

An examination of Americans' search for the purpose of the universe and its life, some of the odd ways they have tried, why the search is doomed to failure, and why that is not a problem.

The Purpose of Life

**Buy The Complete Version of This Book at
Booklocker.com:**

<http://www.booklocker.com/p/books/4622.html?s=pdf>

The Purpose of Life

AN
AMERICAN CONCEIT



WHY SEEKING THE PURPOSE OF LIFE
IS A WILD GOOSE CHASE

William M. Hastings, Ph.D.

Copyright © 2010 William M. Hastings, Ph.D.

ISBN 978-1-60910-103-9

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the author.

Printed in the United States of America.

BookLocker.com, Inc.
2010

CONTENTS

Preface	vii
Introduction	1
Chapter 1 PERSONS AND PURPOSES	11
Chapter 2 PHILOSOPHY	55
Chapter 3 SCIENCE.....	91
Chapter 4 SPIRITUALITY	125
Chapter 5 RELIGION.....	163
Chapter 6 CHRISTIANITY.....	201
Chapter 7 THE SPECIAL CASE OF AMERICA	269
Chapter 8 MORALITY AND MORTALITY	315
Chapter 9 CONCLUDING UNSCIENTIFIC POSTSCRIPT	355
Notes.....	361
Index.....	387

Introduction

Babe, you're just a wave,

You're not the water

—B. Hancock

Imagine a society where it is the norm to be tattooed. Never mind what strange concatenation of events brought the people to this belief. Faith in tattoos is generally held throughout this society although there are some who openly scoff at the idea. In itself the issue of tattoos could be a relatively harmless belief. But unfortunately, this society endures constant bickering between the majority of tattoo fanciers and the scoffers. Furthermore, there is also considerable squabbling among the different pro-tattoo factions. There are some who feel a modest tattoo on the arm would be proper while others insist that to be truly tattooed you must sport a big one. And then there are those that avow the leg is the most appropriate site for displaying your tattoo. To make matters worse, some have been caught using a phony tattoo. They put a fake one on the arm

when with the arm crowd and switch it to the leg when hobnobbing with the leggers. Meanwhile, the scoffers have been heard to declare that, if the truth be known, most people are faking their tattoos but refuse to admit it. The true tattoo believers have replied by inserting “with our tattoos” in the society’s national anthem and stamping “In Tattoos We Trust,” on the coinage.

America is very similar to this society except the belief is not about tattoos but about the purpose of the universe and its life forms. This could be a harmless issue but in America it has stirred up all sorts of mischief. In a different society, adherence to some belief about a purpose to the universe would be treated like allegiance to a sport team or a theory of art appreciation. It might be interesting to discuss over dinner, but mature people would not get agitated over it. Unfortunately, in America today the purpose of the universe is mixed up with a constellation of attitudes and expectations about the world, religion, and morality. This confusion has brought much agitation.

One of the themes of this book is that we should separate out thoughts about the purpose of the universe from other opinions about personal responsibility and religion. Once we disconnect them, the question of the purpose of the universe and its life can be recognized as not worth getting excited about. For all practical matters, whether you think you have found a purpose to the universe or not is of little significance. It is only thought to be important because we have been tricked into bundling up a large collection of distinct beliefs and treating them all of one piece. In fact, historical and anthropological research shows numerous bundles of beliefs are possible. Even God should not be confused with any particular belief about the purpose of the universe. There could be a God who created

the universe unconsciously and has no idea what it is for. Or a committee of gods might have fashioned the universe to serve a purpose clear to them but impossible for us humans to fathom. Maybe the purpose of the universe keeps changing depending on which god has grabbed the remote control. And there is my personal favorite that the universe is not the result of any purpose. The universe did not arise from a purpose, but purposes have arisen out of the universe. The only purposes in the universe are the purposes each of us develops for our lives. And that is sufficient.

Of course, many people think the purpose of the universe has to be taken seriously because they think they are it, and they take themselves seriously indeed. They hold the whole cosmos was made for them. As a result, when scoffers say they see no purpose to the universe, the believers feel personally insulted as if they were kings and some unruly mob had taken away their throne. In defense of their royal dignity they insist that the universe and its life forms were made by a Creator either for their pleasure or for their testing or for both. They further insist that they happen to know this Creator quite well. If his purpose is not appropriately acknowledged, the Creator will be offended, and you do not want to see the Creator offended. That can get ugly.

The issue where the purpose supporters and their opponents have clashed most heatedly is the controversy over creationism versus evolution. And the arena of their combat has been the American public school. This is most unfortunate because the courtroom and the school board meeting are poorly arranged to yield wisdom and insight. Rather than furthering understanding, the courts are structured to produce winners and losers which makes the conflict all the more intense. The debate over creationism versus evolution must be considered when discussing the

broader issue of the purpose of life. But that dispute is much too narrow and politicized to serve as a proxy for the larger topic. The issue is what life is all about in the broadest sense, not just what should be taught about living things in biology class in tax-supported schools.

As often happens in such squabbles, those who advance their conception of the purpose of life and the universe employ a slippery slope or domino-effect argument. It goes something like this: People must hold there is a purpose to the universe and its life or they will not believe in God. Those who do not believe in God will not believe in heaven and hell. Those who do not believe in heaven and hell will have no reason to be moral. Without a reason to be moral, life will be dominated by selfishness, cruelty, and greed. Therefore, we must insist on a divine purpose to the universe. Otherwise, America will be plagued with crime, poverty, and vice. The purpose proponents admit that with Christians firmly in control of America, we already have plenty of crime, poverty, and vice. But rejecting their purpose to the universe, they assure us, can only make it worse. In the chapters to come I will show why this argument is fallacious. There is no slippery slope. God, hell, and the rest of the dominoes are positioned far apart. When one falls, the others do not feel as much as a quiver.

Not only can we remove the issue from politics and education, but as we will see, the matter of the purpose of life is not even important to religion. Most of the world's belief systems have little to say about whether there is an intelligent design behind the frogs, ferns, or fleas. Most people around the world do not choose their religion on the basis of its origin myth about the universe. It is only an odd sort of belief system that does that. However, many Americans claim they subscribe to that odd

belief system. Nor do dogmas about the purpose of the universe and its life have an intimate connection with any particular moral code. One can be a saint and believe in a purpose to the universe. One can be a thug and a cutthroat and hold to a very similar purpose. We recall that Saint Francis of Assisi and the Grand Inquisitor belonged to the same religion, honored the same Bible, and worshipped the same deity.

One of the most unfortunate aspects of the way the debate about the purpose of life has developed in America is that it has gotten muddled up with personal responsibility. The notion that the universe, in general, and humans in particular were intelligently designed by a Creator for his purpose has become erroneously identified with the purposes of individual lives such as your own. There may be no purpose to the universe, but there clearly is purpose in the universe, the purpose humans create for their lives. Although the evidence indicates that all animals are the result of an unintended evolutionary process, humans are a different kind of animal from kangaroos or centipedes. In the case of humans, evolution has produced self-conscious beings with language, culture, and remarkable symbolic dexterity. We humans can anticipate the future and try to guide our lives accordingly. Your personal actions, therefore, may well have a purpose—the purpose you sustain for them. The overarching purpose of your life as a stream of action and experience is up to you. Whether all of life, including you and the kangaroo, has been created with a purpose by a Creator is a quite different issue. You may have been told that you cannot find a purpose in your life unless you accept the Creator's purpose for you and the rest of the universe. Without that acceptance you will be a mere leaf blown in the wind.

In fact, the exact opposite is true. You will be much more likely to find an admirable purpose for your own life once you stop worrying about the universe. The conviction that you must know the purpose of the universe in order to know your own purpose substitutes a hard problem, probably an impossible one, for a simple one. It is a lot easier to find a satisfying purpose for your own life than to explain the existence of the whole universe. Does an honorable mother with a sick child really need to know the purpose of, say, turtles to know what she should be doing?

You are more likely to be successful in finding a guiding purpose to your life, to choose your path responsibly in the world, when you are not distracted by trying to discover some overarching plan for every star and bird. We are blessed with an abundance of religious sects with conflicting explanations for what life is all about and what you should be doing. It would be best for you to decide the purpose to bring to your life without handing your decision over to any of these sects. Even if your intelligence is the result of blind evolutionary processes, it is still too precious to waste on those who demand absolute allegiance on faith alone.

The churches popular in America today maintain some form of the belief that we humans are the purpose of the universe. To make their claims even more bizarre, they declare that the universe was perfectly designed by a supreme intelligence just for folks like you. All the plants and animals exist for folks such as you. Even all the stars were made with you in mind. This belief got started when people knew of only one star, our sun. Nowadays, we know the universe is a lot bigger than that. It has been estimated that the universe contains 50 trillion (50,000,000,000,000) stars for every person on earth. This is an awfully big universe if it is

The alternative perspective that many scientists have adopted is that the feeling that we are the center of things is a simple illusion of perspective bolstered by egotism and abetted by religious organizations. Ask children to draw a map of the world, and they usually put their home in the center. Before astronomy informed us about the immensity of the universe, it was perfectly natural for people to feel they were at the center. The Aztecs felt they were at the center of things, the Australian aborigines felt they were at the center of things, and the Jews felt they were at the center of things. The stories they told about where the world came from reflected this prideful illusion.

The problem is some people did not just say, “This is my story, and it feels right to me.” They claimed their story was much more important than that. It came from a powerful supernatural source. It must be revered because it came from the Creator himself and revealed his great plan for the universe. Once they said that, they were stuck; they had pontificated themselves into a theological corner. When the data came in showing the vast sweep of the universe and how insignificant we humans are, they might have said, “Whoops!” But to say “Whoops!” would imply that what we were told about God was really something somebody made up. Folks would feel inconsequential and suspect their leaders of being impostors. This was a scary prospect for their leaders. It also was troublesome because the stories about God and how we are the center of his universe were wrapped up in beliefs about morality. They told their children stories about creation and gave them moral guidance in the same breath. Extirpating beliefs about God without simultaneously cutting out

the moral code was like a surgeon trying to remove a brain tumor without harming the functional parts of the brain. Often enough, those who claimed we are the purpose of the universe left the tumor alone.

This is especially a problem for those Western religions that came out of the Middle East: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. They are known as the Semitic monotheisms or the Abrahamic religions, the ones that trace their roots back to Abraham, a mythic Semitic rascal. Most peoples around the world have thought of themselves as being at the center of things, but they have not been overly worried about passing any cosmic test proctored by some supreme Creator. That is more of a Western problem. Other people wake up in the morning, feel a full bladder, and go to the place considered appropriate for urination. They feel hungry and eat something considered proper food. They hear their children stirring and tend to them. They manage to accomplish all this without worrying about what it has to do with the stars or the birds. They probably have stories about the stars and the birds that they share of an evening around the fire. But they can take care of the daily chores, pastimes, and pleasures without worrying about the connections of their ordinary lives with any grand purpose or cosmic examination. The world is filled with children who are well fed even though their parents never thought the Andromeda nebula was created by an intelligent designer with them in mind.

Many Christians have trouble accepting this notion that their purpose can be found from within rather than being imposed from on high as an integral part of a grand design to the whole universe. They find it impertinent to suggest that something as grand as the purpose of the universe and all its life is comparable to something as trivial as tattooing. But remember one man's faith is another man's foolishness. No honorable

Moslem man would feel worthy unless he removed the flap of skin, the foreskin, with which Mother Nature embellished his penis. Among the Maori of New Zealand, no adult male of social prominence would be without his moko tattoos. Orthodox Jewish men would not feel decent without a skull cap or yarmulke. The natives of Cambodia are adorned with yantra tattoos by Buddhist priests to help ward off evil spirits. Devote Mormon men would never leave home without their proper spiritual underwear. Each of these cultures has a story about the supernatural forces that govern the world and how to placate them. Each attempts to connect its rituals and beliefs to these forces. What is trivial to one culture can be a forceful expression of the holy to another. We have tremendous flexibility in what we hold sacred.

This book is not a science text. It is an introductory-level work of social science—the social science concerning claims about the purpose of the universe and its life. Necessarily, it must deal with the issue of creationism versus evolution. The main topic, however, is whether the universe, its life, and in particular, its human life, were created by someone for something. In the chapters to come we will consider why Western religions seem preoccupied with finding a purpose to the universe and all its life and why it is a foolish quest. We will explore the various routes that have been tried, especially in America, to find a plausible purpose to it all and see why they have failed. The next chapter is an overview of some of the issues to be faced if the universe is seen as a device planned by a Creator for either our pleasure or our testing. It investigates why we may be tempted to construe the world as created by a person for a purpose and why we should avoid the temptation. After this introduction, we then go on

to consider a number of the social structures or ways of knowing related to the purpose of life. I hope to show that each in its own way fails to find the purpose sought. I also hope to show that this is not really a serious problem. The universe is doing just fine without any purpose. Along the way you may discover some interesting aspects of the matter of purpose, yours or the universe's.

Chapter 8

MORALITY AND MORTALITY

We are here on earth to do good to others.

What the others are here for, I don't know.

— W. H. Auden

We're all in this alone.

—Lily Tomlin

Most cultures seem to get along fine knowing there is no purpose to the universe and the diverse life it contains. While they may believe in sundry spirits, they can let go of faith in an eternal intelligent designer for it all. And if life is joyful and exciting, it is not the deliberate intention of the designer. It is a kind of unintended windfall from a vast evolutionary process. One reassuring feature of this insight is that you are not

responsible for the whirling galaxies, and if the whole universe comes crashing down someday, it will not be your fault. Whether the world ends in fire or in ice, it will be from the working out of the impersonal laws of nature and not from the vengeance of some cosmic lord angry over irregularities in your sex life.

Living in a purposeless universe does not eliminate purpose in our own lives; it removes it from the stars and places it where it belongs—on us. It is only our human action we are responsible for, but this is surely enough to keep us occupied. The purpose we advance in the universe will be a human purpose on a human scale.

Nonetheless, some people, especially Americans, feel a void when thinking about living in a universe which only holds the purpose we bring to it. Looking up at the stars makes these people feel lonely, incomplete, or empty. They would almost prefer the sky to be populated with angry gods than to be filled with cold indifference. Such feelings reveal quite a lot of hubris (How dare the universe not exist for me!). Nonetheless their distress is real. Let us attempt to assuage that distress a bit.

I think there are two areas that most often cause anxiety for those who feel lost in an indifferent universe. They are morality and mortality. We have already touched upon them in previous chapters. It might help to revisit them and perhaps tie up some loose ends. We cannot relieve all the disquiet about morality and death. But we can consider a few of the issues as they relate to the purpose of the universe, especially the claims made by Western religion.

Morality

We first encountered morality when we considered the limits of science in Chapter 3. We observed that morality is a system of beliefs and feelings about what we ought to do. Science cannot provide a guide to what we ought to do because it can tell us only what is, not what ought to be. We noted the hypothesis of separate magisteriums, which contends that both science and religion are fine activities, but they deal with essentially separate worlds. Therefore, they cannot conflict. This notion was considered unsatisfactory because sooner or later you have to decide, for example, whether people can or cannot walk on water or rise from the dead. There are not two separate but equally valid answers depending on what course you are taking in college or what book you are reading at the moment. Once morality is separate from the world of facts, there is no restriction on what religionists can claim you ought to do. As a result, religion will always profess it can trump science because science is merely facts, and religion possesses ultimate moral imperatives.

A common moral position popular with both philosophers and scientists, monotheists as well as atheists, is utilitarianism, which says we should act so as to bring the greatest good to the greatest number of people. With a little reinterpretation, utilitarianism is similar to the golden rule, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” This is popular among ordinary citizens as well. Some version of the golden rule is a cultural universal and found in all the major religions. Nonetheless, popularity does not provide a solid foundation for a moral code. “We don’t like what you are doing” is not likely to be a persuasive argument for a selfish miscreant bent on breaking the golden rule.

Have we found a more persuasive argument for unselfishness? Biologist Richard Dawkins, perhaps the most articulate of the popular contemporary atheists, has argued that moral systems seem to follow the *Zeitgeist*, the spirit of the times.¹ Evolution has given us a foundation for moral sentiments, but history has to fill in the details. This is why slavery, the killing of prisoners of war, the subjugation of women, and other odious practices were tolerated in the past by many cultures including the Semitic monotheists. Our genetically determined feelings had to be channeled by learning. Although this may be true, it is merely a descriptive statement of how cultures have developed. Those who reject God, the spirit of the sky, can just as easily reject the *Zeitgeist*, the spirit of the times. A society may be better off on the average when its laws are built upon the golden rule, but some people may not give a hoot for the average person. They may be born morally blind just as some are born without vision. From a totally selfish point of view, the best thing for a scoundrel to do would be to be selfish himself while encouraging others to be unselfish. Scoundrels would be expected to join honorable citizens in supporting the golden rule in their preaching, but to reject it when they can get away with it.

Cheating on the golden rule is much easier to accomplish in modern, urban, mass society than it was in the past when people lived in small bands and everyone knew everyone else. In today's world you can take advantage of people you will never meet again; you do not have to worry about alienating the friends and neighbors you might need some day. In complex organizations, decisions to defraud people can be made at the top and carried out by the service staff at the bottom that actually has to interact with the victims. More to the point, and sadly, in today's world you can kill at a distance and never see the results of your homicide. The

signals that were evolutionarily developed to turn off aggressive impulses and arouse pity—crying babies, wailing women, begging men, blood and guts—may be fairly effective in small hunter-gatherer groups. But they cannot be discerned by the killer who sends deadly missiles from afar.²

And that is why, the Christian's argument goes, we need faith in God and in a purpose to the universe, in order to rein in our selfish tendencies and make it a better world for everyone. And so it is appropriate to feel sad at the loss of a purpose to the universe. It is not mere romantic foolishness or nostalgia for that old time religion that makes us want to believe in the Christian creed. Christianity provides a justification for the golden rule that holds society together.

Even if the evidence indicates a lack of purpose to the universe, the argument concludes, in order to instill proper moral behavior we should pretend there is a God-given purpose for the universe and especially for us, its most notable occupants. For the sake of peace and justice, we should lie to the little children about a divine judge watching over them. Even recognizing that Christianity is a fabrication, we should still pretend it is true to order to implant a conscience and encourage everyone to obey the golden rule. We recall from the last chapter that many Americans took their children to church, not because it offered them a convincing purpose in life, but rather as a means of fostering morality. This argument is sensible and noble in its goal. How might nonbelievers respond?

To begin, there is a certain incongruity in bearing false witness in order to instill in children the commandment, "Thou shalt not bear false witness." There is irony in sanctimoniously inventing a purpose to life and the universe in order to trick children, fools, and other innocents. Tricking

the little children is especially troubling because many of them sooner or later will figure out they were lied to. But theologians are not noted for their appreciation of irony. Besides, parents tell children about Santa Claus and the tooth fairy, and when the youngsters discover their parents lied, they do not hold it against them.³ The purpose of the universe would be something like belief in Santa Claus advanced to a higher dimension.

The atheist's hope is that, given our genetic predisposition, if we are provided with careful instruction on proper conduct, appropriate use of rewards and punishments, and modeling of correct behavior, that should be sufficient to engender moral conduct in most of us. There will always be a few who try to beat the system, but they can be reined in by the usual societal controls ranging from dirty looks to imprisonment. There is no need to lie to little children who will eventually figure out they were lied to. Furthermore, in the industrialized world, most citizens of Christian nations do not take their religion very seriously. If all we can hope for is that the commandment "Thou shalt not kill," will be as successfully inculcated as "Thou shalt keep holy the Sabbath Day," we are in big trouble.

Perhaps the greatest difficulty with the use of religion as a training technique, according to nonbelievers, is that the religions we have available—the popular versions of Semitic monotheism—do not offer the pure moral guidance centered on the golden rule that we might seek. They contain some version of the golden rule mixed in with a crazy quilt of superstition, ethnocentrism, and offensive silliness. In addition, they invite hostility toward competitive creeds and offer a cruel and capricious God as an ideal. Until they can focus on the golden rule, popular Western religions

might do more harm than good by smothering a constructive moral code with petty superstition, cruelty, and self-aggrandizement.

This is the point in the discussion where skeptics insert examples of the Bible's divinely ordained massacres to underscore its lack of commitment to the golden rule and the dangers of using the Bible as a moral authority.⁴ Allow me but one modest massacre from the book of Job to make the point. There is inspiration in the story of Job. I used it in Chapter 3 as an inspiring lesson in humility, and concluded that, like Job, we would be best to admit we do not know how the universe was made. But interpreted as something that actually took place, the story of Job is execrable. As part of his tribulation, with God's blessing, Satan kills all ten of Job's innocent children and a large, indefinite number of his blameless employees. Having lost everything he had, wracked with pain, covered with sores, Job more or less still praises the Lord. God declares himself the winner of his bar bet with Satan and gives Job back everything he lost and then some. Of course, this does not help any of the throng that God allowed Satan to kill, but they are bit players in the drama and of no consequence. The callousness with which human life is treated in the Bible is one of its greatest limitations as a moral guide.

The book of Job highlights another problem with the Bible as a moral guide—its ambiguity regarding the relationship between good and evil. Consider the character of Satan. In the book of Job, Satan, whose name means "adversary" or "impediment," is an associate of God and one of the heavenly assembly. Originally, a satan is more of a role than a personal identity. A satan is a type of angel, one of God's assistants, and not an adversary of God. A satan earned his title by being an adversary of humans, a kind of heavenly enforcer. There are a number of references to

satans or avenging angels in the Old Testament, but Job is the one place where Satan is not just a role but is fleshed out as a person.

With such confrontational angels on his payroll, in most of the Old Testament Yahweh was the source of both good and evil.⁵ While the Jewish Lord dropped some of the human traits of the Greek gods—we cannot imagine Yahweh having sex with a comely human maiden as Zeus would—unfortunately he kept the nasty traits of anger and vengefulness. When he was not himself hurting those who bothered him, he was sending avenging angels to do the job.

In short, throughout much of the Bible we find good and evil are intermingled in such a way as to preclude simple moral guidance. Later on, after meeting Persian dualism and Greek idealism, the Jews began to separate out the two aspects of power—good and evil—into discrete personifications. Satan eventually morphs into the Christian conception of the Prince of Darkness who personifies the opposite of the Lord, leaves heaven, and rules his own kingdom of evil.⁶ No explanation is given in either testament for this major shift in allegiance. God is still indirectly the source of misery although he hides behind the character of Satan and washes his hands of any responsibility for evil.

Christians ignore the fact that Satan, while ostensibly God's enemy, is part of God's intelligently designed creation. Being all powerful, if God is to have a foe—and to make a good story, he must—God has to create his own archenemy. According to the Christian creed, God created Satan, tested his creation, found Satan inadequate, locked him into evil when he failed the test, gave him dreadful powers to deceive and influence including the power to take control over someone's body, afforded him access to humans that he made susceptible by bathing their souls in

original sin, and then, when the weak and vulnerable humans are tricked by Satan and do something wrong, God says, “Don’t blame me, I didn’t do anything.” God’s exculpation would never stand up in any American court. The Lord is clearly an accessory after the fact. Monotheism is haunted with the inability to show how one good, wise, and loving Creator can get mixed up with so much unnecessary grief and ugliness. And that is one reason why we would expect Bible-based religions to fail to provide the moral foundation we seek.

In Search of Evidence

It would be helpful to find empirical support for the hypothesis that traditional religion and Bible study lead to improved morality. But the research has not been particularly fruitful. For example, we saw in the last chapter that by some measures Christian America is more criminalistic than secular Europe. But we also saw that Christian America was not all that Christian either. There are also a lot of confounding variables and complications Christians can point to in exoneration. With “Hollywood homosexuals” dominating the media, Godless evolutionary biology taught in the schools, and atheist books thrust upon unwary youth, how can we blame Christianity for crime in America? The ideal experiment would be easy to describe and impossible to perform. We could take two cultures (preferably composed of matched identical twins) and have one teach morality by intertwining it with Bible stories about the purpose of the universe, the wrath of God for those who violate the purpose, and the rest of the Semitic monotheistic Weltanschauung. The other culture would use shame, reward and praise, and modeling correct behavior without any

claims about a Creator and a purpose to the universe. We could wait a generation or two and then compare the two cultures on homicide rates, amount of larceny, and the like and see whether teaching a purpose to the universe produces a better society. For obvious reasons this ideal study will never be done.

Although frustrated by a lack of decent experimental controls, psychologists and sociologists have, in fact, developed a fairly extensive research literature on the relationship between religion and morality in America. For instance, numerous studies have correlated an individual's professed religion with prejudice and other nastiness. The results have not led to any simple conclusions. To escape the snarl of so many variables confounded with religion, the researchers have used ever more precise and focused measurements and ever more complicated statistical analyses. The result is we know more and more about less and less. We are left with tentative conclusions that religion defined this way is positively correlated with prejudice or delinquency, and religion defined that way is negatively correlated, and religion defined the other way yields a complex interaction.⁷

In recent years psychologists seem to have tired of the topic of moral behavior and switched to investigating whether religion is correlated with health and happiness. The question of whether religious individuals help others is shelved in favor of determining whether they help themselves. Again, there are the usual arguments over definition and measurement and lots of problems with confounded variables. Yet a number of studies have indicated that Americans who say they believe in God and go to church may indeed be helping themselves. On the average they live longer and are healthier. That does not make them more moral,

however, and that is the issue here.⁸ The religious may be doing well but that is no evidence they are doing good.

The absence of a scientific conclusion has not stopped the two sides of the debate from adducing historical examples to support their case. Religionists throw out such instances as the saintly Francis of Assisi. Nonbelievers counter with the horrid Tomas de Torquemada, the Grand Inquisitor. Religionists adduce the evils of atheistic communism. Atheists note that Russia had a long history of Orthodox Christianity, and that Stalin himself was once a seminarian. They also note that the Nazis were raised as Catholics and Lutherans. Religionists reply that the Nazis went over to the dark side when they rejected Christianity for Wagnerian paganism.⁹ And so on. These debates can be stirring, but rarely do the interlocutors change their mind.

At this point animal rightists would join the debate and argue the golden rule should apply to animals as well as humans. A dog, they avow, can feel as much pain as a bishop. In passing we can observe that it is difficult to find any concern for the feelings of animals in either the Old or the New Testament. In general, the Bible bestows no rights on the animals that are sacrificed with great enthusiasm throughout its pages. One notable exception may be the story of the prophet Balaam and his ass found, in Chapter 22 of the book of Numbers. Even by Biblical standards it is a wacky tale. God sends an adversarial angel, a satan, with a sword to bar Balaam's path because God does not approve of his journey. The ass Balaam is riding miraculously sees the angel while Balaam does not. In a bizarre comedy of errors, the ass keeps back pedaling to avoid the threatening angel while Balaam keeps beating it for not obeying him to go forward. Eventually, God tires of the farce and gives the ass the gift of

speech and Balaam the gift to see the threatening angel, and after a little chat it all gets straightened out. Other than showing an animal in a positive light, it is hard to find any moral guidance in the tale.

Attempting to ascertain the effect of religion on morality is hampered by the fact that rarely do we find religious differences isolated to allow a causal connection. They are always confounded with language and cultural differences, tribal allegiances, and assorted secular quarrels. The European wars of the seventeenth century are called “wars of religion,” but other interests and motives were also operating. What are presented in the popular press as religious conflicts are often just as much battles between the haves and the have-nots. This was the case between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland. It is the case between Jews, Christians, and Moslems in the Middle East as well. It is hard to determine how much of the distress and tribulation can be blamed on religion when ethnic groups are vying over land, water, and oil.

This having been said, with all the wars, pogroms, persecutions, jihads, crusades, enslavements, rebellions, invasions, oppressions, autos-da-fé, witch hunts, and the like displayed by the Semitic monotheists over the centuries, it is fair to observe that these religions have demonstrated little of the power to engender peace and virtue claimed by their supporters. There is no reason to believe that, if the education of our young was given over to the Sunni Moslems, Russian Orthodox, Roman Catholics, Orthodox Jews, Southern Baptists and the like, the result would be peace on earth and goodwill toward men, let alone goodwill toward women.

The Afterlife

The religious doctrine most often thought to aid in the inculcation of proper moral conduct is belief in an afterlife. If religion is to foster morality, fear of hell and hope for heaven should be just what a society needs. The two major religions that have stressed heaven and hell the most are the Moslems and Christians. If belief in the afterlife is doing its job, then compared to others such as Jews, Buddhists, ancestor worshipers, and the like, not to mention atheists and agnostics, the Moslems and Christians should be noted for creating loving, gentle, and peaceful nations. As if in recognition of this excellence, many other societies have eagerly ceded control of their territory to these monotheists when they came knocking at the door. Being fearful of hell and hopeful for heaven, Moslems and Christians then turned the once uncivilized pagan cultures into a veritable paradise. They avoided conflict, embraced peace, distributed their resources without prejudice, and provided exemplary loving-kindness.

Okay, even the pope must be rolling his eyes at this one. Nonetheless, we cannot close an examination of the purpose of life without discussion of life after death. We have previously touched upon it from time to time, but it is important enough to merit a more extensive treatment. After all, Christians tell us that the afterlife is what life on earth is all about. And when asked in surveys, most Americans claim to believe in an afterlife and that this earthly life is but a fleeting introduction to an eternal existence.

A well-constructed afterlife can solve an otherwise huge problem for purveyors of morality. In spite of the message contained in most popular stories, that the bad guys always lose, one of the more painful

lessons we learn in growing up is that in real life the bad guys do not always lose. Which of us cannot recall knowing at least one truly nasty character who enjoyed a merry life at the expense of his victims and died at a ripe old age on clean sheets with a smirk on his face? How sweet it would be to wipe that smirk off! Like the cavalry in a traditional western, the angel of death carrying a one-way ticket to hell comes charging to the rescue. Even when God in his infinite but mysterious wisdom lets the bad guys get away with their sins in this life, they are not off the hook. God can always get revenge in the next life. This can be a comforting solace for victimized people and a warning for those tempted to become the victimizers.

Even those of us who doubt perfect moral accountability after death may tell children about a happy life waiting in the great beyond. If stories about Santa Claus coming down chimneys are harmless fictions, why not tell them about the pastures of plenty as well? What harm is there in telling a child that grandma “passed over” and went to a wonderful place called heaven and someday the child will meet her there? Of course, children become adults, and many adults learn to prefer the truth over charming fantasies.

Assuming we are all adults looking for the truth and not a child’s fairy tale, the question arises: If we reject the sky God and an intelligently designed universe, must we reject the afterlife as well? And rejecting an afterlife, can we find value in this life? Is there any merit in a world where everything must end? Can a flower still be beautiful when we know it will wilt and die? Must there be an eternal perfect flower in Plato’s world of ideas or the mind of God in order for us to appreciate our fragile earthly

one? Can we still enjoy life knowing that, like the flowers, we will wilt and die? Can our lives hold dignity and beauty in our impermanence?

In exploring such questions it helps to remember the lesson of the previous chapters that Semitic monotheists have the habit of confusing their own peculiar package of beliefs with religion in general. Moreover, we have been told we have to take the Christian package all or none, but in fact the package can be unwrapped and taken apart. We have the model of America's Cafeteria Christians who shop the theological buffet line with their own personal taste as a guide to what items to load on their plates and which to shun. Perhaps we all can become discriminating shoppers at the religion counter.

When the traditions of other cultures around the world are examined, we find no simple relationship between belief in heaven, hell, reincarnation, or other views of an afterlife, on the one hand, and faith in any particular gods or moral systems, on the other. Jews believe in God—but not heaven and hell. Buddhists believe in no God—but in several heavens and hells, none of them permanent. Hindus think endless life, manifested in an incessant stream of reincarnations, is a curse. The goal of life for Hindus is to lose one's personal identity and be absorbed in Brahma, the Godhead. The doctrine of karma reminds us that we can end up in hell from the workings of impersonal nature—without a professional wrestler deity body-slamming our sorry souls there.

It may be difficult for some Christians to accept this, but as far as belief in an afterlife is concerned, God is beside the point. If gravity can have the force of a natural law without a personified cosmic enforcer, so also any other law can be in force including the law of karma. Just as your body must obey the law of gravity, your spirit might have to obey the law

of karma. There is nothing to stop those so inclined from thinking that, as an expression of a depersonalized law of nature and without any assistance from any deity, people who have lived good lives end up romping in Beulah Land when they pass over. This does nothing to help us decide what constitutes the good life that is so rewarded, however.

When you talk to Americans and share their stories, it becomes clear that many are uncertain or in conflict on the subject of eternal life. Surveys show that most Americans claim they hope for heaven. But there is also evidence to cast doubt on how earnestly this hope is held. They evidence a Platt River confidence that is only an inch deep. In fact, much popular culture indicates there is a strong vein of the Hindu disdain for living eternally that runs through contemporary Christianity. Americans have abundant stories about those who have escaped death, and they are uniformly grim. Legends such as that of the Wandering Jew, novels such as Simone de Beauvoir's *All Men Are Mortal*, and popular movies such as *Groundhog Day*, depict those who cannot die as enduring a curse, not enjoying a blessing.¹⁰ In *Groundhog Day* the Bill Murray character, a kind of antihero, must endure the same day over and over without any reprieve by death. He soon discovers this is dreadful. He is eventually released from that day and allowed to age and finish his life normally but only when he learns to love unselfishly, a very Buddhist message.

American popular culture recounts numerous tales of those who accidentally escape death, often by being bitten by vampires or werewolves, and become one of the undead themselves. They are notoriously troubled and give new meaning to the phrase "grumpy old men." There are also lots of stories about those who biologically die but somehow cannot let go of their earthly life and remain as ghosts.

Throughout the world's folklore, including that of contemporary America, people typically become ghosts when they have unfinished business. This is true for high culture apparitions like the spirit of Hamlet's father in Shakespeare as well as the rude specters that populate late night campfire yarns. The spirits of the dead are angry or despondent and unable to depart "when their time has come" until they achieve some closure or revenge. The lesson in these stories and legends is that a long dreamless sleep after death is a blessing.

Contemporary Americans seem to hold contradictory hopes for an afterlife. One part of them wishes for eternal life in paradise. But the other part is not so sure. The expression *Rest in Peace*, often heard at funerals, may be a more heartfelt hope for a loved one who has "passed on" than the preacher's assurance that the dearly departed is now frolicking in fields of glory. At funerals in America today there seems to be a drift away from specific claims of eternal life. Often we hear the eulogist declare the gathering is to celebrate the life of the departed whose spirit vaguely lives on in memory or in some other unspecified manner. The possibility that, according to Christian dogma, the loved one may be burning in hell for his or her sins is never mentioned, although it may be on the minds of the more devout in attendance.

Personal Identity beyond the Grave

No one knows what the minimal conditions are for consciousness to exist. Somehow the brain produces consciousness, and every time someone is knocked out by an anesthetic or a blow to the head, there is further evidence that consciousness demands a properly functioning brain to

continue. There is no reason to believe that when the brain is totally dysfunctional in death somehow consciousness is liberated, maintains its identity, and floats off somewhere else. However, until we know more about how the brain produces consciousness, no one can say for sure.

But pure consciousness beyond the grave is not the essence of heaven and hell. Hindus hope for dissolving into absolute Brahma consciousness; Buddhists seek transcendence into Buddha consciousness. But for traditional Christians it must be an identity that remains. There must be an eternal person that somehow is the same self that lived on earth, and there lies the rub. It must be that bastard who stole from you, beat you up, or raped you who suffers in hell. Those with a taste for vengeance—and which of us has never savored that taste?—want assurance that the smile is wiped from the malefactor's face to be replaced with an agonized grimace. Yet somehow it must be recognizable as the same face.

Knowing nagging pain, we can almost envision some soul enduring eternal suffering. But knowing the evanescence of pleasure, heaven is impossible to imagine. It has often been observed that, although we can say the words "If I obey the church, I will have eternal, perfect bliss," no one has come up with a credible conception of what it would be like. This is one very good reason to reject the notion of a personal heaven. It is literally inconceivable. It is like trying to imagine a four-sided triangle. Here on earth it is precisely the fragile flower that we find so alluring, not the perfect essence of flower in some everlasting cartoon. That it will wither and die is part of its charm. "Pure, endless beauty" are only words; actual experienced beauty is always laced with poignant vulnerability.

Our earthly life, the only one we know, is a symphony of highs and lows, beginnings and endings. A theme enters, its variations explored, and then the music ends. Major keys yield to a minor key; there are crescendos and diminuendos. An eternal crescendo is as ridiculous and inhuman as an everlasting orgasm. A life without pauses, threats, challenges, complications, and uncertainties is no human life at all. Why would anyone go bowling if all they ever bowled was a perfect game? What would be the point? How long would people enjoy playing golf when all they ever shot was a hole in one?

The stereotypic image of heaven as a group of thin-lipped smiling souls floating around in white smocks playing harps gives the whole game away. Most people would be bored silly after an hour of such a life, let alone an eternity. It is no accident that the only place we commonly find depictions of heaven and hell is in humor. There are countless cartoons depicting a merry Satan replete with horns, tail, and pitchfork herding the damned souls as flames lick at their heels. There are numerous jokes that begin, "So this lawyer dies and goes to heaven. . . ." Humor is the cognitive frame of reference used to deal with the absurd.

To keep our personal identities in heaven we must also keep our social relationships. Think about your earthly friends and relatives, what they mean to you, how you love them, and all the different ways their lives intersect with yours. Surely, they are a part of your identity. But how would such human ties play out in heaven? For example, consider the case of Dorothy, a saintly mother in paradise who has a beloved daughter, Mary, who died tragically at the age of twenty in a gas-line explosion. Mary was having sex with her husband just when the house blew up. They were using a condom at the time. Because of her sinful perversion, the

Roman Catholic Church assures us, Mary's sorry soul will be eternally tormented in hell. Could there be a heavenly conversation that goes like this:

St. Peter: Well, Dorothy, how do you like paradise?

Mother: The harp music sure is pretty, Peter, and I enjoyed meeting George Washington and Abe Lincoln. I forgot how tall they were. But I was wondering. I haven't seen my daughter, Mary, yet. Can I see her? There is so much I want to talk to her about.

St. Peter: (Looking away) Dorothy, if I were you, I'd forget about Mary.

Mother: But I want to see her, and I was told by Father O'Reilly that in heaven we get what we want. What's the problem?

St. Peter: Alright, Dorothy, since you insist. (Peter leads her over to the edge of a cloud and they look down.) You see that horribly anguished soul there in the flames. You may not recognize her because her face is so contorted by pain, but that is your daughter.

Mother: Oh, No! Mary is in purgatory. I should have made more novenas to the Blessed Virgin for the release of her soul. How selfish I was!

St. Peter: (Clearing his throat) Ahem, Dorothy, more novenas would not have helped. Mary is not in purgatory. She died while using illicit contraception. Father O'Reilly explained it all to her during confession.

The only legitimate depository for her husband's semen is her vagina unimpeded by contraceptive devices. Your daughter Mary is burning in hell forever. Don't do the crime if you don't want to do the endless time.

At this point you might be tempted to imagine that Dorothy, Mary's loving mother, might be saddened to see her daughter suffer so. But this could not be. Suffering is not allowed in heaven any more than joy is possible in hell. The Christian tenet is that the mother's mind is now in perfect synchrony with God's perfect plan. As a result, contemplating her daughter's eternal agony will be part of the joy she finds in paradise where she rejoices in all of God's actions. The obvious point to be made here is that perhaps there is such a woman, but she is not the same mother who wept at Mary's funeral. The woman who rejoices in her daughter's torment has a new identity.

For individualistic religions like Christianity and Islam, where souls are saved or damned one at a time, dealing with the loved ones of the deceased can present problems, and the Bible is of little help. Until the book of Daniel, near the end of the Old Testament, there is no mention of heaven or hell. The ancient Jews believed in a tribal ethics and collective punishment in this life, so cases like that of Dorothy and Mary do not arise. In the New Testament Jesus does comment on the topic of personal relationships in the afterlife, but it is a baffling commentary. There are a number of oblique and vague references in the Gospels to rejection by God such as sinners being thrown into the darkness where there will be "weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matthew 8:12). But there is just one place, Chapter 16 of the Gospel of Luke, where hell is presented in any detail. Jesus describes a place of fire where a sinner maintains his personal

identity and is tormented for his earthly sin. This is the conception of hell Christians have adopted. It is of some passing interest what the only sinner described as burning in hell in the whole of the Gospels did to merit such punishment. He was not an abortionist, a pornographer, or a homosexual. He was not even a secular humanist who wrote a book that said there was no divine purpose to the universe. The only one Jesus described as burning in hell got there by being rich and not giving sufficiently to help Lazarus, the poor beggar at his doorstep.

The parable of Lazarus and the rich man is germane to the present discussion because the penurious moneybags burning in hell had five brothers that he worried about. The damned soul begs that Lazarus, who meanwhile has died and gone to heaven, be allowed to come back from the dead and warn his brothers of the punishment that awaits those who do not give sufficiently to the poor. Father Abraham, speaking for heaven, rejects the request. Apparently, the lesson in Chapter 16 of Luke—in addition to warning that sins against charity are more damning than sexual offenses—is that even in the afterlife we still care about our kinfolk. Paradoxically, love of his brothers and fear for their souls increases the rich man's suffering. That love would be punished does not seem right, but then again this is hell Jesus is talking about. Jesus offers no guidance on what would happen if the rich man were in heaven and worried about the salvation of his brothers. Then we would face the greater paradox that in heaven love diminishes joy, which is not the way it is supposed to work. It is difficult to imagine how such relationship issues can be worked out in heaven.

The message of Luke Chapter 16 implies that we maintain our relationships in heaven. But that seems to be contradicted by another Gospel lesson. In chapter 12 of Mark, Jesus is confronted with the question

of what to do about a frequently widowed woman who legitimately married several husbands over the course of her life. When she dies and joins her husbands in heaven, whose wife is she? Jesus answered that she is no one's wife in heaven. "For when they shall rise from the dead, they neither marry, nor are given in marriage; but are as the angels which are in heaven" (Mark 12:25). There is much here to puzzle those who take the Bible literally. Do we lose our affinal relations in the great beyond but keep our consanguine ones? Or do those tormented in hell keep their relatives to enhance their suffering, but blissful souls in paradise lose them? In any event, the Bible offers no coherent guidance on how heaven handles our personal relationships. With loved ones going off in different directions after death, much of our personal identity must be compromised.

In the chapter on Christianity we already touched upon another problem with paradise: the enigma of what our bodies are like in heaven. There we were concerned with how God's intelligent plan for human souls could provide a test for babies and embryos. It is time to revisit that question from the perspective of personal identity in the afterlife and the moral lessons it may convey. What do our souls and bodies do after passing the pearly gates? Jesus said we would be like angels in heaven. The most obvious interpretation of Jesus' observation would be that the souls in paradise do not keep their earthly bodies. That is why the much-widowed woman did not have to worry about which of her husbands she would sleep with once she passed on to a heavenly repose. However, this is one of the places where most American Christians try to improve on the message of Jesus and assume there is a resurrection of the body as well as the soul. It is hard enough to believe in eternal bliss under any circumstances, but what could we enjoy as pure spirits? Most Christians

are not sure what they would do with their bodies in heaven, but they have grown fond of them and want to keep them. On the other hand, resurrection of the body creates its own problems.

One major question is which body do we get when we arrive in heaven? As we age, our bodies get more and more threadbare and worn. We lose teeth and hair; we gain a pot belly and varicose veins. The usual answer is that, since this is paradise after all, we get our bodies back at the peak of their health and vigor. Better yet, they are glorified bodies minus any imperfection. If you never liked your nose, don't worry. In paradise you will get a new, improved nose. If here on earth your ears were too big, relax, in paradise they will be just right. Yet somehow the new, improved heavenly you will still be recognized as the old earthly you by all your friends and relatives who made it through the pearly gates. It would not do that someone born with a handicap, say a club foot or a hunchback, after being teased her whole life on earth, would have to spend eternity nagged by the same old deformity. God will give all heavenly souls new glorified bodies without any deformities.

The enigma becomes more acute for those who never had bodies at all. Some Christian sects, including the two most powerful in America, the Baptists and the Catholics, departing from the traditional Christian position, now hold that as soon as the human sperm hits the egg God pops an immortal soul into the zygote. Up to half or more of the zygotes conceived never get implanted to become a fetus, let alone a baby.¹¹ This is mostly because of biological happenstance and not deliberate abortion. Including zygotes, embryos, fetuses, and babies, most of the purportedly ensouled humans die before reaching the age of reason and never get tested. Nor do they ever have anything resembling an adult body.

We saw that this was no problem for St. Augustine and his followers who claimed that those who did not pass the test did not merit heaven and, consequently, must be tortured eternally in hell, the only other alternative. This is true even though, through no fault of their own, they never had the opportunity to take the test. Nowadays, most Christians, having discovered an iota of common sense, reject this notion. The zygote, embryo, fetus, or baby is allowed in heaven or at least the cozier suburb of hell, called limbo, where life is pleasant.

We take up this issue again here as it relates to the soul's identity in heaven. How can a soul have a glorified body and keep the same identity when on earth it had no body at all? An unimplanted zygote's only earthly identity is its DNA, a blueprint for forming a body that never got made. What other kind of identity could a fertilized egg have? It has not a single brain cell, no history, no personality, no encounter with life, no experience of ever making a decision, no memory. And yet, we are told, the fertilized egg has a whole complete soul that will exist in either heaven or hell forever. The only thing on its soul, Augustine reminds us, is the original sin that it inherited from Adam through its father's sperm.¹² Even though there is nothing on its soul except sin, the Baptist and Catholic credo insists it is a complete and glorious person with all the rights, privileges, and duties of any eternal soul. This they tell us is the intelligent design that comes from the intelligent designer.

Written over many centuries by numerous authors, the thousand or so pages of the Christian Bible have something for almost everyone, no matter what their creed. But there is nothing resembling this dogma anywhere in the Bible. And this bizarre unbiblical contention is what the male Catholic and Baptist bosses provide as justification for the cruel

insistence that a woman who has been raped must be denied the morning-after pill! If the pill prevents a pregnancy, it is called “baby killing” because a baby is not, as you may think, a creature of flesh and blood that a mother can hold in her arms. Babies are essentially souls, abstractions held in the arms of Greek metaphysics, known infallibly by the male keepers of the faith. The morning-after pill could cause the soul of a zygote to be sent to heaven or limbo and denied the chance to be tested on earth and burned in hell forever upon failing the test and adding some of its own sin to the original sin God ordained it to inherit from Adam.

Assuming God lets it through the pearly gates, what are we to make of the identity of the eternal soul of the zygote floating around paradise? What does it do? Can it think? Some may imagine if it could have thoughts, it might feel a bit of survivor’s guilt. It somehow got a free pass to glory land when others had to run the gauntlet of terrestrial temptations. Would its bliss be tempered by pity for the damned souls that failed the test that it conveniently skipped? This would be to accuse the zygote’s soul of heresy because it would indicate doubt of the justice and wisdom of God’s intelligent design. The souls of zygotes in paradise are not allowed to sin, so contemplating the eternal suffering of those who have failed the test of life does not bother them in the least. It adds to their joy. With their glorified DNA intact, the zygotes join with the rest of the celestial choir and blissfully shout “Hosanna, Hosanna, Hosanna!”

Traditional Christian theology reminds us that before the age of reason the soul does not have free will and cannot sin. Once in heaven or limbo, the souls of zygotes, embryos, and fetuses cannot sin either. Persons without any meaningful identity going from a temporary state without free will to a permanent state without free will could constitute the

bulk of the denizens of paradise. Heaven is filled with souls that never made a free choice about anything. What a scene it must be in Beulah Land when countless millions of interchangeable souls, differentiated only by their DNA, souls that never had a thought, formed a personal identity, or made a free decision about anything, are singing “Hosanna in the Highest” with glorified bodies provided by God for the occasion! This, we are told, is the purpose of our intelligently designed universe with its trillions of stars. This is God’s infinitely wise plan for the world. This is the vision you risk losing when you accept that there is no discernable purpose to the universe, and the only purpose in your life is the one you choose to put there, the one you are responsible for.

Alternative Afterlives

Besides the standard Christian version, there are plenty of other conceptions of what happens to us when we die. As was the case when we discussed God and creation, it is valuable to explore other people’s beliefs. Understanding alternative belief systems might help monotheists better understand their own. One alternative view found in some cultures is that when we die our consciousness disappears. We lose our subjective experience, and what remains of us is in the effects we had on the world we leave behind. In the felicitous phrase of the poet W. H. Auden, we “become our admirers.” The idea that the inner, conscious self is extinguished when the body gives up the ghost is independent of other beliefs about the purpose of the universe or morality. The universe could still be designed or not, intelligently or not, and yet when you die, you die.

You could still say it is wrong to torment animals whether or not you are tormented for it yourself in some otherworldly realm.

That our consciousness is extinguished in death is a very old notion. It is the lesson taught in the earliest legend extant, the classic *Epic of Gilgamesh*, dating back to the third millennium BCE. In this timeless tale Gilgamesh, a bold Mesopotamian king, seeks wisdom and eternal life. In his search he has many noble adventures, as befits an archetypal hero. But he is also a tragic hero for when he finds wisdom he learns that the everlasting life he seeks will be denied him. As the wise woman teaches him, if he would find joy, it must be in this life:

You will never find that life for which you are looking. When the gods created man they allotted to him death, but life they retained in their own keeping. As for you, Gilgamesh, fill your belly with good things; day and night, night and day, dance and be merry, feast and rejoice. Let your clothes be fresh, bathe yourself in water, cherish the little child that holds your hand, and make your wife happy in your embrace; for this too is the lot of man.¹³

The book of Genesis in the Bible came after *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and is generally thought to have borrowed from it. However, the Hebrews were tribal monotheists and although they were not averse to the pleasures of home offered to Gilgamesh, they also placed emphasis on contributing to the success of the tribe. The fundamental covenant that God made with Abram—later renamed Abraham—formed the Hebrew people and made him their beloved patriarch. It said nothing about eternal life:

The Lord said to Abram, “Leave your country, your relatives, and your father’s home, and go to a land that I am going to show you. I will give you many descendants, and they will become a great nation. I will bless you and make your name famous, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, but I will curse those who curse you. And through you I will bless all the nations.” (Genesis 12:1–3, Today’s English Version)

This was about as big a promise as the ancient Hebrews could imagine, not having fallen under the spell of Greek philosophy with its obsession with pure eternal abstractions and disdain for the transient material world.

Returning to the book of Job, after he passed God and Satan’s test, Job received the typical Old Testament reward for a praiseworthy man.

So the Lord blessed the latter end of Job more than his beginning: for he had fourteen thousand sheep, and six thousand camels, and a thousand yoke of oxen, and a thousand she asses. He had also seven sons and three daughters. . . . After this lived Job an hundred and forty years, and saw his sons, and his sons’ sons even four generations. So Job died, being old and full of days. (Job 42:12–17)

We have already seen that asking what people really believe can be trickier than we might first think. So let us rephrase the question a bit and ask ourselves if Christians today behave as if they were really motivated by a pressing desire to join the zygotes and fetuses in the celestial choir? Or do they seem to be seeking the good life Abraham was offered? Having wealth, a large and prosperous family, a good reputation, and comforted by

the knowledge that you have benefited all nations—not to mention knowing that those who mess with you will get their butts kicked—still sounds like a pretty good life to those of us who can pass up dreams of Beulah Land. It may not be the ideal purpose some want, but it is a goal most of us could settle for.

Souls

Concern for the afterlife invites us to revisit the topic of souls or spirits. It is common for people across cultures to talk about spiritual entities residing in or through physical objects. In keeping with the human fondness for personification, the spiritual beings are often thought of as persons. Anything can be spoken of as having or expressing a spiritual person, including rivers, mountains, and forests. But animals that move and seem to have a life of their own are more easily thought of as possessing an energizing force we could call its soul or spirit.

Cultures that have totem animals often believe that a human's soul and the soul of his totem animal are somehow commingled.¹⁴ This fusion creates numerous opportunities as well as hazards. Similarly, tabooed animals were not just unhygienic, they were spiritually impure, and improper contact with them has to be remedied by purification rites or the spirit of the human would be threatened. We can note similarities here with the ancient Hebrews who had numerous taboos about dealing with pigs, menstruating women, and other things considered unclean and complementary purification rites for those contaminated. These were of paramount importance to God's plan during Stage 7, the Moses period, but were later inexplicably dropped in Stage 8, the Jesus period.

When it comes to discovering souls or spirits in the world, most people understandably grant themselves the most splendid ones. Many cultures espouse ideas about the human soul, spirit, essence, or ghost and use these ideas to explain various aspects of human experience. As with gods, there is an amazing variety of beliefs about souls. Stories about souls can be entertaining or informative. They can serve as a vehicle for moral guidance. These beliefs about souls are usually contradictory across cultures, and therefore most of them must be wrong. And if most of them are wrong, maybe all of them are wrong. Typically, the spirits or souls proposed by other cultures are thought to function somehow independent of the body and so could remain after death and offer the possibility of some sort of afterlife. Most cultures, however, do not expect the pure, eternal bliss or agony of the Christian heaven or hell.

These various conceptions of spirits existing beyond death may mollify some fears, but they create difficulties of their own. The special problem with the Christian conception of the soul is analogous to the problem with the Christian conception of God. It is too absolute and rigid to fit the confused, messy life we experience in the real world. With a great leap of faith, one single, pure, simple, eternal, otherworldly essence is offered as the ultimate answer to every earthly mystery, both profound and trivial. Inheriting a philosophical disdain for the evanescent, distrustful of the senses, and infatuated with spiritual essences, Christian psychology—like Christian theology—spurns the messy world as experienced and replaces it with a pure spiritual being. The spiritual being, whether God or soul, gets the glory. What is real—flesh and blood and the messy world—gets the blame.

As is the case with gods, many cultures see no reason to stop at one soul. If one soul is good, two souls could be better. From the scientific perspective, belief in several souls is as unnecessary as the Christian belief in one, but it does have the advantage of allowing a more sophisticated foundation for our human experience. Belief in multiple souls invites speculation. The believers can sit around the campfire of an evening and discuss how each soul operates, the particular characteristics of each one, their domain of influence, and how they are organized. The Christian conception of only one soul enjoys parsimony, but parsimony is desirable in a theory only to the extent that it actually explains something. We have yet to be shown how one, eternal, immaterial soul can be the cause of every human expression, function, or dimension. Until a coherent and compelling explanation is given, we are not shaving with Ockham's razor; we are hacking off great chunks of human experience with a meat cleaver.

Consider just two roles attributed to the one soul of Christianity. First, the soul maintains the bodily functions such as breathing, and second, the soul is the seat of consciousness. We often think of these two human aspects as going together and creating a kind of unity. But unities can be broken. In the experience of sleep, breathing and the other physical functions are maintained, yet consciousness drifts off to strange lands in dreams. Thus, many cultures argue, we must have two separate souls with one staying with the body to keep it functioning while the other drifts off to dreamland. These other cultures think of dreamland as an actual place visited by the spirit of the sleeper.

When we have more than one soul, they must work properly together. It can become a life-threatening problem when the dreaming soul does not return on time to join the breathing soul when the body awakes.

Sickness or even death may ensue. The disembodied dream-soul may have to be lured back into the body by priests or shamans reciting charms or offering food.¹⁵

The typical Christian position is that the soul can leave the body only once, in death, and eventually the body will catch up with it later in heaven or hell. In the psychology of other cultures, souls leave the body and return quite often. Shamans, curanderas, witch doctors, and the like do it regularly in order to heal diseases and get guidance from the spirit world. The trick often can be used for ill as well. For example, the natives of the Trobriand Islands believe there are sorceresses called *mulukuausi* that can dispatch a “double” or “sending” out of their bodies which possesses great power. While the body of a *mulukuausi* can be seen stretched out in her hut, her double can be miles away doing all sorts of mischief. We would call the double a “spiritual being” for lack of a better word, but it is not an insubstantial wraith that floats through walls like the ghosts in Hollywood movies. The double is physical enough that it can also knock down walls if it is so inclined. Just as it sometimes takes a thief to catch a thief, Trobriand Islanders may utilize a friendly *mulukuausi* to protect them from a threatening *mulukuausi*.¹⁶

In addition to the exceptional tricks the *mulukuausi* can perform, the Trobriand Islanders believe everyone has two souls. One of them, the *baloma*, is the main spiritual essence of a person. Upon death it goes to another island where it has a human-like existence and can eat, drink, and have sex, as it did when it was alive. It should be placated, or it will get angry and cause harm. The second soul, called the *kosi*, is more like our Western-style ghost. It hangs around after death, is often seen in places frequented by the deceased, and can play tricks. The *kosi* in time

disappears, and there are some who even say the kosi becomes the baloma.¹⁷ The baloma exemplifies a common characteristic attributed to spirits or souls by other cultures. They are seen as not quite material and not quite spiritual but something of a mixture. A baloma, for example, is invisible, but it can appear in dreams. It is also physical enough to hit you over the head with a coconut.

After passing over, the souls of other cultures are not simple, pure spirits and often have an existence as untidy and conflicted as we humans experience on our side of death. When a person has several souls, one may live forever in another world, one may slowly fade away, and one may get reincarnated in a new body.

Australian Aborigines typically believe in two souls as well. Upon death one soul returns to the sky. This is the primary, preexisting spirit that came from its sky home and returns there when its bodily existence is over. But there is also a more earthly secondary spirit or spirit double. This one can hang around after death and, like the ghosts in Western ghost stories, cause trouble. To circumvent such an unfavorable prospect, proper cleansing ceremonies must be performed. Destroying the dead man's possessions and avoiding mention of his name reduce the likelihood that he will want to return.¹⁸

Four is a special number to many Native American tribes, like seven is for Catholics and forty for Jews, and accordingly American Indians often believe in four souls. According to the Yuchi, for instance, upon death one soul stays at the place of death, two others are attached to the kin of the deceased, while the fourth goes to the sky and attempts to join the spirit land.¹⁹ According to the Tarahumara Indians of Mexico, men have three souls and women have four. Women merit the additional soul

because they are the ones that produce new life.²⁰ This perspective provides quite a contrast with the Baptist and Catholic attitude that when the sperm meets the egg, all the important soul-forming action is complete. One cell is a complete human person, and one eternal, pure, simple soul is all we need for all human functions. The woman's pregnancy is but a trivial add-on. Is it any surprise that this conception of souls has been promulgated by religions run by men who have never been pregnant?

In addition to individual souls, Native American peoples also imagine a communal soul, the spirit of the tribe, which is shared by all members. Individual souls may cease to exist upon death, but the person's spirit lives on in the spirit of the tribe. This seems to provide Native Americans with the courage to face death as willingly as does the Christian's hope for an eternal, individual bliss.²¹ (The "happy hunting grounds" was not a common Indian belief but rather a white, Christian invention.)²² From the American Indian perspective, the Christian insistence on salvation in a lonely, individual existence displays a perverse and corrupt egoism. In their narrow-minded selfishness, Christians have literally lost their souls, the essential spirit of the community. When a person's soul resides in the community, the predicament of Dorothy and Mary—mother and daughter, with one in heaven and the other in hell—would be unthinkable.

The Native American community soul provides echoes of the Hebrew conception of the tribe and one's descendants as the means for a person to achieve a kind of immortality. In fact, the Christian and Moslem obsession with individual immortality in a pure infinite paradise is mostly limited to the West. Religions from the Indian subcontinent, such as Hinduism and Buddhism, think of the lone individual soul as an illusion to

be discarded. The ultimate aim is to lose one's personal consciousness and the illusion of identity by becoming absorbed into a supreme, impersonal reality.

In the Far East, family and community are essential dimensions of the moral code, and religions such as Confucianism focus on social relationships as the core of any personal identity worth cherishing. As the Chinese American philosopher Chenyang Li observed, "For the Chinese, the family is the center of and the most important aspect of a person's life. The family is the foundation of one's identity, one's morality, and the source of the meaning of life."²³ Or as Karma Ura, a contemporary Bhutanese philosopher, noted, "We don't believe in this Robinson Crusoe happiness. All happiness is relational."²⁴

Gaining a sense of communal identity and family connectedness comes early in the East. Respect for elders is learned from the cradle on, so that it is a natural progression to revere ancestors when they are departed. Although the Ten Commandments demand we honor our parents, contemporary Americans often ignore this one. Making sport of parents and other old people is a staple of American television situation comedies. In Japan the tradition of family bathing exemplifies how family members literally and figuratively "keep in touch."

How the two cultures deal with recalcitrant teenagers is instructive. Wayward teens in America may be "grounded" and kept at home; in Japan they may be locked out of the house. Being denied access to their families is a punishment in Japan while being forced to be with them is the punishment in America.²⁵ The children soon learn the value their cultures place on their families one way or another. As with notions about art and sports, the conception of the afterlife is an expression of a

culture's *Weltanschauung*. Many cultures find the American Christian belief in a lonely heaven, a Robinson Crusoe paradise, to be a perverse rejection of our true communal identity and a sad expression of the Christian devotion to self-centeredness.

The Soul Industry

From the scientific perspective, beliefs about souls, like the parallel beliefs about gods, reflect the primitive human tendency toward personification. They provide parents with a conventional set of answers when children in due course ask the tough questions about the existentials of life. They also complement the rituals that unite the culture and serve to provide moral guidance and encouragement. When we move from primitive cultures to complex literate civilizations, a new dimension emerges—the influence of a professional priesthood.

We saw there was folk science and Big Science, and there was folk philosophy and institutionalized Big Philosophy under the control of the church and the university. So also folk cultures have beliefs about souls, but complex civilizations have an institutionalized soul business under the control of a priestly class. Even in nonliterate cultures there may be individual curanderas and witch doctors that receive some treasured prestige out of their supposed gifts and may pick up an occasional chicken as payment for applying their spiritual powers to heal the sick. But to have an authoritative priestly class in control of knowledge about and control over souls requires an advanced civilization.

By all accounts, the ancient Egyptians were the ones who began the priestly soul business. They developed the most complicated system of

beliefs around death, souls, and the afterlife and in addition the most sophisticated crew of priests living off of the system. In most other climes, corpses put in the earth soon become skeletons. But this did not necessarily occur in Egypt. The fortuitous combination of soil and climate found in Egypt made natural mummification possible. Doubtless, ancient Egyptians were stunned by how lifelike grandma looked when she was disinterred after many years. This got some folks to thinking: if we can preserve someone like this without really trying, what wonders might we achieve if we put real effort into it? A guild of priests claiming expertise in the care and treatment of dead bodies—as well as their souls—soon followed.

Depending on how you count them, the Egyptians claimed there were from five to ten different souls, each one with its own properties, responsibilities, opportunities, and dangers.²⁶ For example, a person's shadow was an important adjunct to the person and a kind of soul. If you step on someone's shadow you could bring harm to the person. Like many cultures, the Egyptians thought a person's name had a mystical relation with the person referred to. That made it part of the person's soul, and if you want to live after death, your name must be kept alive by your descendents. The major souls for the Egyptians were the *ba*, the soul or noble spirit, and the *ka*, the heavenly personality or double. Originally, only the gods had a *ka*, but since the pharaoh was a god, he had one too. Keeping the pharaoh's *ba* and *ka* and the rest of his souls in proper condition after death in order to ensure his immortality became a major enterprise for the priests. Around the Middle Kingdom (c. 1900 BCE) immortality became democratized, and any wealthy Egyptian could hope to live a glorious life in the sky if he could afford all the rituals and

rigmarole that the priests claimed were necessary to get the souls of the deceased properly cared for. Naturally, this created a lot more work for the priests.

Once the soul industry is institutionalized in a culture, there is a self-reproducing elite that has an entrenched interest in fostering fear of death, a fear they will gladly relieve if the price is right. Trading on human vanity and natural apprehension about the unknown, a shrewd priesthood can become a remarkably lucrative enterprise. The Egyptian pyramids provide stark testimony to the power of an established priesthood exploiting the fear of death. Countless Egyptians labored to build a combination tomb and space ship for the sky journey of the pharaoh, the god-king, who was afraid of the dark of the grave.

With so many different souls to ponder, the ancient Egyptians have overdone the reification of souls beyond anything useful. But the idea of several different souls is plausible. With so many different facets and dimensions of the human experience all occurring more or less simultaneously, inconsistency and discord can be expected. Using several souls to clarify our different selves is a reasonable first step in attempting to explain what it means to be human. To a point, this attitude is corroborated by the modern study of the brain, which argues that the brain is an integrated system of semi-independent modules.²⁷ Modern psychology and primitive psychology differ in that the modules discovered by modern science are brain functions, whereas the primitive thinks of them with unbridled reification as spiritual entities capable of acting independent of the body. If they can act independent of the body, then they can survive the body as well, and some form of afterlife is possible. According to such an approach, a wide variety of destinies and experiences

for our various souls is possible once they are freed from the shackles of the body. Death opens up many doors for those with many souls. As with other elements of their faith, American Christians may not be aware that they are exercising a choice, but their religious faith in a soul that is pure, simple, lonely, and eternal is only one choice among many.

Contemporary Christian priests may feel it is unfair to link them with the Egyptian priests of old. Christian priests are so much more sophisticated and their theories so much more up-to-date. The ancient priests had ugly old pyramids while the current priests have lovely cathedrals. The old Egyptian priests anointed the deceased with oil and said prayers to Osiris, the god who rose from the dead, asking him to accept the soul of the departed. Christian priests anoint their deceased with oil and say prayers to Jesus, the God who rose from the dead, asking him to accept the soul of the departed. The soul of the ancient Egyptian was judged by being weighed in the scales of truth by Maat, the goddess of truth and justice. The soul of the contemporary Christian is judged by the masculine St. Peter, no goddesses being allowed in paradise. When the soul of an insufficiently devout Egyptian failed the test, it was gobbled up by a giant crocodile. Christian priests reject this silly notion. When souls fail the test because of insufficient devotion, Christian priests assure us, the intelligent design of the universe calls for them to be tortured in hell forever with Satan and his evil demons. They are not allowed to join the zygotes in the celestial choir. And of course belief in giant crocodiles is pure superstition.

An examination of Americans' search for the purpose of the universe and its life, some of the odd ways they have tried, why the search is doomed to failure, and why that is not a problem.

The Purpose of Life

**Buy The Complete Version of This Book at
Booklocker.com:**

<http://www.booklocker.com/p/books/4622.html?s=pdf>