

Heaven and Hell

by [Jillian Becker](#) (June 2023)



The Falling Angel, Marc Chagall, 1922-47

*Death and life were not
Till man made up the whole,
Made lock, stock and barrel
Out of his bitter soul,
Aye, sun and moon and star, all,
And further add to that
That, being dead, we rise,
Dream and so create
Translunar Paradise. –W.B. Yeats*

In 1968, the start year of the New Left, there was a commune of young revolutionaries in Vienna, housed in a beautiful old building with wide curving stairways and grand halls, monuments to the skills of architects and builders and to the achievements of owners who had won fortunes in manufacturing, commerce, and the professions in the *belle époque*.

When the communards moved into one of the spacious apartments—as squatters, not rent-paying tenants—its walls were richly clad with glowing, dark, polished wood paneling. They tore it off. They considered it “too bourgeois.” Holes remained where the panels had been pinned into the brick. The communards—every one of them born of bourgeois parents who indulged and supported their idleness along with the welfare state that the affluent young revolutionaries ached to overthrow—said they liked the damaged look because it “proletarianized” the apartment.

One wall only they had repaired: the holes filled in, the surface plastered smoothly. There they planned to paint a mural. One of them drew a vertical line down the middle. On the left they would depict Hell, and on the right, Heaven.

They began painting (“There’s an artist in all of us,” they claimed) their vision of Hell, but soon became disappointed with the way it was shaping up and decided to hire a professional artist to realize their vision.

The artist, an American, was found, agreed on terms, and arrived on the appointed day with brushes and paints ready to carry out their instructions.

The communards were unanimous on what Hell looked like. It was Vienna; its streets, traffic, monuments, palaces, art galleries, houses, theatres, open-air market, department stores, banks, schools, sports grounds, hospitals, factories, a prison. There were shoppers, families with children,

prisoners, police brutally breaking up a protest rally, fat men in big shiny cars smoking cigars ("capitalists"), and so on. Everything had a dingy look, the colors predominantly "like mud, excrement and vomit" as per the communards' orders.

It took the painter about a month to finish Hell to their satisfaction.

"Now," he said, moving along to the other side of the line, "describe your Heaven to me."

'Um,' they said. 'Take a few days break while we think about it.'

They never did come up with a vision of Heaven. It wasn't that they couldn't agree among themselves on what it should look like; the trouble was none of them had any idea of it at all.

They paid off the artist with their parents' money, and the right side of the wall remained permanently blank.

The fun revolutionaries and vandals of the Viennese commune lived very comfortably in what they chose to call Hell. They knew it was nothing of the sort. They also could not help knowing that millions in neighboring Communist countries longed for the freedom and prosperity that they had and pretended to despise. Their Hell was a lie, but their Heaven was truly unimaginable.

Genuinely feared Hells are much the same in successive generations and diverse cultures. Hell is pain, sorrow, fear, loneliness, loss, defeat, confinement, oppression, humiliation, frustration, helplessness, despair. It is all that we dread. Its geography and architecture are hideous and threatening. Its images are iron and fire wielded by ruthless tormentors with absolute power, assaulting vulnerable flesh.

But what of Heaven? Who has described or pictured it convincingly?

Heaven does not feature significantly in Orthodox Judaism. It is vaguely a place where God is. Or it is God's vicinity. The nearest thing to Hell in Judaism is Sheol, which essentially just means death.

Our conventional idea of Hell is a Christian conception. In both Protestant and Catholic doctrine sinners go to hell and suffer in fire. St. Augustine held that the saints in heaven could observe and righteously enjoy the torturing of sinners in hell.

Our conventional idea of Heaven is also Christian. Heaven (or "Paradise" –an Old Persian word for a garden) is commonly depicted as a pearly-gated garden where human-shaped beings with wings stand on clouds and pluck harp-strings in the vicinity of a throne on which a huge bearded man is seated. It is a vision that cannot have a lot of appeal to a human nature that craves excitement, competition, challenge, variety, drama, achievement, and carnal satisfactions. There are more sophisticated Christian visions. In Dante's *Paradiso*, the degrees of bliss—that is, nearness to God—depend on the capabilities of the individual souls.

In ancient Greece, the shades of heroes went to Elysium to wander about in a state of blessedness but not happiness, according to Homer. It lay on the rim of gloomy Hades, where the unheroic multitude languished forever. The wicked suffered unremittingly in the dreadful pit of Tartarus.

A perpetual feasting with the gods in the great hall of Valhalla was how the Vikings imagined eternal bliss. But even if immortal digestive systems are part of the deal, such an afterlife, when measured against the rich variety of pleasures pursued on earth, must surely lack a certain *je ne sais quoi*.

In Islamic teaching, when Muslims die they pass over *as-Siraat*, the Bridge of Hell, whether they are going to Heaven or Hell itself. Those destined for Heaven, or Paradise, remain

on the bridge while they are purified by the setting right of any wrongs that existed between them and others in this world. (The bridge idea is reminiscent of the Zoroastrian belief in the bridge that the dead have to cross to get to their afterlife destination, and on which they are confronted with their earthly record.)

It is not clear (as it is also not clear in Zoroastrianism and Christianity) whether the destination of Heaven or Hell will be attained only after the Day of Judgment or immediately after death. Some authorities say that at least *the ash-Shuhadaa* (the martyrs) will enter Heaven without having to wait for the Day of Judgment. "Their souls are in the bellies of green birds, and they have lights suspended from the Throne." Whether as spirit pilots of the green birds or in some sort of bodily existence, they "wander about Paradise wherever they wish" and are granted anything they want.

One *hadith* says that the first three to enter Paradise are: The *shaheed* (the martyr); the chaste and proud; and the slave who worships Allah by carrying out his duties and is faithful to his master.

Some Islamic authorities say that Heaven has a hundred levels. Others say there are two Heavens, each having two rivers. In the first—better—Heaven the water of the rivers flows; in the second Heaven it gushes and bubbles.

Heaven, *Iannah*, is a garden called *Adn* (Eden). It is very green. The trees have gold trunks. There is one tree so vast that it takes a hundred years to cross its shadow. There are tents and houses of gold, studded with pearls. The highest dwellings [highly placed, or built high?] are reserved for martyrs. If they need coal for anything [?], it will be "from aloe-wood."

Every happy male resident, no matter what his stature, appearance, and age were on earth when he died, is here six

cubits tall (the ideal height, which was that of Adam, the first man, after whom "people shrank"), thirty-three years old, and in perfect shape aesthetically and organically, his eyes surrounded by black as though outlined with kohl, and with no body hair.

He reclines on green cushions, on couches of silk brocade, and is served drinks in gold and silver cups on a gold tray by pretty young boys with long eyelashes. They are as beautiful as pearls. Maidens also attend him. They too are forever young, and as beautiful as rubies, coral, and pearls, with breasts firm and full, and with large slanting eyes, of which the whites are very white, and the pupils very black. They are virgins forever, even though enjoyed on the silk couch and green cushions, for their virginity is renewed every morning.

While there is no night and day as such, the light from the Throne is adjusted to create the look and feel of evening and morning by the opening and closing of curtains. "The people of Paradise do not sleep."

Are the eternal virgins the happy men's wives? Where do good earthly women go after death? There are different and contradictory teachings on wives in Heaven. While it is said that a woman who goes to Heaven will there be the wife of her last husband, it is also said that husbands are unencumbered in Heaven by their earthly wives. Apart from the permanent staff of stripling lads and maidens, Heaven's population consists mostly of men. Many authorities speak of them as having wives but not the women they were married to in their earthly existence, and the smallest number of wives that any man will have in Paradise is seventy-two.

The shaheed will have seventy-two young virgins "from among the *al-Hoor al-Eeyn*" –the houris with the "wide, lovely eyes." They will be so finely beautiful as to be transparent; "the marrow of their leg-bones will be visible through the flesh." They will not menstruate, they will have no postnatal bleeding

[does this imply that they will or will not give birth?], and have no spittle, mucous, urine or feces. They will be “purified mates,” creatures made by Allah especially for Paradise.

The drinks are pure water, milk, honey, and wine, watered wine, and wine with ginger. The wine will not intoxicate or cause a hangover. There are “seas” of water, wine, milk, and honey.

Food is also on continuous offer, fruit and chicken specified, but anything can be ordered according to the heart’s desire. On entering Paradise the new arrival will be given a bull, and the extra- “caudate” –lobe of a fish liver, and any fruit he yearns for.

The happy one will never again excrete, or spit, or need to blow his nose. Substances that necessarily pass out of his transformed body will do so as a gentle sweat that will smell of musk. If he burps, that will smell of musk too.

The fabric for clothes in Paradise comes from a huge tree called *Tooba*. The happy one’s clothing never wears out and he may deck himself in as much jewellery as he likes.

When the company are not reclining on couches, they loll on thrones, rank on rank facing each other. It’s not known what they talk about, if they talk. Perhaps they reminisce about their lives on earth. If so, there would inevitably be much repetition through the unending ages. But new arrivals would bring fresh stories, and new ears. The ranks will multiply forever, but Heaven can never become overcrowded.

Might Heaven be best described as simply the opposite of Hell, an eternal experience of pleasure, happiness, success, desirable company, instant gratification, hopes fulfilled? Many of us would probably agree on that being “heavenly” in a general way. But just what brings pleasure and happiness, who in particular provides the right company, exactly what wishes

need to be gratified and what hopes fulfilled, are questions to which there will be as many answers as there are people.

What of secular beliefs in the creation of *heavens on earth*?

No one has been able to describe ideal conditions for life on this earth that would be attractive to all or most people—or even equally as much to my friend as to myself. One man's ideal state is another man's purgatory. How many would choose to live, for instance, in Thomas More's Utopia?

It is a communist, slave-owning society. The slaves are foreigners or criminals. (Their chains are made of gold, but that's unlikely to be much of a consolation to them.)

All the citizens, both men and women, live by compulsory labor on the land and in handcrafts, except a minority who are scholars and may choose to become ruling officials or priests. The ruling officials, the "administrators," watch over and control the rest. They monitor and correct activity in every household, and uniformly govern the affairs of the towns. They constitute the state.

All religions are tolerated. Atheism is too, but it is despised and feared, and atheists are subjected to constant counseling by the priests to cure them of their perversity.

Meals are eaten communally, households taking it in turns to prepare them. The administrators get the best food.

Everyone is dressed in the same simple garment.

As in the promises of our contemporary World Economic Forum, there is no private property. People ask for what they need and officials dispense it to them.

Everyone gets free health care. Euthanasia is decided upon and administered by the government. Citizens feel protected from the struggle for survival and the need to make hard decisions, but at the cost of self-determination.

No one may choose to leave the country, which is an island, or travel about in it without a permit. To do so is a crime punishable by enslavement.

Women toil in the fields and workshops equally with the men for the same six hours a day. But they are subject to the will of their husbands. They may not wear make-up. They have to confess their sins to their husbands once a month. They alone carry out the domestic chores (in addition to their other work). A few may become priests in their old age, but not administrators.

Both men and women are given military training, but women are never put in command over men.

Gambling and hunting are forbidden to all.

It is a vision that partly matches and partly differs from that of the Left in our time. One notable difference is that in Utopia there is no sexual freedom. Pre-marital sex is punished by forced celibacy for life, and adultery by enslavement.

What of Karl Marx's utopian vision? For the Christian idea of the Apocalypse at the end of earthly existence—the divine event called the Eschaton—after which all people who have ever lived will be judged and assigned to heaven or hell forever, Karl Marx substituted the Revolution at the end of capitalist existence after which all good people will live in a communist paradise. It was against the Marxist vision that Professor Eric Voegelin urged, *“Don't immanentize the Eschaton.”* (Don't make the Great Reset of human existence an earthly event, don't bring it inside history). But Marxism is increasingly popular now in the Western world.

So what was Marx's vision of earthly paradise? An egalitarian society from which the state will eventually “wither away.” There'll be no private property, and the only authority will be one that administers and distributes things—as in More's

Utopia— “to each according to his need.” The need will be judged by the distributors. There will be liberty, equality, fraternity, plenty and joy. Heaven on earth.

The reality has not conformed with the vision. Wherever Marxism has been put into practice—in Russia for instance, and China, Cambodia, Cuba, North Korea—the state did not wither away but remained robust as long as the regime lasted; the people lost their liberty and suffered poverty, misery, arbitrary incarceration, summary execution, forced starvation, massacre, torture, enslavement, and labor under the lash.

It seems that plans for earthly heavens invariably turn out to be blueprints for earthly hells. Perhaps because heavens are made of infinitely variable individual choices.

Earthly hells are numerous, thriving, and multiplying.

Hell is a communal project, Heaven a private enterprise.

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Jillian Becker writes both fiction and non-fiction. Her first novel, *The Keep*, is now a Penguin Modern Classic. Her best known work of non-fiction is *Hitler's Children: The Story of the Baader-Meinhof Terrorist Gang*, an international best-seller and Newsweek (Europe) Book of the Year 1977. She was Director of the London-based Institute for the Study of Terrorism 1985-1990, and on the subject of terrorism contributed to TV and radio current affairs programs in Britain, the US, Canada, and Germany. Among her published studies of terrorism is *The PLO: the Rise and Fall of the Palestine Liberation Organization*. Her articles on various subjects have been published in newspapers and periodicals on both sides of the Atlantic, among them *Commentary*, *The New*

Criterion, City Journal (US); The Wall Street Journal (Europe); Encounter, The Times, The Times Literary Supplement, The Telegraph Magazine, The Salisbury Review, Standpoint(UK). She was born in South Africa but made her home in London. All her early books were banned or embargoed in the land of her birth while it was under an all-white government. In 2007 she moved to California to be near two of her three daughters and four of her six grandchildren. Her website is www.theatheistconservative.com.

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