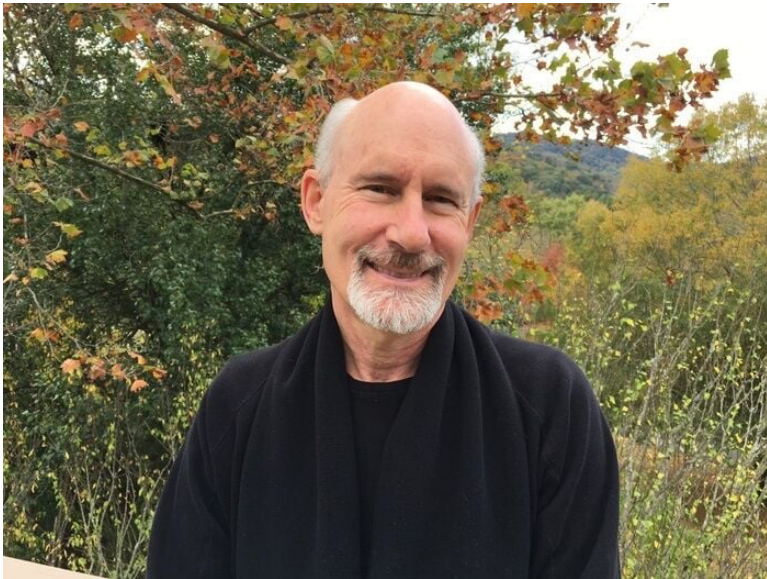


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Friendly Freethinker: Good Heavens! Does Heaven Really Sound Heavenly?

By Chris Highland
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In the PBS series “All Creatures Great and Small,” the Yorkshire veterinarian and his wife have a young son who plays an angel in the Christmas play. The little boy has a hard time remembering one word in the script. He says “Hepton” instead of heaven. Hepton was the name of a rural district in Yorkshire, so their son may have heard that name from adults. It’s a

heartwarming scene that makes the adults laugh. It also made me think about the ways we imagine someplace called heaven.

I recently wrote a column on the dark and dangerous concept of hell. On a sunnier note, it seems appropriate to turn our attention to the idea of heaven. However, I'm not sure it's much sunnier than the other place.

When I was studying the Greek language in college and seminary in order to “go deep” in scripture, I was presented with a troubling notion (at the time I believed in a literal heaven where God and Jesus lived). I learned that the word normally translated as “heaven” in the Bible may simply refer to “the heavens”—the realm above the clouds, the sky, the stars. In the classical imagination, the gods must be up, higher, lofty in their abode above the human race. “The Most High” became the “Heavenly Father” who must be looked up to as the Almighty King watching over the earth and His obedient (or disobedient) subjects.

One theme that carries through the whole biblical story places mountains in central positions. The Prophets of Israel often condemn surrounding cultures, calling for their “high places”—where “other gods” are worshipped—to be torn down. Moses meets the Lord on Sinai, Jerusalem is built on a hill, Jesus is transfigured on a mountain. The conclusion of the Jesus Story has him “going up” to Jerusalem, then “lifted up”

on a cross, then floating up into the clouds. This somewhat reflects a major worldview in the ancient world—up is good; down is bad; the heavens are good because the gods are up there; the earth (at least what's under the earth) is bad. As some believed, along with the Apostle Paul, “the flesh” is bad; “the spirit” is good. Think and believe upward. Humans are caught on the middle level of a three-story universe.

Paul, who never met Jesus (except in a vision he claimed to have), related other visions to substantiate his authority in the early church. In his second letter to believers in Corinth, after a dramatic description of his personal sufferings, he writes (chapter 12): “It is necessary to boast; nothing is to be gained by it, but I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows.” What or where a “third” heaven is, he doesn't tell us.

Paul continues: “I know that such a person—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know—God knows—was caught up into paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat.” This “person”—obviously speaking of himself—is taken up somewhere to receive special, secret words. This is a classic defense of authority. Someone claims a personal revelation and

assumes or demands everyone believes it. In this case, he doesn't want to be prideful, and yet. . .
"If I wish to boast, I will not be a fool, for I will be speaking the truth." How would we know?

What do we learn about heaven from Paul?
Nothing really. How about from Jesus himself? In Matthew 18, the disciples ask Jesus who is the greatest in the "realm of the heavens." Jesus brings a child into the circle and says: "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the realm of the heavens. Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest [up beyond the clouds]." Scholars and preachers still argue over what the "kingdom of heaven" means, but it seems to refer to the celestial home of the divine. Is it on earth, among humans, or in the sky?
Does the Lord's Prayer actually say "On earth as it is among the stars"? It's difficult to describe a cloudy or cosmic place beyond Sinai or Mount Olympus.

There's a popular, and very understandable, belief that believers will see their departed loved ones "up in heaven" where everyone will praise God for eternity. Imagine an everlasting mega-church service ... singing and praying ... forever.

Have you ever really thought about this view of the afterlife? Does it sound "heavenly"?

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