

When I get to heaven

by [Carol Zaleski](#) in the [April 5, 2003](#) issue

Is it dangerous to dwell upon heaven? Many of the world's great religious teachers seem to have thought so. Confucius told his disciples to pay respect to the spirits, but keep them at a distance; it was the will of heaven, he believed, that we keep our eyes trained on earth. What becomes of the enlightened after death was one of the ten questions the Buddha refused to answer because indulging opinions on such matters is not conducive to liberation. The sages of classical Judaism displayed similar restraint. The Talmud includes the cautionary tale of four sages who entered paradise: "Ben Azzai looked and died; Ben Zoma looked and lost his mind; Elisha ben Avuyah became a heretic; and Rabbi Akiba entered in peace and departed in peace."

The moral is: Don't delve into the mysteries of heaven uninvited or unprepared. It is all too easy to go off the deep end. Aside from those few who have been set apart for a special role—prophets, shamans and mystics—most of us are better off taking the normal road to heaven, which goes by way of performing one's assigned duties in life.

Such reining in of curiosity can be found in every religious tradition; but we should not mistake it for skepticism or indifference to the reality of heaven. On the contrary, it stems from the recognition that heaven is so real, so fascinating and so unsettling to our normal way of being that we need to be very careful how we approach her gates.

These days, under the corrosive influence of secularism, few of us are in danger of neglecting our earthly responsibilities because of an overwhelming passion for the afterlife. The effect of secularism on our dealings with heaven has been curious. It has not diminished the quantity of belief in heaven (which registers at 70 to 80 percent on recent social surveys), but it has diminished the quality of that belief. One regularly hears the complaint that popular belief in heaven smacks of a generic and sentimental spiritualism, far distant from the robust, Christ-centered resurrection faith of classical Christianity.

We believe in heaven, it seems, because we cannot bear not to, because we are either too optimistic or too despairing to deny ourselves the consolation of looking forward to a blissful reunion with the loved ones we have lost.

At the same time, we think that science and public reason go against this belief. Since we rely on science and public reason to regulate much of our existence, our belief becomes something private, tepid and inhibited. It does not animate our common life in the way that it did for past generations of believers. What is the source of our inhibitions? Whence this loss of nerve?

First, heaven appears to have fallen off our world map. Recall cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin, the first human to travel in space, who sent down the report, "I don't see any god up here." Recall Rudolf Bultmann, the giant of 20th-century New Testament studies, who took as his starting point the assumption that the old mythical three-story picture of the cosmos (heaven above, earth in the middle, hell below) is as dead as a doornail. Their legacy is powerful. Today just about the only thinkers who seriously attempt to find room for heaven in the heavens are intellectual dreamers of a theosophical bent, who wax lyrical about the many dimensions through which the spirit wanders on its way home to the land of bliss. The rest of us share something of Walker Percy's sense of being "lost in the cosmos."

The old synthesis of Ptolemaic cosmology and Christian worldview has collapsed and nothing has emerged to take its place. Efforts to tell a new story of the cosmos have been noble but flawed, producing embarrassing science or catch-all spirituality. Kant's ethics of immortality attempted too little; Frank Tipler's *Physics of Immortality* attempts too much.

Heaven has lost its coordinates; therefore we have lost our bearings. But the key thing is not to lose heart, remembering the assurance given in John 14:1-3: "Let not your hearts be troubled; believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And when I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also."

The old Ptolemaic cosmology cannot reserve this place for us any more than Copernicus or Einstein can take it away. In fact, if we take a closer look we find that the Christian doctrine of heaven was as problematic for ancient science as it is for modern. Gagarin could not see God in the heavens, but ancient cosmology could not

see humans there. Aristotle taught what would become axiomatic for Greco-Roman thought: that everything from the moon down is subject to change and death, and everything above the moon is eternal. Among the fixed stars and the crystalline spheres of the heavens, there is no place for the changing human heart.

Similarly, the creation myths of the ancient Near East hinge on the separation of heaven, the realm of the gods, from earth, the realm of mortals, and in several accounts this separation of heaven and earth is the first significant act. When the gods created humans, Gilgamesh learns, “death for mankind they allotted, life in their own hands retaining.” Israel inherited this idea: “The heavens are the Lord’s heavens, but the earth he has given to the sons of men” (Ps. 115:16). The Tower of Babel story echoes the old rumor of an ancient time when an invasion of heaven was attempted, with disastrous results.

It is all the more remarkable, then, that out of Israel came a strange new rumor: that God has prepared a welcome in heaven for those who love him—for the martyrs who die in his cause, the prophets who transmit his word and, eventually, for all who die in his grace and friendship. This new rumor, which emerged at first only as an inchoate longing, gradually developed into the articulate hope and steadfast assurance that although we are mortal creatures, composed of dust and God’s breath, we may look forward to sharing in the immortality and blessedness that is God’s alone to give.

The world of classical Greece and Rome was prepared to accept the idea that our souls might journey to heaven, for heaven is the native climate of the immaterial soul. But nothing in classical cosmology could make sense of the specifically Christian understanding of heaven, determined as it is by the incarnation, passion and resurrection—events that break all metaphysical rules. On his way down from heaven, Christ broke the rules of divine decorum; on his way down to Hades he broke the law of death; and on his way up to heaven he broke open the gate that separates the changing world from the eternal world. And he let the human riffraff in.

On Ptolemaic principles, heaven is by definition impenetrable by material bodies. The ascension is therefore as great a scandal for ancient science as for modern, as are all subsequent human incursions into heaven, from the assumption of Mary to the rapture of St. Paul to the final resurrection. No less scandalous is the belief that heaven has its outposts on earth, preeminently in the eucharistic presence. Try as it

may, the modern world cannot make these revealed works of grace any more improbable than the ancient world did. Yet they come to us bearing the marks of sacred testimony and internal consistency, which is what we discover when we try to cast doubt selectively on any of the articles of faith.

The sophisticated will tell you that it is better to let dead maps lie: heaven is not a place but a state of being, a condition of communion with God. Moreover, it is often said that heaven is utterly mysterious; our endlessly varied pictures of heaven can only be endlessly varied ways of getting it wrong. True enough, but we are beings of imagination, and abstract ideas cannot animate us the way pictures can. We have to visualize in order to conceptualize. Better to picture heaven as a concrete place and then purify that picture of its crudeness than to be deprived of all pictures.

This is what our tradition provides us: a way of picturing heaven and a way of correcting that picture. A skeptic can tell us what is wrong with the old picture but cannot supply us with a new one.

But there are other worries. Next to the cosmological dilemma is a psychological one. What doctrine of man or theory of consciousness can render intelligible the notion of an afterlife in heaven? Philosophers have delighted in pointing out that the very idea of people surviving death is riddled with incoherence. The most enduring and popular version of this idea, which rests upon a dualistic model of personal identity, has come close to being laughed off the stage of respectable intellectual conversation.

Yet dualism has its strong points. When Sir Walter Raleigh was imprisoned in the Tower of London in 1618 awaiting execution, he took comfort from the thought that "Seeing my flesh must die so soone, / And want a head to dine next noone" he could look forward to carrying on quite nicely without his body, and with good company to boot: "And by the happie blisfull way / More peacefull Pilgrims I shall see / That have shooke off their gownes of clay / And goe appareld fresh like mee."

Raleigh did not stop to ask himself what would become of his personal identity when he shook off his gown of clay. But a philosopher might argue that with the gown of clay go most of the markers by which we identify him: adventurer, historian, soldier, champion of the Huguenots, captain of the queen's guard, founder of the lost colony on Roanoke Island, fortune hunter, seeker of El Dorado and now doomed convict. How many of these facts of his biography, how many of his personal features,

memories and idiosyncrasies could survive the loss of his head?

And this is a puzzle for everyone: How will I recognize myself when I am disincarnate and so little remains of the me that I once knew? What consolation is it to me or to my loved ones if the spiritual being I am to become in heaven cares little for the mundane being I have been here below?

Despite these difficulties, some competent philosophers still defend dualism (notably Richard Swinburne), and others propose new ways of imagining personal survival of death. Yet every such attempt is followed by a counterattack. The debate is endless, the quarrels are legion. The puzzle of immortality is turned this way and that, as if it were an improbable fossil or a three-legged duck, its paradoxes unpacked with the playful logic of a thought experiment in time travel. There is only one rule that governs this otherwise anarchic philosophical game: ignore God. When the argument about survival reaches a deadlock, to invoke God as a tiebreaker is viewed as a cheap trick, like the ploy of the physicist whose lengthy formula culminates with “and then a miracle occurs.”

Philosophers may be right about the paradoxes of personal identity that arise when we try to imagine journeying to heaven after death, but similar paradoxes dog us throughout the course of our natural life. In life as in death we are creatures of inconsistency, discontinuity and self-contradiction. Dying only makes this more dramatic. We can never be sure that we are who we seem. Our only reliable identity card is a baptismal certificate, testifying that the One who made us has remade us in Christ, who, in Paul’s words to the Thessalonians, “died for us so that whether we wake or sleep we might live with him” (1 Thess. 5:10). Now and in the world to come, our identity consists of this communion and cannot be secured by any philosophical guarantee. Conversely, if we begin by ignoring God we will never make philosophical sense of the survival of death.

Certainly it is paradoxical, if not downright preposterous, to speak of someone, previously known to us only as this embodied person whom we meet for coffee, suddenly and unaccountably checking out of our space-time lodgings and showing up—in the twinkling of an eye—in a realm beyond all telling. Have you ever been struck by the oddness of dying? Along with the sorrow, when a friend dies, it sometimes hits us: what a very strange thing for Harry to have done on a Sunday afternoon. But this is the kind of paradox that comic artists, rather than philosophers, handle best. Leaving the body is not so much a logical contradiction as

a particularly ungainly and undignified thing to do, in the same way that sex is ungainly and undignified and that being born is ungainly and undignified. It is essentially comical and has all the marks of a pratfall.

The word *comedy* comes from the Dionysian revels; the classical Greek view of comedy was that it depicts the clash of our animal energies with our rational intellect. If this is what comedy means, then it is comical to give birth and comical to be born, comical to cut teeth and comical to grow long in them. Puberty is comical and aging is comical. Only death, seen as the end, is tragic, for here the clash of body and spirit ends in defeat for both sides.

Yet if death is not the end but a translation to a new life, then the comedy resumes. Dante realized that the journey to heaven is essentially a comic matter, a *commedia divina*. He called his work a comedy because it has a happy ending, and he wrote in the rustic speech of vernacular Italian because his subject was a practical and popular one: the ordinary happiness of souls after death.

Humor trades in incongruity. The practical joker pulls the chair out from under the guest of honor, revealing that he, no less than the rest of us mortals, is a helpless subject of gravity. The divine joke is to pull the gravity out from under the chair. In the divine comedy, we play the part of the fool, but this turns out to be our best role. For our folly conducts us to paradise, bringing us into the arms of the beloved (as in the Shakespearean comedies of mismatched loves resolved) and lifting us to the court of the Most High, where by all logic and etiquette we most certainly do not belong. When finally we come to prostrate ourselves before the divine throne, it will very likely be because we have tripped.

So far I have set forth some of the obstacles to belief in heaven and have suggested that they need not be viewed as fatal. But I have a nagging sense that there is something wrong with this approach. Do we really want to make heaven plausible? Recall how Søren Kierkegaard anathematized the intellectual “approximation-process” by which we try to render religious ideas increasingly probable and free of offense. Why should we expect something of such surpassing goodness as heaven to fit into our minds in a believable way? If we manage to construct an altogether believable picture of heaven, we should count this as a strike against it. Conversely, it should count for the plausibility of heaven if there are elements of the preposterous or even the grotesque in our image of it.

The son of Rabbi Joshua ben Levi died and went to heaven but then returned to life. When Rabbi Joshua asked him what it was like, his son replied that it is exactly like this world, only everything is upside down, for there the lofty are brought low and the lowly raised to high esteem. Some of the best critical satires of heaven render its upside-down character very effectively. However merciless may be their send-up of heavenly ascents, they do more to make heaven real and attractive than any number of dry theological treatises, for they do justice to the comedy of it all.

Henry Fielding, the 18th-century English satirist who gave us *Tom Jones*, accordingly fights on the side of the angels in his unfinished book *A Journey from This World to the Next* (1743). It begins as follows:

On the first day of December 1741 I departed this life at my lodgings in Cheapside. My body had been some time dead before I was at liberty to quit it, lest it should by any accident return to life: this is an injunction imposed on all souls by the eternal law of fate, to prevent the inconveniences which would follow. As soon as the destined period was expired (being no longer than till the body is become perfectly cold and stiff) I began to move; but found myself under a difficulty of making my escape, for the mouth or door was shut, so that it was impossible for me to go out at it; and the windows, vulgarly called the eyes, were so closely pulled down by the fingers of a nurse, that I could by no means open them. At last I perceived a beam of light glimmering at the top of the house (for such I may call the body I had been inclosed in), whither ascending, I gently let myself down through a kind of chimney, and issued out at the nostrils. . . . as the window was wide open, I sallied forth into the open air: but, to my great astonishment, found myself unable to fly, which I had always during my habitation in the body conceived of spirits; however, I came so lightly to the ground that I did not hurt myself; and, though I had not the gift of flying (owing probably to my having neither feathers nor wings), I was capable of hopping such a prodigious way at once, that it served my turn almost as well. I had not hopped far before I perceived a tall young gentleman in a silk waistcoat, with a wing on his left heel, a garland on his head, and a caduceus in his right hand.

The young gentleman turns out to be Mercury, attired as he appears in the theater, who in his traditional role as psychopomp (conductor of souls to the realm of the

dead) directs the author, still hopping, to a coach that is set to depart for the next world.

The picture of this hapless soul hopping to meet his Maker lingers longer than any skeptical message Fielding may have wished to convey; it is so preposterous that it may as well be true. At least it is consistent with the other preposterous and indecorous positions in which we find ourselves as we hop from womb to cradle and from cradle to grave. Why should the transition from death to eternal life be any tidier than these have been?

Perhaps the greatest obstacle to a robust belief in heaven is the curious notion that a life of eternal blessedness would be boring. This charge has been made by theologians as discerning as Paul Tillich, satirists as sharp-witted as Mark Twain and countless others of much duller perception. It's not really a very subtle point. My five-year-old son raised the same objection early one morning while he was bouncing on the bed where I was trying to sleep. "Momma," he said, "you're Mary and I'm the baby Jesus. Up here is heaven, downstairs is earth. And in the basement there's a secret passageway that goes to another world." To which I gave a half asleep "Uh-huh." Then Andy, still bouncing, said, "Let's go downstairs. There aren't enough rooms in heaven." To which I replied, hoping to buy more time in bed, "But I thought you said your father's house has many mansions!"

Given eternity, many of us fear that there will not be enough mansions to keep us entertained. Because the liturgy gives us our best image of heaven, because the words and actions of public worship mimic the divine service performed by the angels and saints who attend God's throne, a rumor has gotten out that heaven will be church services that never end. This is a terrifying prospect to my 13-year-old. It reminds me of the story about the little girl who asked whether, if she were very good up in heaven, they'd let her go down to play in hell on Saturday afternoons.

But boredom is in the eyes of the beholder. My son also thinks it's boring to go to a museum, to sit still or to do anything contemplative for very long. We all have different boredom thresholds. Is it too much to hope that our boredom threshold will be raised when we are raised? Even in this life there are moments when church is truly enthralling; why should the inability to be bored not be one of the gifts with which the Holy Spirit endows the blessed?

Entry into eternal life means being remade in the image and likeness of the One who made us, being transformed by the renewal of our minds. Dante establishes this principle at the outset of the *Paradiso*, when in gazing upon Beatrice, he is “transhumanized” so that he may eventually be capable of looking upon God: “Gazing at her, I felt myself becoming / what Glaucus had become tasting the herb / that made him like the other sea-gods there.”

By definition, heaven cannot be boring. If our picture of heaven is boring, then the fault lies with the picture and not with heaven. It simply means that we have not yet tasted the herb that would allow us to see, that we have not taken seriously the promise of transhumanization—or deification, as it is called by the church fathers and in the Christian East.

There are times when heaven does look boring, however, and that is most often when it is made too generic. A general-issue heaven, made to please everyone, ultimately satisfies no one, as John Hick’s heaven illustrates. Hick, one of the few prominent philosophers of religion who concerns himself with personal eschatology, has labored over the past few decades to construct a picture of heaven that is free of religious particularity. Hick’s heaven is a pluralistic realm in which souls progress through a series of religiously influenced dream worlds toward ever higher planes of existence. As they progress they discard the specific elements of their own religious traditions and gravitate toward an all-inclusive Reality—a reality that bears a striking resemblance to the universalistic teachings favored by late-20th-century religion professors.

I prefer a more primitive conception of heaven, a heaven that is concrete, peopled, concatenated, hierarchical and symphonic; as lush as the pure land of the celestial Buddha Amitabha, as visceral as the Islamic garden of the houris, as engrossing to an academic like me as the rabbinic vision of heaven as a Talmudic house of study, and as immediate as the paradise that Christ promised to the good thief dying at his side.

Heaven will no doubt be much more real than can be conveyed by such poor images, for as St. Paul says, “No eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him” (1 Cor. 2:9). But certainly it will not be less real. In this realm there is no eating or drinking, no marriage or giving in marriage, no procreation or aging; yet everything good that we experience in eating and drinking, in love and sex, in our young bodies and our

aging bodies, will be translated there to perfection. We will recline at banquet tables and feast on Leviathan. Although the ultimate experience of heaven is beyond imagination, there is no reason not to exploit our imagination until its resources are exhausted and we say with Dante, "Here power fails the high fantasy."

The truly boring heaven is one from which the prospect of a personal relationship with God is absent. What could be more dreary than life everlasting without God? Conversely, conceptions of heaven with God as center and source are, or should be, endlessly rich and appealing. In communion with God, in the beatific vision, we are promised the perfect happiness and fulfillment that never wanes. As Jonathan Edwards puts it, "They shall see every thing in God that gratifies love. They shall see in him all that love desires. Love desires the love of the beloved. So the saints in glory shall see God's transcendent love to them; God will make ineffable manifestations of his love to them. They shall see as much love in God towards them as they desire; they neither will nor can crave any more."

Perhaps it is not boredom that this vision evokes in us so much as fear. We may be told that it is wonderful to be taken up into eternity, but we are well aware that it will cost us the sacrifice of our narrow ego-self and most of the things to which we are attached. Along with fear of eternity, there is fear of perfection, fear of having our deepest wishes granted, fear of our own desires. In John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, as the heroes Christian and Hopeful approach the celestial city they fall sick with desire; but ultimately this sickness heals them and makes them strong enough to bear the delights of the beatific vision. In effect they have been through purgatory, which is one of our best defenses against the fear of heaven.

There was a time when my son Andy suddenly became afraid of heaven. It lasted only a few days, but he was quite stricken with fear. He had heard that heaven was a perfect place, where nothing is lacking for our happiness—families reunited, harmony, delight, Popsicles aplenty—but none of this could console him. He wasn't ready to imagine leaving our little house on a quiet hillside road with ant colonies in the driveway and moss on the steps. I tried to convey to him, as a rule of thumb, that whatever he found missing from his picture of heaven should be made up by the exercise of his imagination. If our picture of heaven fails to inspire longing and delight, the problem is not with heaven but with us—we have not pictured it right.

How, then, can we exercise our imagination to make heaven more real? Not, I would like to suggest, by giving it free rein. Not by subtracting features that strike us as

conventional or mythological. Improvisation will make the picture shallow, turning the vault of heaven into a mirror in which we discern only our own face.

We do better to let our imagination steep in tradition. Think of the great artists of heaven: heaven's poets Dante, Spenser, Milton, Donne, Herbert, Vaughan, Traherne, Bunyan; or heaven's painters Fra Angelico, Luca Signorelli, Botticelli, Correggio, Van Eyck, Lochner. Only because they have fully assimilated the traditional Christian iconography of heaven are they able to play freely with its conventions. Only because their imagination is thoroughly saturated with Christian symbol and doctrine are they able to manifest a fully realized and believable heaven.

Let me take a stab, then, at painting a believable picture of heaven, as our tradition teaches us to envisage it. Heaven is the realm of God and the reign of God, the realm of the saints and the future world of the resurrection. Here the Father rules with Christ in glory, in the power of the Holy Spirit, one God the only immortal. Here is the Sabbath morning of creation, in which all time is enfolded and from which all times radiate. All light comes from here, all energy, goodness, love, holiness, intelligence and truth.

Here kingdom is commonwealth and empire is family. Here is the Madonna in the Rose Garden with the child Jesus in her lap. Here is every mother with her young child. Here is every young child grown to full stature. Here is every moment in which we discovered heaven on earth. God has saved these memories for us and purified them of the falseness with which they were inevitably mixed, restoring them to us no longer as isolated vanishing points but as his and therefore as more truly and reliably ours. In the same manner he will restore us to ourselves and to one another.

Those who die in God's grace are drawn irresistibly by the beauty of God until they arrive at their proper station in the celestial hierarchy and find their complete happiness in adoration of the divine face. Not by their intrinsic merit or power do they travel, but solely by the good pleasure of their Creator and Lord who will not see his image in us shattered, his design for us brought to nothing. The blessed have arrived at perfection, a state of complete wholeness and maturity that is at least as incomprehensible to us now as the rewards of adulthood are to those caught in the hectic fever of adolescence. But each one has a unique purchase on perfection. Glory is unequal, hierarchically distributed as in a Fra Angelico painting, for the relationship between God and humankind is not a generic condition but a person-specific one, composed of divine election and our free response.

The idea of the unequal glory of the blessed may run against our egalitarian instincts, but it is really a way of saying that individuals count. Saints are highly idiosyncratic. Between Bernard and his namesake Bernardino, Teresa of Jesus and her namesake Teresa of the Infant Jesus, Anthony the Great and his namesake Anthony of Padua, there is the greatest difference in the world. They followed the same ideal, they conformed their life to that of Christ, and they adhered to the ways of his church, yet all this conforming made them freer than most to be their own peculiar selves. From the lives of the saints we get an inkling of the kind of personal existence that is fit to emerge intact from the altar fire of death and enter into the divine fire of heaven.

Some pictures of heaven are strongly theocentric, depicting the blessed as caught up in an endless rapture of adoration; others are sociable and anthropocentric. But a more adequate picture of heaven would be theocentric and anthropocentric at once. We find such a picture in the tenth-century Irish *Vision of Adamnan*, in a curious scene that captures the sociability of the beatific vision. Adamnan discovers that the company of saints who encircle the divine throne have acquired the power to face in all directions at once: "None turns back nor side to other, but the unspeakable power of God has set and keeps them face to face, in ranks and lofty coronels, all round the throne, circling it in brightness and bliss, their faces all toward God."

A similar episode occurs at the end of Dante's *Paradiso*, when Dante reaches the apex of heaven and the end of his wits. Only because he is empowered by grace can he gaze directly on the divine light without being annihilated. And the longer he gazes the more clearly he sees, until gradually he discerns that the Great Light is shining in three circles. "The first seemed to reflect the next like rainbow on rainbow, and the third was like a flame equally breathed forth by the other two."

We have all heard ultimate reality described as a dazzling light—the motif is in Shelley, it forms the centerpiece of the Tibetan Buddhist *Book of the Dead*, indeed it is well-nigh universal. But what we have in Dante's vision is a complex trinitarian dance of lights, a luminous and effervescent assembly, rather than a single searing radiance. More amazing, Dante sees a human form imprinted upon and united with the three circles of light. This human form is no mere projection; it radiates from the divine essence. From this we learn that the beatific vision does not cancel out our personality or God's, but rather gives us the measure by which we may understand all human possibility, and it places sociability at the heart of divine union. It is a profoundly ecclesial vision. Our fear of eternity might be overcome if we were

capable of envisioning it as a fellowship of this kind.

Andy recovered from his fear of heaven after he had a dream, on Epiphany 1999, of which I give his verbatim account: "I dreamed I was with all the nuns and monks and there were nice animals there too. There were nice pigs and raccoons and giraffes. All the animals were there and they were nice. And all the nuns were there. And one was named Father Anselm. And my brother was there and you and Dad and Mom. And Cassidy was there. And lots of nice animals. And my teachers were there. All the nuns and monks and my family and everybody I love was there. And nice animals."

Here is a perfect image of the peaceable kingdom, or paradise regained. It has a terrestrial quality to it, but that has never deterred Christian writers from pressing such images into service as previews of heaven. Andy ceased to fear heaven when he learned how to conceive it after the image of his own sociable and pastoral heart, as a realm where nuns and nice pigs dwell in friendship.

If we wish to make heaven believable, we would do well to follow the method of St. Anselm, the 11th-century Benedictine who is famous for devising the one argument for the existence of God that asks God to provide the argument for his own existence. Anselm begins by addressing God directly: Lord who made me and remade me—*me fecisti et me refecisti*—illuminate my mind so that I may understand that You exist so truly that You cannot be thought of as not existing. We might consider doing the same: Lord who made me and remade me, illuminate my mind so that I may understand that you exist so truly that you cannot be thought of as forsaking your creatures, forgetting your revealed promises, or bringing to naught the work of redemption you began with the incar