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CHRISTIAN BELIEF ABOUT
HEAVEN AND HELLby
Dorothy Sayers

IF we are to understand the Christian doctrine about what happens at death, we must first rid our minds of every concept of time and space as we know them. Our time and space have no independent reality: they belong to the universe and were created with it. Take down any novel you like from the shelf. The story it tells may cover the events of a few hours or of many years; it may range over a few acres or the whole globe. But all that space-time is contained within the covers of the book, and has no contact at any point with the space-time in which you are living. It, and the whole universe of action which goes on inside the book, are made things, deriving their existence from the mind of their maker.

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Christians believe that our universe of space and time is, similarly, a made thing. It is quite "real" so far as it goes, but its reality is dependent on that of its Maker, who is alone real in His own right. They also believe that the soul of Man has been so made that it is capable of entering into the true Reality which we call "Heaven" or "the presence of God." So that when we die, it is not as though the characters and action of the book were "continued in our next" like a serial; it is as though they came out from the book to partake of the real existence of their author.

If this real existence involves anything at all corresponding to "time" and "space," these do not coincide with ours in any way, and we can have no conception of them. We call them "eternity" and "infinity" simply to mark their total unlikeness to anything that we experience; and when we speak of God's "time" as an "eternal present" we mean to exclude every idea of duration in *our* time.

* * *

CHRISTIAN BELIEF ABOUT HEAVEN AND HELL

All this was understood and insisted on by instructed Christians up to the end of the Middle Ages (e.g. by Boethius in the sixth century and Dante in the fourteenth). It was only after the Reformation and the Renaissance of Learning that childishly literal notions of a localised Heaven extended in measurable time began to creep out of popular mythology into the minds of educated people.

Accordingly, Christians do not very much care for the term "survival," which suggests a continuation along the old lines of space and time. It is less misleading to speak of coming out of time into eternity. Heaven is the abiding contemplation of, and union with, that total perfection which we call "God," who is the unconditioned Reality containing and upholding the conditioned realities of the space-time universe which He made.

It is in this sense that we speak of Christianity as an "other-worldly" religion—not because it denies the significance and importance of the created universe, but because it places the centre of reality not within that universe, but in God. Our senses, assisted by the

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THE GREAT MYSTERY

sciences, teach us to follow "the story" from inside, and to see it as an orderly sequence of events; and as such it will appear to be a self-contained network of cause and effect. But the *real* cause of these events—the intention in the mind of the author—can only be very dimly inferred from the data within the story, unless the author should choose to reveal himself by becoming a character within his own creation; and this, of course, Christians believe that our Maker has done.

But in this life, as T. S. Eliot has said, "Human kind cannot bear very much reality. We have to be trained to encounter it." It is not merely that, being finite, we cannot apprehend reality, but that, being sinful, we are unwilling to accept it. For, to accept reality, it is necessary to acknowledge that the source and centre of our being is not in ourselves, but in God. Sin is the self-sufficiency which urges us to reject this idea and to delude ourselves with the flattering fantasy that Man's being is centred in himself—that he can be "as God." Thus our outlook is not only finite, but violently distorted, and evils are called into existence—evils which,

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though from the point of view of eternal reality they are seen to be lies and illusions, yet within the created frame of things are, unhappily, quite as real as anything else in the material universe.

Our "training" to encounter reality is thus made much more difficult by our insistence on clinging to a false idea of the self. We have not only everything to learn, but also much to unlearn. The will and judgment need to be purged as well as strengthened before we can become possessed of our true selves and endure to enter the heavenly presence of God, where we shall "know even as we are known." This training is the work of time, and its aim is the freeing of the will and judgment from those errors and perversions which render it incapable of facing the Divine Reality.

If the training is not completed at the time of death, it will have to be completed after death; that is why any attempt to hold the spirits "earthbound"—by "calling them up" at séances, or even by importunate and possessive grief—is to do them wrong by delaying their entry into beatitude. But sooner or later, if beatitude is what we truly want, we shall get

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it; for it is what God wants for us and, as St. Paul says, no created thing, whether of time, space or spirit, can separate us from His love.

But do we truly want it? At bottom—yes, we do, for it is the end for which we were made and without which we cannot be happy or complete. "In every soul that shall be saved," said the Lady Julian of Norwich, "there is a godly will that never assented to sin, nor ever shall," and it is this will which has to be set free so that it may become united to God.

* * *

There remains, however, the terrible possibility that the continual indulgence of the false self may so weaken the true God-ward will that it becomes impotent, so that, in the moment of death which is the moment of final choice, the soul will shrink away from the presence of God and refuse beatitude. If so, we shall have what we have willed to have. We shall have to live for ever with the sinful self that we have chosen; and this is called Hell.

God sends nobody to Hell; only a wicked

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ignorance can suggest that He would do to us the very thing He died to save us from. But He has so made us that what in the end we choose, that in the end we shall have. If we enter the state called Hell, it is because we have willed to do so.

Neither can He force any soul into beatitude against its will; for He has nothing but Himself to give it, and it is precisely the light of His presence which the self-centred soul can know only as burning and judgment. So the Lady Julian said that in her visions she "saw no Hell but Sin," and St. Catherine of Genoa said that the fire of the torment was the light of God as experienced by those who reject it.

* * *

Christians believe that "in the end of the world" God will make "a new heaven and a new earth," and that the body will then be raised from the dead and be united to the soul, so that the whole man will be restored in his completeness. About this we know very little. The only resurrection-body of which we have any knowledge is that of

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the risen Christ, and it is clear from the Gospel narrative that, although it could manifest itself in our time and space, its relation to them was of a very special kind, and that it did not belong to our universe at all. St. Paul calls the resurrection body "a spiritual body," and stresses its *difference*: "It is sown in corruption, it is raised in incorruption: it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power."

In any case, we need not puzzle our wits to find a time and place for it within the universe, because, in the end of time, that universe "shall be rolled together as a scroll" (that is, as a reader shuts up a volume when he has finished with it), and God will write a new book.

BERTRAND RUSSELL

Do Men Survive Death?

Bertrand Russell (Barl Russell, O.M.) writes as a scientific philosopher and rationalist.