



# A heaven with no sex could give us pause

**E**ternity is a long time to go without sex.

To many Americans, eyebrows raise at the very idea of suicide bombers believing their heavenly reward will include sex with beautiful virgins. But aren't the 75 percent of Americans who believe in an afterlife concerned that there might not be any sex in their heaven?

Mark Twain considered the problem. In *Letters From the Earth*, he writes of humankind: "He has imagined a heaven and has left entirely out of it the supremest of all his delights — the one ecstasy that stands first and foremost in the hearts of every individual of his race — sexual intercourse!"



**Faye Flam**

*Carnal Knowledge*

For any sane person, he wrote, heaven would be an intolerable bore.

Not so in Islam. The Koran describes a lush garden-like heaven in which each man can be married to a bevy of beautiful, dark-eyed females called *houris*. The passage is open to interpretation, but scholars say these are not earthly girls who died but heavenly creatures, and, it would appear, they can be deflowered and then automatically reflower.

"Obviously the *houris* are there for a reason or they wouldn't be described as ever-virgin," said Tim Furnish, a professor of history at Georgia Perimeter College and author of *Holiest Wars: Islamic Mahdis, Their Jihads, and Osama bin Laden*.

One of the inflammatory Danish cartoons played on this idea with a voice from the clouds yelling to would-be suicide bombers to stop, because the supply

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# Eternity without sex: Is it heaven's rudest surprise?

**VIRGINS** from E1 of virgins was running low. Many articles in the U.S. press refer to a reward of 72 virgins — a number that's not in the Koran, Furnish said, but comes from supplementary writings.

"If you take the opposite sex out of the picture, that would not be a heaven where I'd want to go," says Alam Payind, director of the Middle East Studies Center at Ohio State University and a part-time imam. Yes, it's a male-dominated vision, he said, but that was woven into the fabric of Middle Eastern culture.

Many scholars say it's misleading to harp on the virgins. The prospect of sex in the here-

after has cropped up across other traditions, including Christianity, says religion professor Alan Segal, of Columbia University's Barnard College.

Whether anyone gets to hook up in heaven depends on whether you believe in immortality of the soul or a full resurrection of the body, said Segal, who is author of *Life After Death: The Afterlife in Western Religions*.

Plato and Aristotle taught that the body dies but a conscious soul lives forever. There would be no sex for the Greek philosophers, but they could continue to do what they really loved — to learn, to teach and to think.

Segal said while modern Juda-

ism focuses more on this life than the next, early Jews introduced the notion that martyrs would be bodily resurrected in the hereafter.

Early Christians believed that after the end of the world they'd all get their bodies back in heaven, and this led inevitably to questions about sex and marriage. On pondering resurrection of the flesh, St. Augustine decided we'd keep our sex organs for aesthetic reasons but wouldn't use them.

In the New Testament, a man asks Jesus what happens if you've been widowed and married several times. Which of your spouses will you be reunited with in heaven? Jesus says

no one will marry or be given in marriage but we will be as angels.

So do angels do it? Milton asked the question in *Paradise Lost*, and the angel Raphael told him that when angels embrace, it is "easier than air with air" — not exactly a clear answer.

Still, heavenly sex is problematic in Christianity, he said, since intercourse for pleasure was considered "depravity." That changed somewhat for Protestants after the Renaissance. They loosened some of the sexual prohibitions and some started to consider a sexier afterlife, Segal said.

In Islam and Judaism, sexual

pleasure is not considered filthy, he said, making its possible appearance in heaven less shocking.

Zoroastrians, he said, believed there was sex in heaven but people would wean themselves away from both food and sex as they got used to being dead.

A more relevant question may be whether there's sex in the other place. There certainly will be lots of interesting souls, so it may depend on how well the underworld is supervised.

In the end, the desire for our sexual selves to live beyond our short time on Earth isn't so shocking. Eternity is a long

time to remain celibate.

While many motivations have been attributed to suicide bombings, the 72 virgins are sometimes used as an inducement, said Payind. "It is one of the more important enticements for the desperate, the dispossessed, the disenfranchised living in miserable conditions."

Segal points out that the virgins are used to appeal mostly to teenage boys. If you're a grown man faced with the prospect of 72 heavenly wives, he said, "you'd want some of them to be experienced."

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