

Religion and Utopia: Heaven (On Earth?)

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Jill and I have agreed to split our time and that we would each speak for about 25-30 minutes. I want to begin by saying that it is very nice to be on the same platform with Jill once again. Jill and I co-taught a course last spring Phl 160: Ideas of God. I very much enjoyed doing that with her and it's nice to be back with her again. I hope to be doing that course with her again this spring term. When she and I talked about an "Ideas Matter" lecture on religion and utopia, we decided that it might be interesting to focus it around the topic of heaven, and that for two reasons. First, images of heaven as images of life after death are often visions of the ideal life or the perfect life. That is because they are often projections of what we most value and enjoy. Secondly, we also were aware that religious traditions sometimes speak of heaven on earth; that is, a vision of ideal life in this world, and not just after death. I'll be talking about both in the Biblical and Jewish and Christian traditions, which is my particular responsibility this afternoon.

Namely, I'll be talking about ideas of heaven as after-life, or other-worldly utopian visions; and then ideas about heaven on earth, or this-worldly utopian visions. Let me state my central claim by using the title of the last chapter of my recent book on God: "Salvation: What on earth do we mean?" The implicit message of the title is that the central Biblical images for salvation are primarily about this-worldly salvation - salvation this side of death. And, salvation in the Biblical sense means most comprehensively, wholeness, wholeness of life. That will be the point I emphasize this lecture: salvation or utopia as a this-worldly reality and experience in the biblical tradition. I will do that in part two of my talk.

But first, I want to spend a few minutes talking about heaven as after-life in Jewish and Christian traditions, about other-worldly utopias: heaven as life after death. I want to warn you in advance that I have to be very compact and efficient here. I will develop two main points under other-worldly utopias. First, after-life beliefs in the Jewish and Christian traditions developed relatively late. To be specific, the first clear unambiguous reference to an after-life in the Old Testament or the Hebrew Bible, the scripture of ancient Israel, is in the twelfth chapter of the Book of Daniel which most scholars date to around the year of 165 b.c.e. Because the belief was probably around before Daniel wrote about it, we routinely speak of after-life beliefs emerging around the year 200 b.c.e. in ancient Judaism; possibly, fifty years or a hundred years earlier. Now, the exodus from Egypt, which is the birth event for ancient Israel, occurred

around the year 1300 b.c.e. That means for the first thousand years of Israel's existence, the ancient Hebrews were religious without believing in an after-life. That's very interesting. Within Jewish and Christian traditions, belief in an after-life becomes important by the first century, that is, by the time of the formation of the New Testament. It has continued to be very important in subsequent Jewish and Christian history, both biblical and post-biblical. A measure of how important it has become in Christianity is that in the form of the Christian tradition that I learned while growing up, which was a fairly standard form of mainline Protestantism (and I think the same thing could be said for Roman Catholicism), the after-life was so central to what it meant to be a Christian that if you had been able to convince me at age 12 or so that there was no after-life, I would have had absolutely no idea why one should be a Christian or why one should be religious. The after-life was what it was all about. To return to the basic point: after-life beliefs developed relatively late in the biblical tradition.

My second main point under other world utopias consists of some comments on varieties of after-life beliefs in Jewish and Christian traditions. Most of these are found in both, but I'm not regularly going to differentiate as I go through this material. I will talk about six topics about which there is considerably variety in the Jewish and Christian traditions. The first of is, reincarnation. We usually think of reincarnation as associated with Eastern religions traditions. It therefore comes as a surprise to many of us in the west to know that many post biblical ancient Jews, as well as Jews today, believe in reincarnation; this is especially associated with the Jewish mystical tradition. Moreover, many early Christian theologians believed in reincarnation, and it was only in the year 598 A.D., in round numbers 600 A.D., that Pope Gregory the Great declared reincarnation to be unacceptable Christian belief. But until then, it was one of the forms of after-life belief that Christians held. And, it persists to this day. In a Gallup poll of what Americans believe about life after death, 24 percent of American Catholics believe in reincarnation. 21 percent of American Protestants believe in reincarnation. My second example of variety concerns purgatory. Purgatory, a place like "hell light". (Do you know what I mean?) Not really, but rather a place of purification beyond death. In the popular imagination, it is a place of minor punishment for those not good enough to go straight to hell or good enough to go straight to heaven. But it is really a place of purification beyond death. The underlying notion is that in one lifetime, we don't become fully compassionate enough human beings to enter immediately into the presence of God, so we get another shot after death. It's like reincarnation but on another plane.

Is there a purgatory? Most Christians have believed so throughout history. Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox Christians have thought so. It's only Protestant Christians who've said, nope it's instant heaven or instant hell. And Protestant

Christians as a total percentage of all the Christians who have ever lived are maybe two percent. That doesn't make the belief wrong. I'm just pointing out that ninety eight percent of Christians have believed in purgatory.

The third point about which there is variety: many or few. That is, are those who will be saved into a blessed hereafter, are those who will go into heaven, many or few? The Christian tradition is all over the map on this. Some Christians have argued for universal salvation on the grounds that nothing ultimately can resist the grace of God. Christian sectarian groups have argued that the total number of saved people will be only 144,000, based on a literal reading of the end of the seventh chapter of the Book of Revelations.

The fourth variation concerns bodily existence: that is, will in some sense we have bodies in the after-life? And if we do have bodies, will they be physical bodies or will they be spiritual bodies, whatever spiritual bodies are? Christians again have affirmed both and I'm not mocking anything here, I'm just saying that there is tremendous variety in all of this stuff.

That point leads rather directly into the fifth differentiation or variety that I want to mention. Does personal identity survive into an after-life? By that I mean, in an after-life, if there is one, will you know that you are you, or will I know that I am me, or will I know that I'm Marc, that I used to live in Oregon, and I had a cat named Jenny and see people I knew, and if it did would that be a superior or inferior state of affairs? Most of us, I suppose, would think that it would be a superior state of affairs. After all, isn't that what an after-life is all about -- that I get to live forever? But, if you think about the best moments in your lives right now, the most exquisite three minutes or thirty seconds, or however long those moments have lasted - if you are like me at all, the best moments in your lives right now are when you are wholly caught up in the experience so that there is no part of you left over being self aware that you are you having this experience. In those moments, there is no part of me left over saying, "I'm Marc and I'm having this experience." One is so wholly into the experience there's no self consciousness or self awareness left. Now, if our best moments in this life are like that, would it be a superior or inferior state of affairs in heaven if I knew I was Marc? I raise it as a question.

And, the sixth and final focal point for talking about variety that I'm going to mention is a basic division between images of heaven. This is true for all religious traditions, I think, not just the Jewish and Christian traditions. The last variation I want to mention is a division between (some semi-technical language coming at you here) anthropocentric (human centered) visions of heaven and theocentric (God-centered) visions of heaven. An anthropocentric vision of heaven is one that emphasizes what it would be like for human beings. Maybe it would include other species, but typically

we are guilty of specism when thinking about heaven. An anthropocentric vision thinks of personal identity remaining, of relationships being restored (I'll see my family again and so forth). It might even include visions of the central pleasures of this life also being part of heaven, as in many of texts Jill alluded in her talk. To use a favorite expression of mine from C.S. Lewis, "It is heaven complete with cigars." The best of what we have here will be there and that will surely include cigars. A theocentric vision of heaven is very different. A theocentric vision of heaven emphasizes that everything is centered in God. On the popular level, I suppose this is a vision of heaven in which everybody is joined in perpetual hymns of praise and adoration -- the harp picture. On a less popular level (that is, a more sophisticated level), this is the notion of the after-life as pure bliss, pure consciousness, and pure being, without differentiation. We will be caught up into this ecstatic mode of consciousness, so that I will not be aware that I was Marc and I used to live in Oregon. I will just "be" -- you know that last line from "Amazing Grace": "when we've been there ten thousand years bright shining as the sun," "we've no less years to sing God's praise as when we first begun". That's a very theocentric vision of the after-life. So, there is a great variety in the traditions about other-worldly utopias .

I turn now to the second and last half of my talk: This-worldly salvation or this-worldly utopias in the biblical traditions - heaven on earth if you will. I have a preliminary point before I begin to unpack this. The preliminary point is simply to mention that there is a wide variety of images of salvation (or wholeness) in the biblical tradition, and I'm going to present you with a selection. In the relevant chapter in my book on God, I describe nine varieties; here I'm going to mention five. These are all images of salvation. The first of these is salvation as exodus, as liberation. The second one is salvation as return from exile, salvation as homecoming, or as living in one's own land and not being a stranger in a strange land. The third one is reconciliation with the sacred, with each other, and perhaps with nature itself -- with the coming together of that which has been alienated or separated. The fourth is one resurrection, and here I'm not thinking of empty tombs and so forth, but resurrection as a metaphor for salvation which affirms new life in the midst of death, or new life where it's not expected. Fifth and finally, there is salvation as a banquet, a common theme in both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. The emphasis can be on the inclusiveness of the banquet -- everybody's going to be at that banquet, everybody's going to be eating and drinking together in the Kingdom of God. Or, the emphasis can be on our being fed spiritually with spiritual food, and the emphasis is more individualistic.

The main point I want to make by mentioning the multiplicity of images of salvation in the biblical material is that these images can have both an individual meaning and a social political meaning.

Liberation is something we experience as individuals -- liberation from blindness, from conventional wisdom, liberation into a new life and so forth. But obviously liberation is a potent political metaphor, and its original meaning in the Bible is political. It means liberation from Pharaoh's Egypt. Or, another example: return from exile. Historically, that meant that the Jewish people who had been living 800 miles in exile got their land back and get to structure their own life together once again. But obviously, return from exile can have an individual meaning as well: the experience of being at home in the world, that experience of homecoming, and so forth. I could go on with several others to make the same point, but I want you to see simply that these images of salvation have both an individual application and a social and political application.

This leads me to what I want to highlight most in this talk, my concluding 8 - 10 minutes or so. Namely, this-worldly utopian vision in the Bible. I'm going to develop this with four points and then make a comment as I conclude. First, ancient Israel began as a utopian experiment. What do I mean by that? I've already mentioned that Israel's birth is essentially the exodus from Egypt. This was an exodus from ancient Egypt as a classic domination system -- an economically and politically oppressive system ruled over by the elite. Egypt was a classic example of the aristocratic agrarian society which dominated human existence for maybe 3000 B.C. until very recently (and now it takes another form). And so, Israel begins with a liberation from an oppressive political system.

Very strikingly for the very first 200 year or so of ancient Israel's existence in their own land, their social organization was marked by two primary features. First, there was equal land distribution among families. Every family had the same size plot of land. Secondly, there was no centralized government. The lack of centralized government wasn't because it took them a long time to get their act together and get a government organized. Rather, they were trying to prevent the growth of an elite ruling class that would recreate a domination system within Israel itself. It was a profoundly utopian experiment.

Then, after 200 years (in round numbers, around the year 1000), we have the rise of kingship in Israel itself, the rise of a native domination system. Thus, as the Hebrew Bible scholar Walter Brueggemann puts it, "Egypt now lived within Israel". The King had become a new Pharaoh.

This leads to my second point, namely the great social prophets of Israel, figures such as, Amos, Hosea, Micah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and so forth. The great social prophets of ancient Israel were basically a protest against this, and a reaffirmation of Moses. The great social prophets were marked by two primary characteristics. First, they radically criticized the domination system that had arisen in Israel itself. They were God

intoxicated voices of religious social protest. Secondly, they used the imagination to imagine a different future than the oppressive conditions of the present. It was a vision of how things ought to be, and how they could be and their vision is described very poetically.

Let me mention three common emphases of their vision that come up again and again and again. The first is a world of peace. Here I think of that verse all of us, whether we've read the Bible or not, have all heard of. Found in Isaiah Two two and also found in Micah five, therefore suggesting that it was a common saying in prophetic circles, it expressed a hope for the future. Namely, "They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore". The second focal point of their utopian vision was justice.

Let me point out the distinction between procedural justice, which is concerned with making sure the rules are all enforced the same for everybody, and what might be called results -- oriented justice, where you judge things not by whether the rules are being fairly enforced, but by what is the result. The prophets were advocates of a result-oriented kind of justice. I don't mean that they would say that any means is justified by the end. That is not the point here at all. But, they were not impressed with a society that says the rules should be the same for everybody, and hence the clever and the unscrupulous and so forth do much better than everybody else. Rather, it's distributive justice, not just procedural justice that they were concerned with. "Seek justice and live," Amos said. "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream". The third characteristic of their utopian vision is a very homey, maybe even homely vision. It is the vision of every family under their own vine and fig tree. It's an image of every family having their own land for their own sustenance. It's interesting that it's the vine and the fig tree that are singled out, because vines and figs are both delicacies and luxuries. We're not talking just about subsistence but about the delights of life being available to everyone.

My third point concerns Jesus as standing in the tradition of the great social prophets, in particular, an often overlooked aspect of Jesus (even though it's right in the Lord's prayer which is said every Sunday morning by most Christians in church). Jesus was many things. I argue that he was a spirit person and a healer and a teacher and a movement founder and so forth, but he was also a social prophet. As a social prophet and a movement founder, he taught his followers to pray for the Kingdom of God *on earth*. Think of that line in the Lord's prayer, "Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done". We usually miss the connection to its coming on earth because we leave a single beat at the end of that line. But if you don't leave a pause, it goes like this, "Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven". As my colleague, John Dominic Crossan says, emphasizing the meaning of this prayer, "Heaven is in great shape -- the

problem is here on earth". And we pray in this prayer for the coming of the Kingdom of God on earth. What would the Kingdom of God on earth be like? It would be what life on earth would be like if God were king, and Caesar weren't, and Herod weren't, and you can start adding your own list of proper nouns. In short the Kingdom of God for Jesus was a utopian vision that embraces peace and justice and the classic images from the Hebrew Bible.

I turn to my last point. In subsequent Christian history (that is, after the time of Jesus and the Bible), the notion of the Kingdom of God and the this-worldly utopian vision has not fared very well. The big turning point was in the fourth century when Christianity became first, a legal religion within the Roman Empire; and then, before the end of the century, the official religion of the Roman Empire. This began under the Emperor Constantine and is often called in shorthand the Constantinian revolution or the Constantinian accommodation. Basically, Christianity became the religion of the dominant society. And with that, the utopian vision was largely lost, and Christianity became a religion of the after-life. The utopian vision has still found a voice in small group movements like the Amish who tried to create an alternative society in the midst of earth. Or, in public voices such as that of Martin Luther King who invoked the biblical visions of utopia and spoke about, "I have a dream". That dream is formed by biblical images, and is profoundly a this-worldly dream. So, the utopian vision still surfaces, but it's not the dominant voice of the tradition.

This leads me to my concluding comment. The question this survey leaves us with: to use the title of this series as a whole, "Why do these ideas matter?" Why do these ideas about an after-life or a this-worldly vision matter? Are our utopian visions about another world, or about this world, and what's at stake in that question?

If, our utopian visions are primarily other-worldly, then they don't matter much. Let me qualify that a bit. If they are primarily about another world, they give us comfort and consolation in the face of death, and that's no small thing. But they have little to do with our life in this world. But if our utopian visions are also or instead this-worldly, then they can generate an imperative and passion to try to change the world. Or, if we are secular and not religious and have no utopian vision, is that because we think that life is about a competition about the goodies with the high scorers entitled to whatever they can get?

So, let me conclude by suggesting that there is something to be said to holding onto a this-worldly utopian vision. Many people have thought that utopias are irrelevant -- hence the word play "no place", because there can never be a place like this. But others have said "utopia" means "the good place" as Jill pointed out. It seems to me that even a utopian vision can have historical relevance. Reinhold Niebuhr, one of the great theologians and social ethicists of the middle part of this century in North

America, spoke of the relevance of an impossible ideal. What he meant is that it is not enough cynically to say that these utopian visions are impossible and let's just get on with our lives, because then you leave the world as it is. Rather, utopian visions can be approximated in history. Jill used this line: "Utopia employs the imaginary to invoke the ideal." I agree and then add that utopias evoke the ideal in order to affect the every day, in order to lead. us to that place where we can say, "I have a dream". Or, to that place where we can earnestly pray, "Thy kingdom come on earth".

Thank you very much.