



# THE HOLY MAN

## BACKGROUND

The belief in heaven, where we are rewarded for what we do on Earth is widespread and powerful. These days, beliefs in the afterlife vary widely. Some believe literally in what the Bible, Koran, or other holy book says heaven will be like. Others have a more vague idea that their spirit will somehow live on. Whatever the type of belief though, it is worth stopping to think that martyrs of all religions have been prepared to suffer terrible deaths because they believed that their suffering would be rewarded in another life. And many ordinary people have endured terrible illnesses or hardship for the same promise of paradise.

If there is a Heaven then it solves one of the problems with getting people to lead a more virtuous life. A lot of the time being good appears to be against their interests: they will have less money, time and property to please themselves if they take other people's needs into consideration. Every time we do the tiniest good deed - even holding the door open for someone else - we lose out in some small way. So should we bother? And why?

The philosopher Immanuel Kant wanted to prove that we should bother. In fact, to be more exact, he wanted to prove that we had to bother. He set out to prove that the golden rule of 'Treat others as you would want to be treated' was actually the most logical way to behave. He wanted this proof because he felt that up until then all writing about morality seemed to say that we should be good in order to achieve some other end (e.g. to get into heaven or avoid punishment). Instead, he wanted to establish that it was absolutely necessary for a human being to do the right thing, regardless of circumstances or consequences. His writing is difficult for the non-specialist to follow but he came up with something he called the Categorical Imperative:

'Act in such a way that you would want your action to become a universal law'.

So this means if you are tempted to steal sweets or you see someone that needs help, do whatever you would want the rule to be for everyone in such a situation. This may well be a motto that most people would approve of. However, it is not immediately obvious how it solves the problem of why we should decide to be good. But Kant thought it could. He seems to have believed (and scholars of Kant will have to forgive the simplification) that as rational human beings we have no choice but to act as we would wish everyone to act in our place. This is because to be good is to realise that we are surrounded by other rational human beings whose needs are the same as ours. So it is irrational to selfishly pursue our own ends.

In bringing up children we are faced with the issue of virtue and reward all day. Should we give children rewards for kind behaviour so as to train them into good habits? Or does that actually teach them to be selfish - to do it just for the reward they get out of it? Or instead should we tell them that good is good, so just do it? In that case children are blindly following rules, without any thought as to why one thing is good, and another bad.

The motto 'Do as you would be done by', 'Treat others as you would want to be treated' or 'How would you feel?' is often used to instil in young people a sense of empathy, and a guiding rule to test their own actions. It works well when getting children to rub along together and stop warring with each other. It appeals to their belief in fairness.

The promise of Heaven, however, removes all this head-scratching and gives us an ultimate goal for all our actions.

## STIMULUS

*There was once a poor villager called Layla. She worked hard farming the land, growing just enough food to eat and saving a few coins every week. If she saw people hungry in the village, she would share any spare food she had, but it wasn't much.*

*Her village was outside a wealthy city, full of rich people. The people inside the city did not allow the villagers through the gates. They didn't let outsiders get jobs, and they didn't share any of their money, food or possessions.*

*Some of the other villagers would sneak into the city and steal things. Or they would wait until the rich people travelled out of the city for some reason and then rob or trick them. They used the money they got to buy things they couldn't normally afford.*

*One day, when Layla was very tired after a long day working on the land, she saw one of the rich city people walk along the road. It was a woman with long, lovely hair, very fancy clothes and expensive shoes. She was laughing and happy and obviously had lots of money. At that moment Layla felt jealous and was tempted to try to rob her.*

*Just then, a man with long hair and ragged white clothes appeared, as if from nowhere. He told Layla that he was a holy man. He said that Layla should not be tempted to steal or trick those rich people. She should carry on living as a poor person and lead a good life.*

*'What is good about my life?' asked Layla. 'Nothing!'*

*'Your life is the best possible life' replied the holy man. He said 'You are a good person because you don't lie, steal or hurt people. You are not greedy or selfish. People like you go to heaven. People like that lady you just saw, with all her fine clothes and money – she will never get to heaven. When she dies she will not go where you go.'*

Layla felt better. It was good to know that there would be a reward for her good behaviour. She thanked the holy man. The holy man asked if she had any spare coins or bits of food, as he had been walking a long way, and was going to spend the rest of the day walking from village to village helping people to follow a good life.

Layla went to get the bread and coins she was keeping in the house and gave some to him.

A few days later she saw the holy man again. He told her that he visited many people like Layla and helped them to see the right way to live, but some had got angry and hit him or kicked him out of their towns. Again, Layla gave him a little money and food so that he could carry on his good work.

And so this went on for many years. Layla worked hard and dreamed of the day she would reach heaven. Sometimes she felt tempted to join other villagers to cheat and lie to get money. But then she remembered the words of the holy man, who had explained that she must have a hard life now, so that she could earn a place in heaven. The other villagers laughed at her and told her to come and join their trips sneaking into the city to steal. She refused. Whenever the holy man came through the town she made sure he had enough to eat.

One day, Layla realised she was getting too old to work on the land. She was always tired and in pain. But if she stopped working she would have no food and no money at all. She asked a neighbour what to do.

The neighbour said Layla should start to use her savings: 'You have been so careful all these years; you must have money saved up'. Layla explained that she gave her money to the holy man.

'He's no holy man!' the neighbour laughed. 'Come with me, I'll show you.'

The neighbour led Layla out of the village and over the hill. They arrived at a nice little cottage - nicer than Layla's. At first, Layla didn't recognise the man lying in a hammock outside the house. His hair was neat and tidy and he wore fashionable clothes. He was smoking, drinking beer, and scratching his belly. It was the man who was supposed to be holy.

'You tricked me!' shouted Layla. 'You pretended to have no house and no money and to be a holy man!'

The man jumped out of his hammock and defended his behaviour: 'It is holy to tell people to lead a good life. Lots of people lead better lives because of me.'

The neighbour saw that Layla was crying and shook her finger at the man, saying: 'You have no right to ask people like her for money and food. You should give it all back to her.'

'I can't' shrugged the holy man, 'I've spent it all.'

'I don't care about the money,' sobbed Layla, 'Now I won't go to heaven.'

## Task Questions

- ✓ Will Layla go to heaven?
- ✓ Was the holy man telling the truth about heaven? Did he tell any 'white lies'?
- ✓ Was he a holy man?
- ✓ Was it good of him to get other people to be good?
- ✓ Is there a difference between a good person and a holy person?
- ✓ Should we help holy people by giving them food or money?
- ✓ Should they work like everyone else? Can holiness be a job?
- ✓ Is it easier for poor people or rich people to get to heaven?
- ✓ Is it easier for poor people or rich people to be good?
- ✓ Do poor people have more temptations?
- ✓ Is it wrong to be rich?