

A View of Heaven

By Nancy Knowles

It's a wonderful time of the year to contemplate the great mysteries. We are brought together with our friends and family, enjoy the fellowship of our human community, and are inspired to look deeper into our spiritual heritage. Recently, while watching a Barbara Walters' holiday special in which she interviewed various religious leaders regarding the whereabouts and substance of heaven and hell, I was inspired to reflect on my own views of the next life. Although Walters interviewed a wide range of people, many of the views seemed more human in origin than divine. For instance, there were those who believed that food and physical relationships would be in ready supply in heaven. When thinking of the world beyond this one, I rarely think of the more material aspects of our life. Many of those interviewed also had a vision of a concrete "afterlife"—a world that mirrored this world to a great degree. And many of the interview participants believed that if you were not of their religious tradition, then the only option available to you in your afterlife was a hell of fire and brimstone. So who is right? Would our creator keep his domain for a specific few? Is it possible that the next world is larger than our beliefs? That it is eternally unknowable and mysterious and that the spiritual paths that we as individuals take toward that life are many?

One of the key tenants of the Baha'i Faith is oneness. Whether it be the oneness of man, of religion, or of God, the Baha'i writings emphasize unity on the largest of scales. This universal "oneness" extends to the ideas of the afterlife. The Baha'i concept maintains the reality of the next world in which our actions during this life are important. Thus it is imperative to my spiritual development to be of service to my fellow man, to devote time to prayer and meditation, and to remain faithful in the universally divine teachings of love, tolerance, and gratitude. The Baha'i writings also paint a picture of "God's realm" that is welcoming in its scope and wonder. It offers an interpretation of "heaven" which I've always found logical, compassionate, and beautiful. Thus heaven becomes a place of progress—a place in which our developing souls continue along their journey, not simply a place of reward or punishment. Baha'u'llah, the Prophet Founder of the Baha'i Faith writes "Know thou of a truth that the soul, after its separation from the body, will continue to progress until it attaineth the presence of God..."

He goes on to say in another passage that "the world beyond is as different from this world as this world is different from that of the child while still in the womb". That's a pretty interesting idea, one that encourages a life of goodly deeds, but also acknowledges our basic humanness, our fallibility, our tendency to make mistakes as we grow. Indeed, our spiritual journey at this level echoes our physical journey from newborn to senior citizen. We are born and evolve; we learn and progress; we grow old and die. But in that death, our souls are released into a new birth, into a world that we cannot comprehend. Our first impressions of the next world will be as foreign to our human experience as a "birthing room" is to a newborn. We prepare for this "next" step by developing our spiritual selves in this world, by prayer and pure and goodly deeds. Hell is not a "place",

but a condition. To be closer to God in the next world is heaven and remoteness from God is hell. When we die, we aren't condemned to a static existence. We continue the journey.

I'm grateful I tuned in at the right time to see that Barbara Walters' special. It is easy to lose sight of our purpose in this physical, busy, complicated world. It is nice to take the time to consider that which is really important, the meaning of these religious holidays, and the eventual outcome of a life geared toward spiritual development. As so many faiths celebrate major holidays in this season, and as so many differing belief systems are brought together in our "mixing bowl" culture, it is important to slow down and ponder the ponderables. We are one people on one planet under one God that we worship in innumerable ways. Isn't it feasible that His realm is open to all?

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