

Thinking Of Hell

GEOFF RYAN, MAY/JUNE 2003

*"All folks who pretend to religion and grace,
Allow there's a Hell, but dispute of the place;"
(Jonathan Swift)*

*"Excuse me for not answering. I have friends in
both places." (Jean Cocteau, politely declining to offer
any opinion when the subject of heaven and hell was
broached in a conversation)*

*"Yes, because it is the dogma of the church – but I
don't believe anyone is in it." (Abbe Arthur Mugnier,
upon being asked if he believed in hell)*

I know at least one person in town who is terrified of going to hell. He came out with it once when I was visiting him in prison and took me a little by surprise. He is a tough guy - a little crazy even, some might say. There is not much finesse to him, but a reputation for unpredictability and a lengthy criminal record packed with violence.

On this visit he was awaiting trial, the charges more serious than the crime because he was under surveillance for organized crime activities at the time. He worked for the mob as a low-level enforcer. There didn't seem to be much he was afraid of. The way the other prisoners reacted to him, this certainly seemed to be the case.

He was afraid of hell, though. After talking for about half an hour about things he had done, a confessional of sorts, he leaned across the table in the visiting room, dropped his voice down low, glanced around the empty visiting room as if there were someone else besides just the two of us and hissed with a low urgency... "I don't want to burn in hell!"

As I mentioned, this took me by surprise, coming so unexpectedly at the end of a confession session with hardly a warning in sight. It seemed at first that he just blurted it out but then I understood that he had been heading in this direction all along, leading up to it in fact.

It was this vivid fear that had been preying on his mind as he sat in prison. Sunday school memories stirred up by the chapel services he had been attending in order to kill time as he waited for his day in court. He was afraid and looking for an out.

Frankly, I did not know what to say not having thought much about hell lately. I was certainly not used to using it as an evangelistic method or a ruse to winkle my way into someone's soul in order to get a profession of faith. Lets say it isn't a window of opportunity I am accustomed to climbing through. But then it was not me who brought hell up.

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We do not talk about hell much - not in The Salvation Army, not in evangelical circles and definitely not in Canada. Hell remains the domain of the wild-eyed, revivalists who inhabit the barely respectable fringes of evangelicalism; the crazies south of the border in their bad suits and worse accents (yet somehow scads of money to pay for TV time).

Most of us are several generations removed from such crudity and view their antics with distaste. We are more educated, more urbane, more dignified and frankly much more humane than to be scaring people with tales of everlasting torment and unquenchable flames and devils with pitchforks. We know that fear is only good as a short-term motivator, that it wears off pretty quickly. We are surgeons, scalpling in with razor-sharp precision on seeker-sensitive terms, not theological thugs bludgeoning our way into people's souls with the doctrine of hell as our cudgel. Shudder!

I personally cannot remember hearing one single sermon on hell in, say, the last ten years (not that I'm complaining, mind you). Jonathan Edwards may have been able to convict ranks of New Englanders with his "*Sinners in the Hands of An Angry God*", but what was

effective in 1741 might not play so well in 2003. Besides, I have my doubts about the efficacy of any step of faith motivated primarily by self-preservation.

As is usually the case, there seems to be two hard poles between which the majority of us flounder and flop and eventually position ourselves. On the more liberal (ergo compassionate) side are those who cannot conceive of themselves treating their children or any of their friends in this manner - namely consigning them to a hell - so naturally enough they transfer this parental indulgence to God. Hell is strange that way. It's the one doctrine that makes otherwise theologically conservative people go soft and wobble into a vague liberalism. People who would be quite offended if you referred to them as such, nevertheless slide into a gentle universalism in order to get a handle on hell. Now going this way raises all sorts of questions about God's deep intolerance for sin, his unassailable holiness, not to mention more than a few passages of the Bible that will need some rather clever explaining away. For me it seems too easy an out - way too easy. Why play the game if everybody wins in the end? Why run the race if it's fixed? Common sense says there is a ying to the yang of God's love.

The other side is more hardcore. It's made up of the black-and-whiters who hold fiercely to a kind of "The-Bible-said-it-I-believe-it-that-settles-it-turn-or-burn/Jesus-or-hell" kind of theology. All Augustinian rigidity and dire consequences. They don't do much for me either. I've never liked bullies - physical or theological. At the end of the day, the hardcore crew seem to enjoy the prospect of hell far too much for my liking. There is an almost pathological glee about their adamant views on the matter and their careless willingness to consign whole nations into the lake of fire. This raises all sorts of questions about God's essential nature being love, the tremendous pains he has gone through over several thousand years of human history in order to reconcile mankind to him, his utter inability to sin (isn't torture always a sin?), to name a few?

Such people would have had a hard time in Russia. I was constantly fielding queries from first-generation Christians who, as the concept of a hell dawned on them, wondered if this meant that the past several generations of their countrymen and women, not to mention parents, grand-parents, siblings, friends...were basically - toast? Their lives on earth had been hell enough under Stalin and his cronies - but I'm the guy here to tell them that it was all just a warm-up for the really big one? There was

no way on earth! Innate cowardice aside, I didn't really believe it.

I resolved the issue for myself while I was in Russia, about ten years ago, by reading a book entitled "Four Views on Hell". The book consists of four theologians each of whom in turn present their views on hell, while the other three respond. The four views were: literal, metaphorical, purgatorial and conditional. The Salvation Army's position, according to our 11th doctrine is literal, but I must confess that after reading this book, I became a conditionalist, if not a downright annihilationist. Clark Pinnock's rhetoric won the day for me as he eloquently held the line between the demands of a Holy God, the various Biblical hints on some very nasty consequences to sin and the essential quality of God as Love.

The competition consisted of the literalist, John Walvoord of Dallas Theological Seminary, who was predictably unyielding, with the smugness of a convinced inerrantist and the smell of blind faith about him. The metaphoricalist (read as liberal) was William Crockett of Alliance Theological Seminary. He was frankly a little too airy-fairy and high-brow for the average pew warmer to ever comprehend, myself included. Zachary Hayes' defense of purgatory (Catholic Theological Union) was tempting, but too dependent on tradition and not enough on Scripture and overall - a little too weird for a Protestant boy.

But Pinnock hit the nail on the head for me and I became a believer. His convincing theology aside, I figured that any serious Canadian theologian who has consistently resisted the siren-call of the United States, who has had the courage to publicly change his mind and his theology over the years and who chooses to worship and minister in a small, inner-city church - well, he's got my vote.

For purely psychological terms, I think our 11th doctrine could do with a bit of brushing up. It's a bit of a downer to end our statement of faith on. At each commissioning of new Salvation Army officers, as the new hopefuls repeat the doctrines from memory, that final "...*endless punishment of the wicked*" always seems to echo around whatever hall the Army is using that year - it kind of kills the conversation. If it *must* stay in, maybe we could shuffle things around a bit, put it first and at the very least end on something more upbeat such as: "...*whosoever will may be saved.*" (doctrine 6); or: "...*undivided in essence and co-equal in power and glory.*" (doctrine 3); or even: "...*whole spirit and soul and body*

may be *preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.*" (doctrine 10)? Just a thought.

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As for the guy I visited in prison. He walked. In spite of his past record, in spite of being on probation and in spite of having been caught red-handed, he went free. Amazing what can be done with one of the best lawyers in town on the case. Last I heard he had become a partner

in a downtown sports bar, our visiting room chat most probably a distant memory.

But you know what? Theological queries and methodological misgivings aside, I've been thinking lately that I may just walk into that bar one day and remind him of that conversation. A herald of hell – or a messenger anyway, in a manner of speaking. It seems to be the only chink in his armour and some windows you have to learn to crawl through, even if they just open a crack.