friend bases her approval of what others do on their happiness, that means that what they *do* to be happy matters less than the fact that they *are* happy. Being happy then becomes the primary

purpose or aim in life. You see? Happiness becomes a sort of general unit of measure for life's success. Since I am happy in life, I received my friend's stamp of approval.

But what is our ultimate purpose? Isn't that the million dollar question! And it's precisely the question I want to explore in this article. The answer you give will depend on your perspective. So I'll consider several different perspectives, or worldviews, including my own, Christianity. Contrary to current thinking, the fact that there are different perspectives which result in differing meanings to life does not mean that all perspectives are equally true or even valid. Truth is found in Scripture so that's where we look to discover the true meaning of life.

As a Christian, I believe the ultimate purpose in life is salvation; that is, after I die I want to be with God for eternity.

"Being with God for eternity is great," you might say. "But how does one do that?" That's a great question. Certainly not all Christians will state it the same way, but the answer is believing in Jesus Christ of Nazareth as God who died for your sins and rose again to new life (cf. 1 Cor. 15:3-4). A Christian living out this principle patterns his life and relationships after Jesus Christ—serving, loving, and teaching.

Christianity is unmistakably present in America, but obviously this isn't the case in every culture. Next we'll consider mankind's purpose according to a very different worldview closer to home than you might think: Buddhism.

Buddhism

I was at a diner last week grabbing a late night burger with my friend from Bible study, and I mentioned a desire to start a new workout regimen. He handed me a business card for a

place doing some new form of [yoga](#), apparently really good for you.

Is it me, or does yoga seem to be increasing in currency among Christians as just one more way to work out?

It's totally fine for Christians to practice yoga as physical exercise, isn't it? The answer is too complex to say here, but the sheer fact that we pose the question underscores the unmistakable impression yoga has made on American culture.

What if I did practice yoga? What if I were a practicing Buddhist? Would that make a difference anyway? I think so.

To ask a larger question, what is our ultimate purpose? Once again, the answer depends upon your perspective. For the yoga-practicing Buddhist, the answer is nothing. Literally. The ultimate purpose for life is to cease to exist, or what is called *nirvana*.

Traditionally understood to be from India, yoga is a discipline of the mind and the body, and is actively practiced today by both Buddhists and Hindus.^{1} But increasingly, Americans have jettisoned the spiritual disciplines of yoga, ignoring its spiritual aspects, in favor of the sheerly physical, often in lieu of the morning jog.

Now, ceasing to exist, or *nirvana*, may seem more like an anti-purpose for life because it is defined by not living rather than that for which one lives. Nevertheless, much thought and action is involved in this monumental goal of *nirvana*.

One such step in attaining *nirvana* is realizing the second of the Four Noble Truths: all frustration in life arises from desire. Did that make your head spin? It makes mine spin. Simply put, frustration is an unmet expectation or desire, so frustration's origin then, is desire.

Life is filled with desires—food, shelter, or clothing may be

the first to come to mind—but there are a myriad of others from cars, to jewelry, technology, even relationships.

Follow me here. Since desire leads to frustration, the best way to eliminate frustration is to eliminate desire. This is precisely the path to *nirvana*, the elimination of desire. Therefore, we must cease to exist in order to free ourselves from this frustration or suffering.

Do you see the difference in life's purpose? The ultimate purpose in life for the Christian is to be with God for eternity, but for a Buddhist it's to cease to exist. Very different indeed.

Hinduism

Fifty singers gather on a Sunday morning in Queens. The director groups them together and gives them one final word of instruction before they begin. Listeners don't entirely fall silent. Priests in the background continue to laugh among themselves, as the choir begins, "Om! Ganesha Sharanam!"

Notice something different about this picture? It may not fit your expectations. That's because this choir isn't singing praise to Jesus Christ; they aren't even in a church. Rather they're Hindus worshipping in their New York temple.

Surprised? So were many of the devotees gathered that Sunday morning in late August 2009, the New York Times reported.[\[2\]](#) Most of the faithful Hindus worshipping there for years had never before heard a Hindu choir. It is a mix of both Hindu and Christian traditions.

This story testifies to the strange and wonderful effects of very different religions meeting in a single culture, and undoubtedly demonstrates the pervasiveness of Hinduism in American culture today.

Choirs seem so commonplace in America. How can a Hindu, like

those mentioned earlier, have never heard one in his own religion before? The answer lies in the difference between Hindu and Christian worship.

Hindu worship tends to be much more individualistic. And while predominantly occurring at a temple rather than at one's home, Hindu worship is more focused on prayers and rituals rather than on an assembly or gathering as a Christian understands a church service.

Take a step back. Ask a larger question. Why does the Hindu go to temple? What's his motivation? The answer? To appease a myriad of gods in hopes of being reincarnated in the next life as a higher life form. If you're a human being listening to this right now, then you've already had thousands of good lifetimes prior, combined to bring you to your current form.

To be fair, Hinduism is a huge religion with over one billion practitioners, spanning thousands of years, and existing in multiple different cultures. Some scholars believe it is the oldest recorded religion. So to ascribe the Hindu's motivation as wanting to please the gods is a drastic oversimplification, but is nonetheless true for many if not most Hindus.

You see, for the Hindu the world exists eternally. People die and are reborn all the time in a never-ending cycle. The ultimate purpose for life, then, is to be freed from the never-ending cycle of rebirth and become one with Brahma, or the ultimate singularity of the universe. This release is called *moksha*. It's achieved by offering sacrifices to the gods, including prayers, and right living.

Does this sound like your life? If not, you're probably not Hindu. This further underscores the fact that all religions at their core may not all be the same.

Islam

“Boycott Facebook” reads the placard of an Islamist protestor in Karachi.

Late spring 2010 in Pakistan, a Facebook page declares, “Everybody Draw Mohammed Day!” A Pakistani high court deems the material highly offensive, and the entire Facebook website was shut down within its borders as a result, the *Wall Street Journal* reports.[\[3\]](#)

Ban Facebook! You may find yourself asking, why would anyone ever do that? What about rights to free speech, or exercise of religion? Doesn’t a Facebook ban deny people just such rights? Well, under a government far less liberal in doling out these liberties, claiming rights quickly makes a sticky situation.

But the short answer to the motivation for banning Facebook is because they’re Muslim, and as such they regard as sacred Mohammed, their most famed prophet. He’s so sacred, in fact, that to depict him in a portrait is a kind of blasphemy. Hence art from Muslim cultures is either calligraphy or geometric (think mosaics).

There is more going on here beneath the surface, leading an entire country to ban Facebook. It’s not just reverence for a significant religio-cultural phenomenon, or even devotion to their faith. No, it goes deeper than that. Muslims have a different perspective from most Westerners on how this world operates at its most fundamental level.

For the Muslim there is one God, Allah. He is the supreme unquestioned creator and Lord of the universe who revealed his intentions for mankind through his prophet Mohammed. Reverence for Allah is paramount, even above the value of the individual. This leads Muslims to value obedience to Allah over freedoms of the individual. In this case obedience is not portraying Mohammed.

You may respond by posing once again the previous question: what about a man's right to speech or religion? But for the Muslim, you're simply asking the wrong question. A better question the Muslim would ask is, what about putting Mohammed in his proper place, and by extension obeying Allah?

The ultimate purpose in life for a Muslim is to obey Allah and to be rewarded after life by entering paradise. Unlike Christians, Muslims do not believe mankind is sinful and in need of a savior, but only needs to perform the right actions, of which we are certainly capable. While Muslims hope for the mercy of Allah, the right to enter paradise is a result of obedience, not his grace. So central is this unmitigated obedience to Muslims, that many give their lives to defend Allah and their way of life.

Rights to free speech aside, when given the choice between a Facebook ban and martyrdom, suddenly Facebook deprivation doesn't seem so bad.

Hollywood

An honest working man returns home from a rough day at the office. He's a struggling ad specialist for a sports magazine. He's in his mid-thirties, single, and completely eligible. But the right woman just hasn't come along. He's a handsome, brown-haired man with kind blue eyes and a knack for making you want to trust him when he flashes you his easy smile. We long for him to find satisfaction in someone as we trace the story of his search.

One night he meets a dashing young lady. Our hearts jump for him. A relationship ensues and they grow closer. One night in desperation to express his deepest and truest feelings for the gal, he confesses, "You complete me." Perhaps now you realize I'm describing the story from Hollywood's hit 1996 film, *Jerry Maguire*.

We've been considering the ultimate purpose of man from different perspectives, and, with an ever-increasing number of Americans considering themselves not religious, I've gone to a secular source for consideration: Hollywood.

Jerry Maguire's famous confession, "You complete me," is a wonderful illustration of mankind's ultimate purpose being himself, or what is called humanism. Maguire realizes something is missing in his life. He longs for satisfaction, for joy, for love, but his seeming inability to find it causes him pain. We realize that the world in which we live is broken and imperfect, and who would disagree?

Maguire finds in this woman, in this relationship, the completion of himself. He looks to her to be what he cannot be himself. In so doing, he creates out of her a savior. He looks to her to save him from his misery of singleness and heartache. He needs her in order to be whole himself.

This story is a clear demonstration of mankind looking to himself to be his ultimate purpose. I am generalizing a bit to choose words from a single film, but many messages from Hollywood films don't contradict this theme. We want to be able to save ourselves. Isn't that the American ideal: pulling oneself up by one's bootstraps?

Beware what Hollywood would have us believe, that our ultimate purpose is ourselves, and only we can save ourselves. Hollywood would have us believe that life can be found in relationships, people, or even ourselves. It's a lie. Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6). Only Jesus can save mankind. Serving Him is the only purpose that will bring satisfaction and joy in life, only in Him alone.

"What is my ultimate purpose?" That's the question. The answers we've considered from different perspectives range from happiness to appeasing the gods. Why does it matter?

Because your ultimate purpose determines how you live, and while we may all be alike, since we are all human, when it comes to what really matters in life, we are very different indeed.

Notes

1. "Yoga," Wikipedia, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yoga (accessed May 6, 2010).
2. Jonathan Allen, The New York Times online, nyti.ms/hJUJ8b (accessed May 20, 2010).
3. Tom Wright, "Pakistan Maintains Facebook Ban," The Wall Street Journal online, on.wsj.com/dJiwI6 (accessed May 20, 2010).

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"Why Wouldn't God Let Me Commit Suicide?"

Hi Sue,

I just read your article [Do People Who Commit Suicide Go to Hell?](#). I believe everything you say to be true and biblical...and then I get stuck.

I have bi-polar depression, I thank God that I am now stable, but last year there were many times when I seriously considered suicide. I believe in God, His grace, and Christ's death for all sinners, and I believe, like Romans 8 says that we can never be separated from Him – but my one question is, "Why am I still here? Wouldn't it have been/be much easier to die and be with Him in His glory for eternity?" I mean I'm not sure that the suffering is worth it...

I believe God kept me from suicide...but I still wonder if it's so easy to be with Him (in death) then where's the catch?

Dear _____,

Bless your heart. I have friends who are bipolar and we have gone through some DEEP depression with our son over this.

What's the catch, you ask?

Well, to make what's probably a weak analogy, are you familiar with the NBA draft that has signed young basketball players just out of high school? Oh wait, I see you are in another country. Oh well—I bet you can appreciate it anyway. . . There is a promise of money and fame and glory for these young athletes, so why “waste” their time in college when they could be making big bucks playing basketball? Sounds good—only, they are too young to appreciate the maturing process that happens in college. So often, they crash and burn once they turn professional because they're not ready. The trials of being a college student, it turns out, are deeply beneficial for maturity and character development; they prepare students for life as professional athletes.

Our life on earth isn't a holding tank or a detention center where we impatiently wait out our time until we're given a “green light” to die and go to heaven. (I know, it's easy to think of it this way, particularly for sensitive people who really hate living in a fallen world.) God's purpose in leaving us on earth once we are saved is to grow holiness and maturity and strength in us, a process that would be short-circuited by an early death. It would mean we enter heaven in a state of “arrested development,” so to speak. Since the scriptures speak of being given power, authority and responsibilities in heaven, the only place and time we have to develop our stewardship is here on earth.

I understand your feelings of not being sure if the suffering is worth it, but that's because of not having an adequate view

of God and of heaven and of your future, not to mention not understanding the value of suffering. (If I may be so bold as to recommend my own article on that subject. . . it's the best thing I've ever written: ["The Value of Suffering."](#))

Yes, it would be a lot easier to be in heaven than to continue to live in a fallen world and a fallen body on earth, but God isn't into "easy," God is passionately committed to fashioning us into the image of His Son. I'm afraid there are no shortcuts, but you can be assured that every difficult day you endure, every trial and every heartache, is being used to achieve that "weight of glory" in you (2 Cor. 4:17). God never wastes suffering, not a scrap of it. He redeems all of it for His glory and our blessing. Every single tear you have shed is so precious to your heavenly Father that He has them stored in a heavenly bottle. He hasn't turned away or forgotten you.

_____, I pray you will know His comfort and peace like a warm blanket enveloping your soul.

Sue Bohlin

Probe Ministries

(Follow-up e-mail from Sue)

I have continued to think about your question and my answer, and the Lord put it on my heart to send you a P.S.

I have a young friend (early 20's) who attempted suicide several years ago but survived. She couldn't understand why God didn't just take her to heaven, either. Why wouldn't He honor her (seemingly) reasonable request to be with Him in glory?

Well, not too long after her suicide attempt she met a wonderful man, got married, and just had a precious little baby. On both her wedding day and then especially when she first held her newborn infant in her arms, she was overwhelmed

with thanksgiving that God DIDN'T take her home to be with Him when she wanted it. She realized that God still had blessings to lavish on her that couldn't come in heaven. As a cystic fibrosis patient, she understands that she also has certain trials and pain ahead of her, but the joy far outshines the darkness.

This brings up one of answers to the question, What is the purpose of life? –For God to bring glory to Himself by lavishing His love and grace on us. All of creation, including the unseen realities in the heavenlies, is given the opportunity to see evidence of God's character and heart as He pours out His blessings on the people He made in His image. And that's one of the reasons why so many people who have been tempted to kill themselves are prevented from doing so—because God still has blessings in store and we need to be HERE on earth to receive them.

Warmly,

Sue