

HEAVEN

Probably it would be an exaggeration to state that the ordinary run of non-religious literature makes a jeer of Heaven. But unquestionably the references to it are of the light or frivolous order. In that type of literature known as the "Who-done-it," the rough guy in a jam is found declaring that he has no taste for going to Heaven just yet; that he never had any attraction towards playing the harp. That would be one of the general notions of Heaven: you spend your time kneeling and playing a harp, interspersed of course with copious hymn-singing. Obviously the idea of Heaven which exists in too many minds is inadequate, to put it mildly. In fact the slightly tough sort of person - that type which makes up the great bulk of the population of the world, cannot possibly imagine himself at home in Heaven.

AN UNATTRACTIVE HEAVEN

A little episode which took place in the "Morning Star" Hostel in Dublin for destitute men is eloquent as to that. One of the men had just died. This event reflected itself in an increased attendance at night prayers. When they were pouring out of the oratory the crowd naturally congregated around the board which sets out the names of those of our men who have passed away, now a large assembly. While they were going through the names and refreshing their memories, one of them, peering forward from the background, exclaimed: "If all them fellows is up in Heaven it must be a hell of a rough joint." You see the position. The idea of Heaven is totally out of relation with them! They have no conception of Heaven! They cannot see themselves or their type up there at all! And obviously with that notion of theirs, which is, I have to repeat, the current notion - Heaven has no positive attraction for people. It has only the negative attraction that it means escape from Hell.

If you look into this position, you will see that it is definitely serious. What should be tremendous, irresistible attraction for the Christian, that is the reaping of the reward of his labours, the coming face to face with the Lord and His Mother, and the living with those lovely Persons forever - is not an attraction at all. I would fear that this really boils down to the fact that fear and not love is the urge in religion. Than that, I think, nothing could be more destructive. Therefore, people's thoughts must be set moving on a higher plane. This is not to say that we will be able to present a sufficient idea of Heaven, but at least we

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may be able to supply a notion above that of playing the big harp and chorusing the incessant hymns. I have to confess that if I were thrown back on those employments, I would not feel any attraction to Heaven myself. I find, for instance, that I cannot join any more in that popular item: "I'll sing a hymn to Mary," because I have now sung it ten thousand times and I have become tired of it.

GOD IS HEAVEN

To be adequate about Heaven is, of course, impossible. All said and done, God is Heaven. It is His presence which constitutes Heaven, and we cannot estimate Him. Neither can we by any possible striving or stretching of the imagination portray Heaven. We can only give a human view of it. And that human view is very like the description that a fish would give of the intellectual life of a man, or the appreciation a monkey would have for mathematics - there is no approximation.

Suppose you were in touch with that monkey. You would find that its actions could resemble your own quite closely. If it saw you reading a book, it would be able to imitate that process, even to putting a pair of spectacles on its nose and turning over the pages. But the animal has not the faintest conception of what you are at; and an infinitely wider difference would exist between ourselves and God. We have not even the slightest notion of what God is in His essence, so that to describe Heaven, which is our enjoyment on God, is beyond human power. When we set about our little effort to do it, we can only enumerate a lot of pleasant things and then argue that Heaven rises high above them. Thereby is created an imagination of simply immense happiness. That carries us a certain distance. It may fill us with the desire to possess that happiness. But all that we have done in the end is to depict a human Heaven. It is a product of our own mind, not rising above that level, because we would have omitted the real things of Heaven through inability to comprehend them.

THE SATISFACTION OF EVERY LEGITIMATE DESIRE

However, what we can do we must do. Therefore, let us begin and see how far a little logic carries us. In the first place it is reasonable to suppose that Heaven must contain the satisfaction of every legitimate desire. That complete satisfaction is something which is not afforded to us here below. In this existence nothing is complete. There is a "catch" in absolutely everything. Either a pleasure that we have long looked forward to does not come up to anticipation, or else we are quickly satiated with it. We have longed for something - we get it, and it is only a disappointment! There is a flaw in every situation, a fly in every ointment, a thorn with every rose, a cross attached to every bliss. It is our

human condition.

Not so in Heaven. Everything comes up to and far exceeds anticipation. There are no disappointments, no cloying. We are not satiated with the torrents of delights; the eye is not filled with seeing, nor is the heart tired from feeling. The cross is there only to add to the bliss of everything.

But what are legitimate desires? Here on earth I suppose one might say everything except formally prohibited things. Meat on Friday, drink in excess, murder and robbery in all circumstances, and sex in certain circumstances. Well, in Heaven there will be no desire to kill or rob, no fasting or abstinence, nor the earthly sex relations. So that we have to view all those things from a different angle.

Presumably in Heaven everything will be allowable, but will human pleasures and desires carry over into Heaven? It is logical to suppose that they will if we want them. Heaven must hold every wish of the heart. Unless the human heart is going to be transformed to the point of making it radically different from what it is, which is not likely, that heart in Heaven may still continue to wish for those lesser things. What then? I repeat that Heaven must hold the satisfaction of them.

HUMAN PLEASURES AND HEAVEN

Let us look at a few of those pleasures of earth. What about sweets? It is a popular pleasure. Likewise is drink, which is beloved by many who give their time to it and derive their chief enjoyment from it. It is not exactly the loftiest form of enjoyment, but it is permissible and we must not indulge in mere condemnation. The incorrectness enters in with excess.

Will that taste for drink be satisfied in Heaven if one has it? Emphatically it would. Would it be by the method of winging one's way to a Heavenly pub and getting glass after glass of nectar from an angelic bar-tender? This would land us into complications, for a certain amount of the pleasure which is derived from drink lies in the losing of control and good sense; everything becomes exciting and rose-coloured and the woes of the world drop away for a while. In Heaven, of course, there is no loss of self-control. One does not come staggering out, and there is no need for the lending of enchantment to anything. Neither is there the phenomenon known as "the morning after the night before." So let us content ourselves with saying that the form of getting particular pleasures, sweets, or drink, or those other things, will be different. At the same time it will be more than equivalent. It will be perfect, no disadvantages attaching, no remorse, no day of reckoning.

Take another human occupation - Sport, which a great proportion of the world's population follows up very ardently and which is necessary to a balanced life. But how could we find that reproduced in Heaven! Surely we will

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not congregate in crowds in the heavenly substitutes for the great stadiums to watch two teams encounter each other, say "The Converts" versus "The Born Catholics," or "The Saints" versus "The Scrape-Ins."

Our immediate reaction is to regard that as a joke. We cannot bring ourselves to believe that there could be that sort of occupation in Heaven, but we cannot be sure of anything in regard to the detail of Heaven. We dare not even laugh at the contemplation of those rival teams. Heaven is so far above our efforts to imagine it that such games might indeed exist there as one of the aspects of our human relationships, ascending to sublime heights. It would not be necessary, I presume, in those circumstances to have referees. If they were required for some inscrutable purpose, they would no doubt fare better than they sometimes do on earth. In any case, it is good to tell the football fans here below that they certainly would be able in some form or other not clear to our minds to follow up their pursuit without which they would not be happy on earth. It gives their minds something to dwell on other than the harp.

Now let us consider the higher things. I have mentioned sex. The pleasures of the man and woman relation can be exquisite. The prevalence of misuse has warped our outlook and prevents us from considering these things frankly and properly. Will sex be in Heaven? Again one has to say that it will be in equivalent. We are told in Scripture that there will not be the giving and receiving in marriage. But there will have to be something which represents or continues that companionship which was instituted by God Himself and used by Him as the channel of souls into this world and into Heaven. Whatever it is, it will have to surpass immeasurably the communing of hearts, the joy of one another's company, and the desire for union which make up the unique earthly relationship.

Such indeed will be the outpourings of mutual love in Heaven that it is probable that the mere meetings of one person with another would yield greater delight than would proceed from the most ideal earthly marriage.

PLEASURE PURIFIED

It is to be borne in mind that in Heaven every pleasure would be felt by a nervous system freed from the purely earthly. The body will be a glorified one. Purified from the abuse and excess of which it had been the victim on earth, it will be a most tender instrument. Its nervous system will be exquisitely sensitive, responding to impulses in a way beyond our present imagining. As a faint example, take the case of the Saint who goes into an ecstasy at the thought of God. That shows what an extreme pleasure can do even on earth to a person who is delicately attuned to it. The mind becomes overwhelmed and in turn overwhelms the body.

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Then we read of cases where artists or musicians were similarly overcome by the sudden presentation to them of something superb and novel, by a discovering in their line of genius. Emotion can enter with such force as momentarily to disable one.

Thus the intellectual pleasures of Heaven will be drunk in by minds of almost infinite sensibility, thrilling profoundly to circumstances which on earth would have passed unnoticed, or which would have hardly stirred the pulse. Moreover our enjoyment will be what might be called a universal one. Here on earth each one is only interested in a few things. We have not the capacity for taking in more. Therefore we have limited horizons of joy. In Heaven we would be interested in everything, science, music, things outside our present thoughts altogether.

Perhaps somebody might be inclined to say: "Surely in Heaven all those things will not be bothered about! Would we not be absorbed in the contemplation of God alone?" No, because to turn to God does not necessarily exclude the things that are not God. In Heaven every creature, every science, every art would be seen as an aspect of God, as a means of understanding Him more perfectly and enjoying Him the more. Accordingly it would be a delight to engage in them. Each one of them would be a new voyage of discovery far greater than Columbus' epoch-making voyage to America.

DELIGHT THAT IS NOT HEAVEN

Everything there will be a new source of joy and wonder, because we will see its meaning, the part it was intended to play in God's scheme. All these incomprehensible things of earth, things we cannot even guess at the purpose of, there will fall into their wonderful place. Everything is linked to the Incarnation, and therefore everything without exception plays some part in salvation.

What about our relations and our friends up there? Will we know them? Most assuredly we will if our life on earth is going to be reflected in Heaven; if our worldly desires are going to be fulfilled up there. I suppose that nearly everyone puts in the foreground of his expectation of Heaven the ardent longing to meet his beloved ones once again. Surely that is a most worthy wish! Yes, that will be one of the very great joys. We will embrace our own again in a union that will never cease or grow stale. None of the variations that interfere with things down below, none of the little departures from harmony that mar the earthly association, no defects, nothing but a blissful encounter that will last for all eternity.

One could go on indefinitely in that strain. As the mind fills in the picture, the accumulation of delights becomes startling. We cannot take it in, and eventually we are forced to pause; we have reached a sort of saturation. At that point we

begin to think that we are sensing the wonders of Heaven. Yet all that accumulation, that contemplation which has become dizzy, is not Heaven at all. What we have been thus reasoning out is only the equivalent of Limbo. It is only on the natural plane and Limbo is all that in its fullness and perfection. But Limbo is not Heaven.

So all those thoughts, and any other thoughts which we might build upon that foundation, still leave Heaven untold. Because the position is that Heaven only really begins where our minds leave off. No matter how high we pitch our thoughts, we are still in the position of that monkey surveying the man. But at least - and this is worthwhile and necessary - we have painted a worthier Heaven than that of the harp and the hymns. In God we will experience what we have no conception of here. We will see all, know all, have all. We will be able to do all, because living in God we will be given the entry into His power. We will play with His power as a child would play with toys. Our Lady is in that state at this moment.

Where is Heaven? Heaven is a state and a place, because Our Lady's body is there. The intriguing proposition was recently made by a Dominican writer that Heaven will be on this earth after the glorious Resurrection. That after the earth will have passed through its ordeal of ending, perhaps a fiery ordeal, it will be purified as our bodies will be glorified, and that we will live on it. We will not of course have any need for a place to walk about on, as we have at the moment. We will not require the shelter or the things on which we now depend. But at the same time we can glimpse the purpose of such a re-creation of the earth. Now the earth ministers to our salvation, and so its continuance would be fitting. We would be able to visit the scenes which were the theatre of our life and to tread once more the paths which had led us on to the abode of bliss.

St. Thomas Aquinas holds that the Garden of Eden still exists on earth and that it is still guarded by the Angel with the Fiery Sword to prevent the entry of human beings. The commentators have suggested that the Angel would not be visible, but that the Sword might show itself as a volcano or some other emission of fire which would look purely natural and yet fulfil the other role. But why should the Garden of Eden be thus preserved except that there is an eventual plan for that other restoration of the whole earth.