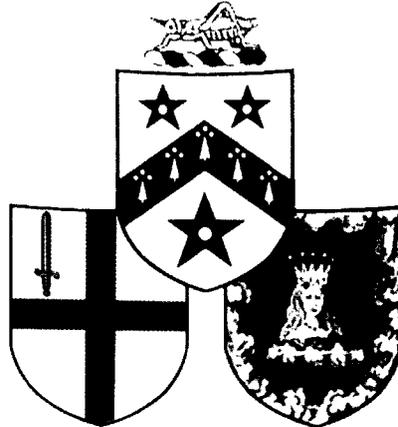


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**RELIGION ON THE LEVEL**

Lecture 5

**WHAT IS THE USE OF HELL?**

by

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## Religion on the Level

### V

#### What's the Use of Hell?

Tonight, I am going to give you Hell. Now, it is probably the height of narcissism when a speaker starts quoting his own books, but that is how I want to begin this evening. I wrote a wee book fourteen years ago, now out of print, and one of the chapters was on, 'Fear'. When I was searching for a quotation for tonight that I remembered using in the book, I had a look at that chapter again, and decided that the opening paragraph would be good place to start tonight's proceedings. Here it is:

'On a wet Sunday one summer I went to church in Salisbury. The church, a beautifully light and airy building, was medieval, but the service, a family Eucharist, was pleasantly modern, like thousands of others held up and down the country at the same hour. The whole tone of the service, while not exactly stirring, was gently Anglican. There was no sense of captivating awe or overwhelming emotion of any sort, everything was decent and orderly, nothing to set the blood racing. And high above this quiet activity soared the chancel arch, and over the arch there was a medieval doom painting. While we exchanged the kiss of peace with good-natured self-consciousness, demons with long, forked tails were thrusting tormented souls into hell. I returned to that painting repeatedly as the service proceeded, and the incongruity of it all struck me with considerable force. There was clearly little or no relationship between what was happening below and what was happening above. Once there would have been a solid connection between what was done or said in that church and the gruesome painting that dominated the entrance to the sanctuary'.<sup>1</sup>

Then I went on to point out that the fires of hell were once regularly stoked in Christian pulpits, and proceeded to the quotation that I had gone in search of for tonight. It comes from a sermon James Joyce had heard in his youth, preached by a Jesuit, in which the torments of hell were meticulously described, as follows:

'The torment of fire is the greatest torment to which the tyrant has ever subjected his fellow creatures. Place your finger for a moment in the flame of a candle and you will feel the pain of fire. But our earthly fire was created by God for the benefit of man, to maintain in him the spark of life and to help in the useful arts, whereas the fire of hell is of another quality and was created by God to torture and punish the unrepentant sinner. Our earthly fire also consumes more or less rapidly according as the object which it attacks is more or less combustible, so that human ingenuity has even succeeded in inventing chemical preparations to check or frustrate its action. But the sulphurous brimstone which burns in hell is a substance which is specially designed to burn for ever and for ever with unspeakable fury. Moreover, our earthly fire destroys at the same time as it burns, so that the more intense it is the shorter is its duration; but the fire of hell has this property, that it preserves that which it burns, and, though it rages with incredible intensity, it rages for ever.

Our earthly fire again, no matter how fierce or widespread it may be, is always of a limited extent; but the lake of fire in hell is boundless, shoreless and bottomless. And this terrible fire will not afflict the bodies of the damned only from without, but each lost soul will be a hell unto itself, the boundless fire raging in its very vitals. O, how terrible is the lot of those wretched beings! The blood seethes and boils in the veins, the brains are boiling in the skull, the heart in the breast glowing and bursting, the bowels a red-hot mass of burning pulp, the tender eyes flaming like molten balls'.<sup>2</sup>

You can imagine the effect of a sermon like that on a congregation of adolescent boys. It was meant to build an overwhelming fear into them, as the great preventive against sin. An Oxford don was reported to have warned his audience of young men against the sins of the flesh by crying out, 'Why risk your eternal soul for the sake of a pleasure, which, I am reliably informed, lasts less than ninety seconds?' Even if you believe that masturbation and fornication are sinful, I think you will agree that there is a gross disproportion between the offence and the punishment. It seems fairly obvious that hellfire preaching was meant to act as a preventive against sin, but there was another, even uglier, side to it than that. This was brought out by Nietzsche, in one of his withering asides on Christianity. Describing the Christian vision of heaven, he writes:

'For what is it that constitutes the bliss of this Paradise? We might even guess, but it is better to have it expressly described for us by an authority not to be underestimated in such matters, Thomas Aquinas, the great teacher and saint: 'The blessed in the kingdom of heaven', he says, meek as a lamb, 'will see the punishments of the damned, in order that their bliss be that much greater'.<sup>3</sup> So hell is both punishment and pleasure. It is torment for the damned who endure it, but bliss for the redeemed who observe it. How can we account for the emergence and development of this, the most diseased of the great Christian themes? Let me offer a few suggestions.

In my last lecture, I talked about that element in the Bible called 'apocalyptic'. Apocalyptic was about the intervention of God at the end of the world, and the vindication of God's poor and righteous ones. I pointed out that apocalyptic usually begins as the religion of the oppressed. The psychology of its development seems to be fairly obvious. If you are an impoverished peasant, taxed into destitution by the callous rulers whose greed starves your own children, a burning resentment against them is bound to rise within you, and a passionate longing for justice. You want to overturn the system that so cruelly oppresses you and your loved ones, but you want more than that. Justice demands that those who have trampled upon your humanity should be punished for what they have done to you. So one of the marks of the great schemes of apocalyptic longing is the condemnation and punishment of those who have exploited the poor in this life. The Letter to James expresses it in this way:

'A word to you who are rich. Weep and wail over the miserable fate overtaking you: your riches have rotted away; your fine clothes are moth-eaten; your silver and gold have corroded, and their corrosion will be evidence against you and consume your flesh like fire. You have piled up wealth in an age that is near its close. The wages you never paid to the men who mowed your fields are crying aloud against you, and the outcry of the reapers has reached the ears of the Lord of Hosts. You have lived on the land in wanton luxury, gorging yourselves - and that on the day appointed for your slaughter'. (5.1-4)

There is a compelling moral logic in it all, but it is intriguing that, in the west, it took the direction it did. In the east it developed differently, as Mr Huddle knows to his cost. In the east the moral logic that requires the satisfaction of justice went in the direction of the

doctrine of *karma*. What we sow, we shall reap in our own future destiny. Every act has a consequence that determines the agent's status in the great transmigration of souls. The eastern solution to the problem seems to lack the voyeuristic ugliness of the developed doctrine of hell in the west, but there may well be a certain quiet satisfaction to be had from knowing that the overweening tyrant who has made this life such a trial for you may have the tables turned on him during his next go-round. There is also the fact that the doctrine of *karma* was a very effective way of justifying the inequities of the caste system, because any challenge to its injustice could always be met by the claim that, in the long circles of time, it would all eventually be justified.

Now, I am not suggesting that at some stage in moral evolution a consortium of spiritual leaders got together and invented the myth of hell in the west, and karma in the east, to act as a deterrent against human wickedness, on the one hand, or as an explanation for human injustice, on the other. But I do believe that there has to be a solid connection between a frustrated sense of moral outrage, particularly in apocalyptic movements, and the evolution of these doctrines. The wicked ought to be punished, but rarely are in this life, so they will have to be punished in the next, because righteousness must be vindicated. It is the thought of the millennia of unrequited suffering that is the strongest emotional element in the logic of damnation. Morally speaking, however, this is light years away from the terroristic use of the threat of hell to deter young boys from sexual experimentation that so disfigures later developments of the doctrine. 'Surely', the original logic must have reasoned, 'if there is anything for us beyond death, a righteous God must require the wicked to pay for their evil deeds in this life, and repent of them'. Repentance, that change of mind that owns the truth about itself, requires some sort of response on our part, some sort of reparation. A good contemporary example of this powerfully felt conviction is provided by programmes that bring offenders together with their victims. Often, the encounter leads offenders to a change of awareness about their conduct, and a recognition of the victim as a person. Repentance means a change of attitude, a turning towards and an owning of the truth about oneself. But what if the repentance has not happened in this life? Is there another chance beyond death, supposing that anything awaits us beyond death? The absolute systems say a definite 'no' to that. That is why death-bed repentances feature so strongly in history. It is cutting it fine to

leave it till the moment of death, which is why the old Prayer Book litany prayed fervently against dying 'suddenly and unprepared'. However, there was an interesting development in Roman Catholic theology that modified the rigour of this answer. One of the fascinating things about Catholic theology is the way it invents rather unpleasant doctrines, because of its passion for logic and law, and then gradually admits to itself that it has probably gone too far for frail humans. So it proceeds to construct ameliorating exceptions to the general rule, into which it manages to fit most people; or it develops the offensive concept in different directions, to give it a saving versatility. This is what happened in the case of hell. It was later followed by the concept of purgatory, where the soul confronted what evil it had committed in life, and went through a refining fire that purged and purified it, so that it could at last enter the presence of God. It is true that hell was still the verdict for what were classified as mortal sins, while purgatory was for venial sins; but casuistry did allow a bit of leeway even here, and concepts like invincible ignorance were useful ways of getting people off the hook.

There are obviously several human applications of this rather grisly theme in Christian theology. The main one has to be the need to take personal responsibility for our own actions, especially for the pain and damage we have inflicted on others. The important thing to notice here is not any forensic or legal logic: we are not talking about punishment to satisfy the law's demands. That may have its place, but it is not what I am focusing on for the moment. It is important to ourselves to accept responsibility for our actions, and to acknowledge the effect they have had on others, because knowing the truth about ourselves is fundamental to our spiritual and moral development. One of the saddest misuses of a life is to go through it without really getting to know it. Plato said the unexamined life was not worth living. To get through life without any discernible increase in self-knowledge is a terrible waste, because it is a refusal to look attentively at the reality that is closest to hand, our own self. That is why all the great systems of spiritual discipline emphasise the importance of self-examination and confession. If we are to grow as humans, we need to know what we are up against within ourselves, need to understand the reality of our condition, our weaknesses, and our strengths, our failures, as well as the things we have done well. Unfortunately, human males, in particular, have developed among themselves cultures of honour and shame, in which losing

face or owning up to weakness is not done. This is why it can be particularly difficult to bring them to deep self-awareness, which may be one reason why institutional religion has manufactured brutal spiritual mechanisms, such as hell, in order to blast through the carapace of male insensitivity. Unfortunately, their effect has often been to coarsen rather than refine the process of true spiritual awareness.

But let me return to the concept of hell itself. The idea, as expressed in the sermon from Joyce, or countless others we could quote, is so gross that something deep and archetypal must be going on below the overt need to control human waywardness by literally scaring the hell out of them. Why did the concept develop in the way it did, with its cast list of demons commissioned to lure unwary souls into their clutches? One of the theologians who gave some thought to this was Paul Tillich. He believed that the idea of the demonic was the mythical expression of an important human reality, namely, the structural and inescapable power of evil. There is a kind of mind (kindly, liberal, humanist) that either refuses to, or is incapable of, confronting the intractability of this kind of evil. It sees only 'individual acts of evil, dependent on the free decisions of the conscious personality', says Tillich. It believes 'in the possibility of inducing the great majority of individuals to follow the demands of an integrated personal and social life by education, persuasion, and adequate institutions', he goes on. This kindly belief in progress and human perfectibility was destroyed by the horrible wars and purges of this century, as well as by our explorations into the depths of our own psyches. The great analysts of humanity's sick soul (Freud, Jung, Adler) explored and recorded their encounters with destructive forces deep within us that unpredictably determined the energies of individuals and whole groups. It was as though their encounter with the unconscious forces within us were providing them with a preview of the great horrors that were to erupt on the conscious surface of history. The wars and persecutions of this century, as well as some of its most exciting intellectual discoveries, have forced us to confront two almost ungovernable sources of evil, which Tillich called the demonic. One is the hidden continent within our own nature we call the unconscious; and the other is the herd instinct, the collective dimension of humanity which can take over or possess our individuality. These demonic forces, together or separately, create structures of evil that are beyond the influence of the normal powers of good will. They promote individual and social tragedy of the sort that we have witnessed

throughout this century, and which we continue to observe helplessly in our own time.<sup>4</sup> Our impotence in the face of this kind of structured evil, our recognition that the institutions we create have a collective dynamic that often overrides the ethics of the individual, and our experience of the brutal reality of the group mind, all persuade us that there are systems of evil that are superhuman in their power and impervious to human rationality. That is why it is so difficult to find a way of explaining these great forces that does not fall back on supernatural language. The best analogy I can think of comes from the weather systems that make life in the United States dangerously unpredictable. The great hurricanes and twisters that wreak such damage in the United States could easily lead the uneducated mind to supernatural conclusions. Science, however, knows about the collision of weather systems that generates these spectacular forces, and can even predict them. The myth of the demonic is a way of expressing the eruptions and collisions of evil and suffering that so disfigure our history. If it is hell we are thinking of, then we have confronted it in our own century in a series of monstrous evils that might have been scripted by Dante. And none was worse or more archetypal than the holocaust, the destruction of six million Jews in the death camps of Europe. It was as if the hell of the Christian imagination had finally erupted into history and established itself in our midst.

In a previous lecture in this series I quoted from what I consider to be the greatest of the novels about the holocaust, 'The Last of the Just', by André Schwarz-Bart. I read to you a passage in which Ernie Levy is in a box car on his way to Auschwitz, shepherding a group of Jewish children. He has consoled them with the lie that they are on their way to the peace and safety of the Kingdom of Israel. When they reach Auschwitz, Ernie leads his little flock into the gas chamber: 'Breathe deeply, my lambs, and quickly' he says. Then we read these unbearable words:

'When the layers of gas had covered everything, there was silence in the dark sky of the room for perhaps a minute, broken only by shrill, racking coughs and the gasps of those too far gone in their agonies to offer a devotion. And first as a stream, then a cascade, then an irrepressible, majestic torrent, the poem which, through the smoke of fires and above the funeral pyres of history, the Jews - who for two thousand years never bore arms and never had

either missionary empires or coloured slaves - the old love poem which the Jews traced in letters of blood on the earth's hard crust unfurled in the gas chamber, surrounded it, dominated its dark, abysmal sneer: 'SHEMA ISRAEL. ADONAI ELOHENU ADONAI EH'HOTH...Hear O Israel, the Eternal our God, the Eternal is One. '

'The voices died one by one along the unfinished poem; the dying children had already dug their nails into Ernie's thighs, and Golda's embrace was already weaker, her kisses were blurred, when suddenly she clung fiercely to her beloved's neck and whispered hoarsely: 'Then I'll never see you again? Never again?'

'Ernie managed to spit up the needle of fire jabbing at his throat and, as the girl's body slumped against him, its eyes wide in the opaque night, he shouted against her unconscious ear, 'In a little while, *I swear it!*'...And then he knew that he could do nothing more for anyone in the world... With dying arms he embraced Golda's body in an already unconscious gesture of loving protection, and they were found in this position half-an-hour later by the team of Sonderkommando responsible for burning the Jews in the crematory ovens. And so it was for millions, who from *Luftmensch* became *Luft*. I shall not translate. So this story will not finish with some tomb to be visited in pious memory. For the smoke that rises from crematoria obeys physical laws like any other: the particles come together and disperse according to the wind, which propels them. The only pilgrimage, dear reader, would be to look sadly at a stormy sky now and then'.

The novel ends:

'At times, it is true, one's heart could break in sorrow. But often too, preferably in the evening, I cannot help thinking that Ernie Levy, dead six million times, is still alive, somewhere, I don't know where...Yesterday, as I stood in the street trembling in despair, rooted to the spot, a drop of pity fell from above my face; but there was no breeze in the air, no cloud in the sky...there was only a presence'.<sup>5</sup>

I make no apology for that long quotation. It seems to me to encapsulate the horror that we are capable of inflicting on one another. More significantly, it seems to me to show that hell exists, not in some supernatural sphere, not in our imagination, but in Christian history. Hell is largely a Christian invention, and we built it on earth, in our time, as a crematory for the Jews. Why have we hated them so much? We could trace the trajectory of that hatred from the Gospel of John, through the pogroms of the Middle Ages, to the Final Solution. Among other things, that trajectory demonstrates the demonic use to which the Bible can be put: 'His blood be on us and on our children', as it has been down the century, rivers of it. But there is something of the demonic here, as well, something beyond explanation, something right off the trajectory of history. Why this hatred of the Jews?

I'll leave you with a thought from George Steiner, who is also obsessed with the question. Several places in his writings, and most recently in his little volume of autobiography, *Errata*, he wonders if humanity does not hate the Jewish people because it bore the law to them, and the pain of conscience. In *Errata* he suggests that in Moses, Jesus and Marx, the Jew has striven to confront human consciousness with transcendent absoluteness. The moral dictates which come through Moses are uncompromising, and 'entail the mutation of common man. We are to discipline soul and flesh into perfection. We are to outgrow our own shadow'. Steiner continues his paraphrase, 'Cease being what you are, what biology and circumstance have made you. Become, at a fearful price of abnegation, what you could be'. According to Steiner, 'This is the first of the three moments of transcendent imposition on man out of Judaism'. The second comes from Jesus. 'He requires of men and women an altruism, a counter-instinctual, 'unnatural' restraint towards all who do us injury and offence'. Steiner continues, 'The profoundly natural impulse to avenge injustice, oppression and derision do have their place in the house of Israel. A refusal to forget injury or humiliation can warm the heart. Christ's ordinance of total love, of self-offering to the assailant, is, in any strict sense, an enormity. The victim is to love his butcher. A monstrous proposition. But one shedding fathomless light. How are mortal men and women to fulfil it?'

What Steiner calls 'the third knock on the door' comes from Karl Marx...who secularises, makes 'of this world' the messianic logic of social justice, of Edenic plenty for all, of peace on

an undivided earth'. He goes on to talk about Marx's rage against social inequality, against the sterile cruelty of wealth, against unnecessary famine and *misère*. He concludes, 'Three times, Judaism has brought Western civilisation face to face with the blackmail of the ideal. What graver affront?'<sup>6</sup> These morally towering figures are uncomfortable for most of us to live with, because they challenge our compromises, our corruptions, our failure to struggle for the ideal, the absolute. They fill us with guilt and shame; and guilt and shame easily turn to self-hatred; and, since self-hatred cannot live with itself, it goes in search of a scapegoat. We kill the conscience of history. That's why we need to hear the prayer of the women of Canterbury, in Eliot's, *Murder in the Cathedral*:

'Forgive us, O Lord, we acknowledge ourselves as type of the  
common man,  
Of the men and women who shut the door and sit by the fire;  
Who fear the blessing of God, the loneliness of the night of  
God, the surrender required, the deprivation inflicted;  
Who fear the injustice of men less than the justice of God;  
Who fear the hand at the window, the fire in the thatch, the  
fist in the tavern, the push into the canal,  
Less than we fear the love of God.  
We acknowledge our trespass, our weakness, our fault; we  
acknowledge  
That the sin of the world is upon our heads; that the blood of  
the martyrs and the agony of the saints  
Is upon our heads'.<sup>7</sup>

**Richard Holloway**

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Holloway, *Seven to Flee, Seven to Follow*, Mowbrays, 1986, p.51.

<sup>2</sup> James Joyce, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Penguin, pp.121,122.

<sup>3</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Oxford University Press, 1996, I.15.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Tillich, *The Protestant Era*, Nisbet, 1955, p.xxxv. ff.

<sup>5</sup> Andre Schwarz-Bart, *The Last of the Just*, Penguin, 1960, pp.382,383.

<sup>6</sup> George Steiner, *Errata*, Phoenix, 1997, pp.57-60.

<sup>7</sup> T.S.Eliot, *Murder in the Cathedral*, Faber and Faber, 1936, pp.85,86.