

# Heaven and Hell

These two religious terms have gained enormous spectra of significance. The heavens are first heard of in cosmological terms, and great religious significance obviously attaches to the sky as the dome under which all human experience happens, thus a symbol of religious truth: if one sky covers all that is, then one mind can comprehend all that is. There is a kind of divine imagery, therefore, in the sky itself. This is deepened by the experience of the sky as a symbol of eternity: it sometimes looks down sunnily on harsh tragedy, or (conversely) rains on our parades. It is sometimes impassive, but also sometimes eloquent, a source of tremendous beauty for the gardens of Babylon or for the back streets of Rawtenstall alike. Few can stand unmoved beneath a clear sunset, or a starry night. "The heavens, the work of your hands" leads on directly to the Psalmist's question: "What is man that you keep him in mind, mortal man that you care for him?"

As the concept of God as a being within the Universe recedes in favour of a God who holds the Universe in his hand, the heavens themselves become slightly ambiguous. Paul clearly thought there was a space above the earth and below the realm of God, which was ruled over by other spiritual powers, and Jesus himself says that when the world begins to dissolve, "the powers of heaven will be shaken"; this is the layer of being which is referred to by the terms "thrones and dominations, powers of the heavens", which are in turn dominated by the cherubim and seraphim, the great winged creatures of the Jewish heavenly host. So the phrase "God of earth and heaven" is not bi-polar, where heaven belongs to God and the earth to humanity.

In this kind of theological topography, heaven as the eternal dwelling-place of God comes dimly to view: dimly, because theology itself sternly relegates any attempt to imagine it as idolatrous. It is a theological necessity for us that we should think of God's life as existing, with a reality we cannot grasp; we know that we are at a distance from this life, and so we imagine a distant place in which the life of God unfolds. This whole enterprise is fraught with simple falsehood. The life of God does not unfold, as it were, in some parallel universe, from which he surveys our history like someone watching a soap-opera. God is not obliged to have a place, as we are, nor is his life set in a time-bound continuum. The depiction of heaven has therefore always been theologically problematic, the more so in a cinematographic age. It needs to be said that the sort of canvas painted on the grandest scale by the greatest artists which is later reduced to mockery by the utterers of kitsch "holy pictures", is simply not in obedience to the Church's canons of truth. The representation of God as an old man throned amid the clouds - even if well-painted, majestic, and aesthetically overwhelming - will still be a travesty of faith, a risible attempt to bear witness to things beyond the mind of humanity.

If the concept of heaven is problematic for human discourse or representation, the concept of hell is too. Here is another theological place that is most necessary for us. Theologically, and most particularly from spiritual and ethical points of view, it is essential to our dignity that we should have somewhere to go to get away from God. The fact that God himself has to supply this place of refuge for free-willed creatures, is the way the cookie crumbles. If we are to evade an almighty one, it must be by his permission. But without it we would be robbed of our independence, slaves to the plan of God, over-ruled by his superior plan for us.

The representation of hell is even more dangerous than that of heaven. No-one who has read Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* will ever forget the word-picture of hell offered to the little boys at Clongowes College by the Redemptorist who preaches their mission. Here the urge to disparage the attractions of Hell as a piece of eternal real-estate takes over the transmission of understanding. Hell, in the end, must be a work of God's love for our nature, a preservation for us of our inveterate propensity to find our own way to misery and stick to it.

Without this, we can never achieve the dignity of a free choice.

The actual nature of hell, therefore, can never be conjectured with accuracy. Those who depict certain states of life on the face of the earth as experiences of hell may well be nearer the mark than those who conjure up cosmic torture-chambers of infraterrestrial horror, with the necessary adjunct of physical pain, mental despair, and spiritual agony drawn from the final awareness that *it could have been otherwise*: most of the authors of infernology believe that the awareness of the vision of God is administered to the damned, so that they can, as it were, meditate for all eternity on the absolute loss they have inflicted on themselves.

We could discuss the function of these two terms in our own spiritual lives. Just as, in a human relationship which is really deep, the meditation on what life used to be like before we found each other, and the meditation on what life would be like if we lost each other, are an organic part of our progress and understanding, the cosmic images of heaven and hell perform a real function in our fundamental choices about good and evil, about suffering and self-interest, about God and not-God.

Heaven also functions as a release from the self-enclosed experience of life which is called solepcism - where we see ourselves as the centre of the Universe and interpret all other realities in relation to ourselves. Solepcism is a spiritual disease, and a dead end for the personality. The notion that God's desire is to share with us the wonder of his life, that our destiny is radically connected with the eternal life of God, releases us from the need to construct our own destiny, choose our own purpose and mode of accomplishing it, and insure ourselves a proper pay-off at the end. Such a twentieth-century recipe is profoundly at odds with the Judeo-Christian concept of a loving Creator who is also the final cause of the Universe.