



THE ROAD TO HEAVEN

It is full of mystery and foreshadowings.

By Jonathan Aitken

WHEN I WAS READING THEOLOGY at Oxford, my tutor, the Regius Professor of Divinity no less, set his students this topic for our weekly essay: *What is heaven and who will get into it?* Toiling away on my research in the bibliography of heaven, I soon discovered that the answers to these apparently simple questions can be complex and confusing.

The confusion has been deepened by contemporary journalism. Who would have thought *Time* magazine would devote the cover story of its April 16th issue to “Rethinking Heaven”? At first it seems like a spoof, since the cover portrays not the usual celestial images of angels, halos, and harps, but a bow-tied Ivy League type perched on a ladder in the clouds and peering forward through binoculars. He looks more likely to fall out of heaven than to get into it. Perhaps this was *Time*’s way of reminding its readers that the ascent to our celestial home is likely to be a precarious climb.

Anyone interested in making this journey, whether as a questioning skeptic or a committed believer, should study the principal sources of heavenly knowledge: Scripture, Tradition, Interpretation, and Experience.

The paucity of descriptive material on heaven in the Bible is puzzling. In the Old Testament’s greatest scene of theophany (an encounter with God), the Prophet Isaiah is admitted to a heavenly throne room guarded by winged seraphs, one of whom touches a live coal to Isaiah’s lips to purify him. (Isaiah 6:1-8) His abject penitence during this purification indicates that entry into God’s presence will be preceded by judgment. Isaiah saw in his vision that heaven is the epicenter of God’s holiness and glory.

The Psalms contain clues to what heaven could be like. Psalm 48 suggests that the city of God on his holy mountain is “beautiful in its loftiness, the joy of the whole earth.” In the ensuing verses heaven is portrayed as a fortress of absolute invincibility. Before its gates, kings flee, strong men tremble, and

mighty ships are shattered in the wind. This is a theological way of saying that man's power on earth offers no security, whereas God's power in heaven gives total security.

The themes of feasting, joy, beauty, loftiness, and security also resonate in the visionary hints of heaven found in the New Testament. Its Greek word *ouranos* (literally sky or air) has given us the English word heaven, denoting the firmament above the earth where God has his abode. The first indication of this concept in the Gospels is found in Mark's account of the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist, in which the heavens open and a divine voice is heard saying, "This is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased." (Mark 1:10-11)

Later in the New Testament, St. Paul finds heaven indescribable: "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him." (Corinthians 2:9) The author of Revelation has no such descriptive hesitation. He paints a vivid picture of multitudes that roar out Hallelujahs and praises to God while the elders keep singing "Holy, Holy, Holy" and "casting down their golden crowns around the glassy sea." (Revelation 19:1-4) These noisy manifestations of worship contrast with the peaceful heaven portrayed by the author of Hebrews, who sees rest as the reward for the completion of the earthly pilgrimage. (Hebrews 3:11)

THE COMMON Christian denominator in all these ideas about heaven is that it is filled with the presence of God. Intriguingly, the principal writings of other leading faiths point to a similar concept. The Koran suggests a garden (the word for heaven in Arabic) full of pleasures and privileges, of which the greatest is meeting God. *Atziluth*, *Vaikuntha*, *Kailas*, and *Da Luo Tian* are names for heaven in respectively Judaism, Hinduism, Tibetan Buddhism, and Taoism. Each is where God will be seen face to face.

The question of whether God dwells in a place, in some unimaginable sphere above the cosmos, or in human hearts is a matter of tradition—much of it the creation of artists and writers. Dante's account in *The Divine Comedy* of arriving in heaven, although fictional, nevertheless reflects the visionary culture of the time when it was written. After this Medieval period, individual visions of heaven were reported less often, and were not part of a continuing culture but were one-off creations by poets and artists. A

famous description from the 17th century comes from John Donne (1572–1631), who wrote a prayer depicting heaven as a house "where there shall be no darkness nor dazzling but one equal light; no noise nor silence but one equal music; no fears nor hopes but one equal possession; no ends nor beginnings but one equal eternity: in the habitation of God's majesty and glory, world without end."

In the 20th and 21st centuries, the traditions of heaven have been interpreted by many commentators. One of my opposite numbers in this *American Spectator* symposium, John Derbyshire, highlights two of them—C. S. Lewis and Peter Kreeft—and gives both a rubbishing for their failure to produce evidence. This is an easy hit because faith consists of what we do not see. Nevertheless, because some signs from the invisible world can occasionally be sighted "through a glass darkly," as St. Paul puts it, let's play Mr. Derbyshire on his home turf. For the next paragraph or two, take a look at this subject on contemporary evidential grounds and consider reports from living witnesses who think they might have had a premature glimpse of the next life. In the language of heaven-watchers, these are people who claim to have had an "out-of-body experience."

The phrase may sound like new-age jargon, but its antecedents are biblical. St. Paul, in his second letter to the Corinthians, writes of how he "was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know—God knows." (2 Corinthians 12:3-4) More surprising than a Christian saint having such a vision two millennia ago is the reality that a significant number of ordinary people, living here and now in the 21st century, claim to have had similar out-of-body experiences. Even more arresting, these experiences appear to have important features in common. People report seeing dazzling light; watching their own deaths from a viewpoint high above ground level; entering into a higher realm of great peace and contentment; and meeting wonderful people, often relatives, who have long ago passed away. If this sounds like wacky nonsense, one has to explain why so many rational people who have been on the brink of death survive to tell such tales of considerable similarity. Surely they can't all be part of a vast international conspiracy to spin heavenly yarns? And if they were merely hallucinating, how come they had the same hallucination despite their completely different physical circumstances and spiritual beliefs? Is it possible that these near-deathers *did* get a peek of the afterlife? It is a mystery not easily explained.

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AT THE RISK OF being thought a lunatic, I will now record for *TAS* readers my own near-death experience. I have rarely spoken and never written about this before, largely because at the time I thought it was just a one-off dream. Now I think differently. Subject to that health warning, here are the facts.

At the age of 15, a schoolboy adventure of midnight skinny-dipping with a bad cold led to a bout of pneumonia. My fever climbed so high that I was rushed into the local hospital. I had a temperature of 107.8 degrees, which sent me into a delirium. In rural England of the 1950s, the hospital treatment consisted of shots of penicillin (to no effect) followed by nurses fanning my bed with blankets to cool me down. I lost consciousness.

During this drama I remember looking down on the scene from a vantage point on or above the ceiling. I felt happily detached from what was going on

around my bed. I could not understand why the nurses were in such overdrive with the sponging and blanket waving, or why my mother was crying. Then, in my hallucinations, I started to travel. I was

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surrounded by brilliant white lights of an intensity I have never seen before or since. I flew at high speed first in the sky, then through a tunnel. I arrived in a garden of exquisite beauty where a lunch party was in progress. I was welcomed with great love by two of my grandparents and an old family friend. Never had I felt happier or more at peace. Even my favorite food—roast beef and Yorkshire pudding—was on the table! But just as I was about to sit down after kissing my grandmother, I politely said, “Not today, thank you,” and left.

The next thing I knew was waking up in the hospital where the doctor was taking my temperature, saying, “I think he'll be all right now.” In medical terms, I was later told that I had been through the “pneumonia curve” when the temperature soars to critical heights. It either goes on rising and the patient dies, or it suddenly falls. Apparently it had been a close-run thing.

There were oddities to my delirious dreams, which later seemed perplexing. Although I had been unconscious at the time, my descriptions of the scene around my bedside, down to details and snippets of the nurses' conversation, were 100 percent accurate. The people I met in the garden had been dead for some years. One of them, my Canadian grandmother, had never met me in life. Yet I was able to describe her well, right down to the locket she wore round her neck. None of this seemed particularly important until, much later, I read articles and books about out-of-body experiences. What I now know is that many peoples' out-of-body experiences have been remarkably similar to mine. Not in every respect, but com-



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mon features recur time and again. We can't all be making this up.

THE CONTEMPORARY "EVIDENCE" of out-of-body experiences may not convince Mr. Derbyshire, but it has persuaded a good few people at least to wonder about what happens on the other side of the grave. "Nothing, a void, the end, period," say the atheists. "Rising in heavenly glory," claim believers. Who is right?

Because we mortals are creatures of time, we are unable to get our heads round the concept of eternity. Even when we believe in God, "we only understand the outskirts of his ways," says the Book of Job. So after citing any number of biblical passages, religious traditions, visions, artworks, experiences, and theological libraries full of "evidence," we are still only guessing about heaven. But at least we can ask the right questions before we guess.

The first question is: Are we satisfied with an earthly life that ends in nothingness? Our free will entitles us to answer in the affirmative and to take no interest in God or where he dwells. The flaw in that approach was well summarized by the lyrics of the 1960s Peggy Lee song.

*Is that all there is?
Is that all there is?
If that's all there is my friend
Then let's keep dancing
Let's break out the booze
And have a ball
If that's all there is*

The second question, only to be answered by those who have moved on the assertion that human life consists merely of DNA strands, is: Do we have any spiritual curiosity about what might be in store for us beyond the horizons of our earthly sight?

If we do have such curiosity, the full title of Peter Kreeft's seminal book, *Heaven: The Heart's Deepest Longing*, becomes highly relevant. For what he and other writers on this subject argue is that many of us, deep down, instinctively understand that this world is not our home. We experience in one form or another a call within our hearts of dissatisfaction with the earthly nature of our daily lives. Augustine of Hippo caught this mood when he wrote, "Our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee." It is a restlessness that cannot be satisfied by booze, balls, bank balances, promises of politicians, or symbols of success.

Once we have stumbled our way to this reality, we have begun our quest for heaven.

Inevitably, this quest is a mystery. There are two main schools of theological opinion as to where it leads. The traditional view is that heaven is a place to which our souls travel after death. It will be peaceful, beautiful, restful, joyful, and full of the glory of

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God. We will be reunited with our loved ones, and we will have heavenly rather than earthly bodies. If it is anything like my grandparents' dining room, to which I may have made a fleeting visit at the peak of my pneumonia curve, well, Hallelujah! But I suspect that the joys of heaven are far more profound. There is encouragement in the words of Jesus: "In my Father's house are many mansions." (John 14:2)

The modernist view of heaven does not encompass mansions, gardens, angels, seraphs, or throne rooms. It is not a place but a space—God's space. We enter it not by our work but by his grace. And his space fills our hearts as our hearts open up to his grace. As the ancient liturgy says, "We pray that we may dwell in Him and He in us."

None of this will make sense to Mr. Derbyshire, who seems determined to deny the existence of both God and Heaven. But perhaps his rejection is not quite as absolute as it seems. I was amused by his qualifying penultimate line: "If the admission standards are low enough to get in..." Amen to that from me and from all the rest of us sinners facing our uncomfortable interviews at the pearly gates. For the answer to that Oxford essay question mentioned in the opening paragraph of this article is:

Heaven is where God dwells, and its population will be full of surprises. ❧

Jonathan Aitken is *The American Spectator's* *High Spirits* columnist and the author of *John Newton: From Disgrace to Amazing Grace (Crossway)*, *Charles W. Colson: A Life Redeemed (Doubleday)*, and *Nixon: A Life (available in paperback from Regnery Books)*.