

Thinking About Heaven – John Schuurman's Class
IPC Adult Sunday School
Kent's Excursus on Other Religions

Some terms:

Karma = "Action," any action in the world has effects, like echoes or shaking a rope attached to a wall at the other end, such that vibrations that are put into it must come back

Samsara = The cycle of rebirths, all realms into which a soul can be born: human, animal, "hungry ghosts," hellish beings, heavenly beings

Moksha = "Liberation," escape from all rebirth, thus a final impersonal eternity of being

Caste = In Hinduism, various levels of social organization with occupational and religious implications; one is simply born into caste, which changes only with reincarnation. Note that Buddhism denied caste but kept the idea of reincarnation.

Monism = The idea that there is only one Reality, so all things, especially your own true Self (note capital 'S') is identical with Eternal One. All appearance of difference is illusion.

Nirvana = A grammatically negative term meaning "extinction" or "extinguishing," like when a fire goes out. In Buddhism and some forms of Hinduism, the term denotes the ideal state of detachment from the world such that karma ends, thus rebirth ends, and *moksha* is achieved.

Olam-ha-ba = In Judaism, "the world to come," suggesting for some an afterlife with resurrection, judgment, and heavenly blessing. For others it denotes a this-worldly state of justice, moral righteousness, the restoration of Israel, achievable as a final ideal state of being.

Al Janna = In Islam, literally "the Garden," a term for the ideal heavenly state of being for those judged by Allah (God) to be worthy.

Other-worldly salvation – Images of ideal existence that appear after death, perhaps in some resurrected or otherwise supra-normal world.

This-worldly salvation – Images of ideal existence that emphasize a personally harmonious or socially just and ideal world without reference to death or resurrection.

Hinduism: Performers of karma do not know the Truth [for] they fall from heaven, misery-stricken, when the fruit of their work is exhausted [i.e., they go to heaven for good karma but use up the merit]. Ignorant fools, regarding sacrifices and humanitarian works as the highest, having enjoyed their reward on the heights of heaven, gained by good works, they enter again this world or a lower one. (Mundaka Upanishad, composed perhaps around 200 bce)

The finest essence [of a thing] that you cannot see, in that all things have their existence. That is the truth. That is the Self. And that is you. (Chandogya Upanishad)

Buddhism: The king [Melinda] asked, "Is cessation Nirvana?" "Yes, your majesty," [replied the monk Nagasena]. "All foolish common people take delight in the sense and their objects, are impressed by them, are attached to them. In that way, they are carried away by the flood and are not set free from birth, old age, and death. But the well-informed holy disciples do not take delight in the sense, [etc.], and in consequence their craving ceases; the cessation of craving leads successively to that of grasping, of becoming, of birth [i.e., no reincarnation], of old age and death." (Questions of King Malinda)

New Age: It is true that almost all New Agers believe in reincarnation. [But] rather than [simply] reincarnation, the universal element in New Age ideas about survival is progressive spiritual evolution considered as a process which started before birth and will continue beyond death. ... Every reality [i.e., every rebirth and lifetime] one may find oneself in constitutes a learning task, which serves the cosmic process of progressive spiritual education and evolution of consciousness. (Hanegraaff: *New Age Religion and Western Culture*, 162-3)

Native Traditions: "When I looked behind me there were ghosts of people like a trailing fog as far as I could see – grandfathers of grandfathers and grandmothers of grandmothers without number. And as we went the Voice behind me said: 'Behold a good nation walking in a sacred manner in a good land!'" (from *Black Elk Speaks*)

China: "When the dead are honored and the memory of remote ancestors is kept alive, a people's virtue is at its fullest." Confucius, *Analects* 1:9 "When your parents are alive, serve them according to the ritual. When they die, bury them according to the ritual, make sacrifices to them according to the ritual." *Analects* 2:5. A student asked about death, and Confucius said, "You do not yet know life, how could you know death?" *Analects* 11:12

Judaism: "The resurrection of the dead is one of the cardinal principles established by Moses our Teacher. A person who does not believe in this principle has no real religion, certainly not Judaism. However, resurrection is only for the righteous. How after all could the wicked come back to life, since they are dead even in their life times? (Maimonides, Commentary on Sanhedrin Ch 10)

Islam: These [those who gain salvation by martyrdom] are they who shall be brought nigh to God, in gardens of delight, on inwrought couches reclining on them face to face; Aye-blooming youths go round about them with goblets and ewers and a cup of flowing wine, and with such fruits as shall please them best, and with flesh of such birds as they shall long for. And theirs shall be the Houris, with large dark eyes, like pearls hidden in their shells, in recompense of their labors past. No vain discourse will they hear therein, nor charge of sin, but only the cry, "Peace! Peace!" And the people of the right hand [also achieving salvation]: Amid thornless *sidrahs* and *talh* trees clad with fruit, and in extended shade, and by flowing waters, and with abundant fruits, unfailing, unforbidden, and on lofty couches. Of a rare creation have we created the Houris, and we have made them ever virgins, dear to their spouses, of equal age with them. [Etc. Then follows the description of hell]. Quran, Sura 56

Baha'i: Paradise is decked with mystic roses, and hell hath been made to blaze with the fire of the impious. (Tablets of Bahauallah, p 119)

Platonism: If at its release the soul is pure and carries with it no contamination of the body because it never willingly associated with it in life, ... then it departs to that place that is, like itself, invisible, immortal, divine and wise. ... But if at the time of its release the soul is tainted and impure because it has always associated with the body and loved it, do you think it will escape independent? On the contrary, it will be permeated by the corporeal... (Plato: *Phaedo* 81)