

Heaven's Many Guises: The Idea of Heaven in World Religions

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I'm honored to be here today, to share some of my musings about heaven with you. It is especially a pleasure to share the podium with Marc, who has been one of my best teachers. Bill referred to us as a Universalist and a Unitarian.... I remember that once Marc remarked to me you must be an Orthodox Unitarian -- suggesting that my own liberal religious views were somewhat more traditional than many of my fellow UU's. He is probably right about that. Still, I doubt that he has been introduced recently or ever as a Unitarian, and I'll be interested to hear what he has to say about that...

My job today is to give an overview of the non-western religious traditions, focusing on the idea of heaven as an utopian idea.

In one of Mark Twain's stories about heaven, a man called Captain Stormfield arrives at a set of gates, after a fantastic trip among the stars, shooting along at billions of miles an hour. The gatekeeper greets him, checks a list, and is puzzled that Captain Stormfield's name is not there. Are you sure you've come to the right part of heaven? the gatekeeper inquires. Perhaps you were meant to arrive at a different gate. Captain Stormfield is confused. A different gate? How can there be more than one gate to heaven? The gate keeper tries to explain that heaven is a very big and very diverse place. But aren't you going to give me my stuff? the Captain inquires. What stuff? replies the gatekeeper. You know, my wings, my halo, my harp and hymn book, my palm branch... all the things folks need up here. The gatekeeper replies, I don't think you belong in this part of heaven. We don't use that stuff here. Poor Captain Stormfield spends several hours searching through long halls and corridors, meeting all sorts of strange and interesting people before he finally understands that heaven is not exactly as he had imagined it would be. Unable to find his way, he returns to the first gate. Okay, he says to the gatekeeper, I see that a man has to be in his *own* heaven to be happy. Perfectly correct, answers the gatekeeper. Did you imagine that same heaven would be for all sorts of men? Well, I had that idea, but I see the foolishness of it now, Captain Stormfield replies. Which way am I to go to get to *my* heaven?

This story is a perfect introduction to this consideration of the idea of heaven as an utopian idea, for it touches on the fact that there are many different ideas of heaven --

and that heaven is a very big idea. Everyone has their own understanding of what the word heaven stands for, whether you believe in the picture the word conjures up or not. Mark Twain was correct, I think, in trying to show that there are different heavens for different folks. What I will try to do is describe some of the ideas of heaven which can be found in the classical religious traditions, and then consider how those ideas have influenced or been influenced by utopian philosophies. In other words, I will take a look at the intersections between religious ideas, specifically ideas of heaven, and philosophical notions of utopia.

First, I want to admit that I am not more than an amateur philosopher, and not quite a professional theologian. My work would be best described as applied philosophy and theology. Therefore, in my process of considering this topic, I started from scratch by reading definitions of utopia in a dictionary of philosophy to make sure I had the definitions right. What I found was in fact very helpful. It was a description of the treatises by Thomas More, written in the 1500's, in which he coined the word utopia. More was interested in the fact that the Greek word utopia can be translated as no place, while a very similar word, eutopia, means good place. The article I was reading went on to say that within this close relationship and the different meanings of these two words lies a key to understanding utopian ideas and utopian literature. This is the key: Utopian writing uses the imaginary to evoke the ideal. In my own experience, this is precisely the function of religious ideas of heaven.

There are several kinds, or varieties, of utopias, categories which I think are helpful to know when considering ideas of heaven as utopian ideas. Let me describe two which are most helpful. First, utopias are imaginary societies which are held to be perfect, or closer to perfection than the current state of everyday life. These imaginary societies can be understood as past, present, or future possibilities. Second, utopias can be prophesies of profound alteration in the human condition. Millennialism is a good example of this variety of utopian thinking. The hope that in the year 2000 we'll all (or some of us....) be taken into heaven (someones idea of it, anyway) is an idea that is alive and well in our own community.

In addition, it is helpful to be aware of some of the causes of utopian thinking as we consider these religious ideas. Why is an idea of heaven interesting, or necessary, for some people? Perhaps it is because at some level we know that people can get along with each other -- or even more, that love is possible. With that grounding sense, it is easy to arrive at the conviction that living toward social harmony is our calling. Experience of intolerable wrongs, and of disharmony, coupled with the sense of the possibilities for harmony, sometimes make the utopian ideal even stronger. Utopianism grows out of a sense of the possibilities for human life, possibilities which are either thwarted or missed in the daily experience of living.

How then, does religion intersect with utopian philosophies? It is quite plausible that the origins of utopianism are to be found primarily in religious ideas and traditions, beginning with the religious ways of peoples long before recorded history. Although ancient religious traditions are many and varied, there are similarities between them, which are evident in the living religions of peoples whose ancestors were original inhabitants of the lands they claim as home. These religions are called indigenous traditions in the literature of religious studies, and they share several common characteristics. One of these characteristics is a perspective on time. In indigenous ways of seeing reality, time is understood to be timeless, and eternal. To the human, time is experienced as cyclical, like a wheel, ever turning. There was a beginning of time -- probably earth time -- for time itself is eternal. Life on earth did have a beginning -- and in the beginning -- the time of creation -- everything was as it should be. It was a time of perfection, sometimes referred to as the Golden Age. All life existed in harmony, and each part of life fulfilled its function perfectly. It was a time of noble rest and comfort, free from war and famine and other evils, according to one source. Huston Smith says, ". . . the Golden Age can be understood as a time when divine creation had suffered no ravages of time and mismanagement..." In other words, with every passing moment, we get farther away from the Golden Age, and we screw things up a little more, and a little more. In many indigenous traditions, the generations of people who were closer to the Golden Age were closer to perfection. Ancestors are worthy of reverence and respect because they knew more about harmonious and wise living, by virtue of their proximity to the Golden Age. Other writers have commented that the Golden Age signifies a time of being in touch with a divine reality, or with the source of reality. Therefore it was a time without domination, irrational inequalities, or scarcity, without brutalizing labor, warfare, and the tortures of consciousness -- without disharmony in any form. Although fondness for early simplicity may seem regressive or an ignoble attachment to primitive and subhuman harmony, still, the impetus for utopianism is found here, in these ancient religious perspectives. The idea that there was a time when we didn't suffer the pains of separation from perfection, and that that experience is still somehow part of who we are, is one of the powerful sources for utopian ideals.

As religious traditions evolved, they spent more and more time reminiscing about the Golden Age, and emulating its perfection through ritual. In fact, many traditional rituals are carried out in order to literally recreate the Golden Age in the here and now. Eventually, however, it was recognized that the Golden Age was a time past, not to be reclaimed. The best humans could do was to try to understand and then reconstruct the elements of the Golden Age, through creating social habits and institutions which would accomplish the qualities of harmony and perfection. In these realizations that the Golden Age was past, and that humans would have to design structures in society that would emulate a harmonious social order -- are the

beginnings of philosophical utopianism. Within later religious traditions utopianism took on the forms of eschatology -- projections of a future time when a New Golden Age would be achieved.

Heaven is another name for the Golden Age of the future. In the history of religions there have been many varieties and permutations of this idea. In Greco-Roman traditions, there are stories of an afterlife in which people lived in an underworld (or they became shadows, which were associated with the underworld.) Classical Greek traditions added a component to this perspective; great heroes and leaders deserved more than just becoming shadows. Instead of going to the underworld they went to happy fields higher than the underworld, somewhere on top of the earth, but in a different realm of existence. As connotations of the underworld became more graphic and more pejorative, the idea of meriting a better fate became more important and the happy fields were described as places in higher and higher realms, toward the sky. Our western ideas of heaven are basically the result of this process -- the recognition of merit in life and of a place, above the underworld and above the earth, where worthy souls retired. (For Greeks, the Elysian Fields) In Norse religions there were similar ideas. For those who merited reward in the afterlife, there was a special place called Valhalla. It was not a place on earth, in the here and now -- it was a different realm of reality. Still, it featured many of the comforts of home. Valhalla was pictured as a vast drinking hall, where heroic warriors were served by beautiful maidens. Which brings up an interesting and important point to note in the evolution of the idea of heaven: Whose heaven is it? It goes without saying, I imagine, that in patriarchal cultures, heaven was the ultimately chauvanistic idea; heaven was a place for men.

The Aryan traditions which evolved into pre-Vedic and Vedic literature in India included a similar notion about heaven. It was called 'the world of the fathers' (we could have expected that, right?) and it resembled the Norse Valhalla. The world of the fathers included all the pleasures of life on earth, but in full measure. There was no skimping on things which pleased the body and the senses (especially -- you guessed it! -- beautiful young maidens.) To gain entrance to this place/time/realm, a man earned merit by practicing and carrying out religious rituals and acts of worship and devotion. The more merit you earned in earthly life, the longer you got to stay in heaven. Eventually, as the Vedic teachings evolved and expanded into what we know as Hinduism, heaven became a kind of way station, a resting place between lives. Once all of your merit had been spent in heaven, you would return to earth for another life, and another chance to stock up on good deeds. I suppose you could think of it like having tickets to a carnival. When the tickets ran out, it was back to earthly life to begin to earn tickets again. Eventually, the goal in Hinduism is to break free of the cycle of life and death, the cycle of working to earn a place in heaven, then going back to start over again. Ultimately one hoped to achieve liberation, which was to

return to ultimate reality -- far beyond heaven. This kind of ultimate state was called Nirvana, and was understood to be the union of the human soul with ultimate reality, or at the very least an eternal communion with God, but both were beyond heaven.

Can we call these ideas of heaven utopian? In some ways they represent otherworldly utopias -- visions of realms beyond this life where all is beauty, and comfort and harmony. If you were male, of course. I would stop short of calling these heavens true utopias simply because they are exclusive of half of the population, and therefore don't address the need for harmonious relations between all people. Even so, they are representative of utopian thinking.

Siddhartha Guatama, the Hindu prince who became the Buddha, embarked upon a lifetime of teaching and helping others after experiencing the cessation of desire which is another way to describe nirvana. It was his conviction that this was what people needed and wanted most, the experience of moving beyond desire, which was in itself both enlightenment and liberation. Although he was very familiar with Hindu cosmologies and religious practice, he found most of them to be quite unnecessary in the pursuit of nirvana. Heaven? He didn't waste his time speculating about it. His was a more practical, this-worldly approach. Perhaps he was one of the first to bring utopian thinking into daily religion. He didn't present a vision of a utopian society, but he advocated a religious path that was in some ways utopian. The path he described was egalitarian (because it was individualistic) -- any person could undertake the discipline necessary to move themselves toward nirvana, regardless of gender, caste, age, occupation. The motivation, he said, was to recognize and acknowledge the universality of suffering and vow to live compassionately -- another utopian ideal. To follow the path of the Buddha was to live in ways that would help create a heaven on earth, though not by that name.

When he died, the Buddha is said to have encouraged his followers to work diligently towards their own salvation -- their own cessation of desire -- reminding them that it was up to them, and that no merit for heaven, in fact no heaven, was of any lasting worth. It is fascinating to observe that in the 3-4 centuries following the death of the Buddha, Buddhism evolved into a highly cosmological tradition. The Buddha's teachings were absorbed into and mixed with the Hindu culture and traditions of India (and then with China, and Japan) -- resulting in an interesting mix of beliefs. The idea of heaven was by no means discarded. In the branch of Buddhism which came to be called Mahayana, not only was the Buddha himself eventually turned into a deity, but the idea of heaven became more and more elaborate, including anywhere from six to eighteen levels, depending upon which branch of the tradition you followed. These Buddha fields were understood to be impermanent, were overseen by various buddhas in various stages of enlightenment, and were considered to be resting places between lives. As Mahayana Buddhism mixed with the Taoist and Shinto traditions in China

and Japan, heaven became even more significant. Japanese Zen traditions describe a heaven called the Western Paradise or the Pure Land, an other-worldly utopia of the highest order -- a place/time/realm where there was no pain or suffering, filled with natural beauty, flowing rivers, lotus-filled lakes, pleasant music, trees and bushes adorned with exquisite gems. This heaven was the abode of a Buddha of much merit. Called the Amida Buddha, he had achieved so much merit that he had acquired the power to grant salvation to anyone who had faith in him and called out his name. Here religion once again provided a utopian vision, but what a long way from the Buddha's this-worldly teachings was this amazing faith base -salvation scheme! (Just a note on the gender issue; in the Pure Land of the Amida Buddha, all beings had been reincarnated into men, and had moved beyond the need for sensual pleasures. Still one-sided, but chauvanistic in a different way...)

We can't reflect on the idea of heaven without mentioning the Zoroastrians of ancient Persia. Within this tradition there developed very explicit ways of describing the dualistic nature of reality, and so the descriptions of heaven and hell are quite graphic. Heaven and hell were rewards or consequences of individual choices during earthly life. Since the universe revolved around the tension between good and evil, so the human task was to choose the good. At death, a body would lie in state for three days, while its soul was weighed. If the acculmlation of good deeds tipped the scales in favor of good, the soul would be met by a beautiful young maiden and escorted accross the Chinivat bridge, which connected the realm of human life with the realm of the afterlife. The Chinivat bridge was large and wide, and one would travel easily to heaven, a paradise of beautiful sights, sounds and smells, where the lucky soul would retire to a life of comfort, eating sweet butter every day. Another utopian vision.

If however, your accumulated good deeds were too light, or worse, your evil deeds outweighed the good, then your soul would be met by an ugly old hag, who would escort you to the Chinivat bridge. Once you started your journey across the bridge, however, it would turn up on it's side and become a razor sharp edge, causing your soul to plunge down into the darkness of hell, the stench becoming worse the closer you got. The descriptions of what you might see and experience in hell are fascinating, and I'd love to share some of them with you, but that will have to wait for another day, since we're focusing on heaven. Suffice it so say that the Zoroastrian hell is a good example of distopia.

Islamic ideas of heaven are quite similar to the Zoroastrian ideas. In Islamic tradition there will come a judgement day, and if the soul has earned enough merit, it will cross a bridge into heaven, which is envisioned as a paradise. Merit is earned by doing good deeds in life, but entry to heaven is determined in the end by the depth of devotion to Allah. For those who are found wanting in either devotion or deeds, their journey

across the bridge will be thwarted, and they will fall off. One tradition holds that Muhammed will be there to catch them, and give them another chance at heaven through spending time in a kind of purgatory.

In Islam, like in Zoroastrianism, descriptions of heaven are very colorful. Heaven will be like a Garden of Eden, where... 'the gates open to everyone, where all recline in comfort, calling for fruits abundant and sweet potions and with them maidens restraining their glances and... etc, etc.' There are seven realms of heaven in some Islamic traditions, eight in others. In the story of Muhammed's Night Journey he was taken up, on a winged horse, through the levels of heaven, each more beautiful than the previous, where he met Moses, and Jesus, and other saints before finally finding himself in the presence of God.

It is fascinating to me that this other-worldly utopian heaven co-exists in Islam with a very this-worldly vision of a just and harmonious society on Earth. To follow the straight path by living according to the five pillars of Islam, a believer engages in bringing about a new world order in very practical ways -- eschewing materialism, practicing charity and the equitable distribution of resources, recognizing the relatedness of peoples of all races and nationalities. From the Islamic perspective, as the ummah -- the community of believers -- expands, the likelihood of achieving a just society increases. Therefore, to be devout, and to exemplify the teachings of the prophet and the prescriptions of the Quran is to be committed to the creation of a new kind of society -- and Islamic utopia. Even so, at the end of human life comes heaven.

Finally, to conclude this brief overview of ideas of heaven in the major non-western religious traditions, we turn to the traditions of China, for it is in these traditions that I find the most interesting examples of heaven-related utopianism. In Chinese writing, a character which includes Heaven and Earth together is a symbol and a word for the entire physical universe. The two realms are intricately related: each depends upon the other. In indigenous Chinese religion, Heaven was understood as the place/time/realm of the ancestors. It was important to stay in touch with the ancestors, and to discern Heaven's call, because the ancestors were closer to the Golden Age, therefore the source of wisdom. Many ancient rituals involved sacrificial fires made of agricultural products, producing smoke which would travel to heaven and awaken the ancestors. Wise people were also skilled at reading signs in nature to learn what heaven was trying to tell them.

The classical Chinese traditions, Taoism and Confucianism, share a common cosmology, while they differ in their approaches to human living. Both take for granted the relationship between heaven and earth, and also the essence of Life, which is named Tao. Both have a sense that The Mandate of Heaven calls humans to live in the Way of the Tao. Taoism turns from there to a focus on individual human living.

The scholar Liu Xiaogan says that the most populist form of Taoism, Religious Taoism, though it carries the age old practices of keeping in touch with heaven and trying to access its power, is not so concerned with life after death. In fact the priority of Religious Taoism is to pursue longevity and physical immortality.

Confucianism has a different approach. A modern scholar of Confucianism, Tu Mei Wing, describes Confucian spirituality as an attempt to live the Mandate of Heaven in each moment of daily, ordinary life, and to thereby become co-creators of the world -- more specifically a utopian world of harmony and peace. Tu illustrates the relations between Heaven and Earth as a series of concentric circles. At the center is humanity -- individual selves whose task is to continually grow in their ability to live the Mandate of Heaven, or the Way, the Tao. This involves self-discipline and learning. The self is always evolving, or growing: the self is transformation. The circle of the self is embedded within the circle of the community -- the web of relations which are the context for human living and the vehicle for self-transformation. The community is embedded within the physical world -- nature -- which is both our home and the stuff we are made of. Finally, nature is embedded within the realm of heaven, and the way of heaven -- the Mandate of Heaven -- is the ultimate source of human movement toward heaven. Like a magnet pulling gently, the Mandate of Heaven is what sparks our growth and action.

Confucius' project was to teach people, or to remind them of the nature of their relatedness to heaven, and so to all others, and to the earth. Although Confucianism is widely regarded as a 'non-religious' philosophy, Confucius understood himself to be carrying out a divinely-ordained task. Through his teaching, he hoped to bring heaven to earth, which meant to establish the way of heaven as the way of human living -- a way of harmony and peace. Tu Mei Wing explains it this way:

The Confucian calling presupposes that Heaven is omniscient and omnipresent, if not omnipotent. What we do here and now as human beings has implications for ourselves, for our human community, for nature and for Heaven. We need not appropriate the way of heaven by departing from here and now, but since the way of heaven is right here, near at hand and inseparable from our daily existence, what we do in the confines of our homes is not only anthropologically but also cosmologically significant.

Tu's understanding of Confucianism includes a large component of this worldly utopianism, influenced by an understanding of Heaven as the Way of Ultimate Harmony and Peace, not to mention the source of life. The job of human living is to live heaven on earth, to nurture life through right relations. The vision is open-ended, because the realization of heaven on earth is a process of ongoing creation. What the

utopia will look like depends at least partly on how we live, but how we live depends in turn on how heaven lives through us. I close with Tu Mei Wing:

We are the guardians of the good earth, the trustees of the Mandate of Heaven, that enjoins us to make our bodies healthy, our hearts sensitive, our minds alert, our souls refined, and our spirits brilliant.... We are here because embedded in our human nature is the code for Heaven's self-realization. Heaven needs our active participation to realize its own truth. We are heaven's partners, indeed co-creators. We serve Heaven with common sense, the lack of which nowadays has brought us to the brink of destruction. Since we help Heaven to realize itself through our self-discovery and self understanding in day to day living, the ultimate meaning of life is found in our ordinary, human existence.

I will now turn the podium over to Marc to consider the Biblical traditions, their heavens, and utopian ideas.