



Is Christianity about Heaven?

MARCUS BORG

Reflection questions: If you grew up Christian, how important was an afterlife to the form of Christianity that you learned or absorbed in childhood? If you had been asked at age ten or twelve, “Why should somebody be Christian?” what would your answer have been? And, whether you grew up Christian or not, how important is an afterlife to your present understanding of Christianity, the gospel, the Christian message?

I grew up Lutheran (old ELC; that is, Evangelical Lutheran Church) in the 1940s and 1950s—initially in a town of 1400 people in northeastern North Dakota and then in a “city” ten times that size in western Minnesota. Church mattered. Mom was in Ladies Aid and “circles.” Dad was on the board of trustees and sometimes sang solos in church. Several of my uncles, on both sides of the family, were Lutheran pastors—some ELC (Norwegian) and some Augustana Synod (Swedish). My siblings, all older, sang in the choir and were members of Luther League and LDR (Lutheran Daughters of the Reformation).

Sunday mornings were spent in church and Sunday school. Only serious illness—like life-threatening fever and projectile vomiting—was a sufficient excuse for staying home. Simply saying “I don’t feel well” didn’t do it. There were frequent church suppers, at least monthly and maybe more often. During Lent, we had seriously somber services on Wednesday evenings. Confirmation classes began in eighth grade and lasted two and a half years—twice a week, on Thursday after-

Although most Christians have grown up with the notion that the reason to be a Christian is in order to go to heaven, putting the emphasis on the afterlife distorts the Bible, the gospel, the purpose of Jesus, and the message of his followers. Christian faith is much more about transformation—of ourselves, our communities, and our world.

noons and Saturday mornings. I didn't really mind. Church, Sunday school, and confirmation were okay, maybe even fine. In any case, it was what we did.

The afterlife was absolutely central to the Christianity I absorbed in my childhood. If you had asked me at age ten or twelve why somebody should be Christian, I would have answered, "So that you can go to heaven." If you had asked me to put into one sentence the Christian message, the heart of the gospel (a good question to ask at any age), I would have said: "Jesus died for our sins so that we can be forgiven and go to heaven." Going to heaven was the motive, the reason, for being Christian. It was also the reason for Jesus' death: we have sinned and do not deserve to go to heaven; but Jesus saved us from our sins by dying in our place. Being Christian means believing that Jesus did this for us. Even more concisely: believe in Jesus now for the sake of heaven later.

*the afterlife was absolutely central to the Christianity
I absorbed in my childhood*

I did not grow up in a "hellfire and brimstone" church. I don't recall that Pastor Thorson, as I call him, preached many sermons about hell. But the threat was there, explicit or not. Pastor Thorson was stern; he was a finger-shaker, both metaphorically and literally. We heard again and again how sinful we were and thus how desperately we needed God's grace in order to be saved. He even shook his finger as he pronounced the absolution, the forgiveness of sins. We were forgiven—but we had better be careful.

So central was the afterlife to my end-of-childhood understanding that if you had been able to convince me at age twelve or so that there was no afterlife, I would have had no idea why I should be Christian, or why I should be religious. A blessed afterlife, the overcoming of death, the avoidance of eternal punishment, was what it was all about.

This impression, this understanding of Christianity, was not idiosyncratic to my childhood or to my branch of Christianity. For 1500 years or so, it has been what most Christians have believed. Imagine how the offer of heaven and the threat of hell operated in the minds of Christians during all the centuries when heaven and hell were taken for granted. You might be condemned to eternal torment. Imagine how this produced a fear-based Christianity.

Most of us who grew up a generation or two ago absorbed a form of this. It is also what many Christians today still believe, especially, but not only, in fundamentalist and conservative Evangelical churches. For some mainline Protestants and Catholics, a blessed afterlife continues to be the major reason for being Christian, even if often almost unconsciously. But is Christianity primarily about post-mortem states? Is it about where we will spend eternity?

Now, a half century and more after the end of my childhood and, I trust, with a greater degree of Christian maturity, I see things quite differently. I have become convinced that an *emphasis* on the afterlife distorts Christianity and what it's about.

It distorts the Bible, the gospel, the purpose of Jesus, and the message of his followers, including Paul. Note that I use the word *emphasis*. My passion is not to deny an afterlife—more about that later. My passion is about what happens when the afterlife is emphasized; it intrinsically distorts Christianity, for more than one reason.

THE DISTORTIONS

First, an emphasis on the afterlife turns Christianity into a religion of requirements and rewards. The logic is transparent: if there is a blessed afterlife, it doesn't seem fair, right, or just to most people that everybody gets one, regardless. To use extreme examples, does Hitler get to go to heaven? Stalin? Pol Pot? Most people would say, "I don't think so!" So there must be something that distinguishes those who do get to go to heaven from those who don't. Unless one thinks that God predestines some to heaven and some to hell, that which separates those who do go to heaven from those who don't must be something that we believe or do, or some combination of the two. Within this framework, Christianity becomes a religion of requirements, no matter how much the language of grace is used.

Second, an emphasis on the afterlife typically creates an "in group" and an "out group." There are those who believe and/or behave as they need to in order to be saved, and there are those who do not.

Third, an emphasis on the afterlife focuses our attention on the next world and what we need to believe or do in order to go to heaven. This world doesn't matter very much, except as preparation for heaven.

Fourth, when the afterlife is emphasized, our concern is primarily about the self. What must I believe or do in order to be saved, to live forever, to be spared from hell, and to be reunited with those whom I love? But is this what Christianity is about—the eternal preservation of me and those who matter to me? Is it about eternal and ultimate self-interest? Or is it about letting go of a concern with self-interest and being caught up in a self-consuming passion?

A few years ago at a clergy conference when I did a similar criticism of what happens when the afterlife is emphasized as the reason and motive for being Christian, one of the clergy asked in the question-and-response session, "If Christianity's not about an afterlife, then what's our product?" From his tone of voice, I knew that his question was earnest and not primarily confrontational. He was a man in his 40s, so I also knew that he had been to seminary not that long ago. And I realized that for him, if Christianity wasn't about an afterlife, he wasn't sure what his message was. His question was a good one: If Christianity isn't about an afterlife, what is it about?

THE MEANING OF SALVATION

There is another important distortion that occurs when the afterlife is emphasized. Namely, it affects the meanings of the word "salvation," one of the "big" Christian words. It names the goal, the aim, the purpose, the yearning of the Christian life. It is as central to Christianity as *nirvana* is to Hinduism and *satori* is to Buddhism.

For a long time, I have been aware that “salvation” is commonly understood as “going to heaven.” Nevertheless, I was surprised when I recently facilitated an intergenerational discussion of Christian language. Half of the people in the group were in their 20s and 30s and the other half in their 60s and 70s. Most were committed Christians significantly engaged in the life of their congregations. The rest were earnest seekers, wondering and hoping that there might be something real and important in Christianity. All had at least a college degree, and most had taken courses in religious studies and church adult education courses.

What surprised me was not that most of them identified “salvation” with an afterlife, but that the word had primarily negative associations for 80% of them. Salvation was about heaven and the threat of hell. Most who had grown up Christian recalled feeling deep anxiety about whether they were “good enough” (in belief or behavior or both) to be saved, that is, to go to heaven. Some recalled the threat of hell being used in emotionally abusive ways. Many were troubled by the notion that there was only one way of salvation, namely Christianity, and that everybody else was going to hell. The association of salvation with heaven and hell made it a negative word—spoiled, soiled, contaminated.

SALVATION IN THE BIBLE

The identification of salvation with an afterlife is deeply unfortunate. It reduces and seriously distorts the biblical meanings of the word. In the Bible, salvation is primarily about something that happens in this world, this side of death. It is about the transformation of ourselves and the world. Salvation is about God’s passion for both of these transformations.

in the Bible, salvation is primarily about something that happens in this world, this side of death

Salvation is seldom about an afterlife. In the Old Testament, it is not. Ancient Israel for most of its history did not believe in an afterlife—not in the time of its ancestors (Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Rachel and Leah), not in the time of the exodus, the prophets, and the psalms; not in wisdom books like Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job. Only in Daniel, the last book of the Old Testament to be written (around 165 B.C.E.), is there a clear reference to an afterlife. For all the centuries prior to Daniel, ancient Israel was passionate about God and God’s salvation without affirming an afterlife.

Salvation in the Old Testament has many meanings. Liberation from slavery, as in the story of the exodus—liberation from a bondage that was economic, political, and religious; return from exile, as in the second half of the book of Isaiah; rescue and deliverance from danger and illness, as in the Psalms. Salvation meant light in the darkness, and related images like seeing and awakening; a world of justice and peace where no one shall be afraid; and more. All of these are about

transformation in this world, this side of death—our transformation and the transformation of the humanly-created world of societies, kingdoms, and nations.

These meanings continue in the New Testament. Exodus imagery, return-from-exile imagery, light and enlightenment and seeing again imagery, rescue from illness and paralysis imagery, imagery of a new world different from the world of domination systems—all of these abound in the New Testament.

Though the New Testament does affirm an afterlife, salvation is still primarily about transformation in this life, even when the language of death and resurrection is used. Paul in Rom 6 speaks about dying and rising with Christ as something that happens here and now. In Gal 2:19–20, he says about himself: “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.” Notice how the language works: the old Paul has died, and a new Paul has been born whose life is now in Christ. Paul has experienced death and resurrection. So also in the story of Jesus and Nicodemus in the third chapter of John: it speaks of being “born again” or “born anew” or “born from above” (John 3:7). To be born again is to enter into a new life here and now.

Salvation—the yearning of the Christian life, the heart of the Christian gospel—is about far more than an afterlife. It is about transformation in this life—of ourselves and the world. In language from Verna Dozier, an African American theologian and author, and from South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu, salvation is “the dream of God,” “God’s dream,” for the earth.¹ In language from Jesus, salvation is the kingdom of God—which, as the Lord’s Prayer affirms, is for *the earth*: “Your kingdom come...*on earth*, as already in heaven.”

THE AFTERLIFE

In this concluding section, I become more personal. Of course, the whole essay is personal. All any writer, ancient or contemporary, can do is to say, “This is how I see things.” None of us can escape our personal vantage point. But thus far I have sought to report how mainstream biblical scholars (meaning those not committed to biblical inerrancy and literalism) see salvation and the afterlife in the Bible. Now I share how I think of the afterlife.

In the precise sense of the word, I am an agnostic about what happens after death. “Agnostic” means “one who doesn’t know.” Agnosticism is not a halfway house between believing and atheism. It is a state of “not knowing.” I do not know about an afterlife—and I am aware that I cannot resolve my uncertainty by deciding to believe something in particular. Believing does not make something true. For example, I could decide to believe that the earth and the universe were created not more than 10,000 years ago, as almost half of American Christians do. But believing that has nothing to do with whether or not it’s true.

Among the things I do not know: I do not know that there is no afterlife.

¹See Verna J. Dozier, *The Dream of God: A Call to Return* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley, 1991); Desmond Tutu, *God Has a Dream: A Vision of Hope for Our Time* (New York: Doubleday, 2004).

Indeed, I find the research that has been done on near-death experiences intriguing. Some of what is consistently reported as part of these experiences suggests that we do enter another realm at death: the tunnel, the bright light, the experience of leaving the body and seeing things from a vantage point outside of the body. Who knows what this means?

And if there is a blessed afterlife, there is much that seems impossible to know. For example, if there is life beyond death, is it about heaven or hell—and maybe even purgatory? Most Christians have believed in purgatory; only Protestants reject it. Or is an afterlife about reincarnation? Though we commonly think of reincarnation in connection with Buddhism and Hinduism, a significant minority of Christians have affirmed it from antiquity to the present. Some early Christian theologians—like Origen (around the year 200)—believed in reincarnation. Not until the end of the 500s was it declared heretical by Pope Gregory the Great. He wouldn't have had to do so unless some Christians affirmed it. I was surprised by polls that indicate that about one-fourth of American Catholics today, and about 20% of American Protestants, believe in reincarnation. So, heaven, hell, or purgatory—or reincarnation?

If the afterlife isn't about me and us knowing that we are me and us, what's it about?

If there is a blessed afterlife, and I'm there, will I know that I am me? That is, is personal identity preserved in an afterlife? For some people, this seems like a ludicrous question. If the afterlife isn't about me and us knowing that we are me and us, what's it about? Yet when I think of my best experiences in this life, they have been experiences in which I was so completely caught up in what I was experiencing that there was no part of me left over that was aware that "I'm Marcus and I'm having this experience." If the best experiences of our lives are moments when we are not conscious of being this particular self, would an afterlife in which I know that I'm Marcus be an inferior state of affairs?

The next question is a variation of the previous one. If there is a blessed afterlife, are there reunions with people we have known, including family reunions? If so, is this good or bad news? For some people, family has been the greatest source of joy in their lives, and the prospect of being reunited with those whom they loved is immensely attractive. But for others, family has been one of the greatest sources of pain and suffering. Does an afterlife mean that we will be with these people forever? Do the relationships we have now continue?

Puzzlement about this is the premise of the question asked of Jesus by the Sadducees in Mark 12:18–27. If a woman has been married to seven different men, whose wife will she be in the hereafter? Jesus' answer suggests radical discontinuity between this life and the next: "For when they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven" (Mark 12:25). What

does that mean? Finally, the passage ends with another puzzling statement from Jesus: God “is God not of the dead, but of the living; you are quite wrong.” Perhaps the whole is a non-answer to the Sadducees question. Or if taken as an answer, it suggests at the very least that the afterlife is quite different from a continuation of the relationships we have in this life.

So also there is ambiguity about the degree of continuity in what Paul says about resurrection in 1 Cor 15:35–50. There he contrasts two kinds of bodies, translated in the NRSV as “a physical body” and “a spiritual body” (1 Cor 15:44). He uses an image that speaks of both continuity and discontinuity between the two: the physical body is like a seed, the spiritual body is like the full-grown plant. Continuity? Yes. But think of how different the full-grown plant is from the seed.

Finally, if there is a blessed afterlife, I cannot imagine that it is only for Christians. To imagine that the creator of the universe has chosen to be adequately known in only one religious tradition, which just happens to be our own, is, for me, beyond belief.

For these reasons, I am an agnostic about what happens after death. I do not even know what I would prefer—not that my preferences have anything to do with what will be.

What I am convinced of is this: when we die, we do not die into nothingness, but we die into God. For me, that is enough. I can affirm with Paul:

We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. (Rom 14:7–8)

I also am fond of two statements attributed to Martin Luther, the mentor of my youth. I cannot quote them directly, but I am confident of the “gist.” In one, he said that the afterlife is God's business, and that he (Luther) didn't have to worry about it. In the other, he said that we can know as little about life after death as a baby traveling down the birth canal can know about the world it is about to enter.

And I love the confidence (etymologically, that which comes with faith) in Denise Levertov's poem “The Avowal.” After describing how water bears swimmers and air sustains birds, she continues:

*so would I learn to attain
free fall and float
into Creator Spirit's deep embrace,
knowing no effort earns
that all-surrounding grace.²*

The images of floating and buoyancy are marvelous. Just as God has buoyed us up in life, so also in death. What more that means, I do not know.

I conclude by returning to the question the clergyman asked me: “If Chris-

²Denise Levertov, *The Stream and the Sapphire: Selected Poems on Religious Themes* (New York: New Directions, 1997) 6.

tianity's not about an afterlife, then what's our product?" My answer: our product is transformation—the transformation of ourselves as individuals and communities, and the transformation of the world. Most people yearn for such transformation, I think. We yearn that our lives be better than they are, and we yearn that the world be a better place. This twofold transformation is what salvation is about. And it is the passion of God. ⊕

MARCUS BORG is Distinguished Professor Emeritus at Oregon State University and Canon Theologian at Trinity Episcopal Cathedral in Portland, Oregon. He is the author of nineteen books, including the best-sellers Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time, Reading the Bible Again for the First Time, The Heart of Christianity, and Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teaching, and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary.