

The Fate of the ‘Good Person’

One criticism that has sometimes been leveled at Christian theism is that it does a rather poor job accounting for the fate of the “good person.” On the big question of one’s eternal fate, moral virtue ends up being inconsequential. Heavenly reward is meted out on the basis of whether someone has faith in God. And however one spells out the nuances of “faith,” it seems safe to say that faith is not a moral work one does. After all, Christianity is explicit that it is by *faith*, and not by *works* of moral virtue, that one is said to be saved.

But surely, so the objection continues, this framework of faith and eternal reward should strike us as odd, if not morally outlandish. It seems intuitively obvious that works associated with moral virtue—charity, honesty, sacrifice, and so forth—are laudable. If Christian theism provides a framework in which the morally virtuous person may be fit for hell, while the person who simply has faith in God is fit for heaven, then Christian theism can be dismissed as a rather poor source of moral instruction.

How might the Christian theist respond to this line of objection? My own first comment is that it is a perfectly reasonable concern to raise. If Christian theism *did* imply that faith somehow trumps moral virtue, then the critic’s objection outlined above does indeed seem compelling. However, in what follows I want to show that the objection rests on several flawed assumptions about the nature of faith and of heaven. Admittedly, these flawed assumptions have sometimes been perpetuated in some Christian circles. Nevertheless, I want to show why a proper understanding of “Christian faith” actually accords very well with our best intuitions about the importance of moral virtue. And I want to argue that non-theists who act virtuously exhibit important marks of Christian faith, even though they do not describe their own virtuous actions in these terms.

I. The Nature of Christian Faith

I should first establish what the exercise of Christian faith consists in, as well as why faith should not be equated with *belief*. In short, explicit Christian faith is a matter of saying “yes” to a certain kind of relationship with God, extended to us through Jesus Christ. The shape of this relationship is one in which we relate to Jesus Christ as *lord*. Relating to Jesus as lord involves allowing him to make the final decisions in how we lead our lives.

The summation of Jesus’s directives to us is to “love God and love our neighbor.”¹ God invites us to respond in kind to the loving commitment he has to us. And God instructs that our relationships with one another are to mirror the loving, interdependent relationships that Christians affirm existed eternally among Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Only within a community of perfected relationships—with God and with others—can we attain ultimate flourishing, or “fullness of life,” which Jesus stated as his purpose in inviting people to relate to him as lord.²

The commitment to relate to Jesus Christ as lord is of course only possible if one has various beliefs about him. For example, one needs to believe: that Jesus is God incarnate; that Jesus therefore has certain authority-making features; that Jesus invites us into a personal relationship, and so on. Nevertheless, it is crucial not to equate belief with faith. The commitment of explicit

¹ Mark 12: 29-31.

² John 10: 10.

Christian faith is, again, the commitment to relate to Jesus Christ as lord. Beliefs about Christ may be *requisite* for explicit faith in him, but the act of putting one's faith in Christ is clearly not the same as forming beliefs about Christ.

This point should perhaps be obvious, given that a person might hold true beliefs about Christ and still be a perfect scoundrel. Further, strong arguments exist that we form beliefs involuntarily, whereas the Christian affirmation is that the act of putting one's faith in Christ is a *voluntary* response toward him. Admittedly, though, the language of Christians sometimes suggests that "faith in" God is little more than having "beliefs about" God. Christians sometimes refer to themselves as "believers"—as distinct from those who remain in a state of "unbelief." Perhaps these Christians will clarify that they "believe *in*" God (as opposed merely to believing things *about* God). But to those outside Christian circles, it can understandably remain unclear whether, and how, faith is to be distinguished from belief.

II. Why So Much Emphasis on *Belief*?

In my own view, I think Christians would do well to avoid the language of "belief" in describing the invitation Christ extends to people to commit their lives to him in faith. My conversations over the years with those outside the Christian community have led me to conclude that this language perpetuates a big misunderstanding: namely, that the response the God of Christianity seeks to elicit from people is the response to (somehow) choose to hold Christian beliefs. Perhaps I owe an explanation for this emphasis on the language of belief among Christians in describing their relationships with God, even while I would urge my fellow Christians to rethink this language.

Two points seem especially important to consider. First, I have thus far been referring to "faith" in the sense of the response, or commitment, God seeks to elicit from us. This act of faith moves us into a positive, interpersonal relationship with God. But there is another context in which the term "faith" is used more generally to refer to the Christian religion. We can speak of "the Christian faith" as synonymous with the Christian worldview or way of life.

We use this second sense of faith in distinguishing Christianity from other religions or from a non-theistic worldview. *Creeds* become crucial in this context. Christians typically recite some historic creed as part of weekly worship services. Creeds mark out the core, fundamental points of agreement that all Christians share. *Not* to share in these affirmations is, by definition, to identify oneself as outside "the Christian faith"—that is, as outside the historic community of professing Christians.

The Christian creeds tend very much to come in the form of propositions—to which Christians corporately assent. Reciting a Christian creed in public worship does involve more than merely giving intellectual assent; it also assumes some kind of commitment to God and to others in the Christian community. Still, the form of the creeds remains propositional: a list of assertions about who God is and what God has done in human history. In reciting the creeds Christians affirm that they believe these things.

Potential confusion arises, though, when this second sense of faith (as outlining the distinctives of the Christian worldview) is not carefully distinguished from the first sense of faith (as describing the voluntary response God prompts people to make). Hence, one may hear Christians speaking of their hope that others outside "the faith" will come to "the faith." When further describing what "the faith" amounts to, they may list the affirmations contained in Christian creeds. To the outsider, this might understandably—though unfortunately—convey the

idea that the step of faith outsiders are called to make is the step of choosing to believe these creedal propositions.

A second reason Christians may often favor the language of belief stems from the fact that English Bibles tend to use the verb “believe” as a translation for the Greek New Testament texts that describe people’s positive responses to God. The most common Greek root used in this context is the noun *pistis*, along with the corresponding verb *pisteo*. Interestingly, English Bibles almost always opt to translate *pistis* as “faith”, with readers encouraged to put their “faith in Christ.” But alas, there is no verb “faithe” corresponding to the noun “faith” (as “believe” corresponds to “belief”). And so English Bibles typically use the verb “believe” as a translation for *pisteo*.

In truth, the Greek verb *pisteo* carries far wider connotations than the English word *believe*. *Pisteo* can be used to convey trust, obedience, cherishing, faithfulness, and a number of other ideas. Admittedly, outsiders may hear Christians quoting from the New Testament about the directive “to believe.” But the English word “believe” is an uneasy translation of the Greek. The New Testament does contain the repeated encouragement to turn to Christ. But it would be far too quick a conclusion that this act of turning is fundamentally a matter of forming beliefs about Christ. Indeed, I contended in the previous section that the commitment of Christian faith is not a *decision to believe* certain things about God.

III. The Christian Description of a Non-Theist’s Good Work

Having offered two reasons why Christians commonly use—perhaps overuse—the language of belief in describing the commitment of faith God seeks to elicit from all people, let me again acknowledge that beliefs are of course *requisite* for explicit faith in Christ. So, clearly the non-theist (as well as the non-Christian theist) cannot exercise explicit faith in Christ in this earthly life—the kind of faith through which we can be fully and finally reconciled to God. Is *any* kind of faith possible for non-theists in this life, such that they can move into *some* kind of positive relationship with God?

The preponderant view within the Christian tradition is decidedly “yes.” The beginning point in explaining and defending this conclusion is to offer a Christian account of what is actually happening when a non-theist performs a work we associate with good moral character. My purpose here is not to argue that Christianity *is* true and that this Christian account of things is therefore accurate. I am merely offering a description of what we Christians genuinely believe is occurring when a “good person” performs a work we associate with moral virtue.

Perhaps one will find some individual Christians who are hesitant to affirm that non-theists actually *do* perform works of true virtue. But this hesitation is surely unwarranted.³ Non-theists help fund medical research, help start orphanages, volunteer time at homeless shelters, and so forth. Non-theist parents exhibit every mark of benevolent care for their newborn children. Non-theist soldiers give their lives self-sacrificially for their comrades. So I return to the matter

³ Admittedly, some Christians might rejoin by seizing upon a Bible verse like Isaiah 64:6: “All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags.” But surely such verses are simply pointing out that our best attempts at virtue still fall short of the standard of perfectly consistent self-giving love that characterizes God’s nature and must characterize us if we are to take our place within the heavenly community. It remains not at all plausible to insist that we humans—whether theists or non-theists—are capable of *no* acts of genuine benevolence, *no* acts of self-sacrificial love.

of offering a description, from the historic Christian perspective, of what is happening when a non-theist performs a morally good work.

The consensus of the Christian tradition has always been that humans are incapable of performing virtuous works or otherwise moving toward God *unless* God first draws or prompts them to do so.⁴ This prompting may potentially take various forms. The Christian scriptures speak suggestively about God having “written his law on the human heart.”⁵ The Christian moral philosopher might spell out this theme in terms of God ensuring that we have certain moral beliefs, or God kindling certain desires we have, or some other way. But the general point will be that God *communicates* in some way to humans and ensures that they are *motivated* to perform certain actions. This divine work Christians understand to be a work of the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit.

What actions does the Holy Spirit prompt people to take? The formal answer to that question is that, on a Christian, Trinitarian understanding of God, the Holy Spirit always prompts us to join Christ in the work he is already doing in the world. Jesus Christ, the second person of the Trinity, has the role of reconciling the world to God. In full Trinitarian terms, we are prompted by the Holy Spirit to add our efforts to the work Christ is already doing—work which Christ offers *to* God the Father.

Turning to a substantive answer to the question of what kinds of actions God prompts us to perform, the broadest answer will be acts of self-giving *love*. This is the broadest description of the work of Jesus. Within the umbrella of loving actions that can be performed, Jesus emphasized care for those on the margins of society.⁶ And his stated purpose in coming to dwell among us was so that people would “have life, and have it to the full.”⁷

So we arrive at the following theological account of what is happening when a person (including a non-theist) performs some act of self-giving love that brings life to others. From a Christian perspective, the person has been prompted in some way by the activity of the Holy Spirit. This prompting has been to join Christ in some work in which Christ is already engaged (in his task of bringing life to all people, which ultimately involves reconciling people to God). Non-theists of course will not *identify* their felt motivation to serve others as a prompting from the Holy Spirit. They will not see their own efforts *as* an act of joining Christ in his work. As such, their acts of virtue cannot constitute what we might call “explicit” Christian faith. However, the Christian tradition has a long history of affirming the possibility of “implicit” Christian faith.

I recognize that non-theists—as well as theists in other religious traditions—may view it as presumptuous of Christians to describe all people’s acts of virtue in specifically Christian terms. However, *any* worldview has implications for what is “really” going on when people make decisions in the context of religious or ethical deliberations. I am spelling out the implications arising from a Christian starting point. In the next section I want to look at what it would mean for the non-theist to have implicit faith in Jesus Christ.

⁴ This orthodox Christian position was confirmed in the Second Council of Orange in the year 590.

⁵ Jer. 31:33; Rom. 2:15; Heb. 10:16.

⁶ Cf. Jesus’s statement at the beginning of his earthly ministry (Luke 4:14-21) that he was fulfilling the Old Testament prophecy: “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Isaiah 61:1-2).

⁷ John 10:10. The sense of “life” here is of course a broad one, focusing on love, joy, peace, and other “fruit of the Spirit” (Gal. 5:22-23).

IV. The Possibility of Implicit Christian Faith

There are obvious examples in everyday life of our decisions amounting to implicit decisions about how we will relate to someone. For example, suppose that Fred resolves at the age of 25 that, should he marry someday, he will remain faithful to his wife, share whatever finances he has, tell her the truth about his background, and so forth. If Fred subsequently meets and marries Susan four years later, he will not need to decide *again* to relate to her in these ways. These decisions were already made, we are supposing, at a previous time. There is a clear sense in which Fred's earlier decisions were, implicitly, decisions about how he relates to Susan.

Similarly, a person might explore the existence of God, having made a decision that she wants to know, and to meet all the obligations she might have toward, her creator—should she in fact have a creator. We suppose now, *ex hypothesi*, that the Triune God created her and that Jesus Christ has rightful claim to be lord of her life. If the person's original decision is decisive enough to cause her to relate to Jesus as lord when she comes to see the truth about Jesus, then there is a clear sense in which her original decision was an implicit decision to relate to Jesus as lord.

Admittedly, this example is neat and tidy. Decisions so easily translated are surely rare. However, it remains plausible that a wide range of everyday decisions we make shape our character and dispositions, making us either more or less apt to embrace Jesus Christ as lord.

A non-theist who reads this conclusion may wonder if I have reached it too easily, as though I am trying to baptize good moral deeds in an ad hoc move to claim them as somehow religious in nature. But as noted earlier, the orthodox Christian position has always been that any good human deed is always prompted by the activity of the Holy Spirit and is God's invitation to join Christ in the work he is doing in bringing fullness of life to others. Further, the Christian tradition has always pointed to a key precedent in considering the possibility of implicit faith: namely, the precedent of the Old Testament saints.

The Christian tradition has long affirmed that (some) individuals who lived on earth before Christ will be among the redeemed in heaven. And yet, those who predated Christ had no knowledge of the person and atoning work of Christ—and thus did not exercise explicit faith in him. So how did the early Church reconcile these two points, given the Christian affirmation that we are fully and finally reconciled to God only by offering Christ's sacrificial life and death as atonement for our own sins?

The only way to reconcile these points, the early Church concluded, is to affirm that figures like the Old Testament patriarchs at some point after their earthly lives must have formed true beliefs about Jesus Christ.⁸ Richard Swinburne explains this early doctrine of *limbus patrum*:

According to this doctrine, the Old Testament patriarchs were consigned to an intermediate state, *limbus patrum*, until Christ "descended into Hell" to preach to them the redemption which he had won for them on Calvary. Once they accepted that (as they were already geared to do in virtue of their good will), they inherited its benefits—Heaven. Their inability, through ignorance, to plead Christ's sacrifice alone barred them from Heaven; when it was remedied, they could avail themselves of that sacrifice and Heaven was theirs.⁹

⁸ See John Sanders, *No Other Name* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), pp. 181-88.

⁹ Richard Swinburne, *Revelation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), p. 192.

The reference from Swinburne to Christ's teaching refers to a time between Jesus's death and resurrection, when he "preached to the dead."¹⁰ The consensus of the Church Fathers was that this was most likely when the Old Testament figures heard and responded to the news about Jesus's reconciling work. But the principal point is that it was at *some* point after their earthly lives that they heard the specific news about Jesus.

Importantly, this post-mortem decision to embrace Jesus as lord should not be understood as a decision with which the Patriarchs *wrestled*. Their response to the full revelation of God they received was an inevitable response, given the character they developed in their earthly lives as they responded to the (partial) revelation from God they did receive. Interestingly, the earthly responses of certain Old Testament figures are described within the New Testament as examples of the kind of *faith* toward which we should all strive.¹¹ And this despite these responses not involving *explicit* faith in Jesus Christ.

If implicit Christian faith was possible for those individuals *pre*-dating Christ, is there reason to think it would not be possible for those living after Christ? One key reason to think implicit faith *is* possible for people today centers on the historic Christian consensus that *ignorance* will not ultimately be a deciding factor in whether an individual is fully and finally reconciled to God at some point. Thomas Aquinas is representative in avowing that "it pertains to divine providence to furnish everyone with what is necessary for salvation, provided that on [one's] part there is no hindrance."¹²

How does the Christian theist understand God to provide for all willing individuals "what is necessary for salvation?" One option would be to claim that, for all people who *are* open to a relationship with God, God *does* ensure that the conditions for explicit faith in Jesus Christ (including of course beliefs about the divinity of Jesus) are realized during their earthly lives. Such a move, while logically possible, is nevertheless wildly implausible. Again, plenty of non-Christians exhibit the kind of character that would reasonably lead us to expect that they would embrace Christ's offer to them of a relationship of mutually self-giving love.

The other option would be to claim that the conditions are indeed present for all individuals to begin a relationship with God that can end with full and final reconciliation with God (i.e., with salvation)—with these initial conditions not always needing to include beliefs about the divinity and atoning work of Jesus Christ. A response of explicit faith in Jesus Christ would of course not be among the options available to non-theists in this life. And without explicit faith in Christ certain benefits would be unavailable to non-theists in this life.¹³ The Christian tradition affirms that there are various private and corporate practices—some of them specifically instituted by God—which allow us best to seek after God and to receive help from him. These formation practices allow us to gain direction from God, to receive strength and encouragement, and to experience peace and joy even through the trials of life. Without participating in these explicitly

¹⁰ 1 Peter 3:18-20 was widely viewed by the Church Fathers as a reference to this event.

¹¹ See Hebrews, ch. 11.

¹² Aquinas, *Truth*, 3 vols. Trans. R.W. Mulligan (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1994). Aquinas's teacher, Albert the Great, signaled that this view was indeed widespread, affirming that "Theologians in general teach that it is impossible that a man, who performs adequately all in his power to do to prepare himself, should not receive a revelation from God, or instruction from men who have been themselves inspired, or some sign of a Mediator." (See the citation from T. P. Dunning, "Langland and the Salvation of the Heathen," *Medium Aevum* 12 (1943): 49.)

¹³ The Christian tradition has always affirmed that only in the events of conversion and baptism can such things become available to us as: certain guidance, comfort, and power from the Holy Spirit; and a releasing of our spiritual gifts in working partnership with others within the body of Christ (i.e., the Church).

Christian ways of relating to God, many supernatural benefits described by Christians are not as available, if at all.

But *some* kinds of response to God's prompting would be possible for the non-theist, enabling her to receive *some* positive aspects of a relationship with God. For example, God could infuse a non-theist with some measure of joy, even if the joys remain out of reach which are specific to: knowing that one is in a relationship with Jesus; knowing that one's past misdeeds have been completely forgiven, knowing that heaven awaits those who persevere in faith, and so forth. If non-theists continue to respond positively to the communication they are receiving from God, then the precedent of the Old Testament patriarchs suggests that they, too, upon coming to see the truth about Jesus Christ at some point after their earthly lives, will be disposed to accept Jesus and thereby be fully and eternally reconciled to God.¹⁴

VI. The Nature of Heaven

I have not yet offered any definitive answer to my initial question, which asked about the ultimate fate of the good person. Thus far I have only established the possibility that a non-theist might be exercising a kind of "implicit faith" in God. I have offered a Christian perspective on what is happening in the life of the non-theist who performs acts of loving service. And I have suggested that these acts are actually a response to a divine prompting and that they amount to adding to the work Jesus is already doing in the world. In this sense, we can speak of a certain kind of positive relationship with God as possible for the non-theist. But what of the ultimate, eternal fate of the non-theist after this earthly life?

Christians offer a vision of an afterlife, heaven, where the redeemed experience ultimate flourishing as they are fully and finally reconciled to God. How good does a "good person" need to be in order to be rewarded with heaven? Non-theists may do *some* loving actions in this life. But the Christian view is that *no one* in this life performs *only* good deeds. We all fall short of perfect virtue, sometimes acting out of selfishness, if not malice. So, again, how good does a person need to be to qualify for, or to be rewarded with, heaven?

From a Christian perspective, this is decidedly the *wrong* way to ask that question. And it is important to understand why. Perhaps under some religious descriptions heaven is a place with external rewards of fine wine, fine women, and so on. The general idea would be that, if you serve God and others in this life, then in the next life *you* get served. But this is decidedly *not* the Christian view of heaven.

For Christians, what is so enjoyable about heaven is that one's relationships with God and with others are perfected. We come to live in a community of loving interdependence (mirroring the eternal relationships of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), where life-diminishing experiences of loneliness, resentment, and rejection can gain no foothold. "Heaven" is simply the place where our perfected relationships can continue for eternity.

Accordingly, there is no external reward which the non-theist (or the professing Christian) could hope to gain, as recompense for relating positively to God. The positive relationship with God *is* the reward. That is, the dynamic of continued creative offering and response—which characterizes any interpersonal relationship—is what is experienced and enjoyed, in eternal and ever-increasing measure.

¹⁴ For a fuller discussion of the points of this section, see Kevin Kinghorn, *The Decision of Faith: Can Christian Beliefs Be Freely Chosen?* (London: T & T Clark, 2005), ch. 8.

Admittedly, Christian writers and speakers have sometimes undermined this Christian distinctive about the nature of heaven. In reacting against certain practices in the Roman Catholic Church that seemed to exaggerate the role of certain human works in guaranteeing one's eternal destiny, the Protestant Reformers of the sixteenth century emphasized that it is by faith, and not by works, that we are fully reconciled to God. I set aside many of the complications arising from this debate within the Christian tradition. But I do concede that the language of many Christians—emphasizing “faith and not works”—has been misleading. What I want to highlight is the historic consensus within the Christian tradition that being fully and finally reconciled to God involves being *made fit* for heaven. That is, it involves a person responding positively to the various promptings of the Holy Spirit, such that the person cooperates with God's process of *transforming* her into the kind of person who can take her place within the heavenly community of relationships perfected in love. There simply is no question of (somehow) “making it to heaven” without coming to have the moral virtues needed to participate in relationships of self-giving benevolence.

So it does not make sense, on the Christian picture of heaven, to ask: *How good* does a person need to be in order to be rewarded with heaven? A better question would be: Who gets to enjoy perfected relationships with God and others for eternity? And the answer is: those who decide to participate in these relationships! That answer is of course a formal one. But it is still a significant answer. Once we eliminate ignorance as an ultimate explanation for why any person would not be in heaven (as discussed in section IV), then the reason any person's fate would *not* include heaven would be that the person simply has chosen to reject the offer of perfected relationships. Put another way, heaven is available to anyone who would enjoy it.

Of course, a crucial point from the discussion of heaven in this section is that not just anyone would enjoy heaven. Again, the enjoyments of heaven do not stem from external things—fine food, fine scenery—that anyone would enjoy. Rather, the joys that come with heaven come from perfected relationships of self-giving benevolence. Yes, the great paradox of the Christian religion is that, only as we “lose” our lives in service to others will we “gain” a life of joy, peace, and ultimate fulfillment.¹⁵ But to someone not sold on the idea of self-giving love to God and to all people, the invitation of heaven is not at all an attractive option.

In answering any substantive question about the fate of a particular non-theist, the crucial question is: would that person enjoy heaven? But of course, this question could also be asked of professing Christians in this life. In comparison to a non-theist, a professing Christian will believe further things about Jesus and about the kind of relationship into which God invites all people. Yet, the life of the professing Christian continues to be one of discovery: we discover new facts about what it means to follow Christ. And we discover aspects of our character that are still resistant to Christ's full lordship over our lives. At times, professing Christians can turn away from the life of faith. We discover that following Christ means we have to forgive *that* person. We discover that Christ's lordship extends to very personal areas including our finances, our vocation, our sex life. And we may balk at Christ's directives in such areas.

Christian doctrine emphasizes the necessity of Christ eventually becoming lord over every area of our lives. In part, this full submission is necessary in order for God to coordinate everyone's well-being, with every person having a dignified and meaningful role to play within the community God is establishing. The necessity of full submission to Christ is also seen when we remember that Christ's commands are, in the end, commands to love. Full submission to

¹⁵ Cf. Jesus's summation in Matthew 16:25: “For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it.”

Christ is full submission to the goal, the end, of pouring out our lives in loving service. Accordingly, the process of God leading people into perfected relationships is essentially the same for the Christian as for the non-theist. God will seek to lead us into further truths about what relationships of love truly demand of us. Professing Christians should know a good deal more of what *God* must do, and has in fact done, to restore broken relationships with us. But new Christians hardly know all that relating to Christ as lord will require of *them*—just as a newly married couple hardly knows what marriage will require of them.

The key point in this discussion is that the fate of *all* people—professing Christians or non-theists—will hinge on how they respond to the invitation to participate in the community of perfected relationships. There is no “cut off” point in terms of how many good responses to God’s leading one needs to make. Eventually, the process of God leading us toward perfected relationships will involve God pressing upon us the *full* truth of what love requires of each of us. In this sense, the fate of the “good” non-theist is the same as the fate of the professing Christian: their fates will hinge on whether they choose to embrace God’s invitation to live in a community of perfected relationships, made possible only as all members of that community relate to Jesus Christ as lord.

VII. Consonance With Our Moral Intuitions

I set out in this chapter to address the objection that Christian faith is championed over moral virtue, rendering the latter relatively unimportant. However, on a closer analysis of Christian faith, the two cannot at all be separated. A good way to see this connection is again to reflect on the Christian picture of heaven, which offers an account of human well-being and how it is achieved. The Christian picture of a community of relationships perfected in love then becomes a framework for understanding the process through which God must lead people—whatever their current level of theistic belief—if they are to participate in this community. The responses of faith which God seeks to elicit from us are, then, the responses that move us toward becoming the kinds of people who can take their place within this community.

Rather than being at odds with our moral intuitions about the importance of love and self-sacrifice, the Christian doctrines of faith and heaven accord extremely well with our moral sensibilities. These doctrines stem from the theological beginning point for Christians that we humans are created in the “image” of a relational—a Trinitarian—God; and our well-being will ultimately hinge on the state of our relationships.

Christians can point to everyday clues to this theological explanation of where our well-being as humans is ultimately found. A thanksgiving feast may come with all the trimmings; but it won’t be enjoyable if it is eaten in the midst of a family quarrel. By contrast, a newly married couple may be poor as dirt; but if they’re in love and enjoying each other’s company, a spaghetti dinner for the fourth night in a row will still be a wonderful dining experience. A great comedic film will fail to amuse someone in the throes of depression. Yet, viewing an inane B-movie can be a time of great laughter and fun, if viewed with a group of close friends.

So many other everyday examples exist as similar clues to the way relationships ultimately hold the key to our well-being. One could discuss the mental effects of being completely isolated from other humans. Or one could listen to the testimonies of therapists who describe how some absence of healthy relationships inevitably lies at the root of visits to their offices. When we reflect on the Christian picture of heaven and of human well-being, I think it connects very well with our experiences about the importance of healthy relationships.

Further, experience also seems to bear out the Christian description of how healthy relationships are established and maintained. Injury to another person must be exposed, it must be confessed and forsworn for the future, it must be forgiven, and the costs of the broken relationship must be absorbed. Otherwise, the possibilities of resentment, distrust, and reprisal are ever present, threatening that relationship moving forward. The Christian picture of full and mutual submission—common commitments to the benevolent goal of the others' well-being—offers a way toward perfected relationships. In short, I think the Christian understanding of heaven, and how God leads us there, accords well with our experiences and with our noblest moral aspirations.

VIII. The Challenge of Being a Genuinely Good Person

What the Christian picture of heaven *does* challenge, however, is our views about ourselves. The Christian picture of heaven stands in stark contrast to the state of most of us here on earth. As such, Christianity offers a devastating critique of the human condition: just how far we are from being fully committed to benevolent service to others. A Christian anthropology declares a shared human tendency to focus on ourselves at the expense of others—an anthropology Christians defend by noting our human history of violence, power struggles, and oppression.

Central to Christianity is the claim that Jesus Christ was uniquely able to absorb the cost of our broken relationships. While Christians have offered varying theories as to *why* Jesus's perfect life, death, and resurrection makes full restoration of relationship with God and others possible, they have always agreed *that* the events culminating in Easter weekend make this restoration possible.

One of Christ's directives to his followers is that we must avail ourselves of his perfect life by offering it to God as atonement for our own sins and shortcomings. It is only in understanding the events of the Cross that we understand the full truth of who we are—e.g., how our universal, human attitudes of jealousy, cowardice, and self-justification lead us to mistake evil for good, just as it led those in first-century Palestine to judge it a good thing to crucify the one person who had led a morally perfect life. Christians affirm that part of God's revelation to us includes these facts about ourselves. Hence, for those who relate to Jesus as lord, they are called also to relate to him as savior: as the one who alone can save them from the self-destructive outcome of their existing sinful attitudes and actions.

Jesus's teachings about discipleship, as well as his example on the cross, show us that the path toward perfected relationships is going to be far more demanding than we imagine. Primarily, this is due to the overly optimistic picture we humans inevitably have of ourselves. The literature in experimental psychology documents a staggering array of strategies humans devise to hide the truth of their moral flaws to others and to themselves. People continually frame their own actions in a favorable light, compare themselves favorably with others, adopt excuse-making tactics, and in general imagine themselves in a way that is comfortable. The psychological literature again documents a huge variety of blatant and subtle ways people deceive themselves about the state of their own moral character. What these varied strategies have in common is that they all tend to be highly effective.¹⁶

Accordingly, the process toward perfected relationships may involve God needing to press upon us various truths about ourselves which are difficult for us to admit. While Jesus proclaimed the possibility of perfected relationships through him, he also emphasized that we

¹⁶ For a fuller discussion of these points, see Kinghorn 2005, ch. 6.

cannot hope to build such a loving, lasting community through our own efforts. Hence, a crucial step in achieving this ideal becomes our owning up to our shortcomings and cooperating with God's activity in our lives, asking him to change us in ways we cannot change ourselves. The path toward perfected, loving relationships may thus require such traits as openness and humility—traits which we perhaps do not yet possess in the measure we (self-deceptively) think we do.

Still, the Christian ideal of relationships perfected in benevolent love appeals to our best moral aspirations, even if it poses a challenge to our favored view of ourselves. Christianity's formal answer to the fate of the good person remains the same: for those who embrace the process of being conformed to the image of Christ, which is a matter of being fully formed in love, a heavenly community of perfected relationships is their ultimate fate. But Christianity's reminder is that being "good" must ultimately involve total surrender to God and to others, taking up a cross as needed. And this reminder should serve as a caution to any non-theist—as it serves to any professing Christian—that there may not be easy answers to the substantive question of how many of us are approaching this kind of goodness.

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