

The History of Heaven and Hell

BY R I K K W A T T S

How relevant to the modern world are heaven and hell? Our longing for justice, which derives in part from an increasing sense of human dignity, almost demands a final accounting. Likewise our deepest longings to be loved and to love, also tied to our awareness of human dignity, make it difficult to accept that a less than perfect world is all there is.

Where do the Christian notions of heaven and hell come from? How relevant are they in the modern world? The three books reviewed here concentrate, each in their own way, on the first question; but in doing so they offer clues for answering the second.

Alan Bernstein is a medievalist who set out to write an introductory essay and ended up with a book, *The Formation of Hell: Death and Retribution in the Ancient and Early Christian Worlds* (Cornell University Press, 1993; 392 pp., \$21.50 paperback). His fundamental thesis is that the Christian notion of hell as “a divinely sanctioned place of eternal torment for the wicked” is a late development among views of after-death existence (p. 3). In a partially thematic, partially chronological treatment, Bernstein briefly examines ancient Mesopotamian and Egyptian ideas before concentrating on Greco-Roman, Jewish, and finally Christian perspectives.

Initially, the afterlife was neutral; the righteous and wicked shared the same shadowy fate. (In the Greek tradition, only particularly wicked heroes suffered.) But this created problems: why should the righteous dwell together with the wicked? Already hinted at in very early Egypt (in stories

about Osiris, the god of the dead) and the Homeric period (in worship of Demeter, a goddess of agriculture), a bifurcation emerges wherein the moral or enlightened quality of one's life determines one's fate (e.g. the writings of Plato and Plutarch, and the book of Daniel). Later, religiously skeptical Roman authors, like Cicero and Lucian, use this notion to strengthen the state or to foster virtue; in their thought, the opponent of civic virtue becomes a candidate for hell, and hell becomes a sublimated desire for vengeance (p. 202). This utilitarian approach is foreign to Jewish and Christian thinkers for whom the destiny of the wicked was a question of God's justice. But it was the very question of justice, when set alongside the mercy of a God who himself was a victim, that raised serious questions for Christians. Is hell annihilation or eternal suffering? And if the latter, is there any escape? Hence the tension between the early theologians Origen (185-232 A.D.), who believed in the reforming character of hell such that even death itself will be reconciled (Colossians 1:20), and Augustine (354-430 A.D.), for whom perfection implied immutability, who could allow no further character change in those persons consigned to heaven or hell after the final judgment. This tension is with us still.

Bernstein covers a vast field and we are greatly in his debt. But his strength is also his weakness. In the biblical materials, where I have some expertise, there are significant problems, including a number of exegetically dubious discussions and the failure to appreciate the occasional nature of Paul's writings: does Paul's relative silence really mean that he "doesn't have a clear idea of hell"

(p. 207), or just that he feels no need to develop this topic in his letters? Consequently one feels uneasy in trusting Bernstein's detail in other places. There are also problems with the larger thesis. While the arrangement and argument implies a development

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from neutral to moral conceptions of hell, Bernstein allows that the ideas are "historically concurrent" (p. 107). The reality appears more complex than the book's linear organization suggests.

Nevertheless, and in spite of the largely descriptive nature of the book, it raises important questions. What drives our ideas of discipline in the afterlife? To put it crudely, is it self-focused and utilitarian, or grounded in a reality beyond us? To what extent is a more ordered human society, dependent as it is on a more defined notion of justice (which is a moral abstraction) and a growing sense of human dignity (which is an experience),

responsible for the notion of settling accounts in the afterlife? Does hell become more horrid as human beings become more significant, and with it torments that are increasingly suited to the crime (as in the second century Gnostic writing, *Apocalypse of Peter*)? We will return to these later.

One of Bernstein's points, that our environment influences our perception of hell, is closely detailed in Piero Camporesi's *The Fear of Hell: Images of Damnation and Salvation in Early Modern Europe* (translated by Lucinda Byatt; University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991; 221 pp., \$49.50 hardcover). Perhaps in keeping with its subject matter, Camporesi's style and content is flamboyantly Baroque. (In spite of the title, his material is limited to Jesuit preaching in seventeenth century Italy.) Offering an almost overwhelming compendium of lurid images, Camporesi shows how the geography and punishments of hell mapped the great changes of that century. Under Dante's hand the "Aristotelian compass and a Thomastic square" had transformed the medieval hell into a "rigorously geometric and minutely controlled" Florentine city of graded inhabitants. But when faced with emergent and unrestrained Baroque sensuality, the fire and ice disappeared and hell became a cesspool resembling the worst of primitive working conditions where overcrowded inhabitants were pressed into a seething mass of reeking, violating promiscuity and shameful diseases, which was a horrifying prospect for an elite audience. (Hell is indeed "other people.") Such horrors could not long be endured, and gradually the dandies and skeptics turned to satire to blunt its sting. Finally, with the restraint and refinement of the eighteenth century, hell too became more refined, and under the influence of Galilean science was even removed to the Sun (because it was located in the center of the universe in Galileo's world system). But when this more civilized version of hell lost its power to morally reform people, the universal fire and the scandalous mix of the noble and the plebe returned. Our conception of hell is far more closely linked to our present experience than we might otherwise consider.

Although most of his previous work likewise concentrated on hell, Jeffery Burton Russell makes a radical change in direction in *A History of Heaven: The Singing Silence* (Princeton University Press, 1997; 256 pp., \$15.95 paperback). Professor of History and Religious Studies at the University of California, he offers a loving and profoundly stimulating foray into conceptualizations of heaven. This title is also misleading since the focus is on the Christian heaven, with some other traditions, such as Jewish and Greek, being mentioned only as contributing influences. But the title thought, "Singing Silence," captures perfectly the mystery and apparent antinomies that immediately arise when our finite minds attempt to grapple with the foundation of all human existence. This is because, for Russell, to understand heaven is about our existential longing to understand the self, others, the cosmos, and God (p. 3).

The problems facing serious reflection on heaven are many: Is heaven here among us, or beyond? Is it attained primarily through the intellect (as Thomas Aquinas taught) or through love, or will (as in Bernard of Clairvaux)? Is it primarily individual or communal? Is God ultimately unknowable, or can the intellect grasp some things? Is it the beatific vision of God through a penetrating awareness of God's outward acts (as in the Eastern tradition), or is it an unmediated experience of his essential being (as understood in the West)? Is it experienced immediately on death or only after the final judgment? To what extent are we united with God (which is called "divinization" in spiritual theology, especially in the Eastern tradition) and yet maintain our individuality? If body and soul are separated at death, how and at what point is our human unity maintained or restored? Can we speak of embodied and conscious existence in a place which is at once no place and all places, and where all is the eternal present? How does one reconcile the theological need for abstraction with the everyday desire for physical images? Faced with such profound questions, modern "concrete" language is utterly inadequate. Instead, because reality is at bottom personal and moral, any

serious talk about heaven must necessarily be metaphorical and allegorical, because only such language can express our ideas of fundamental reality.

Taking a roughly chronological approach, Russell first examines the Christian heaven's Greek and Jewish antecedents. Platonic dualism, Aristotelian physics, and Ptolemaic geography envisaged the individual soul's upward flight from the discarded body into a hierarchy of outer spheres (air, ether, planets, stars,

and finally the *primum mobile*). To the Jewish mind, however, both body and creation are good; so, heaven often is conceived as coming to a restored earth inhabited by resurrected and embodied persons. While the Greek notion of upward movement was largely accepted, it was the attempt to reconcile Greek immortality of the soul with Jewish bodily resurrection that would set Christian thinkers their greatest problem.

Greek views envisaged the soul's upward flight from the discarded body. To the Jewish mind, however, both body and creation are good, with heaven conceived as coming to a restored earth inhabited by resurrected and embodied persons. Reconciling Greek immortality of the soul with Jewish bodily resurrection would be Christian thinkers' greatest problem.

Holding to their Jewish origins, the earliest Christians envisage a communal salvation where heaven, already breaking in with the presence of the kingdom, will not be completed until the descent of the heavenly Jerusalem/Zion and a transformed Garden of Eden. Against the Gnostics who denigrated the body, the bodily and transforming resurrection of Jesus provides the pattern for the saints. But the ambiguity of the Greek words for soul, spirit, body, and flesh foreshadowed complexities to come.

Russell then outlines the Christian struggle to give the Jewish idea of heaven a metaphysical basis in the world of Greek rationality. Western Christianity, in a parting of ways with the Eastern Church, thinks philosophy is not up to the task of reconciling the Jewish and Greek notions of heaven, while monasticism envisions a more ascetic heavenly existence. Later, monastic decline and the growth of cities, universities, and ecclesiastical hierarchy underlie the tension between the late medieval scholastic (or university) and mystical visions of heaven. This tension reflects more a matter of emphasis than strict dichotomy, for the scholastics understood that reason goes only so far, and many mystics were skilled in scholastic thought. Through all these chapters we also see clearly the struggle to give some kind of concrete expression to the ineffable, whether through vision, heavenly journey, or mystical poetry. Arguably the best of all, the chapters on Dante are a fitting climax “because beyond Dante no merely human word has gone” (p. 151). Given Russell’s deeply sympathetic treatment, we are inclined to agree, though I would have liked some analysis of Dante’s combining Aquinas and Bernard.

The history of heaven is a complex topic, and credibly describing the good is far more difficult than dealing with lurid evil. Nevertheless, Russell’s deep sensitivity and love for his subject make him an able guide. He concludes, “Heaven is whatever and whenever God wants it to be. More deeply, heaven is where God is, in the rose of fire that keeps opening dynamically in one eternal moment. We have loved the stars too much to fear the night. So shall every love every love more enkindle, until the cosmos coruscates with loving light, living more and ever more” (p. 189).

How relevant to the modern world are the Christian notions of heaven and hell? Our longing for justice, which derives in part from an increasing sense of human dignity, almost demands a final accounting. Our deepest longings to be loved and to love, also tied to our awareness of human dignity, make it difficult to accept that a less than perfect world is all there is. Thus, the history of heaven and hell reflect our deepest existential longings about the nature of reality. To say this in another way, we might ask: Is ours merely a utilitarian existence, focused only on this present life, where to undergird our moral actions we employ the belief in eternal punishment or reward beyond this life? Or is there a greater, ineffable, and necessarily personal God who undergirds and shapes our present actions? Perhaps just

as our immediate experience shapes our conceptions of the 'furniture' of heaven and hell, so our deepest longings are profoundly linked to their very being.

But heaven and hell have disappeared from the modern public consciousness; our longings for justice and love have been reduced in a technological world merely to our own material accomplishments. With the emergence of modern democracies, the delights of heaven and the justice of hell have been ushered into the present. But what happens when that democratic order is challenged and its justice and plenty are threatened? Of course, we might devote our lives in the hope of creating a better world for our friends. But for our enemies? And what if that hope is delayed, as was the Marxist hope of the Soviet Union? In the end the question that presses from these three books seems to me to be: How realistic and how true to our humanity is the hope for a better world in the here and now, if there is no hope of heaven beyond? Perhaps it is ultimately the hope of the latter that is intimately linked to the transformation of the former (Romans 8:18-23).



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