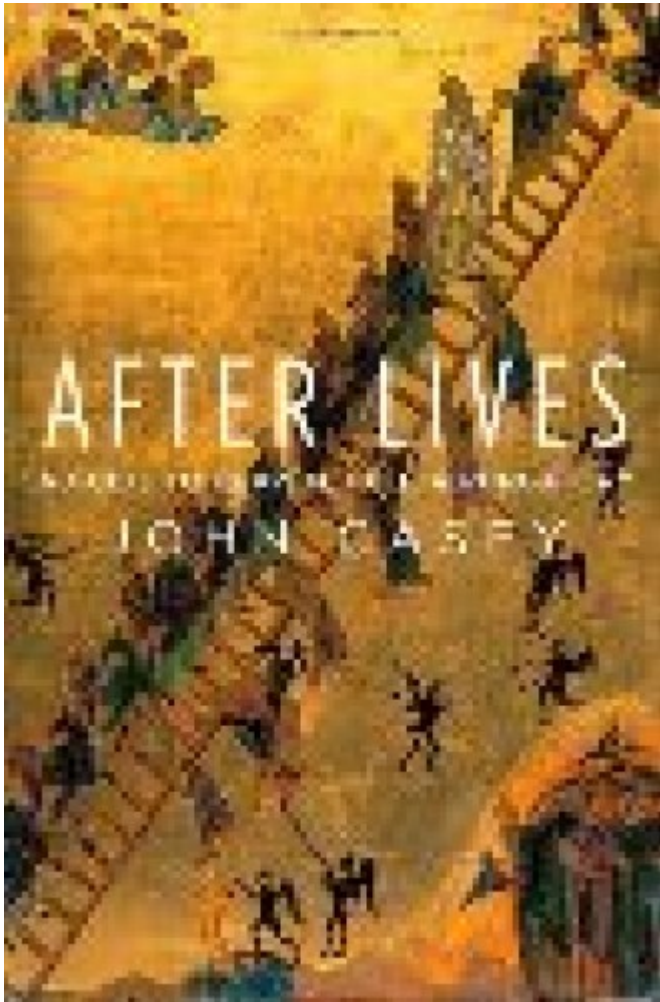


What's next?

By [William H. Willimon](#) in the [June 1, 2010](#) issue

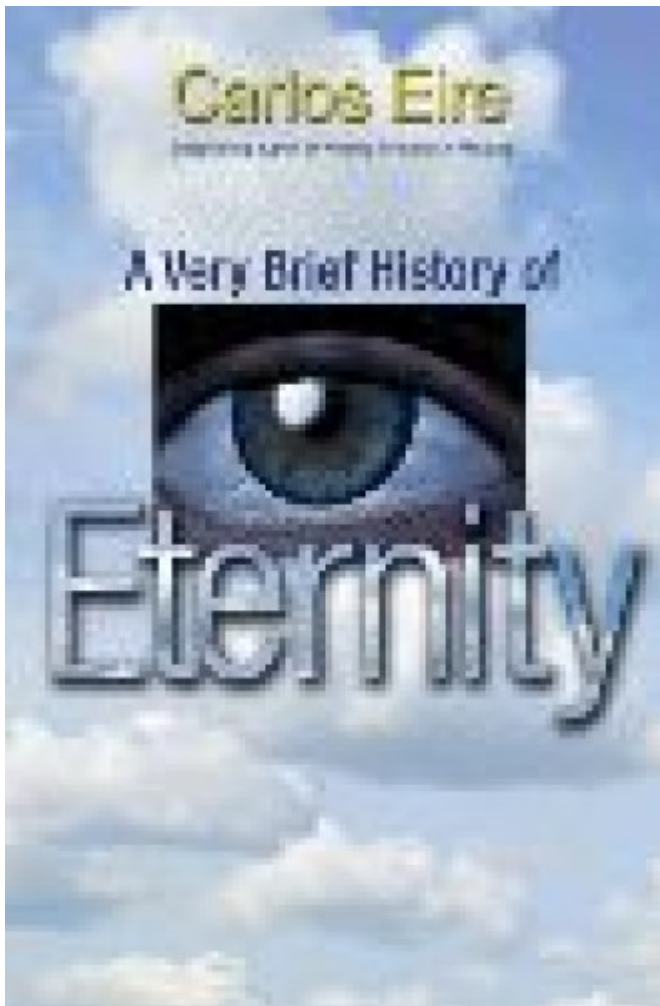
In Review



After Lives: A Guide to Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory

John Casey

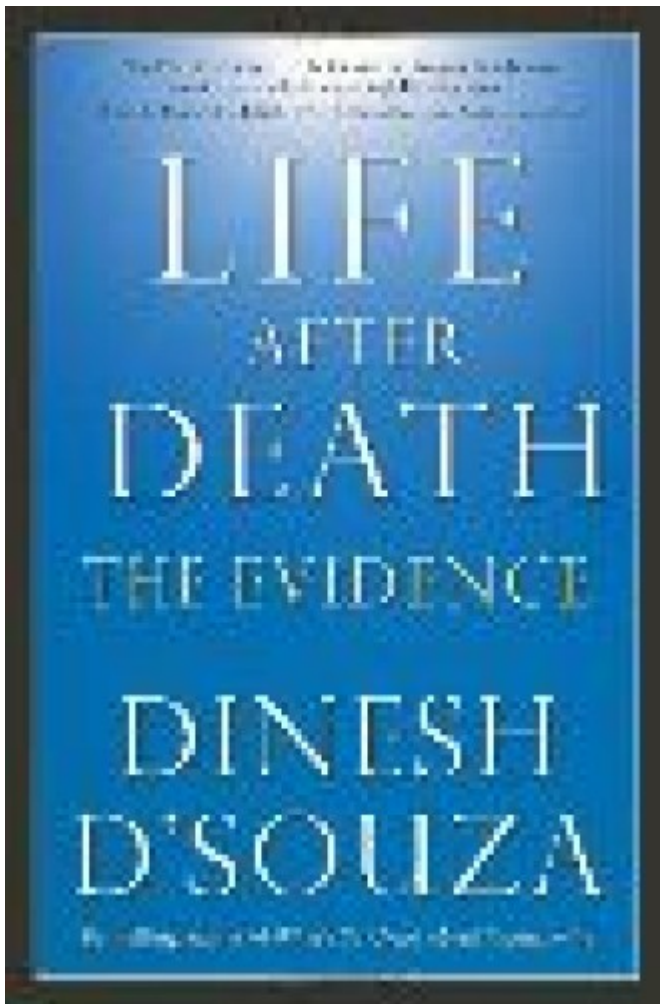
Oxford University Press



A Very Brief History of Eternity

Carlos Eire

Princeton University Press



Life After Death: The Evidence

Dinesh D'Souza

Regnery

Heaven is a place where after death we'll be forever free of suffering and pain. Hell is a place where after death we will suffer eternal punishment. For this scheme to work, we must first believe in a soul or something about humans that endures beyond our frail flesh. Sadly, the idea of an immaterial soul, or something that survives our deaths, is incredible from a materialist worldview, a view that has been operative in the West since the time of the Enlightenment.

That's the first part of Dinesh D'Souza's argument in *Life After Death*. He then turns to materialistic science—the discipline he has just castigated for demolishing belief in eternal life—to find evidence that we really do have souls and that they are destined for eternal life. He argues that string theory in physics, with its claim about

multiple realms of reality, confirms the Christian concept of eternity. So eternity—defined by D’Souza as God outside of space and time—is “rendered intelligible.”

He also contends that near-death experiences (NDEs) provide further evidence. (Both he and his wife have been the beneficiaries of such experiences.) While he admits that NDEs don’t necessarily validate Christian ideas of eternal life, he thinks they prove that death does not have the finality it seems to have. Even science, at least a certain sort of science, says that there is something more. Though he is loathe to give much definition or substance to that something more, D’Souza is convinced that he has discovered “thrilling evidence that the Christian view of life after death” is true after all.

D’Souza’s “Christian view of life after death” is a sort of eternal continuance of this life—only a lot better—reserved for individuals who get their ticket to eternity from Jesus. Though D’Souza seems more indebted to Plato than to Jesus in his view of eternal life, he is certain that the only way to get a pleasant eternal life is with Jesus. All the religions of the world say there is life after death, but “only one religion says that it has actually happened. Jews and Muslims, for example, believe that there is a resurrection at the end of the world. But Christianity asserts that its founder, Jesus Christ, died and came back to life. No other religion claims that its founder . . . physically returned from the dead.” D’Souza argues that the resurrection of Jesus is a historical event; there’s no way to explain the willingness of Jesus’ followers to suffer and die for him if they weren’t convinced that he had overcome death and enabled them to do so as well.

D’Souza also lauds the salubrious moral and social effects of believing in Christian eternal life, thus commending eternal life on the basis of its utility in improving this life. As he said in a recent interview, “The Christian view of the afterlife rises above the pack. It is the one to take seriously.”

All of us have a primordial desire that we and our loved ones will live forever and that the horror of annihilation is not the last word. Christianity promises the gift of eternal life in heaven, free from suffering and pain, and since Christianity has some of the best evidence for the reality of an afterlife (D’Souza is more taken with the scientific evidence than with arguments offered by scripture or the church), it makes sense to go with Christianity. D’Souza actually comes close to validating Freud’s claim (which D’Souza otherwise criticizes) that belief in eternal life is a projection of

our wish that we might escape death and live forever. The best that can be said about a belief in eternal life, from a Freudian point of view, is that it makes life in this world go better—which is very close to what D’Souza says.

D’Souza’s argument has been conventional among Christian apologists in the modern age, but it has little to do with orthodox Christian thought. One can understand why D’Souza’s nemesis on the lecture circuit, the atheist Christopher Hitchens, blurb-ed the book. After all, what does Hitchens know about orthodox Christianity? But one is baffled to read the blurb that D’Souza received from evangelical scholar Dallas Willard: “I know of no better way to understand the issue of life after death than to get this book.”

How did Christians get a Platonic, utilitarian view of eternal life, propped up by string theory and virtually devoid of christological content? That’s the story told eloquently and revealingly by two much better books than D’Souza’s, books with wonderfully ironic titles: *A Very Brief History of Eternity* and *After Lives: A Guide to Heaven, Hell, & Purgatory*.

Both books examine how the concepts of *forever*, *eternity* or *afterlife* evolved in Western culture and shaped our culture and ourselves. They cover much the same literary, philosophical and biblical ground. Neither Carlos Eire nor John Casey spends much intellectual energy debating the Enlightenment as D’Souza does; both simply assume that the era of the Enlightenment is over and thereby postmoderns are free to consider the issue of eternity afresh.

Eire begins by painting death as the ultimate outrage. No Stoic stiff upper lip, no hearty humanistic optimism can properly meet the offense of the annihilation of human life. Eire says that one cannot really think about human immortality without reference to some unseen and imagined eternal realm that is different from the realm of mortality and finitude.

Once there was no modern and no secular; there was simply a world that was determined by a general consensus on our ultimate destination. That destination was in many ways an ineffable mystery, but it was a mystery that determined how we lived, thought, spent money, had babies and created art and architecture.

Greeks like Parmenides and Plato argued that eternal ideas were more real than the sham reality of finite things. The closer we get to eternity in our thought, the nearer we are to the truth of things. The ultimate *telos* of our lives is elsewhere. The sheer

“beyondness” of eternity—immaterial, outside our experience, lacking sufficient analogy in this world—made it seem more real than what was merely here.

Convictions about the reality of eternity provoked extraordinarily rich metaphysical exploration. Eternity was an all-pervasive reality in the complex thought of medieval Christianity. Most medieval philosophers knew that when you are thinking about something beyond the present and the material, only poetic, artistic thinking is equal to the task. (D’Souza’s book is a good illustration of how logic and evidentiary thinking just won’t lift the luggage when it comes to thinking about eternity.)

Casey tells the story of medieval developments in greater detail than Eire. He offers a fascinating survey of eternity in Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Jewish and Greco-Roman thought before launching into a sweeping treatment of the Christian era.

Mysteriously, Casey has only a thin discussion of Jesus, limiting himself to treating books on Jesus by Geza Vermes and Joseph Klausner.

Augustine’s rather excruciating speculations on the nature of heaven and hell, reward and punishment, show both the fruitfulness and the pitfalls of attempting to specify the nature of an afterlife. Augustine framed the discussion for later debates with his claim that earthly time is illusory and brief, that heaven is something that only God can grant, and that human life cannot be fulfilled except in eternity. All Christian thought about eternity understands that the afterlife is a cosmic matter—it has to do with much more than what happens to me and my loved ones after death (the question of most concern to D’Souza). Resurrection for Christians is always linked to a cosmic restoration, a new heaven and a new earth wrought by the eschatological work of God.

After Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, who was deeply influenced by Platonic and Aristotelian notions of eternity, carried Christian thought to the next step by articulating a vision of eternity built upon the monastic ideal of the perfected life as a life of serene, sublime contemplation. Eternity is where we at last get to do nothing, though doing nothing in heaven is quite different from doing nothing in hell. In heaven we will be given the opportunity to live forever like a monk or a nun contemplating God.

We have Dante to thank for taking this medieval metaphysical scheme and giving it vivid embodiment in the *Divine Comedy*. God is the whole point of Dante’s *Paradiso*. Eternity is a place of punishment for the rebellion of some against God and a place

of joy for those who want nothing more in eternity than to contemplate God. While Dante's heaven is a place of justice, where the wrongs of this life are set right (a persistent theme in Jewish and Christian thought about the next life), alleviating earthly vexations is not the point of paradise. Heaven is where we get to be with God and where God at last gets what God wants— where everyone and everything is subsumed in sublime contemplation of the divine.

The Reformers revived an Augustinian view of the afterlife. They rebelled against what seemed to them the Pelagian, merit-based Catholic views of the afterlife. Luther and Calvin and their heirs were convinced that human perversity is so deep-rooted that eternal punishment is richly deserved and can be avoided only through the unmerited grace of God.

Yet the Reformers also (perhaps unintentionally) emptied eternity of much of its practical force, remaking the afterlife into “a great perhaps” (Rabelais). Eternity was reconfigured from Dante's well-furnished place—including paradise, purgatory and hell—into something less alluring and less fearful. Belief in purgatory, so popular throughout the Middle Ages, was dropped by the Reformers. (Eire offers a date for the death of purgatory: October 31, 1517, when Luther attacked Tetzels selling of indulgences.) The Reformers denied the long-held notion that we can have continued contact with the dead through relics, masses for the dead and prayers to the saints.

The Reformers believed that an unbridgeable gulf separates the living from the dead. When you are dead, wherever you are (debates continued about what happens between death and eternity), you are no longer here, no longer now. Calvin asked that after death his body be deposited in an unmarked grave outside the walls of Geneva. In death he simply disappeared from the realm of the living. Calvin's departure was in great contrast to that of Teresa of Ávila, who was repeatedly exhumed and reburied here and there, her remains scattered all over Europe so that she could continue to commune with the living faithful.

Both Eire and Casey believe that the most radical break that the Reformation made with medieval piety was in deciding that there is nothing the living can do for the dead and nothing the dead can do for the living (Eire calls this “apartheid for the dead”). When it comes to death, the Reformers thought nothing can be done by anyone but God. Clergy thereby lost the power to open or close eternity to the faithful. Life after death was taken out of the church's hands. Perhaps

unintentionally, the Reformers ended up giving much greater significance to life in this world. Eternity is vague, so you had best make life here and now count.

Partly because of the Reformers' reticence to address the specifics of what we'll do in eternity, and mostly because of the ravages of the Enlightenment and modern sentimentalism, Eire thinks that the force of eternity "has steadily declined or almost disappeared" in the West. Religion became all about finding a more meaningful life in the here and now.

Views about eternity may have changed, but eternity is still a major determining force in our civilization. Hollywood movies still imagine people coming back from the dead and communicating with the living. Political leaders still reassure grieving families that their loved ones live on—in our memories or elsewhere.

The most interesting (and, for Christians, most disturbing) modification in views of eternity is the disappearance of God. Over two-thirds of all Americans believe in a life after death, but only a small percentage of them believe what the church has traditionally believed. Eternity is now conceived as the time when an individual life is resumed. Eternity is a congenial extension of this life, without this world's aggravations. Death is a transition to "a better world," not a dark abyss into which one enters as a vulnerable being totally dependent upon God for rescue.

Casey's discussion of 19th- and early 20th-century spiritualism and his excursions into the world of the modern, upbeat, death-denying funeral will help any contemporary pastor make better sense of how death and dying are viewed among parishioners. I also liked his attempt to wade through the elaborate and imaginative views on the afterlife that have developed among Mormons (who are, as he shows, more heavily indebted to 19th-century spiritualism than they would probably like to admit). His discussion of Hal Lindsey and his heirs is also revealing. He argues that Lindsey and the Left Behind novels buck a cultural trend by making eternity the point of everything.

While both Casey and Eire refer to the seemingly vibrant, formative (for good and ill) views on eternity that remain operative among Muslims, neither ponders why eternity continues to play such a strong role in Islam when compared to the rather flaccid idea of eternity in contemporary Christianity. Presumably, Muslims missed the European Enlightenment. But biblical and orthodox Christianity's reticence (in contrast to the Qur'an) to specify the nature of the afterlife may also be part of the

story.

In thinking about eternity, Western people now assume that the quality of one's performance in this life has little to do with one's eternal destination. Entering eternity is an innate right, and it means the continuance of our basically good human spirit, so that we will continue to enjoy whatever brought us bliss in this life. In short, modern views of eternity are a sort of variation on a Platonic idea of the soul, except with a much more determined sense of the eternal persistence of the individual. Whatever we may think about God, we are convinced that there is no way people as nice as us will ever die.