

WISDOM  
*of the*  
HEART



WISDOM  
*of the*  
HEART

The Good, the True, and the Beautiful  
at the Center of Us All

Peter Kreeft

TAN Books  
Gastonia, North Carolina

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Cover design by Caroline Green

Cover image: Sacred Heart watercolor by runLenarun/  
Shutterstock

Library of Congress Control Number: 2019956419

ISBN: 978-1-5051-1441-6

Published in the United States by

TAN Books

PO Box 269

Gastonia, NC 28053

[www.TANBooks.com](http://www.TANBooks.com)

Printed in the United States of America

*Blessed are the men whose strength is in you,  
in whose heart are the highways to Zion. (Ps 84:5)*



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## PREFACE

I've published about eighty books so far. The ones that "work"—the ones that people thank me for because they actually changed their lives a little bit—are always the ones that came from my heart and that addressed the reader's heart. They include the one on Pascal (*Christianity for Modern Pagans*), the one on Heaven (*Heaven, the Heart's Deepest Longing*), the one on suffering (*Making Sense Out of Suffering*), the one on Jesus (*Jesus-Shock*), the one on Job, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs (*Three Philosophies of Life*), and the ones on the sea (*The Sea Within*) and surfing (*I Surf Therefore I Am*). It took me many years (I am a very slow learner) to realize that, and to realize that I ought to write a book about this weird and wonderful spiritual organ that we call the heart.

I am a genuine certified absent-minded professor (of philosophy, no less), who is so foolish that he could be tempted to put more time and effort into writing a book on Heaven than into getting there. We desperately need good philosophy, for philosophy is the love of wisdom. But wisdom is about life, and life is about love, and love is the work of the heart. Therefore, philosophy is (or should be) about the heart. We need brains, but we also need hearts. Hearts need brains to direct them, but brains need hearts to pump lifeblood into them. We need light, but we also

need heat. We need truth, but we also need love. Both are absolutes. Here is my attempt to combine the two, to throw some light on that fire and to put some fire into that light.

\*

How do you get to Heaven? What is the road? Objectively, it is the one who said “I am the way” (Jn 14:6). Subjectively, it is in the heart, as the Psalmist says: “In whose heart are the highways to Zion” (Ps 84:5). What does that mean? Why does the Psalmist speak of the heart’s “highways”? The heart is not a city; it does not have highways in it.

Yes, it does, both literally and figuratively.

The literal, physical heart has arteries and veins, chambers and tubes. Blood moves through it just as literally as commuters move through cities on highways. If the blood does not flow, or leaks out, or flows in the wrong direction, we die, just as if a car drives off the road and into a canyon or over a bridge guardrail, both the car and its passengers are lost.

And the “heart” in the spiritual sense—that mysterious center of the soul or psyche that love comes from—that, too, has highways, which lead to either the life or death of the soul, either joy or sorrow, good or evil, eventually Heaven or Hell.

These highways are actions and habits, both inner and outer, physical and spiritual. There are many forks on these highways. These forks are choices between alternative roads, and the different roads lead to different destinations,

different ends, just as surely as physical roads do. Just as it is impossible to get from Chicago to the Atlantic Ocean by traveling west, it is impossible to get to happiness or Heaven or holiness by egotism, cruelty, hate, arrogance, self-righteousness, dishonesty, pride, or despair.

There is also another kind of spiritual highway: the highways of the mind. There, too, different roads lead to different destinations. It is impossible to get to an odd number by adding up only even numbers, and it is impossible to get to the conclusion that you are not mortal by combining the two premises that all men are mortal and you are a man.

All three kinds of highway—the world's, the heart's, and the mind's—are objective, not subjective. Therefore, subjective sincerity and good feelings are not enough. No matter how sincere you are, you can't get to the destination at the end of any one of those three different kinds of highways by travelling down another highway or in the opposite direction. There are objective truths about matter (the physical highways), and about ethics (the moral highways), and about numbers (the mental highways). There is an objective "real world" as well as a subjective "inner world," and if the two do not match, we live a lie. And if the lie of the mismatch is big enough, we are insane. The fundamental measure of sanity or insanity is that match or mismatch. If I believe I am the greatest philosopher in the world, I am an arrogant idiot. If I believe I am the archangel Gabriel in disguise, I am probably literally insane. If I believe I am God, I am maximally insane.

Those “New Agers” and postmodernists who claim that we “create our own reality” are really claiming that they are God. To exercise what Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy called a right that is “at the heart of liberty”—namely, the right to determine for oneself the meaning of life and the mystery of human existence—is to tell God, “Get off my throne.” That is exactly what Satan did when he said, “Better to rule in Hell than serve in Heaven.”

Our lives are determined by our choice of highways. And of the three kinds of highways—those of the body, the heart, and the mind—the most momentous are those of the heart, because that is where love comes from and love is the force that decides everything for us. As Augustine says, “Amor meus, pondus meum,” “My love is my weight,” my gravity, my density and my destiny. I go where my love (and thus my heart) moves me, both in this life of time and in eternity. I choose to park my car by a house that I love. I choose to park my mind by the idea that I seek, that I love. The heart is the captain of the soul; the mind is the navigator, or the science officer, and the body is the sailors. The soul is not only a ship but a starship. It is the Starship *Enterprise*.

## Chapter 1

# OUR HEART DISEASE: NEGLECT

**W**hy a book about the heart? Because that's where the road to Heaven is. That's what the Book says (Ps 84:5).

That's also where all the issues of life on earth are. The same old Book says: "Keep thy heart with all diligence, for out if it are the issues of life" (Prv 4:23, KJV). The lifeblood of everything in us issues from the heart.

Our culture tends to forget "the heart of the matter." We give our hearts away. As Wordsworth famously said,

The world is too much with us; late and soon,  
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers.  
Little we see in nature that is ours.  
We have given our hearts away: a sordid boon!

This has been true especially since the Industrial Revolution and the "Enlightenment"—i.e., the Endarkenment—when we began to worship the works of our own minds and hands, the golden calves of our technologies, whether mechanical, economic, or cybernetic. We have put our heart into whatever can be quantitatively measured and controlled. The STEM course (science, technology,

economics, and math) now receive 99.4 percent of university budgets for research and development; the humanities now receive 0.6 percent. But this neglecting of the humanities means neglecting our humanity!

And when we do study humans, we study everything but the heart. We don't put our heart into our heart. Wordsworth spoke about the neglect of the love of nature. Ninety-nine percent of all our books about nature are about the science and technology of ecology, of preserving rather than polluting nature, which is fine, but what about our love of it, what about the joy and wisdom we find in it? What about *our* nature?

Forgetting that is absentminded thinking. We are all turning into absentminded professors with nothing to profess. We are becoming experts on everything in the universe—except ourselves.

This is not an attack on science, reason, mind, intellect, philosophy, or theory. There is much theory in this book, many maps of the soul. But it is above all a book about practice, about life. Theory is necessary for practice, as road maps are necessary for journeys. For practical reasons, we need clear theoretical distinctions.

We lack them. For instance, the word "heart" connotes to most people today simply the source of feeling and emotion. But the Bible, and most pre-modern authors, use the term in a very different way. The two biggest differences are that the premodern meaning of the heart is broader than feeling, and that it is more mysterious. The word "heart" is used as a physical analogy for a spiritual reality: as the organ that pumps the blood is the source

of our physical life, so the heart of the soul is the source of our spiritual life, both conscious and unconscious, both thinking and feeling—and also loving and desiring and willing and choosing.

### **The Heart as the “I”**

In this ancient, traditional sense, the heart is where we are one, a single “I” that “has” all the feelings and thinkings and choosings. It is impossible in principle to understand this non-object as an object of thinking (or feeling), since this “I” is the source and owner of all our thoughts and feelings. It is that which lights them up, or fires them up, so it is not a thing that is lit up or fired up by them. It is the non-objectifiable subject, the un-thought thinker and the un-felt feeler, the pre-functional root of all the functions.

The heart (in this profound and mysterious sense) is what Jesus always addressed when he spoke to people. Not their lips, not their words, not their brains, not their self-images or their masks, and not just their feelings or emotions (He was not a pop psychologist!) but their heart.

We can learn to do the same. But for that, we need to know the heart.

We have many layers inside ourselves that both conceal and reveal, both mask and express, that heart. Even masks are chosen by the heart; therefore, even the heart’s disguises reveal the heart. We usually talk to the mask, to the disguise, not to the heart; to the tongue, the hands, the brain, or the face—the words, the deeds, the concepts, or the mask. But not usually to the heart. Even when we are

physically face to face, we are rarely spiritually face to face. We address screens, like teenagers on smartphones.

When we talk to another person, we have to realize that there are usually at least two people there: the person wearing the mask and the mask, or “persona,” through which they speak. The word “person” originally meant the “mask” *through* which (“per”) an actor on stage spoke or “sounded” (“sona”), like a musical instrument. Jesus never spoke to the instrument but to the player.

Our culture is a head culture, not a heart culture. That is the point of Neil Gaiman’s best-selling fantasy *American Gods*, in which the old gods, the gods of the heart, the beautiful and fascinating fantasies of all the old pagan religions, are still alive in America but they survive only because they are in disguise—and they are dying. They are being replaced by the new gods, the gods of the head, the gods of science and technology and brain power. But these are the gods of ugliness and emptiness. It is the fulfillment of the prophecy of Ragnarök, the Armageddon of Norse mythology at the end of history when the gods themselves are conquered by the demons. For the agnostic Gaiman, all gods are only projections of the human heart, including the Christian God. But there is a profoundly true psychology behind his false theology. The highways to Heaven are in the heart, and we are relentlessly closing the highways.

### **Our Materialism**

One reason we are doing this is our practical materialism. We have succeeded remarkably in understanding (by science) and controlling (by technology) the material



world. We therefore pay almost all of our attention to this realm. But most of us are materialists only in practice, not in theory or philosophy. We do not deny the existence of the soul. We understand that the physical heart, the blood pump, is only a part of the body. When we say, "I love you with all my heart," we don't mean "with both the left and right ventricle." And when we speak of the "highways of the heart," we don't mean the arteries and the veins. You are reading this book because you are an amateur psychologist, not an amateur cardiologist.

Everybody understands that except a theoretical, philosophical, ideological materialist. Materialists are not worth arguing with. It is a waste of time. You can't argue about colors with the blind, especially the willfully blind. You can't do *any* science with those who simply refuse to admit the data. You can't do psychology if there is no *psyche*, or theology if there is no *theos*, or physics if there is no *physis*.

Confining ourselves to material data is quite proper when we are doing physical science, including cybernetics (e.g., measuring brain waves). That is a methodological necessity. But we get there only by a prior act of abstraction from the broader and deeper spectrum of human experience; and the materialist forgets, ignores, or denies that broader experience. Materialism is an ism, an ideology.

### **My Assumption**

I will make the two assumptions: that there is both a soul and a God. (One of the many ways I am unlike the Blessed Virgin Mary is that I make more than one Assumption. I also assume that Protestants may protest at my in-house

Catholic pun.) I also assume that the world's biggest faith is not the world's biggest fake, and that the world's most believed and beloved Teacher is not the world's biggest liar, and that the world's most believed and beloved Book is not the world's biggest bogus.

If that assumption is true, then the answer to the heart's deepest longing is God, and Heaven, where we not only see God but actually unite with him, share his life, marry him! Yes, that's what the Book says. Check it out. "Your Maker is your husband, the LORD of hosts is his name" (Is 54:5). The consummation of history is Christ's "marriage" with his bride, his Church—us (Rv 21)! True religion is entering that wedding.

True religion is a matter of the heart; in fact, it is God's heart surgery. But it is not some spiritual technology for manipulating this mysterious center of our being, as if it were a machine with buttons for us to push. Religion is not a technique; religion is a romance, both for us and for God. That's why all the saints say, when speaking of prayer, that methods and techniques are much less important than we think.

It is a spiritual romance, of course, not a biological one. God is not a biological being. "God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth" (Jn 4:24). Although your body and your soul (spirit) are equally necessary for your human nature, they are obviously not equally important. Paralysis of soul is even worse than paralysis of body; it is worse to be confined to an insane asylum than a wheelchair. Losing your body is not the worst thing. It happens to everybody. It's called death.

But losing your soul is the worst thing that can ever happen to you. “For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?” (Mk 8:36, KJV). I think no one in the whole history of the world has ever uttered a more practical sentence than that one. It is the primary principle of economics, the science of profit and loss.

In the heart of our soul is our Jacob’s Ladder to Heaven. It has a name. A powerful enough rocket can attain “escape velocity” and leave the earth’s gravity, but the heart is the only rocket ship that can attain “escape velocity” from the whole universe and go to Heaven.

But how can we escape and transcend the world if we are in the world? Isn’t the heart in us, and aren’t we in the world, and isn’t the heart therefore in the world? Yes and no. In the world, yes, but not only in the world. It is a part of the world, but it is also more than a part of the world.

What a strange claim! Prove it.

I will. It’s surprisingly simple. Premise One: The heart *knows* the world and either loves the world or hates it, or both. (We have “a lover’s quarrel with the world.”) Premise Two: To know or love something is to transcend it, to be other than it, more than it. The projecting machine is not any one of the images it projects on the movie screen. The mind that knows the brain is not any part of the brain. The judge who judges the accused prisoners innocent or guilty is not one of the accused prisoners. The person who hears the music or sees the painting is not one of the notes in the music or one of the brush strokes in the painting. It

is often said that astronomically speaking, man is utterly insignificant. We forget that man is the astronomer.

From these two premises, it necessarily follows that the heart (and also the mind), in some way, transcends the world. It's like a bridge, with one end in this world and the other end in the next. It spans the river of death. And you can cross that bridge, not by your body, but by your soul. By what part of your soul? By the heart. You don't get to Heaven by going outward into space but by going inward. That's what the Book says: the highways to Zion (Heaven) are in the heart.

But beware a very common and very deadly misreading of the verse that says that. It does not say that Heaven is in the heart, but that the highways to it are. It does not say that the heart is the place where we find Heaven itself residing, but that the heart is the place where we find the highways to Heaven. In the heart is the act of finding, not the thing found. How could Heaven be in our hearts? Heaven is perfect. Are we? If Heaven was only something in our own hearts, religion would be auto-eroticism and self-worship, which is exactly what all true religion saves us *from*! How awful would it be if there was nothing better for us than our own pathetically puerile, pitifully paltry, yet pridefully pompous hearts! That's a definition of Hell, not of Heaven.

At the heart of Christianity is the claim that the "way" to Heaven is Christ: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life" (Jn 14:6). But the heart is where He comes to meet us—but only if we let him. He came into our world without our consent—"He came unto his own home, and his

own people received him not” (Jn 1:11)—but he comes into our hearts only with our consent. He is not from the Godfather, who makes you an offer you can’t refuse, but from God the Father, who makes you an offer you can refuse. He will make love to our souls and impregnate them with his life, but only if we want him and ask him in. He is a gentleman. He will not invade the house of our heart. He will not molest us. He is true love, and true love respects freedom. True love is always both given freely and received freely.

That is the only possible reason there could be a Hell. Hell exists only because of our free will, and our free will exists only because of God’s love for us, therefore Hell exists only because of God’s love for us.

### **Three Proofs that the Heart Is “the Heart of the Matter”**

Here are three more proofs that the heart of the matter is the heart and not the head.

#### *Proof 1*

Catholics believe that it was the Holy Spirit who inspired one of the great personal devotions in modern Catholicism, the devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, and also the Church’s liturgical feast of that name. But there is no feast of or devotion to the Sacred Head. There is also a devotion to the Precious Blood, which comes from the heart, but not to the Precious Truths, which come from