

Happily Ever After

Christian Eschatology as the Universal Hope

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Desire of Every Nation

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Introduction

“The consolation of fairy-stories” is, Tolkien tells us, “the joy of the happy ending.”¹ On that note, then, tragedy as a genre is dead. Fairy tales have won the day. This is probably an exaggerated claim,² but it is hard to miss that the overwhelming majority of movies, TV shows, and novels end on a glad note, or at least a bittersweet one. If this is at all an indication of what the people want, it suggests that most of us most of the time prefer to see happy endings.

Men are also universally story-tellers. No known culture exists without stories.³ Indeed, nearly everything we say beyond the most raw facts comes out as a story or part of one. “I had a sales call, but suddenly I heard a crash and the line went dead. Later he called back from the emergency room and finished signing up.” In such a simple communication as this, there is a clear beginning, a tense middle, and a happy ending. This does, however, raise a suggestive question. Is reality truly made of stories? Are they plain human impositions are they in any sense objectively there? However we might answer this, the question of story also raises the matter of happy endings. Will there be any happy ending for the world? Do we at least want one, and if we do, whence cometh such an outlandish desire in the face of much evidence for universal final defeat?⁴

Inquiry may go further still, and indeed it is this step, rather than those above, upon which the present argument shall dwell. If men in general do desire some kind of happy ending, even if just as a possibility, what would make for a happy ending? Is there a single ending which

1. J.R.R. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf* (HarperCollins Publishers, 2012), “On Fairy Stories”, e-book.

2. At the very least it is one which is beginning to change, I might suggest.

3. Citation needed.

4. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, “On Fairy Stories”.

would satisfy the hearts of all men? Are all hopes and dreams irreconcilable in the end? *A prima facie* reading of the diverse religious, philosophical, and folk accounts of ultimate destiny suggests not. However, with the proper metaphysical and theological categories in place, I suggest this discord can be resolved. Christian eschatology, rightly understood and related to the longings present within the most representative prophetic anticipations, provides the true hope of hopes, the euchatastrophic resolution to all the melodies of the human heart. To make this intelligible, we must survey some chief rival visions of the future and the desires they express.

Ultimate Exodus

The conception of the future is not always a straightforward one, nor does an eschatology always relate directly to “future” in the ordinary sense of the term. There are conceptions of time that are infinite, having neither beginning nor end, which may take either flat (linear) forms or cyclical ones. The infinite, cyclical forms of time are generally associated with Eastern religions, such as Buddhism, Hinduism, or Jainism. In all of these, there is an infinite series of ages, with varying accounts of how such ages are made up. For example, Jainism in particular has a simple ascending and descending cycle, beginning with tall and happy men, descending to short and miserable men, and then returning.⁵

In these religions, the future is truly endless. There are no “last things” to speak of, for there will always be another turn of the wheel. In such a context it might seem odd to speak of an eschatological hope. This is an instinct, however, which is only valid inasmuch as a *cosmic*

5. Winfried Corduan, *A Tapestry of Faiths: The Common Threads Between Christianity & World Religions* (Intervarsity Press, 2002), pg. 176-177.

eschatology is in view. Even in these systems of infinite cycles, there is *personal* eschatology. Though there is no public Last Day, there may be a last breath before the individual exits the infinite cycle. As Corduan explains of Jainism, “just as with Buddhism and Hinduism, salvation cannot lie within temporal history but must be found by escaping time and history altogether.”⁶

This personal eschatology is, naturally, bound up closely with soteriology. For such religions as these, the ultimate goal is to escape the cycles of time, space, and personal/phenomenal existence entirely.⁷ This usually goes with the notion that existence is suffering, and that specifically this suffering comes from desire, particularly from other material or illusory things. To escape suffering, a man must free himself of the desires associated with phenomenal existence and realize his identity with ultimate reality (however conceived, even when this is Nothing), so that finally his particular, phenomenal existence will cease entirely.

The desire against desire, to escape what we know of as existence and cease to “be” in any ordinary sense, is a strange one to evaluate. To what is the will inclining? A naïve reading might suggest the answer is “nothing,” but for the will to incline to absolutely nothing is a metaphysical impossibility. Per Aquinas, the will is a “rational appetite,” and an appetite “is directly only toward the good.”⁸ For an appetite is simply an inclination toward an object good and right for the subject, and the Good as such is what all things desire.

What is truly the desire here, then? Inasmuch as it involves the extinction of personal existence, the question overlaps with the ostensibly very different question of what men seek in

6. Corduan, *A Tapestry of Faiths: The Common Threads Between Christianity & World Religions*, pg. 188.

7. *Ibid.*, pg. 115.

8. Thomas Aquinas, *New English Translation of St. Thomas Aquinas's Summa Theologiae*, trans. Alfred J. Freddoso (2018), II.I, q. 8, a. 1, *responsio*, <https://www3.nd.edu/~afreddos/summa-translation/TOC.htm>.

suicide. Both Buddhists and the suicidal man may agree that to exist personally is to suffer, and in both cases they will probably appeal to personal experience of many frustrated desires, along with many thought experiments, to show that every desire for anything within the circles of the world will be so frustrated and cause suffering. Yet does either seriously consider the possibility that there is a future in which the desires that existence awakens need not be extinguished for our suffering to end, but rather that they may be ultimately and perfectly fulfilled?

Nirvana addresses the hopeless tangle of frustrated desires by, in a sense, eliminating the desiring self, but is this really what attracts the will? The appeal seems to lie entirely in an escape from the restless trouble of our desires in this life, but is not an alternative to restless trouble simply rest?

Shalom is a famous word in biblical Hebrew, and indeed it remains in use today. The simple translation is “peace,” but the imagery surrounding it in the Scriptures is rich. It connotes calm and quiet,⁹ an end to hostility,¹⁰ and general well-being.¹¹ On a few occasions it is paired with rest, from strife or labour.¹²

This holistic rest, set in the context of the mercy and love of God, is key to the eschatological vision of Christianity and seems to fulfill the desires underlying the hope glimpsed in the idea of nirvana. When all is said and done, the strife will be over, all desires will be fulfilled,¹³ and the endless frustration of our hearts will come to an end. This does not require

9. Psalm 4:8.

10. Gen. 26:29, Deut. 2:26.

11. Gen. 37:14, 1 Chron. 18:10.

12. 1 Chron. 22:9, Isa. 57:2.

13. Psalm 37:4.

personal abolition, though, but simply the Good above all goods. The frustrated desires men feel on this earth need not be solved by the end of personal existence. Rather, “Thou madest us for Thyself, and our heart is restless, until it repose in Thee.”¹⁴ When the heart so rests, is this not precisely what nirvana has to offer? Desire may finally still, not by annihilation but by eternal satisfaction in union with the One all things desire.

Man’s Conquest Over Nature

If the East has classically sought ultimate good in an escape from the world of time and space, the modern West has gradually produced a very different vision of ultimate hope. Once upon a time, all men, East and West, know their lives solely as dependence. All things, good or evil, came from the hands of the gods, and only by submitting to them in the right way could we hope to experience true blessing and (hopefully) some kind of everlasting beatitude. However, once the gods went quiet in the West following their replacement with Christ alone, man began to view himself differently. A Man was in charge of all creation already, was he not? How small a step it seemed to sever the deity from this Man as we grew up and learned more about the causal structure of the world.

With modern science and technology, a new eschatological option has entered mass consciousness. Perhaps there will be no ultimate escape from this world. No matter. As we develop ever more effective techniques, we can soon learn to make the world of our dreams on our own. This is essentially the vision of modern philosophies steeped in evolutionary thought, perhaps paradigmatically in what is called “transhumanism.”

¹⁴. St. Augustine of Hippo, *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*, trans. E. B. Pusey (Project Gutenberg, 2002), bk. 1, p. 1, e-book.

In transhumanist thought, the great problem is essentially biology, or perhaps more broadly human nature in the conventional sense. Man as we know him is finite, corruptible, relatively impotent, and given to all manner of random defects. With the development of modern techniques to manipulate the “stuff” of which we are made, however, who is to say mankind cannot be upgraded? This is the basic philosophy of transhumanism. Where the ancients saw nature as that to which man must conform to live a happy life, transhumanists see nature as a limit to be overcome for the sake of a happy life. As Nick Bostrom explains:

Transhumanists view human nature as a work-in-progress, a half-baked beginning that we can learn to remold in desirable ways. Current humanity need not be the endpoint of evolution. Transhumanists hope that by responsible use of science, technology, and other rational means we shall eventually manage to become posthuman, beings with vastly greater capacities than present human beings have.¹⁵

For modern minds, the transhumanist vision has a great deal of intrinsic probability, even if in some details it might seem too radical. Everyone knows well the benefits of Science and Progress. What should prevent the project of human technique moving ever higher, further up and further in, until there is nothing but bliss? In the end, perhaps, should we find all the correct techniques, men will be “infinite in being, glory, blessedness, and perfection; all-sufficient, eternal, unchangeable, incomprehensible, everywhere present, almighty, knowing all things, most wise, most holy, most just, most merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth.”¹⁶

Whatever the merits or demerits of this remarkable secular eschatology, it seems preeminently concerned with the classical imperfections the ancients detested in man:

15. Nick Bostrom, “Transhumanist Values,” *Review of Contemporary Philosophy* 4 (May 2005).

16. Wikisource, *Westminster Larger Catechism – Wikisource*, [Online; accessed 22-June-2022], 2022, q. 7, https://en.wikisource.org/w/index.php?title=Westminster_Larger_Catechism&oldid=12119858.

mortality, corruptibility, and slavery to irrational passions. The transhumanist future is ostensibly one of everlasting and increasing perfection and rationality, until all men are eternally “holy” and happy. That Christian eschatology offers this, and does so without the many dubious features of transhumanism, is not difficult to demonstrate.

The chief evidence here lies in Jesus Himself, raised from the dead early 2000 years ago. He is the pledge of new creation, the prototype of all resurrected men, and He embodies within Himself everything transhumanism looks for. Bostrom, cited above, mentions five areas in which human nature lacks and upon which transhumanism hopes for improvement: lifespan, intellectual capacity, bodily functionality, sensory modalities, and passions.¹⁷ These are the elements of human life which transhumanists (and indeed most of us) see need for the most improvement, and it is in these precisely that the Christian vision offers an ultimate hope.

Jesus raised from the dead provides for a foretaste of a glorified human life, sometimes elaborated more specifically by His ambassadors in the Scriptures, which does offer categorical superiority in each of the spheres which Bostrom mentions. As to lifespan, that of the glorified Christ never ends.¹⁸ As to intellectual capacity, we shall know even as we are known.¹⁹ In bodily functionality, we anticipate complete mastery of movement and presentation,²⁰ perhaps even over all the elements.²¹ When it comes to sensory modalities and passions, there is less clear-cut

¹⁷. Bostrom, “Transhumanist Values.” The last of these Bostrom lists as “mood, energy, and self-control,” but “passions” was preferred as shorter summary and also to link these concerns to classical philosophy.

¹⁸. Heb. 7:16

¹⁹. 1 Cor. 13:12.

²⁰. John 20:19, Luke 24:13-34.

²¹. Matt. 8:27.

instruction in the Christian hope, yet if the righteous will see God,²² and He will wipe away every tear, then these too seem ultimately and incomparably fulfilled in the Christian hope. Though not by the route of pure scientific technique, the Gospel promises a world in which “all are yours, and you are Christ’s, and Christ is God’s.”²³ In the transhumanist future, further technological development will bring all things under human sovereignty. In the Christian future, “we see the relations of spirit and Nature so altered that Nature can be made to do whatever spirit pleases.”²⁴ As the transhumanists desire, “There shall be no more death. Neither shall there be any more sorrow nor crying nor pain.”²⁵ Indeed, there can hardly be, in a sense, a creature more “transhuman” or “posthuman” than what Lewis described of glorified man as “a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship.”²⁶

The Everyman Expectations

As much ink as has been spilled on the more or less “official” views of innumerable philosophies and religions, generally the opinions of ordinary people are of the most consequence. The views of the masses, of course, are rarely robust or particularly coherent. Even so (or perhaps on this very account), the expectations of ordinary men and women often afford the most insight into the basic structures of human desire. Without a clearly defined and well-regulated framework of beliefs and concepts for understanding that which is yet to come,

22. Job 19:26, Matt. 5:8.

23. 1 Cor. 3:21-23 (Modern English Version).

24. C. S. Lewis, *Miracles* (Distributed Proofreaders Canada, 2015), ch. XVI, e-book.

25. Rev. 21:4.

26. C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (HarperOne, 2006), Kindle ebook.

we can hardly avoid it if men's hopes and dreams simply snap into the shapes into which human hopes and dreams instinctively form them.

According to recent Pew polling, 73% of Americans still believe in heaven, and 62% still believe in hell.²⁷ Of the details of heaven, the points most strongly held seem to be freedom from suffering, reunion with loved ones, meeting God, and perfect health.²⁸ Views on hell are more various, but the chief points widely agreed upon include psychological suffering and an awareness of evil inflicted on the world.²⁹ All of this is personal eschatology, of course, and the absence of questions about cosmic eschatology on a survey such as this perhaps itself speaks volumes about the mindset of modern day folk religion.

This is not at all to say that there are no popular expectations about last things. The success of the *Left Behind* series itself seems sufficient to demonstrate this, along with the incredibly successful ministries that often form around prophecy and its interpretation. The popular visions generally include civilizational decline, worldwide catastrophe, innumerable deaths, and a final moment of vindication for those on the right side of this apocalyptic history.

This last feature is itself a most peculiar one. Even those who hold to no beliefs ordinarily considered “religious” generally seem to believe there is progress in history, so that the present is more enlightened than the past, and we only need to give it time for justice and peace to multiply until they cover the earth as the waters cover the seas. Even in spite of (or perhaps with the help of) the widely accepted evolutionary theories in one sense removing final

27. Pew Research Center, *Few Americans Blame God or Say Faith Has Been Shaken Amid Pandemic, Other Tragedies*, technical report (Washington, D.C., November 2021), pg. 11, https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2021/11/PF_23.11.21_problem_of_evil.pdf.

28. *Ibid.*, pg. 31.

29. *Ibid.*, pg. 32.

causality from the world, the nearly universal assumption of the modern West is almost precisely that the world is teleologically ordered toward perfection across every realm: technical, biological, and ethical especially. We speak of the “right side of history,” taking it for granted that “where we’re going” and “where we belong” are long-term the same place.

The eschatology of the everyman, then, has both individual and corporate dimensions. Individually, most people assume there is some kind of postmortem bliss for good people and postmortem suffering for villains. Cosmically, the human race is destined to improve and expand, though the route to this happy ending may be calamitous. There always seems to remain the niggling fear as well, though, that the happy ending for the cosmos may not be one with a happy ending for humanity, and that for justice to finally be served will require that the human race be cast into everlasting darkness.³⁰

What is there to say about all of this? Any sketch of popular views on the future is limited by the morass of inconsistent desires it must represent, but there are a few profitable threads to take up. When it comes to eschatology in the modern West, the folk views are not altogether incommensurable with Christian theology, as indeed they seem to derive from it. It is an easy commonplace that God will “render to each one according to his works.”³¹ Though the popular views tend to overlook the rigor of the judgment and assume far more men are righteous than the Christian faith says they are, the principle is soundly affirmed.

30. Disaster movies are perhaps the best indication of this strain of popular human thought. Movies such as *The Happening*, *Godzilla*, and countless others suggest that man has sinned so gravely that his world will need to be torn down. Often the suggested sin is hubris, which perhaps connects the inner concerns of this genre to the myths of ancient paganism.

31. Rom. 2:6 ESV.

Of perhaps a more interesting character is the set of errors that popular conceptions of heaven and hell often incorporate. Men often imagine or portray heaven in terms of a shining city in the clouds, with gold everywhere and loved ones all within walking distance. This picture differs from Christian views in several ways, not least of which is conflating the intermediate state with the eternal state in the new heavens and the new earth. Yet even though the image is in error, must it be said that the desire is as well? Few truly look to the gold or the clouds or the mansions as particularly exciting desires in themselves. Rather, it seems that for most men, this imagery simply represents a variety of impressions and associations connected to joy and the well-making of all things.

Classically, in the intermediate state, Christianity speaks of the righteous as enjoying some kind of immediate share in the divine presence, and is it not true that in His presence is fullness of joy, and at His right hand are pleasures forevermore?³² In the resurrection this will be made truly complete, and almost everything, even the family reunions, may indeed become actual possibilities.

Moving further, though, both in the idea of hell and of an eschatological disaster we see yet again cases in which the true faith preserves their real value while discarding their liabilities. Christianity can really offer the hope that men who escaped due justice in this life will finally be repaid, but without obligating belief in a red devil with a pitchfork stabbing people or even necessarily a literal flaming torture chamber. Almost everyone hates the idea of hell most of the time, until they see that someone who has done something so evil they would convince themselves to believe in it just to see him brought to a rightful end. Christianity affirms the

32. Psa. 16:11.

desire to see wrongs righted, to see an eye for an eye, yet at the same time offering mercy for the penitent.

All of this is fairly trivial to note, however. Of more interest perhaps is the matter of cosmic eschatology. The symbiotic relationship between disaster movies and the book of Revelation is an illuminating one. We find something compelling about the notion of a final reckoning, not just on the individual stage but for the world at large. The Christian can agree with the radical environmentalists behind certain “vengeance of nature” stories that man has indeed sinned, his hubris has indeed grown far beyond excuse, and that he will have to be cut down to size. However literally we take the book of Revelation, it is fascinating that the sheer scale of the judgments it mentions can really only be paralleled by such modern apocalypses. We know that man is guilty, that he has abused his fellows and the world around him, and that if he is forced to face up to it, this is only right.³³

Yet whereas the imagined disasters of popular media are often ambiguous about the relation of such events to a final and cosmic happy ending, Christianity is not. Christianity integrates the guilty fears of disaster movies with the positive, “progressive” expectations addressed first. Though there are many Christian views on the precise mechanics of this, the faith does teach that the Gospel is full of power, that it will spread to the ends of the earth, and that in the end, good (that is, God Himself) wins. However many disasters there are along the way, even if a great disaster shakes the earth at the last, there will be a further moment in which all is made well, in which the good works of men will be vindicated and be brought into their own, and in which we will finally reach the highest bliss across every sphere of human existence.

33. <https://pbs.twimg.com/media/FJ4UPnoXoAQoQT6?format=png>

Christianity can affirm the *telos* to the world that nearly everyone assumes in human history; there *is* a right side of history, and it is Christ's. This may not mean the smooth progression upward that so many moderns take for granted, but the faith does affirm that, in one sense, "where we're going" and "where we need to be" are finally one place.

Conclusion

There is, of course, much more to be said on every point we have examined. Not least among these regretful negligences is the idea of "micro-eschatology," or the category of smaller "last things" along the way to the ultimate destination. Here Christianity again has riches to share, and it opens up new vistas for dialogue alongside several worldviews including but far exceeding the few surveyed here.

That said, the sheer diversity of the three eschatological visions we have analyzed above should help to make the crucial point. Buddhist nirvana, transhumanist upgrades, and folk tropes about the end of life and the world all operate on different registers, represent drastically different concerns, and embody different (though related) sets of desires. Despite this, the Christian faith seems to integrate the insights and satisfy the longings in each. Nirvana can be transcended without losing anything in *shalom*. Transhumans or posthumans have nothing to offer which God did not already pledge in the glorification of Christ. And all the popular hopes, wishes, and fears fueling popular eschatology among the common folk derive from and truly come into their own in explicitly Christian soil.

If each of these diverse takes on the future and the ends of things seems to point somewhere within the territory of the blessed hope, then, it hardly seems a stretch to imagine that all of the great eschatological visions of the world, those which truly speak to the heart of

mankind, likewise all aim in the same direction. The risen Christ, coming again to judge the living and the dead, bears within Himself the hopes and fears of all the nations. It remains only to tell of the hopes, lest men be caught off guard when they meet the fears.

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