

Review of Heaven Beyond the Grave

View the History Channel video "Heaven: Beyond the Grave" (video available through the Dartmouth Library website). Write a 3-page personal assessment of the views expressed by the religious leaders (Rabbi, Priests, Minister, and Imam) in this video.

What happens when we die? This question continues to go unanswered despite the advancements of human civilization. From captivating the minds of our ancient ancestors to people in modern society, the concepts of heaven and the afterlife continue to divide people from different sections of society. Does heaven exist? If so, what does it contain? If not, what do people see when they claim they see heaven? How do we then make sense of near-death experiences and their implications on human psychology? Reverend Mary June Nestler mentions that the concept of heaven begins in every human heart. This creation of heaven could have arisen due to the innate nature of ancient humans wanting to survive despite the harshness of the surrounding environment. What once served as an evolutionary strength, now aids humans in overcoming the final obstacle of our environments, i.e. death. Humans can overcome death and other Earthly limitations by continuing their lives in heaven, a utopian world. Father Michael Manning of Wordnet Productions accurately encapsulates this idea by saying, "Heaven represents the big question: What happens after death?"

The idea of heaven begins with the Ancient Egyptians who envisioned heaven in the sky that Pharaohs joined after their death. The ancient Egyptians envisioned heaven as a fertile and divine garden that was always lush and fruitful. The idea of heaven as a lush and fertile garden particularly contrasts the harsh desert landscape that the Ancient Egyptians inhabited. Thus, this idea of heaven highlights heaven as a romantic version of human society and continues to endure as the idea of heaven continues to evolve through various religions. Another key idea of heaven from the Ancient Egyptians is the democratization of heaven. Heaven was initially an afterlife reserved only for the Pharaohs who would join the gods, but eventually became accessible to the nobility and finally all the members of society. The significance of a highly accessible afterlife and the idea of an idealized afterlife not only lies in influencing religions of communities that came into contact with the Egyptians, like the Ancient Israelites, Greeks, and Romans but also in highlighting the development of literacy/thought and inclusion of a larger section of society. From an anthropological perspective, the democratization of heaven sends a clear warning to the minority of society that often controls the resources and power in society.

The democratization of heaven shows that sooner or later the oppressed shall rise to fight for a more equitable and just society.

With the evolution of Christianity, two ideas of Christian heaven emerged. Communal heaven included the continuation of life in a utopian society, whereas contemplative heaven revolved mainly around worship and being in the presence of God's glory. Although it is easy to see the benefits of a communal heaven, the benefits of a contemplative heaven are harder to accept and comprehend, given that most religions offer heaven as a reward for leading a just life or to offset the suffering one faces in this life. Contemplative heaven portrays the unification with Christ and seeing God face to face as the ultimate reward for a righteous life. This version of heavenly rewards helps emphasize the concept of Earth as an imperfect world filled with sin, and the human soul attains true happiness when uniting with God because of its liberation from the body tying it to the Earth. This idea is the culmination of Paradiso in Dante's Divine Comedy where Dante ends his journey by seeing God and exclaiming, "Vidi. Vidi. Vidi." These two ideas of heaven continue to divide religious communities today as well. One can explain the approach to these divine rewards by looking at communal and contemplative heaven through an Ancient Egyptian lens. Communal heaven is offered/more appealing to communities deprived on Earth. Hence, they have vast resources in the afterlife to make them happy and justify their earthly suffering. On the other hand, a contemplative heaven is more appealing to those who see life as a treacherous journey through a sinful world and life on Earth as the primary cause of suffering. Thus, unification with God, who is and resides in an unblemished environment, is more appealing to this section of society.

Another key idea talked about by the religious heads in this video is the introduction of tests to get into heaven by the Ancient Egyptians. The Egyptians saw this as a series of tasks the soul had to complete to reach the heavenly realm. The Greeks viewed this separation as a gate to highlight Elysium's exclusivity to Greek gods and exceptional individuals, like heroes. Individuals were deemed exceptional based on ethics and needed to lead a righteous life to enter paradise. Other religions then refined these requirements to get into heaven based on their needs. The idea of prerequisites to enter heaven then brings about the concept of a divine judgment, where the dead are judged their fate for the afterlife. Although who judges the souls, and what the souls are judged on vary from religion to religion, the idea of a divine judgment enforces "righteous" behavior among a religion's followers by depicting heaven as a pleasant afterlife, a privilege available only to the righteous and just.

Because of the highly exclusive nature of heaven, it is not surprising to see people willing to do anything to get into heaven. In modern society, terrorism in the supposed name of

God has become infamous. Suicide bombers cause immense physical and emotional damage to nearby citizens and bystanders with the hopes of going to heaven. With the rise of islamophobia, it is important to note that these extremist views are shunned by many in the Islamic community itself. Imam Sayed Mostafa Al Qazwini says that martyrdom is sacred. He emphasizes the difference between extremist and nonextremist views while rejecting the extremist ones of going to heaven after death by saying, "Muslim martyrs sacrifice themselves for the sake of god and faith, not killing themselves for a purpose." This quote also highlights the fact that people can be convinced and manipulated to carry out suicide bombings that serve the purpose of a terrorist organization instead of serving God and Islam.

Unlike Western religions, Eastern religions don't share a lot of ideas. This disconnect among religions allows diverse ideas of heaven to be created. For example, Buddhism has over 30 heavens and hells. A person's afterlife fate is determined by their karma, like a spiritual currency, built by a person's thoughts, speech, and actions. Thus, accumulating enough good karma takes a person to the appropriate heaven, while bad karma takes the person to the appropriate hell. However, this afterlife is temporary and the person is reborn again into some life form here on Earth. Nirvana represents the ultimate enlightenment gained through the accumulation of knowledge from the numerous births and rebirths that a soul goes through. Nirvana is depicted as a state of being better than the afterlife because the soul no longer has to be reborn. Buddhist ideas of heaven and the afterlife align more with the idea of a contemplative heaven instead of a communal heaven. The view of the Earth as impure, the source of pain and suffering, offers Nirvana as the ultimate reward because the soul can remain in the afterlife without the worry of being born again to suffer in the world.

In conclusion, heaven and the afterlife have captured man's attention and imagination. Although initially introduced by the Egyptians, the afterlife and afterlife beliefs have evolved and been refined with the development of new religions and philosophies. From the conception of an afterlife for the Pharaohs to an afterlife available to everyone who lived "righteously", heaven has evolved based on power dynamic shifts and justice/equity in society. Everything associated with the afterlife (everlasting rewards for the good, damnation for the wicked, and the constant complication of the requirements for the soul to pass the divine judgment) all reveal more about our psychology than they do about the afterlife. Whether seen as a reward for righteousness, a refuge from earthly suffering, or a state of ultimate enlightenment, heaven inspires contemplation and curiosity, uniting cultures and generations in a shared quest for meaning and transcendence beyond the grave.