

I have a very long list of questions in my Readers' Mailbag. Here's an interesting one that's been hanging around for a while.

#### QUESTION:

One of the really odd things about Christianity is the emphasis on believing in order to gain admission to heaven. Why is that so critical?

#### RESPONSE

I would say that this one really odd thing is actually two really odd things: from the outset of the Christian movement, followers of Jesus emphasized both the centrality of belief and the realities of the afterlife. These are oddities because prior to Christianity (this admittedly seems weird) there weren't any religions that (a) focused on "having faith" and (b) stressed the afterlife as an incentive to practice religion.

Really? Yup, really. People may have trouble believing this (at least my students do), but it's true.

Let me start with the afterlife. For many of my students the afterlife is the one and only reason that anyone would want to be properly religious. If there is no afterlife, why bother? If there are no rewards or punishments after this life, then why be religious?

Ancient people almost never asked this question, in part because ...

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