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Heaven

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Beyond its basic meaning as the divine dwelling place, the idea in <u>Christian theology</u> of heaven as the ultimate (or penultimate) destiny of human beings is where most reflection has focused, and where most problems arise. The first part of this entry explores conceptual issues, the second imaginative ones. Six conceptual issues are examined: (1) the extent to which heaven and eschatological fulfilment 'at the end of the age' (cf. Dan 12:13) are competing or complementary models; (2) the two key motivations for advocating postmortem survival; (3) metaphysical conditions for entry; (4) moral conditions for entry; (5) mental activity in heaven; (6) social activity in heaven, including the question of whether personality might be transcended; (7) the scope of heaven's occupants; and (8) whether <u>time</u> is transcended. The imaginative section uses Dante's *Paradiso* to introduce three key imaginative issues: first, the competing symbolism of city and garden; second, the relevance of imagery of social interdependence; and third, the way in which the centrality of Christ might be developed.

Keywords: Eschatology, Bible, Jesus Christ, Imagination, Judgement, Immortalism, Salvation

Table of contents

1 Meaning

Not only is there an asymmetry between when the two ideas of heaven and <u>hell</u> originated (heaven being much earlier), but also the history of their treatment as literal or metaphorical appears reversed. Whereas hell began as a metaphor and became increasingly literal (see encyclopaedia article), heaven began literally, only later to acquire more metaphorical significance. Thus, there is little doubt that heaven as the place where God dwells once had a specific literal designation, in the area beyond the vault of the sky. As such it was conceived of as a solid firmament (Gen 1:6–8; Isa 45:12), apparently resting on pillars (Job 26:11) and with windows (Gen 8:2). Indeed, as is argued by a number of contemporary scholars, including the conservative Jewish rabbi Benjamin Sommer (2009) it was an account which was reinforced by the assumption that divinity was itself constituted by a more refined form of matter, rather than not being physical at all. Therefore it was not so much the case that the sky was used as an image for transcendence as that the notion went naturally with where the divine abode was placed. In the patristic period advantage was taken of the fact that Gen 1:1–2 speaks of 'heavens' in the plural, to distinguish (as in Augustine, *Confessions* XII.2) between lower heavens and 'the heaven of heavens' where God dwells. In medieval <u>cosmology</u>, the primary site of the divine was commonly located in the Empyrean, the highest heaven, borrowed from ancient Greek cosmology that spoke of its constitution as a 'fiery' fifth element, aether. Action was effected at a distance largely through the work of <u>angels</u> ('messengers'). Only gradually was such a specific location for the divine abandoned altogether, with heaven now seen as an entirely non-physical reality and as such capable of 'touching' the world at any and every point – as in the sort of imagery to be found in J. H. Newman (1801–1890). He suggests that 'every breath of air and ray of light and heat' be thought of as the 'waving of the robes of those whose face see God in heaven', with 'the angels revealed to us, that heaven may be as little as possible an unknown place in our imagination' (Newman 1987: 453, 456). Similarly, C. S. Lewis makes for the children of his Narnia stories an immediate connection to another realm through a wardrobe (Lewis 1950). In short, heaven had now become a metaphor for a different kind of reality, transcendent to us in the same overwhelming way as the physical heavens are vastly distant from us.

Even so, that was not the only use of the term. Even though a non-physical heaven might make better sense when the primary emphasis is on divine omnipresence, heaven was also used to speak of the ultimate destiny of human beings, embodied or otherwise. The language of 'soul' could be accommodated relatively easily to the later version of what heaven meant. More difficult was the primary Christian imagery of '<u>resurrection</u>', given that it was commonly taken to imply some continuing physical reality. Perhaps unsurprisingly, therefore, this sort of heaven (also sometimes known as paradise) was usually relegated to the end of the age, even though that idea sat uneasily with the idea

of Christ's resurrection body and Mary's assumed body, both presumed to be already in some kind of spatial heaven. Since it is this latter notion of human beings occupying 'God's space' (rather than God's space as such) which presents the greater difficulties, the rest of this article will be devoted to consideration of some of the major issues raised. Attention will be devoted first to conceptual questions, and then to imaginative. The latter are of special importance, since, as Newman saw, without imaginative appropriation any convictions about such a different form of reality are unlikely to gain any significant purchase among Christian believers.

2 Conceptual questions

2.1 Competing or complementary models

The merely shadowy postmortem existence that dominates the Hebrew scriptures (e.g. 1 Sam 28:14; Ps 31:17; Ezek 32:21, 27) was shared by many other cultures, including the Greek Homer in his description of Odysseus' visit to the underworld (*Odyssey* XI). However, longings for the immortality of the soul were found as early as the Sumerian classic *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (c. 2100 BCE). These were given classic expression in the writings of Plato (427–347 BCE), especially in the four arguments for the immortality of the soul that he provides in his dialogue *The Phaedo*, the first of his middle-period works. While the notion did gain acceptance in some late Jewish biblical material, including two late psalms (49:16; 73:24–26) and the Book of Wisdom (1:15; 3:4; 4:1; 8:17; 15:3), its appearance is most prominent in Jewish apocryphal writings (e.g. 4 Maccabees, Jubilees and 1 Enoch). So firmly embedded were these ideas that a number of scholars (e.g. Nickelsburg 1972; Barr 1992) have argued that it is a mistake to see them as an essentially foreign Greek import, to be contrasted with notions of a native emphasis on the resurrection of the body, as in Dan 12:1–3 and 2 Macc 7:13, 31–38. Indeed, the result was a New Testament world in which both conceptions were seriously entertained. So, for example, one might contrast Matt 25:31–46 (resurrected body) with Luke 16:19–31 and 23:42–43 (soul), with Paul employing both, as in 1 Thess 4:13–18 and 2 Cor 12:1–4. Although hard to codify, it does look as though resurrection of the body was reserved for the end of the age, while something like immortality of the soul is assumed for any postmortem existence immediately after death.

However, further complications are introduced by the scenario envisaged by the Apocalypse or book of Revelation. In chapter 20, prior to the last judgment, a thousand-year reign of the saints seems to be envisaged. While across history the passage inspired a number of radical 'millenarian' groups, such as the late second century Montanists and Reformation followers of people like Thomas Müntzer and Gerard Winstanley, in the early church it was quickly subjected to a less literal interpretation (Kovacs and Rowland 2004: 199–219). Nonetheless, that still left the need to reconcile accounts of what happened immediately after death and at the end. Here Augustine's influence was definitive. A first

and second resurrection were assumed, the first involving the resurrection of just souls at death and the second a resurrection of the bodies of all humanity at the last judgment (*City of God* XX.6; Augustine of Hippo 2003: 903–906).

It was this pattern which the Middle Ages inherited, and which is therefore also found in Thomas Aquinas. A somewhat surprising feature of the discussion is that the first death is taken to involve a 'resurrection' of the soul, primarily because it is assumed to go to a place in the heavens with a specific location where it could eventually be united with its body. Indeed, to that end, there are even discussions of how it could ascend despite being heavier than some of the elements above it (Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* IV.87; O'Neill 2022: 327–328). More expected is debate about what kind of life might reasonably be expected of a soul that lacks a body. The extent of Augustine's commitment to the natural immortality of the soul can be seen in early works such as the *Soliloquies*, where the soul's knowledge of immortal truths is taken as indicative of its character (Augustine of Hippo 1990). However, even when Aristotle's assumption of a different relation between soul and body replaced Platonism as the main philosophical influence on the church's theologians, not dissimilar ideas remained in force. A pivotal moment proved to be the debate which took place in 1336. Although he recanted on his deathbed, Pope John XXII had denied that the full beatific vision of God was possible before the last judgment. However, his successor, Pope Benedict XII, declared in his decree of 1336 (*Benedictus Deus*) that entry to heaven upon death was of such a kind as already to allow its full enjoyment. Only a relatively minor or secondary completion must wait till the end of the age. Those baptized and purged of any surviving sin:

> already before the resumption of their bodies and before the general judgment, have been, are and will be with Christ in heaven […] These souls have seen and see the divine essence with an intuitive vision and even face to face (*faciali*), without the mediation of any creature by way of object of vision; rather the divine essence immediately manifests itself to them, plainly clearly and openly, and in this vision they enjoy the divine essence. Moreover, by this vision and enjoyment the souls of those who have already died are truly blessed and have eternal life and rest. Also the souls of those who will die in the future will see the same divine essence and will enjoy it before the general judgment. (present author's translation; Denzinger and Shönmetzer 1976: 296–297)

Such a two-stage process is, however, largely ignored in contemporary thinking, whether among academics or at the more popular level. A choice is commonly made, with individuals either immediately going to heaven after death or else needing to wait to the end of the age. Over the course of the twentieth century the latter option has greatly increased in popularity, partly because of declining belief in alternative spiritual worlds but partly (especially among theologians) because of increasingly recognition of the

apocalyptic character of the teaching of the early church (and perhaps of Jesus too). Albert Schweizer (1875–1965) effectively began the trend with his *The Quest for the Historical Jesus* of 1906. Among more contemporary writers, one might mention it as a repeated theme in the work of Jürgen Moltmann (e.g. 1996). The intervening period is then usually described as souls being 'asleep in the Lord' until that point in time. A phrase in Paul (1 Thess 4:13–15) that was once intended as a euphemism for death (as in 'pass away') is now interpreted literally. Sometimes there is talk of 'correcting' earlier 'less-biblical' perspectives. But while this might be correct in the different balance offered, there seems little doubt that, as we saw above, a belief in the immortality of the soul and in resurrection of the body did for most of the history of the Christian tradition run side by side.

Given these conflicting pulls, it is not surprising that some periods of Christian history have been dominated by eschatological hope while others have been content to point to a transcendent heaven as the significant alternative reality. In determining what degree of modification, if any, might be required to traditional answers, it is important to work back from first principles and consider why such doctrines emerged in the first place.

2.2 Motivations for advocating postmortem survival

The question applies equally to imminent or delayed fulfilment. Two motives in particular may be noted. First, there was (and is) a concern that justice should be achieved: that there should be a 'balancing of the books'. In earlier Jewish tradition this took the form of hopes for the restoration of the nation (e.g. Jer 30:1–38:22). Increasingly, however, compensation came to be applied to individuals, for example in acceptance of the necessity for some divine act to balance the pains of martyrdom, most obviously in 2 Macc 7:14–38(cf. 14:46). While it is possible to interpret the change as due to no more than a reflection of the nation's declining power, a story can also be told of the guiding hand of God and so of revelation. In the same way that henotheism (exclusive worship of a single deity without denial of the existence of other such beings), to avoid misconceptions, had to precede monotheism and monotheism to precede trinitarianism, so it could be maintained that a social understanding of interdependence needed to foreground a more individualist perspective, in order to avoid discounting the social (contrast, for example, Exod 20:5–6 and Ezek 18:19–20). Such an appeal to justice has also reappeared in some contemporary theological reflection, in response to the presence of 'Horrendous Evils' in the world (Adams 1999). But, although such appeals to justice are to be found in one form or another in all the world's major religions, they are not without difficulty. A once-common objection is that God as the origin of all cannot possibly stand in any kind of relationship of reciprocal obligation. Equally, even if such reciprocity is accepted, it is not clear how convincing such compensatory notions really are. Is not the most pressing obligation to provide some immediate aid to individuals (in grace assisting them in their present distress) rather than appeal to a more distant balancing of the books?

Secondly, there was also a deeper intuition that divinity so valued individuals that a closer relationship with them was desired, and that this would therefore involve their full flourishing. The suggestion in John 3:16, that divine love brings eternal life with it for those who believe, was expanded in the Shorter Westminster Catechism as 'man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him for ever' (cf. Ps 73:25). Within the Catholic tradition this continued to be called 'the beatific vision', utilizing the metaphor which Paul uses in 1 Corinthians: 'Now we see in a mirror dimly, but then we shall see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I am known' (1 Cor 13:12).

Trying to expand on what this might involve inevitably meant pulls in different directions. Much was premised on existing aspirations, for example the contemplative monk using the second sentence of the above passage by Paul to justify talk of an intellectual vision, the mystic using it to justify further mystic experiences of union, and by the ordinary person to justify more of ordinary life but better. It is sometimes said that one should remain totally agnostic about what might come next and so inquire no further. But, without further conceptualisation, the conviction of any such closer relationship would soon lose its force.

It is therefore worth asking what further development might be involved. In more recent centuries there is often little sense, as in the past, of the primary or even exclusive emphasis being on a connection with God, rather it is much more on the pursuit of happiness through more immediate goals (McDannell and Lang 1988: 181–352; Garrett 2015: 95–124). So, for example, in the 1868 best-seller *The Gates Ajar* E. S. Phelps makes heaven little more than an extension of the Victorian home, while in the twentieth century other more 'anchored' alternatives were sought, as in James Hilton's novel *Shangri-La* of 1933 or the Elysian Fields which feature in Ridley Scott's film *The Gladiator* (2000). But it would be wrong to suggest that false pathways were absent in earlier times. In particular, there was a tendency to suppose the continuation of earthly hierarchies. The way in which the fourteenth century poet William Langland makes the penitent thief eat his food off heaven's floor in his poem *Piers Plowman* (XII. 202–205) is a memorable example of attitudes once common even among the church's theologians, including Augustine and Aquinas.

2.3 Metaphysical conditions for entry

In this and the subsequent section there are two rather different questions to consider. First, there is the metaphysical issue of what it might mean for individuals to survive death, whether immediately or through resurrection at the end of time. Second, there is the spiritual issue of appropriate prior moral dispositions.

Given the quite different metaphysical presuppositions envisaged in each stage of this process, it would be easy to present the notion as inherently contradictory. It is important to note, therefore, that in the history of their application the contrasts are not quite so

extreme as it would be if one followed the understanding of the soul found in René Descartes (1596–1650). For Descartes, nature (including other animals) was seen as entirely mechanistic, with the human soul alone a pure, immortal mind, unclouded by emotion or pain (*Meditation* VI; Keeling 1968: 187–213). In marked contrast, the medieval soul intended for heaven was seen as including the full range of emotions. Indeed, in various ways it functioned altogether more like a soul which continued to have a body, for example in the range of pains and pleasures to which it was seen as subject (Bynum 1995). Similarly, already in Paul's writings there is an emphatic declaration of the vast difference that exists between the present earthly body and any future resurrection body; as different as a seed is from its final product (1 Cor 15:35–57, esp. 37–38). It would therefore be safer to conclude that the metaphysics adopted was subordinate in both cases to deeper considerations. What mattered was the claim that the human being survives, not necessarily the choice of one conceptual system over another. Another way of putting this is to affirm that the true underlying aim was the preservation of the totality of whatever makes for human identity, rather than any particular way of achieving this.

Most contemporary thought finds difficulty both with substance dualism and with any unqualified notion of resurrection. Richard Swinburne and J. P. Moreland have argued that substance dualism is consistent with the deliveries of modern science, and also essential to account for the rational faculties of human beings (Swinburne 1997; 2013; Moreland 2014). But this would be a minority position, with most contemporary thought requiring more interaction and interdependence between spirit and body. Nancey Murphy, for instance, has critiqued substance dualism for being scientifically inadequate, suggesting that the rational and higher-level functions of human beings are better framed within non-reductive physicalism and the language of neuroscience (Murphy 2006). Whether that would leave any room for talk of the survival of the soul is a question to which we will need to return.

In the meantime, it may be noted that the final end scenario is also not without its difficulties. While Augustine and Aquinas alike denied any continuing role for digestive and erotic functions, both insist upon an enhancement of the original physical body, and so what they see as real continuity. Augustine even has a long discussion considering whether the beatific vision might be secured by physical as well as spiritual sight (*City of God* XXII.29; Augustine of Hippo 2003: 1081–1087). However, most important for him is that the resurrected body should reach the full stature of Christ (Eph 4:13), and so be a body in its prime (*City of God* XXII.15–16; Augustine of Hippo 2003: 1055–1057), even if as, with Christ himself, physical marks might still be carried as badges of honour (*City of God* XXII.19; Augustine of Hippo 2003: 1061–1062).

Ironically, whereas Augustine sought to answer those who saw return to the body as a retrograde step, the contemporary challenge is most likely to come from the opposite

side, from those who see such transformations of body and universe as inimical to their fundamental character as essentially subject to decay. Even if possible in theory, the lack of continuity would seem sufficient to call into doubt whether it was really the same persons and world whose existence is being continued. Leaving such objections to one side for the moment, it will be appropriate to note here why, apart from embeddedness in the tradition, theological pressures remain towards endorsing such a perspective. Just as giving an ending to the lives of individuals helps give purpose to their actions, so the same might be said for history as a whole. Indeed, such a view might be said to be integral to Christian notions of hope. Yet, on the other side it may be noted that most humans are content with less wide-ranging aims or vision.

As we have already seen, for most of Christian history it was assumed that the soul was naturally immortal. There was thus no problem in conceiving of the soul's elevation at death to a contemporaneous heaven, nonphysical like itself. Nowadays, however, there is near-universal acknowledgement of the mind's dependence on the brain. Quite a few Christian theologians interpret this conclusion as retrospective endorsement of the dominant biblical perspective of human beings as psychosomatic unities, of a soul incapable of existing apart from the body. A natural temptation might then be to say that nothing can happen until the end of the age, with divine power then used to resurrect the body. But matters are not quite that simple. Despite Paul's strong assertion of the huge difference between the two bodies, for most of Christian history it has been assumed that major continuities must continue to exist. Indeed, these were deemed of such a close kind that cremation was all but universally forbidden until the twentieth century, so important was it held to be that the same set of bones were still available. Thus, cremation was only first allowed in Britain in 1885. Catholic resistance lasted until 1997 (though with some degree of acceptance in the Code of Canon Law in 1983), while Orthodoxy still forbids the practice. Thus both types of conceptualization face fresh metaphysical challenges.

Some theologians have attempted to escape altogether from such a choice. Karl Rahner (1904–1984) suggested that at death the soul immediately enters into relation with the world as a whole, with the world in some sense functioning as the soul's new body (Rahner 1973; Murphy 1988). However, it is hard to make sense of the proposal since each of us would cease to have our own individuating matter. The more common strategy is to seek new forms of analogy. One which draws on the world of computers suggests that we think of our mental constitution as rather like computer software that can be preserved until the final days, at which point it could then be attached to a new set of hardware. The analogy was first proposed by the theoretical physicist Sir John Polkinghorne (1930–2021), and is used in a number of his books: for example, the soul is described as an 'almost infinitely complex *information-bearing pattern*' (Polkinghorne 2004: 161, emphasis added). But, if that analogy works, one might also talk of a soul being reconstituted in relation to a different matter from that which prevails in this universe, perhaps analogous

to the 'matter' of a parallel universe. 'Parallel universe' is a term used both in quantic mechanics and by fantasy writers, the common element being a world running alongside our own but not detectable from it. Alternatively, one might think of the immaterial souls acting in an entirely different sort of way, in an entirely non-physical universe, for example, as in the various proposals made by the philosopher H. H. Price (1899–1984). He suggested that each individual might be able to create a dream world based on past memories which could then be shared through telepathy (Price 1972).

2.4 Moral conditions for entry

In providing the appropriate context in which to think about moral and spiritual preparations for life in heaven, it is important to note how different the form of ethics which dominated the twentieth century (and indeed much of the nineteenth) was from the practices of earlier, more Christian ages. Conditions for decision-making were presumed to lie entirely on the surface, as it were, with the immediate availability of all that it was necessary to know either on the basis of the high morality of Kantian choice or else the more pragmatic procedures advocated by Utilitarianism. By contrast, for most of Christian history something quite different had been assumed to be essential by way of preparation, involving a certain kind of prior, fixed disposition. Such was the context for talk of the necessary cultivation of seven virtues, 'powers' already inclining one to act in specific ways that had been encouraged by education and practice. Four that had been discussed in Plato's *Republic* were identified as the cardinal 'secular' virtues of justice, courage, temperance and practical wisdom, to which were added the three theological virtues of faith, hope, and love.

There is biblical precedent for talk of instantaneous transformation: 'in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye' (1 Cor 15:52). And it is a notion which continued into later Christian thought, as in the poet John Donne's assertion that 'God shall create us all Doctors in a minute' (Donne 1962: IV, 128). Yet it is not altogether easy to make sense of the claim. After all, if the new dispositions are to be properly owned by the individual concerned, do they not need some sense of themselves acquiring them rather than these being simply imposed upon them from without? Instantaneous transformation into some very different sort of being seems to suggest an altogether different sort of being, rather than one continuous with what has gone before. Therefore, there do seem to be good arguments for thinking of pre- and postmortem change requiring a degree of gradualism, which would then fit naturally with earlier notions of purgatory as a place where purgative progress could occur towards more perfect dispositions (see Purgatory in Historical Perspective; Brown 1985: 447–456). Even in contemporary thought the notion occasionally resurfaces, as in T. S. Eliot's famous description of how: 'We only live, only suspire, / Consumed by either fire or fire' (*Little Gidding* IV, 13–14). More importantly, one might note the revival of such a dispositional account of morality in modern English philosophy. Pioneered

especially by the writers Elizabeth Anscombe, Philippa Foot, Mary Midgley and Iris Murdoch, it may be significant that three out of the four had religious convictions that were encouraged by their tutor, the Scottish philosopher Donald Mackinnon (Lipscomb 2022). Another Scottish philosopher writing in a similar vein was Alasdair MacIntyre (b. 1929), as in his 1981 work *After Virtue* and onwards. He converted from Marxism to Catholicism in 1983.

Such an approach to the creation and development of moral dispositions also helps to refute any suggestion that, for the notion of heaven to be workable, individual freedom would need to be denied. How otherwise is the regression of some particular individual to be avoided? The answer is that the relevant virtues would be so deeply embedded that they would prevent any such fall. Putting it a different way, instead of freedom to do otherwise the key freedom would now be seen as lying in the ability to pursue further what had already been chosen, or, in other words, the freedom for self-realisation (Gaine 2003).

Complicating all such discussions is the history of theology, and the key part unacceptable applications of the doctrine of purgatory played in fostering the Reformation. The idea had become too closely associated with crude calculations of the seriousness of sin and corresponding degrees of merit, through the sale of indulgences that entirely ignored the divine ability to transcend such categories in freely bestowed grace. As the relevant article in the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England (1563) declares, the idea was seen as 'a fond thing vainly invented, and grounded upon no warranty of Scripture, but rather repugnant to the Word of God' (Article XXII). It is true that most biblical passages cited in support of belief in purgatory admit of alternative meanings (e.g. Matt 5:26; Rev 20:13–15). However, if even the passage to which appeal is most commonly made does not bear such a precise meaning, it does at least demonstrate that the need for such purification was acknowledged: 'the fire will test what sort of work each has done […] If the work is burned, the builder will suffer loss; the builder will be saved, but only as through fire' (1 Cor 3:12–15, NRSV).

In the patristic period, where notions of progress were sometimes canvassed but increasingly stress was placed on punishment for past sin (see further encyclopaedia entry on Purgatory). Its development as a specific place is relatively late, not occurring until after 1170 (according to le Goff, who posits wider sociological pressures (1984). In essence, disentangled from accretions, two key points remain: the need for purification before a sinful soul could enter the divine presence and that, however it was accomplished, this should be seen as a matter of divine grace. Because any appeal for help to saints already in heaven was seen as undermining the unique quality of grace from Christ, such prayers were also jettisoned at the Reformation. However, answers to theological objections are possible, by stressing that no ultimate change of status can occur after death, while the saints should be seen as operating not on their own but as part of the body of Christ. It is

in such a spirit that more recent Catholic defences of the doctrine have been written (e.g. Rahner 1980: 181–193; Thiel 2013: 97–105). This presumably explains why in the public prayer of some Protestant churches remembering the dead and invoking the saints has once again become quite common. Yet, it is surely a retreat too far to suggest, as Thiel does, that purgatory should be absorbed into heaven, with one of heaven's major roles now seen as the achievement of mutual forgiveness (Thiel 2013: 51–55, 171–174). While undoubtedly of immense value from a Christian perspective, forgiveness seems too limited and temporary a goal to be made constitutive of the very identity of heaven.

Even with these historical divergences admitted, it would be a mistake to exaggerate their extent. Mainline Protestant churches have continued to stress heaven as a present reality. This is partly because sects which cherished apocalyptic expectations were regarded as dangerous fanatics, as can be seen, for example, both in Martin Luther's condemnation of the Peasants' Revolt and Thomas Cranmer's decision to exclude most of the book of Revelation from the lectionary of the new Church of England. In marked contrast, the notion of the soul as immortal and so as potentially fit for heaven continued in full force. As the Calvinist Westminster Confession (1647) puts it:

> The bodies of men after death return to dust, and see corruption; but their souls, (which neither die nor sleep), having an immortal subsistence, immediately return to God who gave them. The souls of the righteous, being then made perfect in holiness, are received into the highest heavens, where they behold the face of God in light and glory, waiting for the full redemption of their bodies. (Chapter XXII: 'Of the State of Man after Death')

Therefore, disagreement is about how the perfection of heaven is achieved, not about its already-existing fundamental character. To more detailed consideration of that character we now turn.

2.5 Mental activity in heaven, including the question of boredom

A modern (but in fact long-standing) objection to the possibility of providing adequate content to the concept of heaven has been that any such form of existence would be intrinsically boring, not least in the continuous repetition of the same sort of activities such as the beatific vision, or worship more generally, which are always guaranteed fulfilment (Williams 1973: 82–100). Although medieval Christian theologians mocked the literalism of Islam in its acceptance of continuing basic bodily functions (Lange 2016), sometimes Christian expectations could be just as crude. The novelist and cleric, Charles Kingsley, for instance, insisted on the presence of married erotic love in heaven (McDannell and Lang 1988: 262–263), despite Jesus' denial (Mark 12:26; Luke 20:35). Again, in the

earlier and hugely popular visions of *Heaven and Hell* (2002), from the pen of Emmanuel Swedenborg, life is presented as surprisingly close to that of earth, with married love again endorsed (Swedenborg 2002). Although Swedenborg influenced Balzac, Blake, Emerson, and Jung, among others, it is important to note that this was not the dominant Christian intellectual tradition. Although Irenaeus looked forward to an earthly millennium of feasting before the final resurrection to heaven, ingestion and sexual intercourse are excluded by most major theologians, including Augustine and Aquinas.

In any event, the 'boring' objection had already been countered by the fourth century Cappadocian theologian, Gregory of Nyssa. Assuming a more spiritual form of existence, he had insisted that it would have its own distinctive raison d'être, in a venture of exploration:

> This truly is to see God: never to have found the satisfaction of one's desire. But one must always, by looking at what it is possible to see, be fired on towards the desire to see more. Thus no limit should interrupt growth in the ascent to God, since no boundary to the Good can be found nor is the progress of the desire for the Good cut off because it is satisfied. (Present author's translation, *Life of Moses* II, 239; *Sources Chrétiennes* 1955: 109 [vol. 1])

Similar sentiments are to be found in his contemporary, Gregory Nazianzen (*Oratio* 38.7). It was also a position endorsed by Aquinas in his more intellectualist account. While he accepted gradations between what could be achieved by different individuals, it is important to note that all were ultimately seen as equally dependent on divine illumination as gift, in completing what was understood to be the highest aspect of the human soul: its quest for knowledge. In a similar way, Calvin had insisted in his earliest theological treatise, *Psychopannychia* or 'Sleep of the Soul' (1534; see 1932) that the Anabaptists were wrong to think only of 'sleep' prior to the Last Judgement. Instead, he advocates growth in heaven, a position that is further developed in the later *Institutes* where, like Aquinas, he accepts differences in attainment:

> We should regard as above all controversy the teaching of Scripture that, just as God, variously distributing his gifts to the saints in this world, beams upon them unequally, so there will not be an equal measure of glory in heaven, where God shall crown his own gifts. (III, 25,10; Calvin 1965: 1005 [vol. 2])

Yet, as the Scottish theologian John Baillie observes, especially by the nineteenth century such depictions of the pursuit of progress were in danger of degenerating into endless, busy activity. It was almost as though the attempt was being made to match evolution in an earthly context. The notion also seemed to sit uneasily with the divine promise of

eternal rest. 'Instead of development toward fruition', Baillie therefore suggests, 'there will be development in fruition' (Baillie 1933: 281). In other words, instead of progressive development towards some ultimate goal, each new action is better seen as an end in itself.

While the presence of hierarchy in thinkers as different as Aquinas and Calvin could be put down simply to natural conservatism, it is also possible to speak of progress matching gifts, and so appropriate adaptation to each individual. Even so, it is surprising how little attention is given to social interaction, which is the next issue to which we turn.

2.6 Social activity in heaven, including transcending personality

Gregory of Nyssa's counter-argument to boredom might have been strengthened by some reference to learning more about others in heaven, but for most of the earlier history of Christian theology the focus had been almost exclusively on a deepening personal and individual relationship with God. This is certainly true of both Augustine and Aquinas. Although some scholars do emphasize a social element in Augustine, for instance in the way in which he stresses the ability of earthly individuals to relate to one another without lust or other fallen emotions obstructing the relationship, the conclusion of one philosophical commentary is significant: 'in the Augustinian view the city of God is not a political association. It has no politics; politics belong with sin' (Kirwan 1989: 224). Therefore, although Augustine speaks of 'a completely ordered and completely concordant fellowship in the enjoyment of God and of one another in God' (*City of God* 9.13), he seems unable to envisage any form of cooperation that might involve various levels of discussion and disagreement as progress is made towards a common goal.

Largely confining the relationship to the divine was, in part, motivated by the desire to avoid any implication that the divine was in itself insufficient to fulfil human longing. In the case of Augustine however it is hard not to detect influence also from Neoplatonism, and in particular Plotinus' famous description of the spiritual goal as 'the flight of the alone to the Alone' (*Enneads* VI.9.11). Even the conclusion of Augustine's *De Trinitate* is found to reflect a similar emphasis: 'When we shall have come to you […] we shall say one thing without end, in praising you in One, ourselves also made one in you' (present author's translation; XV.28.51). Again, while admitting that friends are essential to human flourishing in this life, Thomas Aquinas takes a quite different view of the next:

> But if we were to speak of the perfect happiness which there will be in our homeland, the society of friends is not required of necessity for happiness because human beings have the complete fullness of their perfection in God […] As a consequence, if a solitary soul

> was enjoying God, that person would be blessed, even if they did not have someone close whom they might love. (Present author's translation; *Summa Theologiae* 1–2, q.4 a.8)

Such a perspective contrasts markedly with the strong biblical emphasis – especially in Paul and John – on the social character of salvation, mediated through incorporation into Christ (e.g. 1 Cor 12:4–30; Rom 6:3–11; Eph 2:4–10; John 15:1–11). Given the strong metaphorical character of 1 Cor 13:12, it is somewhat surprising that this verse was given precedence over the declaration elsewhere of God that 'it is he alone who has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see' (1 Tim 6:16). Does such an intellectual vision not then need to be accommodated within strong scriptural insistence upon the indispensable role of Christ's humanity in human salvation and, with it, salvation's more general social character? This is not to challenge the possibility of a beatific vision of such a kind, only to raise the issue of whether it too might not be more plausibly mediated through Christ's humanity, and so given a portrayal in more obviously social terms.

In support, one might note that there is a strong element of interdependence already in earthly life, inasmuch as individuals are in fact the product of the influence of numerous others, including family, teachers, and friends. Perhaps we should think of such influences being made more explicit in the next life, and so of awareness being not simply individualistic but rather a function of such interactions. Such a notion would also give added strength to the doctrine of the communion of the saints, as it would make better sense of asking for their prayers. The desire would then be not just for their help but also an expression of the desire for a closer identification with them, in sharing their Christ-like character and so eventually being made one with them in heaven. Again, prayers for the dead would be part of a mutual search for the kind of forgiveness that could eventually make possible a richly fulfilling common life together (Brown 2016: 153–190). Defenders of the centrality of the beatific vision are likely to object that to speak thus effectively undermines the determination of the tradition, from Augustine to Calvin, to keep God in an absolutely central place. But this is not necessarily so, if everything significant remains mediated through the human Christ and he in turn guides those in his corporate body in their encounter with the divine.

2.7 Scope of heaven's occupants

As noted earlier, much theological discussion over the past century or so has focussed on eschatology rather than on heaven as such. One aspect of that discussion has been to present what is redeemed as in effect a retrospective endorsement of the value of what may still remain contested in our present world. So, for example, both Wolfhart Pannenberg (1928–2014) and Jürgen Moltmann (b.1926) see it as a way of asserting the value of enmattered reality. Therein lies the strength of the position of those church

fathers such as Origen and Gregory of Nyssa who conceived of the end as the 'restoration' or 'recapitulation' of all things (*apokatastasis*; cf. Acts 3:21). Such developments of the 'new creation', though, have been criticized for failing to give sufficient attention to how contemporary scientific accounts foresee the world as ending (Wilkinson 2010: 23–52).

Much attention has also been given of late to those who in the past were marginalized on such accounts. While Augustine did give fleeting acknowledgement to questions of what might happen to the physically and mentally disabled (*City of God*, XXII, 13–14; *Enchiridion* 87), the change in focus has been to consider, so far as possible, matters from the perspective of the disadvantaged themselves, in particular what kind of transformation they might want and how this relates to how they are regarded in their present position by those close to them (e.g. Yong 2007: 259–292). Again, taking up occasional earlier precedents, such as the views of John Wesley in his famous *General Deliverance* sermon (Wesley 1988: 437–550 [vol. 2]), some writers have sought to explore what it might mean to talk of the survival of animals as valued in their own right (see Nonhuman Animals in Christian Theology; Johnson 2014; Clough 2014, esp. Part 3).

Not that this is the only possible approach. C. S. Lewis adopted at different times two quite different strategies. One was to suggest a Platonic form as representative of a particular species as a whole. The other more plausible strategy was his suggestion that human beings, by their cultivation of particular creatures, could raise them to self-consciousness, which in Lewis' view is a necessary condition for postmortem existence (Foster 1997: 47–53). In contemporary discussion, however, a much wider range of possibilities would need to be taken into account. On the one hand, there are animals such as dolphins which already seem to possess such characteristics, while on the other hand some human beings only possess minimal self-awareness and yet are no less valuable for all that.

At the same time, numerous complications arise when we start to consider those animals that seem to be gifted with only short-term memories. In such cases it is hard to make sense of talk of compensation for past pain. This is not the place to consider such questions in any detail, except to note that some other religions seem to find it much easier to speak of value in the transitory as such. This latter idea is not much canvassed within Christian theology but its potential value can be seen in Japanese religious thought (e.g. Tanizaki 2001; Juniper 2003) and in some aspects of Indian religion, such as both Buddhist and Hindu mandalas which are created only to be destroyed shortly thereafter.

So far as the immediately postmortem heaven is concerned, it is more difficult to envisage what might happen given its less physical conception. It is possible that some use might be made of the more social aspects considered under the previous heading. Volunteers in L'arche communities, caring for the mentally challenged, often comment on the way in which it turns out not to be just a matter of their contribution to those in their care but also

a powerful formative impact the other way round, from the actual members of the house. In effect, both sides end up creating a more wholesome corporate identity.

In a similar manner, it is worth noting how the identity of pets might best be seen as preserved through the way in which they contributed to the shaping of the lives of their owners. Consider the case of dogs as valued pets. In experiencing their unconditional love, one can also learn about a primary characteristic of the divine in its similar, unqualified character. Again, in the need quite frequently to place the animal's interests above the owner's own (for example in necessary walks), truly other-regarding desires are more fully developed. To the objection that such an account would still be to exalt human consciousness above the animals, it may be observed that the resultant consciousness of the human being is in quite a real sense the product as much of the dog as of the owner. Therefore, the dog could be said to survive in this more mystic sense of identity.

2.8 Whether time is transcended

It is quite often objected that the notion of heaven is trying to link two incompatibles: the divine – which thinks without any succession in its thoughts (for an omniscient being everything is available for inspection in a single moment) – and humanity – which cannot avoid this succession. Some claim that, in the afterlife, human beings would themselves enter a timeless world and so draw closer to God in this way. But it is not clear that such a notion makes any kind of logical sense, unless one makes what is very rare in ordinary human life into the norm. So, for example, any sense of temporal succession can disappear when we are intensely involved in some particular experience: not only can this happen with religious mystics but even in ordinary situations such as intense enjoyment of a film or football match. The individual concerned ceases to be aware of the passage of time, though even in such circumstances it is an awareness which returns. In any event, the argument is not about the conceivability or otherwise of a timeless reality but rather what it would mean for a limited, finite reality such as human beings to experience everything significant simultaneously rather than consecutively.

In the theology of Paul Tillich (1886–1965), the various terms used to describe heaven become symbols for a different quality to life. So, for example, 'immortality does not mean a continuation of eternal life after death, but it means a quality which transcends temporality' (Tillich 1963: 410 [vol. 3]). In a similar way, while insisting that resurrection entails that 'the whole personality participates in Eternal Life', at the same time Tillich writes that 'eternity transcends temporality and with it the experienced character of self-consciousness' (ibid., 413, 414). While the description sounds impressive, it is not altogether easy to decipher what precisely might be meant. One philosopher went so far as to entitle his review of Tillich's contribution 'Professor Tillich's Confusions' (Edwards 1965: 192–214).

An additional problem is what sense might be made in scientific terms of a move from temporal existence to a timeless reality. For example, cosmologist and theologian Robert J. Russell (who seeks to defend Christian eschatology more broadly) has argued that eternity may be reconciled with contemporary eschatology only if eternity is characterized as purely temporal unending time, and not the thicker notion of timelessness (2008; 2012).

3 Imaginative treatments

Of all areas of Christian doctrine this is probably the one where treatments in art and literature most seldom succeed in moving thought beyond the present world. As has been widely noted, imagery of heaven has usually closely followed earthly aspirations (McDannell and Lang 1988). Even so, one advantage of such naïve realism is the common exploration of the theme in the cinema (Deacy 2012; Allen 2018; O'Neill 2022). In mitigation of such failings, one might note how the New Testament itself makes allusion to a rather earthly future 'paradise'. Inspiration which drew upon actual usage of the term 'paradise' (Luke 23:43; 12:4; Rev 2:7) led subsequently to a common, though by no means universal, early assumption that the earthly garden of Eden had been reopened by Christ and was now occupied by those awaiting the final resurrection. The idea is hard to reconcile with the millenarian expectations of Revelation 20. That chapter describes a projected future in this paradise which is expected to resemble the past with its garden of Eden (Delumeau 1995: 39–96). Attempts were even made to identify its location, as in the legend of Prester John. Whether heaven was also expected to be equated with paradise remained a matter of dispute. Augustine seems undecided; at one point, he does wonder whether the two are not the same thing (*Confessions* 9.3.6). Basil the Great treats the two as interchangeable (*Homilia in Ps.33*: PG 33.377). However, with the *Benedictus Deus* of Benedict XII, the identification became the established view. It is this usage that we find deployed in the title of the final part of *The Divine Comedy* of Dante Alighieri (1265–1331): *Paradiso*.

3.1 Dante

Readers in general find the *Paradiso* the most difficult section of the whole poem to comprehend, as it is the most consistently theological and abstract, with much less in the way of vivid imagery. Following the position codified in the fourteenth century, heaven is seen as a series of ten concentric spheres, with only the most distant – the non-physical Empyrean –as the dwelling place of the divine. Aristotelean and Neoplatonic cosmology were adapted, not least in the transformation of the 'fiery' heights into a dwelling place of 'light' and of God. Seen in the *Glossa ordinaria*'s exposition of 'heaven and earth', a second heaven is detected in the opening verse of Genesis (to cater for angels in heaven), which is then duly followed by Peter Lombard in his *Sentences* (2.2.4). The order of the other nine spheres reflects the traditional seven planets (in the order Moon, Mercury,

Venus, Sun, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn), plus a place for the fixed stars and for the primum mobile which moves them all.

The equation of God's presence with light in the Empyrean is a matter of no small historical importance. The inspiration is ultimately biblical (cf. Isa 60:19–20; Jas 1:16–17; 1 John 1:5; Rev 22:5). Dante, however, plays on the theme to develop the mysteriousness of God, with such a splendour or glare that complete human comprehension is made impossible. It was a notion that was subsequently taken up in the rather different medium of visual art. Of particular significance is how such aims require modification of the claim that the Renaissance was only really concerned with naturalism. On the contrary, in religious paintings most artists allude as much to supernatural light (coming from no obvious source) as to natural; In contrast to the pattern set by Piero della Francesca, Bellini and Leonardo are rare exceptions in admitting only natural light in their paintings (Kemp 2021: 84–86; 91–92; 108). Not only that, but closer inspection often reveals within such light further almost-hidden indicators that speak of its supernatural origins, as with the putti in Raphael's clouds (Kemp 2021: 110–123).

Whereas in the *Inferno* a separate canto had been reserved for each of the seven deadly sins, in the *Paradiso* the three theological virtues (faith, hope, and love) are placed in a single canto in which the beatific vision is seen not only at its most acute but also at its most intellectual (in the eighth sphere, in the realm of the fixed stars). By contrast, three of the cardinal virtues (justice, courage, and temperance) occur twice, first in an imperfect form and then more positively – now that a fourth has been added – in practical wisdom. Thus, deficient forms of fortitude, justice, and temperance occur in the first three circles; then, once wisdom appears in Canto IV, the other three reappear in their perfect form. Therefore there is a rigid hierarchy in heaven, no less than in the other two sections of the poem. There is, however, an occasional surprise, such as the inclusion of two pagans – the Roman emperor Trajan and Ripheus the Trojan – among the just rulers of the sixth sphere (Jupiter). In theory, only the baptized could enter heaven. Conveniently, according to legend, Trajan had been given a second chance to convert through Pope Gregory the Great calling him back to life. However, given that Dante's earlier guide, Virgil, had not been baptized, any reason to include Ripheus as another pagan looks decidedly suspicious. Perhaps Dante thought that his praise as a just man in the *Aeneid* (II, 426–427) was sufficient. At all events, some small openings for pagans were also left elsewhere (XIX.70–81,103–105; XX.145–148).

Rather than pursuing the contents of the poem in detail here, it is more important to draw attention to the underlying issues it raises, which are found reflected in one way or another in artistic treatments throughout Christian history. These are the question of pastoral versus city landscapes; the social character of heaven; and the key role of Christ.

19

3.2 Implications of garden or city landscapes

In considering the issue it is important to note that, although the Bible begins with a rural paradise, its present order of contents ends with an image of the new Jerusalem that is at one and the same time a cityscape and a garden (Rev 21–22). The author of Revelation has nothing positive to say about the cities of Asia Minor, so it seems likely that his symbolism is based on Hebrew notions of the new Jerusalem rather that any positive evaluation of generic city life. That being so, care is needed in interpreting imagery of either garden or city in subsequent art. Should the art be interpreted purely symbolically, or with an element of realism? Does it say as much about the artist's evaluation of the present world as about any future reality in heaven? Two very different but roughly contemporary paintings may serve as examples. In Fra Angelico's two versions of the *Last Judgement* (1431 San Marco and 1435 Berlin), heaven is presented as a rural idyll with dancing angels, with only a modest acknowledgement of a cityscape in the background of one picture. By contrast, although there are rural elements in the foreground, the Van Eyck brothers' depiction of Flemish/Dutch city architecture in the background of their *Adoration of the Lamb* (1432; St Bavo's Cathedral, Ghent) seems quite pressing, indeed inescapable.

Although some historians suggest that Fra Angelico intended the luxuriant meadows literally, it is much more likely that the flowers are there to suggest such things as peace and love because, as a Dominican friar (elevated to the status of Blessed by John Paul II in 1982), Angelico in all probability shared the same rather intellectual concept of the beatific vision found in Aquinas. So the imagery is intended as symbolic of the kind of personal relationship with God that can now be enjoyed. With the Van Eyck brothers, however, the probability is that the prominence of the cityscape represents both genuine pride in their own locality and a conviction that heaven would also have at the very least a similar social character. Although some of the Gothic buildings are imaginary, two are recognisable: the towers of St Nicholas in Ghent and of the Cathedral in Utrecht. Given that the imagery as a whole is drawn from Revelation (7:8–17), it is not surprising that there is also some rural imagery in the foreground.

How complicated these questions of interpretation can be is nicely illustrated by the different approaches adopted by two nineteenth century English artists who were also committed Christians: Samuel Palmer (1805–1881) and John Martin (1789–1854). In the case of Palmer we are fortunate to have quite extensive notes on how he himself interpreted his paintings and drawings. He conceived of God as immanent in every aspect of <u>creation</u>. One may legitimately suppose that he conceived of such immanence as a primary way in which God relates to humanity, and that such a relationship would therefore continue into the next world (Vaughan 2015). Initially, Martin's vast canvases might seem also to give priority to the natural world but closer inspection suggests a different judgment,

as does the wider background to his own practice, even if the kind of written evidence that comes from Palmer's own reflections is lacking in this case. In a painting such as *The Last Judgment* (1853), for instance, there is a city clearly portrayed in the background (Coltrin 2018, esp. 71). Again, during the period in which he abandoned his artistic profession, his alternative occupation actually involved the investigation of various proposals for the improvement of cities (Coltrin 2018: 72–73).

3.3 A social and not just an intellectual vision

Much of the twentieth century was dominated by Existentialist stress on individual decision-making. This was paralleled in Britain by those who followed either Immanuel Kant or John Stuart Mill in prioritising the liberty of personal choice in each individual act. The Reformation had also placed great stress on faith as a personal decision. It is possible to see both the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation heading in much the same direction, on this matter at least. For example, Catholicism also moved to more individualistic conceptions of salvation, as in regular private auricular confession (Bossy 1985). Nonetheless, the longer Christian tradition was a more corporate one of interdependence, as is evident from the gospels themselves where Jesus happily relies on the faith of family or friends to guarantee the propriety of curing relations: not only children and servants but also friends, as in the story of the paralytic (Mark 2:1–12). Therefore, Jean-Paul Sartre's image in his brief play *Huis Clos* (1944), of hell as allowing our self-worth to be conditioned by others, is emphatically not a Christian perception: L'Enfer, c'est les Autres ('hell is others'; *Huis Clos*, scene five). Certainly there must be release from self-deception, but it will be one in which the value of others is positively acknowledged, as the perception dawns that it is through others that the power to live fully is duly acquired. An instructive comparison might be made with a roughly contemporary work by C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (1946), and the various ways in which it is suggested there that self-deception can be overcome, and the role of others acknowledged.

This traditional idea of corporate interdependence is nicely illustrated in a familiar painting by Peter Paul Rubens, in which viewers are offered an effective contrast between the social character of heaven and the individualism of hell. In his *Last Judgement* of 1615 (now in the Alte Pinakothek in Munich; Baudouin 1977: 96), the rising of those destined for heaven is accomplished as a corporate act, with them all interlinked, but those destined for hell fall down as a motley crew of individuals, each seeking their own personal aims.

3.4 Christ at the centre

So strongly has individualism dominated conceptions of the afterlife that in more recent centuries meeting friends and family has more often than not been at heaven's imaginative core, with any mention of Christ seen as important but nonetheless essentially secondary. The New Testament, however, repeatedly uses imagery that is strongly suggestive of

interdependence, particularly in the writings by Paul and John. It is sometimes of such a kind as to seriously call into question whether the unitary character of the self is intended to survive: as in Paul's qualification, 'Not me but Christ in me' (Gal 2:20). Might it not, then, be a matter of human beings coming to consciousness of all those interconnections of which they were only once subliminally aware, and so living in such interrelatedness? How far such considerations might legitimate talk of individual personality being transcended is too large an issue to pursue further here. It could however be argued that accounts of mystical union in this life, by saints such as Bernard of Clairvaux and Teresa of Avila, provide an interpretative key.

However, there is also another way in which Christ is central to biblical conceptions of heaven. Paul especially links believers' resurrection to Christ's own (1 Cor 15:13–14). If that is so, might it not be reasonable to assume that the character of Christ's continuing life would also throw some light on believers' own life? However precisely Christ's resurrection is understood, the most basic claim has always been that it was the totality of Christ's humanity which survived death. The same assumption applies to his post-ascension existence: his humanity was not merely absorbed into the divinity as a memory, but continues fully to exist in its totality in what is now the non-physical reality that is heaven. Indeed, this is precisely the point made in some of the culminating lines of Dante's *Paradiso*.

> How weak are words, and how unfit to frame
>
> My concept – which lags after what was shown
>
> So far, 'twould flatter to call it lame!
>
> Eternal light, that in Thyself alone
>
> Dwelling, alone dost know Thyself, and smile
>
> On Thy self–love, so knowing and so known!
>
> The sphering thus begot, perceptible
>
> In Thee like mirrored light, now to my view –
>
> When I had looked on it a little while –
>
> Seemed in itself, and in its own self–hue,
>
> Limned with our image; for which cause mine eyes

> Were altogether drawn and held thereto. (*Paradiso* XXXIII, 121–132; Dante Alighieri 1962: 346)

The same idea ('limned with our image') might then also be argued for the rest of humanity: an alternative to more obviously physicalist assumptions in envisaging human survival needs to be considered. This is not to suggest a return to Platonic notions of immortality. Rather, it is to propose that any such understanding might be profitably interpreted in the light of medieval reflections, not least imaginative developments such as those in Dante. That is, like the unusual character of Christ's post-ascension existence, something nonphysical should be envisaged which nonetheless has some of the attributes of physical existence about it, in particular a full emotional and perceptual life. This is easier to comprehend than the alternative which is sometimes canvassed – of the physical body being 'enhanced' – which effectively requires that the usual rules applying to material existence no longer hold. Dante was able imaginatively to advance such a conception, and, still more impressively, an appropriate surrounding imaginative environment.

This would not be to deny the importance of eschatological questions, but it would be to insist that heaven, for those already there, is, as it is for Christ, a fully realized reality. They thus await expectantly the fulfilment of other aspects of the divine purpose rather than their own. With such a proposal two puzzles can be effectively resolved: the nature of Christ's existence in heaven, and the assumption that there is still something lacking in heaven that resurrected bodies would provide, when the imaginative tradition has already provided all that seems necessary in its redescription. Rather than addressing fundamentally the same issue, heaven and eschatology could then be seen as concerned with two rather different questions: heaven primarily with the redemption of those already dead, eschatology with what it might mean to speak of the fulfilment of the material world. Those in heaven will continue to look expectantly towards the latter, but not in a way that might threaten their own present joys.

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