Do Atheists Go to Heaven?

by Herb Silverman

Atheists are the only ones who say unequivocally that atheists don't go to heaven. Most heaven-believing religions seem to have a clause that allows even atheists to integrate the neighborhood. The road, however, is usually narrow and littered with obstacles.

Pope Francis (**Jorge Mario Bergoglio**), seeking common ground with people outside the Catholic faith, once implied that atheists who do good works are good people and might get to heaven without passing the "Go" of Christianity. This is not the official Catholic position, which is that those of us who do not accept Jesus as our savior are doomed to the fires of hell.

Speaking of heaven and hell, I once gave a sermon at a Unitarian Universalist Church, a human-centered religion with which I find much common ground. I began by telling the congregation that I had more in common with Christian conservatives than with them. To puzzled looks, I explained: "Unitarian Universalists believe everyone goes to heaven, Christian conservatives believe very few go to heaven, and I believe nobody goes to heaven. So I'm closer to them than to you."

The audience laughed, since most didn't believe in a heaven and many had never thought about what the "Universalist" in their name meant.

Aside from deciding who allegedly goes to heaven, there have been countless claims by so-called experts about the specifics of an afterlife. How do we determine who the experts are? The number of experts on any given topic is inversely proportional to the evidence available on that topic. And by that criterion, we are all experts on the afterlife because there is absolutely no evidence for its existence. Anyone can make up stuff about heaven or quote stuff from books made up by others.

Unlike, say, biology or geology, there is no academic discipline called "heaven-ology" or "hell-ology," unless such topics are included in a course on mythology. However, there is scholarship documenting what different cultures believed about the afterlife and how such beliefs have evolved.

Being certified by a religious body gives you no special knowledge of an afterlife. I should know. I am certified as a Humanist Celebrant through the Humanist Society, designated a religious nonprofit organization. I've performed 15 Humanist weddings, none of which have mentioned any gods, heaven, or hell.

We atheists shouldn't get too comfortable about Christian love for us. There's a strain of Christianity that says my cat is more likely to wind up in heaven than I am. The gist of the argument is that cats don't reject Jesus, but many humans do. I'm partly okay with a theology that praises cats. If more people loved their neighbor as much as they loved their pets, we would have a better and more peaceful world.

When it comes to discussions about heaven and hell, I prefer **Mark Twain**'s quip: "Go to heaven for the climate, hell for the company." According to Christian conservatives, when you die you will either be in the company of people like Twain, **Albert Einstein**, **Steven Weinberg**, and many other atheists and Humanists, or people like **Jerry Falwell**, **Billy Graham**, and **Chuck Colson**. Living in South Carolina, I'm used to the heat. So it's an easy choice for me.

There are probably as many ways to think about heaven and hell as there are believers in heaven and hell. I think the right way to think about heaven is also the right way to think about hell — both are nonexistent.

All this afterlife theology raises a lot of questions. Here are just 10 I've wondered about:

1. Why is faith not only important but perhaps the deciding factor about who winds up in heaven or hell?

When I'm asked what I would do if I meet Jesus when I die, I say I would then have enough evidence to become a believer. Apparently, though, that would be too late. If a creator god exists, why would she create so many evidence-based approaches if she wants us to make faith-based decisions?

2. Why do the last 30 seconds of life matter so much?

If **Adolph Hitler** repented on his deathbed for his role in the Holocaust or other atrocities and accepted **Jesus**, some say he would go to heaven. I think it would be more reasonable (though what's reason got to do with it?) for a person to be judged on lifetime actions rather than on an end-of-life belief.

3. If we have free will on Earth, will we have free will in heaven?

If so, might we sin and go from heaven to hell? If not, will we be heavenly robots? If a god can make us sinless in heaven, why didn't he create us sinless on earth? So many ifs, so few sensible answers.

4. What moral purpose does eternal torture serve?

We want to rehabilitate evil-doers on earth with the hope that they will learn from past mistakes. Even in capital punishment cases we try to execute as painlessly as possible. Why would a purportedly all good and compassionate god burn people for eternity?

5. What happens to people who died before Jesus was born — or didn't hear of Jesus?

If they can still go to heaven, how does Jesus matter? If they are all condemned to hell, how is God merciful?

6. If our goal in life is to go to heaven, shouldn't we be committing infanticide?

Wouldn't it be a blessing to baptize newborn babies and then kill them? Or perhaps encourage abortions, since presumably all fetuses go to heaven?

7. How much more deserving is the worst person in heaven than the best person in hell?

Our earthly binary divisions are usually arbitrary. People may vote when they are eighteen and buy alcohol when they are twenty-one, but they are not permitted to do so on the day before. We recognize such rules for what they are — distinctions without a real difference. Not so when it comes to the cut-off between an eternity of bliss and an eternity of torture.

8. How could heaven be a happy place?

Can you be blissfully happy in heaven knowing that some of your loved ones are being tortured in hell? And what do you do for an eternity in heaven without getting bored?

9. Why did God torture his son?
Couldn't he come up with a less bloodthirsty way to allow us into heaven than by torturing and killing his innocent son to make up for a misdeed of an alleged first couple? We praise God for an action for which we would incarcerate any human. God seems inhumane, but I suppose that's because God isn't human.

10. Wouldn't a loving god who wants us all to go to heaven make it unambiguously clear how to get there?
Christians, let alone those of other faiths and none, disagree about what to believe or do. Faith? Good works? Some believe we were predestined for heaven or hell before birth, and there's nothing we can do to change the outcome. Others say we are all given the gift of faith to accept Jesus as savior and thus go to heaven, but that some people refuse the gift. I didn't refuse a gift I was never given. A gift is different from a belief in a gift.

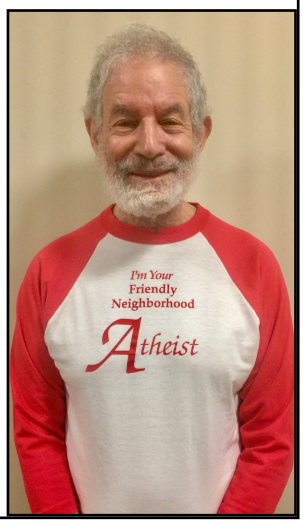
I think these questions can best be answered by applying Occam's Razor: In trying to understand something or search for truth, it's best to get unnecessary information out of the way. That's why I don't believe the wishful thinking about eternal life found in ancient "holy" books.

My wish is for people to focus on helping our fellow human beings and treating them with respect and compassion. If, by any remote chance, a loving and judging deity or force exists, perhaps he, she, or it will respect you and me if we value behavior above belief.

Herb Silverman is a regular contributor to the Freethought Society's ezine, *The Freethought Society News*. He is a Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Mathematics at the College of Charleston, South Carolina.

Silverman ran for governor of South Carolina in the 1990s to challenge a state law that required religious belief to hold public office.

In 1990, a colleague pointed out that atheists were ineligible to hold public office in South Carolina. After an eight-year battle, Herb won an unanimous decision in the South Carolina Supreme Court, which struck down this religious test requirement.



Silverman is the author of two books, *Candidate Without a Prayer* and *An Atheist Stranger in a Strange Religious Land*. Both of these books are available through amazon.com.

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Freethought Society Tables at University Job Fair

The operation of the Freethought Society (FS) includes many tasks and responsibilities. Duties can be easy yet time-consuming, or difficult and extremely demanding. For almost eight months FS founder and president **Margaret Downey** has worked on all these duties without assistance.

Downey's last office assistant, **Heidi Ickes**, took a high-paying job elsewhere in March 2021. In the past, filling the job opening was usually accomplished through word-of-mouth or through contacts with students who attended West Chester University which is located near the FS Pennsylvania office. The COVID health crisis, however, created many hiring complications, and the need to find qualified employees has been a major problem all around the country.

Rather than offer just sympathy, United States Representative **Chrissy Houlihan** (D-PA) took action. Her office arranged for an October 12, 2021 job fair on the campus of West Chester University.

FS was one of about 200 businesses that participated in the job fair. Houlihan's office provided each exhibitor with a table, two chairs, and table coverings. Downey worked the table with FS vice-president **Glen Loev** (photo right). They were proud to display two eye-catching posters, newsletters, and a variety of complimentary brochures.

During the day, Downey and Loev interviewed four possible employees, but for various reasons the applicants were not a good fit. Consequently, FS is still looking for a part-time office assistant.

A graphic designer stopped by the table and there was an instant connection. She agreed to work at home on projects calling for her expertise and she joined FS as an interested supporter.

During the event Downey introduced herself to people working at various school district tables. She gave the representatives information about the "Life and Work of Thomas Paine" assemblies she conducts and encouraged them to fill out the grant application at:

https://www.ftsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/Application-for-Thomas-Paine-Assembly-1.pdf

While the position of office assistant was not filled that day, Downey and Loev made many new contacts. Several exhibitors visited the FS table to learn more about the organization and quite a few people mentioned their admiration of the work done by FS. All visitors to the table signed up to receive the FS ezine.