

## Chapter Eight: A Case Study in the Philosophy of Death: Christianity

This chapter concerning Christianity continues in part the previous chapter on Judaism. In other respects it stands in sharp opposition. The Christian religion emerged from ancient Jewish religion and can never sever its connection to the original plant. In a different metaphor, Christianity and Judaism have rightly been called siblings, two developments from the mother religion embodied in the (Hebrew) Bible or what Christians call the Old Testament.<sup>1</sup> But, as the impossibility of even having the same name for their originating scriptures suggests, Christianity and Judaism are siblings that have had a stormy relation from the beginning. The conflict has sometimes been not only verbal but bloody.

Jews and Christians share many of the same words but the words usually have different meanings. This confusing relation is not so unusual in the history of religions. Reformers who attempt to give a new direction to the religion use the terms that are familiar to both speaker and listener. Most religious reforms aim at two related results: an interiorized, simpler practice of the religion that in turn can lead to a more universally practiced religion.

A widespread religious reform is, if not anti-ritual, skeptical of complicated codes and rites. The highly developed rituals surrounding death and mourning are a primary target for religious reformers. Not surprisingly, the Protestant Reformation set off from the issue of *selling indulgences* that were supposed to release souls from purgatory.

Similar to variations within Jewish tradition, there are deep chasms in the Christian tradition. A claim to present *the* Christian view of death is therefore suspect. One major division is between Catholic and Protestant branches; but one must also distinguish Eastern and Western Catholic churches, as well as a great variety of Protestant denominations.

The different parts of Christianity vary in how they view Judaism, ranging from the seemingly collegial to the nearly negative. The views cannot be lined up across a simple spectrum of liberal to conservative. The entanglements of Christian and Jewish traditions require patient attention to the fact that well-meaning statements on one side can mean something very different on the other side.

The invention of the term *Judeo-Christian tradition* in the 1890s has been mostly an obstacle to understanding Jewish tradition(s), Christian tradition(s) and the relation between Jews and Christians. The inventors of the term Judeo-

Christian were not seeking understanding. Arthur Cohen, who tracked the rise of the term, writes: "European intellectuals came to regard Judaism and Christianity as essentially similar - similar not with respect to truth, but rather with respect to untruth which they shared."<sup>ii</sup>

The one element for which the Judeo-Christian tradition received some credit was for emphasizing the individual. Ironically, late twentieth-century writers attacked the Judeo-Christian tradition precisely on this point. Contemporary attacks of environmentalists on the Judeo-Christian tradition may be accurate insofar as they refer to a nineteenth century ideology, but they do not have much to say about the actual histories of either Jewish or Christian religions.

On some points of history and tradition, Jews and Christians do agree. But the term Judeo-Christian tradition hides the difference of approach that each religion takes. Judaism is a religion of ritual, law and tradition (closer to Islam than to Christianity in many respects). Christianity did not totally reject ritual, law and tradition, but it is suspicious of ritual, critical of law and rebellious against tradition. Christianity stakes its claim on belief in the Savior, on a proclamation that history has been fulfilled by the appearance of the God-man. The Jesus movement that evolved into the Christian religion radically shifted the emphasis from commandments given by God to a faith in God, centered on the death-resurrection of Jesus.

The death of Jesus plays such a central role in Christianity that Christians have often been accused of glorifying suffering and being obsessed with death.<sup>iii</sup> The Jesus movement did not begin with death but with the announcement "He is risen." However, Christianity has found it difficult to keep death and resurrection together. Historically, the figure of the risen Christ on the cross gave way to the crucifix with its portrayal of Jesus' agony.

Ascetic and moral practices most often sprang from the central belief that "Christ died for your sins." Modern critics of Christianity accuse it of promising a reward in the next life as a way of justifying oppression and suffering in this life. Nietzsche was not praising Christianity when he wrote "He who has a why to life can bear almost any how."<sup>iv</sup>

One thing that Christians and non-Christians might agree upon is that Christianity has produced intricate and comprehensive systems of thought (Theology). From Origen and Augustine in the early church to Karl Barth and Karl Rahner in the twentieth century, Christians have elaborated world views of impressive complexity and depth.

Arising within the philosophical context of Hellenistic culture, Christian writers could not avoid developing their own philosophy, opposing, but at the same time absorbing, the currents of thought that were present at one of the world's busiest crossroads. The tireless disciple, Paul, made disparaging comments about philosophy and its unknown God.<sup>v</sup> Paul would probably be surprised to know that the Pauline philosophy has been endlessly discussed for two millennia.

Both the Gospels and Epistles of the New Testament are centered on the death and resurrection of Jesus. The recounting of Jesus' life in the synoptic gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke leads into the later New Testament writing, attributed to Paul, which theorizes on Jesus as the second Adam and the one who redeems the whole cosmos. The fourth Gospel, attributed to John, presents a Jesus with divine qualities. Attempts to separate the history and theology in the New Testament can never be fully successful. The writings are testimonies, faith-based reports of historical events.

Christianity spread across much of Asia, Africa and Europe, able to appeal both to the simple folk who could grasp the good news that Jesus saves, and to sophisticated thinkers, who were looking for a system of profound ideas. On one side, the Christian church was thought to be a burial society, one of many associations in Rome that provided a social unit more inclusive than the family yet smaller than the city.<sup>xi</sup> Christianity got much of its power by appealing to the dispossessed and by taking care of the widows and orphans.

At the same time, Christianity could present itself as an alternative to the world views of Stoicism, Epicureanism, Neoplatonism and every other school of thought. Although Tertullian in the West saw no connection between Athens and Jerusalem, the Greek Fathers of the Church showed that the Christian message was more than compatible with philosophical concepts.

Jewish religion, as indicated in the preceding chapter, moves from ritual to implied beliefs. In contrast, Christianity largely moves from beliefs to ritual. Rather than examine in this chapter the rituals surrounding death, mourning and afterlife, it makes more sense to follow the doctrinal beliefs, noticing their effect upon rites. In Christianity, as in Judaism, there is a dialectical relation between belief and ritual. Vincent of Lerins, one of the Latin Fathers of the Church, stated the principle which is still repeated in Catholic liturgy today: the rule of prayer is the rule of what is to be believed. Nevertheless, throughout most of Christian history the beliefs have had the primacy.

The Christian religion's beliefs offer great comfort to many people. The way of

salvation is clear. One's sufferings can be offered up and can be borne with as participation in the sufferings of Christ.<sup>vii</sup> On the other side of death is the stern judgment of God but also the intercession of the company of saints. What awaits the Christian who has faith in God and Christ is eternal happiness.

Other religions have tried to give some explanation of death; Christianity is different. The gospel of the Cross preaches salvation *in* death. Here complete impotence becomes the utmost development of power: absolute disaster becomes salvation; and thus what the mystery religions dare not speak of, nor mourn, is changed to highest bliss. Death annihilates death.<sup>viii</sup>

This startling paradox - complete impotence as power - has had earth-shaking consequences for individuals and societies. Christian doctrine can be a strong force for good, liberating the aspirations of people who have been dismissed as powerless. Unfortunately, the same ideas can be repressive when used as elaborate justifications for suffering.

Elisabeth Kubler-Ross said that in her extensive experience with the dying, she had found that ninety-five percent of Christians seemed to be wracked with fear and guilt rather than finding hope and support. (She said the other five percent seemed to die with an attitude similar to atheists).<sup>ix</sup> Anyone can dispute her unscientific findings but it is likely that she is pinpointing the inadequacies of Christian education and a Christian discipline of life. That is, the complicated beliefs of Christianity need to be connected to the experiences of ordinary life. Otherwise, when death is imminent, the Christian may know only enough theology to feel guilty and fearful.

### Death in the Christian Worldview

The Christian is asked to put his or her death in a cosmic perspective. Death is said to be a punishment for sin. Either death was not part of the original plan or else it would not have been experienced as painful and fear-inducing. Sin came into the world through the first parents who were banished from the Garden of Eden. Ever since then, the human race has been in search of a new paradise and is burdened by the faults and failures of its ancestors.

The doctrine of Original sin is strongly criticized by non-Christians; it can be the source of a negative and pessimistic attitude to bodily life. It can also be a realistic acknowledgment that each person's freedom is constrained by the limits that are present from the time of his or her birth. In the Christian belief system, this sinful condition is overcome by the death of Jesus which provides the grace

of redemption.

What complicates Christian belief is that the death of the Christ, God's anointed, was to be the end of history. The earliest stratum of the New Testament indicates an expectation that the world is very soon coming to an end. The resurrection of Jesus is the beginning of the restitution of the whole cosmos. In the first and second centuries, the community prayed "Come, Lord Jesus," with the expectation of the final appearance (*parousia*) of Christ as judge of the whole world.

By the end of the second century, if not much earlier, it was apparent that the end was not arriving. Tertullian, writing at the end of the second century, cites a prayer that includes a petition for the *delay* of the *parousia*.<sup>x</sup> Like Rabbinic Judaism, Christianity had to settle into the flow of ordinary history. Unlike Judaism, Christianity has had a more severe tension between a world redeemed by the death-resurrection of Jesus and a world that clearly has a long way to go before peace reigns and justice is secure.

The unresolved tension in Christianity is manifest in its use of the term revelation. The term is Greek (*apokalypsis*) in origin; it means the unveiling of something that has been secret. The term made its way into Christianity through Apocalyptic writing at a time when Jewish religion was deeply affected by Hellenistic culture. In this apocalyptic literature, there are sharp divisions between good and bad, this world and another world, body and spirit. Within the literature of the New Testament apocalyptic elements are present in the Gospels of Mark and Matthew. Paul occasionally uses the term *apokalypsis* but without any special emphasis.

The energy behind the use of the term revelation or apocalypse came from the last book of the New Testament. Called the Revelation of John or simply Revelation, the book uses the word revelation only at its beginning, but the whole book is a vision of the end and the final destruction of evil forces by the Christ. The inclusion of this book in the Christian canon was at first disputed but the book gave consolation to Christians of the first three centuries during times of persecution. While intellectual leaders, including Origen, Jerome and Augustine, interpreted the book allegorically, playing down its predictive character, the book continues to be central for many Christians.

Liberal theology and church officials eventually adopted the term revelation for what has been deposited in the past by God and handed on from authoritative officials to the Christian faithful. But the more marginal Christian sects continue

to use Revelation as predictive of the future. This deep gap has remained throughout Christian history and shows no signs of being overcome. The result is that Christians look to the past for the truth and they may also look to the future in hope, but the present remains a problem. How does the Word of God speak to the experience of ordinary Christians today?

In the Catholic tradition, the answer is largely to be found in the sacramental rites. The sacraments, as delineated in the Roman Catholic Church, include Baptism and Confirmation to enter the community, confession of personal sin, and a final anointing of the sick and dying. The central act is the Eucharist (the Mass) which looks to the Last Supper of Jesus and looks forward to the parousia but is celebrated as a daily prayer of thanksgiving. In the Protestant tradition, the sacraments are not generally so prominent or numerous. The word of God comes mainly through preaching. The ancient texts of the Bible are to come alive in the preached message of today.

Catholics and Protestants differ in their rituals surrounding death. For Catholics the burial Mass is central, along with music and prayers which are in large part medieval in origin. The priest usually leads the prayer at the wake, the funeral mass and the burial site. A family member may give the eulogy these days but that speech is often delivered at the end of the service. The priest is still likely to deliver the main talk (homily) after the liturgical readings.<sup>xi</sup>

Protestant services are usually simpler ceremonies. More attention is given to the eulogy and the reading of the scriptures. At the time of the Reformation, the anointing of the dying was one of the sacramental practices criticized as an unauthentic development. It is not a practice sanctioned by the Christian Bible. It found its way into Christian practice from the Jewish religion and other religions present at the birth of Christianity.

When the Puritans came to seventeenth-century Massachusetts, it was to set up a society free of priests and sacraments. However, they quickly adopted ritual practices surrounding death, a tendency that made them vulnerable to the charge of Catholicizing or Judaizing the pure Christian faith.

Christianity demands faith but in practice faith slides into beliefs. The two terms are often used interchangeably but faith as it emerged in the Hebrew Bible refers to openness and to trust. One is to believe in God as Creator and Redeemer of all. The act of believing in (or faith) finds expression in formulated beliefs. A complex system of these beliefs, derived from the Bible and church teachings, may overwhelm rather than express the attitude of trust in and

openness to God. Perhaps when many Christians come to die, they suddenly realize they have a whole system of beliefs but it may not give much support to what they experience.

Christianity has been the source of profound speculation that has produced works of complexity and insight. But the mystical side of the religion arose from quiet contemplation and can be startlingly close to agnosticism. For the mystics, God is not found along the route of the rational faculty; faith, hope and love are the main attachments to the divine. Karl Rahner was the most profound thinker and prolific theologian in the Roman Catholic Church of the twentieth century. Yet, in his works on prayer, Rahner is often shocking in his stark description of the Christian's lack of knowledge of God's ways. Christianity is, according to Rahner, a religion which sets man face to face with the Incomprehensible which pervades and encompasses his existence....<sup>xii</sup> The Christian has less ultimate answers which he could throw off with a flourish than anyone else.<sup>xiii</sup>

Christian beliefs offer a partial and changeable picture of what Christianity is. Some beliefs are more central and fixed than others but even the most important beliefs (Trinity, Incarnation) are subject to development, that is, reform. Protestant tradition keeps close to the scriptural sources but interpretations will always vary. Catholic tradition defines certain doctrines as necessary and true, but at most these doctrines are a fence around faith, or protocols against idolatry.<sup>xiv</sup>

Most often the doctrines are formulated as negatives or, where intended to be positive, as double negatives. Thomas Aquinas begins the *Summa Theologia* by saying since we cannot know what God is but only what God is not, let us proceed to examine the ways that God does not exist.<sup>xv</sup> The fourteenth-century mystic, Meister Eckhart, noted that while a doctrine may be true it is likely to leave out as much truth as it includes.<sup>xvi</sup>

From the beginning of Christianity there have been intense debates and disputes over matters of doctrine. The defining of doctrines regarding Jesus in relation to God provided a stable basis for the Church's survival. But unlike Judaism, minority reports were not recorded at councils. The term heresy, which had begun by simply meaning a sect, came to mean error.

The condemnation of heretics might drive those views out of official belief but often the ideas lived on because they had a partial truth not included in official teaching. For example, in trying to reconcile divine power and human freedom,

no formula is completely successful. What is called heretical may be a valid representing of an aspect of human experience.

In 553 C.E., the Second Council of Constantinople said *Whosoever shall support the mythical doctrine of the pre-existence of the soul and consequent wonderful opinion of its return, let him be anathema.*<sup>xvii</sup> It is understandable why the Council would condemn belief in the reincarnation of the soul. The belief seems to run directly contrary to belief in the resurrection of Jesus and those redeemed by him. Nevertheless, belief in reincarnation among Christians has never entirely disappeared and is probably stronger today than it has ever been.

Perhaps reincarnation needs to be looked at again in official circles - at least as a possibility for some people. If people are judged on how well they have lived their lives, what can one say of the millions who die as infants?<sup>xviii</sup> Is it possible that the body of Christian beliefs would be more intelligible if reincarnation were left open as a possibility for lives prematurely aborted? Humans can only guess at what is a premature death but that there are such cases seems highly probable.

Christian doctrines are not a series of truths handed down from heaven. They are a kaleidoscope of interrelated statements interpretive of Christian experience. They make the case for living and dying according to a pattern of activities that praise God and serve one's neighbor. The lynchpin, at least in official teaching, is the death-resurrection of Jesus. Belief in the *Last things*, that is, judgment, heaven and hell, follows upon belief that Jesus=death-resurrection is the center of human history and the revelation of its meaning.

The term *Christ* is what gives Christianity its unity and Christian theology its conceptual strength. From the later Pauline writings to the mysticism/science of Teilhard de Chardin, *Christ* is a term that comprehends all time and place, the basis on which the world was created and the judge of the world on its last day. At the same time, the term refers to an indelible image of a single man, an itinerant preacher put to death on a hill outside Jerusalem. Not surprisingly, Christianity has a difficult time holding together such a complex system of belief.

Insofar as Jesus was a Jew, he unites Jews and Christians. In being proclaimed *Christ*, he divides Judaism and Christianity. The Greek term, *Christ*, translated the Hebrew, *Messiah*. From the beginning, however, the two terms diverged in meaning. The *Christ* was said to fulfill the Jewish hopes for a *Messiah* - but not in the ways Jews had expected. *Christ* quickly acquired a philosophical meaning associated with God's Son in a way that was unknown to

the Hebrew scripture. The danger, already present in the New Testament, was that Jesus, who died and was raised from the dead, could almost disappear, absorbed into the meaning that Christ took on.

The not entirely successful resolution of this problem was to use the liturgical formula Jesus, Christ as a name. Although this name Jesus Christ, retained a sure reference to someone, the word Christ collapsed into being a surname. Instead of a term that would connect the story of Jesus to his Jewish ancestry and to present and future Christian experience. In Christian speech, Christ is most often the name of someone, or, when used alone, a name interchanged with God.

The Christian doctrine of resurrection is difficult to make sense of when it is seen as a spectacular feat by one man, but not so surprising, after all, if the man is God. The Christian apologetic quickly jumps into trying to prove the divinity of Jesus Christ.

If instead, the Christian wishes to get intelligible connections to the past and the future, the resurrection can be understood as Jesus becoming the Christ, a process that continues until the last day. For the Catholic tradition the resurrection is a cosmic event, it means that Christ is present to the whole world whether believers or not. The resurrection meant not just that a church was founded, it meant that the world was different.<sup>xix</sup> Thus, resurrection is an assertion about God before it is a puzzling reported fact about Jesus.<sup>xx</sup>

The Christian who is to die with the hope of resurrection needs more support than belief in a puzzling fact about the past. Resurrection, or some sign of the beginning of resurrection, has to be experienced in the present, particularly in the communal effort to resist injustice. No community can credibly speak of the resurrection unless it has placed itself in the situations of the struggle for justice and truth in human affairs.<sup>xxi</sup>

Here is where Christianity badly needs to reconceive its relation to Judaism, a movement that has begun but has a long way to go. Resurrection could be a bridge to unite Jews and Christians, instead of the dividing line it has been.

Jews sometimes joke that it is the newspaper that separates them from Christianity. The Jew reads the newspaper and asks 'Is this a redeemed world?'<sup>xxii</sup> It is possible, however, that with some moves on both sides, Jews and Christians could give the same answer to that question. Is the world redeemed? Both Jews and Christians could reply: 'Partly.' For both religions, God's grace,

forgiveness and transformation are present in the world but the world is not (fully) redeemed until the messianic age arrives, or differently formulated, until the entire body of Christ is formed.

For Christians to keep their exalted meaning of Christ concretized and realistic, they need to situate Jesus in his Jewish milieu and the Jewish beliefs of the time. Gerard Sloyan, referring to Jesus' resurrection, writes: "He was for the Jews who first believed in him, the first fruits of a harvest of all the dead. If you had the faith of the Pharisees, his appearance would have startled you, but it would not have surprised you. You would have been stunned chiefly that he was *alone*. That he was risen in the body was something that ultimately you could cope with."<sup>xiii</sup>

Despite the terrible portrait of the Pharisees in the New Testament, it is the pharisaic doctrine of resurrection that Christians borrowed and still use. And the Pharisees had good reason to be surprised that he was alone. Resurrection is ultimately about a community, history and the cosmos. If Christianity is to be consistent with itself it has to articulate an answer to what the Pharisees expected.

For the individual Christian, the doctrine of resurrection is, as it is in Judaism, an affirmation of bodily life. Of course, it is impossible to imagine beyond death a bodily life with fleshly desires and pleasures. Nevertheless, resurrection is a powerful symbol of trust in the body, community, history, and earthly life. As a doctrine, it can only be cast as a negation, or more exactly a double negative, that is, a denial of those who deny the value of bodily life. Karl Rahner writes that resurrection tells us two things that death is *not*. The doctrine denies that we change horses and ride on. It also denies that with death everything is over.<sup>xiv</sup>

In the history of Christianity, a belief in the immortality of the soul has been more dominant than belief in the resurrection of the body (or person). Similar to Jewish history, the two appeared at almost the same time, although the resurrection of Jesus gave a single, clear focus at the start of Christianity. Nonetheless, Greek ideas of the soul were in the air and were quickly absorbed into Christian belief.<sup>xxv</sup>

By the Middle Ages, belief in the soul seems to have become the heart of Christian hope for an afterlife. As was true of Jewish thought, Christian thinkers found support in philosophy for the immortality of the soul, a support that could not be mustered for resurrection. Popular piety gave support to the soul's survival, even as the corpse was lowered into the ground.

The belief in resurrection had the same problem in Christianity as in Judaism, namely, the status of the deceased between death and resurrection. With belief in the immortality of the soul, the problem shifts to the status of the soul before the last day. Thomas Aquinas argued that the soul continues to exist but is not a person until the restoration of the body.<sup>xxvi</sup> In recent times, a famous essay by Oscar Cullman argued that only resurrection was authentically Christian and should replace immortality.<sup>xxvii</sup> While many other authors have argued for reestablishing the centrality of belief in resurrection, most of them accepted the fact that belief in an immortal soul would continue to have a major place in Christian belief and prayer.

### Last Things

According to Christian belief, what follows death is judgment and then either heaven or hell. More precisely, death is followed by the particular judgment of the soul, a possible stint in purgatory, a final judgment on the last day, and eternity in heaven or hell.

The idea of two judgments was a theological development that was needed to explain what happens immediately after death and at the same time to maintain belief in a resurrection on the last day.<sup>xxviii</sup> The New Testament pictures a final accounting when the good and the evil are separated. In subsequent centuries, as the focus shifted from the final resurrection to the individual soul, the judgment at death emerged as a frightful occasion. People prayed to be saved from sudden death (probably the opposite of what many would pray for today) in order to get themselves ready for the great trial.

In the thirteenth century, judgment was thought to take place before a stern judge. One's deeds were placed in a scale: *Allo, the book exactly worded, Wherein all hath been recorded, Then shall judgment be awarded.*<sup>xxix</sup> No one could hope to survive the scrutiny without help from the Virgin Mary and the saints who might be able to temper divine justice.<sup>xxx</sup>

Later in the Middle Ages, there developed belief in a final temptation at the moment of dying. The individual would see his or her whole life in review and be tempted by either despair over one's sins or vainglory over one's good deeds.<sup>xxxi</sup> The belief gave support to deathbed conversions and the last act of contrition to gain forgiveness of sins.

An echo of this belief is found in a modern theological theory that each person has a final option at death. One can choose to die alone or one can die in communion with Christ.<sup>xxxii</sup> The intention here is positive, a last chance for those

who have messed up their lives. But this dramatic, all-important choice can also be a source of terrible anxiety and unrealistic expectation. William Lynch wisely notes that Christianity must always remain realistic, even about death, and should refuse to increase its burdens. Therefore, it will not demand a surcharge of fantasy at the very moment when that is least possible.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

*Purgatory.* The theological development of purgatory came largely from Augustine, while the imagery is especially from Dante.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Purgatory was needed to explain a final readying for heaven of souls not yet perfect. Although the fires of purgatory were sometimes said to be as bad as hell's, arrival in purgatory means ultimate success.

The doctrine of purgatory created a link between the living and the dead; the Christian on earth prayed and performed good works for the poor souls in purgatory, who could no longer help themselves. The calculations of time to be served and the efficacy of certain prayers, especially the Mass, created a complicated system. By the time of the Protestant Reformation, the system had been corrupted by money and power-brokers.

Protestant Christianity tried to eliminate purgatory but was never entirely successful. By the nineteenth century, there were references to an intermediate state or progressive sanctification after death.<sup>xxxv</sup> Given the rest of Christian doctrine, something like purgatory is probably unavoidable.

As I pointed out in the previous chapter, Jewish religion needed an intermediate state for the saved but imperfect soul. Reincarnation in Buddhism and Hinduism plays a similar role. In Catholic tradition even up to the present time, purgatory is the glue for a grand cosmic design called the communion of saints. The saints in heaven and the faithful on earth are linked by their working to liberate the souls in purgatory.

*Hell* The final destination for the dead is believed to be either hell or heaven. Of the two, hell has received the greater attention. The description of hell has been carried out in detail, often to lurid excess. One might guess that the horror of hell was too well described for the doctrine's own good. At some point, the doctrine becomes so truly awful that it strains belief. A decline in belief in hell may be tied to the success of preachers, poets and playwrights describing what a terrible place it is.

That line of thought, surprisingly, was raised by one of the most famous preachers of hell fire. Jonathan Edwards, a brilliant and learned man, is most

remembered for his sermons on God holding the soul over the fiery ovens of hell.

At the conclusion of one such sermon, Edwards says: I suppose some of you have heard all that I have said with ease and quietness....You have been too much used to the roaring of heaven's cannon to be frightened at it. It will therefore probably be in vain for me to say anything further to you.<sup>xxxvi</sup> It must be wondered how accurate are the polls that show a decline of belief in hell during the twentieth century. In the distant past, many people may have said they believed in hell but their life's activity seems to cast doubt on the belief being more than notional assent.

The Christian belief in hell emerged from the Jewish understanding of Sheol that had developed over the centuries. *That* hell was a place where the just were awaiting redemption, along with the wicked who were being punished. Christians say in their Creed that *He* (Jesus) descended into hell.<sup>@</sup> In the imagery of the fourth Gospel, Jesus begins his resurrection from the center of the earth, carrying space and time with him. Having been *lifted up*<sup>@</sup> on the cross, he is able to lift up the souls awaiting in hell.

Hell became a much worse place in the early centuries of Christianity; the second-century *Apocalypse of Peter* described hell in obscene detail (for example, blasphemers hanging by their tongues).<sup>xxxvii</sup> Later centuries continued to add frightful details. Some of the imagery goes back to Jesus who did refer to the wicked being cast into everlasting fire.

A favorite text for commentators was Mk 9:48: *Hell*, where their worm never dies and the fire is never quenched.<sup>xxxviii</sup> Jesus, as he often did, was adapting a text from the prophets (Is.66:24) and applying it to the afterlife. Hell understood as a place of fire has always been a part of popular piety and was affirmed by church teaching. Fire is a powerful image but one that is difficult to take literally. John Hick, a contemporary theologian, writes that bodies burning forever *without* being consumed or losing consciousness is as scientifically fantastic as it is morally revolting.<sup>xxxix</sup>

Earlier commentators did not put the case that strongly but they looked for a meaning of hell that went beyond torture by fire. Augustine, while insisting that hell is real fire, identifies the greatest suffering as spiritual, the *fruitless* repentance of the damned.<sup>@</sup> The same path was followed by Thomas Aquinas, that the souls in hell are tortured by what they have lost.<sup>xi</sup> Even Dante, who had so much to do with the popular images of purgatory and hell, places the ultimate punishment in spiritual misery. Dante has Virgil say to the blasphemer, Capaneus, *Only your own rage could be fit torment for your sullen pride.*<sup>xii</sup>

And Milton's Satan says: "Which way I fly is Hell, myself am Hell."<sup>liii</sup>

Christian poets, mystics and philosophers have thus been able to interpret the fantastic idea of hell fire as a psychologically profound metaphor. If a human being is to share his or her life with others, then love becomes the highest Christian virtue. Conversely, the ultimate failure in life is the absence of love. Although pride is said to be the first of the capital sins, it is so because it blocks the capacity for love. "The sorrow, the unutterable loss of those charred stones which once were men, is that they have nothing more to be shared."<sup>liv</sup> Jean Paul Sartre's *No Exit* nearly reverses the meaning of hell by saying it is other people, but the lack of true love continues to underlie the theme of hell.

Whatever images of hell are used, Christian writers insist that "the misery of hell is not so much a penalty imposed by God to make the sinner pay for his sins, as it is the necessary outcome of living a sinful life."<sup>lv</sup> Heaven is God accepted, purgatory is God purifying, hell is God rejected. "The flames of hell," said Catherine of Genoa, "are the rejected flames of God's love."<sup>lvi</sup>

Following this logic, hell could be understood as invented and imagined by the sinner. *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* describes the soul on its journey in the "Intermediate state" as it meets a series of frightening figures. Relief is found in the realization that these terrifying encounters are a product of the soul's own imagining. There is also offered the comforting thought that since you are already dead they cannot hurt you. In a contrasting logic, Dante's despairing description of hell is that there is "no longer even a hope of death."

At the heart of this despair is the fact that hell is eternal. That has always been a feature of the Christian hell, one defined as doctrine by the Catholic Church. This belief in eternal punishment separates Christianity from Judaism which has the wicked suffering for at most one year. Many people who can understand the logic of a final judgment that rights the injustices suffered in this life are still appalled by the seeming lack of proportionality in the idea of an eternity of punishment.

Perhaps the most appalling aspect of the doctrine of hell was the belief commonly held - even by Thomas Aquinas - that one of the joys of heaven would be watching the punishment of the damned in hell. Contemporary people, including most Christians, are repelled by that idea. But for some other Christians, an unwillingness to believe in an eternal hell is a sign that Christianity has been corrupted by modern sentimentality.

The belief in a universal salvation is not an entirely new doctrine. Origen is the best known writer in the early church to posit that eventually all of creation is saved.<sup>xlvii</sup> Many writers, without directly taking on the doctrine of hell, suggest that God's ways are unknown to us.<sup>xlviii</sup> Hell may exist as a possibility but there is no proof that anyone (including Judas Iscariot) fails totally. Juliana of Norwich's "The Lord shall make well all that is not well" undermines without attacking the eternity of hell.

John Hick uses the interesting analogy of God as a therapist. The number of sessions it may take to restore psychic health is unpredictable, but the divine therapist will not simply reject the patient as unsalvageable.<sup>xlix</sup> The seriousness of human choice, the outrage of injustice, and the need for retribution need not be undercut by a non-eternal hell.

*Heaven.* As for heaven, the idea is easy to understand: the fulfillment of all human dreams and desires. But working out the details of that idea presents a challenge. Christians feel that they have inside information on heaven, but they still have to work within the range of images and metaphors that human history offers.

The recounting of Jesus's resurrection and his ascent into heaven are central to any Christian version of heaven but that report needs considerable filling out. The New Testament is skimpier in detail than the Qur'an and many other religious traditions. The task has been left to poets, philosophers and mystics to exercise their imaginations and conceptual skills.

Christian writing over the centuries has been more concerned with describing hell than with describing heaven. Perhaps that is just the nature of the human imagination. But the somewhat pale versions of heaven offered as a lure to the faithful might not stir up an eager enthusiasm for the good. Many Christians might want to go to heaven simply because they are intensely aware of the only alternative.

Christian speculation on heaven is based on the New Testament but here, as elsewhere, it draws upon the Old Testament. One tension in the Bible is between heaven imagined either as a garden or as a city. Those who prefer the latter are quick to note that the Christian Bible starts in a garden and ends in a city. The movement from garden to city is what human history shows. However, people who think that the contemporary urban scene is a nightmare tune into biblical and post-biblical suggestions that the end of history is a return to the garden. The garden - paradise - is a restored but better garden, according to Augustine.<sup>1</sup>

The images of both garden and city require some reference to ordinary human experience. Heaven is conceived of as better than what is already very good. The garden is an obviously attractive image, especially for people who are used to the desert. Abundance of food, rest from oppressive surroundings, and the fertility of the earth make up the image of an earthly paradise, which is a prefiguring of a heavenly paradise. Humans were excluded from the garden at the beginning of time but they have never lost their hope of return to harmony and peace.

The image of heaven as a city has a more distinct historical track. The first glimmer in the Bible is in the Book of Ezekiel which dates from the sixth century B.C.E. The center of Jewish life, the city of Jerusalem, becomes the model for a greater city in the world-to-come. The earliest Christians took over the language of a new or heavenly Jerusalem. The last book of the New Testament, the Revelation of John, was especially influential in permanently fixing the New Jerusalem as a Christian, as well as a Jewish symbol.

The most dominant image of the endtime that Christianity adopted from Judaism was a kingdom or reign of God. Here, too, the image of heaven is based on a particular earthly experience. The Hebrews had tried having a king ruling over a kingdom. Although David is thought of as a great king, the whole experience worked out rather poorly. Thus, a God's kingdom is thought not to be a projection of a human kingdom but its correction. The sharply different ways that one can interpret this image have played a role in Catholic-Protestant differences on the role of church.

Catholics and Protestants do agree that the image of kingdom underwent radical transformation in the preaching of Jesus and his death-resurrection. In the nineteenth century, one of the most quoted texts of the New Testament was Luke 17:21: *The kingdom of God is within you.*<sup>16</sup> Logically, the metaphor seems misplaced, especially since Jesus speaks elsewhere of the kingdom having gates, seats and rivers. The *Reign of God*, which many Christian exegetes prefer to kingdom, largely overcomes the logical problem but offers a thinner image. Jesus seems to have applied the idea to his own body so that kingdom or reign of God get their substance from Jesus=resurrection.

This recentering of kingdom or reign in the person of Jesus, the Christ, gave rise to the Christian ways of imagining heaven. On one side of the tradition is the vision of God, on the other side is union with the divine. The two symbols are shared with Jewish and Muslim traditions but Christianity worked its own distinctive twists around the Christ figure. The philosophical minded have sought

for a vision of truth and reality. In Christ. The mystics have sought a final unity, when All things will be Christ and Christ will be God. The great figures in Christian history, such as Augustine, Aquinas and Dante, tried to hold on to both images.

The image of heaven as a beatific vision was almost a foregone conclusion once the language of Revelation was adopted. Revelation is a visual metaphor, the unveiling of the truth which comes out of the darkness into the light. Although the New Testament says that No man has ever seen or can see God (1Tim. 6:16), it also says Now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. (1Cor. 13:12).

Early Christianity struggled mightily with Agnosticism, the claim to a secret knowledge of the divine held by a superior class. For Christians, the unveiling of the truth can only come at the end. We shall see him as he is (1Jn3:2). As theology developed in Christian history, emphasis was placed on the understanding of a complex belief system. Aristotle and Plato played a large part in the forming of Christian doctrine and theology. Christianity absorbed the premise that the highest human power is intellect and that intellectual knowing is a kind of seeing.

Even Augustine, with his insistence that love (*caritas*) is the heart of Christian life, gave support to heaven as a kind of vision. A more erotic form of love was excluded by Augustine in his controversies with those who expected a thousand years of earthly delights.<sup>lii</sup>

Thomas Aquinas devotes two sections of his *Summa* to the beatific vision.<sup>liii</sup> Human intelligence when strengthened by the Sight of glory will be flooded with joy at the sight of God. Aquinas has other more mystical and affective possibilities for imagining heaven but they are only hinted at. Aquinas had a vision a few weeks before his death that made him wish to destroy all he had written. Perhaps his having a vision confirms his metaphor of vision or it could suggest that the vision was of something greater than vision.

The more affective side of Christianity was left to the mystics. Bernard of Clairvaux in the twelfth century was the start of a tradition that used sexual and marital imagery to describe the relation of human and divine. The vision of an object is superseded by the tactile and the intersubjective.<sup>liv</sup> These writings often veered close to a monistic or pantheistic philosophy in which the human is finally absorbed by the divine.

The great mystic, Meister Eckhart, has often been treated as a misplaced Buddhist.<sup>iv</sup> Eckhart certainly used dazzling phrases that confounded church officials. However, all Christian mystics, including Eckhart, hold to the resurrection and the Christ. What may sound like pantheism is the exaggerations of love poetry. The paradox of the Christ as both divine and human retains a distinction that other forms of mysticism tend to blur.

For many Eastern writers, Christian mysticism is necessarily flawed; it can never get beyond a duality. For Christian writers, mystical union in Christ is not a final obstacle to be overcome. As Kierkegaard put it: *Never anywhere has any doctrine on earth brought God and man so near together as Christianity....Neither has any doctrine so carefully defended itself against the most shocking of all blasphemies, that after God had taken the step, it then should be taken in vain.*<sup>dyi</sup>

What ordinary Christians have believed about heaven may have only a faint connection to either beatific vision or mystical union. They have been sure that heaven is where their recently deceased loved ones are gathered around Christ, the Savior. Some believe in heaven because they hate their life; some believe in heaven as the fulfilling of what is best in their experience.

Neither scripture nor church doctrine give a clear picture of what heaven is supposed to be. The Christian is free to let his or her imagination roam. The fact that Christian believers usually can only come up with stereotypical banalities, which Hollywood movies employ, does not prove that the belief in heaven is unreal. It is not beyond human hope even if it is beyond human imagination.

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ii. Arthur Cohen, *The Myth of the Judeo-Christian Tradition* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), xviii

iii. Elie Wiesel, *Messengers of God* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1976), 76.

iv. Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1956).

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v. Rom.1.

vi. Wayne Meeks, *The Moral World of the First Christians* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986), 40.

vii. Col. 1:24

viii. Gerard van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation* (Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1967), 112.

ix. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, *Questions and Answers*, 162.

x. Tertullian, *Apology*, 39.2; 32.1.

xi. In 2003, the Vatican's Order of Christian Funerals approved the U.S. guidelines that include a friend or family member speaking at the funeral mass after the communion; *New York Times*, January 23, 2003, p. 5.

xii. Karl Rahner, *Belief Today* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1967), 111.

xiii. Karl Rahner, *Christianity at the Crossroads*, 23.

xiv. Nicholas Lash, *Easter in Ordinary* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1988), 265.

xv. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologia*, preface

xvi. Frank Tobin, *Meister Eckhart: Thought and Language*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986), 86.

xvii. *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Series 2, Vol. 14 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 318.

xviii. Or Christians who believe that abortion is the taking of human life

xix. Hebert McCabe, *What is Ethics All About?* (Washington: Corpus Books, 1969), 142.

xx. Joseph Sittler, *Ecology*, 40.

xxi. Peter Selby, *Look for the Living* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 179.

xxii. Lionel Blue, *To Heaven with Scribes and Pharisees* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976),

xxiii. Gerard Sloyan, *Jesus in Focus*, (Mystic: Twenty-Third Publication, 1980), 146.

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xxiv. Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith* (New York: Seabury Press), 436; see also Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963) III, 416.

xxv. Robert Wilken, *The Immortality of the Soul and Christian Hope*, *Dialog* (Spring, 1976), 110-17. Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 51: *The idea of the immortality of the soul came eventually to be identified with the Biblical doctrine of the resurrection of the body, a doctrine one of whose original targets was the immortality of the soul.*

xxvi. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologia* : incomplete person

xxvii. Oscar Cullman, *Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead?* in *Immortality and Resurrection*, ed. Krister Stendahl (New York: Macmillan, 1965), 9-53; John Hick, *Death and Eternal Life* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1976), 180f.

xxviii. Tertullian seems to have been the first to refer to an *interim state* between individual death and the last day; see Jeffrey Russell, *A History of Heaven* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 67.

xxix. Lines from the medieval hymn, *Dies Irae*.

xxx. Philippe Aries, *The Hour of Our Death*, 31.

xxxi. *Ibid.*, 36.

xxxii. Ladislaus Boros, *The Mystery of Death* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1965); Karl Rahner, *Theology of Death* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1961).

xxxiii. William Lynch, *Images of Hope* (Baltimore: Helicon, 1965), 108.

xxxiv. Jacques Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

xxxv. John Hick, *Death and Eternal Life*, 202.

xxxvi. Jerry Walls, *Hell: The Logic of Damnation* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), 154; Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957), 7: 504-05.

xxxvii. Wayne Meeks, *The Origin of Christian Morality: The First Two Centuries* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 176.

xxxviii. Augustine, *Commentary on the Gospel of Mark*; John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), 3:37.

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xxxix. John Hick, *Death and Eternal Life*, 199.

xl. Augustine, *City of God*, 21:9.

xli. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologia*, Suppl Part III, q.98, a.9.

xlii. Dante, *Inferno*, Canto 14: 60-63.

xliii. Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 4,75.

xliv. George Bernanos, *Diary of a Country Priest* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), 127; Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Dostoyevsky* (New York: Signet, 1957), 297.

xlv. Jerry Walls, *Hell: The Logic of Damnation*, 150.

xlvi. Cited in Morton Kelsey *Afterlife: The Other Side of Dying* (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 176.

xlvii. Origen, *First Principles*, 3:1:7.

xlviii. This is a belief in Islam which speaks of eternal fire (Qur'an 23:105) but adds Unless God decides differently. (11:09)

xlix. John Hick, *Death and Eternal Life*, 250.

i. Augustine, *City*, Jeffrey Russell, *A History of Heaven*, 85.

ii. The Revised Standard Version of New Testament translates the text as The kingdom of God is among you. (11:09)

iii. Augustine, *City of God*, 20:7, where he laments the millennialists awaiting The most unrestrained material feasts. (11:09)

iiii. S.T. I., art. 12; II.II, 1-5.

lv. Caroline Walker Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 329.

lvi. D. T. Suzuki, *Mysticism: Buddhist and Christian* (Westport: Greenwood, 1975).

lvii. Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling; Sickness Unto Death* (Garden City: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1954), 248.