

*Provide a philosophical discussion of the concepts of
'heaven' and 'hell'*

Introduction

The concepts of ‘heaven’ and ‘hell’ vary, not merely because of the diverse range of images of the afterlife, but also because they are influenced by many classical and contemporary debates: freewill and predestination, materialism and dualism, religion and science, and so on. A universal doctrine, therefore, does not exist, as each religion interpreters the afterlife according to their own religious traditions and responds to changes in the intellectual, political and social landscapes.

The afterlife, as presented by both Catholicism and spiritualism, epitomise the inherent diversity within eschatology, however, the reality of an eternal life is central to both beliefs. For instance, Jesus’ resurrection explains that ‘He descended into hell’ in order to conquer death and the devil. Moreover, ‘[Jesus] opened heaven’s gates for the just who had gone before him.’¹ Therefore, without an afterlife, Christianity could not ‘[encourage] virtue by promises of future reward [heaven], and [discourage] vice by threats of punishment [hell].’² Similarly, ‘the anchor’ of modern spiritualism, is the belief that communication exists between the ‘living’ and the ‘dead.’³ As such, spiritualist teaching emphasises the nature of the afterlife, which rests on ‘spirit communications.’⁴

Although the definition of spiritualism may vary depending on the context in which it is discussed, for the purposes of this paper, I will define Spiritualism as follows: A religious movement, which attempts to demonstrate that it is possible for the living to communicate with the departed through various forms of séance phenomena. Spiritualist teaching therefore comprises of the accounts of spirits who have communicated the nature of their post-mortem experiences.

To illustrate the diversity of teaching between these two religions, I propose to critically discuss the static notion of the afterlife, as portrayed by the Catholic Church, against the dynamic interpretation propounded by spiritualism.⁵ Moreover, I will argue that whilst both teachings share common values, the nature of the afterlife is very different, which affects the worldview of their respective adherents. In order to do this I will adopt a ‘study of religions’ approach rather than a ‘philosophical’ one.

First, I will refer to Augustine’s, *City of God*, to explore the notion of freewill. I will then argue that as freewill is embedded in both Catholic and spiritualist teachings it affects the way its adherents understand and consider the afterlife. I will explore the ‘Seven Sacraments’ and the spiritualist principle of ‘Personal Responsibility’ to illustrate this.

I will then turn my attention to the Catholic imagery of ‘hell,’ and argue that the experience of hell is a reflection of one’s relationship with God. However, I will also argue that as hell, for the average Catholic, is expressed in spatial terms, heaven and hell are considered to be separate entities. Moreover, by exploring the notion of eternity I will explain the nature of the Catholic afterlife is

¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 636-637

² Richards. H.J, 1980, p.11

³ Boddington. H, 1946, p.45

⁴ Whilst it is a truism to say that the validity these communications is debateable, I will regard this question, for the purposes of this paper, as immaterial. This is because, regardless of validity, early transcripts of spirit communications depict the common understanding of the spiritualist’s afterlife.

⁵ Spiritualism became a legally recognised religion, in England, during 1951

static. Consequently, one's actions on earth have eternal consequences, as an individual cannot directly alter his condition, post-mortem.

Finally, I will argue that spiritualism does not advocate traditional notions of heaven and hell. Instead, all souls enter the same 'spirit-world.' Moreover, heaven and hell are a reflection of one's spiritual development, and not one's relationship with God. However, the notion of 'spiritual development,' which is central to spiritualist philosophy, suggests that one's experiences are only temporary, which not only subverts traditional conceptions but also suggests a dynamic afterlife.

Augustine: Freewill in Catholicism and Spiritualism

Augustine argues that evil cannot originate from God, as it does not exist. Instead, evil occurs because of a privation of moral perfection. Augustine considers moral action to be determined by freewill, which is a 'psychological faculty of choice and volition.'⁶ Indeed, freewill enables man to transcend the animal kingdom, as it transforms him into a morally responsible and self-determining agent, Augustine writes: 'what is so much in the power of the will than the will itself.'⁷ Consequently, as man has the freedom to choose how to act, the onus, in terms on moral responsibility, is on him.

Brown, in his, *The First Evil Will Must Be Incomprehensible*, states that, according to Augustine, God is not responsible for the first willing of evil. First, Brown argues that as God created the world out of nothing, He has complete control over His creation. As such, something can only limit God, if God chooses to create something which will limit Him. Secondly, as 'God created man in His own image' (Gen 1:27), and God is good, it follows that evil cannot be a positive force in the world as it is contrary to God's nature. Instead, Augustine considers freewill to be innately good, he writes: 'a will by which we seek to live rightly and honourably.'⁸ Despite this, God bestowed freewill upon mankind in order to preserve man's freedom. Therefore, although freewill is innately good because it comes from God, man's actions can be either good or evil.⁹ However, this also implies that God cannot intervene in matters of moral action, as to do so would deprive man of his freedom.¹⁰

That being said, Augustine defines evil as a 'privation of some feature in a being which he ought to possess fully.'¹¹ Privation occurs because when an evil act is committed it changes man's nature. 'Before the fall' the nature of man was good, but because Adam willed evil privation occurred. As such, God cannot be held responsible for how freewill is used, as we are autonomous and self-determining. Freewill therefore determines evil action.¹²

Within Catholicism the 'Seven Sacraments of the Church' reflects this notion. Indeed, the sacraments of Confession and Penance centre of the idea that as one is responsible for one's actions, one must reconcile one's actions to God. Concerning the sacrament of Penance the Catechism of the Catholic Church states:

⁶ Augustine, 2010, p.18

⁷ Ibid. p.21

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Brown. R, 1978, pp.316-320

¹⁰ Augustine, 2010, p.20

Brown. R, 1978, pp.316-320

¹¹ Augustine, 2010, p.318

¹² Brown. R, 1978, pp.316-320

*‘Those who approach the sacrament of Penance obtain pardon from God’s mercy for the offense committed against him, and are, at the same time, reconciled with the Church which they have wounded by their sins and which by charity, by example, and by prayer labors for their conversion.’*¹³

The language used in this passage suggests that responsibility lies with the individual. The word ‘pardon,’ and ‘wounded’ implies that sin not only goes against God’s nature but that it taints God’s perfection. Although the passage suggests that an individual’s sin ‘wounds’ the Church, the nature of the Church is compared to the nature of Jesus: ‘the Church herself, the Bride of Christ, is holy and without blemish.’¹⁴ Accordingly, I would argue that to wound the Church is equivalent to wounding Christ and therefore God Himself. Likewise, the very act of Confession, another of the ‘Seven Sacraments of the Church,’ implies responsibility, as one must confess one’s sin in order to be absolved. Indeed, God’s retributive justice in hell is justified ‘as the result of the misuse of an absolutely free human will.’¹⁵

One of spiritualism’s ‘Seven Principles’ is ‘personal responsibility,’ which alludes to the notion of freewill. The presence of freewill is more explicit when considered in conjunction with the Principle, ‘compensation and retribution hereafter for all the good and evil deeds done on earth,’ which creates a correlation between one’s actions and one’s post-mortem experience.¹⁶ Indeed, a female spirit, communicating in 1869, states: ‘... [your] actions here [on earth] govern your state upon entering the spirit life; if you have been good and noble you will find the home for the good and noble awaiting you on the other side.’¹⁷ Implicit within the notion of ‘personal responsibility,’ therefore, is the notion of ‘freedom of action,’ especially if one’s actions directly affect the ‘sphere’ one enters on death.

However, it is the nature of the responsibility attached to freewill, which differentiates the Catholic and spiritualist worldview. Undoubtedly, in both teachings the onus of responsibility rests on the individual. Nevertheless, in Catholicism the reason one must confess and repent is because sin is contrary to God’s nature and therefore displeases Him. The act of confession is therefore to ‘[acknowledge] and praise...the holiness of God and...his mercy towards sinful [men].’¹⁸

Conversely, spiritualists believe that God has a nonjudgmental role. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, an author and pioneer of spiritualism, states: ‘when you die it is on your own spiritual development at that moment that you take your place in the next world.’¹⁹ Spiritualism therefore places emphasis on the Augustinian notion that sin changes man’s nature and deprives it of goodness, rather than sin being displeasing to God. Harry Boddington, a noted spiritualist, alludes to this by stating that one’s mental state ‘carries its owner to scenes and conditions’ in the afterlife.²⁰

I would therefore argue that the Catholic considers his admittance into ‘heaven’ or ‘hell’ as a reflection of his relationship with God; he has either earned the grace of God or not. However, for the spiritualist, his place in the ‘spirit world’ is a reflection of his own divine nature and the ‘goodness’ of his soul, achieved through good action alone.

Catholicism: the contours of heaven and hell

¹³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1422

¹⁴ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*,

¹⁵ Almond. P.C, 1994, p.152

¹⁶ www.snu.org.uk

¹⁷ Byrne.G,2010, p.92

¹⁸ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1424

¹⁹ Ballou. A, 1852, p.55

²⁰ *Ibid.*

Indeed, the centrality of one's relationship with God is evident by the fact that the Sacraments are fundamental to one's condition in the hereafter. For instance, if one did not confess one's mortal sins to a priest, who is Christ's representative on earth, one's sins would not be absolved and therefore forgiven. As a result, one would be condemned to hell, whereby one would have to endure eternal suffering and torment. However, if one's sins were confessed, but one had not adequately repented, one would go to purgatory, an intermediary state whereby one would be purged en-route to heaven.²¹

Heaven, therefore, is a place for the pure or sinless 'elect.' Indeed, admittance to heaven was to be part of the body of Christ. I would therefore argue that for the majority of Catholics only the saints would enter into heaven at the moment of death. This idea is expressed in early Church teachings, as Martyrs, who became the first saints and were venerated by Christians, were compared to Christ. The cult of Polycarp wrote: 'as to the Martyrs, we love them as the disciples and imitators of the Lord.'²²

It is interesting that from 1140 CE spatial terms began to be applied to the afterlife. The language used to describe hell, for instance, had dark and negative connotations. Phrases like 'a bottomless pit of darkness,' 'a furnace of fire,' 'a lake that burned with fire and brimstone,' 'a dark and tormenting prison' and 'chains of darkness' were used.²³ By describing hell as a 'prison,' a 'lake,' or as being a 'chain,' I would argue that it created a common perception that hell was a physical place. John Milton, in his *Paradise Lost*, describes hell as:

A Dungeon horrible, on all side round
As one great Furnace flam'd, yet from those flames
No light, but rather darkness visible
Serv'd onely to discover sights of woe²⁴

Despite Milton being a Protestant in his later life, his description 'stood in a tradition developed by the Church Fathers and was utilised by scholastic philosophers.'²⁵ Milton points towards a prison-like state where the flames of hell are torturous. Moreover, the imagery of darkness implies a sense of temporal and spiritual loss, which reflects the scholastic distinction between the punishment of loss (*poena damni*) and the punishment of the senses (*poena sensus*). Whilst the former describes a sense of grief, loss and anguish; the latter describes physical suffering by fire.²⁶

Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI, disagrees with the traditional notion of hell. Instead, he argues that hell 'is a challenge to oneself. It is a challenge to suffer in the dark night of faith, to experience communion with Christ in solidarity.'²⁷ Consequently, hell is not spatial but a necessary part of faith, as Christ entered into hell and experienced suffering; one can only 'draw near to the Lords radiance by sharing his darkness.'²⁸

²¹ The word *purgatorium*, which entered the lexicon around 1170 CE, implies a sense of purification, which is achieved through torture and suffering – Almond. P.C, 1994, p.67

Rosman.D, 2003, pp.3-6

²² Lake. K, 2005, p.28

Rosman. D, 2003, pp.3-6

²³ Almond. P.C, 1994, p.87

²⁴ Milton. J, *Paradise Lost*, Bk. I, l.61^67

²⁵ Almond.P.C, 1994, p.89

²⁶ Ibid. pp.88-94

²⁷ Ratzinger. J, 1988, p.216

²⁸ Ibid. p.218

Although I acknowledge that various conceptions of hell coexist, I would argue that the average Catholic considered hell in spatial rather than conceptual terms. Such distinctions have always been made; indeed, Origen suggests that the Church has two distinct theologies – ‘one for the ignorant masses, the other for the intellectual and ruling elite.’²⁹

This distinction is significant, especially when one acknowledges the concept of eternity, which runs throughout Catholic eschatology. F.D. Maurice, professor of dogmatic theology at King’s College London, during the nineteenth century, argues that eternity is a qualitative description of God, rather than a noun of duration. Moreover, he considered its connection with time to be a product of Enlightenment thinking. I would argue that eternity still carries connotations with time, amongst the ignorant masses, today.³⁰

As the notion of eternal damnation is a central to Christianity’s hell, the misinterpretation of the word has significant consequences. Concerning the centrality of eternal damnation, Ratzinger writes: ‘the idea of *eternal* damnation... has a firm place in the teaching of Jesus [my italics].’³¹ Therefore for the majority of Catholics, the notion of ‘eternal damnation’ suggests that one’s experience of hell is everlasting. That is, once a man’s merits have been judged, on the Day of the Last Judgement, a man’s fate is sealed and cannot be changed. Consequently, the damned are in a condition of everlasting darkness, suffering both physical and spiritual torture.

As such, the notion of eternity, alongside the common spatial perception of hell, results in the damned being in a static state of spiritual and physical torture. Moreover, one can argue that if hell is presented as a spatial, everlasting entity, then it follows that heaven ought to be described in the same way in order for maintain consistency. ‘Heaven’ and ‘hell’ can therefore be considered as distinct entities, and one’s experience of either ‘world’ is everlasting. Consequently, emphasis is placed on one’s physical life, as the way one acts during his lifetime has eternal consequences, which cannot be altered post-mortem.

Spiritualism: A dynamic, progressive experience

Conversely, I would argue that spiritualism, either consciously or accidentally, employs the traditional meaning of the word ‘eternity’ in its teachings. F.D Maurice argues that the early Church Fathers considered the word ‘*aionios*’ as meaning ‘without beginning and end’ when applied to the New Testament God.³² As such, the early Church considered the notion of eternity to relate to the knowledge of God, rather than duration of time. ‘Eternal Life’ can therefore be translated as possessing the knowledge of God, whereas ‘Eternal Death’ is the loss of that knowledge.³³

The redefining of the concept of eternity is significant on two counts; first, it lends further biblical authority to the Augustinian concept that sinful action changes man’s nature. To sin is to be deprived of the knowledge of God, whereas good action enables one to possess further knowledge.

Accordingly, this lends weight to the argument that the degree of knowledge, present within an individual’s soul at the point of death, determines his place in the ‘other world.’ Secondly, as the

²⁹ Almond. P.C, 1994, p.15

³⁰ Maurice. F.D, 1853, pp. 442-448

³¹ Ratzinger. J, 1988, p.125

³² Maurice. F.D, 1853, p.448

³³ Ibid.

Byrne. G, 2010, pp.116-118

notion of time is removed, eternity also refers to the present, as it possible for one to possess the knowledge of God today.

As such, Doyle's statement 'when you die it is on your own spiritual development at that moment that you take your place in the next world,' may be closer to Jesus' teachings than one first images, as the very notion of 'spiritual development' revolves around the idea of possessed knowledge. However, it also assumes that one's personality and consciousness survives physical death. Robert Dale Owen, son of Robert Owen, founder of the co-operative movement, writes: 'death destroys not, in any sense, either the life or identity of man.'³⁴ As such, spiritualists often refer to death as 'passing over' or 'transition,' as they consider death to be a natural continuation of life, which is experienced in two phases; the 'earth-phase' being preparatory for the 'spirit-phase' of life.³⁵

The notion of 'continuation' is discussed in Sir Oliver Lodge's work, *Raymond*.³⁶ For instance, Raymond describes his experience of the spirit world, which is startlingly worldly, by declaring that he lives in a home where there are flowers and trees.³⁷ Furthermore, he says: 'tell Father I have met up with some of his friends... Myers.'³⁸ During many of the communications there appears to be repeated references to human emotions and desires, which suggests they still continue to be part of one's conscious state in the afterlife. This is typified when the spirit of Raymond announces: 'you know I can't help *missing* you, but I am learning to be *happy*.' [my italics]³⁹ In reference to Raymond's experiences of other soldiers who he met up with on the 'other side,' Lodge notes:

'When they first come over [to the spirit-world] they do want things. Some want meat, and some strong drink; they call for whiskey sodas. Don't think I'm stretching it, when I tell you that they [the heavenly angels] can manufacture even that.'⁴⁰

The implications of such descriptions are far reaching. First, it suggests that one's post-mortem condition is a continuation of one's physical life; one is reunited with friends, continues to experience human emotions and is still driven by human desires. However, the physical landscape of the afterlife and the desires for food and drink were only temporary. As a spirit became used to their new environment they were 'weaned' from previous tastes and desires.⁴¹ Consequently, this suggests that one's experiences within the spirit world were constantly changing, as one became accustomed to their new surroundings and further knowledge of their spiritual-selves was obtained. Indeed, one spirit states 'we may sum up man's highest duty as a spiritual entity in the word PROGRESS – in knowledge of himself, and of all that makes for spiritual development.'⁴²

It is interesting that many of the spirits talk about the spirit-world as being 'stratified into "spheres" or "realms" and [that] a spirit was understood to have progressed when it rose 'upward' through these

³⁴ Owen. R.D, 1860, p.352

³⁵ Owen. R.D, 1871, p.123

³⁶ Sir Oliver Lodge, an eminent English Physicist and pioneer of Spiritualism, records the outcomes of a number of séances with a Mrs. O. Leonard, a noted spiritualist medium (the word 'medium' denotes a person who is capable of communicating with a discarnate spirit). During the course of these séances a number of communications took place between Lodge and his son, Raymond, who, at times, describes the nature of the spirit-world.

³⁷ Lodge. O, 1916, p.120

³⁸ Ibid. p.122

³⁹ Ibid

⁴⁰ Ibid. pp.200-202

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Moses. W.S, 1898, p.155

different realms,' as it strived to 'enter into the inner sanctuary to dwell in the presence of the All-pure, All-holy, All-perfect God.'⁴³ Although the exact number of spheres were debated, the spirits consistently claimed that there were somewhere in the middle realms. Moreover, spirits which claimed to be 'spiritually evolved' and therefore had experiences of the 'higher realms,' also openly admitted that they 'have not seen Him [God],' which suggests even in higher stages of development one's knowledge of God is incomplete.⁴⁴

Fundamental to the notion of 'spiritual development' is the concept of 'self-judgement.' That is immediate after death one judges oneself, rather than being judged by God. As such, spirits who existed in the lower realms were there because of 'self-banishment' and not because God was punishing them. Despite this, spiritualists employed traditional imagery of hell to describe these realms. They were often described as being 'lower,' or as 'places of punishment, of "darkness" and "grossness."' ⁴⁵ Moreover, this imagery was still synonymous with sinfulness, as it was thought that those who were in these 'lower realms' were people who refused to grow spiritually. However, there was still opportunity for 'upwards' progression towards God, which was achieved through acts of good work.⁴⁶ For instance, a spirit called Mabel Corelli Green, became involved with teaching spirit children, whilst some spirits, commonly referred to by spiritualists as 'spirit guides,' 'angels,' or 'guardians,' were in charge of assisting the spiritual development of incarnate souls.⁴⁷

It becomes apparent that Christian terminology and concepts are used throughout spiritualist teachings. Indeed, the notion of 'charity' is fundamental to spiritual progression and the way in which God is described as 'All-pure, All-holy, All-perfect' is Christian in itself. Moreover, the word 'heaven' is 'linked to the natural symbolic force of what is "high" or above,'" which is the same imagery employed by spiritualism in relation to 'spiritual progress.'⁴⁸

However, despite similarities in imagery, it is apparent that spiritualists did not consider 'heaven' and 'hell' to be distinct. In fact, the 'idea of a separate, everlasting, inescapable hell was abhorrent to Spiritualists.'⁴⁹ As such, spiritualists referred to the aggregate of 'realms' as 'heaven,' but considered the higher realms to be more holy than the middle ones, where most of the spirits who communicated dwelled. Consequently, implicit within spiritualist teaching is the notion of a spiritual continuum.⁵⁰

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would argue that despite their being similarities, in terms of the language used to describe the afterlife and the assimilation of Augustine's notion of freewill, between the two belief systems, I consider their teachings to be radically different.

Central to spiritualism and underpinning the notion of spiritual development, is the notion of universal salvation, which I have already illustrated does not feature in Catholic teaching, as heaven is preserved for the elect. Furthermore, the use of the word 'eternity' within Catholic teaching means that universal salvation is impossible, as it implies that one's post-mortem condition is everlasting.

⁴³ Byrne. G, 2010, p.89

Moses. W.S, 1898, pp.152-153

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Bryne. G, 2010, pp.89-91

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid. p.95

⁴⁸ Ratzinger. J, 1988, p.215

⁴⁹ Bryne.G, 2010, p.91

⁵⁰ Ibid

However, although it may be unintentional, I would argue that I have presented enough evidence to reasonably suggest that spiritualism incorporated into its teaching Maurice's reassertion of the word 'eternity.' This is because there is a direct correlation between the notion of 'spiritual development' and one's knowledge of God. Consequently, as a spiritualist considers eternity to be 'without beginning and end,' eternity becomes timeless, which means that one's post-mortem experience at the point of death is not constrained by time. Consequently, the spirit-world is dynamic, whereby one not only retains consciousness and one's personality, but where good action is rewarded by being closer to God. Indeed, good action is not only limited to the spirit world, as spiritualists claim that spirits influence our earthly lives today and can communicate with us. The distinction between 'heaven' and 'hell' therefore become redundant to the spiritualist, as the afterlife is merely an extension of one's spiritual nature in the present.

Despite these radical differences, the worldviews of Catholics and spiritualists are less diverse, as both acknowledge that good action affects one's experience in the next. Therefore emphasis is placed on this life. However, for the Catholic, Faith is superior to action, as it is only through Faith that one's relationship with God can be restored. However, spiritualism places emphasis on good action alone, as it is through action that self-knowledge is obtained, which determines the 'realm' one will inhabit immediately after death.

Although spiritualism and Catholicism are radically different, they both agree on there being a life-after-death. However, their interpretation of this 'reality' differs considerably, which epitomises the diversity inherent within eschatology.

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