

Atheist Blogger Turns Back on Christ, Denies Heaven Exists

Since atheist blogger Martin Hughes left Christianity, he hasn't missed believing in God or in hell.

But he does miss heaven.

"I wish that there was one to go to, and that's the truth," Hughes wrote in a blog post, adding that his view is probably not "atheistically correct." In Hughes' version of heaven, he would "understand everything." There would be "deep, rich happiness that feels like Mom's sweet potato pie on Thanksgiving."

Hughes may not be alone in his desire to keep believing in a more secular version of heaven.

According to a recent analysis in the journal SAGE Open of responses from 1973 to 2014 to the General Social Survey, the general trend over the past few decades is broadly toward less religiosity (both public and private). However, the one indicator that seems to buck this trend is belief in the afterlife, where a slight increase was recorded in recent years. A 2013 survey by the conservative Christian Austin Institute for the Study of Family and Culture found that even 32 percent of the group comprising atheists, agnostics, and people of no religion claim to believe that there is life after death. Why this seeming contradiction?

The U.S. is not the first place where this phenomenon has been documented. The U.K.'s Daily Mail asked several prominent thinkers how they might explain the rise in numbers of atheist Britons as well as the increase in those that believe in life after death. The proposed explanations included selfishness, incredulity at the finality of death, a desire to believe in infinite possibility, and hope for those without material

possessions.

But is someone who believes in life after death still an atheist? According to Tom Flynn, editor of Free Inquiry magazine as well as the New Encyclopedia of Unbelief, the answer depends on how you define “atheism.”

“Strictly defined, an ‘atheist’ has no belief in the traditional personal deity imagined by Western religions,” he wrote in an email. “Such an atheist *could* believe in an impersonal supernatural realm or an afterlife, but not presided over by a god. Arguably some Buddhist conceptions of karma and reincarnation are atheistic in this sense.”

Flynn adds that a broader definition holds that an atheist has no belief “in any supernatural realm or phenomena,” which would rule out belief in an afterlife.

Still, the connection between belief in life after death and religious dogma may be more tenuous than widely assumed.

A new study out of Australia took an in-depth look at a group of Australians of varied ethnic and religious backgrounds. Andrew Singleton, a sociologist of religion at Melbourne’s Deakin University, conducted interviews with 52 Australians aged 18-85. And the findings, published in the quarterly journal *Mortality*, suggest that “afterlife belief is varied, individualistic and mainly arrived at with little to no reference to orthodox religious teaching.”

Unlike mass polling that tends to offer large groups or participants merely the option of a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ response to questions like “Do you believe in life after death?” Singleton sought to explore the content and character of their afterlife beliefs. He found that most people had arrived at their beliefs without being faithful to traditional religious dogma, but were still influenced by society at large.

Four categories of belief emerged:

1. “Life continues in heaven”

This was the most popular view, with 20 people expressing this belief. These were further divided into those with a “theocentric” (eternal solitude with God alone) or “anthropocentric” (believers are reunited with friends and family) view of heaven according to the previous work of scholars Colleen McDannell and Bernhard Lang. All the committed Christians in the study (16) believed in the theocentric view of heaven. Singleton found that the older participants were more expansive in their views, but were neither more certain in their beliefs nor more theologically precise. Furthermore, across all ages, heaven was the main focus: “Only a few very committed, orthodox evangelicals and Pentecostals argued for the existence of hell.”

For Hughes, who was raised as a fundamentalist Christian, it was exactly this traditional view of hell that was a factor in him leaving Christianity altogether. In an interview, he said it was a “major part” of that decision: “I just was uncomfortable with a God who thought some people deserved hell.” Asked if he was ever tempted to believe in the version he described, he said he tried, but ultimately could not: “I found no evidence for it.”

An additional four non-Christians believed in an anthropocentric version of heaven, not dissimilar to Hughes’ version. Religious themes don’t feature prominently, or are completely absent: “God is there, but not central to the proceedings.” Singleton attributes the popularization of this version of heaven to Spiritualism – a religious movement that began in the U.S. in the 19th century whose adherents believe the living can communicate with the spirits of the dead. The theocentric and anthropocentric believers in heaven were the only participants that arrived at their beliefs through religion. All other participants formed their beliefs outside of it.

2. “Continuing on ...”

Five participants had beliefs categorized as “Continuing on ...” These people were neither religious nor raised religious. They did not believe their actual consciousness lives on after death, but that “an aspect of our being continues in some way.” The example testimony of a participant who by his own admission had “a very messy belief system” describes the post-death state as: “You as an individual are not consciously involved in it anymore but your existence doesn’t, the existence of whatever makes you doesn’t cease, you’re part of the whole thing whether you’re a conscious part of it or not, it doesn’t matter in the end.”

3. Reincarnation belief

Nine people believed in reincarnation, sometimes in another human, sometimes in another species. Some were influenced by Buddhist or Hindu teachings on this matter, but had never really participated in either religious community or considered themselves adherents. These participants saw themselves more generally as “spiritual.”

While Singleton found a level of diversity among afterlife views, he found certainty to be lacking. Indeed, many never really discussed it at all. The exception to this was strong believers in Christianity. For the most part, informants were “hazy and equivocal” in their religious views. He found no “widely accepted religious model” of afterlife belief to be pervasive.

If not from religious teaching, then how did people arrive at their views? Some were raised religious. There were also those who were convinced they had seen ghosts or communicated with the dead through mediums. Singleton posits this is probably due to a broader modern cultural shift toward picking and choosing from different religions or philosophies: “I

discovered that people place a very strong premium on the right to formulate their own opinions – typical of the religious individualism that characterizes contemporary Western society.”

4. Death is the end

Of course, not everyone believes in life after death. The remaining 16 interviewees (two participants avoided discussing their personal views altogether) were of the persuasion that death is the end. Singleton found them “entirely comfortable” in their conviction and said they had no real desire to entertain speculation about life after death. He asked one of the participants if he “secretly hoped” that there was life after death. Unlike Hughes, he said he didn’t.

When respondents were first asked about belief in afterlife in the GSS in 1973, the U.S. was a more religiously homogeneous country. Afterlife belief was largely synonymous with Christian conceptions of heaven and hell. In today’s more diverse society however, simply asking people *if* they believe in the afterlife may no longer be enough. {eoa}

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