"AIMING AT HEAVEN"

ON THE DECLINE OF AFTERLIFE MOTIVATION IN MAINLINE CHURCHES

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Since afterlife motivation is so prominent in the NT, it's a strange phenomenon that it has so little play in contemporary mainline churches. So? Why?

1 The afterlife question is whether or not there's anything left of us after the funeral except our "remains"--ie, corpse, physical & social products, memories (ie, synaptic sparking in some few other brains still alive). While most religion involves itself in the question, the question in this form is strictly metaphysical, neutral with regard to any specific piety or even piety in general. The word, as "after-life," has been around for some time, at least since 1615. In 1815 somebody used it to refer to you when you're over the hill: "the later period of one's life." Since it's not a religion word, you'll not find it in your alphabetical religion sources (encyclopedias of religion, dictionaries of the Bible). You'll have to track it down under "heaven," "hell," & "eschatology."

But Tillich is right in saying that the after-death question was the heaviest, the weightiest, in the world in which the NT was written, the Hellenistic world. So of course it's prominent in the NT, whose preachers offered Jesus' resurrection as God's answer to the Mediterranian culture's deepest anguish. Come to think of it, remember Tillich's principle of correlation? The Christians' Easter answer correlated with the culture's afterlife question. If one's living in a culture in which the afterlife question isn't alive, then gospel preaching is offering answers to a question that's not being asked. So, here & now, <u>is the question being asked</u>, at least in the heart if not openly?

(To continue with Tillich's thumbnail cultural-historical analogy, is the Middle Ages' question, namely guilt, being asked? And meaninglessness, which he identifies as the question moderns ask? In preaching here & now, are guilt & meaninglessness effectively connectable with the afterlife question?)

2 Christianity began as a collective great <u>hope</u> for this & the coming age on & beyond earth. The more resistance it met, the more it individualized the hope, some of its prophetic-historical force being converted into an apocalyptic-personal, transhistorical vision & expectation (martyrdom & the Cross in reciprocal illumination). Jesus' wisdom sayings, being timeless, were a steadying force during the transvaluation from the eschatology of the group to the eschatology of the individual. The seed of <u>joy</u> was conversion through God's gracious forgiveness in Christ, the bloom of joy was the Christian life, the fruit of joy was on the other side of death, which thus was transition rather than destination. Humanity is never short on knowledge of the good or on worthy purposes & programs, but often on the power to perform. Paradoxically, gloriously, the more those early Christians rejoiced in their afterlife hope, the better they performed in this world.

3 But mainline-church leaders have **heterophobia** (no, not fear of the "other" sex, but fear of the "other" world, otherworldliness). I ran into it yesterday in a case analysis at Cape Cod Hospital. The hospital functionary laid out the case in some detail, & I asked "How come no religion data: what's the patient's religion & spirituality?" The functionary had no idea, yet the presenting problem was that the patient had no desire to continue living! We clergy were being asked how we might intervene. Why? As I saw it, to add forced living to forced feeding! I continued: "Does the patient have any afterlife ideas?" Before the functionary could answer, the early-middle-aged exec of our council of churches broke in with "How about *this* world?" I: "How about both worlds?" The exec is of a radically thisworldly seminary crop I helped educate, & is always popping off about the latest "issue," trying the patience of the saints. The afterlife is not in her individual-therapy & social-transformation kits. Her impoverished motivational range & thinworldly myopia is typical of mainline-church leadership & helps explain it effeteness.

4 Sow an act, reap a habit; sow a habit, reap a character; sow a character,

reap a destiny in this world & the next. A sober, even somber, old Puritan saying I picked up in childhood when such things were still floating in the American atmosphere, including the public schools, which were a Protestant invention. Read from below, the saying is a threat; from above, a promise & challenge. Clearly it was meant to be read both ways--as it were, the meat in a sandwich of meditational bread both above & below. Notice the double-double force: both promise & threat were from both society & God in both this world & the next. You were trapped into good behavior or hell-to-pay. Just what kids need. But just as that liberal council-of-churches exec was oriented to this world & NOT also to the next, our liberal establishment (schools, media, "culture") is oriented to promise & NOT also threat, positive motivation & NOT also aversive conditioning, love & NOT also fear. PBS did a program on AIDS education that never once mentioned the most important dissuader, viz fear. Stupidly, I said at the time & still say: in the 1950s our public schools terrified our childen with "The Russians are coming!" drills (who can be first in diving under your desk?). Well, the AIDS virus is not only coming, it's here: how about some scare tactics to tabu the two behaviors endangering the children, viz sex & drug-needles? The old sequence applies whether applied by Puritans or others: act to habit to character to destiny. We frighten childen away from many things that won't kill them (eg, hot stoves & poison ivy): we should frighten them away from behavior that may kill them (eg, poisons, drugs, & sex).

5 **Prudence** is a virtue scarely prized when lust & greed are let loose in a culture, as in ours now. To the lustful & greedy, the prudent seem selfish, which is exactly how the lustful & greedy seem to the prudent: selfishness is a wash item in the argument between them.

One dimension of prudence is the calculation of consequences to oneself & others: it is both self-regarding (thus a form of self-love, which the gospel enjoins) & others-regarding (which, too, the gospel enjoins: "Love thy neighbor as thyself"). Often I've heard it argued that "aiming at heaven" is selfish, to which I've replied that not doing so is stupid & a failure to love yourself (though also I've relativized the aim by saying "If you must get to heaven, you won't"). The central dynamic of Bunyan's PILGRIM'S PROGRESS is that the progress Christian is making is the action whose motivation is (as a good interpreter of the book put it) "aiming at heaven," the Celestial City, richly metaphored in the Bible's closing chapters. Not this world or the next, but both. "Your kingdom come on earth," & "I go to prepare a place for you." How poor a thing we make of the Christian religion if we reduce it either to an afterlife Orphism or a thisworldly "brotherhood of man" (to use an early Protestant-modernist phrase)!

6 The **hymnody** I have in my heart balances this- & other-worldliness. Last evening, after we'd had a good sing at a council-of-churches meeting, I quoted to Loree a 12-c. afterlife hymn, Bernard of Cluny's "Jerusalem the Golden." As a Hospice chaplain visiting the dying every day, she has a keen sense of life's brevity (on which today I bumped into this in Shakespeare's sonnet #15: "the conceit of this inconstant stay"). Said she, "Show it to me in our hymnal." Said I, "It wouldn't be in our hymnal." She: "Why not?" "Ours is a modern hymnal, shy on the afterlife. But it would be in our old hymnal." And it was. By every test it qualifies as a hymn of first-rank greatness. I hadn't intended to lay it on you, but why not? Is the language somewhat archaic & even arcane? It's biblically rich & well worth explaining to a congregation just before it's sung.

Jerusalem the golden, with milk and honey blest, / Beneath thy contemplation sink heart and voice oppressed. / I know not, O I know not, what joys await us there, / What radiancy of glory, what bliss beyond compare! // They stand, those halls of Zion, all jubilant with song, / And bright with many an angel, and all the martyr throng. / The Prince is ever in them, the daylight is serene; / The pastures of the blessed are decked in glorious sheen. // There is the throne of David, and there, from care released, / The shout of them that triumph, the song of them that feast, / And they, who with their leader, have conquered in the fight, / Forever and forever are clad in robes of white. // O sweet and blessed country, the home of God's elect! / O sweet and blessed country, that eager hearts expect! / Jesus, in mercy bring us, to that dear land of rest, / Who art, with God the Father and Spirit, ever blest!"

So the hymnist copped out on this life, right? Wrong. The opposite! His dreaming & aiming at there made him more joyful & productive here.