

Nothing But the Truth

A C O N V E R S A T I O N W I T H
P E T E R J . K R E E F T

Regardless of whether we are addressing our post-Christian culture or answering our children's hard questions, we owe to them nothing but the truth as we know it about heaven and hell, the unspeakable bliss and unspeakable misery that frame our existence.

Among the more than 35 books written by Peter J. Kreeft (pronounced "Krayft") are some of the most insightful Christian writings today about heaven and hell. In the winsome dialogues *Socrates Meets Jesus* (Intervarsity Press, 1987, 2002) and *Between Heaven and Hell* (Intervarsity Press, 1982), in which he imagines an afterlife meeting of C. S. Lewis, John F. Kennedy and Aldous Huxley (all of whom died within hours of each other), and through more direct teaching like *Catholic Christianity: A Complete Catechism of Catholic Beliefs Based on the Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Ignatius Press, 2001), Kreeft presents the gospel with imagination.

Susan Dolan-Henderson: Do people today take heaven and hell seriously? Though the wider, "approved" culture says dwelling on these transcendent realities is passé, we see all around us the neo-pagan concern with angels. Opinion polls say most people believe in some sort of afterlife. Maybe people are searching for something?

Peter Kreeft: People in every age are always people. Human nature is unchangeable. Heaven and hell as realities touch human nature as nothing else does, the one being the total fulfillment of human nature and the other being the total failure of it. Human souls also, at least unconsciously, know this innately, though they may cover it up. Therefore people today do take heaven and hell seriously, 'deep down.' However, Christendom is dead. We no longer have a Christian society to help us to know the truth and the

good and the beautiful. Our materialistic culture considers working for peace and justice (i.e. solving the problems of the physical pains that are caused by war and poverty) more important than thinking about the alternatives of heaven or hell—that is, unlimited, unending, unimaginable, and unutterable ecstasy or misery. That’s like considering efficient garbage collection more important than sex. I suspect that the current interest in angels is partly a reaction, from our deep, unconscious wisdom, against our culture’s screwing down the manhole covers over our heads and denying the supernatural, and partly a fad as tame and shallow and inauthentic as the little gold crosses worn on little gold chains around little necks. One reason for suspecting this is that almost never do you hear, in any contemporary account of meeting or seeing an angel, the very first reaction that is always present in Scripture whenever a real angel is met, namely fear. The angel almost always has to say “fear not” first. But modern ‘angels’ are too nice (like all those ‘nice’ Christians) for that.

Why have you been so concerned with heaven and hell in your writings?

I am concerned about heaven and hell for one reason only: I know I am human, and will die, and will live forever either in unspeakable bliss or in unspeakable misery. If this is not true, Christianity, the Church, Christ, and the Bible are all liars. If it true, how could concern for heaven or hell be a personal quirk? Is it an unusual personal quirk for a soldier on a battlefield to wonder whether he and his buddy are going to be killed or not?

Plato believed in the afterlife because of justice, that the wicked must be punished and the righteous rewarded after this life. Is it all right for Christians to believe in heaven because of the promise of a reward? Or should we obey God without that?

One good reason for believing in heaven is Plato’s (and Kant’s): justice must have the last word, and it does not have the last word in this life, it seems; therefore, there must be “the rest of the story,” if the story is a story of justice. There is a difference between believing that heaven exists and hoping to go there, however. Philosophical arguments (like the one above) constitute good reasons for the first; Christ’s cross is the basis for the second. It is certainly better to obey God out of love than out of fear or desire for reward. God taught his chosen people first that they must “be holy for the Lord your God is holy,” and only later did he reveal the rewards after death clearly. But God, being love, stoops to conquer and accepts even selfish fear (fear of punishment) as a step on the way to unselfish fear (awe, piety, just response to God’s nature). Like the father of a toddler, God is “easy to please but hard to satisfy.” The beginning of C.S. Lewis’ great sermon, “The Weight of Glory,” is the best thing I’ve ever read on this question of motives. Pascal also has a very wise saying in the *Pensees* on this. He says that we love ourselves by nature, not by choice, so God made it possible for us to love him by joining himself to our nature, so

that in loving God we love ourselves. As Aquinas says, grace perfects nature rather than destroying it. The contrast between eros (desire for one's own good) and agape (desire for the other's good) is not as total as most people think—rather like the contrast between the body and soul.

How literally should we take the Biblical stories and images of hell?

All language about hell, heaven, and God are, I think, to be taken nonliterally, for we cannot see them, so the language taken from the realm of visible things (for example, fire, light, or fatherhood) is analogical. Of course it is true, authoritative, infallible, terribly important, and revealing. But it is not literal. If there were literal, physical fire in hell, it would not be so bad, for the physical pain would distract the damned from their greater, spiritual, interior torment, as tearing our hair out or batting our head against the wall distracts us from terrible misery even in this world.

In *The Great Divorce*, C. S. Lewis's fictional account of heaven and hell, a theologian who was an Anglican bishop is in hell. Can we go to hell for mistaken theology?

Chapter 6 of *The Great Divorce* is indeed memorable. One cannot go to hell for mistaken theology, but one can certainly go to hell for apostasy, or abandonment of faith in God, which is what happens to the bishop. There is a great little episode in the television sitcom "Happy Days" where Fonzie instructs Spike about the difference between a mistake and a sin. Spike wants to be cool like Fonzie, so he steals money from Al's diner's cash register. Fonzie demands he put it back. Spike says, "All right, Fonz, I made a mistake." Fonzie pulls him up short: "No, Spike. You didn't make a mistake. Two and two is six is a mistake. What you did was a crime."

In postmodernity, although starting with modernity, many people in our culture have lost touch with any meaning in life larger than their own goals and purposes. This is one reason that heaven and

hell are not important for many people. What aberrant responses to this loss of transcendent meaning do you see?

Yes, postmodernity is only the extension of modernity. The attack on reason is part of the same rebellion as the worship of reason. Both stem from the loss of our true telos or end. And then you ask me what aberrant responses to this loss do I see. I answer: all of them. All human wrongs are substitutes for the real end, the real happiness. Aquinas writes: "Man can-

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not live without joy. Therefore it is necessary that one deprived of true, spiritual joy go over to carnal pleasures.” When the John knocks on the whorehouse door, he is really looking for a cathedral. It’s the restless heart. It’s all in Augustine, all in Augustine.

And ignoring our true telos distorts our culture—for instance, our religion and science?

Absent the supernatural, religion in America has tended to become a servant of pop psychology. By contrast, science (even as practiced by atheistic scientists who argue against religion) challenges religious truth in a far more healthy way than its supposed friends do; for the scientist is more devoted to objective truth than “personal fulfillment,” which is usually little more than a euphemism for money, sex, and freedom from pain. Knowledge of the truth is the aim of sci-

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ence. I find that science majors are far more open to religion than humanities majors today. You can’t be a successful practicing scientist and be a subjectivist, or a deconstructionist. “It feels right to me” is not used as the *nihil obstat* or *imprimatur* for scientific hypotheses, only for “re-ligious” ideas.

What do you think about theology, which is supposedly about God, and its loss of transcendence? Most theology today stresses God’s immanence and relationship to us. Some theologians speak of “the hole in God” that we have to fill in, rather than it being a hole within ourselves that can only be filled by God.

Theology, like science, is paradoxical if it is true to the whole of reality. Thus to deny either God’s transcendence or God’s immanence is like denying that light is a particle or that it is a wave. God can be totally immanent only because he is totally transcendent, as the subject can know any object because it is not an object, and as light can illumine all colors because it transcends all color, and as the act of existence can actualize any and all essences because it is not any essence but transcends essence. I suspect those theologians mean by “the hole in God” what C. S. Lewis means by almost the same image in *The Problem of Pain*, the “Heaven” chapter (which is just about the best thing I have ever read on it): that each of us is so unique that there is some aspect of God, some facet of the “immortal diamond,” that you and you alone can appreciate; and that one of your blissful jobs in eternity will be to communicate that to others (and they to communicate

theirs to you) by means whereof all earthly art is a pale imitation. In one sense it is healthier to say we exist to fill holes (not lacks) in God than to say God exists to fill holes (lacks) in us. God does not exist for our sake. God exists for his own sake. We exist for God's sake.

How can we train our children toward healthy Christian thinking about the outcome of our lives? For instance, my son Liam was about 18 months old when my mother died a few years ago; my father died in 1984. My parents had many problems. When Liam asks if they went to heaven, I cannot say "Yes" with certainty. How would you answer that?

The answer to all questions about what to say to our children is one word: truth. Just tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth as you see it and believe it. Why should children receive any less than the jury at a trial? I am very big on honesty, so I would not even pretend to small children that you are certain that so-and-so is going to heaven when you are not. I would say, "I think so," or "I hope so," and surround this answer with a lot of love, both for the child and for so-and-so. You were honest with your son ("I don't know"). I think we should be careful, however, not to share our personal doubts and frustrations with children. We all have doubts, and when asked we should answer honestly about them; but I hope your faith is sound and sure enough so that you can communicate to your son the absolute certainty that God loves you. Sometimes that certainty is even more impressive when accompanied by confession of doubts that have been overcome, especially when we are talking to someone a little older; but sometimes the doubts make it more confusing, especially to small children, who think "either/or" rather than "both/and." But always, always honesty.

What have I missed?

You end with a good question: What have I missed? I think the answer is usually: almost everything; but that's okay—you've started. The greatest theologian in history, Thomas Aquinas, did not finish the greatest theology book in history because, he confessed, "compared with what I have seen, all I have written is straw." If the *Summa Theologiae* is straw, our best is dust. Yet God created man from dust, and He can take ours and make palaces of it.



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