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Professor J. Edward Wright RELG 57.06: History of Heaven

## Final Long Essay: The History of Heaven

You have just taken your seat on a non-stop flight from Boston to L.A. In your brief discussion with the person seated next to you, you reveal that you are headed home after spring term at Dartmouth. The person asks you about your courses and when you mention “The History of Heaven” course, the person’s eyes light up. That person then asks you this question: “How, where, when, and why did beliefs about heaven and the afterlife originate? Why do so many people still believe in some form of heaven or afterlife?” Please describe how you would respond to that question based on what you have learned in this course.

Here is how I would respond:

"That's a fascinating question about the origins and evolution of beliefs in Heaven and the afterlife. These concepts have captivated human societies across cultures and throughout our history.

The earliest beliefs about the afterlife emerged in ancient Egyptian civilization. Initially, in the Old Kingdom, only pharaohs could access the eternal paradisiacal afterlife according to the Pyramid Texts, while commoners faced a shadowy underworld existence akin to realms depicted in Mesopotamian and Greek myths - neutral realms without eternal pleasure or suffering. A significant shift occurred during the First Intermediate Period and Middle Kingdom with the rise of the Coffin Texts, extending access to the idyllic afterlife to elite nobles and officials - marking the "democratization of the afterlife" in Egyptian beliefs. By the New Kingdom and the Book of the Dead, this paradisiacal existence became accessible to all, transcending social stratification (Calvert). This democratization was a key evolution over the centuries.

One of the earliest religions to clearly define Heaven and Hell as realms of divine reward and punishment was Zoroastrianism, the ancient Persian faith. Its dualistic worldview of good and evil forces likely influenced later Abrahamic religions like Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (The Wikimedia Foundation).

In early Judaism, the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament had a more ambiguous view of the afterlife, often depicting it simply as a shadowy underworld called Sheol with no conception of Heaven or Hell. It wasn't until after the Babylonian exile that some Jewish texts like the Book of Daniel began adopting the idea of resurrection and a heavenly reward for the righteous.

The ancient Greek philosophical tradition, particularly Platonism, also significantly shaped concepts of the afterlife. Plato proposed the immortality of the soul and a system of postmortem justice and reincarnation based on one's earthly deeds (Reed). This ethical framework deeply influenced both Judaism and the developing Christian faith.

While the Old Testament had little notion of Heaven or Hell, the New Testament and early Christianity expounded on these ideas, likely drawing from both Jewish and Hellenistic thought. Vivid descriptions of Heaven and Hell as eternal destinations after death emerged, becoming central tenets of Christian doctrine despite some diversity of beliefs across sects.

Islamic beliefs about Heaven and Hell also drew from earlier Judeo-Christian, Zoroastrian, and Hellenistic concepts. The Quran describes Heaven as a physical garden paradise and Hell as a fiery realm of punishment, with entry determined by one's beliefs and deeds in life. These concepts became integral to Islamic eschatology.

During the Middle Ages, literary works like Dante's Divine Comedy offered imaginative, allegorical depictions of the afterlife realms that further solidified these concepts in the popular imagination. While traditional beliefs persist today, more recent times have also seen more metaphorical, individualized, and pluralistic interpretations of Heaven and Hell across denominations.

Ultimately, beliefs about Heaven and the afterlife evolved gradually, incorporating influences from ancient roots in Persia, Greece, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam over many centuries to reach their modern conceptions. These beliefs continue to be reinterpreted across cultures and traditions.

So why do so many people still believe? I think it speaks to the fundamental human desire to find meaning, purpose, and continuity beyond this earthly existence. The prospect of an afterlife, whether paradisiacal or transcendent, offers comfort, hope, and significance in confronting our mortality. These beliefs have become deeply woven into the fabric of human civilization and our shared yearning to understand the great mystery of what lies beyond.

Across the various depictions and beliefs about heaven and the afterlife, we can observe a common thread of analogical projection - heaven is often portrayed as an idealized reflection of the earthly existence that humans find most pleasurable and fulfilling. In ancient Egyptian civilization, the paradisiacal afterlife realms were envisioned as lush, fertile lands akin to the life-giving Nile valley. The biblical conception of heaven incorporates imagery of peaceful gardens, flowing waters, and an abundance of pleasing foods - echoing the longing for an earthly utopia free from toil and scarcity. Islamic depictions of Jannah (paradise) evoke sensual delights with shaded gardens, rivers of milk and honey, and virgin companions - articulating an idealized vision of earthly and spiritual fulfillment. Contemplative representations envision Heaven as a contemplative spiritual state of sublime union with God, where souls bask eternally in divine glory, liberated from the miseries and temptations of earthly life. The ultimate joy is being united with the source of all goodness, seeing God face to face. Even modern secular visions of heaven or an afterlife, such as the depiction in the Black Mirror episode "San Junipero," project an eternal idyllic party scene reminiscent of our nostalgic cultural ideals. Whether framed as a lush material paradise, a transcendent spiritual realm, or a nostalgic cultural utopia, beliefs about the afterlife consistently reflect humanity's deepest yearnings for perfect happiness, channeled through analogies and symbolic projections of an idealized existence liberated from suffering, want, and mortality itself.

As our scientific understanding of consciousness evolves and belief systems intermingle through cultural exchange, representations of heaven and the afterlife will likely grow increasingly pluralistic and personalized, while still reflecting our shared human essence. We may see the blending of scientific insights with metaphysical and individualized visions. Advances in neuroscience and physics could yield new metaphors for the afterlife experience, such as higher vibrational planes of existence or rejoining a transcendent universal consciousness. The trend toward highly personalized afterlife realms tailored to individual spiritual longings, akin to depictions in works like "The Five People You Meet in Heaven," could also accelerate. Artistic narratives may offer fresh symbolic frameworks for conceptualizing heaven and the soul's journey. However, certain core rituals surrounding death may remain culturally resonant sources of meaning across traditions as beliefs become more open to scientific reinterpretation. Ultimately, respecting the diverse perspectives emerging from our eternal quest to understand this profound mystery will be crucial.”

Works Cited

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