

# Without End

CHRISTOPHER BENSON

Crowds gather at the top of every hour in Prague's Old Town Square to see the wondrous display of a 15th-century astronomical clock whose inventor was blinded in order to prevent him from re-creating his masterpiece elsewhere. On either side of the geocentric clock, there are four moving figures: the Turk shaking his head (symbolizing lust), the Jewish moneylender clenching his bag of gold (greed), and the well-dressed man gazing into his mirror (vanity). But what captured my attention was the grimacing expression of the skeleton (death). Pulling on a rope in his right hand and inverting an hourglass in his left hand, he seemed to communicate Job's fearful wisdom: "Man who is born of a woman is few of days and full of trouble. He comes out like a flower and withers; he flees like a shadow and continues not" (14:1-2, ESV). At that moment I experienced the intersection of time and eternity.

Two recent books look back to eras when this intersection was a profound, vivid, even quotidian experience among human beings and consider why—in the judgment of many savants today, at least—it has almost vanished. Coincidentally, both authors hail from Catholic backgrounds where the skeleton inverted the hourglass in their childhoods, leaving them agitated about extinction and eternity.

In *A Very Brief History of Eternity*, Carlos Eire, a historian of religion at Yale University, describes a moment of illumination when he recognized the way in which a certain understanding of eternity has shaped his life: "I realized that my own behavior has been determined in large measure by how I think of my eternal fate, day in and day out, and that all of my thinking on eternity has been inextricable from the cultural matrix in which I have lived." From that insight another followed: "Eternity had a history, it dawned on me, . . . and maybe it was high time for someone to write about it, concisely, for even when it's absent from view, eternity can make a hell of a difference."

In *After Lives*, John Casey, a wide-ranging British scholar at Cambridge University, takes an interest in the rapid "deliquescence of serious belief in damnation (heaven remained an attractive, if vague, possibility)" after the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). He says the dramatic culture change in Catholicism feels out of sync with his colorful youth when his mother told him to look at the altar during his first Mass because an angel might take flight; when he wore the Miraculous Medal to ensure that he would not die in a state of Final Impenitence; and when catechesis required him to learn about the destiny of the saved and the damned. Casey is a fencesitter. Sometimes he treats beliefs about heaven and hell with irony because they seem childish; other times he treats them with moral seriousness because they are "an image of how we judge ourselves."

Eire and Casey are not alone in their ambivalence about future life. Ask Americans about ultimate endings, as the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life recently did, and all's

well that ends well: 74 percent believe in heaven, whereas only 59 percent believe in hell. Just as most of us prefer chocolate cake to broccoli, wish-fulfillment explains why there is a greater affirmation of heaven than hell. Interestingly, evangelical Protestants are far more likely to believe

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in hell (82 percent) than mainline Protestants (56 percent) and Catholics (60 percent).

Both books are ambitious in scope. *A Very Brief History of Eternity* wryly traces the concept of eternity for the last four thousand years, focusing on "lived religion"—the connection between belief and behavior. For ancient Jews, eternity was linked with Yahweh, the "jealous deity" beyond time, beyond representation, beyond comprehension. For ancient Greeks, eternity was not linked with any deity but with time, perfection, and the source of the physical universe. Christians in the early church merged the Hebraic and Hellenic conceptions of eternity so that it related to salvation and the afterlife, reified in liturgy, reliquaries, and scholarly discourse. Eire contends that Christians inherited Platonic baggage, viewing earthly time as "an inferior, flawed, passing phase of human history that was about to end." World-weariness removed the sting of death, which clarifies why Ignatius of Antioch sounds calm rather than terrified on the eve of his martyrdom: "I shall be a convincing Christian only when the world sees me no more. Nothing you can see has real value. . . . Do not stand in the way of my coming to life. . . . Do not give back to the world one who wants to be God's. . . . I do not want to live any more on a human plane."

In the centuries of medieval Christendom, Eire writes, eternity was "tightly woven into the very fabric of Western society," overflowing into monastic life, mystical quests, masses, shrines, church architecture, crusades, pilgrimages, feast days, and the triumph of sacred authority over civil authority. In short, the church developed an "intercessory role as nexus between heaven and earth, and as the sole gateway to eternal salvation." Eire has a talent for excavating the most sparkling examples of how "medieval eternity was a social convention as much as a theological one," such as the church's use of relics to engender piety among the simple folk: "Geneva boasted of having the brain of St. Peter, whose body was entombed in Rome (which Protestants would claim was merely a pumice stone), and the arm of St. Anthony (which Protestants would identify as 'the desiccated virile member of a stag')."

Eire is at his best and worst chronicling the Reformation of eternity in the 16th century, giving attention to one of the most profound but neglected changes of the Protestant Reformation: the total segregation of the living from the dead, or "spiritual apartheid," as Eire puts it. The Reformers dug a grave for the Catholic fiction of purgatory and the attendant mercenary rites. "For Luther,"

Eire writes, "death was no gossamer veil through which the living and the dead remained in sight of each other but rather the thickest of final curtains." Against all flights of imagination about the afterlife, Luther emphatically declares: "No man's heart comprehends eternity." In breezy prose, Eire describes the sweeping rejection of medieval rituals and symbols of eternity, but in doing so he grossly exaggerates the extent to which the Reformers believed that "the sole focus of life should be here and now, not eternity." A more sophisticated narrative would reveal the Protestant dialectic of this-worldliness and other-worldliness.

The rest of his book charts the trajectory begun in the Protestant Reformation: an acceleration of the *here and now* through modern science, skepticism, spiritualism, and secularization. If the leap of faith is unavailable, despondency and rebellion are the only responses left to our "terminal temporality." Perhaps Eire intends to give us an ironic sketch of the modern malaise, carrying the logic of secularism to its dead-end conclusion, but

if so, his mimicry is too subtle, and he often sounds rebellious himself.

In *After Lives*, John Casey offers an elegant and encyclopedic survey of beliefs about postmortem survival from the Egyptians to the Mormons, examining literature, philosophy, and theology. The reader is treated to well-chosen and generous quotations from the primary sources, all sensitively interpreted. If Eire assumes the viewpoint of a prisoner "sandwiched by a yawning nothingness," Casey is a sojourner in hell, purgatory, and heaven, guided by "the 'moral world within'—not Virgil and Beatrice. Judging by the division of pages, the dark future of hell (209 pages) excites the Western imagination more than the dim future of purgatory (17 pages) and the bright future of heaven (154 pages), which coheres with the scriptural insight that "people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil" (John 3:19, ESV).

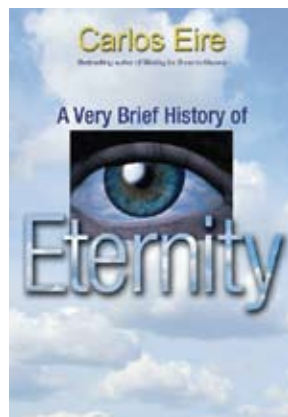
## A Very Brief History of Eternity

CARLOS EIRE • PRINCETON UNIV. PRESS, 2009 • 286 PP. • \$24.95

## After Lives

A Guide to Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory

JOHN CASEY • OXFORD UNIV. PRESS, 2009 • 480 PP. • \$35



Casey eschews a grand theory about conceptions of the afterlife, although he notes that fear of extinction and desire for justice animate many beliefs about our postmortem existence. In Egyptian, Greek, and Roman antiquity, the pleasant afterlife was like an exclusive country club, reserved for kings, demigods, or the powerful. Early Greeks and Romans belonged to heroic societies where “the only immortality worth having” was fame—not fame for the sake of fame (think Paris Hilton) but fame through great achievement (think Hector and

Achilles). The number of immortalized souls remained very small until the Egyptian cult of Osiris and the Greek and Roman mystery religions relaxed entrance to the country club. “But the stronger the belief in personal immortality,” Casey observes, “the stronger also became the terror of judgment after death. The Mesopotamian, Greek, and Roman conviction that after death we become shades in a dark underworld may have been pessimistic—but at least it never led to the fear of eternal damnation that weighed so heavily on Jews at the time of Jesus, and on the

other two Abrahamic religions.”

Casey submits that “purgatory—hardly existent in Scripture, shakily supported by tradition, productive of numerous abuses, responsible for a vast extension of clerical power—could claim to be Rome’s happiest inspiration” because it humanely softens “the sublime and terrible gulf between saving and losing one’s soul.” But the invention of purgatory was not necessary, N. T. Wright argues, because God performs his “rescue operation” *here and now*—not *then and there*. In the old covenant, heaven and earth intersected when

one studied and kept the Torah and when one worshiped in the Temple. In the new covenant, something radical happens: they intersect in the person of Jesus and then, after his resurrection and ascension, in those in whom the Spirit dwells. Everyday encounters with eternity are *still* possible, which is why C. S. Lewis said: “Next to the Blessed Sacrament itself, your neighbor is the holiest object presented to your senses. If he is your Christian neighbor, he is holy in almost the same way, for in him also Christ *vere latitat*—the glorifier and the glorified, Glory himself, is truly hidden.” **B&C**