

Can Atheists Be Saved?

... [it is at the final judgment where] the culpable unbelief that counted the offer of God's grace as nothing [will] be condemned. ...
Catechism of the Catholic Church #678

According to some Christians, there is an understanding that suggests that atheists cannot be saved. I do not know how well-accepted this is, but I have found it hard to be with any group of Christians for any length of time without it being discussed in some form. I have even witnessed it pop up in everyday discussions in the work force. While I cannot quantify how much of a concern this is with Christians as a whole, the threat of eternal damnation for a single soul is a greater threat than all the pain man has suffered in this world's history put together. Therefore, I think this subject deserves at least a few pages worth of thought as to what the Bible says. To casually disregard the fate of those different than us is very un-Christian.

And this is not only a matter of idle speculation. There are those who have deep-seated, emotional and personal concerns with this issue. If one was raised by a wonderful person who was not formally "saved," then it will likely be difficult to convince this person that Jehovah is a God of mercy and justice. To deny Heaven simply because this person failed to say a few words simply does not fit the image of the "all-loving Father" Jesus spoke of so often. On the other end of the spectrum, one may have been horribly abused by a self-proclaimed "Christian." After living in Hell here on Earth with this person, it will likely be difficult to convince one that the suffering in Hell will be any worse than having to share a Heaven with this horrid person.

In both cases, I have heard some variation of the "tough love" argument as how to deal with them. However, I can't help but think of Luke 17:2, when Jesus said, "It would be better for him if a millstone were put around his neck and he be thrown into the sea than for him *to cause* one of these little ones to sin." (italics mine) Sin, of course, is the turning away from God. There is also Mark 10:14-15, where Jesus said, ..."Let the children come to me; do not prevent them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Amen, I say to you, whoever does not accept the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it." I fully realize that am mixing scripture here, but we do see that all who enter are as children, and those who teach the children must not lead the children astray. I also realize that the first scripture, as written, suggests that an active, coercive sin is taking place as opposed to one of neglect. But the phrase "to cause" still suggests an indirect way of causing sin. It is then that I recall Matthew 23:4, where Jesus accuses the pharisees by saying, "They tie up heavy burdens [hard to carry] and lay them on people's shoulders, but they will not lift a finger to move them." And the scriptures that call me to action and understanding keep coming. We are clearly told that we need to provide *assistance* to others in difficult times, not merely *advice*. This is especially true when dealing with those who rely on us for spiritual guidance.

Conversion is a difficult thing in the best of circumstances, as it impacts one's relationships with family, friends and coworkers. Furthermore, I think potential converts to Christianity actually have a better appreciation of the transformation that must follow than those who were brought up in it. It is a very informative (and humbling) experience to convince another to convert, as they see everything remotely wrong as the sin it is. Every little sin the teacher makes will be questioned, as the student wants to know if it is an acceptable level of sin. The teaching to remove the plank from one's own eye before removing the speck from one's neighbor's eye (Matthew 7:1-5) applies to winning converts just as much as it does in judging others. Many Christians are eager to win over converts, but fail to take

into account what is involved. The first one to be converted should be oneself.

A) What is Faith?: Faith is a word that is hard to define because it can mean many different things. Merriam Webster Online gives no less than eight definitions for this word, which vary from a personal attribute to specific religious meanings. But the one I want to use is the most universal of them: "something that is believed especially with strong conviction." (definition 3) Even this causes me pause, as I think the phrase "especially with strong conviction" needs to be explained (as I will do later). As this *is* a document with a deliberate Christian point of view, I would be remiss not to include Hebrews 11:1 which says, "Faith is the realization of what is hoped for and evidence of things not seen." From there, Saint Paul goes on to show the great faith of the patriarchs.

While both of these definitions are good, I want to add something that I think is nonetheless missing. I am not suggesting they are "wrong," but rather incomplete and/or go in a slightly different direction than what is helpful on this matter. My concern is that these definitions seem to suggest that either you have faith, or you do not. I believe there is still more to this.

In Matthew 17:20, when the disciples asked why they could not drive out a demon, Jesus replies: "Because of your little faith. Amen, I say to you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you." We see a similar example when the disciples ask for *more* faith in Luke 17:5-6: "And the apostles said to the Lord, 'Increase our Faith.' The Lord replied, 'If you have Faith the size of a mustard seed, you would say to [this] mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you.'" We also have the desperate man crying, "I do believe, help my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24) In all three cases, the existence of faith is assumed; it is the degree or quality of the faith that is called into question.

Now, the common understanding of the first two passages is that great things can happen from small faith, and with this I agree. But I think sometimes we focus so much on the *result*, we miss the *process*. The question I ask is this: Why did Jesus pick a seed for the analogy? There is no shortage of examples of small objects leading to great things. Throughout the Old Testament, we see God time and time again picking the youngest son instead of the first born for his plan of salvation (including Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David and Solomon). In the parables of Jesus, we see a man sell everything he has for a single pearl (Matthew 13:45-46), as well as a lowly widow scaring a judge who did not fear God (Luke 18:1-8). The list could go on and on, but I hope I have made my point. No doubt Jesus could have shown how a small trickle of water carves a massive canyon, or how the intangible wind brings low the mountains. All of these examples and more were available to Jesus if all He wanted to do was to demonstrate how small things have big impacts.

Personally, I don't think it simply struck the fancy of Jesus to use the mustard seed. I think the seed has an attribute the other examples do not have: growth. Water can be added to, but it does not grow of its own accord. A plant, however, must either grow or die. The wind is fickle, but the plant grows steadily and consistently. It is the same with faith. Everyday life should tell us that this is true even in the unlikely case that Jesus did not mean it this way. After all, one may trust a coworker to pay back a small loan for lunch, yet not trust this same co-worker with keys to the house. Faith is not an all or nothing affair.

For the purpose of this paper, I want to define faith in the following way: Faith is trust in something or someone. Faith, for my purposes, is the same as belief. I believe this is essentially the same as the Merriam Webster definition once the "especially with strong conviction" is removed. I would argue that this is also in line with Saint Paul's definition (the part that says "evidence of things not

seen"). All this new definition does differently is allow for growth.

B) Growing Faith: Faith is not inherent to humans; it must be learned. This is why the Catholic Church makes it a Theological Virtue instead of a Cardinal Virtue. Like with all learning, faith can only come from being taught, and it can only grow through study, observation and reflection. No child is born a Christian, pagan or atheist. But all children are born into one culture or another, and will initially accept the faith of that culture. This is an immature faith, but faith nonetheless. Immature faith tends to be emotional, as it is bereft of reason. A person with an emotional faith tends to either fanatically embrace it regardless of facts, deny it out of rebellion to one's culture (both are examples of strong faiths), or see it change to match whatever group one happens to be with (an example of weak faith).

Mature faith is one grown from observation and reflection. With every new experience, the faith is tested. If the faith is found to be adequate for the experience, then the faith strengthens and grows. The better a person can reconcile his faith with his life experiences, the more it grows. On the other hand, if one's faith fails quite often, or if it fails in pressing times, then only two rational options are possible: either attempt a deeper understanding of the faith, or decide the faith was misplaced and look for truth someplace else. It is the hallmark of immature faith to persevere with a faith that constantly fails them, but sadly they usually look at it as a mark of honor.

I want to point out that "mature" and "immature" do not necessarily correspond to a person's intelligence or social status. A great many intelligent and highly educated people follow religious (or atheistic) beliefs that are not based on reason. Likewise, the phrase "out of the mouths of babes" is real, and great wisdom can be found in simpler minds that are not cluttered by the distractions more "sophisticated" people may have.

C) Types of Faith:

"...a deeper look would be able to recognize that the differences between the three great paths lie elsewhere than is suggested by their three labels, which declare respectively: "There is one God"; "There are many Gods"; and "There is no God." Between these three formulas and the professions contain in there exists an opposition that cannot be swept aside, but there also exists a relationship of which the mere words contain no hint. For all three -- this could be demonstrated -- are in the last analysis convinced of the unity and oneness of the absolute."

-Father Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI) *Prolegomena on the Subject of God*

Faith is found in every belief one can possibly think of, but for this paper I want to focus on theism, atheism and agnosticism. By definition, all religions involve faith of at least the common kind. Atheism starts out the same way, as to be an atheist means to believe that gods are not real. Agnosticism means "without knowledge." If we define knowledge as a concept that one either believes to be true or untrue, then we see that agnostics are those who don't know what to believe concerning deities. As neither agnostics nor atheists have a belief in the existence of gods, they are collectively called "skeptics." Some skeptics are born into a microculture that denies, or at least minimizes, the importance of religion, some rebel against the culture (and usually against parents or the clergy), and others fall into a culture that is predominantly skeptic (this happens in frightening numbers within our education system today). Most self-described atheists are actually agnostics who didn't even know the

critical difference between the two. Most true atheists simply don't think about questions of how we came to be or what makes "good" behavior "good." They just take for granted that God is not needed. Just like with theism, the vast majority of atheists are acting with immature faith. To be an atheist based on immature faith, or to be an agnostic not seeking answers on the matter, is no better or worse than to be a theist based on immature faith.

While immature faith is not bad in and of itself, it must be looked at as a starting point, *not an accomplishment*. Trite phrases and overly simplistic views work with young children, but are revealed for what they are in the face of real-world, adult problems. Parents, clergy and teachers have a grave responsibility to give our children the tools they need to grow on their own, and then encourage such growth. I will not go into detail on that subject here, but God is not only compatible with science (a major weapon of those who attempt to destroy Christianity), but is able to answer questions science is singularly incapable of answering.

I do not deny that a skeptic can become a skeptic through observation and reflection, but I find such cases are usually more pitiable than abhorrent. Listening to them talk makes it quite clear that the majority of those who converted in a mature fashion to skepticism simply outgrew the immature Christian faith they once had without being exposed to what a mature Christian faith looked like. The Bible is a very complex set of documents, and to understand it properly requires education. It is true that much of it can be taken as written (*prima facie*), but there are many stories in it that can really only make sense with a deeper understanding of how the Bible was written. Without this understanding, many things can seem mysterious (such as when Jesus appears to suggest both a hierarchy and an equality with the Father: "My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, ... The Father and I are one." in John 10:29-30), or they may seem contradictory (was Man made before Eve or not, Genesis chapters 1-2), and downright frightening (why did God kill all the innocent Egyptian children in the 10th plague?). Life is complex. The reason Judaism, Christianity and Hinduism have lasted so long is that they have answers to the complexities of life. Pretending Christianity is "simple" will do nothing but harm. To make matters worse, many mature faith atheists are motivated to question Christian teachings because of a very hurtful experience they had with a "Christian" they once trusted, or endured a tragedy that over-simplified Christian teachings failed to prepare them for.

It is in these contexts that I find them pitiable, for many are desperately seeking answers. Not only did those who should have provided answers fail to do so, but sometimes they also created tremendous emotional obstacles that discourage looking for answers in Christianity.

But, assuming the atheist is willing and able to further mature their faith, and the agnostic is willing to form a belief if enough evidence can be provided, then they will eventually come to Jesus because they are still seeking "the truth," and Jesus is "the Truth" (John 14:6). In the words of Sir Francis Bacon: It is true, that a little philosophy inclineth man's mind to atheism; but depth in philosophy bringeth men's [sic] minds about to religion. (Essay 16: Atheism). It is truly rare to find mature faith atheists or agnostics who are honestly seeking truth that cannot be brought to Jesus. Only those stubbornly holding on to immature faith are not willing to learn. But there is always a story that needs to be listened to before they can truly come back to God.

D) Just How Many of Us will Be Saved?:

The Bible is surprisingly contradictory on this matter, at least *prima facie*. On one extreme, we have the 144,000 elect mentioned in the book of Revelation at least 3 times. A good number of Christians take this as the absolute limit. They ignore the part that says these numbers refer exclusively

to descendants of Jacob, and don't consider the obvious numerology associated with this particular number. They also seem to ignore that, when compared to the billions of humans that have lived in the past 200,000 years or so, it means that almost no one will make it. According to the Center for Study of Global Christianity (CSCG), over 900,000 Christians were martyred between the years 2001 and 2010. This is more than six times the supposed limit presented in Revelations. To suggest that even martyrs only have a slight chance of going to Heaven is not only too disheartening for me to believe, but it appears to deny the teachings of Jesus. Passages such as "If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily" (Luke 9:23 with a similar quote in Mark 8:23), and "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." (John 15:13, and note that verse 14 says that one is a follower of Jesus through obedience with "You are my friends if you do what I command you.", see **Topic G**) immediately come to mind.

We also see the prophecy that included a series of examples of one person being taken and another left behind (Matthew 24:40-41). This would suggest that approximately half of all mankind will get to Heaven. If this was all there was on the matter, then I don't think I would have too much more to say, although there would still be those who would wonder just how close to the 50-50 split the real number is (would 60-40 be reasonable, or can we be optimistic and stretch it out as far as 70-30?). But we also have a rare example of Jesus giving three parables all at once, and they suggest 100% salvation: the parable of the lost sheep, the parable of the lost coin and the parable of the lost son (Luke 15:1-32). Jesus was a man of great confidence, and there are only two other times that Jesus tripled down on a point: when describing the kingdom of Heaven (Matthew 13:44-50) and the Bread of Life Discourse (John 6:22-70). But at the same time, Jesus does not deny the existence of Hell. He even tells us there is at least one person in it (the unnamed rich man from the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus in Luke 16:19-31).

So, what are we to make of this? I think the real lesson here is not to worry about how many are saved and how many are not. We should only be concerned about the existence of Hell as it pertains to our own soul, not to the rest of humanity. Jesus clearly came to welcome all into Heaven, and such an offer is only meaningful if there is something other than Heaven as an alternative. If this is true, then we cannot assume any one particular person is in Hell (except, perhaps, the unnamed rich man).

The Catholic Church does not recognize any particular person in Hell (being a parable, the aforementioned rich man could be metaphorical) like she recognizes the canonized Saints in Heaven. In keeping with the joyful hope that Jesus tells us we should have, there is also the Fatima Prayer, which is said four times in the course of a Rosary. It says, in part, "... lead all souls to Heaven, especially those in most need of Thy mercy." Finally, the Catholic Church does periodically pray formally and explicitly that all might one day be saved through the mercy of God. We again come to the idea that while Hell is a reality, it is a reality that Christians should pray no one suffers.

E) What Does It Take to Be Saved?:

"... If [mortal sin] is not redeemed by repentance and God's forgiveness, it causes exclusion from Christ's kingdom and the eternal death of hell, ..."
-Catechism of the Catholic Church #1861

Most Christians know what they need to do; they just need to do it. But when attempting to convince others to join the faith, I think we need to at least open our minds to legitimate possibilities that can make their decision to come to Christianity easier (remember, the conversion will literally

restructure their entire life). In all reality, they are dealing with enough stress in making such a decision to begin with. They are likely to hide behind "unsaved" loved ones or similar topics in an effort to avoid whatever it is that is really holding them back from conversion. I am certainly not suggesting that one should "sugar coat" salvation, but rather to avoid creating artificial obstacles. The apologist and evangelist should have a truthful, yet comforting, answer to it.

At this point, I will try to be careful. It is not my intention to stir up bitter memories of the Protestant Revolution, nor to risk heresy by violating Catholic doctrine. In consideration of the Catholics and the Orthodox, I do believe the Catholic Sacraments, if performed regularly and with sincerity, guarantee salvation. However, in the end, God is in charge: "The confessor is not the master of God's forgiveness, but its servant. ..." (Catechism of the Catholic Church #1466), and we are told that "God reveals His fatherly omnipotence ... by His infinite mercy, for He displays His power at its height by freely forgiving sins." (Catechism of the Catholic Church #270). Even in the case of mortal sin (more on this later), Catholics are taught "... although we can judge that an act is in itself a grave offense, we must entrust judgment of persons to the justice *and mercy* of God." (Catechism of the Catholic Church #1861, italics mine). Contemporary Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthazar claims we can "reasonably *hope* that all are saved." (italics mine) For the Protestants, there is tremendous variety in what is believed, yet the overwhelming majority claim salvation can be had with a lot less ceremony than what Catholics and Orthodox practice (although this does not equate to fewer people in Hell by necessity).

The great George MacDonald is famous for promoting the idea that everyone will ultimately be saved (*Lilith: A Romance* made this a central theme), but he was also of the opinion that eventually everyone would repent once they lived with the results of their sins long enough. In keeping with this thought, in his theological work *The Hope of the Gospel*, he claimed that knowledge of one's sins was a worse hell than anything the Devil could create on his own. This is in sharp contrast with Jonathan Edwards' view in "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," but Edwards often took many of his Biblical quotes out of context for his own purposes. I do not believe the Catholic Church can object to MacDonald's view here, as CCC #1035 says "...The chief punishment of hell is eternal separation from God...".

Whether or not one shares the extreme interpretation of 100% salvation, there is a truth in MacDonald's argument that one cannot easily deny, and there is actually a lot to support it. The three aforementioned parables clearly show us that Jesus Himself not only desired that all be saved, but that we all should rejoice when a lost one is saved. Catholic teachings do not guarantee 100% salvation for mankind as a whole (only those who honestly, sincerely and routinely partake in the sacraments are promised salvation), but Catholic teachings certainly allow for it. And while the Protestant Churches may say things much differently, few would deny that repentance and God's forgiveness are the keys to salvation for anyone (in accord with the quote from CCC #1861 at the heading of this topic).

God's infinite patience and willingness to forgive are identified so often in the Bible that I hope I will be forgiven for not picking any one particular example here. And since God exists outside time and space, He cannot simply "stop" forgiving, as to forgive once is to forgive always. But repentance suggests that something happened beforehand (or else there would be nothing to repent of), and therefore appears to be bound within time and space. So we do have an issue as to when, if ever, it is too late to repent.

At this point, I would like to direct the gentle reader to the famous discussion about the Unforgivable Sin, particularly the words "And whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven; but whoever speaks against the holy Spirit will not be forgiven, *either in this age or in the age to come.*"

(Matthew 12: 32, italics mine). We also have the parable of the Unforgiving Servant (Matthew 18:21-35), where the man is thrown into prison "... *until* he should pay back the whole debt. " (verse 34, italics mine) And even Saint Paul seems to have something to say about the matter (and, *prima facie*, seems to agree with MacDonald that all will eventually be saved) in 1 Corinthians 3:10-15, ending with "But if someone's work is burned up, that one will suffer loss; *the person will be saved*, but only as through fire." (italics mine)

It seems to me that the key here is how to interpret what an "age" is. We only have so many choices. We might assume that the "next age" would begin with the resurrection of Jesus. There is certainly some validity to this interpretation, but I find this a curious choice of words if that is what He meant. Why refer to a time merely a few months (the unforgivable sin) or a few weeks (the Unforgiving Servant parable) away as "the next age?" We could alternatively extend "this age" to the end of the world, with the "next age" beginning when the New Jerusalem comes down from Heaven and rests on the Earth (as described in the Book of Revelation). Then again, perhaps it is a personal event, and the "next age" begins at our death. Perhaps there is a secret meaning that God has not yet revealed to us. But in the last three possibilities, we have a vague idea of having sins forgiven (in a meaningful way) after our Earthly death.

Catholics use this "next age" as one of the Biblical supports for the concept of Purgatory, where those who were not purified on Earth must be purified before they can enter Heaven, as suggested by Revelations 12:27 ("...nothing unclean will enter [Heaven]"). As MacDonald (far from being a Catholic, he was a Calvinist turned Anglican) once wrote: "No, there is no escape. There is no Heaven with a little of Hell in it -- no plan to retain this or that of the devil in our hearts or our pockets. Out Satan must go, every hair and feather." (Unspoken Sermons, Second Series, *The Last Farthing*) MacDonald basically equated Hell with Purgatory, and his most famous follower, C.S. Lewis, imagined a compromise in which the "grey town" everyone goes to after death can be either Hell (if one chooses to stay) or Purgatory (if one chooses to leave). Other ideas exist, although in my experience most Christians simply don't think about the implication of the "next age" at all. But the Catholic Church, and most protestants, also look at the Unforgivable Sin (blasphemy of the Holy Spirit) as a refusal to accept the saving grace that comes from the Holy Spirit. To put it another way, to refuse the forgiveness that the Holy Spirit offers. As God will not deny us our free will, God will not force us into repentance. This concept is wonderfully played out in the role of the "grey town" in *The Great Divorce*.

But we do come to a very common belief among Christians of all faiths, that once one dies, one will go to either Heaven or Hell (some faiths have Purgatory as a temporary delay in going to Heaven). In the Catholic Church, those in a perfect state of grace will go straight to Heaven. Those in mortal sin will go to Hell. Those not in perfect grace, but not burdened by mortal sin (in other words, they are in a state of venial sin), will first be purified in Purgatory and then go to Heaven. Orthodox believe more or less the same thing as do the Catholics. Protestants are much more divided, and while I so not call them "wrong," I will call them "incomplete." I have not yet heard a convincing argument explaining how we reconcile the imperfect, sinful, *post-Baptismal* lives we live here on Earth with the purity demanded in Heaven. But regardless of how one looks at venial sin and grace, almost all agree that death is the crisis point.

If we assume that time and space no longer exist when our soul is free from our body, then any one moment is all moments. In other words, a one time "yes" or "no" is an eternal "yes" or "no." In this scenario, once one is in Hell, one truly is there for eternity as there is no future for a change to take place. This is perhaps the scariest concept possible within Christianity, and the legions of angels who fell from God's grace are widely believed to be in this position. But so much of what we know about

Heaven suggests that time and space will still exist for us. We are told we will have new bodies (therefore we would not be pure spirit), and the Book of Revelation shows heavenly beings performing different things at different times (such as the martyred prophets asking when they will have justice, Revelations 6:9-10). In this scenario, repentance is at least theoretically possible because change can and does happen.

Certainly this will scandalize a great many of my gentle readers, but even if repentance is truly no longer possible *after* death, we still have the infinitesimally small amount of time before death, and even the moment of death, to consider. They both exist within time and space. And even with the best science available, these final moments give us a lot of room for discussion, because they are very vaguely defined, and for at least two reasons.

F) The State of Soul at the Time of Death: The first reason is that, even with all our modern science and medicine, it is difficult to know exactly what moment true Earthly death takes place. The "time of death" reported is usually the point the attending doctor gives up trying to save the victim, not necessarily when the doctor believes the patient actually died. In other words, just because a doctor may think one dead, he may still attempt resuscitation in the hope that the patient will revive (because sometimes they do). To call a patient "dead" by this standard really means that what once was unlikely is now no longer possible.

The second reason is the spiritual meaning of "life" and "death" frequently used in the Bible: those that are saved are often called "alive" while those that are damned are "the dead." And these references are almost always said about those that still had a heartbeat when the scripture was written. To suggest one left this world was usually indicated by suggesting they went "to sleep." Saint John seems to be quite clear on this throughout his writings (consider 1 John 3:14: "We know that we have passed from death to life because we love our brother. Whoever does not love remains in death." for one example). In this context, our Earthly existence is actually somewhere in between life and death, like a twilight. C.S. Lewis and others have talked about how Earthly life is like a camera out of focus, with our life choices slowly bringing the lens into Heavenly or Hellish focus as we obey or disobey. According to them, Heaven and Hell have all the familiarity of our Earthly lives, the only thing different is that we will be seeing them with perfect clarity when our bodies finally give out. Like stepping out of a car that had dirty windows, the reality we saw all along suddenly snaps into perfect focus.

So I don't have a final answer on when it is too late, even using death as a measuring stick. This line of thought can only help us insofar as we need to prepare for the inevitable. All that is certain is that man will face the truth at death, and that this truth cannot be denied. This truth must either be accepted or rejected. Regardless of what happens on the other side of death, now is the best time to prepare for it.

G) How Does Faith Play into Salvation?: This is certainly a loaded question, and to answer it in full would be an entire thesis all by itself. Suffice it to say, all Christians believe faith is a key element to salvation. How this plays out is usually debated among Christians along the lines of "faith versus good deeds," although in the end it always seems to be a matter of emphasis. Few who claim "faith only" will deny a good life is important, and very few who advocate "good deeds" are actually suggesting that one can "buy" one's way into Heaven. Jesus Himself says the two are inseparable in John 3:36: "Whoever *believes* in the Son has eternal life, but whoever *disobeys* the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God remains upon him." (italics mine) The opposite of faith in God is disobedience, not necessarily skepticism. By this standard, there are skeptics who have more faith (and therefore a better claim to

eternal life) than some self-proclaimed "Christians."

There are some who claim that only those who have heard the Word of God can be saved, on the grounds that they can't have faith in something they don't have a concept of. Perhaps the most commonly quoted scripture, John 3:16 (For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life.) seems to support this thought, as the need to believe is clearly stated. But then we have the very next verse: "For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him." We also have 2 Peter 3:9 that says "... He is patient with you, not wishing that any should perish but that all should come to repentant." If the idea that a person has to specifically declare a faith in God in this life is true, then we have an issue with these two verses, as it would suggest that God failed in an epic manner. These verses do not promise salvation to all, but they do offer the *opportunity* to all. If God automatically cut off all those who died before the public ministry of Jesus, as well as all those who lived in ignorance of Him since then, then we cannot say all the world had an opportunity. How do we reconcile this?

Dante Alighieri, in his famous *Divine Comedy*, provides a common answer by placing righteous pagans and philosophers somewhere between Heaven and Hell. But Heaven is where God is, and Hell is where God is not. It is on Earth where we see this blending, not in some transcendental reality. And this Earthly twilight existence will not last forever. I therefore find this solution unsatisfactory.

Likewise, the majority of Christians do not take John 3:16-17 this way either. Partly because it goes against everything else Jesus said and did, and partly because it's hard to imagine a God of justice who would discriminate on something as arbitrary as the availability of a good education. But it is mostly because there are many more passages that suggest God will take for His own those whose beliefs and actions, although done outside of God's name, are still pleasing to God. We have the obvious example of the Roman Centurion in Matthew 8:5-13, where Jesus says "Amen, I say to you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith. I say to you, many will come from the east and the west, and will recline with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob at the banquet in the kingdom of heaven, but the children of the kingdom will be driven out into the outer darkness, where there will be wailing and grinding of teeth." (verses 10-12). Even more shockingly, Jesus says in Matthew 12:41-42 (and in an almost identical quote from Luke 11:31-32) "At the judgment, the men of Nineveh will arise with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and there is something greater than Jonah here. At the judgment the queen of the south [Sheba] will arise with this generation and condemn it, because she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and there is something greater than Solomon here." Clearly one does not need to know of, much less expressly follow, Jesus to have His favor. How can this be? If we remember John 14:6, where Jesus says "I am the way, the truth, and the life.", I think we have an important clue. As Father Ratzinger claimed, all of mankind has a universal desire to seek truth. All who honestly seek truth are seeking Jesus, whether they realize it or not (more in **Topic H**). Finally, consider Romans 2:12-16:

All who sin outside the law will also perish without reference to it, and all who sin under the law will be judged in accordance with it. For *it is not those who hear the law* who are just in the sight of God; rather, *those who observe the law* will be justified. For when the Gentiles who do not have the law by nature observe the prescriptions of the law, they are a law for themselves even though they do not have the law. They show that the demands of the law are written in their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even defend them on the day when, according to my gospel, God will judge people's hidden works through Christ Jesus. (italics mine)

This interpretation opens up an opportunity for righteous pagans and ancient philosophers to be

saved through their self reflection and in seeking truth, while at the same time it is rather damning for those who know better yet still persist in ungodly ways.

H) Hot, Cold and Lukewarm:

"I know your works; I know that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either cold or hot. So, because you are lukewarm, neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth."

-Revelation 3:15-16

The passage quoted was part of a message to Laodicea, a very well-to-do city that was so economically successful, that not only did it have hot and cold water, but it was able to rebuild itself with its own resources after being destroyed by an earthquake (either 60 or 61 A.D). It must have had a significant Christian population to be addressed in such a prominent way. While the rest of the text does not address any specific sins (quite unusual in apocalyptic literature), it does suggest that the city was not using its wealth for the good of the people. It seems to me, and I have yet to find any serious study to suggest otherwise, that the hot and cold water was a symbol of the faith of the people. If so, then we learn quite a bit about how faith plays in salvation.

If this is indeed a reference to their faith, then notice that Jesus wants the people "hot or cold," suggesting that He is desiring the people to take a stand (any stand), as opposed to the wishy-washy "lukewarm" middle ground. This observation suggests that Jesus can work with any kind of faith, as long as there is faith to be worked with. As a former engineer, I can relate to this. I could build a road out of good materials, and I could build a road out of bad materials (although not as effectively). But given no materials at all, I could do nothing.

Coming back to the idea that all who seek the truth are really seeking Jesus, I want to address those who are honestly seeking the truth yet outwardly claim to deny religion. Those who deny Jesus while searching for the truth are often in a state of cognitive dissonance, oblivious to the fact that they are indeed coming closer to Him. Bishop Robert Barron wrote a beautiful dedication to the most influential atheist in the last half century based on this very premise. In his book *Seeds of the Word: Finding God in the Culture*, the chapter "Why I Loved to Listen to Christopher Hitchens" explains how Hitchen's relentless assault on those who would abuse the weak must have come from some sense that justice existed in the absolute sense. But Hitchens never questioned where the possibility of justice as an absolute could come from.

As Bishop Barron pointed out, many atheists base their denial of God on a false understanding of who God is (something I alluded to in **Topic C**), and one can see in their works how their own reasoning brings them back in line with true Christian teachings (I consider C.S. Lewis' book *Mere Christianity* as the standard for non-dogmatic understanding of what true Christianity is about). For skeptic who pursue this search for truth long enough, they will eventually reach a crisis point. They must decide once and for all if God exists (at least as far as their philosophy goes, I'm not considering death bed conversions here).

In looking at the great Fathers of Atheism and contemporary atheists, it is generally easy to see when such crisis points happen. Some have humbled themselves in their search for truth and come back to God (such as C.S. Lewis and Dr. Jordan Peterson); others have not. And those who don't invariably lose inspiration at this point. No great work has ever been built on the explicit idea that God (as properly understood) cannot exist. We see insanity coming out of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel,

despair from Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, genocide from Karl Marx and dislocation from Jean-Paul Sartre (just to name a few). In all of these cases, their work actually brought them to recognize the need for God, yet all of them rejected this conclusion of their own logic (and none of them made significant contributions to philosophy after this rejection, either)! It is quite difficult for a Christian to find fault with their logic or motives prior to the crisis point, and often times one can even say "this is what Christianity is." Indeed, the strong parallels found in their works are why so many troubled Christians are drawn to them: they are finding the answers their Christian mentors failed to provide. It was only *after* the crisis point that their works take on the sinister aspects that they are known for today, but by then the Christian lost sheep have more faith in atheistic logic than Christian theology.

As an example as to how inspiration dries up once the crisis point is crossed, I remember watching what was otherwise a wonderful series of educational films by Carl Sagan in astronomy class. The very last film in the series had Sagan asking why God was needed anymore, because science was taking over the traditional roles God was supposed to do. Whether or not Sagan consciously saved it for the end or not I don't know. But from an educational perspective, it was imperative for it to be at the end. To deny the mystery of creation earlier would have left the rest of the series a boring litany of numbers. All the wonder, beauty and mystery the series had talked about before would have been reduced to nothing more than math problems waiting to be figured out. We would not have looked at a nebula as a majestic piece of the galaxy, but as a cloud of inert gas of a certain size and a certain distance from us. The fact that Sagan was a skeptic did not keep him from discovering so much of the beauty God gave us, it was only when he specifically (and without evidence) denied that this beauty had to come from God that he stopped being a teacher and suddenly became a bore.

I) The Final Decision:

Nor will God force any door to enter in. He may send a tempest about the house; the wind of His admonishment may burst doors and windows, yea, shake the house to its foundations; but not then, not so, will He enter. The door must be opened by the willing hand, ere the foot of Love will cross the threshold. He watches to see the door move from within. Every tempest is but an assault in the siege of Love. The terror of God is but the other side of His love; it is love outside, that would be inside -- love that knows the house is no house, only a place, until it enter.

-George MacDonald, *Unspoken Sermons*, Second Series, *The Cause of Spiritual Stupidity*

As Jesus came to give all of us the opportunity for salvation, no one is in Hell who did not choose to be there. Why would someone choose to go? I recommend the aforementioned *The Great Divorce* for insights on that. I only want to talk about how one's faith might influence this. As this is my personal opinion, the gentle reader can accept this or not. It has been done after much study of the Bible, Christian apologetics and personal reflection as well as my faith in the mercy of God. It is also based upon an assumption vividly portrayed in *The Great Divorce* and *The Screwtape Letters*: that the soul is given a chance to see evil stripped of its disguise and truth unclouded by Earthly sin when the body is finally ripped away. Like the angels before the Earth was created, man will come to a truth he cannot deny, but must either accept or reject it once and for all. But, unlike the angels before us, we have had a lifetime to prepare for this moment.

And here is where obedience (often chided as "good deeds") comes in. We do not simply go through the motions in life once we "pass" the true or false test (often called a "declaration of faith")

normally associated with Baptism. Our eternal "yes" or "no," like faith, is a work in progress. The progress we make on this answer in our lifetimes is what our answer is likely to be. I don't mean to suggest that even the most heinous monster of humanity is beyond redemption, nor do I mean that the most stubborn atheist can't have a change of heart. If I may use a sports metaphor, what I do mean is that a team that has productive practices often is more likely to win than one that doesn't.

At our moment of death, we will see just how willing we really are to accept the revealed truth. I would propose that for those with an immature faith (either theist or atheist), much would depend on how open they were to a mature faith. It may seem shocking that a Christian may deny their own faith, but is it really? Remember, what one is seeing is Heaven as it really exists, not necessarily the Heaven one imagined. Then again, the simple nature of a humble mind incapable of maturing much is probably willing to accept the truth *prima facie* better than a more jaded mind ("unless you turn and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven." - Matthew 18:3).

Mature faith will likewise have to choose to be proud or humble, although for different reasons. The proud mind will place more value on *being* right than in what *is* right, whereas the humble mind is more interested in what is right than in being right. This type of pride is expressed in the Bible more times than I care to count. But a humble person, one who wants God more than his calculations, would not only accept whatever the truth was, but would be ecstatic in finally finding it.

All that's left now is to address the agnostics, who have no faith at all. What is to become of them? If we consider the "hot and cold" to be analogous to opposing faiths, then "lukewarm" is the obvious analogy to agnosticism. Should this be surprising? If one spends a lifetime refusing to take an interest in truth, why would a side be chosen in the final revelation of truth? If one refuses to seek the truth, will one appreciate it when it is found? In this context, I suspect that agnostics who honestly sought the truth, but for whatever reason simply could not commit, would be in a better position to be saved than those who simply didn't care to get involved.

But I feel I may be going too far now in presuming who is and isn't in Heaven. It was never my intent to give a definitive answer to this question. What I do hope I have done, however, is reinforce just how important it is to consider the existence of God, and I hope I have done it in a manner that does not alienate anyone who honestly wants to find the truth.

Conclusion: In my attempt to explain better what faith really means, I feel comfortable with what I have presented. But how this really fits together in the final judgment, I can only speculate.

All too often, when a Christian thinks of an atheist, he often pictures one like Sagan: claiming that science has answered all the questions of life and that religion is now obsolete. Such a view is very understandable, as that is a common claim made by some rather vocal atheists in their efforts to get attention. But the truth is, many atheists haven't had the background or experience to allow God into their lives in a proper manner. Nevertheless, many of them actually do better in following God's commands than some self-proclaimed Christians. Many atheists are more open to different ideas and to accepting new evidence than some Christians. Can we say for certainty that an atheist who seeks and accepts the truth will be damned?

I have heard it said that perfect understanding must lead to perfect forgiveness, understanding comes from listening, and atheists have a story that needs to be heard before being judged. God will certainly take the time to listen, and He expects us to share in His joy when the lost are found. In the end, it is not our position to judge, but we *are* in a position to listen and to teach.

Raymond Mulholland
Original Publication Date: 2 June 2022