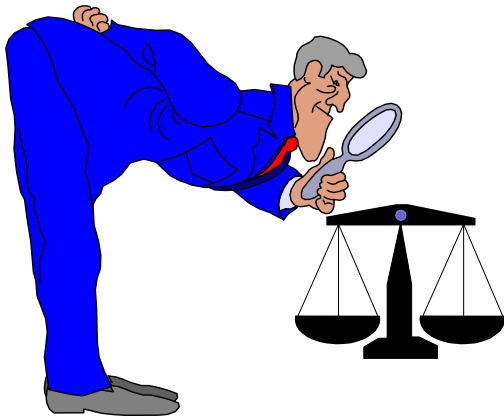


# Hell! Certainty or Fantasy?



## An Examination on Divine Condemnation

“There are a few people who believe in Hell and Damnation – even today”, my religious studies professor declared to me. “It is remarkable that such narrow-minded people are still around. They certainly do not understand God”. His words connected with

me as I walked out from class. He certainly seemed to have a point. Thoughts of Hell take us back to medieval times when people lived in fear of flames of the after-life – as well as falling off the edge of the world. It almost seems a bit childish. As well it raises some hard questions about the goodness and love of God, which was what my professor was driving at. After all, if God loves us, and He is Good – surely He would not condemn anyone to Hell. Is it not more likely that simple-minded ‘Christians’ have extrapolated from some obscure Biblical texts to satisfy their self-righteousness? It is ironic that those who preach ‘Hell-fire & brimstone’ always think that others are going there – never themselves. Is it not more likely a scare tactic to intimidate and control us to their narrow way of thinking?

Many of us would probably identify with my professor. And given that hell is such a negative and unattractive thought, we generally dismiss it from serious thinking – in fact we explicitly avoid thinking about it – reasoning somewhat as my professor did, and feeling rather safe in the knowledge that the majority thinks similarly. As long as we are decent enough people – and if there is a God – then He will surely not bother with Hell since He is full of love and forgiveness. We therefore avoid such enslaving & negative scare tactics and concentrate on positive ideas – love, mercy etc. - which are more inspiring.

What was helpful to me, in trying to think through this difficult topic, was to recognize that it is the truth or falseness of a belief that is always the primary issue, not whether it is negative belief or whether it is doubted by the majority of people. After all, before Copernicus, the majority of people thought that the sun revolved around the earth – but he, being in the small minority, correctly taught that the earth revolved around the sun. Furthermore, thoughtful reflections on serious issues that have potentially negative results are required for safe & healthy living. Information campaigns about such things as AIDS, drunk driving, and smoking have been greatly effective in keeping people safe and healthy. But they are effective precisely because they have forced us to think about

negative and serious consequences of our unsafe actions – then we can better reflect on the outcome of our choices. And we do not consider it manipulative or unfair of these campaigns. In fact, since the outcomes of the issues are truthfully portrayed they are liberating.

But is there a way to get at the ‘truthfulness’ of such claims of Divine Judgment and Eternal Punishment? Doesn’t that all have to be taken on ‘faith’? And that discrepancy between the love and mercy of God with His damning judgment. Isn’t it self-contradicting, thus an irrational belief?

The answer comes in understanding the implications of *love* and *God*. *Love* is not mere sentimentality, but it seeks a relationship between the people involved. In order for a loving relationship to be established, love must always be freely returned by the beloved to the lover. If there is no such return - there can be no love relationship. Consider love between a man and a woman as an example. One of them becomes interested in the other, and then (s)he courts the other to return love. The lover will wait for the beloved to return love, and until it is returned, a full loving relationship cannot develop. And the beloved is always free to say ‘no thanks’. Eventually, if love is not reciprocated, the two go their separate ways. The Bible uses marriage as an illustration of God’s love, so our above example would be applicable to God. He did not create us to ‘believe in him’ so much as to respond to His Love. Because He is love, he seeks a love relationship from us, which really is a commitment of our wills to Him – just as marriage is a commitment of two people to each other.

“Fine”, we may think, but then why can’t He just leave us in peace if we do say ‘no’ to his relationship offer, just like people do when they say ‘no’ in courtship & marriage. Actually, that is what God does. The difference is that people interrelate and have relationships through the fabric of this world, where we actually can be separate from each other and still both be in the world. For example, there are many relationship breakdowns between people that

are ongoing, but the world is so large that the estranged people can go their separate ways & not relate, and yet both still remain in the world. But with God it is not like that. The Bible declares that He is everywhere, and that He made everything, upholding even the fabric of the universe we exist within. If that is true, then the concept of hell is a logical conclusion, rather than a contradiction. We are free to go our way, to say 'no I would like to do my own thing' and separate from Him – but that is precisely what Hell is - separation from God and the Dominion He is building. That is why the Bible uses terms like 'darkness', 'outer darkness' to describe hell since God is the creator of light. He is the center & source of all things. So to be separate from him is to literally be in 'outer darkness'. God is eternal, outside of time, which is itself created by God. So when we step out of time we find that our relationship with God is likewise eternal – in center & light (heaven) or in 'outer darkness' – an eternal hell.

So logic argues for the probability of hell rather than against it, given the premise that an eternal Creator is the source of everything, and He is working towards establishing a love relationship with us. For now we get to enjoy some of the Creator's handiwork – light, the earth, our bodies, music, good food, etc – all that is part of living in this world. When two people court there is also some sharing while one woos the other. But when one courting partner says a final 'no' to the other, (s)he cannot expect a continued sharing of common things, planning for common co-habitation, planning for a mutual family, sharing of money – in short building a life together. Similarly, if we do not want a relationship with God, but would rather do our own thing, we cannot then expect to share and be part of his 'House', His 'possessions', His 'family' etc. So we are outside of all that. But to be outside of that is also to be outside of every good thing – since He made it all. So we are in Hell – an eternal outer darkness.

Now showing the logical possibility of hell does not prove that it exists. Is there any other basis by which we can make an informed evaluation? Actually there

is. In most areas of belief and practice we place our faith in reliable & authoritative sources that speak to us on the issue at hand. For example, when I travel to foreign lands, I often bring a *Lonely Planet* travel guide, as this is a book written by persons who have been to the country and can provide me with useful insights about it. When we are sick we go to a doctor to get information on our condition since (s)he is an expert about sickness & health. Is there a similar such reliable source on hell, or is it solely the domain of obscure and harsh passages in the Old Testament? It may surprise us to know that it is Jesus Christ himself – the person who stands out in history as the teacher *par excellence* on topics such as mercy, forgiveness and the love of God. In fact, the reason we associate *love* with *God* is largely through the influence of this man. Though he did teach about these things, he certainly stepped directly into some troubling teachings about hell and a day when God will grant us our wish for doing our own thing apart from Him if we so desire. And he says that he himself will be the Judge! Consider the following quotes from Jesus:

“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord’, will enter the Kingdom of Heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven... Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers’” Matthew 7: 21-23

“The Kingdom of Heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his servants to those who had been invited ... but they refused to come. Then he sent more servants and ... invited [them] ... But they paid no attention and went off – one to his field, another to his business... Then the King said to his servants, ‘Go to the street corners and invite any you find’ ... Then the king told the attendants ‘Tie him hand and foot and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth’” Matthew 22: 1- 13

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, ... he will sit on the throne in heavenly glory .. He will

separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats ... Then the King will say to those on his right [the sheep], ‘Come, ... take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world .... Then he will say to those on his left [the goats], ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil ...’ Matthew 25:31-41

“It is better for you to enter the Kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell” Mark 9:47

“Fear him who, after the killing of the body, has power to throw you into hell” Luke 12:5

“Once the owner of the house gets up and closes the door, you will stand outside ... But he will reply, ‘I don’t know you or where you came from. Away from me all you evildoers’” Luke 13:25-27

I have included sample quotes of Jesus from three of the four gospels, just to show that at least he taught the reality of Hell as an utter separation from God and His Kingdom of Good. Of course, that does not necessarily prove it. But consider that his teachings on mercy, forgiveness & love have proven to be the most enduring wisdom guiding us through pitfalls in our human relations. We have at least a good basis to consider that he may be equally insightful in warning us of the final realities in our relationships with God. And ignoring the issue will not make it disappear. At the very least, it may be worthwhile to examine the credibility of Jesus, so that we can make an informed valuation of this man, and his teachings about God & people. Whether there is an eternity that we will face – together with or separated from – God. Otherwise, as the saying goes.. ‘there may be hell to pay’.

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