



## Heaven and Hell: More Relevant than I Imagined

SONJA HAGANDER

**M**y young son once asked me, “Mommy, is heaven the attic of the world?” I thought *that* was the beginning of a challenging conversation, but that was before I was asked to write briefly about heaven and hell. My assumption was that “heaven and hell” is not something my students are talking about or thinking about. I imagined that Martin Luther’s great fear of the wrath of God that led him to statements like, “Those theologians are right who maintain that the hellish punishment will be so terrible that the godless will wish to flee from God’s presence but will be unable to do so”<sup>1</sup> does not affect campus religious life in any powerful way. I imagined that the promise in Luther’s *Small Catechism* that in Christ God saves from “sin, death and the power of the devil” is not a formula or presupposition that seems to have much power in the daily lives of students, at least with that particular language. And yet, look again. In StepUP, a residential program of recovery on our campus, students frequently speak of their “living hell” and how they have been “saved” by their surrender to a higher power. A student in that program depicts the dichotomy of heaven and hell tattooed on his forearm, using illustrations of an angel and demon to represent the “everlasting battle of heaven and hell,” as he says. One young Somali Muslim student says that, “Our life motto is trying to do right and avoid doubtful acts, which will help you pass the test, but not being too sure of whether you will enter paradise or hellfire.” Moreover, another student pointed out that popular culture, including Tom Jones’s new album *Praise and Blame*, regularly confronts the theme of heaven and hell. Songs on the album like “What Good Am I,” “If I Give My Soul,” and “Burning Hell” are clear signals that issues of heaven and hell are not dead for society; nor are they for my students.

To be honest, I do not spend a lot of time pondering heaven and hell. I more frequently use words like “separation from God” and “fullness of life” pastorally and in conversation on campus and with peers. I am not alone. Theologians have frequently given up on the theme as well, focusing instead on love. For instance, Martin Marty writes, “The question of hell relates to themes of divine judgment, ‘the wrath of God,’ the calling to account and the like. Loading up those themes

<sup>1</sup>Martin Luther, “Psalm 90” (1534), in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 13 (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1956) 93.

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## Heaven and Hell: Pondering Faith and Doubts

CAROLINE SATRE

**P**ondering heaven and hell has had me on the brink of purgatory. How do I write something true to myself as a theologian and yet pastorally sensitive? How do I write about something that I once thought made all the difference, but now I don't think about all that much? How do I write something on a topic about which I have as much doubt as I have certainty?

Doubt? Did she really say *doubt*? I know that most of us were raised to keep our doubts in check; we were encouraged to construct a theology and defend our position. But today I think of doubt as more friend than foe; doubt is what keeps us honest, humble, and open to wherever the Spirit moves. So I dedicate this article to a few things about which I have my doubts.

First, I doubt that any one person or tradition has all the right answers to questions about life and death. Those who claim absolute certainty, then, are the ones who frighten me most. Recently I was handed a brochure promising that all my questions about life and heaven and suffering would be answered during a local weekend crusade. Brochures like this make me wonder what the authors know about the disappearance of the dinosaurs and the whereabouts of Amelia Earhart. But more than scoffing at their simple certainty, I worry that such brochures miss something vital in the biblical witness. As I see it, the gospel has less to do with life after death than it does with life in the present.

And that is my second doubt: I doubt that the biblical witness is as concerned with heaven and hell as it is with the in-breaking of God's kingdom here and now. Granted, this is a difficult concept to put in a triple-fold brochure. But this is the part I'm convinced we have at least mostly right; this is the part I think matters most.

The fact that I can experience the kingdom now is what gives me a passion for my work and for my life as a whole. As Jürgen Moltmann says, "Our 'soul' is to be found wherever we are utterly given to life, passionately interested and involved."<sup>1</sup> In a similar vein, Douglas John Hall says he is convinced that "'salvation' as presented in the Bible and in the best traditions of the Christian faith, does not mean

<sup>1</sup>Jürgen Moltmann, *Is There Life after Death?* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1998) 13.

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with this glamorous, colorful, mythosymbolic, ever-changing...envisioning, so subject to caricature and so useful for terrifying children, does not advance belief in the God revealed as a God of love.”<sup>2</sup> Is he missing the mark? Am I? How do notions of heaven and hell function in the lives of students on campus? Do they “believe” in them?

So, I was motivated to distribute a survey, albeit an informal one. More than 300 students, mostly young adults, were offered opportunity to respond to a simple, ten-question survey on heaven and hell. Responses came from 104 of them. Overall, both from conversations and the survey, it seems there is evidence to support the claim that heaven and hell are relevant constructs for young adults on my campus.

Does the notion of heaven and hell shape the now? Have power? It seems so, from both my survey (81% believe in heaven, and 57% believe in hell) and from the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life (74% of those 18–39 believe in heaven, 59% believe in hell).<sup>3</sup> Heaven and hell do seem to be relevant constructs for young adults on campus. Most agree with the statements, “I believe in heaven,” “I believe in hell,” and most disagree with the proposal that “the concepts of ‘heaven and hell’ have nothing to do with my life.”

At a minimum, one must take seriously the topic of heaven and hell. Clearly, these are not antiquated issues. Whether one has to deal with someone whose life seems like a “living hell” or one is completely opposed to even including the word “hell” in their vocabulary—or when we stand at the graveside of a young student—our theology must include words and notions and concepts that speak into the lives of these young adults. Furthermore, paying attention to issues of heaven and hell provides entrée into conversations with students who normally do not find themselves in worship on a regular basis.

These results show us that this community of young adults is ripe for language and conversation that is wide and broad enough to include *their* experiences in seeking God. And we can do this. As the Apostle Paul reminds me, nothing, nothing at all “will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus” (Rom 8:39). Nothing. Not hell. Not heaven. Not these vital conversations. ⊕

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<sup>2</sup>Martin Marty, in “A Symposium: What to Say about Hell,” *The Christian Century*, June 3, 2008, 24.

<sup>3</sup>Pew Forum on Public Life, “Religious Landscape Survey,” 33; online at <http://religions.pewforum.org/report2religious-landscape-study-chapter-1.pdf> (accessed November 5, 2010).

being saved *from* our mortality, our finitude, our human creatureliness; nor does it mean being saved *for* an otherworldly state, immortality, heaven.”<sup>2</sup> Rather, Jesus’ most basic intention “was to enhance life...to save us *for* life” (so John 10:10). A friend who is also a Pauline scholar recently told me that, for Paul, “salvation” doesn’t mean “you are counted among those who will go to heaven” but “you are among the people in the present who are properly oriented to God’s coming kingdom and are already living out the reality of that kingdom in your community’s practice.”

Although this theology “preaches,” as we tend to say, I have a third doubt. In the end, I doubt that we can live without hope in a future beyond this world. I have been blessed to bear the sacred title of “pastor” for sixteen years. In that time, I’ve buried a twenty-three-year-old woman who decided she would rather end her life than be a burden to her family. I’ve cried with young parents whose son died short of his first birthday when spinal muscular atrophy took away his ability to swallow and breathe and pump blood. I’ve stood by a man when parts of the bodies of his wife and two daughters started washing up on the Atlantic shore after the crash of TWA Flight 800.

At times like these, what do you say? Even though I believe that the Bible is more concerned with life *now* rather than life *then*, when the questions about *then* arise, I place my bet on the side of hope. As Moltmann observes, our symbols of life after death express “the conviction that I shall come back to my life, and in the light of God’s grace and in the power of his mercy put right what has gone awry, finish what was begun, pick up what was neglected, forgive the trespasses, heal the hurts, and be permitted to gather up the moments of happiness and to transmute mourning into joy. And if indeed what has begun in faith in my life is God’s good work with me, then I am confident that God will bring that work to its completion and that death cannot stand in the way.”<sup>3</sup>

As one who claims both faith and doubt and is most certainly saint and sinner, this is my honest and humble confession. ⊕

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<sup>2</sup>Douglas John Hall, *Why Christianity?* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998) 41.

<sup>3</sup>Moltmann, *Is There Life after Death?* 57.