

Chapter Nine: Heaven, Hell and Beyond

The last things, according to traditional Christian belief, are heaven and hell. After the individual judgment and the final judgment, after the repairs of purgatory, all that then remains is the eternal happiness of heaven or the eternal punishment of hell. But can a modern person make any sense of either final state? The modern secular world tends to be scornful and to dismiss the question as not worthy of consideration.

Some people, however, wonder whether dismissing the concern for an afterlife is itself realistic and whether that attitude could bring us frightful substitutes. George Steiner, meditating on the Holocaust that happened in the midst of an enlightened age and an enlightened country, writes: *To have neither Heaven nor Hell is to be intolerably deprived and alone in a world gone flat. Of the two, Hell proved the easier to re-create.*ⁱ

Is it possible that the only way to get free of heaven and hell is to go beyond them? Is it possible that heaven and hell are symbols of something deeper and greater that calls for exploration? Any attempt to shut down individual life at death threatens to make death into the final god of life. Human beings throughout the centuries have seen their lives connected to some larger purpose and meaning.

A modern individualism which proclaims *Tears of joy, alleluia, I am setting us free; no more heaven, no more hell, only the earth,*ⁱⁱ is certainly attractive to some people at some times. Whether a thorough individualism can be sustained without being parasitic on assumptions from past centuries is still being weighed in the balance. The individual's death is a test of the meaning that unites past and present, person and community, humanity and the cosmos. Tolstoy's question, *As there in my life a meaning which would not be destroyed by inevitable, imminent death?*ⁱⁱⁱ has to be answered implicitly or explicitly by every individual.ⁱⁱⁱ

The Christian answer of heaven or hell provided a simple, clear answer to the question of life's meaning. But, as I indicated in the last chapter, any extensive reflection on traditional images of heaven and hell reveals their vulnerability. Hell was overdeveloped in imagery to the point where its horrors became ludicrous and for most people unbelievable. Heaven has been underdeveloped and remains a less than compelling attraction for many people, a place of white gowns, billowing clouds and harp playing. The idea of infinite joy and unending happiness overwhelms the imagination and can leave the Christian with a blank

mind. Other religions, such as Islam, supply some concrete details for heaven, but there is a problem in finding nourishing images of heaven that can withstand the bite of modern criticism.

Despite the relentless intellectual attack on religion in recent centuries, it shows no signs of disappearing. Some secular thinkers may believe that the recent resurgence of religion is a last gasp before its final demise. What seems more likely is that, while all traditional religion is under severe challenge, new forces in the world are pushing toward a radical rethinking of religion. The worldwide environmental movement is one of the most obvious factors. Any Anew@religion will almost certainly have to emerge from attempts to reform ancient religion. A single religion for the world is highly unlikely but some converging of the world's great religions is quite possible.

Religion very likely started with the funeral ritual, an affirming of life in the face of death. Religion is a confidence that the Aultimate environment of our lives is trustworthy and fulfilling rather than indifferent or hostile toward us.Ⓓ If that belief is to be sustained, religion has to speak candidly about death and the meaning of a life that leads to death. Death has to be potentiality for life not simply an end to life.

Human corpses deserve respect and usually get it because they are understood to be transitional to another reality. AThe gorilla, the chimpanzee, the orang-outang and their kind must look upon man as a feeble and infirm animal whose strange custom it is to store up his dead.Ⓓ Samuel Beckett painted a picture of twentieth-century life as one of barren suffering. There are numerous cries of protest against the absurdities of life. But the most despairing line in all of Beckett is from Endgame: AThere are no more coffins.@ In such a world, where war, famine or disease make impossible a respectful treatment of the dead, human society reaches the edge of disintegration.

Throughout the centuries humans have believed that the dead do not stay dead; they go on to another existence, either on this earth or somewhere else. Religious traditions demand that the living recognize a bond between the unborn, the living and the dead. If individuals ask only Awhat's in it for me?@and Awhat has the future ever done for me?@then the human project is near collapse. ATradition refuses to submit to the oligarchy of those who happen to be walking around.Ⓓ

Although it is impossible to imagine Aeternal life,@religions have a legitimate protest against seeing time as merely a series of moments ending in death.

Modern science, economic systems, and management theory subscribe to an image of time as a sequence of points with before and after. That image of time threatens to exhaust human life of any depth. If the past is gone, the future has not arrived and the present is a disappearing point, where is serious life to be found. *Do you believe in the life to come?* Clov asks Hamm in *Endgame*. Hamm answers: *My* mine was always that.... Moment upon moment, pattering down, like the millet grains... all life long you wait for that to mount up to a life.ⁱⁱ

The past does not disappear; it remains in the depths of the present and is the material out which the future is fashioned. The death of an individual does not annihilate what has been his or her participation in the temporal process. *The* most general formulation of the religious problem is the question whether the process of the temporal world passes into the formation of other actualities, bound together in an order in which novelty does not mean loss.ⁱⁱⁱ What has emerged as novelty -including human lives - is present not merely evanescently in our lives but enduringly in the universe itself.^{ix}

The religious believer who professes belief in eternal life is perhaps saying, *I* believe in earthly historical life that is so truly life that it is stronger than death.^{iv} Religion is sometimes accused of being a higher form of selfishness, a sacrifice of goods in this world to get a greater return in the next. Undoubtedly, religion works that way in the lives of some people. The individual is out to protect his or her investment in eternal life. What they expect as a payoff is difficult to imagine. Some people talk about eternal life, wrote G.K. Chesterton, who don't know what to do with themselves on a rainy Sunday afternoon.^{xi}

Belief in eternal life, however, is not always a product of selfish desire. In the lives of ordinary people, as well as religious mystics, belief in eternal life arises from an outgoing love. The most common reason why people believe in some form of survival is that someone they have loved is dead. Although it may be difficult to imagine that the dead person is alive, it is more difficult to believe that the person is simply no more.

The question of life everlasting, John Baillie wrote, is not *Do I want it for myself?* Even if I say that I am reconciled to the finality of my own death, can I say that is all I want for people I love. *The* man who can see his beloved die, believing that it is forever, and say *I don't care* is a traitor to his beloved and to all their love has brought them. He has no right not to care.^{vii}

Many people have beliefs about an afterlife that involve communication with the dead. In today's culture, these beliefs are usually considered loony, and,

indeed, specific practices are often shown to be fraudulent.^{xiii} Nonetheless, we are all thrown back on basic human experiences for shaping our attitudes and beliefs concerning death. No experience is more powerful than mourning the death of a close friend or a family member. Until someone has that experience, the basis of his or her belief may be thin. The death of a loved one can transform a belief system in a flash. Reflecting on the death of his close friend, Charles Williams, C.S. Lewis wrote: "When the idea of death and the idea of Williams thus met in my mind, it was the idea of death that was changed."^{xiv}

Although it is impossible to demonstrate that the intuitions of love are valid, it is possible to invalidate one charge against religious belief in afterlife survival. The claim has been made, especially in Marxism, that belief in an afterlife arose from a vain hope held out to oppressed people. The Opium of the people was a promise of Paradise in the sky. From archeology and anthropology we now know that ancient people believed in a better world for those who had the best things in this world. For the majority of people, the next life did not promise a social and economic reversal.^{xv}

The rise of the great world religions did signal a new concern for every individual's destiny, not just the king's or the hero's. The pharisaic image of God as loving father suggested that the individual would not be abandoned. In all three of the Abrahamic traditions - Judaism, Christianity, Islam - the fate of the individual became central. In these three religions, a person has one chance to get it right, and what is right is specified in sacred texts. Eastern religions include scriptures as guides to experience but not as words from God. Because of their more flexible outlook, which allows several religions to overlap in individual lives, the religions of the East are thought to be more tolerant of differences.

Any suggestion that the Jewish, Christian and Muslim views of an afterlife might need serious comparison with Eastern views runs up against deeply entrenched beliefs. Any tampering with beliefs in Christianity or Islam is likely to be called heretical. Judaism does not enumerate beliefs in the same way but it has its own distinct boundaries.

There may be an ultimate and impassable gap between the Abrahamic religions of revelation and the spiritual disciplines of the East. But before we can even ask that question, the world needs a dialogue among Christian, Muslim and Jewish religionists. All three religions seem to present an obstacle to worldwide dialogue. They need to address each other and examine their respective languages which strike many other people as highly intolerant.

The question in the following section is not whether Jewish, Christian and Muslim religions have always acted tolerantly. The question is whether there is any room for interpreting these religions in a tolerant way. Can a Jew, a Christian, or a Muslim be open about the salvation of others and still be a faithful Jew, Christian or Muslim?

Ultimate Intolerance?

Jewish writers do not charge Christianity with the belief that Jews go to hell; instead, they presume it is obvious that Christians do and must hold this belief. Herman Cohen, for example, cites Maimonides's teaching that "the righteous of the gentile nations have a portion in the world to come."^{vi} This is in stark contrast with Christianity in all its forms. As Cohen writes, "Christ is the indispensable condition of redemption."^{vi}

Milton Steinberg cites the same passage from Maimonides. And Steinberg makes the same contrast of Jewish universalism and Christian particularism: "Paul's universalism applies to professing Christians only, and of them only to those who profess correctly, that is, in harmony with Paul's ideas. All other men, no matter how truth-loving, devout, and good are irretrievably damned."^{vii}

Even more surprising is to find this contrast bluntly stated by Emil Fackenheim: "Judaism is 'universalistic'—for it teaches that the righteous of all nations enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Christianity is 'particularistic'—for it bars from the Kingdom all unsaved, non-Christians, no matter how great their righteousness."^{viii}

The irony of this contrast - universal Judaism versus Christian particularism - is that it perpetuates in reverse the unfair accusation that Christians have often made against Jews. It has seemed self-evident to some Christians that the Jewish religion is for one particular group while Christianity is catholic or universal. If there is to be understanding between Christians and Jews, this claim that one's own religion is universal and the other's is particularistic must stop.

What has to be realized is that Jews and Christians (and Muslims) use the same logic. Each of these religions points toward the universal by affirming their particular language of belief. While Christians, Jews and Muslims have traded charges of narrow-mindedness among themselves, these three Abrahamic religions can seem to the rest of the world to be remarkably similar in the intolerance of their claims.

Secular outsiders and believers in other religious traditions have plenty of evidence for intolerance by Christians, Jews and Muslims. But the beliefs of Jews, Christians and Muslims may be more complex than many people assume. As Abraham Heschel says, religions are forced to use a language *A*the terms of which do not pretend to describe, but to indicate; to point to rather than to capture. These terms are not always imaginative; they are often paradoxical, radical, negative.^x

As the terms *Scientific* and *Artistic* are used today, the logic of the three religions is closer to the artistic than to the scientific. That is, it is based upon looking for the universal by going more deeply into the particular. Its literary form is the narrative, the poem, or the play. It looks for the deeper truth in the lives of a community and the experience of persons. In contrast, what is taken to be scientific logic moves from individual cases to general statements. It deals with controlled experiments and statistical surveys. On the basis of *Scientific* logic, Jewish, Christian and Muslim statements of who gets saved certainly sound arrogant.

Christianity may have a bigger problem than does Judaism of explaining this logic. Christian missionary activity in the past was often accompanied by political and military force. Islam, too, has a bad reputation, at least in the West, for failing to live according to its principle that there can be no compulsion in religion.^{xx} Whether Christianity or Islam has more often failed in practice does not have to be decided here. I am interested in the logic or grammar that is inherent to Jewish, Christian and Muslim religions.

A Parallel Logic

All three religions believe that there is one God, creator of all, who is good and just. Each religion also believes that this God of the universe spoke to their particular group at particular times and at particular places. The paradox here is obvious to everyone in the world who is neither Jewish, Christian nor Muslim. How can a just and benevolent God condemn people who through no fault of their own do not accept and practice the Jewish or the Christian or the Muslim religion?

The solution is found in the way each religion uses several of its key terms to refer to something very particular but also to point to a universal ideal. The major documents in each religion, using the inner language of the group, are addressed to the believers. Little is said about outsiders. The doctrines are warnings to the believers in each group not to be smug.

Religious doctrines that are addressed to people inside the group risk sounding either unintelligible or offensive when they reach the ears of anyone outside the group. Each of the three religions has a new task in the modern world because intramural doctrines are now readily accessible outside the group. When the Vatican makes a statement about Judaism, Jewish leaders are more likely to pay attention to it than most ordinary Catholics. But unless one devotes a lot of time to understanding the history of Vatican documents, the statements may be unintelligible, or worse, offensive.

The problem is not peculiar to Vatican documents; the problem is inherent to religious statements. In the case of a particular religion, writes George Lindbeck, one must have some skill in *how* to use its language and practice its way of life before the propositional meaning of its affirmations become determinate enough to be rejected.^{xxi} A religion cannot abandon the only logic it has. Nonetheless, each of the three religions has a major educational task in trying to improve its intelligibility. That does not mean converting people to the religion. It means changing some formulas that may have once made sense but no longer do; more often, it is trying to explain the context and the limits of statements that sound intolerant of other religions.

In Christianity key terms that are particular but point to the universal are Christ, church, and baptism. From its earliest centuries, Christianity has maintained that Christ is the one savior, that outside the church there is no salvation, and that one needs to be baptized in order to be saved. Salvation appears to be limited to the Christian.

From the earliest centuries, however, Christian thinkers have wrestled with the question of the salvation of the non-Christian. Tertullian said that the soul by nature is Christian. Clement of Alexandria thought that Christ saves souls even if they do not realize it.^{xxii} Augustine developed a place called Limbo for the unbaptized; God would not damn those who died without baptism.^{xxiii}

Alexander of Hales in the twelfth century did not see a problem with Jews finding salvation by following the revelation in the Torah; for others, God must provide a special revelation.^{xxiv} Thomas Aquinas asks what happens to the unbeliever in Africa who has never heard the gospel preached? Aquinas's answer is that perhaps God sends an angel to deliver the gospel to such a person. The solutions were often clumsy but at least they were tried. The official doctrine makers did not directly address the question; they concentrated on practical guides for Christians rather than speculative questions about non-Christians.

The logic of Christianity can be seen in the double meanings of Christ, Church and baptism. The term *Christ* has always been a title attributed to Jesus of Nazareth. But in the later Pauline literature, in the fourth Gospel, and in the philosophical thrusts of Justin Martyr or Clement of Alexandria, *Christ* is the name of a universal ideal. Thus, in Christian terms the path of all righteous men and women leads to *Christ* whether they have ever heard of Jesus, Pope or sacraments. In Christian terms one must be a follower of Christ to attain salvation.

The continuation of this logic is found in the outrageous-sounding doctrine that outside the church there is no salvation. The doctrine has been especially insisted upon in the Roman Catholic church. To people outside this institution, the meaning of the doctrine seems obvious. Yet, Pope Pius XII excommunicated Leonard Feeney, a priest in Boston, who wanted to be more Catholic than the Pope. Feeney took the doctrine literalistically. By insisting on the need to be within the church, he ironically found himself outside the church.

Church has a different meaning for Protestants and Catholics. The typical Protestant usage is to refer to the local congregation. Catholics usually mean the world-wide institution. In both cases, however, *Church* refers to the assembly of Christian believers. But church can also be used as a pointer to the gathering of the elect, a meaning that was quite common until the twelfth century and reappears during the Reformation. In this meaning, there is no salvation outside the church - by definition. Even if one is Jew, Muslim, Buddhist or atheist, one is saved because of the church.

Karl Rahner's phrase *Anonymous Christian* has often been attacked, sometimes ridiculed. But it is simply an attempt to state in Christian language that salvation is not restricted to card carrying members of the Christian church. In Rahner's words, "It is a profound admission of the fact that God is greater than man and the church."^{xv} The phrase, anonymous Christian, would be better understood as *Anonymous follower of the path that Christians see summed up by the term Christ* rather than *Anonymous member of the institution called the Christian church.*

Paul did not say that Jews would come into the church or accept Jesus as the Christ. Paul never denies the validity of the Torah path for those Jews who cannot accept Jesus as messiah. Paul's main problem was not *How do I find a gracious God* but *How can Jew and Christian live in one community.*^{xvi} Salvation was from the Jews, according to Paul, while the Christians were to be grafted into the tree of salvation.

With the term *Abaptism* there was a more contrived distinction. In addition to baptism of water there was baptism of desire. The *Agood pagan* was said to receive baptism of desire if he or she was seeking God with a pure heart. The same path of salvation was possible for the baptized (by water) and for people who had never heard of baptism

The Catholic church's teaching is stated by the Second Vatican Council: *Those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the gospel of Christ or his church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience - these too may attain salvation.*^{xxvii}

This Vatican II language is (Catholic) Christian but the language points beyond the church. The emphasis is admittedly more positive than was the teaching in the past, but it is not the invention of a new doctrine. Recently, the Catholic church, together with Reform and Conservative Judaism, published a declaration that states: *While the Catholic church regards the saving act of Christ as central to the process of salvation for all, it also acknowledges that Jews already dwell in a saving covenant with God.*^{xxviii} There is no explanation given for what to many people might seem incompatible claims.

The Christian who says to the non-Christian *You are saved because you are unknowingly a follower of Christ* may be offering the highest compliment that the Christian can offer. However, Christians have to realize that what is offered as compliment may be received as insult. This is especially the case in Christian-Jewish relations because of past conflicts. A Buddhist might not be offended by being told he is Christ-like, just as the Buddhist may offer the Christian the compliment that he or she has a true Buddha-nature. But Christians had better refrain from complementing a Jew as a follower of Christ - at least for another millennium or two.

I have acknowledged that Christianity's historical aggressiveness presents a more obvious problem than the one that Jewish religion has. Nonetheless, the logic of Judaism is similar. Three key terms that Jewish religion uses to link particular and universal are *Achosen, ATorah* and *Acovenant*. Each term is an obviously particular word with specific historical references. Nevertheless, each term also points - in a Jewish way of speaking - to an all-embracing universality.

The Jewish claim to be *Athe chosen people* sounds outrageously arrogant to many Gentiles. Some modern Jewish writers try to soften the claim or avoid the claim to be the chosen, but it is undeniably what the central Jewish claim is.^{xxix}

God chose His people. The prayer book, *Gates of Prayer*, says: We must praise the Lord of all, the Maker of heaven and earth, who has set us apart from the other families of earth, giving us a destiny unique among the nations.^{xxx}

If chosenness were an achievement and a possession of the Jewish people, it would be a claim to moral superiority. But chosenness is a burden, the place where responsibility lies. In the Bible the burden usually lies upon Israel but can suddenly shift. Blessed be Egypt my people and Assyria the work of my hands and Israel my heritage. (Isa. 19:25).^{xxxii} When the Egyptian soldiers who were chasing the Israelites drowned in the Red Sea, the angels in heaven began to sing. God stopped them and said: My children lie drowned in the sea and you would sing.^{xxxiii}

This occasional reversal is a reminder to the Jewish people that the real chosen people are people; that Israel is a stand-in for the vulnerable creature that God placed in the middle of the garden. The unique destiny cited in the above prayer is not an exclusion of gentiles but an openness to all humanity. Jewish thought at its best has always recognized this vocation: The election of Israel constitutes in no sense an exception; it is rather the symbolic confirmation of the love of God for the whole race of man.^{xxxiv}

When Torah came into the world, freedom came into the world. Torah is a term that starts out as the instruction of a parent to a child. It becomes the name for God's revelation to Moses and thereby the center of Jewish life. Although Torah is a term unknown to most non-Jews, the Talmud premises the salvation of the Gentile on the fact that he or she engages in Torah.^{xxxv} How can someone engage in Torah who either has never heard of it or who wishes no part in Jewish life?

Torah is structurally parallel to Christ in Christianity. It is a Jewish way of affirming the universal in the particular. The Torah, which was offered to all other nations before Israel, is meant for all peoples.^{xxxvi} The righteous of all nations who are following their best lights are - in Jewish language - following the way of Torah.

A similar connection is made with the word covenant. It starts as a secular word but it is taken over to refer to God's relation to his chosen few at Sinai. Over time a covenant comes to have a more universal meaning. In Jewish terms God made a covenant with all peoples through Noah. According to the Talmud, salvation for the Gentiles depends on following the prescriptions of the covenant with Noah. For the Jew this belief refers to a broadly inclusive covenant but to a

non-Jew this language seems very limiting. How can Gentiles follow out the commands to Noah if they have never read the Bible and do not accept Jewish doctrines?

Once more the covenant with Noah provides a Jewish way of affirming the universal in the particular. All of the children of Adam and the descendants of Noah are part of the covenant relation. Christians, of course, assert their inclusion in a new or renewed covenant. The Qur-ān does not speak much about a covenant but does affirm a covenant as the metahistorical foundation of the relation of God and humanity.^{xxxvi} From a Jewish perspective, those non-Jews who avoid murder, idolatry, incest (the three absolute commands) are living according to the covenant.^{xxxvii}

When a rabbi friend refers to me as *An amateur Jew*, I take the phrase as it was intended, namely, as a compliment. To someone who did not appreciate the logic, such language could be offensive.

Islam has the same problem as do Christianity and Judaism in the way that its logic or grammar sounds intolerant. It speaks of *Islam* and *Muslim* and *Qur-ān* in ways that limit salvation to those believers. The Qur-ān seems to praise Muslims to the exclusion of everyone else. *You are the best people that has been brought forth for mankind.*

The Qur-ān is parallel not to the Bible but to Jesus as the Christ; it is the *Word of God*. The Qur-ān was given to Muhammed at particular times and places. It has been cherished by Muslims ever since. The Qur-ān is also said to be not a book but (as its name indicates) a recitation from a book which exists nowhere but in heaven, it is a text for all peoples. The Qur-ān itself says that every nation has its own messenger (10:48)^{xxxviii}. Thus, the Qur-ān - in a Muslim way of speaking - is the affirming of a universal revelation.

Similarly, Islam is not only the name of a religious institution founded in the seventh century C.E. It is an attitude that every person must have toward God in order to be saved. Outside of Islam - submission to God - there is no salvation. There is only one doctrine of unity which every religion has asserted and Islam came only to reaffirm what has always existed and thus to return to the primordial religion.^{xxxix}

Every child is born a Muslim is a Muslim belief that may sound outrageous. It merely indicates the universal meaning of the term Muslim. The strictures about being a true Muslim are meant for those who have professed to

be Muslim. In the language of Islam, only a true Muslim can be saved. Whoever believes in Allah and the last day and does good, they shall have their reward from their Lord. (2:62)

Similar to saying that someone is a true Christian or a true Jew, calling someone a true Muslim refers to all those who live by their birthright as Muslim and follow the path to the one God of all. Some of those who call themselves Muslim turn out to be false Muslims. Some of the true Muslims turn out to be Christian, Jewish or Buddhist. When I have been called a true Muslim I am grateful for the compliment.^{x1}

Why do these three religions use a logic and grammar so easily misunderstood? Why don't they just say anyone who is good goes to heaven? I think it is because that kind of generalization does not help anyone and it would undermine the power of religious doctrine. It would simply obscure the fact that people live particular lives and speak different languages.

For any religion to try to speak directly about the salvation of everyone would dissolve the religion into philosophical ethics. But what each of the religions finds difficult to grasp is that their particular way of pointing to the universal does not create a universal language. The fact that I intend to include the other is not necessarily experienced as a compliment by the other; no one wants to be part of someone else's system.

Religion lives on the basis of passionate commitment to particular events, persons, beliefs, causes. If the three Abrahamic religions were to disappear, religious passions would find expression elsewhere. Movements that can generate passionate commitment will always pose some danger.

Neither Jews, Christians nor Muslims have done a very good job educating their own people or explaining themselves to outsiders. Still, I would prefer to struggle for improvement with these profoundly human traditions rather than turn over religious passion to the -isms that have tried to replace traditional religion. Fascism, communism and nazism have probably been the worst -isms but every movement that has a name ending with -ism threatens to coerce the rest of us with its ideology while not having the play of ritual, humor and paradox that have been the salvation of Jewish, Christian and Muslim religions.

Jews, Christians and Muslims have been divided in the modern world, each trying to defend its own revelation. But if there is only one God, one creation, one revelation, one redemption, then there is urgent need for a conversation that

would open a better way of affirming one's own religion without insulting the other two. Admittedly, it is difficult enough to learn one's own religious tradition so that trying to master three is an impossibility. But we need a religious education which is aware when using terms such as chosen, covenant, grace, faith, revelation, redemption, that there are two other religions that have a legitimate share in the term. At the least, there must be an unambiguous affirmation of salvation beyond one's own religion even if theology cannot explain how.

In the Christian New Testament, the clearest standard of judgment for one's life is found in Matthew 25:31-46. The judge will say: I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink; I was a stranger and you welcomed me....@No test of denominational membership or orthodox doctrine is put forth. Who turns out to be AGod's people,@we have been warned, will be a surprise.

Human Uniqueness Revisited

Whatever human beings believe about life beyond death is based upon human experience. Even religions such as Christianity, Judaism and Islam that claim a divine revelation have to rely on the human experience of responding to the divine initiative. Those who are certain that there is simply nothing beyond death are likewise basing their certainty on the experience or experiences of this life. No conclusive evidence has appeared in the last five years or the last five hundred years to seal the case for something or nothing.

The best case that can be made would seem to be based on the widest and deepest experiences that humans have - with perhaps negotiation between wide and deep if those two are themselves in conflict. In commenting earlier on the meaning of Uniqueness,@I pointed out that human life is a peculiar tension between the two contrasting forms of uniqueness: differentiation that goes in the direction of exclusion by means of secure boundaries and differentiation that is open to an ever increasing inclusiveness.

Insofar as humans share space and time with other objects on earth, they are concerned with the vulnerability of their bodies. But insofar as humans are intellectual and spiritual beings, they know no inherent limits to thinking, willing and receptivity. Religious people do not see why they should believe that the things that they value most are at the mercy of the things they value least. Does disease or the decay of bodily organs simply erase the drive for beauty and meaning?

If one takes the uniqueness of increasing inclusion to be the more important

form, the uniqueness that is specifically human, then the trajectory of a human life is toward the possibility of greater openness to all humanity and the whole cosmos. Human experience would support the belief that death is a transition to further inclusiveness. As Karl Rahner suggests, death does not make the human being a-cosmic but rather pan-cosmic.^{xii} Freed from the limitations of this life's space and time, the human drive toward further inclusiveness is radically accelerated.

Religions maintain that practically all human beings get it wrong, or rather, they get it only partially right. For a variety of reasons, humans lead imperfect lives, their intellects and wills caught up in illusion. They need the discipline of a spiritual wisdom to extricate themselves from the individual and social obstructions that prevent them from realizing their immense potential. Here or elsewhere they will eventually have to open their minds, hearts and souls to a purifying truth that strips away pretense and hatred.

In the conditions of earthly life, truth and goodness in all their splendor are never available. We can make statements that are neither false nor empty but *the* truth - the whole truth and nothing but the truth - is beyond human capacity. We can know the good not only as object of our desires but as life that overflows itself, yet we cannot grasp the source of being, life and intelligibility. Religions at their best give intimations of a source beyond our power to comprehend. Unfortunately religions, insofar as they are subjected to the pressures of historical existence, can also be one of the very obstacles they claim to transcend.

Consider the claim to divine revelation in the Semitic or Abrahamic religions. The Unveiling of the divine makes sense only if the boundaries of perception are constantly being stretched. Whatever is claimed to re-present the divine reality - an event, a thing, a person, a community - can participate in the divine but is not identical with it. The credibility of the symbol does not depend upon length, breadth or coercive power. In fact, if human uniqueness is the guide, the enormous size of an object or the world-shaking character of an event is less likely to be revelatory than receptiveness to diverse and vulnerable beauty.

The religious person cherishes a small community or a series of events that historians may see as marginal. In some religions, one event in one person's life is believed to hold the key to all history. This belief is unintelligible if it does not lead in the direction of greater inclusiveness.

This Prophetic openness to all humanity and to the future as well as the past, is difficult to sustain when there is a threat to the community's existence. In

Christian history, the claim to interpret a divine revelation gave way to a claim to possess the Christian revelation. The language became fixed in the late sixteenth century as the Christian church, hampered by internal wars, was fending off the attacks of the new sciences.^{xlii}

If Christianity is to throw light on life and death today, it needs a dialogue with other religions that speak of divine revelation, as well as with secular culture and its revelations. The Christian religion, with its peculiar story of death and resurrection, is credible only if it is embedded in ordinary experience. Only if God is revealed in the rising of the sun in the sky can he be revealed in the rising of a son of man from the dead.^{xliii}

Jewish religion has been tempted by the same split that has affected Christianity in modern times: either defense of the symbol as if it were a Jewish possession or else abandonment of symbols for pure reason. Under extreme duress, the tradition becomes either revived or abandoned. Victor Frankl tells of an interview he had with a survivor of the death camp. She said that her only friend was the branch of a chestnut tree that she could see from her cell. She said that she often spoke with the tree. Frankl asked her what the tree had said. She said it replied: I am life, eternal life. Eliezer Berkovits comments on her story: Such are, of course, the unique expressions of unique people.^{xliiv}

The quality of the uniqueness, however, depends on the tradition in which it is embedded. The tree spoke and it spoke of life because of the attitude toward life and God's speaking that were the context of the woman's listening. In a world in which everything can speak of God, it is not preposterous that the tree said I am life, eternal life. A tree is a tree to be appreciated for its own beauty and usefulness. It is also a manifestation of eternal life. Either all occurrences are in some degree a revelation of God, or else there is no such revelation at all.^{xlv}

One can, of course, view the uniqueness of a human life as a narrowing down to the last moment, at which point dying is a uniquely isolating event. But human life can also be seen as a journey of deepening relation to one's ancestors and to the cosmos. In the latter framework, dying is unique acceptance into the matrix of relations which have always been there.

The concluding paragraph of Kubler-Ross's *On Death and Dying* uses two metaphors for human uniqueness. The first refers to the uniqueness of separation and extinction. Watching a peaceful death of a human being reminds us of a falling star, one of the million lights in the vast sky that flares up for a brief moment only to disappear into the endless night forever. To be a therapist to a

dying patient makes us aware of the uniqueness of each individual in the vast sea of humanity.⁶⁶

Kubler-Ross's second metaphor uses the contrasting meaning of uniqueness, a movement toward inclusiveness. It is a meaning of uniqueness better suited to the story that the book has told. A few of us live beyond our three score and ten years and yet in that brief time most of us create and live a unique biography and weave ourselves into the fabric of human history.⁶⁷ Uniqueness extends from person to humanity to the whole cosmos.

The ultimate truth of the human condition resists all attempts to jump beyond the particular existent. A whatever is actual is contaminated by its actuality. For the universal can never lend its full sanction to any particular.⁶⁸ When the human mind is scandalized by time and grasps for a universal truth, it comes up with abstract generalities. The universal is available, to whatever extent it is, in the depths of the particular.

Faith is expressed by a religious commitment that is particular and seemingly exclusive. But if faith, hope and love are genuine, the seeming exclusivity opens out into relations with no preordained limits. To love someone, as Thomas Aquinas said, is to love his or her relatives, which potentially includes the whole universe. Someone who says A you are the one and only one can mean A I am fully committed to you rather than A no one else is worthy of commitment.⁶⁹ Religions would not be improved by trying to create an eclectic unity. The most profound truths of religion will emerge only from dialogue which respects the different traditions. This dialogue has barely begun so that today what happens at death can only be glimpsed from within the differences of religious images and language.

Unity With Some Difference

The most fundamental divide among religions would appear to be whether in the end human individuality is preserved. The divide may be unbridgeable although it is possible that an alternative formulation of the question might narrow the difference. What is affirmed in one tradition may only seemingly be negated in another tradition. Traditions might agree on what they are opposed to while not (yet) finding a way to express their agreements. For example, all religions would agree that life is *not* a set of points with the last point being called death, but there is no agreement on how death is to be situated in relation to life.

For speculating on the ultimate state toward which human life goes, it is helpful to think of the human being as constituted by three elements or aspects.

The threefoldness of human life is suggested in both Eastern and Western thought. However, one has to acknowledge that there is a temptation to imagine the individual's life as a conflict of two parts, body/soul or matter/spirit. In that simple but dichotomous picture of the human being, one part is thought to be good, one part is evil. Liberation is then imagined as escape from the evil part which imprisons or infects the good part.

Popular forms of Platonism assume an opposition between an unchanging form or soul and a body whose senses and desires are a hindrance to the intellectual pursuit of truth. There are passages in Plato's dialogues that support this view, for example, Socrates's confidence that his soul would survive his body.^{xlix} However, Plato has a more complex picture of the human being as threefold. In one of his well-known images, two horses are pulling in opposite directions. One should note that the rider is a third element holding together the other two.

In the *Republic*, Plato has intellect and appetites at odds; but a swing vote lies with *thymos*, a word sometimes translated as *Aspiritedness*.^l Plato has a striking allegory near the end of the book comparing the human being to a man, a lion and a hydra. If the lion is lazy, the hydra with its irrational appetites takes over. If the lion is untamed, it takes over the man. The man has to train the lion which can control the hydra; in that way a unity and harmony are achieved.^l

A threefoldness is also suggested by some of the biblical literature. The spirit of God has been breathed into the human being. From the beginning, however, there has been a conflict of desires that lead to bloodshed and to trust in idols. The mortal flesh weighs down the spirit but is never condemned as evil.^{li} A resolution of the inner conflict depends upon coming into a transformed life. The prophets call the community back to the promises they have made and a life beyond mere fleshly desires. The belief in resurrection that eventually emerged carried the transformation beyond death.

In the New Testament, Paul articulates an anthropology in which flesh and spirit are in conflict. *If you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body you will live.*^{lji} Paul's words, taken out of context, can feed the dangerous temptation to view the world as good spirit imprisoned in evil matter. But Paul's context is that *the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains, while we wait for the redemption of our bodies.*^{ljj} Not just soul or spirit but the *mortal bodies* are to be transformed and saved. *It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body.*^{ljjv}

The phrase *Aspiritual body* would be an oxymoron in many contexts. Paul, like the bible as a whole, does not work from metaphysical concepts but from a pattern of development issuing in a condition which can only be described by a paradoxical phrase. The final condition is spiritual but is reached only by the transformation of bodily experience.

Working within a very different history, Hindu religion also reflects a conflict of desires. The individual has to discover that one's attachments are to illusions, to transitory goods that prevent humans from perceiving a deeper truth. The true spirit in the human is hidden from us and we may need more than one lifetime to realize the final truth.

According to Hindu tradition, we need a discipline of life to help us break free at death from the cycle of birth and rebirth. We have to be liberated from petty desires and attachments. Only when we have emerged from these illusions do we realize that the human spirit (*atman*) is identical with the divine spirit (*Brahman*).

Buddhism arose as a moral critique of Hinduism and the Hindu explanation of the individual's position in the world. While Hinduism begins with the perfecting of the self, Buddhism boldly declares that there is *No self*. The Buddhist interest, however, is not metaphysical debate but a criticism of selfishness and a rebellion against complacent acceptance of injustice. Buddhism is interested in selfless activity rather than a negation of the philosophical concept of self.

With its persistent refusal to accept any entities, Buddhism could be taken to be nihilistic. It is more accurately described as concerned with liberation from suffering and the interrelation of all experience. Beyond the cycle of birth, death and rebirth it refuses to speculate. It speaks in double negatives - about the not born, not become, not made, not compounded - to push language to the limit and to remind us that the most important things cannot be said. Its last word is not *Avoid* but *The void is void, also of voidness*. The religions that claim to have the *Word of God* might experience a healthy chastening effect by encountering Buddhism.

What might be indicated from a more detailed comparison of religions is that heaven, hell and similar pictures of an afterlife are necessary images for orienting human lives. Such images, however, can become idolatrous, feeding human selfishness instead of inspiring loyalty, love and an increasing openness to others. As even the most fervent believers surely recognize, any image of heaven or hell is a projection from earthly experience to a realm beyond our

power to imagine. The mystical strands in each of the religions, while retaining cultural differences, agree that there is no way beyond the double negatives - the affirmation of this world together with the denial of its limits - for speaking of ultimate reality.

If one starts from a threefoldness to human beings, the terms body, soul and spirit are perhaps as unbiased as one can find. Body and soul are not metaphysical elements so much as aspects of our experience. Body is not simply matter but the human immersion in the flux of earthly desires, delights and sufferings. Soul is not Aristotelian form but the experience of reflection, willing and the contemplation of beauty.

Spirit is a highly ambiguous term but ambiguity can be useful here. For a long while it had seemed that the *Aspiritual* was in decline in Western religions but it has vigorously reappeared in recent decades. The spirit/spiritual is the most likely meeting place for diverse religions and also for people who may reject what *Areligion* connotes but are open to a great beyond.

The key question when people use the term spiritual is whether it is a negation of bodily life or its fulfillment. If the spiritual is not to negate the body, one has to respect the historical journey with its slow development of a unified self. The body can become a *Aspiritual body* only when life, including death, is fully accepted.

Two distinct paths lie open for journeying to the spiritual. In the first, emphasis is placed upon a spiritual discipline that aims to purify the individual *Aego* of self-centered desires. The journey is mainly a withdrawal from those distractions that would hold the individual captive to desires that enslave.

The most fundamental drives of the body for food, drink and sex, along with the means to get them, can so dominate a life that human desire is shut down at a primitive level. The spiritual seeker knows that there are more subtle attachments, desires that are distinctly human, which form a stronger chain of bondage. Attachments to one's knowledge, reputation and good works is thought to be a worse danger because seemingly spiritual. The saying that *Athe corruption of the best is the worst,* was a mainstay of medieval piety.

This path seems to take a direct route to the spiritual. It is intent on one goal which is never lost sight of: release from *Aegoity* and contemplation of what is ultimately important. If one is to control unruly desires, a discipline of one's emotions is indispensable. Even those who are skeptical of this journey as a

lifetime project may recognize the value of many of the practices in it. A child or an adolescent who has not learned any self-control is headed for a life in disarray.

The other path evident in the history of religions does not reject this first but sees it as incomplete, and as a dangerous jumping from individual to the final good. Along this second path of personal development, soul and body must slowly work through their tensions on the way to the spiritual. Instead of withdrawal from the world, there is emphasis upon the joint development of person and community.

The experience of brotherhood or sisterhood provides the disciplining of the affections. A greater community is sought which can only emerge out of a struggle for justice. Thus, the spiritual is sought in roundabout fashion with excursions along side paths and immersion in the delights and sufferings of this world.

The danger in this second way is obvious. The goal can simply disappear from the map. One is so intent on doing good, on improving organizations and producing new ideas, that the spiritual purpose is submerged. As one's energy flags and death approaches, the activist for good causes may wonder if that's all there is. Nonetheless, if a life is truly devoted to love and justice, and not just a reputation for supporting good causes, then most if not all religions would call that a spiritual journey, even if God, heaven and salvation are not invoked.

Each of the world's great religions incorporates both paths, emphasizing one or the other. The mystical strand in each religion usually comes closest to uniting the two paths. Mysticism is intent on transcending all the divisions which wrack individuals and societies. Mysticism is a withdrawal from ordinary politics but it often has deeply political repercussions.

Mysticism has dangers on either side. Its stark quest for non-duality, or being united with God, can end in the despair of a dark night. Its refusal to play politics, which has a steadying connection to ordinary life, can take the form of violence. The mystic needs a community to remind him or her of ordinary concerns that no human can entirely neglect. The mystic needs patience of soul; instead of grasping for the end, one must quietly wait for the end.

Mysticism suggests that the final state of the humans is an overcoming of the dichotomy of subject and object. Mysticism can be misleadingly called atheistic in that it denies a theism that pictures God and humans as separate beings. A

god who is looked upon would not be god, a point that Meister Eckhart tried in vain to convey to his prosecutors.^{iv}

The alternative to subject and object need not be either an undifferentiated unity or a void. The richest human experience is an interpersonal and communal unity in which the opposition of personal difference nearly disappears. A subject/subject relation is not the separation of two things but a unity that preserves enriching differences. If love is our ultimate intimation of reality, then beyond heaven and hell is a unity that has been enriched by what we experience as personal love. Each of the religions provides a glimpse of that possibility

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 - iv. John Haught, *The Cosmic Adventure* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), 2.
 - v. Miguel de Unamuno, *The Tragic Sense of Life* (New York: Dover Publications, 1954), 20.
 - vi. G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (Garden City: Doubleday Image, 1959), 148.
 - vii. Samuel Beckett, *Endgame* (New York: Grove Press, 1958), 49, 70.
 - viii. Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York: Free Press, 1978), 340.
 - ix. W.P. Montague in John Baillie, *And Life Everlasting*, 192.
 - x. Edward Schillebeeckx, *Understanding Faith*, 12
 - xi. G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, 120.
 - xii. John Baillie, *And Life Everlasting* (New York: Scribner's, 1933), 62.
 - xiii. Studies indicate that many well-educated people believe that they are in communication with the dead; see Andrew Greeley, *Death and Beyond* (Chicago: St. Thomas More, 1976).
 - xiv. C.S. Lewis, *Essays Presented to Charles Williams* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1947), Preface.
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- xix. Abraham Heschel, *Jewish Education*, in *The Insecurity of Freedom*, Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1966), 119.
- xx. Qur'an 2:256.
- xxi. George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), 68.
- xxii. Jeffrey Russell, *The History of Heaven*, 128.
- xxiii. Augustine, *The Enchiridion on Faith, Hope and Love* (Chicago: Regnery, 1961).
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- xxv. Karl Rahner, *Christianity and Non-Christian Religions*, *Theological Investigations* (Baltimore: Helicon, 1966), V, 134.
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- xxvii. Lumen Gentium, sec. 16.
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xxxv. Frank Crusemann, *The Torah: Theology and Social History of Old Testament Law* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1996), 9; *Mekita Bahodesh*, 5.

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xxxvii. Jonathan Bishop, *The Covenant: A Reading* (Springfield: Templegate, 1983), 40.

xxxviii. S.H. Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972), 86.

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xlii. On the origin of Christian revelation, see Gabriel Moran, *Both Sides: The Story of Revelation* (New York: Paulist Press, 2002), chapter four.

xliii. William Temple, *Nature, Man and God* (London: Macmillan, 1951), 306.

xliv. Victor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*; Eliezer Berkovitz, *With God in Hell* (New York: Sandhedrin, 1979), 69.

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xlvi. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*, 276.

xlvii. William Ernest Hocking, *Living Religions and a World Faith* (New York: Macmillan, 1940), 57.

xlviii. Paul Knitter, *No Other Name* (New York: Orbis Books, 1985), 186.

xlix. Plato, *Apology*

l. Plato, *The Republic*, 588c-590a.

li. Robert Herford, *The Pharisees* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1962), 155. There are two inclinations or impulses: *yetzer hara* and *yetzer hatob*. Sometimes *yetzer hara* is said to be the source of evil. More accurately, the two have to be held in tension, similar to Plato's lion and hydra.

lii. Rom. 8:13

liii. Rom. 8:22-23.

liv. I Cor. 15:44

lv. C.F. Kelly, *Meister Eckhart on Divine Knowledge* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977, 15.