

## THINKING ABOUT HELL

The mind, wrote John Milton in *Paradise Lost* (1667), "can make a heav'n of hell, a hell of heav'n." Metaphor or spiritual reality, men's notions of Hell have always reflected developments within their earthly societies as well as the ruminations of philosophers and poets. Here, historian Alan Bernstein ponders the major Western views of Hell from the ancient Hebrews to the present.

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*by Alan Bernstein*

Hell today is enveloped in silence.

Among those in the West who unquestioningly accept its existence, on faith, the subject is rarely open to debate. To those who reject the notion of Hell altogether, it is an aspect of religion that they have successfully overcome, like some childhood fear.

Between such extremes, there are many who deem Hell unworthy of serious reflection, given the pressing secular concerns of the day. Some, sincerely interested in religion, nevertheless subordinate Hell to matters such as free will, grace, and salvation, or to such political-ethical issues as capital punishment, euthanasia, and abortion.

Hell and its associations, it seems, are unlikely to loom large as a topic of public discussion.

And yet, for all that, Hell retains a certain resonance. "Now hast thou but one bare hour to live, / And then thou must be damned perpetually." Is there anyone who would not appreciate the plight of Dr. Faustus, the protagonist of Christopher Marlowe's 17th-century tragedy, and possibly squirm a bit imagining the prospect?

Looking back, it is sometimes difficult to say just how seriously our forebears entertained the reality of Hell. But there can be no doubt that, real or not, Hell has exercised a peculiar fascination over the minds of men. It is intimately bound up, of course, with the dread of death, but then so are many other things.

What Hell promises is an *accounting*: Yes, there is evil abroad, much of it never punished in this life; but in the end there will be justice. Beyond that, Hell holds out the hope that, if the foregoing is



*On his journey through the circles of Hell, the poet Dante comes upon the ditch of thieves: "Among this cruel and most dismal throng / People were running naked and affrighted." The engraving comes from Gustave Doré's famous 1861 illustration of The Divine Comedy (1308-21).*

true, or if enough people believe it to be true, then perhaps human behavior will be modified accordingly.

Such hopes, illusory though they may be, have guaranteed Hell a long run—for all we know, an eternal one. Today, however, with Hell, so to speak, on the back burner, it is easy to forget that the functions Hell once attended to still need to be performed. Indeed, upon reflection, it may be that modern man has not so much discarded Hell as reinvented it. History shows that conceptions of Hell have always reflected, imperfectly, the societies in which they existed. Perhaps, in the 20th century, instead of looking into the supernatural, we have come to look instead at ourselves.

If written records are an accurate guide, the Western notion of a punitive Hell was developed, in stages, by the ancient Hebrews. As the worship of the Hebrew God, Yahweh, became more uniform throughout the Promised Land during the second millennium B.C., a residual, household-based cult of ancestors—who were thought to be

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semidivine—remained a problem for religious authorities. Yahweh needed no competition. To make a place for ancestors in the scheme of things, while supplanting the ancestor cult, the Hebrew monarchy and priesthood promoted the idea of Sheol (literally, the grave). Sheol was a single underworld for everyone, a vast realm in which all of the dead shared equally without distinction of family, wealth, or virtue. It was little more than a synonym for death.

Then came the destruction of the Northern Kingdom of Israel (in 721 B.C.) and the Babylonian Exile (587–38 B.C.).

Both events raised unsettling questions about how a community of the just—a community, indeed, that considered itself the Chosen—could be allowed to suffer political impotence and exile. Helpless in the here and now, the Jews sought justice in an afterlife. A new and more differentiated view of death and the underworld emerged in the Scriptures. Isaiah taunts the King of Babylon not only for falling prey to death (“You are brought down to Sheol”) but also for the scorn he suffers in the underworld: “You are cast out, away from your sepulchre, like a loathed, untimely birth.” Thus did the oppressor receive his comeuppance.



As time went on, what held true for impious nations came to obtain for impious *individuals*. Exile had brought separation from the Temple in Jerusalem and dispersal of the Jewish community. Cohering in smaller groups under rabbis expounding the Torah, Jews confronted the Law and raised questions not only of national ethics but also of personal morality. What should be the fate of the individual Jewish lawbreaker? Psalmists wondered why, in this life, the wicked might prosper and the righteous suffer. They proposed no single answer with doctrinal clarity—the Book of Job asserts that it is not for mortals to challenge the will of God—but popular yearnings for some sort of ultimate retribution are plain.

The Hebrews entertained two possibilities, both of which would long persist in Jewish thought: Either a Messiah would come and restore the Jewish people to a place of honor, or a divine judge—Yahweh—would somehow render just desserts to each person, whether alive or dead. The first solution looked forward to a kingdom of the just on earth, the second to a resurrection of the dead and the

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*Alan Bernstein, 46, is associate professor of history at the University of Arizona. Born in Philadelphia, he received a B.A. from Wesleyan University (1961) and a Ph.D. in medieval history from Columbia (1972). He is the author of Pierre d'Ailly and the Blanchard Affair: University and Chancellor of Paris at the Beginning of the Great Schism (1978) and is currently at work on a history chronicling man's concepts of Hell from the Bible to Dante. Copyright © by Alan Bernstein.*

definitive separation of the good from the evil, of the sheep from the goats. Both Isaiah and Daniel looked forward to a resurrection and Last Judgment. "And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake," Daniel prophesied, "some to everlasting life and some to shame and everlasting contempt."

The Jews gave various names to the portion of Sheol reserved for the wicked—Abaddon (Destruction), for example, and Bor (the Pit), and Gehinnom (the Valley of Hinnom). Gehinnom, or Gehenna, was a ravine outside of Jerusalem where, according to the prophet Jeremiah, the bodies of victims were thrown after being sacrificed to Baal by backsliding Jews. The Book of Enoch describes Gehinnom as a fiery cleft in the earth: An "accursed valley," in the angel Uriel's words, "for those accursed forever; here will gather all . . . those who speak with their mouth unbecoming words against the Lord."

Christian notions of Hell owe much to Jewish precedents. The idea of a central place of torment for the damned was adopted by the Christians, as was the term Gehenna. Like the Jews, the Christians worshiped a single God, who they believed would judge each soul for its deeds in life. But while Christianity had roots in Judaism, it came to maturity in the larger Greco-Roman world, deeply influenced by the intellectual currents of Greco-Roman civilization.

In Greek mythology, the underworld was the domain of the god Hades, a domain he received when he and his brothers overthrew their father, the Titan king Cronus. Zeus usurped the heavens, Neptune the seas, and Hades the earth and its bowels. To the underworld were consigned the bodies of the human dead, for the Greeks believed that without proper burial the "shades" would wander without a home. Hades did not punish the shades in his domain, though the underworld was indisputably a dark and dreary realm.



We know this from literary eyewitnesses. According to the poet Homer, Odysseus sailed to a land where shades from the House of Hades, recognizable but "impalpable as shadows," were revived by sacrificial blood. The shades tell Odysseus how they died but say nothing of suffering, although Achilles allows that he would rather "break sod as a farm hand" among the living than rule all the dead. (By contrast, John Milton's Satan preferred to "reign in Hell than serve in Heaven.") Minos serves as Judge of the Dead, but a strict statute of limitations seems to be in force. The judge's job is not to assess lives led on earth and inflict punishment for misdeeds but to resolve the shades' post-mortem quarrels.

In Homer, the moral overtones of Hades are meager. Only three men are shown in torment—Tityos, Sisyphus, and Tantalus—and each was an offender from the dawn of time, guilty of defying the

gods. Why the lack of interest in a final settling of accounts? One reason, surely, is that classical Greece never developed a centralized judicial system upon which to model the afterlife. Thanks to the intense fragmentation of the Hellenic world into competing cults and warring city-states, not even a loosely shared Olympian mythology could produce a single, uniform, consistent religion.

In ancient Greece, philosophers also pondered the afterlife—deriving their conclusions from the study of human society and from reason. Plato (428?–347 B.C.) provides the fullest exposition of his own views in the *Phaedo*, his poignant recounting of the last hours of Socrates. Plato establishes a specific link between punishment (or reward) in the afterlife and one's behavior when alive. "I have good hope," Socrates says at one point, "that there is yet something remaining for the dead, some far better thing for the good than for the evil." Plato also posited the duality of body and soul—appropriated with modifications by Christian theorists—and argued that the latter alone enjoyed immortality.

What happens after death? According to Plato, those who had sought after truth and abstained from fleshly lusts—in a word, philosophers—would sit for all time among the divine, in places of great beauty. "No one," he wrote, "who has not studied philosophy and who is not entirely pure at the time of his departure is allowed to enter the company of the gods."

The great mass of the departed, with baser natures, would endure a spell in the afterlife of punishment or reward before returning in some new form to the living world—thus completing a cycle that would be repeated until the soul is pure. Only the incurably wicked, such as the despot Ardiaeus, a patricide and fratricide, would be hurled forever into Tartarus, which Plato describes as a drain or sewer channeling rivers of mud, fire, and molten rock. For most of the dead, a cleansing spell in Tartarus was temporary.



Plato's cyclical view of existence thus holds out the possibility of a perpetual second chance. Hell is not much of a sanction in Plato's cosmos, and recidivism rates are doubtless very high.

The Romans, initially, shared a key trait with the Greeks, on whose culture they unashamedly fed: religious eclecticism. Despite Rome's political dominance in the Mediterranean, regional cults and altars to ancestors at the hearth enjoyed a remarkable longevity. The rites of the Capitol notwithstanding, Roman religion proved difficult to centralize. Few deities, no matter how foreign and obscure, could not boast a marble shrine in Rome.

Gradually, however, especially under Augustus (63 B.C.–A.D. 14) and his imperial successors, Roman rulers were able to unify adminis-

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tration, jurisprudence, and political theory under a systematic state ideology. Generations of jurists showed in detail how each aspect of government derived from a uniform set of absolute principles. Religion played a role in this transformation—the emperor, after all, claimed divinity—and was altered by it in turn.

The changes became dramatically apparent in Virgil's account of Aeneas's trip to the underworld. Unlike Homer, who never quite defined the lines of authority in Hades, Virgil meticulously describes the function of each official that Aeneas encounters. Charon ferries the dead across the River Styx. The dog, Cerberus, guards the distant shore. Minos judges the dead for their lives and crimes and assigns them places in Hades.

While Homer introduces only individuals, Virgil, like a legislator, deals with broad classes of people: infants, suicides, those who died of love or fell in battle, those who hated their brothers, struck a parent, kept riches from kin, killed for adultery, or betrayed their lords. Each offense merits a specific punishment. There is no chaos in this underworld. What we have instead is the order of a great administrative empire. The afterlife is organized like the imperial bureaucracy, and even Hell, it would seem, serves the needs of the Pax Romana.



Christianity, as it matured after the first few centuries A.D., achieved a complex synthesis of Roman, Greek, and Hebrew thought, a synthesis peculiarly reflected in the evolving conception of Hell. In the earliest New Testament texts, St. Paul seems not to have wanted a Hell at all. He refrains from calling God's wrath eternal and yearns for an end in which "God will be all in all." In the Gospels, written some decades later, Jesus is quoted as describing Hell in various ways: As outer darkness, as a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth, as eternal fire, as a place of fire and worms (after Isaiah) or fire and brimstone (the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah). Like other Jews, Jesus accepted the notion of Hell as, originally, a place of torment for the "fallen angels" who, led by Satan, had rebelled against God at the beginning of time. "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven," Luke quotes Jesus as saying. And in the Gospel of Matthew, Christ explains how on Judgment Day, the Son of Man would say to the wicked: "Depart from me, you cursed [ones], into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels."

The fate of the rebellious angels would be taken up frequently by apocalyptic writers, who added a stern warning: If God did not spare the angels, he would not hesitate to cast humans into the Pit.

The themes of judgment, vindication, and retribution—so powerful in early Christian writings—remind us of how important the experience of persecution was to the primitive Church. Of the origi-

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nal Apostles, all but one (John the Evangelist) earned the crown of martyrdom. Countless thousands of the devout met their death in the arenas of Rome. It was only natural that the survivors, like the Hebrews, should try to turn the tables in the only way they could. Christian writers frequently depicted the divine Avenger as a lamb: The Sacrificial Victim becomes the Just Judge. In Matthew's Gospel and John's Apocalypse, the Lord, like the Emperor, sits upon a throne before all the gathered nations, great and small, from the four corners of the earth. His jurisdiction, like that of Caesar, is universal, and his verdict is rendered before a court—consisting, in this case, of angels, saints, and martyrs. Fates are individual and irreversible.

And, as in Virgil, they are varied. Gruesome ordeals are vividly retailed in such apocryphal writings as the so-called Apocalypse of Peter (circa A.D. 135) and Apocalypse of Paul (third or fourth century). Slanderers hang by their tongues, temptresses by their hair. The torments of murderers and women who obtained abortions are witnessed by their victims, who praise divine justice. Blasphemers, idolators, perjurers, showy dressers, loan sharks, and those who persecute the Church—their punishments always fit the crime.



Even the saved, it would appear, sometimes cringed at the horrors of Hell. In the Apocalypse of Paul, the saintly visitor entreats Christ to take pity on the damned, and a day of weekly reprieve, on Sundays, is granted. Whether the punishments of the damned might *ever* be mitigated remained for centuries a popular theme in unofficial religious literature.

Was Hell permanent?

Early Christians reached no consensus. Origen of Alexandria (185–254), using an approach derived from neo-Platonic philosophy, argued that souls could not undergo suffering without becoming purified. Ultimately, he contended, they would be fully deserving of eternal life. Then all souls would be restored to their original company with God, and, as Jesus prayed: “As Thou, Father, art in Me, and I in Thee, they also may be in Us.” Origen was vigorously attacked by St. Jerome (347?–420), who sarcastically asked whether someday Satan would be seated next to the Virgin Mary.

The greatest champion of everlasting damnation was St. Augustine (354–430). In *City of God*, Augustine describes two kinds of resurrection at the Last Judgment: One to life after death (for the just) and one to death after death (for the wicked). Augustine insists that the torments of the damned will be eternal. Their bodies, he believes, will burn forever without being consumed (like the bowels of Mount Etna, Augustine ventures). Worse than this will be the sheer sense of loss: “To be gone from the kingdom of God, to be an exile

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from God's city, to be cut off from the divine life, to be without the manifold sweetness of God... is so mighty a punishment that no torments that we know can be compared with it."

With the decline of the Roman Empire—a Christian empire since the conversion of Emperor Constantine early in the fourth century—the Catholic Church lost the support system that had guaranteed rapid communication and a degree of doctrinal uniformity. For a time, the fulcrum of civilization shifted east, to the courts of Constantinople and Baghdad.

In the West, the collapse of Rome spelled opportunity for competing religions. Roman paganism remained strong in the countryside, and the popular Christianity of the apocryphal writings was open to all sorts of influences. After the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70, Jewish scholars compiled the monumental Talmuds of Babylon and Palestine, a focus for academies scattered across the Mediterranean world. In the early medieval West, Judaism was an ad hoc affair, tied to a few urban centers, whose scholars were free to interpret the Bible their own way.

When the Germanic tribes penetrated imperial territory, their pagan mythology supplied an alternative set of gods and concepts. Later, Manichaeism migrated from Persia through the Near East and Balkans, re-emerging in 12th-century France and Italy as Catharism.

Neither the Germans nor the Cathars, for different reasons, would countenance the idea of Hell, though both took some sort of afterlife for granted.



Among the Germans, the constant political tension between weak kings and strong warriors, as well as among hundreds of fractious tribes, seems to have carried over into mythology. Just as German kings had trouble keeping order, so too did the gods repress evil only with difficulty. Indeed, evil is so pervasive that, in the person of the god Loki, it has infiltrated Valhalla itself. The chronicler Saxo Grammaticus, in the 12th century, writes of an evil that lurks below the seas, where the dead have the power to entrap the living. Snorri Sturluson in his *Prose Edda* depicts a world enveloped by evil forces—fire, ice, forests, seas, serpents—that in time will combine in a climactic struggle against the gods. For the barbarian Germans, no Hell exists because neither kings nor gods are powerful enough to confine evil to a single place.

The Cathars, for their part, mounted the most significant sustained challenge to Hell in all of Christian history. Catharism, which flourished in northern Italy and southern France during the 12th and 13th centuries, was characterized by an extreme "dualism," an exaggerated emphasis on the opposition of good and evil, of spirit and



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flesh. The Cathars did not believe in an end of time, and refused therefore to accept the Last Judgment. The worst fate a man might suffer, they believed, he was suffering already, with his spirit imprisoned in the impurity of the flesh.

The Cathars believed in reincarnation; how well one lived on earth—how ascetic a life one led—determined whether one's soul advanced to a finer body or regressed into that of an animal. All in all, the Cathars' system of reincarnation seems vaguely democratic: Among souls, from one life to the next, there is a great deal of "social mobility." It is probably no coincidence that Catharism cut across class lines and was embraced by nobles and peasants, rich and poor alike; or that it thrived in those parts of Europe where towns and individual lords enjoyed the greatest autonomy, and where men and women were most nearly equal in the eyes of the law.



Generally Jews of this time saw Gehenna as a vast city, presided over by angels. Commentaries on the Torah enumerate the seven compartments of Gehenna, which are measured in centuries; they describe the seven houses of Gehenna, each containing myriads of nations. Gehenna has its neighborhoods and courtyards where there are torments similar to those encountered in the Apocalypse of Peter. (Who knows whether these tortures sprang first from Jewish or Christian imaginations? Perhaps they came from the same pagan sources as Virgil's scourges, shackles, and wheels.)

Lacking a strict orthodoxy, probably because they had no political base or center, Jews held widely varying views about the afterlife, a subject that Christian theologians would come to define with increasing vigor beginning around 1100.

The triumph, in the popular mind, of Rome's version of Hell—Augustine's version, essentially—would not occur until the dawn of the Renaissance. Yet Hell remained a serviceable concept nonetheless. It appears, for example, in satires during the eighth and ninth centuries, as Charles Martel and Charlemagne were (temporarily) re-establishing the Western Empire. One ninth-century chronicle describes Martel, who appropriated ecclesiastical property in order to equip his cavalry, being forced to drink molten gold. (The account was written, of course, by a member of the clergy, which chafed under unwonted secular control during the Carolingian era.)

The three centuries from roughly 1000 to 1300 were profoundly important ones in Europe. During those years, Europe underwent rapid population growth; demographic expansion both fostered and was sustained by the revival of commerce and the city. Europe was becoming a highly complex society—but an increasingly fragmented society as well. It was a society that yearned deeply for a

state of order and unity, and an institution to preserve it. Intellectually and politically, the Church of Rome sought to become that institution. With substantial success, strong popes such as Gregory the Great and Innocent III asserted their claim to a "plenitude of power"—to being, in effect, monarchs of a universal church, from whom secular potentates derived all authority.

From the middle of the 11th century onward, the Church proclaimed itself anew the standard for what, indeed, was Catholic. In the young universities at Bologna, Paris, and elsewhere, theologians codified Church doctrine—using Roman Law as a model for its divine counterpart. An ecumenical council in 1215 made annual confession mandatory. Mendicant friars, notably Dominicans and Franciscans, fanned out as missionaries. By 1300 the Christianization of the areas occupied by Germanic tribes, including the Vikings of Norway and Iceland, was a *fait accompli*. Closer to home, the popes created the Inquisition and launched a ferocious (and ultimately successful) crusade against the Cathars.



The 13th century, when opposition in Europe to the concept of Hell was finally eliminated, marks the turning point. Henceforward the Roman Church would take elaborate steps to maintain belief, leaving the triumph of Hell neither to chance nor to Providence.

The system worked roughly as follows. Popes defined dogma. Theologians justified scripture and dogma on rational grounds, adding refinements such as Purgatory (for those whose souls are not hopelessly soiled) and Limbo (for unbaptized infants)—concessions, perhaps, to popular demand. At the same time, theologians emphasized the utility of Hell as a deterrent to sin (although, as with capital punishment, it is easier to believe in Hell's deterring power than to prove, from hard evidence, that deterrence has been accomplished). Encyclopedists codified the conclusions of theologians and illustrated them with popular tales, called *exempla*. Preachers recounted *exempla* to move the laity toward penitence and confession.

Theologians generally resisted describing the physical character of Hell, preferring vague generalities (e.g., "In Hell, everything contributes to the suffering of the damned"). Preachers, less squeamish, selectively invoked details of the Hellscape to impress their flocks. The rapid proliferation during the Renaissance of detailed vernacular tracts on Hell reflects an expanding grassroots belief in punishment after death. The most famous of these travelogues is, of course, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, of which the first part, the *Inferno*, appeared around 1314. In the *Inferno*, Dante underscores Augustine's view of Hell as a place where "*sanza pro si penta*," where one repents without profit. But he does not doubt that Hell, for all its

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hopelessness, is the work of a just God.

The *Inferno* set a standard—and marked, in some respects, Hell's apogee. After about 1600, Hell never again provoked the same unanimous shudder that it did during the two centuries immediately following Dante. This is true even though Hell retained its force in certain circles and received refinements from modern thinkers.

The leader of the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther (1483–1546), adapted the Catholic view of Hell to suit his own introspective nature. He placed a personalized version of Hell in the individual conscience.

According to Luther, the erring soul despairs of salvation and blames God for afflictions that are in fact manifestations of grace. Thus blinded, the faithless become isolated from God and so, like those dispersed from Babel, they suffer an isolation and disorientation that is a foretaste of Hell. What in life was an interior anguish becomes, at the end of time, a physical reality too. As Luther put it, "Everyone carries his own Hell with him wherever he is." Thus this rebel who placed his conscience above the prevailing orthodoxy, who celebrated the priesthood of all believers, was also the prophet of individual Hell.

Images of hellfire and brimstone continued to trouble the imaginations of Christians in the New World. Indeed, some American churchmen gave new force to the old threat of damnation. The 18th-century divine Jonathan Edwards, in his memorable sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," pictured a fierce Almighty dangling sinners, like spiders held by a thread, over the gaping mouth of Hell. Elsewhere, Edwards declared that the "vitals" of the wicked "shall forever be full of a glowing, melting fire, fierce enough to melt away the very rocks and elements; and, also they shall eternally be full of the most quick and lively sense to feel the torments of hell . . . for ever and ever, without any end at all, and never, never be delivered."



Despite such attempts to preserve people's belief in Hell, powerful new currents were reshaping the intellectual and material life of Europe and increasingly deflecting those efforts. Capitalism and the commercial revolution, the advance of science and technology, the age of exploration and the apotheosis of Reason—these and other factors prompted a new faith in human potential. Intellectuals came to question the authority of, first, the Catholic Church, then of all organized religion. Hell, inevitably, was among the victims.

Voltaire and other 18th-century French *philosophes*, with an eye on the wars of religion, decried established churches as props of oppressive government—and denounced Hell as, in effect, the prop of the prop. Other thinkers took a different approach. The great

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19th-century English philosopher John Stuart Mill claimed a contradiction in the idea of a deity “who could make a Hell: and who could create countless generations of human beings with the certain foreknowledge that he was creating them for this fate. Is there any moral enormity which might not be justified by imitation of such a Deity?”

The very basis of religion was called into doubt. German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach (1804–72) interpreted human definitions of a transcendental reality as precisely that—human definitions—thus making the “other” world, the spiritual one, a mere figment of the imagination. Karl Marx’s characterization of religion as the “opium of the people” combined Voltaire’s view of religion as an instrument of rule with Feuerbach’s claim that it amounted to self-delusion.

Yet Hell hangs on. Sigmund Freud conceived of Hell as a sublimation of anxiety common to all humanity. For Freud it was neither a divinely established institution nor an evanescent dream, but a vital aspect of our inner lives, an integral part of the human condition. With a different emphasis, Jean-Paul Sartre, in *No Exit* (1944), agreed: “Hell is you others.” He saw Hell immanent in humanity itself. Why should Hell be so entrenched? Needing God and Heaven, that makes some sense. But why can’t we get rid of Hell? Is there something deep in the human heart that somehow *needs* the certainty of Hell, under whatever guise?

Whatever else it may be, Hell represents an unacceptable future. And if it has been dismissed as an artifact of the human imagination, it has reappeared as a result of the human imagination, the work of human hands, the manmade horrors of the Nazi death camps, the Gulag, and the atomic bomb. Perhaps the calamities of recent history have so impressed us that they will prevent their own repetition. In a secularized age, we call these calamities hells. Thus we have made many hells, our hells on earth, our living hells.

Yet our hells lack one crucial ingredient of the Biblical Hell: justice. God’s Hell contains only the wicked. Our hells are inverted. Either they are for the innocent, or they are indiscriminate. Our hells offer little recourse to the weak against the mighty, to the exploited against the exploiter. Hell was sought first by the psalmist as a weapon against the tyrant, as a *cri de coeur* against oppression. That retributive side of Gehenna we have not reproduced. We have only feeble mechanisms to punish the creators of concentration camps or the instigators of large-scale suffering. Only when human society can justly punish every evil will Hell be forgotten.

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