Does hell still have a future - Fr Martin Henry

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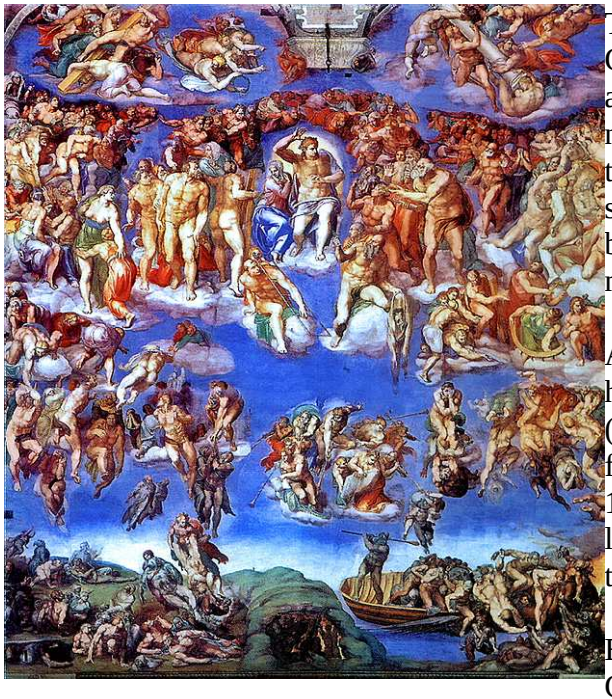
Is it still relevant or necessary to talk about hell in the Church asks **Fr Martin Henry**

In 1998 the Polish writer, Czeslaw Milosz (1911-2004), observed: "In my lifetime Heaven and Hell disappeared...After two thousand years in which a huge edifice of creeds and dogmas had been erected, from Origen and St Augustine to Thomas Aquinas and Cardinal Newman, when every work of the human mind and of human hands was created within a system of reference, the age of homelessness has dawned."



The new circumstances in which Christianity now exists are acknowledged by most commentators nowadays. And it must be admitted that, as regards belief in hell, specifically, the future doesn't look too bright, even in the judgement of mainstream theologians.

Alister McGrath, for example, states in his An Introduction to Christianity (1997): "One of the more noticeable features of western culture since about 1960 onward is that any form of lingering popular belief in hell seems to have evaporated."

Even the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium) of the Second Vatican Council, promulgated in 1964, while it evokes somewhat hesitantly and perfunctorily in section 48 the possibility of damnation, mentioning 'eternal fire', 'the exterior darkness', and 'the weeping and gnashing of teeth', does not use the actual word hell itself.

Yet just a few short centuries earlier, in the 16th Century to be precise, one of the now Doctors of the Church, St Teresa of àvila (1515-82), spoke quite directly - in chapter 3 of The Book of Her Life - of fear of hell as being a key factor kindling in her the desire to be a nun. In chapter 32 of the same work, St Teresa even gives a famous description of a vision of hell she was granted.

Clearly, a huge change in the religious sensibility of the West has come about since the age of St Teresa. One obvious token of the change is the way what used to terrify people of an earlier time - namely, the possibility of hell - has now become a subject of humour, even among believers. Or from the more worldly-wise, the topic elicits, at most, only wisecracks. 'Hell is Heaven enjoying itself' is an anonymous example of this genre.

But before trying to see if the traditional view of hell has indeed now lost all serious meaning for thinking people, it might be useful to survey briefly the long process during which the term hell has already seen its meaning change many times.

History of the concept of hell

Unlike purgatory, which was officially recognised only in the 13th Century, hell has always been a part of the Church's tradition. But the earliest texts relating to hell go back much further than Christianity.

It seems that human beings first began burying, rather than cremating, their dead about 50,000BC.

And it is a small step from that, to believing that the dead, once they have been placed below the surface of the earth, actually continue to dwell there and go on carrying out their previous activities, if in attenuated ways.

Hell, at this early stage, is not bound up with any notion of suffering or punishment. It refers rather, literally, to the underworld or nether world.

This is reflected in the Irish term for hell (ifreann), which derives from the Latin inferus or infernus, meaning simply 'that which is below'. The English term hell derives from the Old English helan, meaning 'conceal' or 'cover'.

The prehistoric hells were quite democratic, in the sense that everyone ended up there, but all led a shadowy, dull, fairly mournful and monotonous existence. The question of judgement and punishment, in the later Christian sense, is not yet really apparent.

But, gradually, the notion gained ground that life in the underworld is related to one's behaviour during life on earth.

The Christian vision of hell seems to have emerged from a fusion of ideas about the underworld that derived from the biblical (and wider near eastern) world, on the one hand, and the ideas on hell to be found in the Greco-Roman world, on the other.

What is worth noting is that, in general, the Bible itself is quite reticent about hell. In the Old Testament, at least up until roughly the 3rd Century BC, there is an absence of any sense of hell as a place of punishment in the afterlife. And this despite the fact that other religions were, by biblical times, well advanced in their own thinking on the subject.

Indeed, it seems to have been contact with other religions and world-views, rather than any intellectual developments within Judaism itself, that prompted further thought about the afterlife among Jews.

And from apocalyptic literary traditions, wherever they originated, came the stock-in-trade of visions of hell: torments, consuming worms, and flames.

But that is to anticipate somewhat. In the literary cultures of ancient Greece and the Bible, the underworld - what was later to transmute into 'hell' in our vocabulary - was referred to as Hades and Sheol respectively.

In Greek mythology, Hades was the dwelling-place of the dead. In the Old Testament, Sheol, a word, it seems, of unknown origin, referred to the abode of the shades, the underworld.

When the Jewish scriptures were translated into Greek, Hades was used to render Sheol. And the term Hades is quite often found, not surprisingly, in the New Testament, though now with an air of menace. For example, in the story of Dives and Lazarus in Luke's Gospel (16: 23), the rich man goes to Hades, where he is in torment.

So, already, at this relatively early stage, the notion of the suffering of the damned after death appears in a Christian (con)text.

In the New Testament, the term Tartarus is also found for hell (in II Peter 2:4). Tartarus in Greek mythology was apparently quite chilly as is the last circle of hell in Dante. And some early Irish texts too portray hell, curiously enough, as freezing rather than roasting.

When St Brendan on his voyage, for instance, encountered Judas on a little island presumably thought to be an outcrop of hell, he learns from Judas that on Thursdays he gets thrown down into an abyss where he is frozen with the cold, and mentions that there is no suffering like the icy cold felt in that abyss.

One mitigating feature, incidentally, of Judas's lot was that he did get one day a week off to rest from his torments, from Saturday evening until after vespers on Sunday.

So maybe medieval Irish hells were not quite as unrelenting in their horror as some others.

More defining for the Christian notion of hell is the mention in the New Testament of Gehenna ('the valley of groaning').

Seemingly, it referred to an ancient Canaanite cultic site where burnt offerings were made to the deity Baal, and maybe even human sacrifice practised.

By the time of the Jews' return from the Babylonian exile in the 6th Century BC, it had become a kind of huge rubbish dump where waste materials and animal carcasses were always burning.

Worms and fire were constant features of the place, and they became part of the mythology of hell (see, for example, Mk 9: 47-48): a place where the worm would never die and the fire never go out.

It is, however, worth pointing out that the theme of hell, while clearly present, is actually quite rare in the writings that make up the New Testament.

Paul's writings, the earliest in the New Testament, rarely mention hell, though he does allude to the final judgement. The New Testament writer who is most expansive on the notion of hell is Matthew, who makes more references than any other evangelist to such things as 'weeping and gnashing of teeth', 'outer darkness', the 'gates of hell', or the 'Gehenna of fire'. St John the Divine supplied the 'lake of fire and brimstone' (Rev 20: 10).

Finally, on the question of the New Testament's teaching on hell, and just to avoid any confusion on the matter, a brief mention should be made of what was to become a specific item in the Creed: Christ's descent into hell (descensus Christi ad inferos).

In medieval English mystery plays, this was to become the theme of Christ's 'Harrowing of Hell'.

The notion has a foothold in the New Testament in the letters of Paul (Rom 10: 7; Eph 4: 8-10) and 1 Pet (3, 19-20; 4: 6). But it has nothing to do with what came to be the classical notion of hell as the place of eternal punishment of the damned, a place or condition of unending distress and despair.

It refers rather to the ancient Christian belief that Christ preached the good news of salvation to the just of the Old Testament who had lived before he came, and were waiting in the underworld for their redemption.

'Harrowing', in the English expression, does not refer to anguish or suffering of any kind, but has rather the meaning of 'robbing', as if Christ had made a kind of triumphant 'smash-and-grab' raid on the abode of the devil, overpowered or outwitted him, and rescued the just who had been waiting for him.

Development of the doctrine of hell in the post-biblical period

The doctrine of hell developed in the post-biblical period at both a theological and a popular level. Theologically, there were two main tendencies: one to see the pains and punishments of hell as eternal and irrevocable, and the other to hope for a final salvation for all.

Origen is associated with this latter teaching (apocatastasis panton), and Augustine with the sterner version of hell, which saw all pagans (who had original sin) and all children who died without baptism and all Christians who persevered in grave sin, as destined for eternal damnation.

The writer, however, who systematised for the Western world the whole eschatology ['doctrine of the Last Things'] of the Church was someone who rarely enough gets the credit - if that's the right word - for his vastly influential undertaking.

This was the Spanish theologian, St Julian of Toledo (642-90), the last eminent figure of the Visigothic Church before the Muslim invasion of 711. His work on eschatology was entitled Prognosticon futuri saeculi ('Foreknowledge of the World to Come'), and was, in the Middle Ages, a much cited work.

It was not, of course, original or innovatory, but what it did do was to systematise for the first time theological reflection on the 'Last Things'.

This work is in three parts: they deal with (1) the subject of death, (2) the state of the souls of the dead after death and before the resurrection (i.e., in the 'intermediate state'), and (3) the resurrection of the dead. The first ever English translation of this book was only published this year.

Much better-known thinkers of the medieval period refined Catholic thinking on hell, developing such distinctions among the pains of hell as 'the privative, or poena damni, and the positive, or poena sensus, the former being the forfeiture of the divine presence, the latter including the inner tortures of despair and anguish and the external torments by demons, fire, etc.' (Van A. Harvey).

But in the medieval period, the most celebrated treatment of hell was, of course, that given by Dante in the Divine Comedy. Interestingly, Dante does not mention the presence of fire until circle 6, but the bottom-most pit of hell, where the traitors are kept, is, as already intimated, frozen over.

Official Church teaching, at the Councils of Florence and Trent in the 15th and 16th Centuries respectively, ratified the views of the Scholastic theologians. And it was reiterated by the Catholic Catechism, ½1035 (1994).

Only a few weeks ago, on September 26, 2010, commenting at the Angelus on the parable of Dives and Lazarus (Lk 16: 19-31), Pope Benedict XVI seemed to endorse unequivocally the possibility of hell. Hell, in other words, does not seem to have been abolished by the Catholic Church. The question still is, of course: What does this mean?

The Modern Period

What seemed to make the first major breach in the Church's teaching on hell developed in the Enlightenment, when scepticism about any privileged access to transcendent truth became widespread. And hard though conservative elements within Christendom may have tried to retain hell and the fear of hell as a pastoral strategy for keeping the Faithful true to the teachings of the Church, the damage was done.

The traditional belief in the eternity of the torments of hell just no longer seemed credible.

The distinguished Church historian, the late John McManners, reckoned that the Enlightenment actually 'did a . . . service to Christianity by ridiculing hell, the ironies of Voltaire and Diderot clinching the case already advanced by innovative Christian thinkers'.

The question of hell has become an increasingly embarrassing thorn in Christianity's side since the Enlightenment.

Traditional teaching has always insisted that at the end of time those who have responded to God's grace and been purified by it will enter eternal bliss, if need be after a further period of purification in purgatory following their death, whereas those who have definitively rejected God will be in hell.

Even the compromise solution of 'annihilationism' (i.e., the notion that the irretrievably wicked will not be condemned to hell for eternity, but will be simply annihilated), which tried to take account of both God's infinite love and the human freedom to reject God, was specifically condemned by the Fifth Lateran Council in 1513.

Yet, how can hell, understood as an eternity of suffering, be balanced against the Church's claim that God is love? How can an all-loving almighty God consign any of his creatures to eternal anguish and despair?

Apart from the moral and emotional revulsion one might feel at such a prospect, is it not close to dualism? It is hardly surprising that Church teaching on hell should have been found problematic at many points in Christian history, from Origen to Hans Urs von Balthasar.

What can be said with certainty is that the Church has never stated that any specific individual was in hell, only that hell remains a permanent possibility for free human beings.

It is worth pointing out in this context that while the Church has ventured into the business of declaring who is in Heaven, in its process of beatification and canonization, there is no similar procedure for declaring who might be in hell.

Such considerations may not, however, constitute the most burning issue in modern theological reflection on hell.

Transformation of hell in the modern world

It is undeniable that in the modern world, when hell has ceased to have the imaginative hold over many minds it once had, it has, as it were, made a dramatic comeback as an existentially experienced reality.

Germany's greatest writer, Goethe, once wrote that Homer taught him with ever increasing clarity that human beings were on earth to create hell for each other.

More worrying, however, is the critic George Steiner's hypothesis (developed in the work In Bluebeard's Castle), of a direct link between the decline of belief in hell in recent centuries in the West and the European enactment of the horrors of hell in the 20th Century.

It is, to put it mildly, disturbing to think that what Steiner calls 'the centrality of Hell in the Western order' could have displaced so catastrophically the Christian message of God as love.

Steiner's grim conclusion: 'In the camps the millenary pornography of fear and vengeance cultivated in the Western mind by Christian doctrines of damnation, was realised', is hardly one that can leave Christian thought indifferent.

Yet, I still think it is saner and finally more hopeful to accept the unpalatable truth contained in the Church's teaching on hell, despite all the many malevolent interpretations and lurid exaggerations to which it has fallen prey in the past.

The truth, which the doctrine seeks to give recognition to, is that questions of ultimate good and evil are not illusory. Human decisions can have lethal, devastating consequences, which are irreversible.

The sins of the world, which continue to inflict unimaginable suffering on human beings, have to be taken seriously, not least for the potentially eternal anguish they may visit upon the perpetrators of evil themselves: and who is without sin?

But the traditional visions of hell are perhaps not so much visions of what is to come, as rather visions of, or visceral reactions to, the damage inflicted in history by human beings on each other.

So far, so bad. But the Church's message of redemption also contains the idea that what is impossible for human beings, is possible for God.

The understanding of Christ, as the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, while it does not imply that sins can be undone, does surely suggest that the damage they do can be absorbed by God.

This may, of course, be of little consolation to history's 'losers' themselves, the reality of whose immense suffering is not thereby removed or undone.

At this point, one seems to have no choice but to fall back on a certain Christian scepticism, and accept that there are things we cannot know about the Last Things, because we are creatures, not the creator.

Hans Urs von Balthasar has argued, however, that it is entirely compatible with Christian faith to hope and pray that God will redeem all, in line with the scriptural assertion that God 'wills all to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth' (1 Tim 2: 4).

But salvation is God's doing, not ours. And what it costs God to redeem his creation is what is hinted at obliquely in the doctrine of hell.

Hell represents the real sin and pain of the world that the Lamb of God can take away for our salvation. But as long as sin and the grief sin causes last, so will hell.

Fr Martin Henry is lecturer in Theology at St Patrick's College, Maynooth.