

Is This the Right Question?

"The Man upstairs, if any, will be kind to me. Never mention God to me again."

Our fisherman-neighbor on Cape Cod was packing 550 pounds of squid he'd just caught, and this was his reply to my asking him how it is between him and God. The occasion, last summer, was my commiserating with him on the suicide-death of his son...

...and, in the same cavalier conceit that God, "if any," is grandfatherly-indulgent rather than fatherly-disciplinary, at the funeral of a scoundrel I picked up the buzz that "He's gone to a better place."

How did the pink cloud of this sentimental amorality descend upon us?

First, God became "if any," only an idea, and a disposable idea at that.

Next, hell died. The afterlife, "if any," became, for everybody, a morally unserious paradise, a post-mortem utopia of bliss.

Finally—as feedback from the de-moralized afterlife—*this* life became morally unserious, a matter of taste rather than of truth, of opinion rather than of judgment. Religion had already become privatized. Now morals and ethics retreated from the public square.

Conclusion: Ideas function as real—as facts—no matter their relationship to any theory of reality. Both beliefs and their denial have **consequences** for both personal and societal life. "Pragmatism" is philosophy's word for our human obligation to anticipate consequences and make here-and-now on-the-ground decisions in their light.

IDEAS are born, evolve, get sick—but don't die. In sickness and in health, they hang around within our human grasp. As we grab them, we sort them, and the ones we hang onto determine how we see-and-live-in the world—that is, our *religion*.

Well, what idea of personal destiny are *you* hanging onto, and why?

Here are the four options:

a) There's **no** afterlife, we die like dogs. Let's call this "naturalism" and see its value in narrowing the gap between us and our fellow-creatures. It promotes dogs, who (in my opinion) deserve promotion.

b) There's a good afterlife for **everybody**. Let's call this "universalism." I've already illustrated its sick forms. Its healthy form is the conviction of love's total victory over hate and indifference. Cover to cover, through a riot of stories, the Bible tells the Story that the holy and righteous God is love, "not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance" (in the New Testament, Second Peter 3:9).

c) Once you're born, you're **stuck** with unending consciousness. When you die, you go either to the Good Place or the Bad Place and stay there forever and ever. Let's call this "eternalism." It assumes the Greek idea that each human being has an everlasting "soul" separable at death from the body. The West's basic mind—in and beyond the Bible—strands together the Hebrew and the Greek minds. The Hebrew mind holds to the integrity of the outer-visible life (*basar*) and the inner-invisible life (*lev*)—so sometime after death, "body" and "soul" must come together—as in Jesus' resurrection, and the final resurrection of all the dead for judgment. This point of view is the ultimate in ethical seriousness, and it honors the Greek doctrine of the immortality of the soul. As it has the most rhetorical power, it's favored by evangelists "preaching for souls." But it is blasphemous in viewing God as an eternal torturer. In the words of a 19th-century contrarian woman, George Eliot, "Father, I choose. I will not have a heaven haunted by far-off cries from hell. My heart has grown too big with things that might be." I can still hear the quiet defiance of those words as they were on more than one occasion quoted (his white beard shaking) by my long-ago tennis partner at the University of Chicago, the Rev. Dr. E. E. Carr, a Christian Marxist, first editor (near the beginning of the 20th century) of THE CHRISTIAN SOCIALIST. That woman and that man had hearts so humane, so compassionate as to be enraged by the very idea of torture as ever an appropriate punishment, to say nothing of *endless* torture.

d) Life is a **gift** of God, and gifts may be turned down. That Greek notion that you get born and are stuck with consciousness forever and ever violates the nature of gift. That fisherman's son came to say "No thanks" to God's gift of life: he committed suicide. After we die, some of us may say "Enough, I want out of here, out of consciousness." So, to the breaking of God's heart, some fade away from the light off into the darkness of nonexistence. Let's call this "conditional immortality" or "annihilationism." It seems to have been the most common view among the early Christians (as in the Gospel of John 3:16). This point of view is the ultimate in religious seriousness, and it honors the Hebrew and Christian doctrine that life is—on both sides of death—a gift from God. (Adam and Eve were ejected from Eden lest, on their own and against the will of God, they eat of the tree of life and attain immortality ["live forever": Genesis 3:22].) (Yes, this is my point of view, though all views of life's ultimates should be held with humility in the presence of mystery.)

Our heaven/hell question this week is a good question, but **is it the right question?** Daily, we Christians pray what Jesus taught us, "**the Lord's Prayer**"—and it doesn't even mention heaven and hell. It's not about our selfish anxiety to enter into heaven. It's about unselfish entry into the needs of the earth—everybody's need of "daily bread," everybody's need of "forgiveness" (the outer and inner conditions of peace). And it premises all—all life and thought and action—on the sovereignty, providence, and promise of God (my translation): "Our Father in heaven, may our lives honor your holy name. Your kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven." In and as Jesus, God came to *earth*. He preached and lived "the kingdom [rule] of God" "on earth as...in heaven." In the ancient baptismal phrase, he died to save us from "sin, death, and the devil." He was "bodily" resurrected, looking forward to our "bodily" resurrections. (The *earthiness* of all this is splendidly spelled out in this week's first published response, by Tom Wright, the most eminent living scholar of the New Testament.)

Comments

Please report offensive comments below.

Hi! I'm John Strass and i like your site!
http://www.blinklist.com/cheap_viagra_online_from_ca/ > cheap viagra
Thank you!

POSTED BY: CHEAP VIAGRA | FEBRUARY 2, 2008 3:23 PM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

Sensible christians is that what lukewarm christians are referred to now. Just something to think about. Sincerely, Thomas Paul Moses Baum.

POSTED BY: THOMAS BAUM | JULY 6, 2007 10:55 AM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

To Anonymous of July 3, 2007 8:41PM: That is pretty much the same thing that the religious leaders of Jesus's day said about Him. Thank You. Sincerely, Thomas Paul Moses Baum.

POSTED BY: THOMAS BAUM | JULY 5, 2007 7:06 PM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

Hey bub. If Odin's the true god, why is it that he got his ass thumped by the silver surfer?

POSTED BY: WOLVERINE | JULY 4, 2007 10:43 AM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

Thanks, Mr. Elliott, for an intelligent look at the possibilities of heaven and hell. Thanks for voicing what I have always felt. froggie

POSTED BY: FROGGIE | JULY 4, 2007 8:24 AM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

Give yourself to ODIN the One True God.
All others are False Gods and are to be avoided
if you wish to spend eternity in Valhalla.
There is no God but ODIN the warrior God.
Surrender now and enjoy His Love and protection
for ever and ever and ever and ever and ever.Amen.

POSTED BY: ANONYMOUS | JULY 4, 2007 2:12 AM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

You might call this great faith:

""The Man upstairs, if any, will be kind to me. Never mention God to me again.""

You know? That could be great faith.

"Our fisherman-neighbor on Cape Cod was packing 550 pounds of squid he'd just caught, and this was his reply to my asking him how it is between him and God. The occasion, last summer, was my commiserating with him on the suicide-death of his son..."

Funny bout them suicides.

POSTED BY: PAGANPLACE | JULY 3, 2007 11:15 PM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

Thomas Baum
You are what Sigmund Freud would call-Bananas!
Your wackiness helps create atheists,so deranged
and beyond reality are your infantile fantasies.
You give sensible christians a bad name.

I bet you believe in UFO's too, and alien abduction.
And monsters and fairies.
Watch out for the Boogiemán.

POSTED BY: ANONYMOUS | JULY 3, 2007 8:41 PM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

viejita...

Good plan. I have found that rational thought is a very reliable guide in my life and choices. It isn't hard - take the "do unto others..." concept and apply it.

I know that: (a) we live in a universe in which cause and effect always apply (b) over time, the things we used to ascribe to divine forces end up being explained in a rational manner and (c) just because we don't know everything it doesn't follow that we know nothing.

Heaven and hell make so little sense and reflect so poorly on the god required to have them exist, it is simply not rational.

POSTED BY: PERSON UNKNOWN | JULY 3, 2007 6:52 PM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

The other option is that we do go thru a judgement, that is what the meaning of vengeance is Mine says the Lord, not by the way does He say revenge is mine. The Second Person of the Trinity of God did not become a human being to let us off the hook so to speak but to be the Saviour of the entire human race and then He asked of us to "Come follow Me". He also said, "He who is without sin cast the first stone", He did not say he who is with lesser sin or whose sin is forgiven, cast the first stone. There sure does seem to be a lot of stone throwers among some of those that call themselves christians. Every human being that ever was, is or will be are going to be in the Kingdom of God, I look past heaven to the Kingdom where ALL TEARS SHALL BE DRYED, ALL FEARS SHALL DIE AND LOVE WILL PERMEATE ALL. I don't really know much about the Kingdom except that it will be better than anybody could ever imagine. New heavens and a new earth, sound familiar. God is Pure Love, not the hate-filled, egotistical, revenge seeking being that so many people that call themselves christians think that He is, of course there are some people that call themselves christians that actually are. I repeat God is a searcher of hearts and minds not religious affiliations or lack thereof. True religion is taking care of widows and orphans. Some people seem to let their religious affiliation and even the bible get in the way of God. satan himself quoted directly from the bible, remember and lots of people use the bible to justify a lot of garbage. I am not here to try and convince anyone of anything just to let you know that God wins Total Victory, satan loses, it really does not matter what you believe, Truth is Truth. Sincerely, Thomas Paul Moses Baum.

POSTED BY: THOMAS BAUM | JULY 3, 2007 6:25 PM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

The concept of life after death like all concepts is mental and not physical. Therefore we can say with certainty that it is in our heads and put there by nature for a very good reason, it allows us to cope with death. The person is not dead but gone on to "a better land I know" (from "Old Black Joe"). That which is in our minds at birth bubbling up at a funeral is not a perversion.

Has it been warped, perverted for sinister reasons? Is the notion of hell the outcropping of God's love of us or mans love of that possessed by his fellow man? What does God have to do with it anyhow?

Hell is a gun held to the head. Do what the holy one says else hell followed by "God needs the money to spread His word" and a passing of the plate. Looks a lot like an ordinary robbery to me, not as honest as one robbing a bank who makes no pretense about what he's doing.

See the map of the universe at <http://www.hoax-buster.org> It locates all the significant places. There's this flat earth joined to the next flat earth by the nebol bridge and even locates hell beneath the bridge. Religion, "faith in God" is belief there is a demon on the nebol bridge preventing all from crossing it. The Reverend seems to think that's an absolute certainty while at least one person at the funeral was bright enough to say it, the demon guarding the gates to the next life is a hoax.

Hoax, the necessary ingredient in the con, confidence in a man that takes money in exchange for nothing. But then it could be an ordinary robbery of the type done by ancient holy ones. "Do what I say or else hell."

POSTED BY: BGONE | JULY 3, 2007 12:21 PM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

Great Question! But it would be good to consider what Jesus said -- read his parables on the Kingdom of God and then consider whether He thought that everyone was going to heaven. Or how about the Apostles Creed with judging the quick and the dead?

"Life is a gift of God and gifts may be turned down." But is your life a gift to you (or only to you)? The son who committed suicide was a gift of God to his parents, friends and perhaps even strangers -- his action deprived those folks of God's gift to them.

POSTED BY: JOHNV | JULY 1, 2007 7:47 AM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

Mickster's idea is a good one, although I fear topic #3 would be unlikely to inspire any rigorous thinking or discourse. Most likely you'd get a lot of cute, pointless and heartwarming little testimonies, like the chain e-mails that circulate among office workers.

If On Faith doesn't follow through, how about we hijack a thread ourselves: starting with
1)Rational Thought: What is it and what is its role in your life?

POSTED BY: VIEJITA DEL OESTE | JULY 1, 2007 12:21 AM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

SallyQ, JonM:

How about a column that alternates weekly with this one that focuses on other worthy aspects of human thought and behavior say
1)Rational Thought: What is it and what's its role in your life, or 2) Logic and Reason: a help or a hindrance for todays modern American or
3) Loving Kindness - How does in manifest in our daily life, 4) Basic Human Values: What Would Henry David Thoreau life tell us about
ourselves today? 5) Self-Reliance: Being a moral/ethical person without God/Heaven and/or Hell.

Cheers,

Mickster

POSTED BY: MICKSTER | JUNE 30, 2007 9:00 PM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

It could be that our brains and consciousness are like radio waves and radios or television sets. Our brains recognize and house
consciousness during our lives on earth. The brain does not create consciousness any more than a TV set creates the radio waves that
cause sound and pictures on a screen.

When a radio breaks, the radio waves can still be recognized by other receivers. The brain is unique to each person, so the thoughts that
arise are unique, also. We do not all perceive the same television program because our brains are not all standardized sets.

On the other hand, I could be completely wrong. Perhaps we should all worship Zeus or a tree in the back yard.

POSTED BY: PAUL H. | JUNE 30, 2007 2:25 PM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

Yes:

It's about unselfish entry into the needs of the earth—everybody's need of "daily bread," everybody's need of "forgiveness" (the outer and
inner conditions of peace). And it premises all—all life and thought and action—on the sovereignty, providence, and promise of God.

No:

Our Father in heaven, may our lives honor your holy name. Your kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven." In and as Jesus, God came to
earth. He preached and lived "the kingdom [rule] of God" "on earth as...in heaven." In the ancient baptismal phrase, he died to save us
from "sin, death, and the devil." He was "bodily" resurrected, looking forward to our "bodily" resurrections. (The earthiness of all this is
splendidly spelled out in this week's first published response, by Tom Wright, the most eminent living scholar of the New Testament.)

When did it say that God sent himself? Hmm.. I coulda sworn Jesus was his SON. I must have missed something in the evangelical
nonsense. Can't we all just pretend that Christianity is truly universalizing -- whatever happened to loving thy neighbor, the notion of peace
and childlike kindness,

I'm converting to Buddhism.

POSTED BY: ANONYMOUS | JUNE 30, 2007 12:42 PM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

as previously written garbled, that is to say the least, that was a terrible article

POSTED BY: CAPTIN AMERICA | JUNE 30, 2007 10:34 AM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

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You said it, Mr. Mark.

BTW, Anonymous, "remorse" isnt' a verb, so I'm not quite sure what you were getting at, either.

POSTED BY: SHEILA | JUNE 30, 2007 8:42 AM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

Wow. What a garbled piece of prose. Difficult to read. In my role as an editor, I'd say it "didn't scan."

POSTED BY: MR. MARK | JUNE 30, 2007 3:29 AM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

Let us remember. If we believe the Bible then we believe the Bible. Not what I choose to believe. If evangelicals are wrong in our interpretation of Scripture and you are correct, then we all go to Heaven. If the Believers in Heaven and Hell and eternal judgement are correct in our interpretation, then I remorse in your soul while on this earth. Scripture teaches that there tears are wiped away in Heaven. I take this to mean, quite literally, that our memory of this life and those who do not join us in the glory of God will not pass into Heaven with us because that would cause sadness and sorrow. Heaven is a place of peace and rejoicing.

POSTED BY: ANONYMOUS | JUNE 29, 2007 5:12 PM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

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