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Life, Death and Eternal Hope

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THE AFTER-LIFE, MORALITY AND THE CREATION: THE FRAGMENTATION OF A
RELIGIOUS TRADITION

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In discussing the relationship between life, death and eternal hope on the one hand and religion on the other, two interesting issues emerge. The first relates to the central questions of religion other than our present main concern 'What happens to us after we die?' namely 'How and why was the universe created in the first place such that we as self-conscious, thinking beings able to pose these questions exist at all?' and 'What are the correct rules for leading a moral existence?'. In this paper I shall try and show that in most religious civilizations historically (with the possible exception of China and Japan) these questions tend to have been answered together in an integrated way but that in parts of the modern western world there has been a fragmentation. It is now common to discuss the three questions separately and without reference to each other. It is often considered that a fragmentation of this kind is a recent so-called post-modern phenomenon but in fact it dates in Britain and America at least from the late nineteenth century - a time of modernity undisturbed by any "post".

The second issue concerns the nature of hope. In principle, to have a hope of eternal life is better than the certainty of annihilation. That is what Heaven is for. However, as with human life on earth, an after-life is only worth living if there is a reasonable quality of life. It is questionable, for instance, whether Dostoyevski's corpses going 'Bobuk', Aldous Huxley's immortal fish or the souls of miscarried Roman Catholic zygotes can be said to have or to have had an existence worth having. Their existence is not in any meaningful sense different from complete annihilation and is certainly not one worth hoping for or even worrying about. An even bigger problem arises in relation to religions that believe or used to believe in eternal damnation accompanied by mental and physical torments, an after-life similar to a National Socialist concentration camp, a Soviet "psychiatric" institution for political prisoners or a medieval dungeon for heretics and witches but a million times worse and going on for ever without respite. Faced with such a possibility, any rational person would

express a preference for annihilation, much as British agents captured by the Nazis swallowed British government issued cyanide pills if captured by the Gestapo, for prudential as well as heroic reasons. The problem is complicated by the fact that believers in the reality of heaven and hell do not know which one they are destined for. They do not even know what the odds are of getting into heaven or of being relegated to hell, either for people in general or in their own particular case. How much faith or works is required? How much sin will weigh you down? How big is the mere remnant that is saved? Who belongs to the elect? None of these questions is answerable; those who ponder such questions may well emerge filled with despair rather than hope. In the latter part of the paper these questions will be examined in more detail but only in relation to the Christian societies of Europe and North America. It is finally tentatively concluded that a window of hope existed in the late nineteenth century in Britain and America when the beginning of the fragmentation of the main religious tradition permitted a widespread optimistic belief in the after-life to exist.

There are no necessary connections between a person's beliefs concerning the after-life, moral conduct and the creation of the universe and of human life. He or she could in principle believe in reincarnation but not in the law of karma, derive his or her moral principles exclusively from utilitarianism and see the universe as being created by a personal God for the benefit of a humanity created in His image, yet visited by mysterious extra-terrestrials. Such a combination of views might be strange but it is not contradictory. There is no need to shop in the same store for one's views on immortality, morality and the universe.

However, such a possibility is distinctly modern - *not* post-modern but modern - modern full stop. Most of the world's main religious traditions, the Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Parsee, Hindu, and Buddhist link the three elements more or less tightly together¹. The strength of the connection between our future state and our moral convictions has been stated particularly forcibly by Antony Flew:

"Can we not understand the hopes of the warriors of Allah who expect if they die in Holy Wars to go

straight to the arms of the black-eyed houris in paradise? Can we not understand the fears of the slum mother kept from the contraceptive clinic by her priest's warning of penalties for those who die in mortal sin? Of course we can: they both expect - and what could be more intelligible than this? - that, if they do certain things, then they will in consequence enjoy or suffer in the future certain rewards or punishments."²

Flew's statement likewise indicates the close links between morality and rewards and punishments in these two traditions and indeed this is the central characteristic of what I have elsewhere termed 'moralism'³, the moral outlook that has as its core the identifying, and respectively penalising and rewarding of guilt and innocence.

Such a moral perspective is far from being limited to Christianity, for Sulayman S Nyang quotes Dalton Galloway as saying: "The resurrection and judgement, as is common knowledge, occupies (sic) a large and important place in the Kor'an. Scarcely is there a chapter without reference to the subject and there are five chapters given almost entirely to the description of the Great Day, one of them (Sura 75) being entitled "The Resurrection". In the mind of the Prophet there seems to have been as strong a conviction that there is a general resurrection and judgement and hereafter, as that "There is no god except Allah."⁴

For our present purposes the key point to note is the strong link between the resurrection and the hereafter on the one hand and judgement on the other. There is no necessary connection between them, but in the Koran, and come to that in the New Testament and in much Jewish thinking, they are strongly tied together. The all-powerful God who created the world will in due course bring it to an end and judge both the quick and the dead.

For Christians the most direct link between morality and the hereafter on the one hand and the creation on the other is the Fall. Adam's sin of

disobedience prompted by Eve's wicked temptation of him led to their expulsion from paradise and to their transformation into ordinary human beings who must die and in consequence must reproduce and who are imbued with Adam's original sin and cursed with the need to work. Only when God redeemed His creation in the form of His son Jesus Christ was there an escape from the permanence of death, as Christ's sacrifice atoned for the sins of the world and Christ's Resurrection pre-figured the general resurrection to come. Thus Christian hope was rooted historically in the Christian theology of creation, incarnation, atonement and redemption.⁵

The Jewish Version of the Afterlife-Morality-Creation Tradition

For the Jews the forces linking the after-life and morality on the one hand and the creation on the other are in a way even stronger but I shall argue that they must be seen as acting in the reverse direction to that commonly understood; it is morality that drives the creation story and Leviticus that determines the way that Genesis is laid out.

For most of the Old Testament period, certainly until well after their time of exile in Babylon, the Jewish people lacked any concept of a moralised after-life. Those who died experienced a neutral death⁶, ie they were not judged and the good and the bad alike led a common shadowy existence in Sheol, the land of the dead, a morally neutral underworld⁷. R H Charles commented on this in 1913 that "The persistence of this heathen conception of Sheol side by side with the monotheistic conception of Yahwè as Creator and Ruler of the world for several centuries is hard for the Western mind to understand; for the conceptions are mutually exclusive."⁸

In 1913 it may have been difficult for a theologian to understand how God and Sheol could co-exist such that God's moral writ did not run in Sheol but it would have posed fewer problems for his numerous Edwardian contemporaries who were combining traditional Christianity with experiments in spiritualism. The heathen civilizations that surrounded the ancient Jews knew both neutral death (Mesopotamia) and moral death (Egypt) in which the dead were judged by

known criteria and rewarded or punished⁹. There is no necessary connection between heathenism and neutral death. Nor is it necessary for believers in monotheism to believe in the last judgement; that Jews, Christians and Muslims have in fact done so is a purely contingent matter.

The Jews seem to have shifted away from neutral death to a view of the after-life in which the righteous are rewarded and the wicked plunged into post-fatal depression because of the conflict between their concept of God and His purposes as being perfectly just and the reality of the world in which they lived, where all too often the wicked thrived, the righteous suffered and the Jews were dominated by alien oppressors. In order to resolve this moral conundrum there had to exist a different kind of after-life in which the just were rewarded and the wicked got their comeuppance. The dominant section of Jewish religious opinion came to believe in a resurrection, a judgement and in heaven and hell as a way of solving this moral problem¹⁰. There is little in the Old Testament to suggest the existence of a resurrection and a moral after-life¹¹ but the post-Bible rabbis squeezed the text until it yielded the answer they wanted. A concept of the after-life was constructed to fit a particular moral perspective and from that time onwards the after-life and morality were closely related.

It was in one sense a curious development, for Jewish law and morality were already directed towards another kind of immortality, a collective immortality - the eternal survival and integrity of the Jewish people as a holy people chosen by God and set apart from others to serve Him. However, the moral code according to which individual rewards and punishments in the after-life were allocated continued to be strongly related to the maintenance of the boundaries and integrity of the Jewish people as well as embracing more universal sins. In a legend cited by Daniel Cohn-Sherbok about Moses' visit to hell, among the damned are sinners who "ate forbidden food, lent their money at usury, wrote the name of God on amulets for Gentiles ate on the Day of Atonement, and drank blood".¹² None of these actions would be sinful for a non-Jew (though the descendants of Noah are all commanded not to drink blood - Genesis 9, 3-5). The food rules in particular were commanded by God purely in order to ensure the preservation of the identity and integrity of the Jewish people in exile¹³. By regularly observing the keeping of separate categories¹⁴ in the

necessary everyday business of eating, observant Jews not only segregate themselves from others by making commensality impossible but also live out a metaphor that reminds them of the one crucial sacred category that has to be kept apart from all others - the Jewish people itself. Thus, individual Jews who consume blood or mix meat and milk (thus mixing and confusing the fundamental categories of life and death) or who eat animals that fail to conform to their proper class (such as flightless birds, fish without fins and scales, animals without a parted hoof and/or not chewing the cud) are endangering the collective immortality of the Jewish people in this world and, therefore, are punished for it in the next.

The point can be made even more clearly in relation to (a selection of) the categories of sinners who will be damned according to the Mishnah¹⁵. The most interesting ones for our present purposes are (a) The generation of the flood, (b) The generation of Babel, (c) The men of Sodom, and (d) The ten lost tribes. The ten lost tribes were that section of the Jewish people (the northern kingdom, Israel) who were taken into captivity by the Assyrians and simply disappeared, presumably through assimilation. For the other two tribes from Judah who survived a later exile in Babylon by developing and observing a very strict moral code that kept the Jews apart as a holy people, the apparent weakness of will of the members of the ten lost tribes was literally damnable.

For a people convinced of the need to preserve social boundaries at all costs, boundary breaking activities of any kind are an abomination, a sin against God's creation, which is itself depicted in terms of the creation of order out of chaos by the marking out of discrete categories as God separated light from darkness, the water above the sky from the water under it, and the sea from the land [Genesis 1: 1-10]. The generation of the flood whom the Mishnah consigns to Hell were punished in this life by drowning in a total flood that signified the deliberate reversal of God's original creation of order out of chaos. The distinction between the waters and dry land was erased leaving only Noah and his ark floating on a formless sea that covered the entire earth. Predictably the sin that provoked this act of divine erasure was concerned with the breaking of social boundaries. The sons of the gods had sex with the daughters of men, producing a race of giants, the Nephelim [Genesis 6: 4]. This monstrous

miscegenation illicitly linking the separate realms of heaven and earth was against the very order of creation and God punished it appropriately - by bringing back chaos. The sin of the builders of the tower of Babel was essentially similar; they sought to build a human link between heaven and earth, categories for ever set apart by God, and again their punishment was confusion. Until then the world had had one mutually comprehensible language, but after Babel there was babble [Genesis 11: 1-9], the confused misunderstandings of many mutually-alien languages where once there had been order, the ugly unintelligible gibberish of *yr hen iaith* clashing with the seeming stammer of the baa-baa-barians.

The fourth group to be found in Hell according to the Jewish view cited by Cohn-Sherbok are the Sodomites, another group of notorious boundary breakers whose city was destroyed after its men sought to bugger two visiting angels [Genesis 19: 1-5]. Sodomy and bestiality are condemned together in Leviticus [18: 22-24] as forms of sexuality that are an abomination because they break down the boundaries between the categories male and female and human and animal respectively¹⁶. The men of Sodom combined this sin with the sin committed by the generation of the flood ie they sought to break down sexually the boundary between human beings and angels. Their immediate punishment for this attempt to confuse categories was the infliction on them of the *confusion* of blindness such that the men of Sodom could no longer find Lot's door [Genesis 19: 11]. The cities of the plain were then destroyed with fire and brimstone, which, according to the Mishnah, became also the basis of their inhabitants' experience of the after-life.

Thus, there is a consistent interlocking pattern between the morality that ensures the this-worldly immortality of the Jewish people and the criteria that determine the fate of those who have offended God, even where the offence occurred before the covenant between God and the Jewish people and the giving of the law to Moses. Whilst Genesis precedes Leviticus, it does seem as if the spirit of Leviticus drives the legends of Genesis, shaping the way the creation is described and the legends of Noah, Babel and Sodom. Holding together the Jewish vision of the after-life, morality and the creation are the principles of order, boundary, category and separation as opposed to confusion, abomination,

chaos and pollution. What could have better served the collective needs of a holy nation striving to preserve its identity in exile?

A South-Asian version of the tradition: the Law of Karma

It is perhaps more difficult to perceive quite this degree of coherence in the ideas of those non-Abrahamic religions that lack a clear monotheistic core with a single all-powerful God who creates, directs and judges. Nonetheless the close link between a belief in reincarnation and the law of karma in South Asian religion does tie together morality and the after-life. There is no judge or judgement involved but an immutable law of creation joins together reincarnation and morality. All the good or bad actions of this and previous lives affect an individual's karma ledger and determine whether he or she is reincarnated in a higher or lower form and experiences felicity or suffering in a future life. As described by the American philosopher, Huston Smith, it is an almost Newtonian system: "*Karma* means roughly the moral law of cause and effect. Science has alerted the world to the importance of causal relationships in the physical world. Every physical event, we are inclined to believe, has its cause, and every cause will have its determinate effects. India extends this concept of universal causation to include man's moral and spiritual life as well. India tightens up and extends its concept of moral law to see it as absolutely binding and brooking no exceptions. The present condition of each individual's interior life - how happy he is, how confused or serene, how much he can see - is an exact product of what he has wanted and got in the past; and equally, his present thoughts and decisions are determining his future states. Each act he directs upon the world has its equal and opposite reaction on himself. Each thought and deed delivers an unseen chisel blow toward the sculpting of his destiny."¹⁷

The karmic moral machine, like the doctrine of heaven and hell, assures believers that justice will prevail in the long run and that in the long run we are not all dead. It also provides an explanation for the problem of evil and suffering but it is one that *looks backwards rather than forward*. For the Christian, justice will be restored in a *future* life, the just who have suffered will

be compensated and the doers of evil punished. Christians (and Jews and Muslims) *do not* have and indeed *cannot* have had *previous* existences. The impact of the law of karma is, rather, that it explains why individuals apparently suffer unjustly in this life in terms of deeds they must have committed in their previous existences¹⁸. It is not a doctrine of hope but of meaning, though by suffering the individual is clearing his or her cosmic karmic account and will experience less suffering in the next reincarnation. If there is any hope, it is experienced by those rare souls who abandon the everyday material world for a life of contemplation, attain *moksha* (salvation) and escape the endless cycle of rebirths. Karma is a doctrine of the pre-life rather than the after-life and imposes a heavy burden of responsibility on the individual, who is told in effect 'if you suffer it is not the fault of the wicked acts of others in this life but of your own evil deeds in this or some previous life'. In this way karmic action and reaction can take precedence over the normally observable patterns of cause and effect to be found in social life¹⁹. If a wife has a husband who beats her, it is not the husband who is the most significant cause of her suffering but rather her own past misdeeds either in this life or in a previous existence. When Mahatma Gandhi killed a badly injured calf at his ashram to save it from future suffering, he was violently criticised by believers in the strong version of karma for interfering with its inevitable experience of pain. The calf would in their view now have to experience extra suffering in its next existence to compensate for the pain that Gandhi had spared it in this one. The karmic system of the universe demands that immortality and morality be linked in these curious ways²⁰; they are part of the creation in supposedly much the same sense as the cause and effect regularities of the natural world that we observe and measure every day.

How much hope if there for Christians who believe in hell?

The karmic view of the world may provide meaning and even a kind of stoical solace but it is difficult to see how the endless wheel of rebirths with a constant quotient of karmic suffering can furnish hope except for those few adepts who abandon this world of illusion and attain salvation. But then why should there be any more hope in the minds of Christian believers in predestination, who know that the numbers of the reprobate damned vastly

exceed those of the minority fortunate enough to belong to the arbitrarily and inscrutably already-chosen elect and who also know that they have no way of discovering to which group they belong. The verdict has already been decided, it is unknowable and it is more likely to be hell than otherwise for only a *remnant* [Romans 11, 5-6] will be saved²¹. This is a recipe for anxiety rather than hope.

A similar anxiety is attached to Pascal's wager; here individuals do have choices and Pascal's wager says that in the face of doubt and uncertainty they should choose faith and moral conformity, because if God exists they will avoid hell and get to heaven either directly or via purgatory. If God does not exist and death is annihilation then the wagers are supposedly no worse off by having adopted this course of conduct, though each of them may have spent his or her one and only life trapped in the tedious disciplines of Port Royal. The problem with Pascal's wager, as Professor Flew²² has pointed out, is that not just one but *many* wagers can be made. In Flew's complex wager there could, for example, exist a God who sends all Roman Catholics (including Pascal) to hell. Indeed such a doctrine of God's behaviour towards Catholics is probably widely held among the Free Presbyterians of County Antrim, Catholics being seen as heretics who have abandoned the truths laid down in the Bible, taken up the worship of idols and graven images and given their obedience to a grotesquely inhuman and immoral authoritarian system. In Pascal's own day the fierce exchanges of *odium theologicum* between religious enemies must have made him aware of such a possibility. In a scheme where men and women are saved by faith, how in a world of religious pluralism could they be sure which out of several faiths would save them? Even if they believed men were saved by works, how could they know what properly constitutes good works, given the moral disagreements between the denominations?

The people of the more religiously monolithic later middle ages with its indulgences, chantries and masses for the dead must have been just as anxious about the after-life, or else the church would not have been able to milk them so effectively by selling to them the surplus grace possessed by individual saints over and above what each saint had needed to get into heaven. As the Church in a fit of Weimar-style inflation poured more and more certificates of indulgence into the market, with only a fixed backing of surplus grace, some of

the indulgence purchasers must have feared that they were holding worthless bits of paper which God would refuse to redeem at par. It has been well described as a society characterised by “a fear of going to the wrong place, becoming a major cause for devotion, art and the increasing power of the church”²³.

This fear of going to the wrong place may well for many medieval believers have counter-balanced or even overborne the hope of going to the right one. Images of a vivid and punitive hell of physical torment certainly seem to have dominated the medieval imagination. Whereas most reported modern near-death experiences tend to be peaceful, filled with a kindly light and involving reunion with deceased relatives and friends²⁴, the medieval near death experiences revealed hell and purgatory in great detail as well as heaven²⁵ and laid great stress on the torments of the former. If the medieval near-dying person did report recognizing particular acquaintances on the other side, this was not a source of comfort for they tended to be in hell and their presence was reported mainly in order to stress that the dead person’s sins were now being paid for a thousand-fold in torment²⁶. The message brought back was primarily a warning to those still alive of what would happen to them if they failed to repent and reform. This absence of pity at the suffering of others in the way medieval Near Death Experiences were reported was matched by the seemingly widely held medieval view that the blessed in heaven would in some sense both observe and enjoy the torments of those in hell. Tertullian may be one source of this view for he is quoted as saying of the last judgement, “how shall I admire, how laugh, how rejoice, how exult when I behold so many sage philosophers blushing in red hot fires with their deluded pupils, so many dancers tripping more nimbly from anguish than ever before from applause”²⁷.

Likewise Peter Lombard in the 12th century wrote: “the elect shall go forth to see the torments of the impious and seeing this they will not be affected by grief but will be satiated with joy at the sight of the unutterable calamity of the impious”²⁸. This view was declared orthodox at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215²⁹.

Thomas Cantimpratanus added a further nice personal touch when he noted

“Some simple folk are wont to wonder that the saints, at the Last Judgement, will be in no wise disturbed at the sight of the damnation of their friends and parents, but all faithful souls will account this, their astonishment, as mere folly, seeing that they know how the saints, confirmed in their perpetual exultation, can be touched by no trouble or grief.”³⁰

Robert Hughes adds “Cantimpratanus then described how the Blessed Marie d’Oignies was sent a vision of her own mother in Hell, whereon she stopped crying over her death. What was the point of expending pity on the damned? Indeed, as Aquinas the angelic doctor has pointed out, it was a sin to commiserate with those in Hell, since this implied you were siding against God”³¹. Aquinas further argued that the glory of the blessed was enhanced by their knowledge of the torments of the damned for when seeing the damned they would rejoice that it wasn’t them but other folk who were being tortured.³²

Hell, then, was ubiquitous. It was even part of the world as seen from heaven. The saints drifted past on high in a celestial Zeppelin and looked down gleefully at the roasting sufferers below. Is this a picture of hope - even for the saved? It is no doubt much more comfortable to sneer at suffering than to suffer but should our hope for the after-life include eternal sneering?

Fragmented People

The Christian tradition of the afterlife-morality-creation discussed above was for most of Christian history a coherent one, just as in their own different ways are the Jewish and the karmic traditions. However, in the secular Europe of today the tradition has, as we shall see, fragmented and neither the hopes nor the fears of the past concerning the after-life have much hold on people’s imaginations. Let us look first at late twentieth century Europe, a place of very fragmented beliefs and then at Britain and America in the latter half of the nineteenth century when a very different kind of fragmentation existed that can be seen in retrospect as a time of hope.

If the distant past was characterised by one or other tightly knit system of after-life, morality and creation, the most vivid aspect of which was the punishment of the wicked, most of the people of late twentieth century western Europe can be seen as living in a time of puzzlement in which the after-life, morality and the creation have little connection with one another. The most striking change detaching the after-life from morality is the collapse of the belief in hell; indeed many would see those who do continue to believe in hell as possessed of warped and cruel minds. Some relevant data from opinion polls taken all across Europe in 1981³³ are shown in Table I below:

% who say they believe in (1981)	Britain	Ireland	France	Denmark	European Average
God	76%	95%	62%	58%	75%
A personal God	31%	-	-	-	32%
Absolute Guidelines for telling good and evil	28%	-	-	-	26%
Life after Death	45%	76%	35%	26%	43%
Heaven	57%	83%	27%	17%	40%
Hell	27%	54%	15%	8%	23%
Reincarnation	27%	26%	22%	11%	21%
% who are definite atheists	9%	2%	19%	21%	11%

Table I

The most striking statistics revealed by the table are those that show (a) the low proportion of people in both Britain and Europe who believe in a personal God, particularly given the high proportion of believers in *some* kind of a God in Britain and throughout Europe and the absence of definite atheists except in France and Denmark; (b) the low proportion in Britain and in Europe in general of believers in an absolute morality; (c) the low percentage of believers in hell, which is well below the proportion who believe in some form of life after death³⁴; only the Irish remain attached to hell; (d) the relatively high proportion of believers in reincarnation, given that this is not part of the European Christian tradition.

The overall picture is one of people who believe in something but are not quite sure what. Where hell once dominated the European imagination, now

less than a quarter of the European population believe in it. Far more believe in life after death and/or reincarnation than in hell. In other words the after-life and morality have become detached from one another. The widespread belief in a non-personal God likewise indicates that the creation too is seen as separate from morality or from the after-life. The tradition has fragmented.

No doubt it will be argued that this fragmentation and in particular the significant levels of belief in reincarnation are a sign of that supposed recent cultural transformation of society called post-modernism. Nothing could be further from the truth. Nor is it the case that the high belief in reincarnation is the product of contact with immigrants from India who believe in reincarnation or of the recent easternisation of western religion through the influence of ISKCON or various influential freelance gurus. Both the fragmentation of the tradition and the belief in reincarnation are *much older* and the product of periods in British history that cannot be described as anything other than 'modern'. Not post-modern or neo-modern or late modern but modern, full stop. In 1955 before post-modernism had been invented, Geoffrey Gorer³⁵ reported that 25% of those English people who believed in an after-life believed in reincarnation ie 1 in 8 of the total population. Over 250 people out of his sample of 5,000 made spontaneous and explicit statements about their beliefs in reincarnation. In an even earlier Mass Observation³⁶ survey of a London borough published in 1947 the authors comment "Perhaps the least expected and in some ways the most significant fact which came to light was the extent of belief in reincarnation. Among the interview sample about one person in twenty-five *spontaneously* went into enough detail to show that they held some such belief. That amounts to about one in ten of those who have any definite belief in an after-life at all, and is almost certainly an underestimate." Likewise Harold Loukes³⁷ in a study of teenage religion in 1961 noted that a belief in reincarnation was common.

Gorer comments that it is very unlikely that many of his sample would have had any contact with an eastern or eastern influenced religion or philosophy (such as Theosophy)³⁸ and in none of the empirical sociological material is there any suggestion of a belief in karma. The British reincarnationists see themselves coming back as other human beings, not as

lower animals and there is no suggestion that they believe that they carry or will carry a burden of karma in the form of a karmic account. Once again the after-life has been divorced from morality.

The same point has of course been made earlier in relation to Near Death Experiences. Medieval Near Death Experiences ones had a script that included heaven, hell and purgatory with a stress on torment and a strong moral message such as a violent denunciation of sodomy³⁹. Typical modern Near Death Experiences that have been reported reveal a pleasing after-life that includes reunion with deceased loved ones. Such images may well not have commended themselves to a medieval society in which celibacy and dedication to an institution was the highest ideal and a spouse was chosen for reasons to do largely with economic necessity for the poor and inheritance and kin pressures for the rich. By contrast only a few modern Near Death Experiences reveal the torments of hell, since most people do not have any mental framework into which a vision of hell could be slotted. Either they do not get Near Death Experiences of hell or they fail to retain the memory of them ie they become not memorable and indelible experiences but mere bad dreams to be forgotten. Only those Near Death Experiences that are believable get believed and modern Anglo-Saxons live in a society a large proportion of whose members are disposed, however vaguely, to accept the existence of some kind of after-life but to repudiate the possibility of hell as an invention of the ignorant or the malicious. In consequence modern Near Death Experiences are indeed sources of hope.

The fragmentation of the tradition and the decline of hell are not, however, new or even specifically twentieth century phenomena, though they may have gone further during the twentieth century as a result of the massive decline in levels of religious affiliation and moral probity from their peak in the first decade of the twentieth century. Rather we may trace both the fragmentation of religion and the quenching of hell back to the latter half of the nineteenth century, a time of great religious and moral fervour compared with the present day. Its origins lie in the threat of a collision between the two great forces of Victorian society, science and religion. Darwin's theory of evolution based on natural selection slowly crushed traditional religious teachings about

the creation. Darwin's views prevailed among those who had no scientific education because the great mass of scientists accepted that he was right and it was the scientists who were providing the wonders and progress of the Victorian era. Religious leaders of sense came to accept the reality of evolution but in doing so they accepted fragmentation. The question of how, if not why, the world was created entered the domain of the scientists and it has ceased to have much religious significance. It is a mere Hubble-bubble that has little impact on our views about the after-life or morality. At about the same time another and much more interesting fragmentation of the tradition occurred to which we must now turn.

Spiritualism and the Fragmentation of the Tradition

The original fragmentation of the tradition, in Britain and America at least, occurred as we have already suggested in the last half of the nineteenth century 1850-1900. It was during that proudly and self-consciously modern period of optimism about scientific, technical and moral progress that the self-construction of religion as bricolage that is now seen as post-modern first become a significant phenomenon. In particular this occurred during the boom in Victorian (and later Edwardian) spiritualism, when millions of churchgoers also attended seances and other spiritualist functions where they believed they could communicate with the dead⁴⁰.

Spiritualism was a direct response to a modernity in which the growing prestige of science and the increasing influence of evolutionary thought seemed to pose a threat to the older tradition of revealed religion. In a period when materialism seemed to be undermining religion, spiritualism was "far more representative of contemporary religious attitudes than the agnosticism embraced by the comparatively few intellectuals who have dominated the historical record...."⁴¹

The most important characteristic of spiritualism was that it limited itself to one set of religious issues only - those connected with the after-life. Spiritualists believed that human beings survived death and that they could

communicate with them and in particular that they could help the bereaved to find their deceased loved ones. Many spiritualists saw this simply as a technique, as a means rather than an end⁴² and far more of those who practised spiritualism belonged to some orthodox denomination such as Methodism than to an occult tendency such as Theosophy⁴³ or a spiritualist church set apart from other denominations. Within the few specifically spiritualist churches were to be found both Christians and non-Christians (who nonetheless revered Jesus and his teachings), both believers and free-thinkers⁴⁴.

The spiritualists, though in conflict with scientists over the scientists' materialist philosophy and over the validity of the evidence for the existence of spirits, were not anti-science. Evolutionists such as Alfred Russell Wallace the co-discoverer of natural selection were spiritualists, and spiritualists saw a congruence between the theory of evolution and the evolutionary, ever-progressing version of the after-life in which they believed⁴⁵. Indeed the spiritualists were probably willing to accept any version of the creation that the scientists chose to provide. For other churches the discovery of the Megatherium meant the end of the magisterium but the spiritualists were quite willing to incorporate the prevailing evolutionary approach to the world into their faith.

Likewise despite being condemned by the ultra-orthodox⁴⁶ for trafficking with ghosts and spirits [Deuteronomy 18, 9-12], the spiritualists had no quarrel with traditional religion; their creed was a purely empirical one⁴⁷ and thus a source of hope that could be used to reinforce beliefs originally grounded in revelation. Spiritualism was a remarkably tolerant and undogmatic movement that offered a particular view of the after-life but otherwise had very little religious content⁴⁸ and allowed its adherents to remain in their own previous denominations⁴⁹. As such it was the first of the pick and mix religions. It looked after the after-life and was quite happy to leave other religious and moral questions to rival religious organisations. Spiritualism was not so much a religion as a religious building block out of which a religion could be assembled with the help of other building blocks from other sources. Spiritualists either "remained uninterested in the traditional questions of western Christian

theology or they took the major part of their religious beliefs from outside the spiritualist movement"⁵⁰. The tradition had indeed fragmented.

Likewise spiritualists did not have a strong and distinctive moral programme of their own but allowed their adherents to follow the rules and conventions of whatever other denominations or social groups they belonged to. Spiritualists would have thus in the main have accepted the moral message, feeling of worship and sense of tradition, continuity and community provided by their local church or chapel. They took their religion from two sources. Spiritualism was "a diffuse movement with no official philosophy other than the claim that spirit communication was a scientific fact"⁵¹. For those spiritualists who did form themselves into churches with attached Spiritualist Sunday schools called Lyceums, the moral teaching was one of conventional Victorian respectability, temperance and self-help⁵². Where they had a reputation for being "progressive" it was on issues such as women's rights and in their general individualism and democratic hostility to authoritarianism and hierarchy⁵³. Even so they were not particularly radical in their politics nor did they achieve very much politically but, then, why should they have done? They were not a political organisation. If there was a distinctive aspect to the spiritualists' moral outlook it lay in their tolerance, in their rejection of absolute morality, in their unwillingness to label individuals as absolutely good or bad, in their ability "to view human weakness without moral outrage"⁵⁴. The spiritualists believed strongly in individual responsibility but they also saw individual character and behaviour as influenced by inheritance and environment and were thus unwilling to pass strong moral judgements on others or to use the language of guilt and sin⁵⁵. They were early causalists⁵⁶ who were beginning to see the world in terms of cause and effect rather than guilt and innocence. We can see here another fragmentation as the utilitarian ideas of political economy begin to influence perceptions of personal morality.

Spiritualist Hope and Orthodox Hell

The tone of the spiritualists' morality reflected their view of the after-life which was after all their main preoccupation. In particular they totally rejected

the idea of hell⁵⁷. Hell for them simply did not exist, though it is difficult to tell whether they deduced this from the absence of spirit messages received from those undergoing eternal torment or from the more general consideration that it was “at once unreasonable and unjust to consign fallible human beings to endless damnation”⁵⁸. In principle there is no reason why strong believers in spiritualism should not also be strong believers in the existence of hell. If such persons also had the mentality of medieval theologians they could even take delight in listening in on Hell Clairvoyance Long Wave to the howls of their own recently deceased children. However, in practice such people seem to be rather rare. There is a lack of affinity between faith in spiritualism and a belief in hell. The idea that religion can be a complete bricollage of arbitrary choices is thus false for certain combinations never get chosen, even though they are logically possible.

For those Victorian spiritualists who also belonged to denominations that officially upheld the existence of hell, life was made easier by the general decline in the belief in hell in the late nineteenth century and a tendency towards universalism⁵⁹. By the end of the century Gladstone was moved to comment that the doctrine of hell had been relegated “..... to the far-off corners of the Christian mind there to sleep in deep shadow as a thing needless in our enlightened and progressive age”.⁶⁰ Some feared that a decline in the degree to which people believed in a horrible hell where the wicked were punished would lead to a collapse of morality⁶¹ but in fact late Victorian England became more and more moral all the time. At the end of the nineteenth century crime and illegitimacy were at lower levels than ever before (or ever since) and temperance was gaining ground⁶². Indeed hell could even be seen as destructive of morality, as in McTaggart’s wager⁶³, another advanced version of Pascal’s wager, one stating that a deity so vile as to consign people to hell has the mentality of a mendacious and vicious bully and, therefore, cannot be trusted. It would be senseless to follow the moral instructions of such a Being, for moral precepts taken from such a source would very likely be a cunning and cruel deception.

It is perhaps no wonder that so many people with spiritualist leanings *and* orthodox church membership should have chosen the hopeful version of the next-world as “Summerland” offered by clairvoyance to the possibility of going

to a Christian hell, even if it was a somewhat fading, dwindling, receding hell. The after-life as perceived by the more independent and philosophically-speculative spiritualists was not a total institution consisting of two hermetically sealed compartments⁶⁴ called heaven and hell, and there were no tortures of purgatory, nor did there exist for them the eternal shades of a limbo filled with virtuous Greek pagan philosophers of the classical era pacifying unbaptised babies and pondering the nature of ensouled miscarriages. Rather the spiritualists' Summerland or heaven consisted of a series of spheres, some more desirable than others, to which the deceased were initially allocated according to their deeds in this life. Through spiritual effort it was then possible to achieve social mobility and rise to a higher and more desirable sphere. There were no punishments and no regression; the after-life too was a land of hope and progress⁶⁵, though few spiritualist theorizers seem to have been willing to effect a complete separation between their ideas of the after-life and of morality.

Such an image of the after-life was appropriate for the growing, progressing, improving society of capitalist Victorian Britain. Capitalism based as it is on growth, innovation and the regulation of human activities through trade in the market place is the only kind of society in which it is in principle possible for everyone to gain. All other large-scale societies are based on force or ideology and are zero-sum games. The use of force means that for every hitter someone else gets hit and political and religious ideologies breed their own heretics and thus victims. The members of such societies know what hell is in their own lifetimes and are predisposed to believe in hell in the next world too. The growth of market relations in modern nineteenth-century Britain by contrast led to a less violent, less authoritarian, less retributive and punitive society and to corresponding changes in perceptions of the after-life.

A Window of Hope

The late nineteenth century in Britain is sometimes represented as a time of religious crisis and loss of faith, an infinite Dover Beach where the tide withdraws for ever with a melancholy rattling of spiritual pebbles until there is an arid causeway all the way to infidel France. For many intellectuals it may well

have been like that but for many ordinary folk it was a time of exciting new religious choices and combinations that provided a spiritual optimism to match the moral, economic and scientific optimism of the everyday world.

It was a time of hope compared both with early centuries when a tightly integrated religious tradition of afterlife-morality-creation perpetuated by a religious monopoly had left most people fearing that they might go to hell and also a time of hope compared with the present day when the majority view of death in Britain and in most of Europe is that it means annihilation. The sting of death has returned and the crematorium has won its victory in late twentieth century England, where most people believe neither in the message of the after-life provided by revealed religion nor in the validity of the evidence provided by spiritualism. This is true not just of Britain but of most of Europe with the exception of God-revering Ulster. The British have thus travelled from fear to hope and from hope to alienation.

The various Christian, Jewish, Muslim and reincarnationist societies that I have discussed earlier in the section on the integrated tradition of afterlife-morality-creation will of course have their own individual linear, cyclical, parabolic or other-shaped trajectories of hope, fear and despair and it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss them. Here I have merely tried to outline the rise and fall of hope in particular western societies and the implications for other similar societies. Hope expanded in Britain in the nineteenth century with the fragmentation of the religious tradition, when the existence of religious pluralism allowed individuals to construct their own hope out of religious fragments of their own choice. The problem today is that their descendants have ceased to believe in the fragments. In principle individuals could construct a new version of the religion of hope out of, say, the evidence of Near Death Experiences, very few of which involve hell, the tradition of duty and service provided by Methodism, messages from the other side supporting birds' rights with particular reference to battery chickens and the physics of the singularity from which God produced the universe literally out of a void. In practice very few of them do. Britain is a sensate society in which most individuals progress as they grow older from hedonism to healthism to materialism to stoicism without ever experiencing hope.

Notes

- ¹ Arnold Toynbee, Man's concern with life after death in, Arnold Toynbee and Arthur Koestler (eds) *Life After Death* New York, McGraw Hill 1976 p 29.
- ² Antony Flew *The Logic of Mortality* in Paul and Linda Badham (eds) *Death and Immortality in the Religions of the World* New York, Paragon 1987 p 171.
- ³ Christie Davies, *Permissive Britain*, London, Pitman 1975.
- ⁴ Sulayman S Nyang, The Teaching of the Quran Concerning Life after Death in Paul and Linda Badham (eds) 1987 *op cit* p 72 quoting Dalton Galloway, The Resurrection and Judgement in the Koran, *The Moslem World*, vol 17, 1922, p 348.
- ⁵ See Paul and Linda Badham, *Immortality or Extinction* London, Macmillan 1984 (2nd edition) p 51.
- ⁶ See Alan E Bernstein, *The Formation of Hell, Death and Retribution in the Ancient and Early Christian Worlds*, London, UCL, 1993 p 8.
- ⁷ R H Charles, *A Critical History of the Doctrine of a Future Life. In Israel, in Judaism and in Christianity*, London, A and C Black, 1913, p 34-41.
- ⁸ Charles *op cit* p 36.
- ⁹ Bernstein *op cit* p 3.
- ¹⁰ Daniel Cohn-Sherbok, *Death and Immortality in the Jewish Tradition* in Paul and Linda Badham (eds) 1987 *op cit* p 25.
- ¹¹ See Cohn-Sherbok *ib id* p 25 on the modes of exegesis used.
- ¹² Cohn-Sherbok *ib id* p 29. The offences he cites that have been omitted by the present author concern acts of dishonesty, such as using false weights, that would be sinful regardless of the religion of the perpetrator.
- ¹³ Christie Davies, Sexual Taboos and Social Boundaries, *American Journal of Sociology* 87, 5, March 1982 pp 1032-1063.
- ¹⁴ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger, an analysis of concepts of pollution and taboo*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966.
- ¹⁵ Cited in Cohn-Sherbok in Paul and Linda Badham (eds) 1987 *op cit* p 26. Cohn-Sherbok gives a total of thirteen categories.
- ¹⁶ Christie Davies, Religious Boundaries and Sexual Morality in G D Comstock and S E Henking (eds) *Que(e)rying Religion* New York, Continuum, 1997 p 41.

- ¹⁷ Huston Smith, *The Religions of Man* New York, Harper and Row, 1958. See also Herbert Fingarette, *The Self in Transformation* New York, Basic, 1963.
- ¹⁸ See Dharendra Narain, *Hindu Character* Bombay, University of Bombay, 1957.
- ¹⁹ See Alban G Widgery, *Reincarnation and Karma: their Value to the Individual and the State*, *Aryan Path* 1936.
- ²⁰ For a critique see Bruce R Reichenbach, *Buddhism, Karma and Immortality* in Paul and Linda Badham (eds) 1987 *op cit* pp 150-1.
- ²¹ John Calvin, *The Institutes of Christian Religion*, London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1986 pp 213-6. The pessimistic gloss is added by this author. But on this point see also Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, London, Allen and Unwin 1930, pp 104-122.
- ²² See Antony G N Flew, *God and Philosophy*, London, Hutchinson 1966.
- ²³ Tony Walter, *The Revival of Death*, London, Routledge 1994 p 14.
- ²⁴ Ian Wilson, *The After Death Experience*, London, Sidgwick and Jackson 1987.
- ²⁵ See Carol Zaleski, *Otherworld Journeys, Accounts of Near Death Experience in Medieval and Modern Times*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1987.
- ²⁶ See Eileen Gardner (ed) *Visions of Heaven and Hell Before Dante*, New York, Ithaca, 1989.
- ²⁷ Quoted in Paul and Linda Badham 1984 *op cit* p 62.
- ²⁸ Quoted in Paul and Linda Badham 1984 *op cit* p 62.
- ²⁹ Paul and Linda Badham 1984 *op cit* p 62.
- ³⁰ Quoted in Robert Hughes, *Heaven and Hell in Western Art* London, Weidenfeld and Nicholson 1968 p 20. For further similar examples from the thought of the seventeenth century English puritans see Philip C Almond, *Heaven and Hell in Enlightenment England*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1994 pp 82-3 and also his note on later responses to Tertullian p 99.
- ³¹ See Geoffrey Rowell, *Hell and the Victorians* Oxford, Clarendon 1974 p 126.
- ³² Paul and Linda Badham 1984 *op cit* p 61.
- ³³ The figures are taken from Stephen Harding, David Phillips and Michael Fogarty, *Contrasting Values in Western Europe* Basingstoke, Macmillan 1986 pp 46-7 and David Gerard, *Religious Attitudes and Values* in Mark Abrams, David Gerard and Noel Timms (eds) *Values and Social Change in Britain* Basingstoke, Macmillan 1985 pp 60-1. All the material comes from the European Values Survey.

- ³⁴ The proportion of believers in Heaven appears to exceed the percentage of believers in any kind of after-life in England and Ireland, probably because the word Heaven can mean 'the place where God is' as well as one section of the after-life.
- ³⁵ Geoffrey Gorer, *Exploring English Character*, London, Cresset 1955 pp 259-62.
- ³⁶ Mass Observation, *Puzzled People* London, Gollanz 1948 p 29.
- ³⁷ Harold Loukes, *Teenage Religion*, London, SCM 1962.
- ³⁸ Gorer *op cit*.
- ³⁹ See Gardner *op cit* and especially *Wetti's Vision* pp 74-7. Wetti was a monk in the monastery at Reichenau.
- ⁴⁰ R Laurence Moore, *In Search of White Crows, Spiritualism, Parapsychology and American Culture*, New York, Oxford University Press 1977 pp xii, 40-1. Thomas A Kselman, *Death and the After-Life in Modern France* Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1993 p 150. Frank Spedding, *Physical Phenomena and Psychical Research in Canon J D Pearce-Higgins*, Rev G Stanley Whitby (eds) *Life, Death and Psychical Research* pp 38-9.
- ⁴¹ Janet Oppenheim, *The Other World, Spiritualism and Psychical Research in England 1850-1914*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1985 p 2.
- ⁴² Oppenheim *op cit* p 84.
- ⁴³ Moore *op cit* p 235.
- ⁴⁴ Oppenheim *op cit* pp 62, 67.
- ⁴⁵ Oppenheim *op cit* p 85, 268.
- ⁴⁶ Oppenheim *op cit* pp 64-68. Moore *op cit* p 40.
- ⁴⁷ Moore *op cit* p 238.
- ⁴⁸ Oppenheim *op cit* p 66.
- ⁴⁹ Howard Kerr and Charles L Crow, Introduction in Howard Kerr and Charles L Crow (eds) *The Occult in America: New Historical Perspectives*, Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1983 p 6. See also Kelvin I Jones, *Conan Doyle and the Spirits*, Aquarian, 1989 p 26.
- ⁵⁰ Moore *op cit* p 43.
- ⁵¹ Moore *op cit* p 41.
- ⁵² Oppenheim *op cit* pp 101-2.

⁵³ Oppenheim *op cit* pp 88-9, 98, Kerr and Crow *op cit* p 5, Mary Farrell Bednarowski, Women in Occult America in Kerr and Crow (eds) *op cit* pp 180-1. Logie Barrow, *Independent Spirits, Spiritualists and English Plebeians 1850-1910*, London, Routledge 1986.

⁵⁴ Moore *op cit* p 79.

⁵⁵ Moore *op cit* pp 82-3.

⁵⁶ Davies 1975 *op cit*.

⁵⁷ Oppenheim *op cit* pp 79-80, 92.

⁵⁸ Oppenheim *op cit* p 92.

⁵⁹ Jonathan L Kvanvig, *The Problem of Hell*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1993 p 13. Rowell 1974 *op cit* pp 191, 213. Charles *op cit*.

⁶⁰ Quoted in Rowell 1974 *op cit* p 212 from W E Gladstone, *Studies Subsidiary to the Works of Bishop Butler*, 1898 p 206.

⁶¹ Moore *op cit* p 45.

⁶² Christie Davies, Does Religion prevent Crime? The long-term Inverse Relationship between Crime and Religion in Britain, *Informationes Theologiae Europae* 1994 pp 76-93.

⁶³ For background see Kvanvig 1993 *op cit* p 9.

⁶⁴ Christie Davies, Goffman's Concept of the Total Institution: Criticisms and Revisions, *Human Studies* No 12, 1989, pp 77-95.

⁶⁵ Moore *op cit* pp 56, 79. Oppenheimer *op cit* pp 85, 94-5. Barrow *op cit* p 251.