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A History of Hell

A man is driven to a wall by a huge wooden stake. Immobilised and helpless, he long ago gave up even trying to move. Any effort in this place is futile and everywhere people are screaming. To his left, a woman sits bound, while around her, assailants crouch near.

If it sounds like a scene from hell; it is. When Hieronymus Bosch painted *The Last Judgement*, he visited every possible torment on the unworthy. With its cartoon style and fantastical creatures, scholars have wondered whether Bosch was quite serious. Was his hell not a little fanciful? Surely hell could not be as bad? But Bosch was a member of a conservative Christian group; and, as such, his hell was no joke.

Bosch's hell fell on a receptive audience. By the time he made this painting somewhere around 1482, the late medieval mind was accustomed to the concept of hell. Preached from every pulpit and driven into every peasant, it was the certain fate to which the majority were doomed. Life on earth was hard enough; people were used to suffering. To a certain extent they were inured to it, which is why medieval punishments were so particularly gruesome and why the corresponding image of hell had to be even worse.

As the victims twisted on the rack, burnt on the stake and were flayed in the market place, the onlookers shuddered and blanched. If this was a foretaste of what could be expected in the great beyond, then what lay in store was not pleasant. And for the ordinary man and woman, the prospect was so real and terrifying, so imminent and final that it dominated the way they lived the only life they actually knew they possessed.

The reality and eternity of hell had strong scriptural backing. Jesus had been distressingly adamant. The story of the Rich Man was tough. Having ignored Lazarus in life, he pleaded from the gates of hell to send a warning to others. And Jesus quoted Isaiah saying;

If your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It's better to enter eternal life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell where the worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.¹

The word he used was 'Gehenna' which was an actual place; a smouldering rubbish pit running on the south side of Jerusalem. In Isaiah's time, children were sacrificed here to the pagan god Moloch. Historically it reeked of death, idolatry and taboo. In Jesus' time it still smelled, though by now only of excrement and animal carcasses. What is interesting is that the fires of the child sacrifice became first the fire of a municipal dump – and then the eternal fires of hell.

The Church Fathers had reinforced a particular reading of Jesus' message. In *The City of God*, Augustine explains it further. Firstly, the Bishop of Hippo sees hell as eternal. While the righteous will be resurrected at the last day, the unworthy will be judged, only to suffer a second death and continue their punishments for all time. To the gentler natured Origen, who believed in the Platonic idea of the pre-existence of souls, suffering on earth was a reflection of past mistakes. To him it was inconceivable that an all-loving God could willingly ordain eternal punishment for a fleeting sin. But Origen's position was unpopular. The idea that all men and women would one day be reconciled to God was declared heretical and he was posthumously excommunicated.

For the majority of Church fathers, only two positions were possible; either God creates a fresh soul for every human being at conception (Immediate Creationism), or the soul was transmitted by one or both of the parents to the unborn child – a theory known as Traducianism. There was some concern over the idea of God having to be 'on watch' for the 'lust of two brutish persons' in order to insert a soul into the product of their liaisons.² But St Augustine is clear that, as all men inherit Adam's Original Sin from the loins of



lust, a wicked soul is a default position. Evil and suffering are man's fault and not God's. God is only acting in his Infinite Justice when he condemns some (most) men to hell. As Philip Almond puts it 'Sin against an Infinite Being, of necessity, merits infinite suffering'.³

With this dismal prospect in mind, pilgrims all over Christendom gathered at shrines, fought in Crusades and established oratories to mitigate both the sins they had inherited and the ones they picked up of their own free

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will. But at least sin and eternal damnation had a comforting, corporate feel. As Chaucer's pilgrims and thousands like them trudged along the rutted tracks of imperfect Europe, they knew they were not alone. And, if they performed enough good deeds or paid for a chantry where priests would sing sufficient masses, then who knows? Maybe you would find the gates of hell barred and those of heaven opened wide, to greet you in your final hour.

Although Augustine was clear that prayer could do nothing for the damned, he prayed fervently for his mother whom he had loved. Later, he was to recount his feelings at her death; 'My soul was wounded, and my life.... torn in pieces, since my life and hers had become a single thing.' He could not help but pray for her; 'Lord, forgive such trespasses as she may have been guilty of..... Forgive them Lord, I beseech Thee.'⁴ But if reward or damnation was fixed at the minute of death, what was the point of these prayers? What effect could they possibly have?

According to Jacques le Goff in his book *The Birth of Purgatory*, the idea of a third state, somewhere between heaven and hell, first appeared around 1170. With it came three possibilities; the wicked would go straight to hell, the good straight to heaven and the vast majority would extend their earthly life in Purgatory where they would be cleansed of their sins immediately after death and prior to the Last Judgement. This immediate post-mortem judgement argues Goff, gave rise to a complicated system of proportionality where sins could be atoned. True, it was still a passive state. The soul could never alter its final result, but purgatory could shorten its time of punishment and hasten it towards a state of grace. And the good thing about purgatory was that it would not last forever. 'Thus there came to be established in the hereafter a variable, measurable and, even more important, manipulable time-scale.'⁵ And, as Philip Almond puts it, it was 'the Church that was in charge of the calculations.'⁶

It was the abuse of these calculations; the sale of indulgences – scraps of parchment

letting people off a specified time in purgatory, dished out by semi-literate priests for a bag of jangling coins – that were among the practices that so enraged Luther. His anger was such that he denied the intermediate state altogether, and gave rise to a whole new way of thinking about Sin and Hell. For Luther, Calvin and subsequent Protestantism, 'sola fide' or 'Justification through faith alone' offered a new and terrifying prospect for the newly dead. 'So sinful was man,' argued Luther, 'so tarnished by the Sin of Adam that nothing could save him other than Christ's atoning love.' It mattered little what a man did in life – no amount of good works, pious acts or anxious alms giving could buy him eternal life. Only God's grace through the death of his only Son could expiate a man for his sins.

During the course of the English Reformation, the idea of predestination affixed itself to many a terrified psyche. Under this banner, not only could a person do nothing to further his cause with his Maker, but his fate was eternally predestined. He had only to live out his life like a river flowing down a gully – his eventual destination – either in Heaven or Hell – was as inevitable as the water one day reaching the sea.

Neither was anyone in any doubt about the numbers destined for hell. In his book *Heaven and Hell in Enlightenment England*, Philip Almond quotes a certain Tobias Swinden, and his reaction to a calculation that there would be 1,000,000 souls in one square mile of hell. 'Tis a poor, mean and narrow Conception both of the Numbers of the Damned, and of the Dimensions of hell' he fumed.⁷ The more charitable Matthew Horbery re-read the New Testament and declared that 'half would be damned and half would be saved.'⁸ This sounds promising; until he went on to say that infants who died before they had sinned could reasonably be expected to escape punishment. But *then* he calculated that, as half the population dies in infancy, the vast majority of anyone surviving into adulthood is doomed by their very survival to hell.

Hell was the intensifying of every possible pain, hurt, stench and darkness. Though fires burned perpetually, the bodies they burnt never disintegrated. Moreover, the fires gave off no light. The miseries of life were but 'flea-bites' compared to that which was to come. It is unimaginable how many countless human beings lived their lives under such a frightful spectre, and the charge that hell was a device

constructed to keep social order was one posited before either Dostoevsky or Marx.

It is tempting to straitjacket hell into a cloud that has loomed over men and woman through the ages, darkening their lives and steering their actions. Tempting but unfair. And the unfairness has something to do with the fact that it is actually not fear, but love that has been the dominant force behind Christianity. The early Desert Fathers, who, in the 5th and 6th centuries lived lives of extraordinary goodness, were motivated not by hell, but by the desire to be like Christ, to see Christ in other people and to love 'as he loves us.' The story of one monk who, robbed by thieves of everything he had, ran after the thief to also offer him his tunic – was an action driven by both love and fear.⁹ But the fear was not that of hell. It was of something both more powerful and more personal – the fear of letting himself down, of being less than he was capable of being. Of being less like the Christ that he loved.

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In the 13th century Aquinas had used the language of Aristotle to explain the 'telos' or 'end' of man as the fulfilment of his God given nature. Whereas for St Thomas, evil had no substance in itself - being only the privation of good - so by extension, hell could be the absence of that which a man needs to become all that he is capable of being. It is a state in the making as well as a state after death, because it is the denial of one's inner reality or God given potential.

With this in mind, it should be stressed that a literal understanding of hell has never been the whole story. With the conception of God as Infinite Goodness whose nature lies at the heart of man's being, comes the commensurate understanding that hell is less something literal than metaphorical or symbolic.

With roots in Origen, Aquinas and even Augustine; it is this view of hell as an ongoing

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psychological perception of the nature of man, and his real and radical freedom, that has been the prevailing view of hell among modern theologians. In the 19th century, the clergyman Wathen Call was so haunted by the thought that 'a great part of the human race... (are) kept everlastingly alive, to be the victims of... insane, concentrated malignity on the part of God,'¹⁰ that he resigned his orders. He would not have had to resign them today.

Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury has said;

My concept of hell, I suppose, is being stuck with myself forever and with no way out. Whether anybody ever gets to that point I have no idea. But that it's possible to be stuck with my selfish little ego for all eternity, that's what I would regard as hell.¹¹

It is a long way from Bosch's vision of tormented limbs, but it does speak clearly of the psychological – and spiritually awful – vision of hell that modern theology asserts.

The Anglican theologian Richard Bauckham writes;

Human beings are made to find fulfilment ultimately only in God. Salvation, both now and after death, is in knowing God. If this is the destiny for which God has made us, hell cannot be a kind of parallel, alternative destiny. Hell is the result of refusing the one destiny for which we were made and the only way in which human life can find eternal fulfilment.¹²

His words are not dissimilar to those of Pope John Paul II;

The images of hell that Sacred Scripture presents to us must be correctly interpreted. They show the complete frustration and emptiness of life without God. Rather than a place, hell indicates the state of those who freely and definitively separate themselves from God, the source of all life and joy.¹³

This disembodied, poetic view of hell is rich

both spiritually and psychologically, attesting as it does to the reality of the choice and the goodness open to God's creations. And yet the visceral and more twisted vision of hell is never very far away. A survey conducted by religioustolerance.org has some surprising results. According to this, only 37% of Christians believe hell to be separation from God, while 85% of people polled thought it would be a real place with tangible suffering.¹⁴

'Alright then, I'll go to hell,' remarked Huckleberry Finn when he decided not to tell Miss Watson where her runaway slave could be found. 'It was awful thoughts and awful words. But they was said. And I let them stay'd said and never thought no more about reforming,' Huck says as he decides which path his eternal life should take.¹⁵

'If you are going through hell, keep going,' said Winston Churchill, drawing on a cigar whilst broadcasting to wartime Britain. It is good advice. It remains good advice wherever one should find oneself in times to come. And for those who assert 'hell is dead,' there is the

Classroom Resources

1. Hell lends itself well to lessons with images. One idea is to introduce an image such as *Illustration to Dante: The Divine Comedy* by William Blake. Explain that Dante saw hell as a series of circles – as depicted in the painting. The really incorrigible sins (and sinners) are in the centre of hell, and the more understandable – or forgivable – on the outer circles. Invite students to come up with a list of activities, which they think are sinful today. Which 'sin' would students place in which circle and why? A variation of the game is to make a pile of sins on individual pieces of paper and students can move another person's sin to replace it with their own – if and only if they can justify their action.
2. Jean-Paul Sartre said that 'hell is other people.' Invite students to write a suitably sharp aphorism to sum up their own version of hell.
3. Not all sins are crimes, and not all crimes are sins. Invite students to come up with examples of each, and debate in what circumstances something might be a 'crime' and not necessarily a sin eg. in England, fox hunting is now a crime though some people would say it is not a sin. Some Christians might say that abortion is a sin, but it is not a crime.
4. Hold a classroom debate on the statement "The idea of eternal hell is incompatible with a God of love." Students stand on one side of the room, or in the middle depending on whether they agree or disagree. Explain that everyone in the middle – including yourself – are undecided. Students on either side must put forward persuasive arguments to influence you (and others in the middle ground), to move closer to their own position.
5. Historically, the five justifications of punishment have been retribution, vindication, protection, deterrence and reform. List these in order of importance a) for the family of a murder victim b) for society c) for yourself. Justify each list.
6. Are there any sins today that deserve punishment in hell? If so, what are they?
7. If Oscar Wilde is right and 'we make this world our hell,' collect newspaper and magazine images to create a collage of hell. Some students might also use art to create a collage of heaven.
8. Invite students to add to the following list of propositions about hell. The class must then vote on one to debate:
 - 'Without conscience there would be no hell'
 - 'Criminals such as Hitler deserve to rot in hell'
 - 'Hell is just an idea to make people live correctly'
 - 'Hell is real because scripture warns us about it'
9. Play a game of 'tennis' with words, titles or phrases that contain the word 'hell' within them. For example, you 'serve' with "hell-hound," your opponent counters with "hell-fire," you hit back with "Bat out of hell." The person that pauses too long drops a point NB. This game is a great revision tool for all kinds of other topics too!

chilling realisation that one can never be sure. One would go far to find a Christian – even a modern secular Christian – who would deny the concept of hell altogether. They might agree with Oscar Wilde that ‘We are each our own devil and we make this world our hell,’ but hell as a concept still speaks profoundly to the spiritual psyche. Even – perhaps particularly – St Augustine, who could write; ‘In that day Happiness shall be the lot of... the good, while deserved and supreme misery shall be the portion of the wicked’ would certainly have understood, and perhaps even have smiled. Some understanding of Hell is as real as it ever has been, and it is not impossible that – paradoxically – the world would be a meaner, poorer and ultimately more restricted place without it.

Nicky Hansell

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Endnotes

- 1 Mark 9:47
- 2 Rust, G. *A letter of resolution concerning Origen and the chief of his opinions*. London : C.L., 1661.
- 3 Almond, Philip. *Heaven and Hell in Enlightenment England*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1994.
- 4 Augustine, St. *Confessions* 9.12.30.
- 5 Goff, Jacques Le. *The Birth of Purgatory*. s.l. : University of Chicago Press, 1986.
- 6 Almond, Philip. *Heaven and Hell in Enlightenment England*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1994.
- 7 Ibid p.73
- 8 Ibid p.74
- 9 Williams, Rowan. *Where God Happens - Discovering Christ in One Another*. s.l. : New Seeds, 2007.
- 10 Rowell, G. *Hell and the Victorians*. s.l. : Clarendon, 1974.
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- 12 Bauckham, R. Short Essays: Hell. *Richard Bauckham – Biblical Scholar and Theologian*. [Online] <http://richardbauckham.co.uk/index.php?page=short-essays>
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- 14 Beliefs about Heaven and Hell. *www.religioustolerance.org*. [Online] September 2003. http://www.religioustolerance.org/chr_poll3.htm#salv.
- 15 Twain, M. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* 1884.



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Dominic Hodnett, Head of Philosophy, Christ Church Grammar School, Perth

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