

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 112

Heaven in the Christian imagination

Death has been swallowed
up in victory.
I Corinthians 15:54





UP, UP, AND AWAY? The metaphorical idea that heaven is “up” strongly echoes through Christian tradition. Here in a 14th-c. fresco of Christ’s Ascension (*left*), we only glimpse his feet. And, in an illuminated manuscript from the same century (*below*), God peeks out of heaven at the earth beneath.



Did you know?

BOOKS, SONGS, ART, POETRY, AND SERMONS
THAT HAVE HELPED US IMAGINE THE HEAVENLY
SCENE

THE RIVER CAME IN A DREAM

Pastor, hymn writer, and composer Robert Lowry gave us the famous nineteenth-century hymn about heaven, “Shall we gather at the river?” In his own words: “One afternoon in July, 1864 . . . the weather was oppressively hot, and I was lying on a lounge in a state of physical exhaustion. . . . My imagination began to take itself wings. . . . The imagery of the apocalypse took the form of a tableau. Brightest of all were the throne, the heavenly river, and the gathering of the saints. . . . I began to wonder why the hymn writers had said so much about the ‘river of death’ and so little about the ‘pure water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and the Lamb.’ As I mused, the words began to construct themselves. They came first as a question of Christian inquiry, ‘Shall we gather?’ Then they broke in chorus, ‘Yes, we’ll gather.’ On this question and answer the hymn developed itself.”

DO DOGS GO TO HEAVEN?

Surprisingly, John Wesley thought so, as he expressed in his sermon “The General Deliverance,” based on Romans 8:22 (“We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now”). Wesley talked about the original happy state of animals in paradise, the way the Fall cut off God’s plan to bless animals as well as humans, and God’s final desire to see not only humans but animals have every tear wiped from their eyes (Rev. 21:4): “They [animals] ‘shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption, into glorious liberty,’—even a measure, according as they are capable,—of ‘the liberty of the children of God.’”

WHO ELSE WILL WE SEE THERE?

As our *History of Hell* guide describes, the debate about whether God will save everyone (and what will happen to the rest if he doesn’t—annihilation or eternal torment) has raged for centuries. Many Christian thinkers have argued the traditional view that at least some people will reject God and never make it to heaven. But some have maintained universalism, the idea that *everyone* will eventually be reconciled to God, often after a long period of suffering and purgation.

Christians explicitly teaching a form of universalism include Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, Hans Denck, William Law, and George MacDonald. Some others—including Maximus the Confessor, Julian of Norwich, and Karl Barth—implied such a view even if they did not directly state it.

Similarly, the idea that God predestines some to salvation has spurred debate from Augustine’s day to ours—debate which intensified after the Protestant Reformation. Today Calvinists are known for insisting that only some of us are among the elect who will persevere in faith until the end. Other Christian traditions either make this idea less central or reject it completely.

DANTE’S VISION

What is one of the most imaginative visions of heaven and hell in Western culture? Dante’s fourteenth-century *Divine Comedy* (covered in CH 70, *Dante’s Guide to Heaven and Hell*). Dante’s three-part poem, one of the first serious literary works to be written in the vernacular rather than in Latin, sold like hotcakes for centuries. (No doubt many people were eager to see who had ended up in hell—like Pope Boniface VIII—and in heaven—where Dante placed not only saints of the church but also Holy Roman Emperor Henry VII.) The book was hand-copied over 600 times in his own century, spawned 12 contemporary commentaries, and eventually became one of the first books to be



VIEWING "THE CELESTIAL ROSE" Above: Haunting, mystical illustrations by Gustave Doré have graced many editions of Dante's *Divine Comedy* since 1861.

AND A LESS PLEASANT VIEW Right: In medieval images of hell and purgatory, readers sometimes scratched out the faces of demons.



set in movable type. Interest in the tale waned for a while, but revived in the nineteenth century.

FURTHER UP AND FURTHER IN


C. S. Lewis profoundly impacted modern Christian images of heaven in his novels *The Great Divorce* (1945) and *The Last Battle* (1956). *The Great Divorce* tells about bus passengers on an excursion from a "grim city" to a beautiful heavenly landscape. Very few passengers choose to remain there when they discover that doing so means submitting to the lordship of Christ.

The Last Battle pictures the closing days of Lewis's imaginary Narnian world. After a dramatic judgment scene, the heroes journey "further up and further in" to Narnia's green and beautiful new heaven and new earth: "The things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them....Now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on for ever: in which every chapter is better than the one before." Lewis also described the medieval view of heaven in *The Discarded Image* (1964), and his friend Charles Williams penned

a novel in which the afterlife looks like the city of London—*All Hallows' Eve* (1945).

BUILDING THE NEW JERUSALEM

Many of us have sung "Christ is made the sure foundation / Christ the head and cornerstone" as we dedicate new churches. But did you know these lines are part of a hymn about the heavenly Jerusalem? Dating from the seventh century, John of Damascus's famous lyric begins by describing the heavenly Jerusalem descending to earth as the bride of Christ decked with jewels. Christians through the years have seized on Revelation's imagery to describe heaven as a beautiful jeweled city, inhabited by the redeemed who unendingly sing God's praises.

On our cover: While the apostle Paul is often depicted standing next to Christ and Peter in heaven, images of his entry into heaven are relatively rare. This painting by Hans Suess von Kulmbach, who studied under Albrecht Dürer, imagines the apostle approaching the enthroned Trinity after his death. Perhaps the artist had Paul's description of a vision of the third heaven (2 Cor. 12) in mind. 



Editor's note

ALMOST THIRTY YEARS AGO, my grandfather died. He was (as I noted in issue 110) a Methodist pastor and the president of a Christian educational institution. He wrote a monthly column for that school's magazine, even in retirement, and his last column came out the week of his death. The last words he left for his readers were from I John 3:2: *"Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is."*

Those words of Scripture came back to me often as we worked on this issue of *Christian History* about heaven. We have been hoping to do an issue on heaven for over three years, ever since we released the *History of Hell* guide in 2011. Many of you who found the *Hell* guide useful and thought-provoking have been eager to see us talk about heaven in the Christian tradition. We are glad to finally be able to show you just a sampling of the incredibly diverse art, music, stories, descriptions, musings, and theological reflections Christians have come up with over the years as they tried to express beauty that is ultimately inexpressible.

MANY IMAGES

For that is, of course, the problem with heaven. None of us have been there. That has not stopped many thinkers, writers, artists, and composers from trying to picture what heaven might be like and who its inhabitants might be. Building on biblical imagery,

heaven has been seen as a garden, a city, a home, a community of saints, and even a starry night. And theological debates surrounding heaven (and hell) have echoed through the centuries. Who goes to heaven? How do you get there? How central is the idea of heaven to the Christian faith? Will everyone eventually end up there, or will some remain in hell? (We covered that particular debate extensively in the *History of Hell* guide.) What will the experience of heaven be like? Will we be able to recognize our friends and loved ones as we did on earth? Is there any kind of intermediate state before we get there? How does heaven relate to Christ's Second Coming and the setting up of a "new heaven and a new earth"?

Walk with us through this issue as we explore how faithful believers have wrestled with these questions in theology, history, art, music, and personal experiences—confident in the hope of something indescribable, trusting in the promise of something greater than we can imagine, and struggling with human limitations to express what is beyond words. *"Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do*



know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is." ☒

Jennifer Woodruff Tait
Managing editor, *Christian History*

Find *Christian History* on Facebook as ChristianHistoryMagazine or visit our website at www.christianhistorymagazine.org. Stay tuned for our next issue of *Christian History* in March 2015 on British authors C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, and their mentors and friends who awakened the church's imagination in the twentieth century.

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Founder
Dr. A. K. Curtis

Managing Editor
Dr. Jennifer Woodruff Tait

Senior Editor
Dr. Chris R. Armstrong

Advisory Editor, Issue 112
Dr. Jerry L. Walls

Editorial Coordinator
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Executive Editor
Bill Curtis

Consulting Editor
Dr. Edwin Woodruff Tait

Art Director
Doug Johnson

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Meg Moss

Publisher
Christian History Institute

Print Coordinator
Deb Landis

Circulation Manager
Kaylena Radcliff

Layout
Dan Graves

Image Researcher
Jennifer C. Awes Freeman

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Heaven's fire department?

MODERN AMERICAN ATTITUDES ABOUT HEAVEN RANGE FROM COMFORTING TO BAFFLING

Rebecca Price Janney

EARLY IN THE MORNING OF August 31, 1997, Americans awakened to the startling news that Princess Diana had died in a Paris car crash. Even as the world mourned that week, another iconic woman passed away; eighty-seven-year-old Mother Teresa died quietly after a long and meaningful life of Christian service. The two women had met each other through their shared passion for alleviating suffering, and many media personalities commented on the irony of their dying at the same time, adding that they are “up there now, looking down on us.”

At the British Embassy in Washington, DC, amid thousands of floral tributes, someone placed a seven-foot-high plywood placard with a painted angel, its arms outstretched. An inscription across the top read, “The angels rejoice for heaven welcomes Princess Diana and Mother Teresa.”

PEACE FOR THE GRIEVING Tributes to those who died in the 9/11 attacks expressed hope that families would be reunited in heaven.

While Mother Teresa's final destination was easy for most to predict, Princess Diana's case was less certain. Most of Diana's fans simply assumed she had gone to heaven, that it had happened immediately upon her death, and that she was able to see, and perhaps influence, those she loved who were still on earth. Why did they think that? Was it because of her beauty or fame? Perhaps it was her tragic death or her reputation for doing good.

Ten years later at a memorial concert in Diana's honor, the performer Diddy offered a musical homage in which he encouraged the audience to raise their faces to the sky and tell Diana how much they miss her, confident that she is “up there” listening.

"GOODBYE, ENGLAND'S ROSE" Right: Elton John wrote these lyrics for his friend Diana: "Now you belong to heaven / And the stars spell out your name."

HEAVEN CAN WAIT Bottom: Mother Teresa once told a reporter, "The other day I dreamed that I was at the gates of heaven. And St. Peter said, 'Go back to Earth, there are no slums up here.'"

Today, the prevailing American attitude is that all people go to heaven. Even in cases of extreme evil, studies show that Americans want to give others the benefit of the doubt, with the possible exception of child pornographers, racists, drug lords, and terrorists. According to surveys, many think that most of us are merely victims of the circumstances in which we were raised and not responsible for our actions. Many Americans can't believe that a loving God would send people anywhere but heaven.

SURVEY SAYS . . .

According to a recent Gallup Poll, 81 percent of Americans believe in heaven; this statistic has remained steady for some fifty years. Even so, what people mean by "heaven" has changed significantly.

For example, some who believe in heaven also say they don't actually believe in God. But the prevailing view in the survey was that no matter one's religion, or lack thereof, all people will eventually attain heaven. This idea has historically been called universalism, although in previous centuries people often assumed that lengthy purgation and suffering would precede reaching those heavenly heights.

Among news commentators and celebrities—today's cultural arbiters—universalism is the most commonly expressed philosophy. After the planes flew into the World Trade Center towers on 9/11, a New York City firefighter told a reporter, "Heaven has some fire department now," expressing the view that all of the rescuers automatically went to heaven based on the honorable way they died.

This was a common philosophy during World War II when American soldiers seemed to be fighting against the very forces of evil. It seemed somehow absurd to many that those who died fighting Hitler, Mussolini, and Tojo, often in extremely horrifying circumstances, could go to hell, and it wasn't uncommon for Americans to say things like "They've already been to hell"—referring to their wartime experiences.

Ironically, Mohammed Atta, one of the 9/11 hijackers, also believed that as a result of that day's events,



he would go to heaven. Traditional Muslim teaching contends that martyrdom is the only sure way of getting to paradise. Atta wrote these instructions to himself before he boarded the plane: "Be happy, optimistic, calm, because you are heading for a deed God loves and will accept. It will be the day, God willing, you spend with the women of paradise."

Yet, on that same day, Virginia DiChiara sustained third-degree burns over 30 percent of her body during a dramatic escape from the North Tower of the World Trade Center as a result of Atta's desire to enter paradise. A *Newsweek* reporter wrote of her recovery, "She had gone to hell and then, slowly, painfully, come back." Many others commented that people had experienced hell that day. It seemed clear to them that hell is unspeakable suffering that happens on earth, rather than a place or condition in the afterlife.



IS HEAVEN FOR REAL? *Left:* In a best-selling book and movie, a pastor's son told the tale of going to heaven during an emergency appendectomy.

"PENNIES FROM HEAVEN" *Below:* Heaven has frequently been featured in pop culture—sometimes as a metaphor, sometimes as a real place. (See p. 39 for more.)

Kent Rominger, chief of the Astronaut Corps. During the eulogy, he remembered the astronauts' brave and honorable lives and addressed the deceased heroes as if they could hear him. "I know you're listening. Please know you're in our hearts. We will always smile when we think of you."

When former Beatle George Harrison died of cancer at fifty-eight, one reporter stated, "He was a cultural explorer, introducing Indian sitar to Western ears and adding Hindu thought to our consciousness. And he was a humanitarian, conceiving the all-star benefit with his 1971 Concert for Bangladesh. But let's face it, Harrison was a Beatle, first and forever. Not a bad deal for eternity." Because he was good-hearted, innovative, and famous, Harrison supposedly attained eternal life. Nothing else about him mattered, not his personal morality or even his religious convictions.

MONKEY SHOPPING?

At times, public impressions border on the bizarre. When actress Elizabeth Taylor died in 2011, someone suggested that now Richard Burton could be her "forever husband," in spite of her other six spouses. Another commentator mused that Taylor and singer Michael Jackson, her close friend who had died two years earlier, were probably in heaven...going monkey shopping.

In an *AARP Magazine* article about afterlife attitudes among older Americans, the writer concluded, "Generally, the traditionally clear Christian vision of Heaven has declined, while the vaguer visions of the continuation of life have taken its place." A case in point was author Edwin

Shrake who, during a medical emergency, said he had an "after-life experience" that taught him "there is no heaven and hell, no Christian, Jewish, Muslim or Buddhist. Life is the gasoline that runs our engine. The machine breaks, but your spirit goes on."

The recent popularity of the book and movie *Heaven Is for Real* shows how afterlife experiences have gained acceptance in our culture. Many people accept near-death accounts because, after all, who can argue the validity of someone's personal experience? A common theme among such afterlife stories is that there is nothing to fear in death, that everyone is welcome in heaven. But some argue that while these are soothing



In times of tragedy, or on the death of a beloved celebrity, national figures often echo this implicit assumption, but not always. When the space shuttle *Columbia* disintegrated upon reentry in February 2003, President George W. Bush told the stunned nation, "The same Creator who names the stars also knows the names of the seven souls we lost today. The crew of the shuttle *Columbia* did not return safely to earth, yet we can pray that all are safely home." These comments expressed faith in a loving God without assuming that all the astronauts knew him personally.

More typical, however, were remarks made at the memorial service in Houston three days later by Captain

reassurances, they are not biblical—and others question how far into death people who have those encounters actually were, as they always live to tell about them. Some scientists argue that hallucinations cause these manifestations.


WHEN WE ALL GET TO HEAVEN

Even among some American clergy, the idea that everyone goes to heaven has taken a strong hold. Ellison Research interviewed 700 ministers from several Protestant denominations. While 96 percent of evangelicals agreed strongly that Jesus is the only way to heaven, just 65 percent of their mainline counterparts did so.

The traditional evangelical teaching has been that the believing dead are with Christ at death—although with some debate about whether that involves immediate consciousness or whether that will occur at the Second Coming. The evangelical clergy surveyed agreed that heaven is a glorious place with an absence of pain, disease, and distress, where people get new spiritual bodies and live eternally in the presence of Jesus, while those outside of Christ go to hell.

Conversely, the mainline clergy surveyed were more likely to state that most people go to a heaven where their fondest desires are realized and that it can either be a place or a state of being—with hell framed mainly as a concept, not a place of punishment.

Traditionally, Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches regard heaven as a gift from God following whatever purification may be necessary in purgatory (see “Another stop on the glory train?” pp. 28–30). Hell is reserved for all those who die alienated from God.

Most Americans today seem content to believe that just about everyone goes to heaven. They don’t want to hear that they might be mistaken, and they aren’t especially eager to delve into the subject of hell. But the traditional Christian teaching on heaven, and images of its glory, are much deeper and more challenging—as the rest of this issue of *Christian History* will explore. 

Rebecca Price Janney is the author of *Who Goes There? A Cultural History of Heaven and Hell*.



Getting ready for heaven

THEOLOGIAN GARY BLACK Jr. *was at the side of Christian writer and philosophy professor Dallas Willard (1935–2013) during his final days.*

In late 2012 Dallas and I began working together on his book *The Divine Conspiracy Continued* (2014). Just a few months later he was diagnosed with terminal cancer; we began to talk about his thoughts on heaven. He had taught a class many years prior on death and immortality, now a much more personal subject.

I spent the last four days of Dallas’s life in the hospital with him. His family was there during the day, and we spent nights together alone. He relayed experiences to me about being in a “hallway” between this life and eternity, meeting people, and building his understanding of the great cloud of witnesses—all of which was prior to him receiving any psychotropic drugs.

In his class Dallas used the book *Tuesdays with Morrie* to give his students an example of a good death. I’m now finishing a book based on my conversations with Dallas that’s kind of like *Tuesdays with Morrie*: it describes Dallas’s last four days and his theology of heaven. We tend to think that in the moment of death we’re going to be perfected in every part of our character. Dallas and I discussed how troubling that idea is: it allows us to think that we don’t have to work on our characters on earth as disciples of Jesus. Instead all we have to do is get into heaven. Passage from earth to heaven becomes something of a “cosmic car wash.” But while we’re

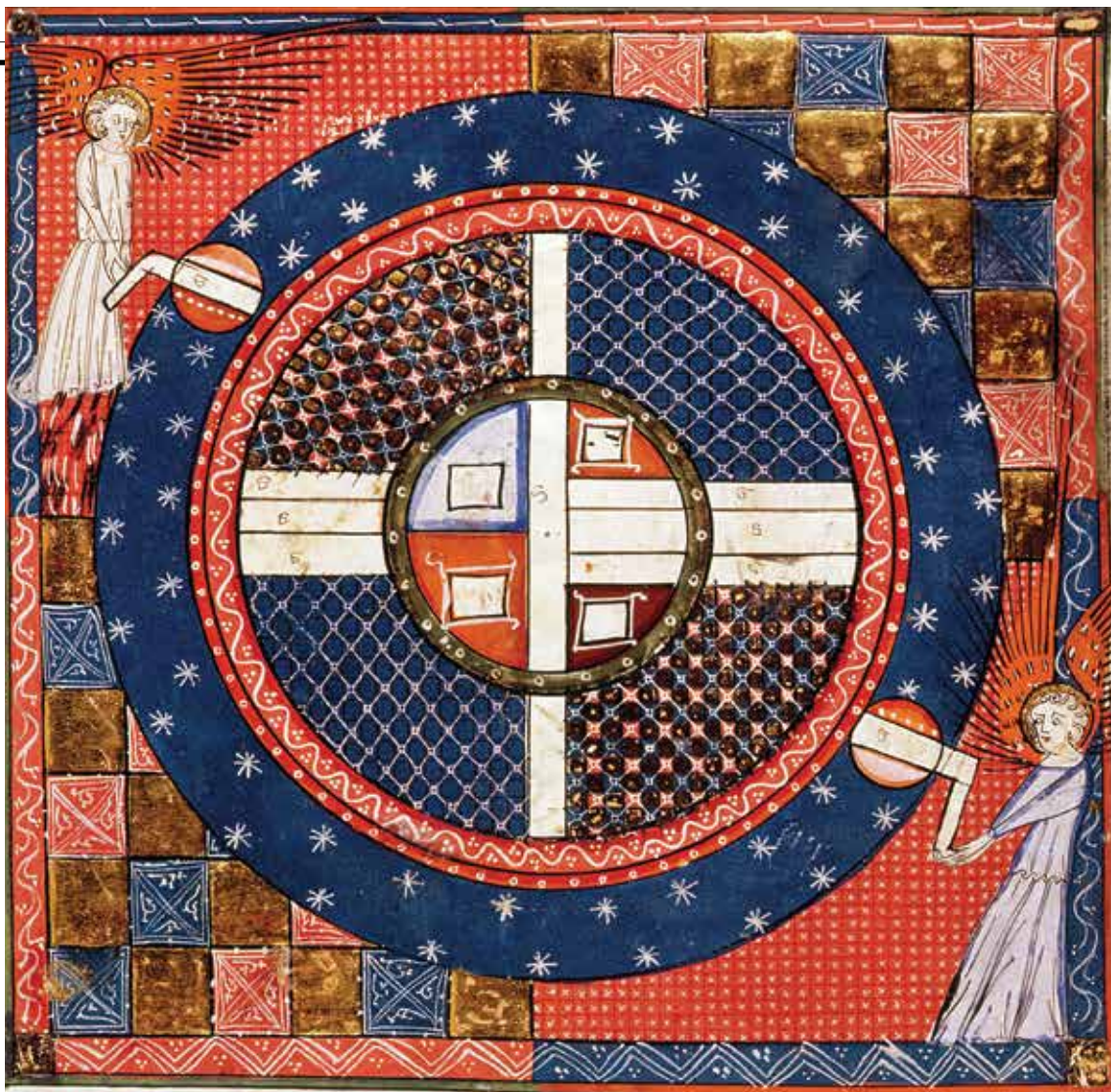
here on earth, God does not change us without our choice. Why then would we believe in sudden cleansing en route to heaven? If we’ve chosen not to have reconstructive surgery on our heart during our entire life on earth, why do we think God can or will, at the end, override our will and perfect our heart after death?

Dallas suggested that if heaven has no shadow, no fear, no shame, no lies—if we are exposed there as we really are, if love is inescapable—are we the kind of people who can handle that environment? He used to wonder if hell may be the best that God could do for some people. He also liked to say that the fires of heaven will be twice as hot as the fires of hell: the reality, the vitality, of life in heaven burns brighter and more intensely under the inescapable love and justice of God.

Heaven is also, he said, a place of continual learning and growth. An oak tree sprout can be perfect in its development, but yet not complete. So, too, we can be perfected when sin is removed from us, while still having room to grow and learn. He believed that in heaven we’ll learn to live our entire existence under the guidance of Christ. He looked forward to it. As do I.

Gary Black Jr. is professor of theology at Asuza Pacific University.





“God’s love that moves the sun and other stars”

CHRISTIANS IN THE EARLY AND MEDIEVAL CHURCH GAVE US PATTERNS THAT STILL GOVERN HOW WE THINK OF HEAVEN

Jeffrey Burton Russell

WHERE DO WE GET MODERN IDEAS of heaven as a place replete with bright light, glory, sky, clouds, harps and song, dance, garden, pasture, walls and ladders, gates, a temple, and living waters? These come from visions experienced by saints and martyrs in the first few centuries of the church. The martyrs Perpetua and Saturus, who died together in 203, saw in visions angels, unending light, a vast meadow, an immeasurable garden with trees and flowers, singing leaves, high walls made of light with a golden ladder, a throne,

white garments, and a shepherd with white hair but a youthful face. Saturus also heard the host of heaven proclaiming the ancient Hebrew hymn of praise to God: “Holy Holy Holy Lord God of Hosts, heaven and earth are filled with your glory.”

They, like other early Christians, affirmed the words of the Lord’s Prayer, “Our Father who art in heaven. . . .” (Matt. 6:9). Where God is, they said, is heaven; where heaven is, is God. Heaven has always been at the center of Christian thought: God is love,

LIKE A CIRCLE IN A CIRCLE *Left:* In a 14th-c. breviary (prayer book), angels in the heavenly spheres keep the world turning.

I'LL FLY AWAY *Right:* A Greek Orthodox mosaic (20th c. but in an ancient style) gives the stairway to heaven wings.

the Holy Trinity is mutual love, pulsing with giving and receiving; and heaven is for those who love God and neighbor.

The Sermon on the Mount lists the kinds of people who will be in heaven: the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure of heart, the peacemakers, and those who suffer persecution because they follow Christ. Theirs, Christ promises, is the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 5:1–12).

SEED AND MUSTARD AND TREASURE

From the beginning Christians affirmed that humans, though mortal, would have eternal life with God. We all suffer bodily death; this St. Paul called “the first death.” But through Christ we transcend death, and Christ transforms us into incorruptible immortals in heaven. Christians have held a variety of views of eternity from the beginning. One is eternity as eternal sequence—that is, time with no beginning or end. Another is eternity as “God’s time,” time beyond human time but also incorporating human time, so that from our point of view heaven appears to be “afterlife,” though from God’s point of view it is in the eternal “now.”

Early Christians looked to the Gospel writers who taught that heaven is present as well as future: the kingdom of heaven is always at hand (Matt. 3:2, 4:17, 10:7). In the Gospels, Christ did not define heaven but rather used similes to convey a sense of it: like a farmer who scatters seed; or like a grain of mustard; or like a hidden treasure; or like a net (Matt. 13:3–52).

In the early church, Christians developed images of heaven that have endured. Biblical commentaries such as those by Origen (185–254) and Augustine (354–430) argued that the Bible is to be read on four levels, one “literal” and three metaphorical: one metaphorical level as to doctrine, one as to morality, and one as to spirituality (see CH issue 80, *The First Bible Teachers*). Metaphor enabled Christians to take descriptions of heaven in the Book of Revelation, for example, in symbolic as well as literal terms. Most Christian thought distinguished between paradise (the original state of humanity with God) and heaven (the final state of humanity with God).

Early Christians thought that the primary characteristics of heaven would be blessedness, joy, love, desire, and fulfillment. Later, Protestants would call this the “vision of God,” Catholics the “beatific vision,”



and Eastern Orthodox *theosis* (coming into union with God).

By the fourth century, universal councils at Nicaea (325) and Constantinople (381) developed baptismal formulas into formal creeds that every Christian was to profess. The councils declared that salvation comes from the second person of the indivisible Trinity incarnate in Jesus Christ, who came from heaven and returned to heaven.

But where *is* heaven? Early Christians pondered the location of heaven in time and space. They believed that heaven, like God, is eternal, but from the perspective of human time it lies in the future, whether at the hour of death or at the end of the universe.

The time in which we live in this life is only analogous to God’s time, they thought, in which he knows everything all at once—though he knows only what he chooses to know. In his absolute power, God could know and decree everything, but he chose in his ordered power to limit or withdraw his absolute control. This allows the physical world to run according to natural law.

They thought that God also limited or withdrew his knowledge to allow for free choice for humans and angels, though in eternity he knows who is saved and who is not, all the way to the conclusion of the created universe. Some people aided by grace choose to love God; others prefer their own selfish desires, follow their own choices, and exclude themselves from heaven. A minority trend appearing in



THE GANG'S ALL HERE Famous saints and biblical characters gather at the feet of the enthroned Trinity and the Virgin Mary in this 15th-c. illustration from Augustine's *City of God*.

we must have our faults burned or washed away.

When in terms of human time do we experience heaven? From at least the third century, many Christians believed that Jesus, Mary, Elijah, and Enoch are eternally in heaven in the flesh, while other humans must wait for the Last Judgment. In that "moment, in a twinkling of an eye . . . we shall all be changed" (1 Cor. 15:52).

LOST IN WONDER . . .

Some early Christians thought humans enter immediately into the timeless moment and thus experience judgment right away. Others argued that their spirits wait in suspension until the Last Judgment. Or they are judged immediately at death, but their bodies remain separated from their spirits until the end, when spirit and body will be reunited in the resurrection (1 Cor. 15:35–54) and joined with God forever. Early thinkers believed that our resurrected bodies will correspond to the age that we were at our highest physical and mental states, fulfilling our potential at the optimal "age" for physical, mental, and spiritual perfection. No distinctions of gender or class will be made. But however glorified, we will retain our individuality and recognize one another in heaven.

Though the ancient notion that heaven is literally up above in the sky (and hell down under the surface of the earth) endured into the seventeenth century, it

was also early understood that its location is best considered metaphorically. Just as heaven is in a time that is not sequential with human time, heaven is in a space beyond geographical and astronomical space. God is transcendent—beyond the universe—and also immanent in the cosmos all around us.

The most influential Christian thinker since the apostles, Augustine (354–430), bishop of Hippo in Latin North Africa, wrote of heaven in his *City of God*:

Any brightness whatsoever of material light, seemed . . . not worthy of comparison with the pleasure of that eternal Light....Rising as our love flamed upward toward that [Light], we passed

Christian thought from Origen onward was *universalism*, the idea that everyone would eventually be saved—even Nero and Hitler (see "Did you know?," inside front cover).

In the Latin West, as the idea of purgatory developed it implied sequential time: one could be in purgatory for days or years (see "Another stop on the glory train?," pp. 28–30). Popular thought often linked purgatory with hell, but theologically it was an antechamber of heaven: everyone in purgatory would eventually be in heaven. Although purgatory was not clearly formulated until the eleventh century, it was based on the ancient idea of purgation: none of us were perfect in this life, so to stand before the measureless love of God,

THE HOLY CITY Apocalyptic images dominate this 13th-c. illustration of Jerusalem in Hildegard of Bingen's *Revelations*.

in review the various levels of bodily things, up to the heavens themselves, whence sun and moon and stars shine upon this earth. And higher still we soared, thinking in our minds and speaking and marveling at Your works: and so we came to our own souls, and went beyond them to come at last to that region . . . where there is that Wisdom by which all things in our past, present, and future are made. . . . God shall be the end of our desires; he will be seen without ending, loved without cloying sweetness, praised without weariness. . . . And in that blessed city no inferior shall envy any superior . . . because no one will wish to be what he has not received . . . each shall receive the further gift of contentment to desire no more than he has.

[Free will remains in heaven, and it will] be all the more truly free [because it is no longer bound to sin]. [The blessed] shall forget their past ills, for they shall have so thoroughly escaped them all that their troubles shall be blotted out of their experience. . . . We shall have eternal leisure to see that He is God, for we shall be full of Him when He shall be all in all. . . . There we shall rest and see, see and love, love and praise. This is what shall be in the end without end. For what other end do we propose to ourselves than to attain to the kingdom of which there is no end?

Augustine established basic concepts that became part of the Christian commonwealth of ideas. He echoed Paul's proclamation that humans are not saved by their good works but solely by the grace of Christ. Those who refuse to accept the gift of salvation are by their own free choice deprived of heaven forever. Some of the blessed have a greater capacity for grace than others, so there will be gradations in heaven; but everyone will be filled with grace to his or her highest potential. Augustine argued that we will be free of all bad memories of wrongs done to others and wrongs they had done to us. We will have absolute leisure for love of God and love of others, and no sequence or change other than a continuing increase of love. We cannot know God as God knows himself, but in heaven we will know God to our fullest human capacity.



In his *Confessions* Augustine reminded his readers that God creates time; God is before the past, is present now, and transcends the future; God is beyond and before the beginning of all ages, prior to everything that can be said to be "before"; in God the present has no ending, and when the universe ends, God remains. We perceive time as passing, Augustine went on, but our lives are one "today": past, present, and future. Here he cited Psalm 90:2-4: "Before the mountains were born or You brought forth the earth and the universe, from everlasting to everlasting You are God. . . . A thousand years in God's sight are like a day that has just gone by."

Some early Christian thinkers, wary of being precise about matters that humans can understand only dimly, debated which came first, faith or knowledge. Is knowledge gained through faith seeking intellect, or through intellect seeking faith? Clement of Alexandria (150-215) called the vision of God *theoria*, a seeing or understanding surpassing human



knowledge. Medieval Western scholastics such as Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) generally sought to understand God and heaven by emphasizing reason and logic, but the Eastern Orthodox more often recognized the limitation of human concepts. Following Clement, the Orthodox believe that the ultimate aim of the human being will be the state of having poured out oneself to be filled with the divine life of the Holy Trinity.

WE MUST BOTH KNOW AND BELIEVE

After Augustine and before the Protestant Reformation, one of the most important touchstones for the history of heaven was the theology of Thomas Aquinas, who explained that both intellect and will are necessary to knowing God and experiencing heaven. By all accounts Aquinas knew a thing or two about willpower. His wealthy family objected to his choice to become a monk and hired a prostitute to seduce him into sin. When this strategy failed, they helped him escape by night to his chosen vocation, so as to avoid the public disgrace that would come if their neighbors found out.

Aquinas wrote in his famous treatise on theology, *Summa theologiae*, that God is the foundation of all intellect and so can be perceived by the human intellect when strengthened by the light of grace.

Those who have more love and understanding will see God more clearly than those with less. However, when in heaven humans will experience everything as God did, simultaneously and all at once, not successively. The goal, end, purpose, and perfection of the human being should be in no created thing but in the Creator and Sustainer himself. The intellect presents this goal to the human mind, but the human will has to desire and choose that goal, so grace confirms both our intellect and our will.

Aquinas wrote that although we can never fully grasp God's essence, the greatest blessing we can have is to perceive that essence (1 John 3:2). Heaven includes love, vision, comprehension, and the communion of saints—it will be the whole eternal fellowship of the blessed, past, present, and future in Christ with one another as well as with God. But the blessed human spirit after death will still lack one thing for

OUR GUIDE *Left:* Dante holds a copy of his poem, surrounded by (from left to right) Hell, Mount Purgatory, and the city of Florence. Paradise is above his head.

WAITING WITH OPEN ARMS *Right:* A man's soul ascends to heaven in a famous commentary on the Apocalypse (also pictured on p. 17).

perfection: it must wait until the resurrection and the Last Judgment to be reunited with the body.

In fact, where is the blessed spirit and what exactly is it seeing? The church continued debating whether we can experience the vision of God immediately after death or whether we must wait till the end of time. Pope John XXII (pope 1316–1334) was inclined to believe that the blessed dead must wait till the resurrection and Last Judgment to experience the “beatific vision,” but his successor Benedict XII (pope 1334–1342) declared in 1336 that upon death the blessed see God immediately, directly, and without the need for any intervening medium. Benedict’s view became standard.

PIERCED BY LOVE’S ARROW

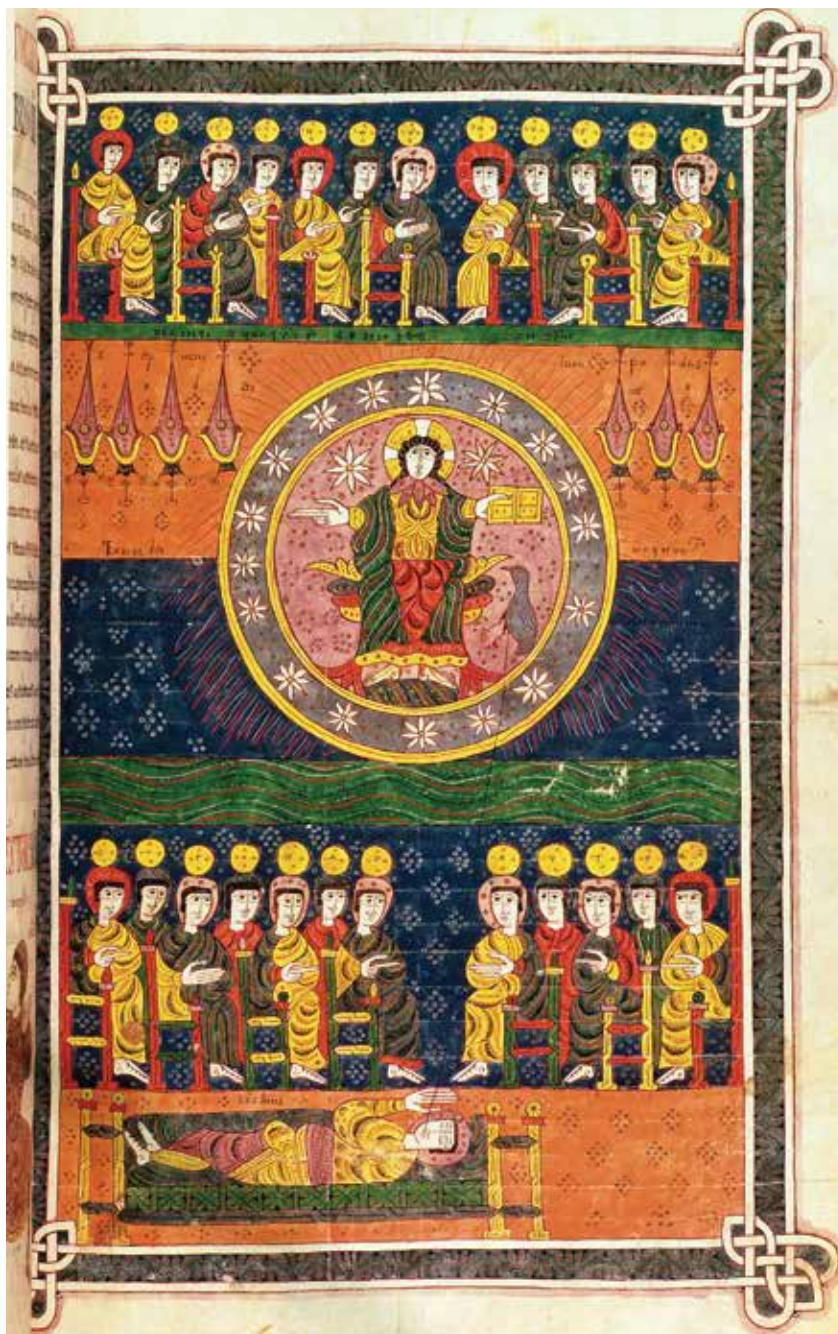
Aquinas’s views were hugely influential, but at the same time, in their efforts to obtain certainty about theological details, he and his fellow “scholastics” (the university professors or “schoolmen” of their day) created a reaction. Some thinkers began to argue that we can say much more securely what God and heaven are *not* than what they are. This acquired the name *via negativa*: the way of negation, approaching God not by study but by contemplation.

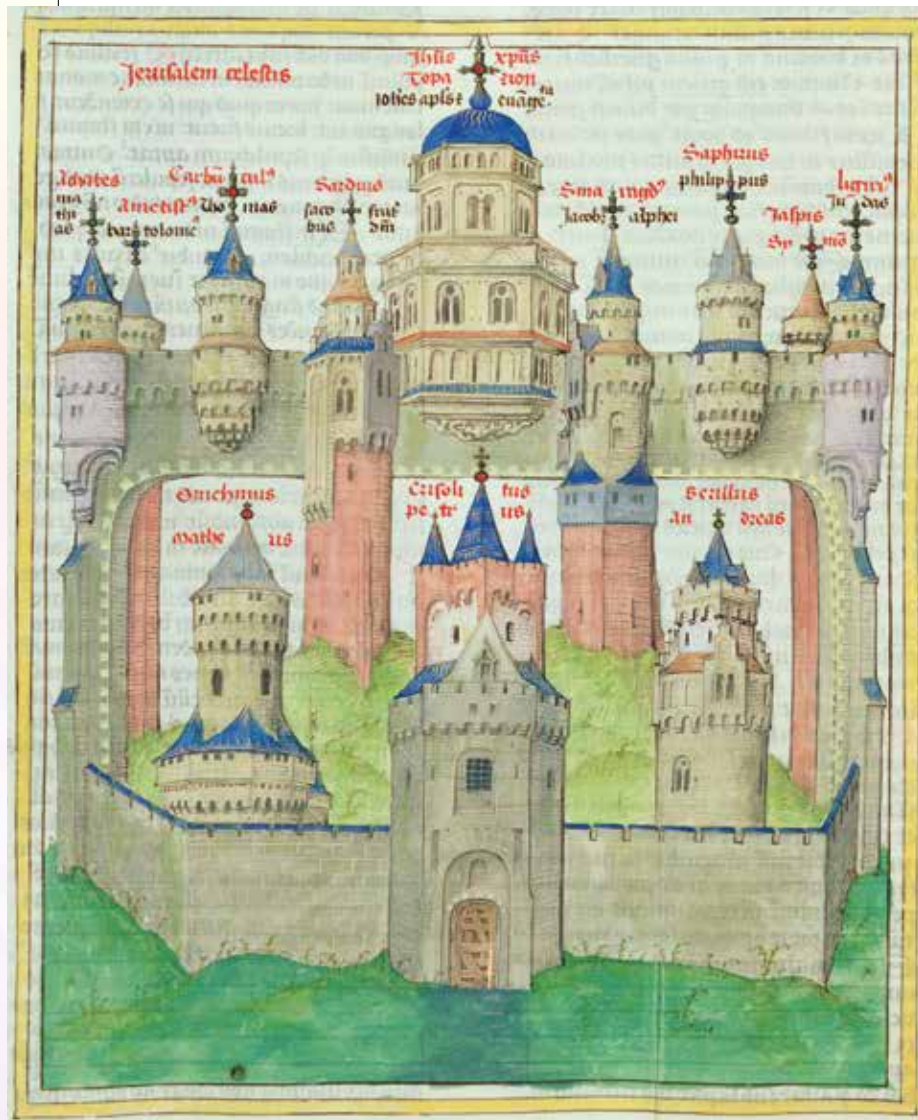
The anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* (c. 1345) observed an intellectual cloud between our minds and God and that this cloud is properly and inevitably there because of the limitation of the human intellect. The cloud can be pierced not by the intellect but only by the arrow of love. Some writers felt the love very sensually: Angela of Foligno (1248–1309) imagined Christ as her lover speaking to her: “Daughter and my sweet bride. . . Since I have entered you and rested in you, you may now enter me and rest in me.” The *via negativa* favors contemplation of God above action, though its supporters agreed that contemplation of God produces good actions.

The most sublime expression of heaven in the medieval church was not argument but poetry: the *Paradiso* of Dante Alighieri (1265–1321; see CH issue

70, *Dante’s Guide to Heaven and Hell*). Dante’s *Inferno* is today more widely known: it seems to be easier for readers to grasp evil and its consequences than to understand the shining pure love that God pours out into his cosmos. While a summary of the *Paradiso* is wholly inadequate to the glory of the poetry itself, in it Dante ascends upward from the round earth through the lunar and planetary spheres until he reaches the *primum mobile*, the outermost sphere, which moves all the spheres below it.

As he ascends, each sphere is more suffused with light, beauty, love, and majesty than the one beneath. Throughout this journey he can look down to the earth





JUST IN CASE YOU NEED A MAP A 15th-c. *Plan of Celestial Jerusalem* shows the 12 gates of Revelation 21.

(O Eternal Light, you alone dwell within yourself, you alone look upon yourself, understand yourself, beam upon yourself, and love yourself.)

This expressed the dynamic of the Trinity: the first Person's knowledge of himself is the second Person, and the love between the first and second Person is the third Person.

Dante concluded the *Paradiso* and the entire *Divine Comedy* with these verses:

*Ma già volgeva il mio disio e 'l velle
Sì come rota ch'igualmente è mossa,
L'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle.*

(God's love that moves the sun and the other stars has turned my desire and will equally and uniformly together as in a great wheel.)

After Dante, such heights of reflection on heaven were few and far between. The leaders of the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther and John Calvin, followed established tradition about heaven with only one essential difference, though an important one. They abolished the idea of purgatory on the grounds that it is not biblical and that God knows who is in heaven so that there is no need to pray for the spiritual welfare of the deceased (see "Another stop on the glory train?").

In the end, while human ideas of heaven are limited, Christian tradition gives us

some idea of what we might expect. Early and medieval Christians teach us that heaven is the state of being in which all who love God are united in community with him and with one another in the brightness of glory; the fabric of love uniting all in a pattern whose beauty passes understanding.

Heaven exists both in time and in eternity. It is a return to paradise and a renewal of paradise and something entirely new to us: the new heaven and the new earth. The bodies we shall regain at the end are the very bodies that we have now but also radically changed: in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, we shall all be changed, and our flesh will become incorruptible (1 Cor. 15:52). But despite what we do not know, we *do* know this: whatever heaven is, it is more glorious than we can begin to understand or imagine. ☒

Jeffrey Burton Russell is the author of *A History of Heaven: The Singing Silence, and Paradise Misland: How We Lost Heaven—and How We Can Regain It*.

far below at the apparent center of the universe. But at the *primum mobile*, he turns so that his gaze shifts from the geographical center of the universe to the true center of the universe, which is God in his heaven.

Journeying closer to this perfect light of love, Dante in his burning desire and enlightened intellect sees God himself—to the extent that human limitation permits. The experience is so perfectly awesome (in the word's original sense of creating awe) that when he returns to earth, he can no longer remember or express it fully, but says "I do remember that my vision bore the intensity of the divine ray until it joined Infinite Being and Good itself. Oh, the overflowing grace through which I could presume to fix my gaze on the Eternal Light so fully that I used up all my sight."

Nearing the end of his journey to God, Dante dares to address the Trinity itself:

*O luce eternal che sola in te sidi,
Sola t'intendi, e da te intelletta
E intendere te ami e arridi:*

A city set with pearls

In "Pearl," an anonymous fourteenth-century poet describes a grieving narrator who has a vision of his young daughter, recently dead, as a beautiful young woman joyfully living in paradise. In this excerpt, she has just shown him the New Jerusalem.

AS JOHN the Apostle saw it with sight,
I saw that city of great renown,
The New Jerusalem, royally dressed
As it had lighted from heaven down.
Of bright burning gold was all that town,
Burnished bright like gleaming glass,
With noble gems offsetting each other,
With twelve great tiers of well-set stone,
On twelve foundations firmly placed;
Each tier was made of a single stone,
As the Apocalypse well describes
Written by the Apostle John.

As John describes I too saw there:
The twelve steps were broad and steep;
The city stood above full square,
Its length and breadth and height the same.
The streets of gold were clear as glass,
The jasper wall like egg-white gleamed.
The dwellings within were all adorned
With every kind of gems there are.
This great estate stretched on each side
Twelve furlongs before it came to an end,
Whether one traced height, length, or breadth,
As measured by the Apostle John.

....
I saw yet more of what John wrote;
Each face of the city had three gates,
So twelve in all the walls I spied,
The portals adorned with rich plates,
And each gate made of a single pearl,
A perfect pearl that never fades.
On each of these was fixed a name
Of one of the sons of Israel,
In order as each one was born—
The oldest on the first was placed.
Such light there gleamed in all the streets
That they needed neither sun nor moon.

Of sun or moon they had no need,
For God's self was the lamplight there,
The Lamb their lantern, without fear;
Through Him the citadel shone so bright.
Through wall and dwelling pierced my sight,
For they were all so fine and clear.
Thus I could see the high throne



A QUEEN OF HEAVEN The narrator of "Pearl" dreams of his daughter decked with pearls from head to toe; when he questions her royal appearance, she tells him that all who enter heaven are kings and queens there.

With all its rich array all round,
As John the Apostle set it down,
Which the high God's Self sat upon.
A river ran out from that throne
Brighter than both the sun and moon.

Sun or moon never shone so sweet
As the flood that flowed out from that floor.
Swiftly it swirled through every street
Free from filth and scum and slime.
There was no church in the city set,
No chapel or temple there at all.
The Almighty was the cathedral fair,
And the Lamb the life-giving sacrifice.
The gates of that place were never shut,
But at all hours were open to all.
For none with blemish beneath the moon
Could ever take refuge within that wall.

—translated from Middle English by Edwin Woodruff Tait



A garden, a city, a home, and a judgment

HEAVEN IN CHRISTIAN ART AND MUSIC

Jennifer C. Awes Freeman

NOWADAYS, TALK OF HEAVEN often brings to mind images of golden gates and smiling cherubim reclining on puffy white clouds. Perhaps the chubby cherubim pluck some innocuous tune on their harps, or there's a Muzak version of Eric Clapton's "Tears in Heaven" permeating the airwaves. But such images and songs depart significantly from historic Christian pictures of heaven in music and art.

Artistically, much church architecture was originally intended to speak of heaven. Adapted from the design of the Old Testament Jewish Temple, Christian churches were traditionally divided into three distinct spaces. The narthex, or entry, represented the world. The

nave, where the congregation stood or sat, represented the whole church or the kingdom of God. And the sanctuary containing the altar (akin to the Jewish Holy of Holies) symbolized heaven. Gradual procession into the church building and to the altar for Communion paralleled the believer's spiritual journey, and liturgy was understood as sacred time when believers worshiped alongside the heavenly host. Images of angels and saints mixed with memorial plaques and physical tombs of deceased church members, adding to the effect.

Not only architecture, but art itself, spoke of heaven: often picturing major biblical episodes in which heaven is momentarily revealed, such as the baptism of Christ,

GARDEN PARTY *Left:* This 15th-c. garden includes symbols of humanity's origins, salvation, and ultimate union with God along with martyrs and saints.

HOLD STILL *Right:* It might look like a game of checkers, but it's actually an 11th-c. depiction of measuring the New Jerusalem.

his Transfiguration, his Ascension, and the visions of prophets.

HEAVENLY GARDEN

Because the biblical story of humanity's origins takes place in a garden, many Christians have historically imagined heaven too as an idyllic garden, restoring humanity to before the Fall. The very word "paradise" came to the English language from the Persian word for "enclosed garden or park."

The Genesis account of Creation describes Adam and Eve's environment as full of beautiful vegetation and delicious food (except that pesky Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil). A river of life flowed through it (just like the one that would reappear in Rev. 22), and humans and animals lived there in harmony. Throughout the Bible, gardens appear as places where plants flourish, where people hold feasts and drink wine, and even where bodies are buried. The Song of Songs, long read in the Christian tradition as an allegory for the believer's relationship with Christ, uses garden imagery to great effect ("A garden locked is my sister, my bride, a spring locked, a fountain sealed"). Artists and writers also applied this image of the enclosed garden to the Virgin Mary.

On the facing page, we see an early fifteenth-century painting by an unknown Germanic artist that draws together these rich layers of meaning—symbols of heaven, of Mary's virginity, and of Christ's Passion. In a garden enclosed by walls, Mary, draped in her customary blue cloak, daintily turns the pages of a book. Martyrs and angels surround her including fourth-century virgin martyrs Dorothy and Barbara. Barbara draws water from a well, evoking the fountain of life (Ps. 36:9) and the living waters mentioned throughout the Bible.

Cecilia, a second-century virgin martyr and the patron saint of music, sits on the ground, assisting the Christ-child as he plucks the strings of a psaltery (harp). In the bottom right are the archangel Michael, saintly King Oswald of Northumbria, and third-century martyr St. George. George's defeated dragon refers to a legend of him slaying a crocodile, symbolizing Christian victory over paganism. The presence of



the five martyrs recalls the martyrs crying for justice in Revelation 6.

Meanwhile, Mary sits by a bowl of apples—referring not only to the fruit of Eden, but also, when taken with the nearby cup, to the Eucharist. Around her are several goldfinches, long associated with Christ's Passion because they eat thorns, and a cherry tree—which, due to its legendary reputation as being in the Garden of Eden, indicates paradise.

PAVING PARADISE

The Christian understanding of heaven as a city draws primarily on Revelation's description of the heavenly Jerusalem (Rev. 21; see also Heb. 11–12). It has long been a popular metaphor, beginning with Augustine's *City of God*, that pits the heavenly city against the worldly city in response to the fall of the Roman Empire.

Another example comes from Beatus of Liébana's *Commentary on the Apocalypse*. A monk at the monastery of St. Martin at Liébana in Spain, Beatus (d. 798) was relatively well educated, may have been an abbot, and is credited with several liturgical hymns. He is best known for his *Commentary*, a compilation of patristic sources (including Ambrose, Augustine, and Gregory the Great). Beatus intentionally structured his book to

provide story, picture, and explanation for each passage, hoping that texts and images would work together to aid the reader in meditating on Revelation and achieving a mystical vision of God. Beatus's *Commentary* continued to be popular well after his death, widely copied and circulated in at least 30 different manuscripts into the twelfth century.

At first glance, the painting accompanying Revelation 21:15–17 in an eleventh-century copy of the *Commentary* looks like a board game (see p. 17). In fact, it shows the measuring of the New Jerusalem—that foursquare heavenly city of equal height, width, and length. In contrast to the chaos and violence of earthly cities, images like this emphasize the order of the heavenly city through symmetry and biblical numbers (such as seven, nine, and twelve). Within the arcades of the city walls stand the 12 apostles, looking inward to the center. There the Lamb of

Christians often emphasized the order of the heavenly city in contrast to chaotic earthly ones.

God holds a cross—flanked by an angel with a measuring rod to the left and the Apostle John to the right.

HAS WALDO GONE TO HEAVEN?

Some images of heaven focus on the heavenly inhabitants themselves and are often referred to as “all saints” images (commemorating All Saints Day, November 1 in the Western church and the first Sunday after Pentecost in the Eastern). Depicting *all* the inhabitants of heaven of course proved impossible, but artists hinted at the divine multitude by tightly packing their compositions with haloed figures: a celestial *Where’s Waldo*, a who’s who of the afterlife.

In Fiesole, Italy, is one such piece: the *predella* (platform) panels of the Fiesole Altarpiece by Fra Angelico

(c. 1394–1455), a Dominican friar. Late medieval altarpieces often have many large panels, opening to display several different images such as the Annunciation, Crucifixion, or Resurrection. In the center panel of this *predella* (see below), the resurrected Christ stands in glory, with a cross-inscribed halo and wounds on his hands and side—surrounded by five rows of densely packed angels, most of whom play instruments or raise their hands in prayerful worship.

The panel to the left pictures the Virgin Mary, the apostles, and the evangelists. To the left of Mary, Peter holds the keys to heaven in one hand and a book in the other. Several other saints can be identified by clothing or other attributes. The panel to the right of Christ shows three rows of prophets, saints, and martyrs, including David and John the Baptist.

This motif emphasized the communal aspect of heaven—imagining it not as a place, but as a spiritual community transcending time and space, where believers can look forward to being reunited not only with family and friends but also with great spiritual leaders who had paved the way. Standing before an image like this and picking out the saints you knew resembles finding friends or family members in a group photo—but playing this visual “game” encouraged viewers to imagine *themselves* among the saints, worshipping Christ.

STARRY STARRY NIGHT

Images of heaven as a starry night sky came from the tendency to focus “heavenward” when praying and worshipping. The domed ceilings of many Eastern Orthodox churches are still painted as dark blue, star-filled skies, often with Christ the *Pantokrator* (Ruler of the Universe) at the center, to remind worshippers of Christ’s reign over heaven and earth.

FACES IN THE CROWD In “all saints” images like the Fiesole Altarpiece, distinctive features allowed viewers to pick out saints they knew.





One early “starry sky” appears in a mosaic of the Transfiguration at Sant’Apollinare-in-Class, a sixth-century church in Ravenna, Italy (shown above). At the mosaic’s center stands a golden bejeweled cross, floating within a starry, dark blue sky and framed by a large medallion. The cross bears a small bust of Christ at its center flanked by text celebrating his lordship.

Atop the surrounding mosaic is a field of solid gold tiles—gold being associated with heaven or spiritual space. Moses and Elijah appear, and reaching down from heaven, the hand of God the Father emerges from the clouds directly above the cross. The bottom half depicts a lush green pasture populated by trees and sheep. St. Apollinaris, first bishop of Ravenna, after whom the church is named, stands below the cross with arms raised in prayer, flanked by 12 sheep, symbolic of

LORD OVER ALL This starry heaven brings together the Transfiguration, Crucifixion, and Second Coming—and would even have reminded worshipers of the processional cross used in the liturgy.

the apostles. Peter, James, and John become three sheep gazing up at the transfigured Christ on the golden cross.

“COME, ANGEL BAND”

Musical conceptions of heaven in Christian tradition have been just as diverse as artistic ones. In contrast to the mute impotence of Satan in hell (at least as vividly imagined by Dante), heaven rings with robust polyphonic praise of God. The Psalms, Isaiah, and Jeremiah all describe the heavens as quite literally singing. In Revelation, John envisions heaven as a place





MUSIC FOR A FRIEND Verdi composed his Requiem to honor the passing of poet and novelist Alessandro Manzoni (1785–1873).

Another nineteenth-century hymn, “Angel Band,” speaks from the perspective of a believer at death’s door: “My latest sun is sinking fast, my race is nearly run; / My strongest trials now are past, my triumph is begun.” The refrain beckons the heavenly host to accompany the singer to heaven: “Oh, come, angel band, come and around me stand; / Oh, bear me away on your snowy wings to my eternal home.” The hymn also imagines sounds heard while passing into the afterlife: “I hear the waves on Jordan’s banks, the crossing must be near. . . I’ve almost reached my heav’nly home, my spirit loudly sings; / Thy holy ones, behold, they come! I hear the noise of wings.”

And the African American spiritual “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,” like many spirituals, not only describes the soul’s journey to heaven, but also references the freedom accessed through the Underground Railroad: “I looked over Jordan, and what did I see coming for to carry me home? / A band of angels coming after me, coming for to carry me home.”

Heaven as home has been a powerful metaphor for freedom in this life, as well as the next.

HALLELUJAH! HALLELUJAH!

Quite possibly one of the most recognizable pieces of Christian music is the “Hallelujah” chorus from Handel’s *Messiah*. George Frideric Handel (1685–1759), born in Germany but an immigrant to England, composed *Messiah* in 1741—in just 24 days. Originally intended for secular settings (its first performance was a charity concert at the Great Music Hall in Dublin), it has graced sacred contexts as well through the years.

Charles Jennens prepared a libretto for *Messiah* that compiles and excerpts texts from the Bible into three parts. The first anticipates the Incarnation in the prophecies of Isaiah, Malachi, and Zechariah, ending with the annunciation of Christ’s birth to the shepherds and a brief meditation on his power to heal and redeem. The second describes Christ’s Passion, death, and Resurrection in texts from Isaiah, Psalms, Lamentations, John, Romans, and Hebrews. The final part, taken from Job, 1 Corinthians, Romans, and Revelation, celebrates the judgment and resurrection of the dead and Christ’s glorification in heaven.

of unceasing song; the four living creatures worship around the throne of God, proclaiming, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!” Isaiah’s “Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!” has been sung in church liturgies since at least the fifth century.

Many hymns and spirituals anticipate the joys of heaven (see “Singing our way home,” pp. 37–39). The early nineteenth-century American folk song “Way-faring Stranger” evokes a great sense of longing and anticipation of heaven, juxtaposing the struggles of the world with the relief of heaven. The world is a place of exile, of difficult wandering and woe, of “dark clouds”; in contrast, heaven is described as a “bright land” with “no sickness, toil nor danger” where the believer will be reunited with deceased loved ones.

Invoking the pastoral language of the Psalms, the song longs for “golden fields” in heaven. Its refrain, “I’m just a-going over Jordan; I’m just a-going over home,” references the epic longing of the Israelites for the Promised Land, entered by crossing the Jordan River. “Way-faring Stranger” has been sung in churches for more than a century and recorded by dozens of famous musicians, including Burl Ives, Johnny Cash, and Jack White.

Part two's final chorus, the one we all know, takes its text from Revelation 19:6; 11:15, and 19:16 (the seventh trumpet and the marriage supper of the Lamb):

Hallelujah: for the Lord God Omnipotent reigneth. The kingdom of this world is become the kingdom of our Lord, and of His Christ; and He shall reign for ever and ever. King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Hallelujah!

The chorus became further associated with heaven through the apocryphal story, one of many spread by nineteenth-century Handel enthusiasts, that the composer was found weeping while writing it and confessing, "I did think I did see all Heaven and the great God Himself."

Handel was indeed a sincere Christian but more practical than mystical. A better-attested story tells of the first performance of *Messiah* in London in 1743, attended by King George II (who reportedly began the tradition of standing during the "Hallelujah" chorus). A few days later, Handel visited Lord Kinnoull, who complimented him on the "noble entertainment" presented, to which Handel is said to have replied, "My Lord, I should be sorry if I only entertained them; I wished to make them better."

"My Lord, I should be sorry if I only entertained them. I wished to make them better." (Handel)

JUDGMENT DAY

Since the Middle Ages, the text of the *Requiem Mass for the Dead* has commemorated the transition of countless souls from this life to the next. The Latin text, developed throughout the high and late Middle Ages, adds to the prayers of an ordinary Mass further pleas for God to grant eternal rest to the departed and mercy to the living—and describes the day of judgment in vivid detail. The text has been set to music in many variations, from traditional plainsong for the liturgy to elaborate versions for concert performance—including famous requiems by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756–1791) and Giuseppe Verdi (1813–1901).

Mozart began composing his (rather melancholy) Requiem in D Minor in 1791 and died that December before its completion. In contrast to Mozart's, Verdi's Requiem (1874) is long and loud. In a performance at the Royal Albert Hall in London, Verdi directed it with a choir of more than 1,000 voices accompanied by a 140-piece orchestra. It was wildly popular with




THE KINGDOM OF OUR LORD Handel's "Hallelujah" celebrates the transformation of earthly into heavenly.

music-loving audiences, though some churchgoers disapproved of Verdi because of his rumored agnosticism.

In 1944 a group of imprisoned Jewish musicians at the Czech concentration camp of Terezín gave a poignant performance of this piece. Sung with just a single piano before their Nazi captors and the International Red Cross, Verdi's Requiem took on new meaning. Through the Catholic Mass, set to music by the possibly agnostic Verdi, the Jewish inmates were able to express their condemnation of the Nazis and their desire for justice:

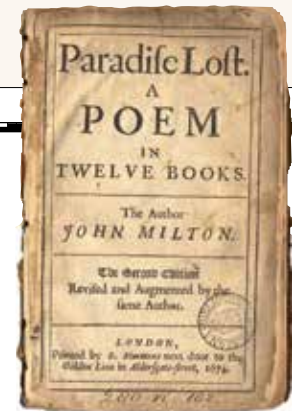
*The day of wrath, that day will dissolve the world in ashes
On which shall rise from the ashes
The guilty man, to be judged....
Deliver me, O Lord, from eternal death on that awful day,
When the heavens and the earth shall be moved:
When you will come to judge the world by fire.*

The Requiem also describes the experience of those spared judgment, praying, "Grant them eternal rest, O Lord, and may perpetual light shine upon them with your saints forever; for you are merciful."

This small handful of examples demonstrates something of the incredible breadth and depth of Christian conceptions of heaven expressed in music and art. While the glory of God's eternal presence is impossible to fathom, let alone describe, it has nonetheless captured the Christian imagination and inspired artists and musicians for generations. 

Jennifer C. Awes Freeman is a doctoral candidate in religion at Vanderbilt University, with a specialty in medieval art and theology, and an image researcher for Christian History.

How Christians have described the indescribable



Milton's story of heaven and hell (1667)

Visions of Perpetua and Saturus (203)

Augustine, *The City of God* (426)

Beatus, *Commentary on the Apocalypse* (500s; famous illuminated manuscripts through the 1200s)

Mosaic of the Transfiguration at Sant'Apollinare-in-Classo, 500s

John of Damascus, "Blessed city, heavenly Salem" and "Thou new Jerusalem," 700s

Peter Abelard, "O what their joy and their glory must be," 1100s

Bernard of Morlaix, "Jerusalem the golden" (1146)

Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (c. 1273)

The Pearl, anonymous poem, 1300s

Dante, *Divine Comedy (Paradiso)*, 1300s (famous Gustav Doré illustrations: 1860s)



The Last Judgment by Giotto; wall of Arena Chapel, Padua, Italy (1366)

200 300 400 500 600 700 1100 1200 1300



Domed ceiling, St. Francis of Assisi Church, Kraków, Poland (15th c.)

325, 381: Councils of Nicaea and Constantinople establish in formal creeds that God the Father is maker of heaven and earth and that Jesus came down from heaven, ascended to heaven, and is coming again in judgment.

1336: Benedict XVI declares that the blessed see God immediately, directly, and without the need for any intervening medium.

1274: Council of Lyons formally affirms purgatory.

Heaven as a garden Heaven as a city; the community of the redeemed Heaven as eternal home; longing for heaven
 Heaven as “the heavens” Heaven, hell, and judgment The new heaven and the new earth

— *The Paradise Garden*, German painting, 1400s

— *Fiesole Altarpiece*, Fra Angelico, 1400s

— John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (1667)

— John Bunyan, *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678)

— Isaac Watts, “Come ye that love the Lord” (1707)

— George Frideric Handel, *Messiah* (1741)

— Charles Wesley, “Lo, he comes with clouds descending” (1758)

— Charles Wesley, “Come, let us join our friends above” (1759)

— John Newton, “Glorious things of thee are spoken” (1779)

— Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, *Requiem* (1791)

— “Swing low, sweet chariot,” 1800s; like many spirituals, used heaven as a metaphor for freedom from slavery

— “Wayfaring Stranger,” folk song, 1800s

— Jefferson Hascall, “Angel Band” (1860)

— Robert Lowry, “Shall we gather at the river?” (1864)

— William How, “For all the saints” (1864)

— Giuseppe Verdi, *Requiem* (1874)

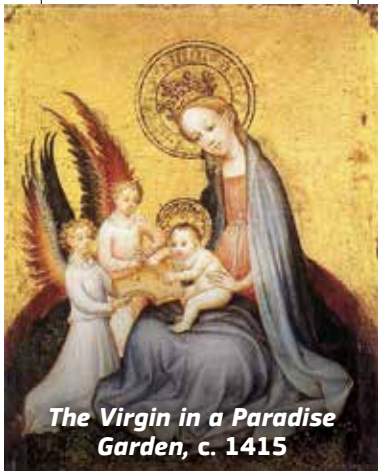
— Charles Williams, *All Hallows' Eve* (1945)

— C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (1945) and *The Last Battle* (1956)

— C. S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image* (1964)

— Natalie Sleeth, “Hymn of Promise” (1986)

— N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope* (2008)



The Virgin in a Paradise Garden, c. 1415

1400

1500

1600

1700

1800

1900

2000



George Frideric Handel (1685–1769)

— 1975: **Raymond Moody** coins the term “near-death experience” in his book *Life After Life*, though reports of similar visions go back, in fact, as far as the early church.

— **Karl Marx** (1818–1883) and **Sigmund Freud** (1856–1939) describe heaven as being wish fulfillment or imaginary.

— **Charles Darwin** (1809–1882) puts forward the idea of evolution without a divine purpose.

— **1500s and 1600s**: Reformation-era catechisms (both Protestant and Catholic) discuss heaven as the destination of the blessed, with an emphasis on its indescribability.

— **Copernicus** (1473–1543) and **Galileo** (1564–1642) establish that the earth revolves around the sun, with implications for where humans imagine heaven to be and what it looks like.

THE VIRGIN IN A PARADISE GARDEN (C. 1415)—UNKNOWN MASTER, GERMAN (ACTIVE 1415–1430 IN COLOGNE)
 THE CHANDOS PORTRAIT OF GEORGE FRIDERIC HANDEL (C. 1720)—UNKNOWN ARTIST



New heaven, new earth

THE TENSION BETWEEN HEAVEN ABOVE AND NEW CREATION TO COME
THROUGHOUT CHRISTIAN HISTORY

John G. Stackhouse Jr.

WHAT'S THE POINT? This question lay at the heart of classical Greek philosophy. Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle emphasized the *telos* of life: its end, its objective, and thus its purpose. Spin the globe and we find Chinese philosophers Lao-zi, Zhuang-zi, Kong-zi (whom we know as "Confucius"), and Meng-zi asking a similar question: what is the best possible outcome of human life?

Great thinkers throughout all of history have examined human life in light of its end goal. But ancient Hebrew prophets and early Christian teachers agreed on something further: that we understand the present and the past best in the light of a clearly understood future. The Bible ends, after all, with pictures of The End, drawing to a fitting climax the narrative of the great story of

creation, fall, and redemption while serving simultaneously as the overture to the splendid age to come.

The "eternal life" promised by Jesus in John's Gospel is, more accurately, the life of that "age to come." But the Bible as a whole argues that it is not only the life that is coming; it is the life Christians are to experience now, a new life of power, goodness, and joy. What, then, does the full realization of this life of power, goodness, and joy look like? What is the next life that shines backward, as it were, into this one?

WILL WE GO UP TO HEAVEN?

Despite the testimony of Isaiah 64:4 that "eye hath not seen" what God has prepared, the Bible ultimately doesn't settle for keeping the afterlife a mystery. Moses

CREATION AND RENEWED CREATION *Left:* 17th-c. painter Roelandt Savery imagined the Garden of Eden, a theme often used to picture humanity's final paradise as well.

HERE COMES THE JUDGE *Right:* Hans Holbein's famous Reformation-era woodcut dramatically portrays the Last Judgment.

stood before Israel and set before them life and death, blessing and cursing, a land flowing with milk and honey contrasted with a desert of wandering and waste (Deut. 30). God gave Ezekiel and then John dramatic visions to relay to God's people about what lay before them: a fabulous garden city of prosperity, security, pleasure, community, and worship—or a nightmare of want, pain, desolation, sorrow, and darkness.

Both biblical Hebrew and Greek use "the heavens" to point up to the sky, to the starry reaches above that, and to the very abode of God. And many modern biblical scholars and theologians believe that humans are not going "up" there.

Instead, the argument is, Old Testament visions look toward a re-formed Israel enjoying *shalom* (peace) in the Promised Land and celebrating God in the refurbished, expanded, and glorified city of Jerusalem. Likewise, the New Testament gestures prophetically toward a renewed heaven and earth (parallel with Gen. 1:1) in which the New Jerusalem descends from heaven to earth as the focus of God's redeemed creation (Rev. 21–22).

So we will not go to heaven, but heaven will come to us. By this account, heaven is the abode of God, and humans cannot live there. Heaven represents God's unapproachable transcendence. Rather, in a new heaven and a new earth we will enjoy the unspeakable blessing of communion with God who descends to inhabit the city he makes for humanity.

The Bible in fact paints a beautiful picture of God drawing nearer and nearer to humans: in the Old Testament tabernacle and temple, in the New Testament Incarnation of God's Son where God dwells in the "tabernacle" of human flesh, and finally in the astounding indwelling of Pentecost, making Christians themselves "temples of the Holy Spirit." In the New Jerusalem to come, there is no tabernacle or temple at all, for "its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb" (Rev. 21:22).

LOOKING AT THE WORLD TO COME

The idea of "going up to heaven" exerted great power over subsequent Christian images of heaven. But in many ways it recast the biblical theme in terms of a Greek worldview, which preferred to speak of spiritual over material, vertical over horizontal, and space ("up") over time ("forward").



In the poetic, dramatic, and graphic arts of the Christian tradition (see "A garden, a city, a home, and a judgment," pp. 16–21), humanity's final destiny has been portrayed as a place where the highest aspirations of the human heart will be realized. This often focuses on the loveliness of God and the experience of what is called the "beatific vision." Since God is the most beautiful of all, heaven has been said to consist simply in the eternal contemplation and enjoyment of God.

This view of the ultimate destiny of the blessed stands literally at the center of Dante's vision of paradise, where the saints sit in ordered circles around the Trinity. They gaze at God forever in their appropriate ranks—not unlike the Rose Bowl stadium in Pasadena, where no one pays attention to the other fans but only to the activity in the middle; in this case, God himself.

Luther and Calvin shared in this medieval outlook, and that focus upon heaven as eternal contemplation of the loveliness of God shows up in later spiritual writers as diverse as Madame Guyon, Richard Baxter, John Wesley, Jonathan Edwards, and John Henry Newman. Collages of images drawn from the kaleidoscope of



CLIMBING JACOB'S LADDER William Blake's 19th-c. vision shows angels walking up and down a staircase to heaven.

perfume, can read in Christian tradition many accounts of sweet smells in the world to come and remember how overwhelmingly *not* sweet-smelling so much of world history has been.

SOMEWHERE UP THERE

But biblical language about a new heaven and a new earth sat uneasily together with the focus on the beatific vision for many Reformation theologians. Luther maintained the faithful would merely visit the new earth, while Calvin held that they would find contemplating the surpassing greatness of God far more interesting than tending the new earth.

In fact, church creedal statements since the Reformation have not devoted a lot of space to heaven. Conceived during a period of persecution, the brief Anabaptist Schleithem Confession of 1527 spoke to the urgencies of the day and didn't even mention the next life. And in 1530 the Lutheran Augsburg Confession simply offered "eternal life and everlasting joys" in the midst of more pressing matters such as condemning Pelagians, Donatists, and the aforementioned Anabaptists.

The Heidelberg Catechism (1563) promised to Reformed Christians that Jesus Christ, "our Head, will also take us, his members, up to himself" where they will "hereafter reign with him eternally over all creatures." Beyond those assurances believers could expect to "possess perfect blessedness, such as no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived—a blessedness in which to praise God forever" (an allusion to Is. 64:4).

The Catechism of the Council of Trent (1566) gave similar counsels to Roman Catholics: "As for the glory of the blessed, it shall be without measure, and the kinds of their solid joys and pleasures without number." No article among the Anglican 39 Articles (1571) was devoted to the world to come; instead the Articles promised "everlasting felicity" in a clause dedicated to predestination and election.

This remarkable reticence showed up even in the generous expanses of the Westminster Confession (1646). Assuming an "immortal soul" (a point on which Christians have actually disagreed), the confession promised to the blessed in the so-called intermediate state between death and the Last Judgment: "The bodies of men, after death, return to dust, and see corruption:

John's Revelation dominate such writings: angelic and saintly choirs in close-packed ranks singing and shouting praise to God enthroned on high.

Though the reformers and their successors primarily described heaven in spiritual terms, the biblical imagery of a new heaven and a new earth sometimes had a place in their rhetoric. Isaac Watts broke with this inherited tradition of heaven as perpetual contemplation most famously in "Joy to the World," which was written to proclaim Christ's *Second Coming*:

*No more let sins and sorrows grow,
Nor thorns infest the ground;
He comes to make His blessings flow
Far as the curse is found.* (See p. 38.)

The new earth as described by these writers is a safe and orderly place, versus the threatening chaos of most societies in history. It is a clean and beautiful place, versus earthly squalor. It is a place of abundant food, splendid clothes, delightful music, and running water—all luxuries denied so many on earth. And it is even fragrant. Modern middle-class North Americans, rarely troubled by anything worse than excessive

THE SWARM OF CUPIDS Jean-Honore Fragonard's 18th-c. painting includes images we associate with heaven today: cherubs and puffy clouds.

but their souls, which neither die nor sleep, having an immortal subsistence, immediately return to God who gave them: the souls of the righteous, being then made perfect in holiness, are received into the highest heavens, where they behold the face of God, in light and glory, waiting for the full redemption of their bodies." After the judgment, "the righteous [shall] go into everlasting life, and receive that fullness of joy and refreshing, which shall come from the presence of the Lord."

WORLD ABANDONED OR TRANSFORMED

The more recent (1992) *Catholic Catechism* goes into much greater detail: "By his death and Resurrection, Jesus Christ has 'opened' heaven to us. The life of the blessed consists in the full and perfect possession of the fruits of the redemption accomplished by Christ. . . . Heaven is the blessed community of all who are perfectly incorporated into Christ." It sounds as if humans are, indeed, destined to go "up" to heaven.

But later the catechism promises a new heaven and a new earth right here: "The visible universe, then, is itself destined to be transformed, 'so that the world itself, restored to its original state, facing no further obstacles, should be at the service of the just,' sharing their glorification in the risen Jesus Christ" (quoting from Irenaeus, *Against the Heretics*). Later the writers claimed the world will be "once again, cleansed this time from the stain of sin, illuminated and transfigured, when Christ presents to his Father an eternal and universal kingdom."

More recent evangelical statements preserve the terseness of their Protestant forebears on the subject. The landmark Lausanne Covenant (1974) only states, "Our Christian confidence is that God will perfect his kingdom, and we look forward with eager anticipation to that day, and to the new heaven and earth in which righteousness will dwell and God will reign forever." The World Evangelical Alliance has for some time affirmed simply "the Resurrection of both the saved and the lost; they that are saved unto the resurrection of life, they that are lost unto the resurrection of damnation" (John 5:29).

Any work of theology, including confessions, creeds, and statements of faith, is aimed at solving a problem, answering a question, accomplishing a task in a particular context among a particular community. So none is ever comprehensive, let alone exhaustive, and theologians have rarely remarked on what to them seemed to be taken fairly for granted among the challenges of their day. Does it matter, then, that modern creedal documents generally say so little about the life to come?


DO OTHER MATTERS MATTER MORE?

The Bible itself might indicate that it does matter. Over and over again, prophets and pastors in both testaments referred to "what is to come" to warn and encourage God's people. They set before the believing community a richly rendered view of the two alternative destinies—heaven and hell—for encouragement and exhortation.

If humans believe that "going up to heaven" is what awaits them, then most likely they will devote themselves to the mystical dimensions of the Christian religion—along with evangelizing to draw others, obediently and compassionately, into this glorious experience. They might engage in some immediate care for the needy too, but its focus will be preparing them for a solely spiritual destiny.

But among those who believe that the everlasting worship of God will take place on a renewed planet where humans will continue to fulfill the commandment of Genesis 1 and 2 to work the earth and make something of it, "earth-keeping" and "city-building" and "peace-making" emerge as crucial to the Christian vocation.

Thus, recently, some traditions have abandoned the focus on the beatific vision taken for granted by their founders. Work, rest, and play; education, politics, and art; worship, evangelism, and Christian fellowship—this "world-affirming" strain of Christian thought embraces all of these as integral not only to human existence today but also to human existence in the world to come.

In the end, our Christian brothers and sisters remind us that the Bible gives us good reason to forego the fatal goodies and the fatal extremes of the "way that seems right to a person" (Prov. 14:12). That reason is life everlasting in the company of God in the peaceable kingdom so powerfully depicted in Scripture. Without such a vision, the people stray off the narrow road and die (Prov. 29:18). With such a vision, however, we can set our minds on things above *and ahead*, where Christ is *and where Christ will be*, and keep on as we should. 

John Stackhouse holds the Sangwoo Youtong Chee Chair of Theology and Culture at Regent College, Vancouver, Canada.





Another stop on the glory train?

CHRISTIANS HAVE WRESTLED FOR YEARS—SOMETIMES WITH EACH OTHER—OVER WHETHER THERE MIGHT BE A “PRECURSOR” TO HEAVEN

Jerry L. Walls

THE MOST FAMOUS WORK ever written about heaven, of course, is Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. Only its third book, however, is explicitly about heaven: *Paradiso*. Ironically, even more famous than *Paradiso* is *Inferno*, Dante’s colorful account of hell.

Heaven and hell are like salt and pepper, or better yet, good and evil, or Batman and the Joker. After all, right in the middle of the most glorious account

of heaven in the Bible (Rev. 21–22) comes a brief, somber description of the lake of fire (Rev. 21:8). To think of one naturally leads to thoughts of the other, and Christians have generally agreed that heaven is not the inevitable destiny of all people, but that some, perhaps many, will wind up in its shadowy counterpart. While heaven is what God intends for us, it is possible to reject God’s will and choose hell.

THE LAST JUDGMENT Left: In Michelangelo's famous painting, humans meet eternal fates.

"FICTION OF SATAN" Right: In this Reformation pamphlet, the devil himself sells indulgences.

But there is a third part to Dante's famous poem, sandwiched between these two: *Purgatorio*. More widely read and known than *Paradiso*, it represents by far the most famous account of another region of the life beyond. But where purgatory is concerned, consensus among orthodox Christians breaks up sharply. There is a heaven and there is a hell. But is there a purgatory?

The doctrine of purgatory stirred up controversy in the Western church, playing a key role in sixteenth-century disputes that led to the Protestant Reformation. Dominican monk Johann Tetzel, whose fund-raising skills rivaled contemporary televangelists, perfected the art of describing the miseries of purgatory in graphic detail. Relatives of the deceased were pressured to buy indulgences, an act guaranteed to send their loved ones straight to heaven. Supposedly Tetzel convinced them with the famous words: "As soon as the coin in the coffer rings / The soul from purgatory springs."

Martin Luther challenged such claims, and several of his Ninety-five Theses were directed at dubious notions involving purgatory. At the time of the theses, he still accepted the doctrine itself, focusing his criticism only on the abuses surrounding it. Later, he rejected the doctrine altogether, as did Calvin, who wrote:

Therefore, we must cry out with the shout not only of our voices but of our throats and lungs that purgatory is a deadly fiction of Satan, which nullifies the cross of Christ, inflicts unbearable contempt upon God's mercy, and overturns and destroys our faith. For what means this purgatory of theirs but that satisfaction for sins is paid by the souls of the dead after their death?

Calvin left no ambiguity in his complaint that the doctrine "nullifie[d] the cross of Christ" by teaching that Christians are required to pay for their sins after death if they have not made adequate penance for them in this life; the death of Christ does not sufficiently provide "satisfaction" to God, but rather Christians must play a part in satisfying the justice of God by suffering after death before entering heaven. So understood, the doctrine of purgatory was starkly at odds with the Reformation emphasis on justification by grace through faith alone.

The abuses of purgatory as embodied by Tetzel cast a long shadow for many Protestants, who still hold



today many of the same objections Calvin raised. But the sixteenth-century version of the doctrine, while its effects were profound, did not represent the whole picture. There were historically two emphases in the doctrine of purgatory: *sanctification* (cleansing, purification, and healing) and *satisfaction* (satisfying a debt of justice through punishment).

BEFORE THE COIN RANG IN THE COFFER

Purgatory, from the word "purge," arose from two parallel beliefs: we must actually be holy to see the Lord, and most, if not all, Christians are far from perfect when they die. But how can Christians purge the remains of sin and imperfection? Patristic writers like Origen and Augustine argued that they will after death complete the purification of their souls begun by the trials and ordeals experienced on this side of death. Even if this involves suffering as part of moral and spiritual growth, the point of the suffering for these authors was cleansing and transformation, not penal retribution. As Origen wrote:

For if on the foundation of Christ you have built not only gold and silver and precious stones; but also wood and hay and stubble, what do you expect when the soul shall be separated from the body?



REFINING FIRE? Right: Souls suffer in purgatory in this carving on an 18th-c. altar.

Would you enter into heaven with your wood and hay and stubble and thus defile the kingdom of God? ... It remains then that you be committed to the fire which will burn the light materials; for our God to those who can comprehend heavenly things is called a cleansing fire.

But by the time the doctrine was first formally affirmed at the Council of Lyons in 1274, elements of satisfaction were present:

Those who have died in a state of charity, truly repentant but before they have brought forth fruit worthy of repentance, their souls are purified after death by cleansing pains. The petitions of the living, the sacrifices of Masses, prayers, almsdeeds and other pious services... are profitable to them for the lifting of these pains.

The focus on transformation clearly remains at the forefront in Dante's famous account, completed by 1319. But Dante was going against the grain (see "God's love that moves the sun and other stars," pp. 8–14). By the time of the Reformation, the doctrine was construed in terms of penal suffering for the sake of satisfying the demands of justice. This version of the doctrine lent itself readily to abuse, and against it the Reformers reacted strongly.

But later Protestants still found themselves wrestling with the issue of human transformation. Eighteenth-century Anglican theologian John Fletcher,

famous for developing and defending John Wesley's theology, wrote in his *Checks to Antinomianism*:

If we understand by *purgatory*, the manner in which souls, still polluted with the remains of sin, are, or may be purged from those remains, that they may see a holy God, and dwell with him forever; the question, *Which is the true purgatory?* is by no means frivolous: for it is the grand inquiry, *How shall I be eternally saved?* proposed in different expressions.

Protestants offered different answers to this question; most were variations on the claim that purgatory happens at or immediately after death. As distinguished nineteenth-century Princeton theologian Charles Hodge put it, "The Protestant doctrine is that the souls of believers are at death made perfect in holiness."

While the emphasis on satisfaction remained prominent in Roman Catholic thought for centuries after the Reformation, twentieth-century Catholic theologians began to rediscover the original emphasis on purification. And at the same time, a reappraisal of purgatory emerged among some Protestant traditions, especially from those that focused on free choice and cooperation as essential to salvation and to sanctification.

They argued that emphasizing sanctification, even after death, is perfectly compatible with the Protestant doctrine of justification by grace through faith alone: whereas justification is about forgiveness of sin and restoring us to a right relationship with God, the process of sanctification is about transforming humans to achieve that "holiness without which no one will see the Lord" (Heb. 12:14).

C. S. Lewis espoused this version of purgatory, writing in *Letters to Malcolm*: "My favourite image on this matter comes from the dentist's chair. I hope that when the tooth of life is drawn and I am 'coming round,' a voice will say, 'Rinse your mouth out with this.' This will be Purgatory. The rinsing may take longer than I can now imagine. The taste of this may be more fiery and astringent than my present sensibility could endure. But ... it will [not] be disgusting and unhallowed." Lewis's ecumenical appeal may have played a key role in paving the way for some evangelicals and other Protestants to take a fresh look at the doctrine.

At any rate, as the shadows of Tetzl fade, it is likely notions of purgatory will resurface in the years ahead whenever Christians think and talk seriously about heaven, and what is required to enter its gates. ☐

Jerry L. Walls is professor of philosophy at Houston Baptist University and the author of four books on hell, heaven, and purgatory.

"Till we reach the golden strand"

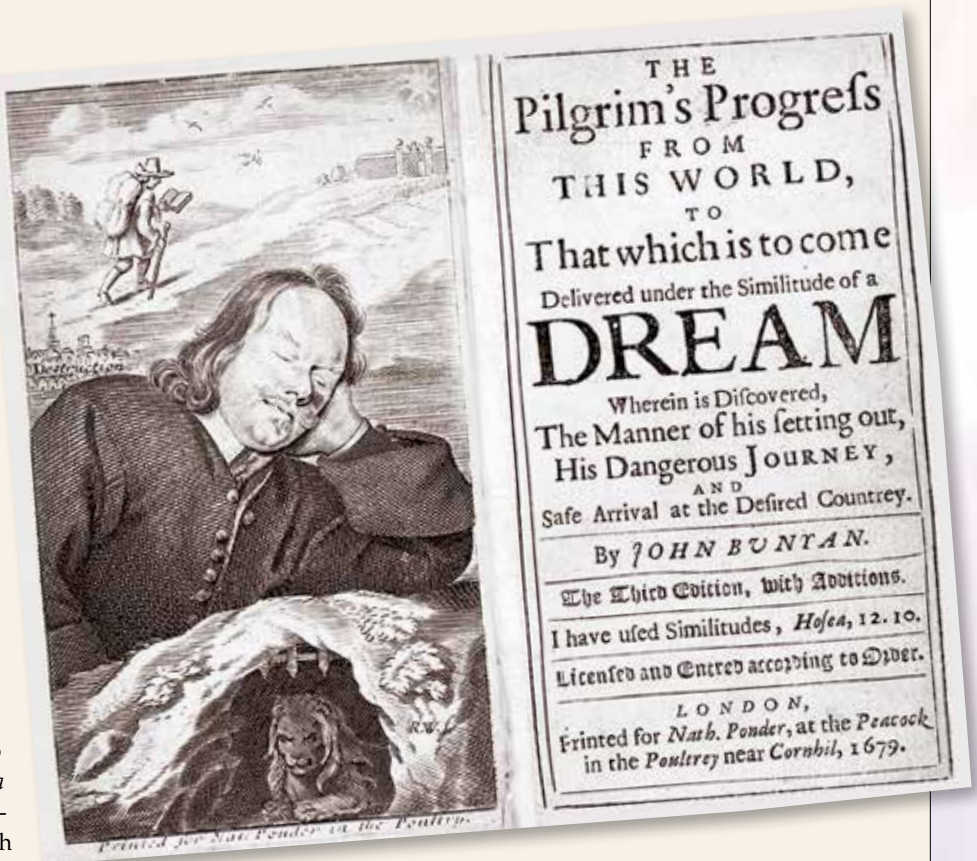
PILGRIM'S PROGRESS GAVE MANY GENERATIONS OF CHRISTIANS A WAY TO UNDERSTAND THEIR JOURNEY TO HEAVEN

Edwin Woodruff Tait

Now I saw in my dream, that these two men went in at the gate; and lo, as they entered, they were transfigured; and they had raiment put on that shone like gold. There were also [those] that met them with harps and crowns, and gave them to them; the harps to praise withal, and the crowns in token of honor. Then I heard in my dream, that all the bells in the city rang again for joy, and that it was said unto them, "Enter ye into the joy of your Lord." —John Bunyan

JOHN BUNYAN'S *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678), perhaps the most popular book next to the Bible for generations of evangelical Protestants, told of the Christian life as a pilgrimage "from this world to that which is to come." Such an idea of pilgrimage had dominated the medieval worldview, where the distinction between this world and the life to come was expressed by the terms *in via* (on the way) and *in patria* (in the homeland). The metaphor was powerful both because medieval Christians spent a lot of time traveling on foot and because one important form of travel was a literal pilgrimage to a holy place. Jerusalem was the ultimate goal of pilgrimage and an earthly image of heaven. In fact even the Crusades were seen originally as an "armed pilgrimage" to Jerusalem.

Bunyan's allegory, though, became the definitive form such imagery took in the evangelical mind—accessible in no small part due to his creative simplicity of language. The pilgrims in his tale are named with their most identifiable traits: Christian, Ignorance, Hopeful, Giant Despair, Mr. Worldly Wiseman. *Pilgrim's Progress* is not significant for detailed descriptions of heaven (they don't occur), but for the way the entire story is suffused with the *hope* of heaven. The "Celestial City" is spoken of over and over on the difficult journey, but not seen until the end, when "shining ones" escort the pilgrims over the river and into paradise. After the joy in heaven that welcomes the pilgrims' arrival, part



"MY LORD, I'M ON MY JOURNEY" Believers for centuries framed their experience of the Christian life in images drawn from Bunyan's "similitude of a dream."

1 of the book ends with hapless traveler Ignorance coming to the gate of the city lacking a "certificate" and being hauled off to a door in the hill leading to hell. Part 2, describing the pilgrimage of Christian's family, says even less about what happened after they "crossed the river." Rather, the focus lies on their reactions to the crossing.

But this description of death as a voyage across a river and the moving portrayal of the pilgrims' experiences in crossing shaped the ways evangelicals sang, prayed, and talked for centuries. While the idea of crossing the Jordan went back much further, Bunyan's vivid word pictures crept into common speech and into



RIVER OF BLISS A 19th-c. illustration of Milton's *Paradise Lost* shows how the image of "crossing the river" endured.

written by Edgar Stites in 1876, derives its imagery from Isaiah by way of Bunyan:

*I've reached the land of corn and wine,
And all its riches freely mine;
Here shines undimmed one blissful day,
For all my night has passed away.*

*My Savior comes and walks with me,
And sweet communion here have we;
He gently leads me by His hand,
For this is Heaven's border land.*

*A sweet perfume upon the breeze,
Is borne from ever vernal trees,
And flow'rs, that never fading grow
Where streams of life forever flow.*

hymns such as "On Jordan's stormy banks I stand" and Fanny Crosby's "In the Cross," with the refrain "Till I reach the golden strand / just beyond the river."

ABUNDANCE OF ALL THEY SOUGHT

But a more peculiar influence of Bunyan's work is the "land of Beulah" which the pilgrims encounter just before crossing the river (the word *beulah* means "married" and refers to Isaiah 62:4, God's blessing of a formerly barren place). In Bunyan's writing this land represents a state of spiritual maturity at the end of the difficult Christian pilgrimage:

Yea, here they heard continually the singing of birds, and saw every day the flowers appear in the earth, and heard the voice of the turtle in the land. In this country the sun shineth night and day: wherefore this was beyond the Valley of the Shadow of Death, and also out of the reach of Giant Despair; neither could they from this place so much as see Doubting Castle.

Here they were within sight of the city they were going to... [and] in this land the shining ones commonly walked, because it was upon the borders of heaven.... Here they had no want of corn and wine; for in this place they met with abundance of what they had sought for in all their pilgrimage.

This picture became particularly popular in the Wesleyan-Holiness movement. Though Bunyan would not have agreed with the theology of entire sanctification—a state of spiritual peace, love for God and neighbor, and victory over sin and fear—that holiness people thought possible for all believers, he had unknowingly provided them with a perfect metaphor for it. The popular revival hymn "Beulah Land,"

Refrain

*O Beulah Land, sweet Beulah Land,
As on thy highest mount I stand,
I look away across the sea,
Where mansions are prepared for me,
And view the shining glory shore,
My Heav'n, my home forever more!*

Bunyan's picture of heavenly realities is so powerful because his sense of the anguish and doubt of earthly life was so strong. Even after the peace of Beulah Land, the pilgrims have one last test as they cross the river to the Celestial City. There Christian fears he will drown in the river: "And with that a great darkness and horror fell upon Christian, so that he could not see before him. Also here he in a great measure lost his senses, so that he could neither remember nor orderly talk of any of those sweet refreshments that he had met with in the way of his pilgrimage. But all the words that he spoke still tended to discover that he had horror of mind, and heart-fears that he should die in that river, and never obtain entrance in at the gate." His companion, Hopeful, holds up Christian's head and comforts him with the assurance: "Be of good cheer, my brother: I feel the bottom, and it is good."

Bunyan's portrait of earthly struggle and heavenly hope has similarly cheered thousands of Christians in their own moments of doubt and despair. We have no direct knowledge of heaven in this life, but we have those, like Bunyan, who hold up our heads in the river and tell us that their feet touch bottom.

Edwin Woodruff Tait is a contributing editor at Christian History.



Heaven lost and heaven found

EVER SINCE THE ENLIGHTENMENT, SOME THINKERS HAVE TRIED TO “THINK AWAY” HEAVEN, BUT IT IS STILL GOING STRONG

Jeffrey Burton Russell

HEAVEN IS FOR REAL? Not to many people over the past 200 years. Belief in heaven has decreased in some parts of the globe, as both modern and postmodern thought offer reasons for not believing. But in other places, heaven is still as real as ever.

OUT OF THIS WORLD

While we may think of “modern” as something happening last week or last month, for historians the era of modern thought stretches from the seventeenth century to the late twentieth and is defined by the tendency to see natural science as the only way to truth. Copernicus (1473–1543) offered the first mathematical demonstration that the earth revolves around the sun, and Galileo (1564–1642) furnished telescopic evidence (among other supports) for the claim.

By the eighteenth century, most educated people accepted that the sun is at the center of the “heavens.” This change had great consequences. Until Galileo it was still respectable to believe that heaven is above all the planetary spheres and hell is under the earth. After him, people began to use the idea of heaven being “up” only as metaphor.

THE GARDEN OF EDEN Contemporary artist Mary McCleary’s collage echoes previous images of the paradise humans originally shared, and might share again. The eyes symbolize God’s eternal presence.

But the shift to a metaphorical “up” was not the only implication of Galileo’s work. His view that the Bible had to be reconciled with observation of the natural world had further implications in intellectual circles. Philosophers began to favor what they could see over what they could not—although some still approved of the doctrine of heaven based on fear that without a future life reward or punishment, people would abandon morality.

Several thinkers helped point the way away from heaven. Francis Bacon (1561–1626) divided all knowledge into the practical and the speculative: Christianity at large, especially heaven, seemed wholly “other-worldly” ideas that needed to be replaced by practical natural philosophy (the original word for what we call “science”).

Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677) held that the Bible must be read, not as revelation, but as any other historical document. David Hume (1711–1776) was skeptical of *everything*, even natural science, but he found science less dubious than religion. Hume believed that only



the knowledge attained by observation of the natural world is worth considering; all evidence from religion is suspect. Instead of evaluating personal testimony, Hume argued that people should focus on the empirical examination of evidence, preferably in ways that can be counted and measured. Among skeptics and Deists (those who believed that God, while he may have created the world, no longer intervenes in it in any supernatural way), the attitude became, "Since we can't know about heaven, what is the point of talking about it?"

PIE IN THE SKY WHEN YOU DIE

History, philosophy, theology, and experience still held roles in discussions of heaven. But the idea that objective truth could come from history, philosophy, theology, and experience was also undermined in the nineteenth century. Philosopher and economist Karl Marx (1818–1883) argued that religious beliefs are a "false consciousness," deriving from the alienation of the underprivileged social classes from reality.

Belief in heaven, he thought, only suppresses any urge for oppressed people to improve their physical well-being on earth: "Man, who has found only the reflection of himself in the fantastic reality of heaven, where he sought a supernatural being, will no longer be tempted to find the mere appearance of himself. . . . Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people."

The material abundance achieved by technology in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries further

SEE WHAT I PAINT. . . . Despite the modern emphasis on science, images that might have been called "heavenly" suffused the work of many 20th-c. visual artists, like Salvador Dali's other-worldly *Last Supper*.

encouraged people to replace hope of heaven with hope of overcoming suffering and death in this world. Naturalist Charles Darwin's (1809–1882) description of evolution through wholly natural means permitted materialists to construct a view that excludes any sort of overall purpose from the cosmos.

While some nineteenth-century Christians saw no incompatibility between Christianity and evolution, it became a particularly useful philosophy for atheists who believed that all thought, and the human mind itself, develop gradually through genetic modification. John W. Draper (1811–1882) and Andrew Dickson White (1832–1918) famously declared, in the face of much competing evidence, that religion and science are necessarily at war (see *CH*'s issues 107, *Debating Darwin* and 76, *The Christian Face of the Scientific Revolution*). Pragmatism, another philosophy arising in the twentieth century, held that any knowledge that did not have positive practical results was useless.

In fact, one of the ways G. K. Chesterton (1874–1936), C. S. Lewis (1898–1963), and other Christian public intellectuals rose to prominence was through their opposition to materialist and pragmatic views—such as the famous passage in Lewis's *The*

. . . . **NOT WHAT I SAY** Arguments that existence lacked purpose and that the next world was illusory often found ammunition in the works of (clockwise from left) Darwin, Freud, Nietzsche, and Marx.

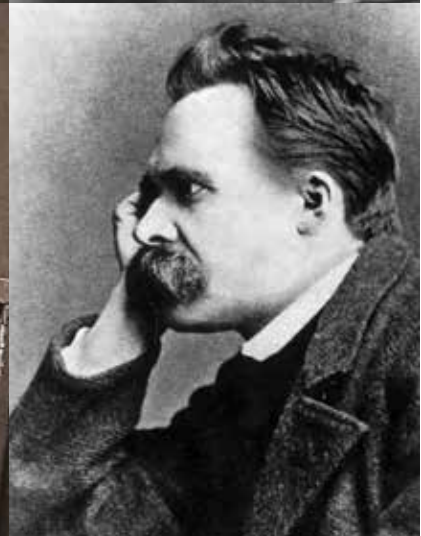
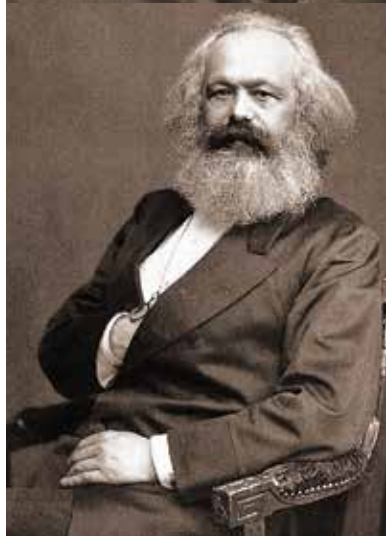
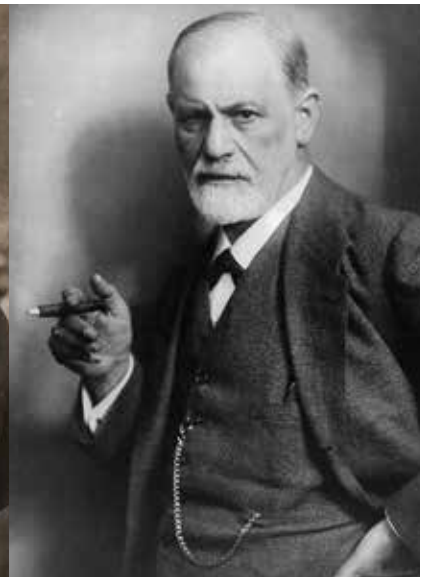
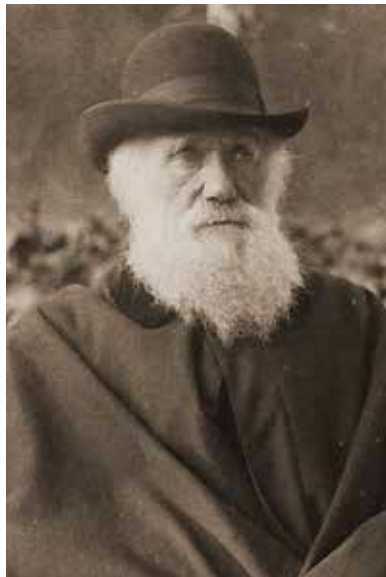
Silver Chair where the witch tries to convince the heroes that their idea of the “sun” is only based on lightbulbs and their idea of Aslan on house cats. Puddleglum the Marshwiggle responds, “Suppose we have only dreamed, or made up, all those things—trees and grass and sun and moon and stars and Aslan himself. Suppose we have. Then all I can say is that, in that case, the made-up things seem a good deal more important than the real ones....We’re just babies making up a game, if you’re right. But four babies playing a game can make a play world which licks your real world hollow.”

EARTHLY BREAD

In more recent decades, the “modern” world of science and rationalism has given way to a “postmodern” one of feelings, images, and stories. Postmodernism too has long roots in the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) and nineteenth-century romantics, who valued feeling more than thinking. Philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) argued that no ideals are real—truth, reason, progress, humanity, God, and heaven. We can’t know anything, Nietzsche said, and religious ideas least of all. German poet Heinrich Heine (1797–1856) expressed similar views:

*Enough bread grows here on earth,
For all mankind’s nutrition,
Roses too, myrtles, beauty and joy,
And green peas, in addition....
To the angels and the sparrows,
We leave Heaven and its Gods.
And, if after death, we’ve grown some wings,
We’ll pay you a visit up there,
To share the holiest tarts and cakes
Your heavenly cooks prepare.*

Psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) argued that the irrational, unconscious mind is a junkyard of repressed longings and wish-fulfillments. His idea of God and heaven as constituting “wish-fulfillment,” still influential today, derived from his theory of the Oedipus complex (named for mythical Greek hero Oedipus who unknowingly killed his father and married his mother).



According to the Oedipus complex, all boys long to kill their fathers and marry their mothers; they repress this longing into their unconscious, where the feelings fester, causing such terrible guilt and remorse that they must create a God to relieve the guilt. Another founder of modern psychology, Carl Jung (1875–1961), while taking religion much more seriously than Freud, believed heaven is the product of the creative unconscious; he did not think it exists outside the human mind.

Among twentieth-century intellectuals, deconstructionists such as Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980) and Jacques Derrida (1930–2004) dismissed all knowledge as mere products of individual preferences, so that everyone creates his or her own reality (though that did not stop them from crediting science as being more “real” than religion). Existentialist Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951) and the influential “Vienna Circle” that followed him insisted that all statements not verifiable by experience are simply meaningless. All these views



WALKING WITH ANGELS Contemporary artist Sophie Hacker imagines an experience of eternity.

undermined the idea that we can know about heaven through historical and theological examination.

Philosopher and critic Michel Foucault (1926–1984), describing how society progresses in the absence of a dominant church influence, ended up convincing two generations of scholars that the pursuit of power is the dominant motive of human activity. Practical pressures reduced Christian influence as well: violent repression of Christians and their beliefs occurred under dictators such as Hitler, Stalin, Khrushchev, and Mao (see *CH*'s issue 109, *Eyewitnesses to the Modern Age of Persecution*).

But heaven was undermined by pressures internal as well as external to Christianity. The type of biblical interpretation known as “higher criticism” attacked the credibility of the Bible. Other scholars saw Christianity as a social phenomenon subject to sociological rather than philosophical investigation. In such views the “supernatural” is confused with “superstition” (though the two words have no connection any more than either has with “supermarket.”)

Under such influences, many Christian leaders from the late nineteenth century on worked to accommodate secular thought. The 1960s, which featured a revolt against the past and tradition in general, also brought growing interest in non-Christian religions and in New Age beliefs. Many who adopted these views replaced heaven as the goal of humanity with

an undefined “progress.” Mainline Protestants became shy in talking about heaven, emphasizing social reform and theologies intending to make Christianity relevant to modern culture. This often led to viewing heaven as simply part of the Christian story, held up along with all the other valid “stories” of a postmodern world.

“I WANT MY STUFF”

In addition to intellectual movements focusing on the material world rather than the supernatural one, heaven in the twentieth century also fell prey to plain old materialism: the collection of more and more stuff.

As people attained a greater and greater prosperity in the things of this world, they became less and less interested in the other one: surveys indicate that (at least in the United States) belief in heaven declines among people making over \$150,000 a year. On one exam asking students to compare Socrates and Jesus on the subject of worldly wealth, a professor got the honest answer: “I don’t care what Jesus or Socrates thought, I want my stuff.”

But in many ways, heaven is reviving. Beliefs focused on a possible imminent return of Christ came back to prominence with the rise of fundamentalism and Pentecostalism. And heaven and hell appear in the contemporary *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (although not always in Sunday sermons).

The Eastern Orthodox maintain a strong confidence in the doctrine, having always resisted attempts to pin down doctrines any more firmly than the church fathers did. For the Orthodox heaven is less a doctrine to be believed than a guide to the practice of discipleship—turning believers into the kinds of people who would want to go to heaven.

In the twenty-first century, vibrant Christian beliefs have been spreading among the poor, and in Asia and Africa more than in Europe or the Americas (see *CH* issue 79, *African Apostles*). But even in developed countries, thinkers such as Lewis, Karl Barth (1886–1968), and Benedict XVI (b. 1927, pope 2005–2013) have emphasized heaven’s centrality and influenced secular and Christian thought.

The future of belief in heaven seems to be brightening in some parts of the world and dimming in others. But as long as Christianity is rooted in the Bible, belief in heaven must persist—and belief in its prime characteristic: the immeasurable love that God has for his people and that Christian people are supposed to have for each other. Whether or not heaven remains in fashion among elites and intellectuals, God’s love for all his people, and his desire to have them with him always, will never cease. ☐



Singing our way home

FAMOUS CHRISTIAN HYMNS ABOUT HEAVEN—AND THE HOPE FOR HEAVEN—FROM THE CHURCH FATHERS TO OUR OWN DAY

THOU NEW JERUSALEM

Thou New Jerusalem, arise and shine!
The glory of the Lord on thee
hath risen!

Zion, exult! Rejoice with joy divine,
Mother of God! Thy Son hath burst
His prison!

O heavenly Voice! O word of
purest love!

Lo! I am with you always to the end!
This is the anchor, steadfast from
above,

The golden anchor, whence our
hopes depend.

O CHRIST, our Pascha [Passover
lamb]! greatest, holiest, best!
God's Word and Wisdom and
effectual Might!

Thy fuller, lovelier presence manifest,
In that eternal realm that knows
no night!

—John of Damascus, 500s, translated by
John Mason Neale

JERUSALEM THE GOLDEN

Jerusalem the golden, with milk and
honey blest,
Beneath thy contemplation sink heart
and voice oppressed.

I know not, O I know not, what joys
await us there,

What radiancy of glory, what bliss
beyond compare....

There is the throne of David, and
there, from care released,
The shout of them that triumph, the
song of them that feast;

And they, who with their Leader,
have conquered in the fight,
Forever and forever are clad in robes
of white.

O sweet and blessed country, the
home of God's elect!

O sweet and blessed country that
eager hearts expect!

—Bernard of Morlaix, 1146, translated
by John Mason Neale

"ETERNALLY GO ROUND" William Billings pictured the praise of God as a literal "round" of heavenly music.

O QUANTA QUALIA

O what their joy and their glory
must be,

Those endless Sabbaths the blessed
ones see;

Crown for the valiant, to weary ones,
rest;

God shall be all, and in all ever
blessed....

There, where no troubles distraction
can bring,

We the sweet anthems of Zion
shall sing;

While for Thy grace, Lord, their
voices of praise

Thy blessed people eternally raise.

—Peter Abelard, 1100s, translated by
John Mason Neale



STREAMS OF LIVING WATER *Left:* This 14th-c. tapestry pictures a river of paradise.

"FAR AS THE CURSE IS FOUND" *Below:* Isaac Watts intended "Joy to the World" to celebrate Christ's Second Coming.

WAKE, AWAKE, FOR NIGHT IS FLYING

Now let all the heavens adore Thee,
And saints and angels sing
before Thee,
With harp and cymbal's clearest tone;
Of one pearl each shining portal,
Where we are with the choir
immortal
Of angels round Thy dazzling throne;
Nor eye hath seen, nor ear hath yet
attained to hear
What there is ours, but we rejoice and
sing to Thee
Our hymn of joy eternally.

—Phillip Nicolai, 1599, translated by
Catherine Winkworth

COME WE, THAT LOVE THE LORD

The hill of Zion yields a thousand
sacred sweets
Before we reach the heav'nly fields or
walk the golden streets.
Then let our songs abound and every
tear be dry;
We're marching through Immanuel's
ground, to fairer worlds on high.

—Isaac Watts, 1707

COME, LET US JOIN OUR FRIENDS ABOVE

Come, let us join our friends above,
who have obtained the prize,
And on the eagle wings of love to
joys celestial rise.
Let saints on earth unite to sing with
those to glory gone,
For all the servants of our King in
earth and heaven are one.
One family we dwell in Him, one



church above, beneath,
Though now divided by the stream,
the narrow stream of death;
One army of the living God, to His
command we bow;
Part of His host have crossed the
flood, and part are crossing now.

—Charles Wesley, 1759

GLORIOUS THINGS OF THEE ARE SPOKEN

Glorious things of thee are spoken,
Zion, city of our God!
He, whose Word cannot be broken,
Formed thee for His own abode.
On the Rock of Ages founded,
What can shake thy sure repose?
With salvation's walls surrounded,
Thou may'st smile at all thy foes.
See! the streams of living waters,
Springing from eternal love;
Well supply thy sons and daughters,
And all fear of want remove:
Who can faint while such a river
Ever flows their thirst to assuage?

Grace, which like the Lord, the giver,
Never fails from age to age.

—John Newton, 1779

SWING LOW, SWEET CHARIOT

Swing low, sweet chariot,
Coming for to carry me home;
Swing low, sweet chariot,
Coming for to carry me home.
I looked over Jordan; what did I see
Coming for to carry me home?
A band of angels coming after me,
Coming for to carry me home.

—Nineteenth-century African American
spiritual, credited to Wallace Willis

SHALL WE GATHER AT THE RIVER?

Shall we gather at the river,
Where bright angel feet have trod,
With its crystal tide forever
Flowing by the throne of God?
Yes, we'll gather at the river,
The beautiful, the beautiful river;
Gather with the saints at the river
That flows by the throne of God.
Ere we reach the shining river,
Lay we every burden down;
Grace our spirits will deliver,
And provide a robe and crown.

—Robert Lowry, 1864 (see "Did you
know?," inside the front cover for
more on this hymn's writing.)

HYMN OF PROMISE

In our end is our beginning; in our
time, infinity;
In our doubt there is believing; in our
life, eternity,
In our death, a resurrection; at the
last, a victory,
Unrevealed until its season,
something God alone can see.

—Natalie Sleeth; taken from "Hymn
of Promise" © 1986 Hope Publishing
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Can heaven wait?

WE SURVEYED SOME OF CH'S FRIENDS AND READERS ABOUT WHAT POPULAR BOOKS, MOVIES, AND SONGS (CHRISTIAN AND SECULAR) HAVE MOST SHAPED RECENT AMERICAN VIEWS OF HEAVEN. HERE ARE THEIR TOP SUGGESTIONS.

- 📖 Book: novel or memoir
- 🎬 Drama: movie or TV show
- 🎭 Play
- 🎵 Song

Our Town (1938): The end of this classic play takes place in a cemetery, and the recently deceased heroine requests (and receives) permission to return to earth for one day (despite the fact that the other dead urge her to move on). 📖

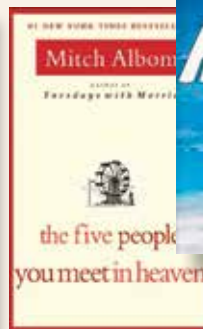
Cabin in the Sky (1940): A man killed over gambling debts is brought back to life and given six months to prove himself worthy of going to heaven. 🎬

C.S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (1945) and *The Last Battle* (1966): A bus passenger in the former travels from a "grim city" to heaven; in the latter the "new heaven and new earth" of Lewis's fantasy world of Narnia begin. (See "Did you know?," inside front cover for more on Lewis and heaven.) 📖

Led Zeppelin, "Stairway to Heaven" (1971): The band's most famous song not only has mysterious lyrics about a woman trying to buy her way into heaven, but for many years people claimed that messages from hell could be heard if you played the song backward. It was played at the close of nearly every homecoming and prom dance for decades. 🎵

Heaven Can Wait (1978): A football quarterback is killed in an accident, but because he was "taken" too early by an overambitious angel, he is sent back to earth in two different bodies. This film is a remake of the 1941 film *Here Comes Mr. Jordan* (where the hero is a boxer). 🎬

Highway to Heaven (1984–1989): An "angel on probation" is paired with a



human partner and given assignments by "The Boss" (i.e., God) to help troubled people solve their problems. 📖

Eric Clapton, "Tears in Heaven" (1991): This song on the death of the singer's young son includes the lyrics "Would you know my name if I saw you in heaven? / Will it be the same if I saw you in heaven? / I must be strong, and carry on / Cause I know I don't belong / Here in heaven." 🎵

Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, *Left Behind* (1995–2014): *Glorious Appearing*, the last of the series, portrays a vision of Christ's return to earth on the Mount of Olives, the judgment that follows, and the beginning of the millennial reign. 📖

Field of Dreams (1989): An unsuccessful farmer builds a baseball diamond in a cornfield where deceased ballplayers appear and play ball, including the farmer's own father. 🎬

What Dreams May Come (1998): A dead physician meets his children in heaven, then goes to hell to rescue his wife, becoming the first resident of heaven ever to successfully rescue someone from hell. 🎬

Alice Sebold, *The Lovely Bones* (2002): A murdered teenage girl watches the

unfolding events of her loved ones' lives from heaven. At one point she is granted a brief return to earth. 📖

Mitch Albom, *The Five People You Meet in Heaven* (2003): A man who thinks he has lived a worthless life dies and meets five people who explain to him that his life really had purpose. Albom also wrote *The First Phone Call from Heaven* (2013), in which a small town starts getting phone calls from the afterlife. 📖

Don Piper, *90 Minutes in Heaven* (2004): A minister recounts experiences he had while legally dead for 90 minutes following a horrible car wreck: a vision of heaven's gates characterized by beauty, music, and encounters with dead loved ones. 📖

William Young, *The Shack* (2010): A man whose daughter was murdered has visions of the Trinity as well as of his dead father in heaven. 📖

Todd Burpo, *Heaven Is for Real* (2010): A minister writes of his four-year-old son's experience journeying to heaven and back during emergency surgery. As he recovered, Colton Burpo's memories of meeting Jesus and various dead family members emerged. 📖



Life after life after death

CHRISTIAN HISTORY TALKS ABOUT THE RESURRECTION WITH N. T. WRIGHT, AUTHOR OF *SURPRISED BY HOPE*

CH: What is the biblical hope? Why is bodily resurrection crucial to that hope?

NTW: The biblical hope is for “new heavens and new earth,” that is, for the utter renewal and reordering of the Creator’s project—begun in Genesis 1 and 2 but aborted, or at least radically distorted, because of human rebellion. The Resurrection of Jesus is the launching of this new creation. His body seems to be

at home in either heaven or earth or both, so that he embodies and encapsulates this new creation in himself. Those who belong to Jesus are thus signed on as new-creation people, not just as *parts* of new creation but (since this is what humans were made for) as *agents* of new creation.

At the moment this is partial and puzzling; Jesus is raised, the rest of us are not. He conquered death; but death still takes us. But because of the resurrection and the Holy Spirit, what we do “in Christ” in the present is in fact part of, and preparing for, the new creation, whether or not it looks like that. In the new creation, decay and death will have been abolished, but it’s clear from Romans 8 that this will be the same world, only rid of its corruption and decay, just as Jesus’ risen body was the same, only different because now it is incapable of disease, suffering, or death itself.

CH: What should Christian views of the future look like?

NTW: Like the Resurrection of Jesus, transposed to all of creation; like the coming together of heaven and earth in a way we only glimpse momentarily at present in great beauty, in great works of putting-right (justice), and above all in prayer, sacrament, Scripture, and ministering to the poor. The reality will be that coming-together that we sense in music, sometimes, or in human love. It will be like all that, only much, much more. It will be both our ultimate homecoming and our ultimate arrival somewhere totally new—since we’ve never before encountered anything totally incorruptible and without-decay.

CH: What does this mean for how we think about salvation and the kingdom of God?

NTW: For many people “salvation” means “being rescued from the world.” In the Bible the world is God’s world, and we are supposed to be looking after it and making it fruitful, so there isn’t much point in being rescued from it. Rather, we are saved FOR the world—rescued to be rescuers, put right (justification) to be putting-right people (justice); restored to the beauty of being image-bearers so that we may be beauty-bringers,

THE LAMB WHO REIGNS *Left:* Marc Chagall pictured Jesus the Paschal Lamb surrounded by two angels and the four Gospel writers.

TELLING THE GLORY OF GOD *Right:* The text of Psalm 19 in Hebrew repeats throughout Sandra Bowden's conception of heaven: "The heavens communicate an inaudible speech, by their very presence offering a universal praise."

beauty-creators, for the world. We are, in other words, to be saved ultimately, in the future, from corruption, decay, and death; from being "out of line," unjust; from ugliness. So, the new "you" will be the "you" that God had in mind all along.

Gnosticism at this point whispers, "Yes, the real 'you' is deep inside somewhere—so just get in touch with it and let it express itself." But the answer is, "No, the real 'you' is God's fresh gift in the death and resurrection of the Messiah." At present we suffer with him so that we may be glorified with him.

God's kingdom means God's sovereign, saving rule. Jesus taught us to pray that it would come "on earth as in heaven." Salvation happens when this prayer is answered, whether partially and in anticipation (as in all the people whose healing Jesus himself described as "salvation") or fully at the end (Rom. 8, Rev. 21–22.) The church exists to serve the kingdom-purposes of God; it's a cliché to say we are "saved to serve," but it's true.


Jesus' Resurrection launched the new creation. The Easter stories in the Gospels do not say, "He's risen; therefore we're going to heaven." They say, "He's risen; therefore God's new creation has begun (under his lordship); therefore we have a job to do!" That's why the disciples are then given the Spirit.

CH: *What are some practical implications of this?*

NTW: People sometimes say to me, "I'm overwhelmed—I see all the things that need doing in God's world, and I don't know where to start!" That's a good reaction. The answer is: (A) Prayer. Prayer itself models, exemplifies, and lives within the new creation, the coming together of heaven and earth—that's why it's hard work and why we are easily distracted. (B) Scripture. In the great story, Scripture tells of creation and new creation—the latter effected through covenant and new covenant—we are shaped for our tasks, attuned to the voice of God and, simultaneously, to the cries of pain in the world (think of the Psalms!) (C) Sacrament, especially the Lord's Supper. Mother Teresa spoke of meeting Jesus in the sacrament and then meeting him on the street. (D) Service, in whatever way we're called. Here being part of the body of Christ is vital: each local worshipping community will gain a sense, in its own locality, of where the pressure points are, what needs doing



(food banks? drug rehab? youth employment? hospice care?). We regularly find our vocations, part-time ones as well as full-time ones, by sharing with others who are committed to God's kingdom.

From Genesis 1 to Revelation 21, God's purposes are temple-shaped. The temple is where heaven and earth came together. That is why the first Christians saw Jesus himself as the true temple and why Paul sees the church itself as the temple, the place where the Spirit dwells. So images of the temple being destroyed and rebuilt come into play in terms of new creation. And at the moment, our life of prayer and worship is the genuine, Spirit-filled anticipation of that great day. 

N. T. Wright is research professor of New Testament and early Christianity at St. Mary's College in the University of St. Andrews and the author of over 80 books including Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church.

Recommended resources

LEARN MORE ABOUT THE LONG HISTORY OF CHRISTIAN REFLECTION ON HEAVEN AND PUT TODAY'S "HEAVEN HEADLINES" INTO CONTEXT WITH RESOURCES RECOMMENDED BY CH EDITORIAL STAFF AND THIS ISSUE'S CONTRIBUTORS

BOOKS

Without a doubt there are a lot of popular books about heaven. But there are quite a few readable and interesting scholarly ones too.

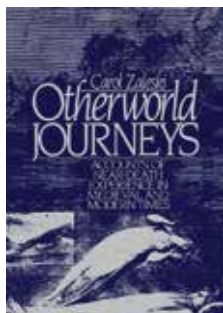


• Jeffrey Burton Russell's *A History of Heaven: The Singing Silence* discusses heaven in church doctrine, literature, and art from the early church to the fourteenth century, and his *Paradise Mislaidd: How We Lost Heaven—And How We Can Regain It* considers how views of heaven have evolved in the last 100 years. Colleen McDannell and Bernhard Lang take a similar survey approach in their *Heaven: A History*, as does Alister McGrath in *A Brief History of Heaven*. A somewhat older book on the topic, but still worth reading, is Ulrich Simon's *Heaven in the Christian Tradition*.



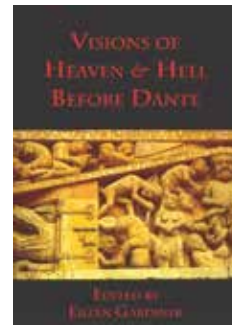
• Journalist Lisa Miller describes a number of views of heaven—including but not limited to Christian ones—in her *Heaven: Our Enduring Fascination with the Afterlife* and in the profusely illustrated *Time*-magazine-sponsored *Visions of Heaven*. (*Time* also did a brief web gallery of images of hell.)

John Casey's *After Lives: A Guide to Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory* serves as a "reader's guide to views of the afterlife across centuries, cultures and religions." J. Edward Wright's *The Early History of Heaven* discusses the cultural context of early Jewish and Christian ideas about heaven. And, given the modern popularity of stories of near-death experiences, Carol Zaleski's *Otherworld Journeys: Accounts of Near-Death Experience in Medieval and Modern Times* is well worth checking out.



• There are many books on heaven in specific eras of church history. Heaven in the early church is treated by Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Shape of Death: Life, Death, and Immortality in the Early Fathers*; in the Middle Ages by Piero Camporesi, *The Fear of Hell: Images of Damnation and Salvation in Early*

Modern Europe and Eileen Gardiner, *Visions of Heaven and Hell before Dante*; after the Reformation by Philip



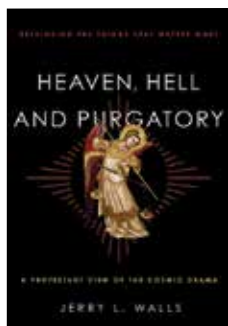
Almond, *Heaven and Hell in Enlightenment England* and Michael Wheeler, *Heaven, Hell, and the Victorians*; and in American religious history in two books called *Jonathan Edwards on Heaven and Hell* (one by John Gerstner and one by Owen Strachan and Doug Sweeney), Jonathan Butler, *Softly and Tenderly Jesus Is Calling: Heaven and Hell in American Revivalism, 1870–1920*, Rebecca Price Janney, *Who Goes There?: A Cultural History of Heaven and Hell*, and Gary Scott Smith, *Heaven in the American Imagination*. (For more see our *History of Hell* guide.)



• Heaven (and hell) as pictured in Christian art appear in many books, among them Robert Hughes's *Heaven and Hell in Western Art*; Rosa Giorgi's *Angels and Demons in Art*; Erika Langmuir's *Heaven in Art*; and Nancy Grubb's *Revelations: Art of the Apocalypse*.

• If heaven in poetry is your thing, excellent translations of the *Divine Comedy* are available: try the Penguin Classics translation by Dorothy L. Sayers and Barbara Reynolds, the Everyman's Library edition by Allen Mandelbaum, or the version by John Ciardi. "Pearl" appears in *The Complete Works of the Pearl Poet* (translated by Casey Finch), The Dover Thrift edition of *Paradise Lost* edited by John Himes is a good place to begin reading Milton's take on heaven and hell.





- And finally, the theological landscape of books on heaven is vast, but you might begin with several writers from this issue: N. T. Wright's *Surprised by Hope* and Jerry Walls's *Hell: The Logic of Damnation*; *Heaven: The Logic of Eternal Joy*; *Purgatory: The Logic of Total Transformation*; and *Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory—*

A Protestant View of the Cosmic Drama: Rethinking the Things that Matter Most. (The CH History of Hell guide also includes some more theologically oriented recommendations covering both heaven and hell.)



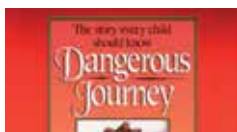
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- 61: *The End: A History of the Second Coming*
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WEBSITES

- A fairly straightforward rehearsal of Christian views of heaven and hell and the thinkers behind them can be found at the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, plato.stanford.edu/entries/heaven-hell. *Christianity Today* has a good roundup of popular articles on heaven (some are subscriber-only access): www.christianitytoday.com/ct/topics/h/heaven.



- At Hymnary.org, the great hymn research site containing over 5,000 texts and tunes from many Christian hymnals, you can access 1,200 hymns on heaven (as well as all sorts of other information, including the biographies of over 1,000 authors who wrote hymns on heaven). Go to www.hymnary.org/texts?qu=topics:heaven.



- A similar search at the Christian Classics Ethereal Library, www.ccel.org/search/fulltext/heaven, will lead you to countless primary sources discussing heaven—even *more* hymns, texts from the church fathers, biblical commentaries, devotional literature, and references to heaven in everything from Augustine's *Confessions* to Calvin's *Institutes*.

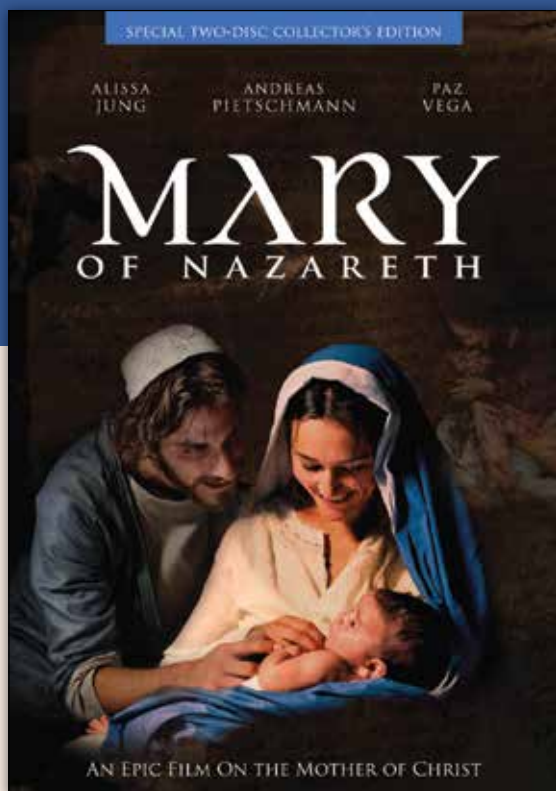


- You can find a good annotated copy of Milton's *Paradise Lost* with supplemental material at www.paradiselost.org and at www.dartmouth.edu/~milton/reading_room/; and everything you ever wanted to know about Dante's *Divine Comedy* at www.worldofdante.org. (A good prose translation of the Italian master's poem is at www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Italian/Danthome.htm). Finally the entire text of "Pearl" translated into modern English is at www.billstanton.co.uk/pearl/menu.php. ¶

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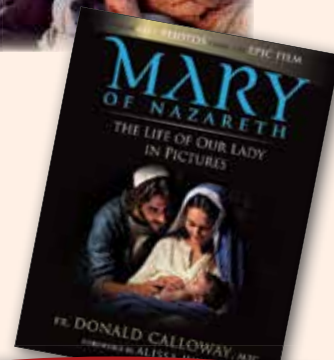
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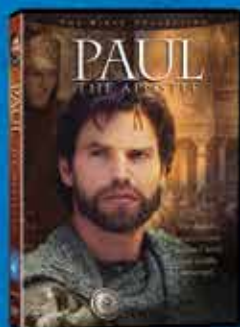
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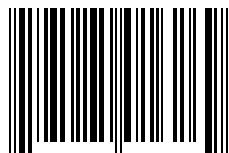


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