

BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVES ON

THE AFTERLIFE

of 14 Aug 70
of Willis E. Elliott
to Hudson Institute
--assigned by
the director,
Herman Kahn

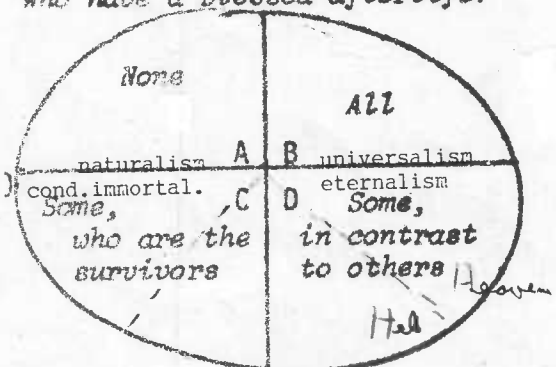
This sketch footnotes Exhibit C9d(1)(f) and illustrates what can happen to a religious doctrine when it loses the spotlight in a culture--which entails loss of religious-institutional and political weight, and consequent loss of power in the roles the doctrine served and that served the doctrine. What tends to happen is that the doctrine (1) is privatized, (2) becomes optional for the faithful, and (3) is purified and illumined in relation to its primal functioning and its roots....When in Latin America (as elsewhere) the doctrine of the afterlife lost force as opiate and goad, scholars, clergy, and the devout generally, came to understand the biblical heritage of this doctrine something like this:

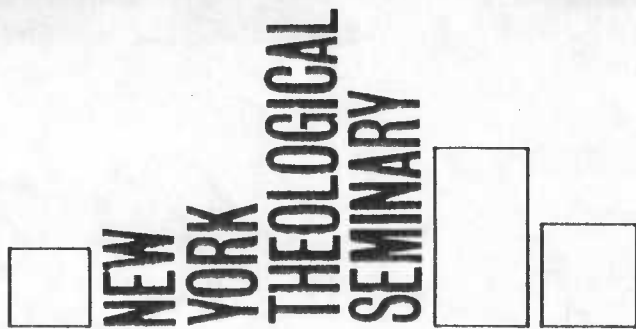
In the OLD TESTAMENT, the afterlife seldom gets on stage and never is in the spotlight--largely because the tribal psyche experienced the future (the beyond individual life) as corporate: Israel would endure and rejoice, and one's sons would see the day of Shalom. Except when the community was under severe threat to its prosperity or even existence [and the focus accordingly shifted to prayers and dreams of a less painful, less precarious future], emphasis was on the present time-and-world....The NEW TESTAMENT likewise puts the major emphasis on the present, with the afterlife confidently assumed [in the light of Jesus' Resurrection] and occasionally appealed to but in the background (the Synoptics [Matthew, Mark, Luke], Acts of the Apostles, Letter of James).... Intermediate position here: First Peter....In the Letters of Paul and in the Gospel of John, the present has a constant quality of anticipation, and the blessed-afterlife quality is thus available to believers now ("eternal life," "realized eschatology").... Intermediate position here: the Letter to the Hebrews....The Revelation of John (the Bible's last book), written in a time of severe persecution, is concerned with the believers' present endurance, which it sanctions with its emphasis on the blessed afterlife of the spiritual heroes --as a hope-focus in joyous contrast to present sorrows. Thus the Bible is "together" in its promise-offer of the continuing divine benevolence: God loves us, and gives us as much "life" as we're willing to receive.

But how picture the afterlife? Here the Bible presents four views, from which a linear consciousness would unfortunately choose one (rejecting the others)--but an esthetic, agglutinative consciousness (e.g., "Chinese") can hold all four and squeeze each for its human worth....

(A) The first picture is chthonic, the dead as "shades" of undifferentiated condition if indeed even real, the negative of positive "the living." Man dies like a dog, which demotes man to fellow-creaturehood with the rest of nature and promotes dogs. (Value: good for psychic and social peace, and ecology.)....(B) Universalism. (Value: victorious benevolence, in God and man.)....(C) Conditional immortality. (Value: the ultimate in religious seriousness.)....(D) Eternalism: everlasting heaven and hell. (Value: the ultimate in ethical seriousness.).... Each picture is appropriate at various times in one's life and in the life of one's groups.

Who have a blessed afterlife?





Willis Elliott

Professor at Large
Acquisitions Supervisor

FIVE WEST TWENTY-NINTH STREET — NEW YORK, NEW YORK 10001 — (212) 532-4012

309 Lake Elizabeth Drive, Craigville, MA 02636.....Phone 508.775.8008

DEE SCHWEITZER-HAUG, 10 Feb 92

Dear Dee,

Sorry so long in answering. Rearranging my study (to accomodate the new downstairs kitchen) put me behind in correspondence.

Unlike mine, your handwriting is almost as easy to read as print! A fact I'm sure your teachers appreciate (if you don't type your papers).

Thanks for family details, & your affirmation of your parents' "Christian charity." You too: up to about your age, it's hard to express charity to one's parents! It gets easier as one's own life gets harder, or at least more complex in ideas, feelings, & relationships.

"Seminary is a wrenching experience! I am in need of a mentor...." Have you found a fellow-student you could stay overnight with? You may not need a mentor who is more advanced than you: a conversational partner at your level could be even better--eg, to talk over your Martin Luther readings with (even if that person hasn't read those particular readings). You have indigestion not from overeating but from undertalking with at least one peer. (Prayer, such conversation, & Christian action are the digestive juices for a heavy diet of religion-reading.)

As for the burden of your letter, the hell-or-universalism issue (as it hit you in your professor's exposition of the third oracle of Amos), Jn.3.16's alternatives are not hell or salvation but annihilation ("perish") or salvation. This was the dominant view among the early Christians. Endless punishment is the apocalyptic counterpoint to endless bliss & is a time-dimension reading of the fact of permanent loss. I've no doubt that turning away from God, choosing darkness rather than light, results in permanent loss even if only of the joy in God in God's people one misses while turned away (a view that can accomodate ultimate universalism). As for "endless," it fits Greek better than Jewish apocalypse (2P. is the NT's only Greek apocalypse); "age-long" fits Jewish apocalypse better (&, again, can accomodate ultimate universalism). Evangelism is inviting people, through the door of repentance & faith, into now-&-forever fellowship with God in Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit with God's people; only secondarily is it warning people to avoid permanent loss, "hell" (though it was primary in the sermon Loret & I heard in a fundamentalist church yesterday, & is primary in the Qur'ai). The Bible presents four answers to *Who will be saved?* (Put them on a pie-graph.) (1) Some, the rest ceasing to be; (2) Some, the rest being lost but continuing to be (the hyperbolic rhetoric of apocalypticism); (3) All; (4) None (the ancient Hebrew view, though "shades" continue). I call these conditionalism, eternalism, universalism, & naturalism. As I explained in #33, each has its proper use in Christian ministry....As for "the failure of God," it's penultimate only (as in the Cross).

Love, Grace, & Peace,