

Relief belief: No sin, satan or hot sulfur to fear?

Imagine your religion, if you have one, has no threatening force of evil to tempt, and no threat of flaming punishment after death. Just imagine. How would your beliefs be different than traditional believe-or-else religion? What would your faith look like? Without built-in threats, without a faith constantly on the lookout for shadowy badguys, could faith become a stronger force for good?

Most people of faith I know—in my close circle and beyond—don’t particularly believe in these things. Unconcerned by the fear-driven doctrines of the past, they aren’t distracted from the positive, compassion and justice-oriented aspects of their faith. Some focus on the ethical teachings in the Sermon on the Mount, and the instructions Jesus gave to practice a life of lovingkindness, especially toward the most vulnerable. These believers don’t have to

believe in the fearful, dark dogmas of old to live a life guided by a brighter understanding of what faith means today.

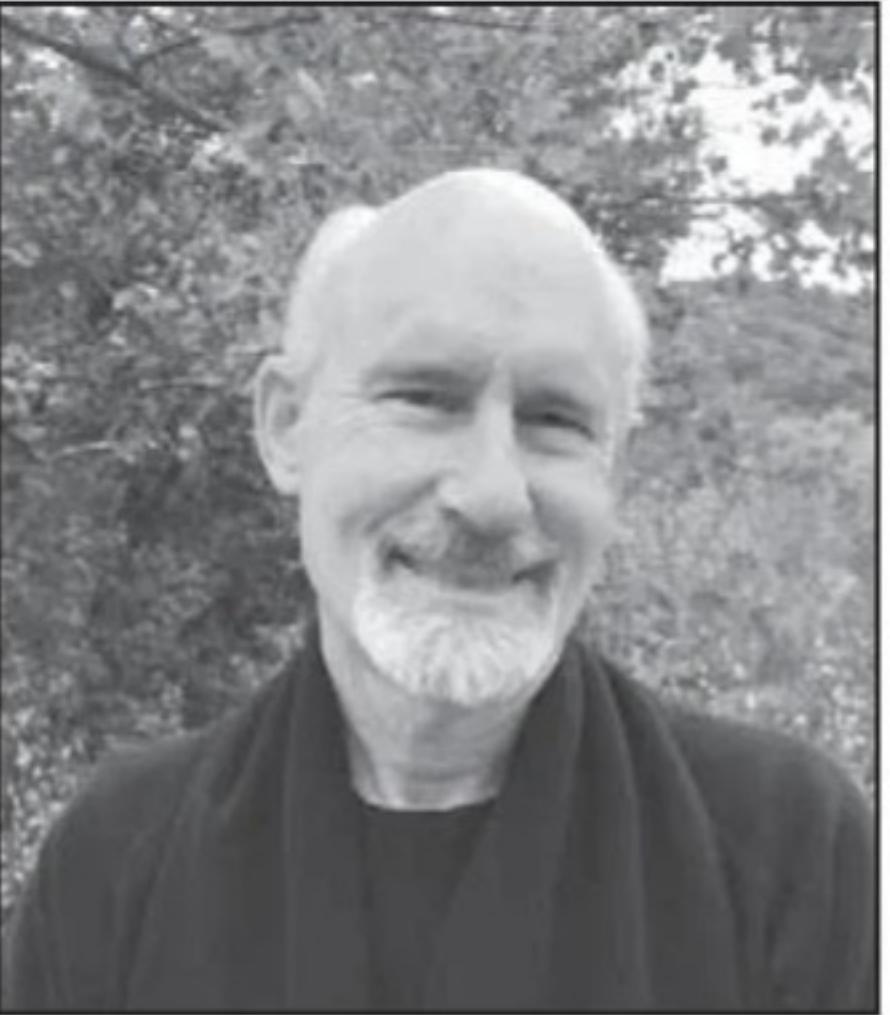
For those of us who have actually read the Bible, we find there is no threat of eternal punishment in most of the book—in fact, the Hebrew Bible omits any afterlife at all. A handful of passages present a “satan” (adversary or prosecutor) sent by God to test and tempt believers (remember, “lead us not into temptation”?). This fellow is not so much an evil figure but an undercover agent of God. It’s true, Jesus speaks of bad spirits, but they don’t keep him from doing his good works; they aren’t the focus of his life, as if he’s constantly fighting spiritual battles. The Apostle Paul seemed to want believers to live in continual fear, on the defense, ready to engage those battles. As I see it, that wasn’t the way of Jesus.

What about “original sin”? Would it be so bad—so “sinful”—to believe no child is born with a “fallen nature,” that from birth we are good, pure, open-minded, ready to gain knowledge? If a person is raised by parents or pastors who instill a belief in sinfulness, that no one can ever be good enough to be acceptable in the eyes of the Strict Father Above, how does that shape a child’s mind? Isn’t it rather cruel and heartless to believe a newborn baby is so “stained in sin” that if they die they will be sent to eternal punishment? I’ve always thought that was a rather horrible thing to believe.

How do we find relief from these very old, insidious beliefs? I would suggest several steps in the process of release. First, take a good hard look at what each belief is saying, about you, others, and God. It may help—though I can’t guarantee it will help—

to read the Bible for yourself, or at least look up the verses that speak of sin, satan and hot sulfur. Putting aside everything you’ve been told, what do they really seem to say? Second, ask yourself how your faith might be challenged or changed by letting go of these concepts. Is it really necessary to shape a faith around the age-old dogma of the “sin-sick soul” and God’s wrath? Without a fiery pit or boiling lake of eternal suffering awaiting the disobedient, could a healthier faith emerge? Third, if there was no divine-decreed terror out there, would it be possible to release supernatural beliefs altogether? If a person chooses to believe we are not born “stained by the world,” it doesn’t mean they are against religious faith. Someone may simply decide that being human is a good thing, and that religion is not the option they choose.

I mentioned earlier that the people I know who have faith generally don’t believe in these tempters and terrors. Let me also state the obvious: most secular people I know—freethinkers, agnostics, humanists, atheists—aren’t burdened by any of this. Though I will say, some of us may feel a bit “haunted” by the leftovers from these unhappy meals we were fed in the past. In other words, at times there may be that little voice in the back of the mind whispering: “You’re not good enough ... if there is a God, He’s angry with you and won’t let you into Heaven ... If you don’t believe in Hell, you’ll go to Hell!” (No doubt I’ll hear from a reader assuring me the voice is the Holy Spirit, and that He’s right in condemning me!). Well, great relief is available, and it all begins by taking those risky steps listed above (you may have other steps). In my view,



the only voice we should listen to in our head is the voice of reason, guiding us to choose more wisely what to believe, and not to believe.

What is your relief belief?

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