

What lies beyond?

Is there an afterlife?

Introduction

This is the question that every sane person asks: what happens when I die? Everyone wants to know this because so much is at stake, depending on the answer. Is there a hell, is there a heaven, how do people get into one or the other? Or is there just nothing but oblivion?

This paper seeks to analyse the options and lay them out for you.

Authority

However, first there has to be an authoritative source to make a foundation. Wishful thinking is useless. As a Christian that source must be the words of God himself giving us absolute answers. These words are found in the Bible.

Yet even if I were not a Christian, the Bible is the best logical source for truth for many reasons.

God's word

The Bible claims to be God's word. Over and over again the writers stated that 'this is the word of the Lord' or something similar.

Miraculous support

God authenticated his words over thousands of years by the support of miracles. The Books of Moses are proved to be of divine origin because Moses enacted multiple miraculous events by divine power: project managing the ten plagues upon Egypt which put the fear of God into all the nations of the Middle East for generations. He brought water out of a rock. He saw opponents burn in fire from heaven or be swallowed up by the earth. Prophets proved their words to be from God as multiple miracles confirmed their divine origin: these include, fire from heaven to devour false prophets, raising an iron axe-head out of water, resurrecting the dead, and so on. The apostles also confirmed their testimony with very many miracles of healing, prescience, and judgments. No other Scripture has been attested by continual miracles.

Fulfilled prophecies

There are hundreds of prophecies in the Bible and all the ones that can be fulfilled by this date have been fulfilled. Not one has failed. Prophets even named future kings who would assist God's people decades later, such as Isaiah naming Cyrus the later emperor that would release the Hebrews from Babylonia.

No other sacred book has so many accurate prophecies that never failed.

Withstanding attacks

The Bible has been assailed by every possible contender. It has been assaulted by atheists, religious adherents, magicians, politicians, lawyers, and many rascals. Every trick in the book has been used to try to undermine Bible statements: these include using medical

grounds, scientific grounds, historical grounds, archaeological grounds and moral grounds. Every trick failed.

In fact, after every attack faith in the Bible was strengthened as it proved to be resilient to all sorts of assaults. Time after time the slanders of scientists, archaeologists, historians and others proved to be wrong as discoveries proved the Bible to be right. For example, old atheistic archaeologists stated that the Bible was wrong to describe the Hittite Empire since no one had found relics of it. Years later multiple archaeological artefacts were discovered proving that this empire did indeed exist when and where the Bible stated it to be.

No other form of literature on earth has had the attacks that the Bible has had to endure – but it defeated every single onslaught.

The foundation of western culture and law

History shows that the effect of the Bible on nations was good. It helped to secure law and order, economic stability, prosperity and social development. Nation after nation across the world used the Bible to develop its own legal system to bring order to society.

Yet the Bible did not simply secure good laws but it undergirded every aspect of social life. It taught moral behaviour to families and how to raise children. It taught people to do good and not evil. It produced the Protestant work ethic whereby people worked hard in society in order to please God. The Bible inspired individuals to search out the natural order and so discover unknown things: like electromagnetic induction (Michael Faraday), the laws of physics (e.g. gravity and mechanics – Isaac Newton), the laws of chemistry (Robert Boyle) and so on. Most of the famous discoverers and scientific pioneers were Christians, or at least theists.

We could go on but this is enough. The source of authority for this paper is the Bible.

So what are the options?

Non religious options regarding the afterlife

Atheism

This is probably the saddest position of all, and yet the most common.

The atheist does not believe in a personal god of any sort. Creation originated by chance in a Big Bang and life evolved from a chemical soup under random circumstances. Proteins and amino acids magically formed into DNA; DNA into single-celled animals; these evolved into fish; fish evolved into amphibians, amphibians into reptiles; reptiles into birds or mammals, and man descended from apes. There is no known scientific mechanism (including mutation) for any of this¹ and every stage is impossible since the animal would die before becoming something else (e.g. going from breathing water to breathing in air).

Thus there is no foundation for ethical behaviour. Man is a chance creation with no moral basis other than survival. Anything goes.

At the end of life man just physically dissolves and that is the end, there is no soul and no judgment.

¹ No animal can add information to its genome, which is what is necessary.

This nihilistic view just engenders hopelessness. It means that there is no accountability for the many injustices experienced during life; no balance of justice. It also means that there is no penalty for bad behaviour. In the end it is just bleakness. There is no meaning in life at all.

Many atheistic profound thinkers eventually killed themselves saying, 'What is the point?'. They were right! Under atheism there is no point in life.

Nihilism

This is the rejection of any authority or moral principles as exercised by the church, the state, or the family. It was based on anti-conservative ideas that prevailed in the late-19th century, particularly in Russia. While the political nihilists were destroyed in Russia, the seminal ideas lived on in literature and philosophy. The foundation of this movement was the idea that life is meaningless and that nothing in the world has any real existence.

Oddly Nihilists believed that violence was justified in order to fight oppression and ignorance and secure freedom. So, although they had, by definition, nothing to fight for, they still fought the status quo.

This is atheism on steroids. Not only is there no God but there is nothing at all; no purpose, no meaningful existence.

Agnosticism

We cannot discuss the agnostic's view of the afterlife since he has none. He knows nothing about which religion is viable or whether there is a God or not. It is wilful ignorance.

This is basically a hopeless position based on hoping in the chance that all will be well and ignoring trying to find out. It is doomed.

Existentialism

We cannot discuss the afterlife here also since there are various positions held among the chief expositors. Some, such as Kierkegaard, were religious or even supposedly Christian, while others were atheists (Nietzsche). Therefore a very few believed in a heaven while many did not.

Since existentialism focuses on man and man's powers (especially in Nietzsche) there is no focus upon God and no desire for heaven. Therefore heaven is not a feature of this philosophy and most existentialists couldn't care less about any afterlife, which they denied.

Pantheism

This is the philosophy that identifies God with the universe, or claims that the universe is a full manifestation of God. It is taken up by various sects and many mystics as the basis of their religion but it is also accepted academically by certain philosophers.

This disregards revealed religion (i.e. the Bible) or the testimony of Christians. It also contradicts other world religions, though it is absorbed by certain religions (e.g. New Age or Hinduism).

Since God is not a personal being, just a force within nature, then there is no accountability for evil and no afterlife. This theory offers no hope for the future.

Postmodernism

This complicated, ill-defined, cultural movement embracing the arts, architecture, philosophy and media since the 1950s, was a reaction to the Post-Industrial Society and Globalisation. We can ignore its impact on the arts here but can consider its termination of both 'grand narratives' and rational explanations on religion; as well as its revolt against order and systems.

It leads to uncertainty, irrationality, scepticism, eclecticism, mysticism, narcissism, self-centredness, and distrust of dogmatic theology. It produced Feminist-Christianity, Gay-Christianity, the Emergent Church, and all forms of superficiality.

In its religious impact it promoted situation ethics instead of God's law, personal truth instead of absolute truth, confused communal consensus agreement instead of leadership and uncertainty about doctrine and practice. As a result it turned into a modern form of liberalism which denied miracles and supernaturalism. As such, many influenced by it denied that hell existed and embraced conditional immortality² (annihilationism).

In short, Postmodernism offers you no hope for a future afterlife.

Religious options regarding the afterlife

Hinduism

Hinduism is very complex since there are many variations within its broad sphere, many teaching contradictory things. However, there is rough agreement on the final afterlife.

There is an afterlife but there is no heaven and no personal existence. The final end is absorption into the universal principle or world soul and release from reincarnation; an unconscious, amorphous lack of existence.

But even to get to this wretched state man has to progress through multiple reincarnations over centuries, reliving existence to get better. Man is trapped in this world undergoing many reincarnations due to the law of Karma (cause and effect) until he eventually escapes and is joined to the impersonal world soul, rising through the caste system. There is no final judgment, only endless reincarnation.

A more wretched system of life and a poorer hope for afterwards cannot be imagined.

Buddhism

The end of life, after many reincarnations, is Nirvana, bliss, emptiness, removal of will and personality where the human life is transformed into spiritual consciousness and independent reality (enlightenment, becoming a buddha). Buddha never explained what Nirvana was after death. In reality this is really a similar state to Hinduism, which Buddha developed.

There is no final judgment but only constant reincarnation, as in Hinduism.

Another hopeless prospect.

² Immortality is conditional upon believing in Jesus for salvation. Thus Christians gain eternal life but non-Christians just evaporate at death.

Islam

Islam is the opposite to Hinduism and Buddhism where the goal is a sort of emerging with the universal soul. In Islam heaven is very materialistic and hedonistic.

For good Muslims, heaven is the sensual pleasures of the Garden of Paradise (*Jannah*). Paradise is a fabulous place of stones being pearls and gems, walls of gold and silver, trees of gold, trees laden with multiple fruit varieties and various tastes, and rivers flowing with water, milk, wine, honey; and so forth. Most notable are beautiful girls with large black eyes, free from all impurity and living in pavilions of large pearls.

Paradise (*Jannah*) is therefore a physical place of sensual pleasure (but not for women). There are many levels of Paradise depending on how righteous a person is on Earth. Muslims that pursue jihad successfully are promised many virgins and earthly pleasures.

The basis of judgment is the balance of good versus evil works performed in this life. Islam is thus a meritorious salvation. However, for Muhammad doing good included: killing non-Muslims, raping women, having multiple wives, enslaving women and children, killing the occupants of raided cities, beheading those who do not submit to Allah, conquering the whole world and so on.

There is a hell which is divided into seven storeys one below another, for different classes of the wicked – i.e. non-Muslims.

A materialistic, pleasurable heaven is enticing but its provenance is very weak. It relies on the testimony of an illiterate, self-proclaimed prophet who mangled together ideas from Christianity, Judaism and Zoroastrianism centred upon worship of an Arabic pagan moon god.

There is no proof supporting the Qur'an from fulfilled prophecies, miracles or healings. Indeed, the Qur'an itself was never written down by Muhammad and there have been multiple versions that contradict each other. In fact, the Qur'an contradicts itself on many occasions and the doctrine of abrogation had to be invented to explain this.

Furthermore, such a violent religion that slaughtered over 700 million people in 1400 years and enslaved millions more (including women and children as sex-slaves) has no ethical grounds for support by any rational person.

Taoism /Daoism

There is no god in this religion which is based upon inactivity. The ultimate reality is the Dao, in which being and non-being, life and death, are merely aspects of the same reality. The Dao, as the origin of all creation and life force, is unknowable in its essence but observable in its manifestations.

Life is then based upon inaction ('Wu-Wei'), or detachment. One must get in tune with ultimate reality; the goal is to become one with the Dao force, the balance of opposites (yin and yang). Yin and yang stem from *T'ai Chi* (the 'absolutely transcendent'), the ultimate source and limit of reality.

After death the aim is to be an important ancestor in heaven; immortality not nirvana. Thus heaven is not really described other than having ancestral authority and respect.

There is a hell, as a sort of purgatory, with nine stages of punishments each governed by a demon king. Prayers can help people escape this judgment.

Taoism is confusing, as it is very eastern in concepts that seem illogical to westerners. The goal is inaction and detachment, which would include not doing the right thing in exceptional circumstances – which is wickedness by omission. Yet the wicked go to purgatory.

The concept of yin and yang avoid the reality of sin. Sin is just the opposite of good and these must be balanced not obviated.

Yet there is a high ethical standard; people must follow the way of humility and piety and control their senses. Self-knowledge and wisdom are important. Taoism teaches non-violence, moderation, humility, compassion, contentment with one's lot, peace and respect for the world.

Yet there is a denial of morality (unlearn what we know); everything is balanced out (yin / yang).

So heaven is very poorly described and seems to be very limited while getting there is not based on morality but detachment.

Judaism

We must first explain that Biblical Judaism, i.e. that adheres to the OT, is not mainline Judaism at all. There is a minority of Jews that use the Books of Moses and the prophets as their fundamental authority. These are called Torah Jews, though some ultra-orthodox Jews also follow this.

The dominant, modern form of Judaism is Talmudic Judaism. This has the basis of authority founded in the Babylonian Talmud (and for many also the Kabbalah). The Talmud is the work of the Pharisees forming a new religion after the destruction of the Jerusalem temple. Jewish encyclopaedias affirm that it is the Talmud that forms the essential authority for modern Jews. In fact the Halakha (Jewish sacred law) is based upon rabbinic sayings founded in the Talmud. The doctrines formed from the Talmud basically teach the very opposite of the Laws of Moses. The Talmud also blasphemes Christ and advocates killing Christians. It is the most anti-Christian sacred text in the world.

Talmudic and Kabbalah Judaism teaches that Jews are to rule the world and enslave Gentiles to do their bidding. Thus the final state of Judaism is not heaven but the world as it is today ruled by Jews. Thus Jews become a corporate messiah ruling the world whereby they become gods.

The Talmud centres upon fleshly pleasures and satisfaction rather than heavenly hope. Sex is frequently commented on and is seen as vitally important; indeed the rabbis forbid virginity.

So heaven, though mentioned by the Talmud, is really focused upon a future earthly, sensual realm of pleasure and ruling the world.

So, similar to Islam, Talmudic Judaism centres hope on a coming Jewish global empire subjecting all other races and exterminating many to ensure sufficient food production. It is a place of sensual, earthly pleasure and sex in particular.

Animism

Strangely there are still many animists in the world today.

Animism is the most basic of religions and is founded on fear. It developed in insecure, vulnerable Stone Age tribes-people and continued when they became more civilised (such as Native American Indians or Japanese).

It is founded upon the supposition that all natural things (plants, stones, animals, and weather phenomena) are inhabited by spirits of various sorts. Some are good and helpful to men while some are evil and destroy men. Animist societies then produce a shaman (witch-doctor) to deal with this phenomenon. These shamans claim to be able to ward off evil spirits or to enlist the aid of a healing spirit, change the weather or use divination.

Some animist societies believe in an afterlife but they have very sketchy ideas about it. Many believe that after death people become ghosts wandering the earth or a spirit being. Some indulge in ancestor worship.

This is the most primitive form of religion and is based on superstitions. It offers no clear hope regarding the future.

The Christian position

Only Christianity teaches a comprehensive and cogent account of the afterlife.

Judgment

First, it affirms that there is a Day of Judgment when every person will have to give an account of their lives to God and be judged accordingly (Acts 17:31; Rm 2:5; 2 Tim 4:1; Heb 9:27; Jude 1:14-15). Those who do good to rewards and those who do evil to condemnation.³ Every secret and hidden sin will be brought to light (Eccles 12:14; Matt 12:36).

This ensures justice in life for everyone; no evildoer will escape punishment by dying. Any system that has no justice for all the wickedness done in this life is not worth consideration. It is morally repugnant.

Punishment

Secondly, there is a fitting punishment for evildoers that is exceedingly serious to contemplate. Since sinners have offended an infinite God and performed multiple iniquities throughout life, the judgment will result in eternal condemnation and separation from God and all good in hell.

This is not just an example of divine justice but is also a deterrent for people on earth. Everyone should fear hell and seek God and do good.

Atheists and others comfort themselves in thinking that annihilation awaits them at death but this is not the case. There is a reaction to every act of evil. Even other religions agree on this principle of cause and effect (e.g. Hinduism). Humans cannot do evil things and get away with it; they will be fairly recompensed.

³ Rm 2:5-9, 'in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, who "will render to each one according to his deeds": eternal life to those who by patient continuance in doing good seek for glory, honour, and immortality; but to those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness -- indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish, on every soul of man who does evil'.

Rewards

Thirdly, even though the salvation of people is from God and is not the work of men (salvation is by grace and not merit) nevertheless God in his wisdom gives rewards to those that have served him well. These rewards have to do with positions of responsibility in God's eternal service.

The current afterlife

Fourthly, there are two stages to the afterlife. Stage one is the current afterlife and stage two is the afterlife after the end of the world.

Human history ends with the return of Jesus Christ in glory and honour. That is when the purposes of God are consummated. However before that time what happens to people who die?

Christians who die now, before the coming of the Lord, go to heaven, the dwelling place of God, and sit with Christ awaiting the end (2 Cor 5:8; Phil 1:23; Rev 14:13). This is a dimension outside of time and space, a spiritual dimension, that cannot be perceived by human beings.

Before the cross of Christ, God's people that died went to Hades but to a special area of bliss called 'Abraham's Bosom' (Lk 16:22); i.e. the place of fellowship with Abraham and the rest of the elect. After the cross the redemption of Christ secured release of these people and Jesus personally took them into heaven to be with God (Eph 4:8).

Sinners (non-Christians) who die today go to the holding place called Hades. This is the abode of the dead and those in this place are in torment awaiting their fate (Lk 16:19-31). After the return of Christ all sinners are raised up for judgment (Jn 5:28-29). The first death is no escape; sinners are resurrected in an eternal body to face an eternal judgment.

Final things

After the return of Christ in glory to the earth (1 Thess 4:16), the collection of God's people in the sky (1 Thess 4:17) and the Final Judgment of all people, there is the restoration of all things (Acts 3:21).

This is the restoration and rejuvenation of the world. When Christ returns, Christians will be caught up with Christ, the earth will be burned up (2 Pt 3:7, 10) and everyone on it killed. These are then raised to face judgment. After these things God fully restores the world to its place of pristine beauty and glory, just as it was at creation in the Garden of Eden (Rev 21:1, 5).

Sinners are sent to hell after the judgment but saints (the elect) are sent to the new earth where heaven and earth now meet. God dwells with men and Jesus is the centre of the glory. All saints dwell with God serving his purpose (Rev 21:3). There is no death, no pain, no unhappiness, no suffering, but joy in Christ (Rev 21:4).

Thus Christians fellowship with God through Christ on the renewed earth for all eternity in bliss.

Questions

Is there any reincarnation?

No! 'It is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment' (Heb 9:27). Men only die once regarding this present life.⁴

Who will be saved?

Only those who genuinely believe in Christ as Lord and Saviour. 'Most assuredly, I [Jesus] say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life' (Jn 5:24). 'You who believe in the name of the Son of God ... you have eternal life' (1 Jn 5:13).

No one can do spiritual good unless he is in Christ. 'There is none righteous, no, not one; there is none who understands; there is none who seeks after God. They have all turned aside; they have together become unprofitable; there is none who does good, no, not one' (Rm 3:10-12). 'What is man, that he could be pure? And he who is born of a woman, that he could be righteous?' (Job 15:14). 'How then can man be righteous before God? Or how can he be pure who is born of a woman?' (Job 25:4).

Is it true that there are many roads to heaven?

No! This is false. There is only one Saviour – the Lord Jesus Christ. 'There is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus' (1 Tim 2:5). 'He is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him' (Heb 7:25). 'As many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name' (Jn 1:12). 'Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved' (Acts 4:12).

Is God a person or a force?

God is a personal being that subsists in three Persons united in one Godhead. These three Persons are: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. All are equally God but all have their own personality.

God is shown to have attributes like human attributes (emotions, will, mind). Jesus is shown to be a genuine man and not some spirit masquerading as a man. To prove this would take hundreds of proof texts to demonstrate that each member of the Godhead thinks, feels, acts, chooses etc. which is beyond the scope of this paper. Just a few examples: 'Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God' (Acts 4:30). 'I abhor them' (Lev 20:23). 'Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross' (Heb 12:2). 'The LORD has sought for Himself a man after His own heart' (1 Sam 13:14).

God is not a force, an unknown entity, a faceless world soul or a universal principle.

Is hell merely annihilation?

Some have suggested this occasionally but the clear Biblical position has been held by Christian churches for thousands of years that it is not annihilation but eternal

⁴ The Bible talks about the second death which is a reference to hell (spiritual death), which occurs after physical death.

punishment. This is required by offences to an infinite God and also for punishments to fit the crimes (e.g. a person committing millions of murders that warrants millions of life sentences). Therefore there are degrees of punishment in hell.

Those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power. 2 Thess 1:8-9.

He himself shall also drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is poured out full strength into the cup of His indignation. He shall be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment ascends forever and ever. Rev 14:10-11

Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels. Matt 25:31

These will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life. Matt 25:46

Hell ... the fire that shall never be quenched -- where 'Their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched'. Mk 9:43-44

These are wells without water, clouds carried by a tempest, for whom is reserved the blackness of darkness forever. 2 Pt 2:17

For whom is reserved the blackness of darkness forever. Jude 1:13

Why is the Biblical version of heaven better than the Qur'an's position?

It is a question of authority. I have shown the authority of the Bible.

The Qur'an was written by Muhammad who was an illiterate slave-trader and merchant who developed a new religion based upon Allah, an Arabic pagan moon god. He did this based upon what he had learned about other religions while travelling in caravans to various places. He was chiefly influenced by Christianity, Judaism and Zoroastrianism, mingled with Arabic paganism. He was a violent, brutal man who encouraged killing and raping captives. He once killed 700 Jews in front of his child-wife in one day. He married his wife Ayesha when she was six and consummated the marriage when she was nine, but had many other wives.

The religion he created was regressive, misogynistic, brutal and savage. It teaches that everyone who does not submit to Allah must be killed or enslaved; most men and the elderly are killed, most women and children are enslaved. Throughout 1400 years the invasions of the Muslims killed over 700 million people and enslaved more. It continues to kill and enslave to this day.

The teaching in the Qur'an is contradictory, which has to be explained away by religious teachers, and includes the idea of *Naskh* (abrogation) which claims that verses from the Qur'an have been lost and others abrogated by later verses (later verses correct earlier verses). After Muhammad's death various editions were collated by Caliphs since he had not left a finalised written version (being illiterate). These versions contradicted each other.

Islam also fragmented into multiple sects after Muhammad's death which not only contradict each other but also kill each other.

So, Islam has no logical authority. If you say the Qur'an, which Qur'an? None of the printed editions are exactly what Muhammad taught. In fact the Qur'an does not even explain all Islamic teaching and the Hadith is required to discover what others think Muhammad would have taught.

So Islamic teaching on heaven has very little to rest upon. Furthermore, the Muslim heaven goes against the human conscience. How can it be right that the more a Muslim kills innocent non-Muslims (including women and children) the more he will gain in heaven.

No sane person can think that this is acceptable.

What is the ground of hope for eternal life?

Since no one can be sure about the afterlife, since the dead do not communicate with the living, how can we be certain about it?

There are two chief reasons and many lesser reasons.

The first is that Christ has testified to the reality of eternal life and described it. He proved that he was telling the truth by being raised from the dead – the only religious leader to be resurrected. By being raised he demonstrated that he really was the Son of God and that all he promised was true.

The second is that God, throughout his word, testifies to the truth of an afterlife. Christians know from personal experience that God's word is true and there is no reason to disbelieve it. In fact, God is the God of the living and not the dead and his saints in history based their lives on the hope set before them that they had eternal life.

Furthermore we know that God does not lie. Therefore if God promised eternal life in Christ, there is eternal life in Christ. 'It is impossible for God to lie, we might have strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold of the hope set before us' (Heb 6:18).

Conclusion

The hope of eternal life and a settling of all accounts by God as Judge, is a key foundation of the Christian life. This hope penetrates through the veil of death and reaches heaven giving us fortitude. The hope acts like an anchor to the soul, enabling it to continue to trust amidst great afflictions.

Lay hold of the hope set before *us*. This *hope* we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast, and which enters the Presence *behind* the veil, where the forerunner has entered for us, *even* Jesus. Heb 6:18-20

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