The following is a Q&A that I have done with my publisher Simon & Schuster for the History in Five page. You should check it out. You will get a free ebook! Here’s the site: https://www.simonandschuster.com/p/historyinfive You’ll see, its an impressive array of authors with intriguing answers to questions about their books.

Here’s what mine looks like.

1. Why write about the afterlife? What drew you toward the subject of heaven and hell?
I was raised as in a Christian household and the literal realities of heaven and hell were taken very seriously. My personal views intensified when I had a “born again” experience in high school, and eventually headed off to the fundamentalist Moody Bible Institute, where we were trained to evangelize “the lost” (that is, the vast majority of the human race): there was one way to heaven, and the results would be glorious; every other way led to hell and eternal torment.

I no longer hold those views, but I have long been struck that so many other people in our world do – nearly three out of four Americans believe in a literal heaven and almost three out of five in a literal hell. I wrote my book to explain that these views were not the original teachings of either Judaism or Christianity and to answer the question: So where did they come from?

2. You argue in your book that it was after Jesus’s death that the ideas of eternal reward and punishment began to develop into their modern form. What do you think were the most influential developments along the way?

The Hebrew Bible that Jesus inherited as scripture has no idea at all of rewards and punishments after death. This life is all there is and is all that matters. But two centuries before Jesus a different view emerged within Judaism, driven by the concern for “justice” in the world. How is it fair that the righteous suffer now and the wicked prosper? Surely God will ultimately bring justice. So, after death, there will be rewards and punishments. But Jews who held this view did not share the Greek idea (found in Plato, e.g.) that the soul could exist when the body dies. For them, the human was a single unit, body and soul together. So when they thought of afterlife, they assumed it would involve a bodily existence. At the end of history, God would breathe life back into dead bodies. Those who had sided with God and his ways would be given an eternal reward in a new utopian kingdom on earth, those who were opposed to God would be annihilated for all time.

That was also Jesus’ view. But the kingdom never arrived, and several decades after his death, most of his followers were by now gentile converts, not Jews. These Christians had been raised with Greek ways of thinking. They did believe in souls that survived the body. And so they transferred the idea of a future resurrection of the body into the idea of the ongoing life of the soul. That is the view then that became the standard Christian view down until today: when a person dies, their soul goes to heaven above or hell below — a view not taught by the Old Testament nor by Jesus himself.

3. Did you encounter any surprises while doing your research?
I had studied the book of Revelation for over 40 years, but I never plowed deeply into its
understanding of the afterlife. I always simply assumed that its famous “lake of fire” was the ending place for all sinners, who would be confined to the flames for all eternity. But when I actually examined the issue more closely, I realized that ...

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... I realized that Revelation does not actually say that. It does say that God’s super-human enemies, the “Beast” (popularly called the Antichrist, but not in Revelation itself), his “prophet,” and then, a thousand years later, Satan, will be thrown into the lake of fire to be tormented forever. But not humans. Revelation, like Jesus himself and the apostle Paul, thought the ultimate penalty as a death sentence. Sinners would be destroyed out of existence. Only saints would live on, here on earth, in the glorious utopia God would send from above.

4. What was the most interesting source you worked with?

One of the most intriguing early Christian books known to scholars but virtually unknown to people is called the Apocalypse of Peter. It almost came to be included in the canon of Scripture. This is the early Christian account of a guided tour of heaven and hell, the oldest Christian forerunner of Dante’s Divine Comedy. The apostle Peter is shown the torments of the damned, which he describes in graphic and even lurid detail. The wicked are tortured in various, creatively imagined ways, depending on their characteristic sins: adulterers, blasphemers, usurers, and so on. Peter is then shown the blessings of the saved, which, remarkably, he discusses only briefly. But the point of the account is clear: if you want to avoid non-ending physical torment, and receive a lovely eternity in a beautiful setting, don’t sin!

5. How does the developing understanding of the afterlife interact with the growth and change of early Christianity?

Here is one way. Christians in the first three centuries occasionally (not regularly) were subject to Roman persecution; in some instances they were tortured to death for refusing to worship the Roman gods. Christians insisted that if they could endure the torment and remain faithful to death God would honor their stalwart commitment by granting them ecstatic pleasure for all eternity in heaven. Moreover, they maintained that the tortures they endured for a short time hour would be revisited on their torturers for all eternity. And so, just as the martyrs were burned at the stake, or torn apart by wild animals, or subject to burning pokers in their eyes – this is what would happen forever and ever to their persecutors. As one Christian martyr reported said to his torturers: “You us, God you.”
6. According to polling, 58% of Americans believe in a literal hell. Why do you think the idea of eternal punishment is so popular and enduring?

My sense is that people cannot conceive of a world where ultimately no justice. Surely if there is any divine guidance of this world, the injustices we face here will be dealt with after death – since they clearly are not being addressed in this world. There is so much horrible, meaningless suffering caused by human willfulness and negligence, with the powerful and the mighty acting in ways that either intentionally or haphazardly create widespread disaster: lack of clean water, medicine and health care; massive starvation, war, and civil unrest; and so on. Those people will pay a price. And since, in this view, this life is only preparation for the eternal life to come, actions now have eternal consequences. The soul will live on, and sinners will pay the price for their deed. (But see my next answer.)

7. How are the changing needs of the modern era affecting the conception of the afterlife? How do you see those beliefs changing in the future?

The most important developments along this line in the West is the constantly growing numbers of agnostics, atheists, and “nones”. In parts of Western Europe the numbers are staggering, and they are growing in North America as well. Many people do not find the church relevant or its teaching convincing anymore; many consider Christian responses to world crises and social issues to be outdated and deficient; many feel that the institution itself has not adopted to the realities of the world or the advances in science. This has led many, many people to think there is no afterlife at all. We are animals, as animals we die, and we have no more afterlife than the mosquito we just swat or the pig we just ate.

What is most striking, though, is that there is a move even among Bible-believing Christians to question and reject the idea of eternal punishment in hell. If the idea of punishment after death originated as a way to establish the ultimate triumph of justice, how can eternal hell be justified, even for the worst of sinners, let alone your run-of-the-mill schmuck? You live an imperfect life, even one filled with debauchery, for, say fifty years, and die, and then are physically tormented for fifty trillion years, and that’s only the beginning? It just doesn’t make sense, and certainly is not just. And in surprising numbers evangelical thinkers also beginning to think and say so.

8. You discuss how, over the years, there was never one single understanding of the afterlife but rather a number of competing views. Which is your favorite? Why and how did it develop – and if it didn’t catch on, why not?

After everything I read on the afterlife for years and years, at the end of the day I think the great Socrates himself got it right. During his trial for crimes against the state, and facing the death sentence, Socrates explained why he was not afraid to die. Death would bring one of two things. It would either mean an ongoing existence with others who have died before – for Socrates, the lover of conversation and dialogue, an eternal happiness. He could talk with the greats of the past about all the mysteries of the universe, forever. How good can it get?

The second option involve a complete annihilation, in which case death would be like entering into a deep, dreamless sleep for all time. And who doesn’t enjoy that? That’s what
I think. Death will either be an unconscious state no worse than what it was before we were born (when I didn’t have a care in the world) or a very pleasant ongoing existence along with those who have gone before us. I personally think it will be the former, but am completely open to being surprised by the latter. In neither event, is there the slightest thing to fear.

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