

WHAT EVER HAPPENED TO THE LAST JUDGMENT?

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For more on life after death see www.class.uidaho.edu/ngier/afterlife.htm and a scholarly piece on Kant at www.class.uidaho.edu/ngier/kantljsj.htm

The judge within will pronounce a severe verdict. . . . The inner reproaches of conscience plague vicious men more relentlessly than the Furies.

--Immanuel Kant

I believe in a future state of rewards and punishments, but not eternal.

--John Adams

When I'm not rushed, I enjoy reading the obituaries. Now that families have the option of writing their own, it makes for much more interesting reading. What blows me away, however, is the overtly religious families believe that somehow their dearly departeds are already in Heaven.

I learned something quite different in Sunday School. I was taught that at the end of time Jesus would harvest his human crop, and just as the farmer separates the weeds and the chaff and destroys them, so, too, will Jesus throw the wicked into a "furnace of fire." Only then, not when they die, will the righteous "shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father" (Matt. 13:43).

As a Unitarian Universalist, who rejects the Trinity and the existence of Hell, it appears to me that, ironically, many who reject us outright may have joined us in committing the heresy of universal salvation.

Or more accurately, these Christians have preempted God's prerogatives in deciding who will be saved and who will be damned. Surely, that is God's decision not ours. In my mind, the latter offense is far worse than the former. Even the closest families could not claim to know the hearts of their nearest kin.

The issue of good deeds is of course a moot point if you are strict Calvinist believing in predestination. Calvin was so keen on preventing anyone from earning their own salvation that he took an obscure passage in Ephesians—"even as [God] chose us in him before the foundation of the world" (1:4)—to imply that your wicked neighbor is going to Heaven and your virtuous life has meant nothing.

If one reads the Old Testament carefully, however, it looks as if all of us are destined for Sheol, the Hebrew equivalent of Hades. The author of Ecclesiastes sums it up well: "The fate of the sons of men and the fate of beasts is the same. . . All go to one place; all are from the dust, and all turn to dust again" (3: 19-20). Job despairs of any hope for resurrection: "Before I go, never to return, to a land of darkness and gloom [Sheol]" (10:21).

Inspired by the Tibetan Book of the Dead, I would like to propose that we take the Last Judgment seriously, but we should reformulate it in terms of self judgment. Both the Tibetan lamas and those who report near death experiences speak of moving through a dark tunnel with a great being of light at the end. Christians identify it as Christ, and Buddhists of course say it's the Buddha.

Consistent with Universalist belief, this great being is not judgmental but filled with compassion. A life review commences and spiritual pilgrims embrace their good deeds and struggle acknowledging their faults. Tibetans who fail to come to a full accounting of their lives are destined to yet another life in the karmic cycle.

I personally have a lot of problems with the concept of reincarnation, so what I suggest is something that John Adams hinted at this cryptic remark: "I believe in a future state of rewards and punishments, but not eternal." What I infer from this is that Adams did not believe that finite sins require eternal punishment and that humans should be able to atone for their shortcomings and be released from punishment.

I would also like to borrow a few ideas from Jean Paul Sartre's play *No Exit*. In our earthly lives, we can get away literally with murder and we can easily deceive ourselves about how bad we are sometimes. But in the afterlife it is different: Sartre's shifty character Garcin admits that "we're naked, naked right through, and I can see into your heart." And he speaks the famous line: "There's no need of red-hot pokers. Hell is other people."

I'm more optimistic than Sartre. I believe that most of us, without the protection of our normal deceits, will eventually own up to everything that we've done and finally be a peace with ourselves. At this point we will have reached Nirvana and that will be the end of it.

Last Judgment is self-judgment, because as the German Lutheran Immanuel Kant said: "The inner reproaches of conscience plague vicious men more relentlessly than the Furies."