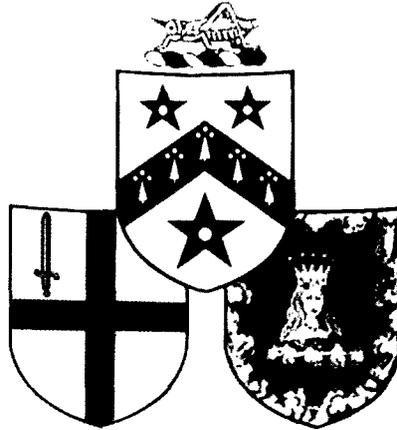


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RELIGION ON THE LEVEL

Lecture 6

WHAT IS THE USE OF HEAVEN?

by

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Religion on the Level

What's the Use of Heaven?

Professor Richard Holloway

In my fourth lecture in this series, 'What's the Use of the Church?', I tried to capture something of the paradox of an institution that was created to preserve the challenging memory of one who opposed the ethic of institutions and their inevitable sacrifice of individuals for the sake of the group. I called this institutional principle, 'the Caiaphatic ethic', because, as the eponym suggests, it was Caiaphas who honestly expressed it, when he said that it was more expedient to get rid of Jesus, rather than risk the destruction of the whole people. This is contrary to the ethic of Jesus who saw individuals, not collectives, as the objects of his love and anger. It does not make institutional sense to leave 99 sheep alone, and go searching for the one who is lost, but that is precisely what Jesus did. The Church exists to preserve the dangerous memory of Jesus, but, by virtue of its reality as an institution of organised power, it inevitably embraces the ethic of the man who condemned him to death and pronounced the ethic of Jesus a historical impossibility. That is why the Church is, to quote St Paul, a true imposter, or, to quote Monica Furlong's description of Alan Watts, 'a genuine fraud'.

But the imposture goes deeper than the inevitable corruptions of institutional survival. It goes down into the Church's very theological system, and this creates a more profound departure from Jesus than the Church's tragic compromises with power. I want to open up this subject by referring to a very difficult book on feminist philosophical theology, which has been recently published. It is Grace Jantzen's, *'Becoming Divine'*.¹ Basing much of what she says on the thought of Hannah Arendt, Jantzen suggests that we need to develop a new set of theological symbols if we are to convert Christianity into a movement that affirms, rather than denies, life. She meditates on the significant fact that, in the Western tradition, humans are described as 'mortals', and the task of the Church is to secure their immortality by programmes of 'redemption' or 'salvation'. The basic premise is that this life is of no significance of itself, but is only a prelude to a state beyond life that is either one of weal or of woe. We are mortal, born to die, and it is what awaits us beyond death that should pre-occupy our every breath, since the way we use this life will procure either an immortality of bliss or an immortality of woe. Hannah Arendt scorns this dismal pre-occupation with death and proposes a new symbolism, borrowed by Jantzen, that will emphasise, not the inevitability of our dying, but the actuality of our living. She wants us to think of ourselves, not as 'mortals', as those who will die, but as 'natales', as those who are alive; and she wants us to act for love of the world, not fear of it. Borrowing this symbolism, Jantzen wants us to emphasise our 'natality', rather than our 'mortality', and the 'flourishing' of humanity and the earth we inhabit, rather than programmes that will 'redeem' us from sin by guaranteeing us a life beyond life. In her exposition of Arendt, she points out that the Christian pre-occupation with death and salvation worked against a sense of connection to the web of life, 'and taught people to be homeless in the world'. She quotes Arendt:

*'The other-worldly attitude of the early Christian creed made commitment to each other's natalities less significant since worldly aspirations and immortal fame granted by history were now viewed as illusory endeavours...In this context, human natality is no longer characterised by its unique capacity to begin, to act, or to re-enact but rather assumes a prominence only so far as it marks the occasion of the announcement of a new life whose ultimate meaning and fulfilment lay in the eternal life to come.'*²

In this quotation Arendt is clearly echoing something said by St Augustine of Hippo, one of her intellectual heroes: "That a beginning be made, humanity was created". This does not mean that there was only one beginning, but that it is in the nature of humanity always to be beginning. Each new birth is such a beginning. The exciting thing about our history, the thing that helps to balance all the evil we have committed, is our passion for discovery, for beginning again. This genius for the new beginning characterises us in many ways, and distinguishes us from other species. We produce new songs, new literature, new political freedoms, new understandings of God. Religious institutions often give the impression that they have God taped, know God's settled opinion on everything. But the history of humanity's struggle with God is a history of constant surprise and discovery. Jantzen, in commenting on this insight, says:

*'...even when Christianity was gradually displaced by the secularism of modernity, the rejection of connectedness with the world and the efforts to dominate the earth and its peoples were a continuation of the Christian hostility to the world in another guise.'*³

One of the conclusions Jantzen derives from looking at ourselves as natals rather than mortals is that it would help us to recover our kinship with the world. She points out that this is why feminist theologians take ecology seriously, in contrast to traditional philosophy and theology, whose disembodied rationality assumes that our true home is in another world, where God resides, so that the nearer we get to God the further away we must go from the natural and animal. She contrasts this attitude with the words of the feminist, Clarice Lispector:

'I felt that animals were still one of the things close to God, a matter that has not yet invented itself, which is still warm from birth, and at the same time something that immediately stands on its feet, is thoroughly alive, that lives fully every instant, never a little at a time, that never spares itself, that never wears itself out completely'.⁴

This approach to life is in marked contrast to one side of Christian thinking, which has looked upon the world with gloom and suspicion, rather than with wonder and excitement. Thankfully, there is a counter tradition within Christian history. Charles Williams said there were two fundamental Christian theologies, 'the rejection of images' and 'the affirmation of images'. I would like, now, to compare these approaches. What Williams calls 'the way of rejection' is based on a theology of redemption or rescue. By virtue of being born, we find ourselves in exile from our true homeland and need to be rescued. We are not where we truly belong, but are placed in some sort of captivity from which we must escape. The work of the Church is to effect this rescue. Since this approach genuinely touches on one of our ancient human experiences, it is no surprise to find that in the mysterious collection of archetypes we call the Bible, there are texts that can be read in support of this interpretation of human history. The originating text is found in Genesis, Chapter 3, where we read of the Temptation of Adam and Eve, their Fall from Innocence, and their Expulsion from Eden. In the Letter to the Romans, in chapter 5, Paul uses this text to develop an interpretation of the work of Christ whose role is to recapitulate or rewind this primordial tragedy and bring it, this time, to a happy ending. In the second lecture in this series, on the Bible, I discussed the archetypal power of this ancient narrative and Paul's gloss upon it. There are other uses of it, of course. It can be used as a metaphor that expresses the human experience of discontent and loss, movingly described by the blind poet, Jorge Luis Borges, in his poem, 'Possession of Yesterday':

*'I know the things I've lost are so many that I could not begin
to count them
and that those losses
now, are all I have.
I know that I've lost the yellow and the black and I think
of those unreachable colours
as those that are not blind can not.
My father is dead, and always stands beside me.
When I try to scan Swinburne's verses, I am told, I speak with my
my father's voice.
Only those who have died are ours, only what we have lost is ours.
Ilium vanished, yet Ilium lives in Homer's verses.
Israel was Israel when it became an ancient nostalgia.
Every poem in time, becomes an elegy.
The women who have left us are ours, free as we now are from
misgivings,
from anguish, from the disquiet and dread of hope.
There are no paradises other than lost paradises.'⁵*

I have already suggested that metaphor is the best way to understand these ancient themes, so that Heaven becomes an image of longing, as well as loss, just as Hell becomes an image of dread, as well as a description of much that we have made of ourselves. However, there is another tradition within Christian theology that sees these great archetypes, not as living metaphors, but as historical facts, and that is when, if we are not careful, we can seriously delude ourselves. Eden used as a metaphor can be illuminating; Eden used as a map reference can be dangerously confusing. The theology of rejection that we are thinking about has usually taken the metaphor literally, so that it ends up condemning humanity to a guilt and bondage that requires some sort of literal redemption. According to this system, Christ's death is a blood bargain with the God who demands satisfaction for humanity's original and actual sin. Christ pays the blood price by his death, and saves those who associate themselves with his sacrifice, by claiming his self-offering as the price already paid for their redemption. The redemption theme is used as a metaphor by Paul to interpret the work of Christ, and it got its meaning and power from the practice of manumission or the freeing of slaves. The older generation in our own society, particularly among the poor, will hear echoes of the rituals of the pawn shop, where you put your grandfather's gold watch in pawn in the middle of the week, when you had cash flow problems, and redeemed it on Friday, when the wage

packet came in. By applying the metaphor of redemption literally, against the background of an equally literalist reading of the narratives of Fall and banishment from Eden, the Church began to think of itself as being like one of those special forces groups sent in to deal with those hostage situations that have become such a cliché of our era. Its job is to free as many hostages as it can from captivity and get them on board the ship of safety. So, to mix the metaphor, the Church becomes a life boat, launched to fish as many people as it can from the sea of destruction.

When this theological system becomes dominant, the prevailing emotion becomes anxiety. If we accept this account of the human predicament, then our anxiety is bound to be acute. We become anxious, not only to avoid actions that may lead to eternal damnation, but to avoid thinking or believing the wrong things about our condition. In the last lecture we spent some time thinking about the ethical logic of systems that used the threat of punishment after death as a way of controlling our actions before death. The anxiety goes deeper than that, and affects the way we think, because wrong believing becomes as dangerous as wrong action. This is the logic behind the excesses of the Inquisition, and all those purges that characterise the history of religion. It is expedient that a few heretics are burned at the stake, rather than that the whole people of God perish through the infections of heresy. Theologies of anxiety postulate God as judge, and the Church as the criminal justice system. It becomes more important to root out evil than to promote good. Contrary to the parable of Jesus, much energy is spent pulling out the weeds from the field of corn. If we follow the advice of Jesus and leave them till the harvest, we might discover that they have taken over and suffocated the corn. Religious anxiety always hates the devil more than it loves God. It creates churches that are exclusive in their self-understanding, and proclaim that there is no salvation for anyone outside their walls. It was this great engine of anxiety that promoted the remarkable successes of Christian mission. The urge to save as many as possible from the wrath of God was a powerful spur to missionary heroism; and the fear of that same wrath has always been a powerful incentive to conversion.

Theologies of anxiety have several important strengths. The main one is the coherence of the system they proclaim. Once we accept the premises on which the message is based, the logic is powerful and persuasive. It can be learnt easily and taught effectively. It is, essentially, a product, a package that can be explained to the sales force. Its second strength is that it can be remarkably successful in inculcating particular systems of behaviour. The Protestant Work Ethic is an example of how a particular version of the theology of anxiety lead to a powerful ethic of duty that remains long after the theological premise on which it was based has been abandoned. The final strength that is worth noting is the sacrificial lives of those who have committed themselves to this particular theological approach. It has taken them to the ends of the earth and prompted them to extraordinary feats of human endurance. Those of us who cannot admire the theological motivation that lay behind such heroism ought, nevertheless, to admire those who gave their lives in its service.

Fortunately, this is not the only theological tradition that has been developed in Christian history. There is the approach that Charles Williams calls, 'the affirmation of images'. This tradition emphasises incarnation, rather than redemption; and the goodness of creation, rather than its fallen state. The great texts from scripture that express this approach are the first chapter of Genesis, and its celebration of the gift of creation; as well as the first seventeen verses of John's Gospel that proclaim the enlightening presence of the Word of God in the creation from the beginning. These rival or complementary theologies inevitably remind us of the old challenge that asks whether the glass is half empty or half full. It is a question as to whether we emphasise what Matthew Fox calls Original Blessing, and the goodness and joy of life; or Original Guilt and the undoubted fact that we go on destroying our own peace and polluting our own habitation. The original blessing or incarnation approach coheres well with Jantzen's theology of natality and flourishing. Grace and the celebration of life, rather than dread and the fear of death, become the motivators of action and thought. The message does not warn people how to be saved out of this wicked world; it invites them to feel at home in it, to reverence it, and to practise the disciplines of sharing its good things with others, particularly with the poor of the earth. It is not true to say that the theology of natality and flourishing, the theology of life, lacks challenge and rigour. It calls us to courageous action against all that spoils the joy of life and the sacredness of creation. It calls us to a politics of justice and redistribution, because one of the scandals of history is the way the powerful always colonise God's creation for themselves and yoke God's children into slavery. The theology of flourishing calls us, in the language of the prayer of Jesus, to build the kingdom of God on earth, as it is in heaven. However, compared to the theologies of anxiety and fear, the theology of life and flourishing often suffers from presentational difficulties. The theology of rejection, as we have seen, is schematically logical, once we accept the originating premise on which it is based. That is why it is easy to plant it as a complete system in the hearts and minds of its practitioners. Its negative use is also easy to apply, which is why the most successful student Christian organisation in the country is able to operate a test that screens out those who do not adhere to the purity of the system. They do not want theological creativity in their speakers, because the system is already perfectly created. The only creativity that

is permitted is at the rhetorical level, where the speaker's art may be used to commend the system. Human beings find these complete systems to be the best antidote to anxiety, so it is not surprising that the history of religion and politics is full of them. T.S.Eliot was constantly reminding us that humankind cannot bear too much reality, so the success of these systems should not surprise or dismay us. Perhaps those of us who can no longer adhere to them should not waste our emotional and intellectual energy in combating them, and, instead, should turn our attention to the positive promotion of the other vision of reality we have been exploring. In conclusion, therefore, I would like to sketch the outline of such a positive programme and in my lectures next year, my final year as Gresham Professor of Divinity, I will continue the process. What should be the defining characteristics of a positive theology of life? I would like to suggest three elements.

We must learn to pay attention to the earth and its creatures. The traditional name for this process is prayer or contemplation. We must be people who pray or pay attention, people who stop and notice things. One way into this is through the writings of poets, who are the geniuses of attention and contemplation. In my second lecture I pointed out that language, while it was our greatest gift and invention, was also our greatest danger, because it can deceive us. I pointed out that things are not what we say they are. The word water is not drinkable. Rather, words are pointers to realities outside the self, to which they call our attention. That is why we must beware of sanctifying the words themselves; they are not holy, though they can be the means whereby the holy is communicated to us. But there are words that transcend this limitation, so that they almost become, or at least put us in the presence of, that which they signify. Poetry is the supreme example of this, as far as language is concerned, though music is probably its purest expression among the human arts. Poetry is the fruit of attention or contemplation, and through it we find ourselves in the real presence of mysteries beyond ourselves. Let me offer you an example of this kind of poetic attention. It comes from Cecil Day Lewis, not a particularly fashionable poet at the moment, and one whom the academic critics define as not being quite first rate. He speaks to me, however, and I have derived much nourishing wisdom from his poems. The one I am going to quote, however, is slight and unimportant, but, as far as I am concerned, it is a beautiful example of the kind of attention to the world I think of as prayer or intrinsic gratitude. It is called, *'This Loafer'*:

*'In a sun-crazed orchard
Busy with blossomings
This loafer, unaware of
What toil or weather brings,
Lumpish sleeps - a chrysalis
Waiting, no doubt, for wings.*

*And when he does get active,
It's not for business - no
Bee-lines to thyme or heather,
No earnest to-and-fro
Of thrushes: pure caprice tells him
Where and how to go.*

*All he can ever do
Is to be entrancing,
So that a child may think,
Upon a chalk-blue chancing,
'Today was special. I met
A piece of the sky dancing'.⁶*

But this prayer of attention should not just be focused on nature; we should look at one another with the same expectation of revelation, especially when we look into alien worlds, even frightening ones. One way of doing this is to make a point of buying 'The Big Issue' from every vendor we meet, so, and this is the real point, that we can look into their eyes and say something that connects us to them. Even if we have no money, we can look at them and apologise, as we smile ruefully. Many of them will find that just as important a gift as the pound coin we can too easily slip into their hands without paying attention. And we should pay attention to people enjoying themselves, especially to lovers and friends sharing affection or amusement. Great cities are the best places for this, because we can encounter many worlds as we walk along the street. I am quoting too many things at you today, but I cannot resist recalling that famous incident when Thomas Merton describes a walk along the street in Louisville, Kentucky:

'At the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the centre of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realisation that I loved all these people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-

isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness. The sense of liberation from an illusory difference was such a relief and joy to me that I almost laughed out loud'.⁷

If attention is the first duty of those who want to love the world, then repentance must be the second. The truth that lies at the heart of all those theologies of rejection and loss we have thought about is the horrifying damage we have done to one another. In these lectures I have used the Holocaust as the great paradigm of human evil, but there are many others that would have done just as well, such as Slavery. The West has not yet really confessed its responsibility for this great evil that still reverberates in our own day, in the racism that so disfigures our society. One of the great paradise longings of humanity is the desire to rewind history, to make it as though the evil had never happened, to bring back that deed, to recall that word, to get back to the time before the serpent put it into our mind to perform the act that destroyed our peace and sent us forth from Eden. One of the best examples of this sorrow comes not from an agent of such pain, but from one of its victims. It is one of the most moving Holocaust poems I know, Dan Pagis', *'Draft of a Reparations Agreement'*:

*'All right, gentlemen who cry blue murder as always,
nagging miracle makers,
quiet!
Everything will be returned to its place,
paragraph after paragraph.
The scream back into the throat.
The gold teeth back into the gums.
The terror.
The smoke back to the tin chimney and further on and inside
back to the hollow of the bones,
and already you will be covered with skin and sinews and you will live,
look, you will have your lives back,
sit in the living room, read the evening paper.
Here you are. Nothing is too late.
As to the yellow star: immediately
it will be torn from your chest
and will emigrate
to the sky'.⁸*

That poem clearly echoes the great vision of the valley of desolation in Ezekiel, filled with the dead bones of the people of Israel. It is a horrifyingly apt *eikon* of the horrors of our history. It summons up, not only the Slave Trade and the Holocaust, but the Killing Fields of Pol Pot's Cambodia, and the Rwandan genocide of a few years ago. One of the tasks of an honest theology of life will be to remember those crimes and cry for collective repentance. As humans, we are implicated in them all, but our particular tribal pathologies will necessitate specific acts of sorrow and repentance. This is beginning to happen in some cultures, but so far we have resisted any collective apology to African people for the Slave Trade that so disfigured our history and continues to stain our relations with black people.

But repentance must not be the final word. The final word must be the remaking of the earth. This is the task to which we have been summoned by Jesus. John Dominic Crossan makes an important distinction in his interpretation of the work of Jesus. I have already talked about the apocalyptic tradition in the New Testament. I suggested that Jesus had tried and subsequently discarded the apocalyptic programme for the transformation of the earth. Let me draw this series to a close by quoting from Dominic Crossan's discussion of the subject:

'The apocalyptic is a future Kingdom dependent on the overpowering action of God moving to restore justice and peace to an earth ravished by injustice and oppression. Believers can, at the very most, prepare or persuade, implore or assist its arrival, but its accomplishment is consigned to divine power alone. And despite a serene vagueness about specifics and details, its consummation would be objectively visible and tangible to all, believers and unbelievers alike, but with appropriately different fates.

The sapiential Kingdom (Crossan's name for a programme of this-worldly transformation) looks to the present rather than the future and imagines how one could live here and now within an already or always available divine dominion. One enters that Kingdom by wisdom or goodness, by virtue, justice, or freedom. It is a style of life for now rather than a hope of life for the future. This is therefore an ethical Kingdom, but it must be absolutely insisted that it could be just as eschatological as was the apocalyptic Kingdom. Its ethics could, for instance, challenge contemporary morality to its depths'.⁹

Such a kingdom is just as world-denying as the apocalyptic or rejectionist theologies, but the world it denies is not this world as such, the only world we know, but the usurpation of this world by the forces of evil and

injustice that claim it as their own. The heaven we long for, and must work to achieve, is God's dominion of justice and peace on earth and goodwill to all its peoples. Beyond our grasp, I know, but what else is a heaven for?

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¹ Grace M. Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, Manchester University Press, 1998.

² Cited by Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, p.151.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., p.152.

⁵ Quoted in , David Curzon, *Modern Poems on the Bible*, The Jewish Publication Society, 1994, p.89.

⁶ Cecil Day Lewis, *The Complete Poems*, Sinclair-Stevenson, London, 1992, p.636.

⁷ Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, Doubleday, New York, 1989, p.156.

⁸ Dan Pagis, *Modern Poems on the Bible*(Ed.David Curzon), The Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia, 1994, p.249.

⁹ John Dominic Crossan, *op.cit.*, p.292.