Religious Views on Heavenly Believes

In the following paragraphs, the reader could assess the origins of Heaven and Hell…

Mesopotamia

The ancient Mesopotamians regarded the sky as a series of domes (usually three, but sometimes seven) covering the flat earth. Each dome was made of a different kind of precious stone. The lowest dome of heaven was made of jasper and was the home of the stars. The middle dome of heaven was made of *saggilmut* stone and was the abode of the Igigi. The highest and outermost dome of heaven was made of *luludānītu* stone and was personified as An, the god of the sky. The celestial bodies were equated with specific deities as well. The planet Venus was believed to be Inanna, the goddess of love, sex, and war. The sun was her brother Utu, the god of justice, and the moon was their father Nanna.

Ordinary mortals could not go to heaven because it was the abode of the gods alone. Instead, after a person died, his or her soul went to Kur, a dark shadowy underworld, located deep below the surface of the earth. All souls went to the same afterlife, and a person’s actions during life had no impact on how he would be treated in the world to come. Nonetheless, funerary evidence indicated that some people believed that Inanna had the power to bestow special favors upon her devotees in the afterlife.

Egypt

In Ancient Egyptian religion, belief in an afterlife was much more stressed than in ancient Judaism. Heaven was a physical place far above the Earth in a “dark area” of space where there were no stars, basically beyond the Universe. According to the *Book of the Dead*, departed souls would undergo a literal journey to reach Heaven, along the way to which there could exist hazards and other entities attempting to deny the reaching of Heaven. Their heart would finally be weighed with the feather of truth, and if the sins weighed it down their heart was devoured.

Bahá'í Faith

The Baha’i Faith originated in 19th Century Persia, present day Iran. The Bahá’í Faith regarded the conventional description of Heaven, and hell, as a specific place as symbolic. The Bahá’í writings described Heaven as a “spiritual condition” where closeness to God was defined as Heaven, conversely Hell was seen as a state of remoteness from God. Bahá’u’lláh, the founder of the Bahá’í Faith, had stated that the nature of the life of the soul in the afterlife was beyond comprehension in the physical plane, but had stated that the soul would retain its consciousness and individuality and remember its physical life. The soul would be able to recognize other souls and communicate with them.

For Bahá’ís, entry into the next life had the potential to bring great joy. Bahá’u’lláh likened death to the process of birth. He explained: “The world beyond was as different from this world as this world was different from that of the child while still in the womb of its mother.” The analogy to the womb in many ways summarized the Bahá’í view of earthly existence: just as the womb constituted an important place for a person’s initial physical development, the physical world provided for the development of the individual soul. Accordingly, Bahá’ís view life as a preparatory stage, where one could develop and perfect those qualities which would be needed in the next life. The key to spiritual progress was to follow the path outlined by the current Manifestation of God, which Bahá’ís believed was currently Bahá’u'lláh. Bahá’u’lláh wrote, “Know thou, of a truth, that if the soul of man hath walked in the ways of God, it will, assuredly return and be gathered to the glory of the Beloved.”

The Bahá’í teachings stated that there exists a hierarchy of souls in the afterlife, where the merits of each soul determined their place in the hierarchy, and that souls lower in the hierarchy could not completely understand the station of those above. Each soul could continue to progress in the afterlife, but the soul’s development was not entirely dependent on its own conscious efforts, the nature of which we were not aware, but also augmented by the grace of God, the prayers of others, and good deeds performed by others on Earth in the name of that person.

Buddhism

In Buddhism there were several Heavens, all of which were still part of *samsara* (illusionary reality). Those who accumulated good karma may be reborn in one of them. However, their stay in Heaven was not eternal—eventually they would use up their good karma and would undergo rebirth into another realm, as a human, animal or other being. Because Heaven was temporary and part of *samsara*, Buddhists focused more on escaping the cycle of rebirth and reaching enlightenment (*nirvana*). Nirvana was not a heaven but a mental state.

According to Buddhist cosmology the universe was impermanent and beings transmigrated through a number of existential “planes” in which this human world was only one “realm” or “path.” These were traditionally envisioned as a vertical continuum with the Heavens existing above the human realm, and the realms of the animals, hungry ghosts and hell beings existing beneath it. One important Buddhist Heaven was the *Trāyastriṃśa*, which resembles Olympus of Greek mythology.

In the Mahayana world view, there were also pure lands which lie outside this continuum and were created by the Buddhas upon attaining enlightenment. Rebirth in the pure land of Amitabha was seen as an assurance of Buddhahood, for once reborn there, beings did not fall back into cyclical existence unless they choose to do so to save other beings, the goal of Buddhism being the obtainment of enlightenment and freeing oneself and others from the birth–death cycle.

Chinese faiths

Chinese Zhou Dynasty Oracle script for *Tian*, the character for “Heaven” or “sky.” In the native Chinese Confucian traditions, Heaven was an important concept, where the ancestors resided and from which emperors drew their mandate to rule in their dynastic propaganda, for example.

Heaven was a key concept in Chinese mythology, philosophies and religions, and was on one end of the spectrum a synonym of *Shangdi* (Supreme Deity) and on the other naturalistic end, a synonym for nature and the sky. After their conquest of the Shang Dynasty in 1122 BC, the Zhou people considered their supreme deity *Tian* to be identical with the Shang supreme deity *Shangdi*. The Zhou people attributed Heaven with anthropomorphic attributes, evidenced in the etymology of the Chinese character for Heaven or sky, which originally depicted a person with a large cranium. Heaven was said to see, hear and watch over all men. Heaven was affected by man’s doings, and having personality, was happy and angry with them. Heaven blessed those who pleased it and sent calamities upon those who offend it. Heaven was also believed to transcend all other spirits and gods, with Confucius asserting, “He who offends against Heaven has none to whom he can pray.”

Other philosophers born around the time of Confucius such as Mozi took an even more theistic view of Heaven, believing that Heaven was the divine ruler, just as the Son of Heaven (the King of Zhou) was the earthly ruler. Mozi believed that spirits and minor gods existed, but their function was merely to carry out the will of Heaven, watching for evil-doers and punishing them. Thus, they function as angels of Heaven and did not detract from its monotheistic government of the world. With such a high monotheism, it was not surprising that Mohism championed a concept called “universal love,” which taught that Heaven loved all people equally and that each person should similarly love all human beings without distinguishing between his own relatives and those of others.

In Mozi's *Will of Heaven*, he writes: “I know Heaven loves men dearly not without reason. Heaven ordered the sun, the moon, and the stars to enlighten and guide them. Heaven ordained the four seasons, Spring, Autumn, Winter, and Summer, to regulate them. Heaven sent down snow, frost, rain, and dew to grow the five grains and flax and silk that so the people could use and enjoy them. Heaven established the hills and rivers, ravines and valleys, and arranged many things to minister to man's good or bring him evil. He appointed the dukes and lords to reward the virtuous and punish the wicked, and to gather metal and wood, birds and beasts, and to engage in cultivating the five grains and flax and silk to provide for the people's food and clothing. This has been so from antiquity to the present.”

Christianity

Traditionally, Christianity has taught that Heaven was the location of the throne of God as well as the holy angels, although this was in varying degrees considered metaphorical. In traditional Christianity, it was considered a state or condition of existence (rather than a particular place somewhere in the cosmos) of the supreme fulfillment of theosis in the beatific vision of the Godhead. In most forms of Christianity, heaven was also understood as the abode for the redeemed dead in the afterlife, usually a temporary stage before the resurrection of the dead and the saints’ return to the New Earth.

The resurrected Jesus was said to have ascended to heaven where he now sat at the Right Hand of God and would return to earth in the Second Coming. Various people have been said to have entered heaven while still alive, including Enoch, Elijah and Jesus himself, after his resurrection. According to Roman Catholic teaching, Mary, mother of Jesus, was also said to have been assumed into heaven and was titled the Queen of Heaven.

The Gospel of Matthew frequently used the phrase “Kingdom of Heaven,” where the other Synoptic Gospels speak of the “kingdom of God,” one of the key elements of the teachings of Jesus in the New Testament. Revelation 12:7-9 spoke of a war in Heaven between Michael the Archangel and his angels against Satan and his angels, after which Satan and his angels were “thrown down to the earth.”

While the word used in all these writings, in particular the New Testament Greek, applied primarily to the sky, it was also used metaphorically of the dwelling place of God and the blessed. Similarly, though the English word “heaven” still kept its original physical meaning when used, for instance, in allusions to the stars as “lights shining through from Heaven,” and in phrases such as heavenly body to mean an astronomical object, the Heaven or happiness that Christianity looked forward to was, according to Pope John Paul II, “neither an abstraction nor a physical place in the clouds, but a living, personal relationship with the Holy Trinity. It was our meeting with the Father which takes place in the risen Christ through the communion of the Holy Spirit.”

Hinduism

Attaining heaven was not the final pursuit in Hinduism as heaven itself was ephemeral and related to physical body. Only being tied by the heaven could not be perfect either and was just another name for pleasurable and mundane material life. According to Hindu cosmology, above the earthly plane, were several other planes. Since heavenly abodes were also tied to the cycle of birth and death, any dweller of Heaven or Hell would again be recycled to a different plane and in a different form per the karma and the illusion of Samsara. This cycle was broken only by self-realization.

In the Vaishnava traditions the highest Heaven was Vaikuntha, which existed above the six heavenly lokas and outside of the mahat-tattva or mundane world. It was where eternally liberated souls who had attained moksha reside in eternal sublime beauty with Lakshmi and Narayana (a manifestation of Vishnu).

Islam

The Quran contained many references to an afterlife in Eden for those who did good deeds. Regarding the concept of Heaven (Jannah) in the Quran, verse 35 of Surah Al-Ra’d said, “The parable of the Garden which the righteous were promised! Beneath it flow rivers. Perpetual was the fruits thereof and the shade therein. Such was the End of the Righteous; and the end of the unbelievers was the Fire.” Islam rejected the concept of original sin, and Muslims believed that all human beings were born pure. Children automatically went to Heaven when they die, regardless of the religion of their parents.

The concept of Heaven in Islam differed in many respects to the concept in Judaism and Christianity. Heaven was described primarily in physical terms as a place where every wish was immediately fulfilled when asked. Islamic texts described immortal life in Heaven as happy, without negative emotions. Those who dwelled in Heaven were said to wear costly apparel, partake in exquisite banquets, and reclined on couches inlaid with gold or precious stones. Inhabitants would rejoice in the company of their parents, spouses, and children. In Islam if one’s good deeds outweigh one's sins then one may gain entrance to Heaven. Conversely, if one's sins outweigh their good deeds they were sent to hell. The more good deeds one had performed the higher the level of Heaven one was directed to. It has been said that the lowest level of Heaven, the first one, was already over one-hundred times better than the greatest life on Earth. The highest level was the seventh Heaven. Houses were built by angels for the occupants using solid gold.