

ANCIENT MYSTERIES, MODERN REVELATIONS

THE STORY OF GOD

WITH MORGAN FREEMAN

 NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

EPISODE

“HEAVEN AND HELL”

Discussion Guide by OnFaith Experts



WHAT DO DIFFERENT FAITH TRADITIONS TEACH ABOUT HEAVEN AND HELL?

BUDDHISM

According to Buddhist tradition, heaven is the realm of “Devas,” or godlike beings who enjoy power, pleasure and the fulfillment of their desires as karmic reward for their past virtuous deeds. Interestingly, these gods who are enjoying the rewards of heaven are not seen as being above humans. Buddhists view enlightenment — not heaven — as the ultimate reward, and therefore value human existence, with its possibility for enlightenment, as the most desirable state.

Hell is characterized by rage and a quick temper. It is described as a prisonlike state of suffering in which the scope of one’s being narrows down to an exclusive focus on one’s suffering — not unlike a very bad toothache, when it’s hard to see beyond the pain of the moment — and in which one does not see any hope for an end to his or her suffering.

While some Buddhists might see heaven and hell as places where one is reborn as either reward or punishment for his or her deeds, most see heaven and hell as psychological and emotional states that we might experience in this lifetime, and not remote places we go to after we die. As the 13th century Buddhist monk Nichiren wrote, “Hell is in the heart of a man who despises his father and disregards his mother.”

Unlike traditions that see both heaven and hell as eternal reward or punishment, Buddhism views each of these states as only temporary. After one’s good fortune has been exhausted, one returns from heaven to one of the other realms to rebuild his or her virtues. Likewise, for those in the throes of hellish suffering, through the accumulation of virtue, they ultimately will repay their karmic debt as it were and will rise in their life state.

Finally, living beings experience heaven and hell not in accordance with the judgment of a divine being, but as part of the workings of the law of life, or “dharma.”

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JUDAISM

Jewish tradition speaks in more than one voice about the possibility of life after death, and our sages deemphasize the conversation altogether. Life at present is the focus, with the goal of helping people find meaning and purpose. Rabbi Or N. Rose has suggested that questions about an afterlife arose in historical moments of spiritual and social crisis, such as



THE STORY OF GOD

WITH MORGAN FREEMAN

the destruction of the First Temple in 586 B.C. or the Second Temple in 70 A.D. Times of upheaval led prophets and sages to ask questions about the existence of an “end of days,” a messianic redeemer and hope for the future. These existential yearnings and fears frame much of the Jewish conversation around heaven and hell, yet are tied most closely to the immediate human needs of our people throughout history.

Jews for over two millennia have been called not to deny possibility of a “world to come,” as doing so would be akin to denying the possibility of hope itself. Yet even our wisest sages say relatively little with specificity about what the world to come might be like — except for the frequent comparison to the Garden of Eden, a place in which the human soul can be free of worry or suffering after death. Similarly, the Jewish views of anything like hell are limited and unclear. Some sages indicate that a place known as Gei Hinnom, a historic valley just outside of the Old City in Jerusalem associated with sacrifices and other problematic practices from earlier civilizations, is where most souls go after death for purification for up to a year, before ascent to the world to come. (Only the truly righteous go right to Eden.) Others indicate that the depraved could reside in Gei Hinnom far longer — or even indefinitely. Our tradition as a whole seems to indicate that a life well lived is both inherently worthwhile and the best preparation for whatever might come next.

JOSHUA STANTON serves as associate rabbi at Congregation B'nai Jeshurun in Short Hills, New Jersey, and is a co-founder of Tribe, a group for young Jewish professionals in New York. He is on the board of governors of the International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Consultations.



CHRISTIANITY

Many who are concerned about the deep divisions in American society today say God is not the solution but the problem. Zealots with God on their side have no room for compromise, they argue. But our Moral Mondays movement has tried to show how recognizing God and moral language in the public square can challenge the particular forms of extremism that threaten democracy. At such a time as this, I'm grateful to brother Morgan Freeman for bringing God talk into our living rooms through his new The Story of God series.

Of course, it always matters what kind of theology we invoke in public life. In the opening of this episode, Freeman recounts how his grandmother in Mississippi introduced him to heaven and hell as a small child looking up at the stars. I thought of that great oral tradition, stretching back to Sojourner Truth's enslaved mother, who said to her, “There is a God . . . who lives in the sky, and when you are beaten, you must ask help of him, and he will always hear and help you.”

The God who delivers enslaved people from bondage is not the same God who blesses empires, even when called by the same name. This is why theology matters. As Freeman says, “Heaven and hell are not just ideas. They're part of us.” And how we imagine them can embolden us either to fight for justice or to justify extremism.

We are many faith traditions in America, and Freeman's exploration acknowledges that. His attention to how various peoples have experienced heaven and hell in their time and context is impressive. Heaven and hell can both fill us with love for our neighbors and inspire fear that drives us to “make positive change right here on earth,” Freeman concludes.

The day before he died fighting for garbage workers in Memphis, Tennessee, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. chose his final sermon title: “Why America May Go to Hell.” God knows we need a force more powerful than our technology and money to

THE STORY OF GOD

WITH MORGAN FREEMAN

compel us to do right by the poor and hurting in America today — to do what’s right for the whole. Heaven and hell offer a moral ballast in life’s storm. What we do with them, however, is up to us. As Frederick Douglass said, “I prayed for 20 years but received no answer until I prayed with my legs.”

REV. DR. WILLIAM J. BARBER II is president of Repairers of the Breach and author of “The Third Reconstruction” (Beacon Press). He is also on the national board of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the chair of their Legislative Political Action Committee.

ISLAM

In Islam, our story originates with Adam and Eve. Muslims believe both, after disobeying God and subsequently repenting for their collective sin, were expelled from heaven. According to Islamic tradition, God then periodically sent divine guidance to humankind through prophets and messengers to facilitate happiness in this life and the hereafter.

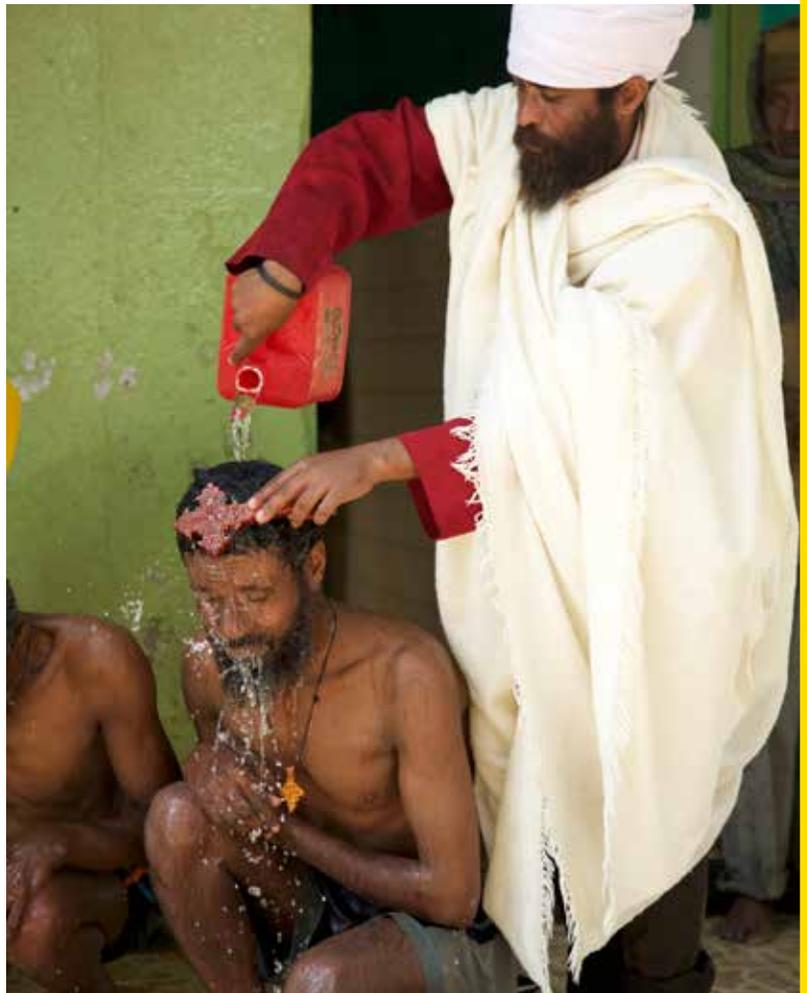
Belief in the day of judgment, the final reckoning when each individual will account for obedience to or defiance against God’s revelations, is an article of the Islamic faith. Ultimately, this life is viewed as a pathway leading to eternal bliss or chastisement in the afterlife.

The Quran, Islam’s holy text, teaches Muslims that God will erect a scale of justice on the last day. Upon resurrection, personal people will be asked a series of four questions centered on how they spent their life, utilized their knowledge, used their wealth and cared for their body. While Muslims are taught that no perfect justice may exist in this world, a full accounting will transpire in the next.

At that time, “whosoever does good equal to the weight of an atom shall see it. And whosoever does evil equal to the weight of an atom shall see it” (Quran 99:7-8). The people of paradise are described within the holy text as charitable, controlling their anger, exercising forgiveness toward others and following up foul actions with good ones in repentance, among other attributes.

Significantly, however, only God knows the residents of heaven or hell. Throughout the Quran, Muslims are reminded of his forgiveness and overflowing grace. For example, according to Muhammad, the prophet of Islam, God forgave a man’s sins because of the mercy he exhibited toward a thirsty dog by alleviating its suffering with water from a nearby well.

ENGY ABDELKADER is faculty at Georgetown University’s Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service, where she teaches courses on international terrorism, human rights, civil liberties and national security. An award-winning attorney and scholar, she has worked with Muslims, Arabs, and South Asians since 9/11 to address Islamophobia.



THE STORY OF GOD

WITH MORGAN FREEMAN

ABOUT ONFAITH



OnFaith is the online community for faith and spirituality. Started 10 years ago by Sally Quinn and Jon Meacham at the Washington Post, OnFaith is building a safe, respectful and engaging place to discuss faith and spirituality away from the noise of everyday life. We have built tools to foster meaningful engagement among our members and to help everyone with their search for meaning. Find yours at OnFaith.

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The Story of God with Morgan Freeman: The Chosen One

Premieres Monday, Jan. 16, at 9/8c

Almost every faith has a figure its followers think was chosen by God. Muslims have Muhammad. Christians have Jesus. Jews have Abraham and Moses. Why do we rally around these chosen ones and how do they guide our faith? Morgan Freeman goes in search of the chosen people walking the earth today, including an American boy from the suburbs who is believed to be the reincarnation of a Buddhist lama who has been returning in different bodies for almost five hundred years.

The Story of God with Morgan Freeman: Heaven and Hell

Premieres Monday, Jan. 23, at 9/8c

What are heaven and hell? Do they await us in the afterlife or are they here and now? People of all faiths and backgrounds have contemplated these conundrums for thousands of years. Morgan Freeman sets out to learn how these unseen places have changed the way we live, by descending into the ancient Native American underworld, investigating the phenomena of exorcisms and the gift of tongues, and meeting a woman who believes she has seen heaven.

The Story of God with Morgan Freeman: Proof of God

Premieres Monday, Jan. 30, at 9/8c

Have we cut God out of our modern lives or are there still special moments when the divine breaks through and makes its presence known? Morgan Freeman meets a man who felt God's presence on Sept. 11, learns how Muslims hear God's voice in the Quran, comes across a tribe whose members believe they can channel the healing power of the divine and encounters a physicist who has faith that science will lead him to God.