Conceptions of Heaven

What is heaven? Where is heaven? Our immediate image of heaven include the sky, a celestial sphere and that it is our final destination—our afterlife where we experience eternal happiness. Our conceptions of heaven of course depends on our faith; what it says about the afterlife. Some religions profess heaven contains angels, heroes, demons and G-ds. In Christianity, heaven may represent the place of pre-fallen man where humanity is reunited with G-d in perfect existence. For some religions, gaining entry into heaven is conditional—meaning one has to earn it. If one falls short of leading a virtuous life as defined by their faith, they go to hell for punishment. In some Christian denominations, entrance into heaven is not necessarily conditional on leading a good life—but in believing and accepting G-ds offer of salvation.

In Catholicism, heaven is the plane of G-d the Father, Christ the Son, His Mother, the angels and the Saints. Heaven, according to Catholicism is described in the Catechism of the Catholic Church as “Those who die in G-ds grace and friendship and are perfectly purified live forever… This perfect life with G-d… is called heaven. It is the ultimate end and fulfillment of the deepest of human longings, the state of supreme, definitive happiness.” Following death the soul is in a state of “the particular judgment” while the afterlife location is determined. The soul may ascend to heaven after purgatory, directly to heaven or to hell. No individual who dies in state of sin can enter heaven because it is exclusively for the pure. It is commonly believed that most individuals who enter heaven do so through purgatory—where they are purified. Among Protestants, salvation is attained by the grace of G-d and it can be unearned favor. By professing faith in Christ; and not necessarily through leading a virtuous, righteous life one can ask G-d to be forgiven for their sins and be granted eternal life.

Traditional Judaism understands that death is not the final, end of human existence and offers some thoughts on the afterlife. It is understood however, that within Judaism there is no systematic, well defined writings for Jews to grasp the concept of heaven, and thus is open to personal interpretation. In the Torah, it is little mentioned and referenced. One reason is because Judaism is primarily focused on the here and now—on our immediate and current lives. The after life in Hebrew is termed “Olam Ha-Ba. Rabbinic scholars assert that notions of the afterlife developed late in Jewish history and that in the Torah, there are references that those who lived as righteous, virtuous life will be reunited with their loved ones. Individuals who were wicked will not be reunited wit their loved ones. Judaism also believes in the resurrection of the dead and it is one of Rambam’s 13 principles. According to Judaism, that the resurrection of the dead will occur during the Messianic age, which is referred to as the World to Come. At the arrival of the Messiah, the dead will be resurrected and the wicked will not. The resurrected will be rewarded by living in a world of peace which they helped to create during their virtuous life.

For the Eastern religions, heaven is de-emphasized and the concept of reincarnation is emphasized. In Buddhism, individuals who carry good karma are reborn in heaven but will not remain in heaven for eternity because after their good karma leaves, they will be reincarnated again. Thus, heaven is not their eternal resting place because they will experience another rebirth and be reincarnated into a different heaven. In Buddhism, heaven is thus a temporary resting plane—and one must escape the cycle of rebirth and achieving enlightenment, which is referred to as Bodhi.

In Islam the concept of heaven is referenced in the Koran as an afterlife in Eden for the righteous; for individuals who fulfilled good deeds in their life. Islam rejects the concept of original sin and believes human beings are pure at birth.

The Hindus believe in reincarnation and they de-emphasize heaven. For Hindus, heaven is a temporary plane until the next rebirth and the desired, permanent state to be achieved is Moksha where the sould is ultimately liberated from the cycle of life and death. It is then possible while in the state of Moksha for one to be reunited with G-d. Entrance into heaven or hell is determined by Yama, the Lord of Death and Chitragupta the karma recorder. Good and bad deeds contribute to either good or bad karma in one’s lifetime.