



In late 1989, the Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN) began airing, as part of its programming, a story declaring that hell, abode of evil and condemned souls, locus of eternal punishment, had been found. Apparently, a team of geologists working in Siberia were drilling a hole in the earth when the drill, about nine miles down, broke through to a large hollow. The temperature, when they measured it, was 2,000 degrees Fahrenheit—surprisingly hot to these geologists.

COME

Faith, fire, and

HELL

brimstone in the

OR

Twenty-first century.

HIGHWATER

Written by TYSON KOSKA

They lowered sensitive microphones into the hole to listen to the earth's movements, but what they found chilled them. "We heard a human voice screaming in pain," the team's leader, a Dr. Azzacov explained. "Even though one voice was discernible, we could hear thousands, perhaps millions, in the background, of suffering souls screaming. After this ghastly discovery, about half of the scientists quit because of fear. Hopefully, that which is down there will stay there."

According to the story, hell was precisely as a Christian would expect: below ground and hideously hot and painful. But for TBN, the world's largest religious television network, the discovery of hell proved auspicious. The story made it onto *Praise the Lord*, the network's flagship show, during which the show's host preacher bawled, "I got a letter today from a geologist in Oklahoma and he's really giving me a rough time. He says that there isn't anything that could drill that deep. Folks, I'm just reporting what people have been sending to me and I don't know if this is true or not. I know one thing, if this is a trick of the Devil, he sure has blown it, because I know of about 2,000 people that have found Christ because of it!"

The host went on, promising “We’re really going to follow this up and see if they really did drill a hole nine miles down there, if they really did have a microphone down there, if they really did hear human shrieks of agony and pain.... If I’m wrong and they’re right, I’ve got nothing to lose. But if I’m right and you’re wrong, you’ve got everything to lose.”

The discovery of hell was a hoax, of course. TBN found the story in an article from what it believed was a respected scientific journal in Finland. That journal turned out to be an obscure Christian newsletter called *Ammennusatia*, which had taken the story from a small Finnish daily that had printed the story not as news, but in a section that featured letters from readers writing about whatever subject they chose. In the end, the origin of the fraud seems to have been an elderly Norwegian man named Age Rendalen, who had recently visited the United States, where he had the opportunity to watch a religious program on which a televangelist announced the discovery of hell. “I couldn’t believe that the hosts really thought the story was true and that they would broadcast it without apparently having checked it out,” the man told Rich Buhler, who specializes in debunking urban legends on his Web site, TruthorFiction.com. Upon his return to Norway, the man composed a similar fiction and sent it to TBN in the form of a translation of an article in Norway’s “largest and most reputable paper.” In truth, it was a small, local newspaper, and the original article was about a building inspector. As Rendalen predicted, his letter and translation found TBN’s hosts gullible. But, in the words of the goodly pastor himself, what did he have to lose by broadcasting tall tales of fire and brimstone as fact, when they could be used to convert the wicked heathen?

The patent absurdity of a story about the existence of hell nine miles beneath the earth’s surface, and of a Christian network’s willingness to present it unchallenged, is less remarkable than it would seem. The American mind is, in large part, captivated by a belief in a place of unending suffering. According to a 2004 Gallup Poll, seventy percent of Americans believe in hell. The numbers have increased since then, a rise which began in the mid-1960s. According to polls, a third of Americans believe non-Christians are destined for hell, most adhering to the “classic” view—that is, torture and damnation. In spite of the “inclusive” Christianity currently favored at most churches, belief in the reality of hell has risen 23 percent in the past forty years.

How do we reconcile these statistics with the common notion that Christianity, or at least a *Christian*, is exhorted by his savior to be forgiving and to withhold judgment of another’s belief? The fact is, harsh treatment of non-believers is widespread in the religious media, particularly on Christian television and Internet sites. Fanatical religious thought is not limited to far-away peoples or lands; belief in the “dark” side of religion is on the rise and its effect ripples far past the church door.

In the Beginning...

While early Sumerian myths describe a “Land of the Dead,” and ancient Egyptian texts depict an afterlife attainable by its nobility, Zoroastrianism provides the first documented example of belief in a Christian-like hell. It describes an accounting of one’s life at death into a great ledger of credits and debits. For those with a positive balance, the soul is escorted to the “House of Song.” For those with a negative tally, however, the soul falls immediately into hell. Should your actions sum to zero, the soul is remanded into limbo until the eventual coming of the savior Soshyans, who will resurrect the dead and destroy hell.

The Christian Bible renders a similar view of the afterlife and is, of course, the basis of belief for Christians worldwide. A variety of Old and New Testament passages seemingly leave little doubt about the reality and nature of hell. Often cited are Jesus’ words from Matthew:

“The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

In fact, the Bible is replete with references to *fire, brimstone, weeping, wailing, darkness, flames, burning, torments*— all used to justify belief in a literal and everlasting place of damnation.

Early Christian theologians embraced and legitimized this view. Saint Augustine, arguably the most important figure in the early Christian church, assured followers that “the everlasting punishment of the damned shall come to pass—shall without fail come to pass.” And St. Thomas Aquinas agreed, adding, “In order that the happiness of the saints may be more delightful to them...they are allowed to see perfectly the sufferings of the damned,” or as Psalm 58:10 expresses it, “The righteous shall rejoice when he seeth the vengeance.”

In the Courtroom of Death

For most believers, however, the primary rationale for hell is not to please the saved; it is for the sake of *justice*. The argument contends that a sin committed against an infinite God requires infinite punishment. ChristianBibleInfo.com explains the situation this way, “Hell is terrible and it exists because God’s perfect justice demands payment for sin.” And Answering-Islam.org, a Web site dedicated to debunking Islam and converting Muslims to Christianity, adds, “The same powerful Word that formed the universe cursed Man. God will not trivialize His Word by arbitrarily forgiving sin! God’s curse will not be stopped.”

As these references make clear, believers rely on an internal logic of their faith, i.e. the debt of sin requires payment. Often the argument is presented metaphorically, equating non-belief to something criminal, and Hell as a sort of after-life sentence:

“What Kind of God Would Cast His Creatures into Hell?”...What kind of policeman puts a criminal in jail?
A MIGHTY GOOD ONE!

Moreover, attempts have been made to explain hell, not in terms of divine justice but in terms of human psychology. The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche agreed that the impulse for hell springs from human notions of fairness, observing that a sin against an infinitely good God creates in us not only infinite debt, but infinite *guilt* as well. This feeling of guilt (along with our desire to punish) has given birth to the everlasting and horrific nature of hell. Nietzsche writes:

“We have here a sort of madness of the will showing itself in mental cruelty which is absolutely unparalleled: man’s will to find himself guilty and condemned without hope of reprieve, his will to think of himself as punished, without the punishment ever measuring up to the crime.”

These same guilty notions are expressed by Christians today. An essay posted at Jesus-Is-Savior.com exclaims, “You are dirt! I am dirt! We deserve nothing better than Hell because of our sins.” And *The King James Bible Page* reinforces this sentiment declaring, “Because of our sin, we deserve death, eternal punishment, the wrath of God...nobody is born into salvation. Nobody deserves it.”

Yet many theologians and believers object to the notion of infinite punishment and have raised arguments against it throughout history. The most basic of these arguments asserts that a God of love would not torment his own creation for eternity, regardless of its impasses. Since the Christian Bible and early church fathers both warn of the dangers of hell, however, one can understand that among two billion Christians, many will adhere to statements of *fire and brimstone*. There is a deep reluctance to accept scripture at less than face value or to believe “interpretations” as valid. This assertion from WayOfLife.org illustrates the point:

“The proud, unbelieving theologian smiles at verses such as this [on hell] and says, ‘Yes, but that is symbolic language, my dear ignorant Fundamentalist friend.’ One day the proud smirk of modern scholarship will be gone and such a one will believe the Bible. But it will be too late. Friends, there is an eternal fiery Hell.”

This example shows the tension that develops when commonly held ideas stray too far from the text. Devout followers often seek plainness and clarity and mock believers who are doctrinally unsound. For example, many Christians hold that the New Testament requires belief in Jesus to be “saved.” Many mainstream churches and religious leaders, however, do not promote this type of exclusivity and attempt to focus on deeds and acts prescribed by scripture. Some believers chafe at those efforts:

“You can never escape [Hell] through the good works of the flesh...you may join a church, be baptized, give your money, help people, live a good life. But these things will not save you. Salvation is an inner thing, a thing of the heart. The Bible plainly tells us that if we believe on Jesus Christ, the doors of hell will be forever closed to us.”

Of course words on a page cannot change with every shifting mindset of the faithful, and when ideas become too divergent from scripture, true-believers often foment a reawakening, urging followers to purify themselves in the original and uncorrupted tenets of their faith. Whether this impulse is at the heart of hell’s resurgence, or if other factors are contributing to it, belief is on the rise.

Prevalence of Belief

Polls have shown that belief in hell is increasing. According to a 2004 Gallup survey, it is up 23 percent in the last forty years. Results show:

- 70 percent of Americans believe in hell.
- 39 percent of Americans believe non-Christians go to hell.
- 32 percent of Americans believe hell is a place of torment.

Based on these statistics, 115 million Americans believe non-Christians are destined for hell—that is 4.4 billion people worldwide (or a soul per second using current mortality rates). Interestingly, however, only about 4 percent believe themselves in danger of going to hell.

These ideas are not found only in religious media. In 2002 on MSNBC, Phil Donahue asked, “Do you have to be a Christian to get into heaven?” His panel consisted of five guests, including Dr. Michael Brown, president of Israel, the Church and the Nations. Dr. Brown stated on the program:

“People who don’t believe in Jesus, we should view them as people about to get on a plane we know will soon crash...”

During the show, Donahue aired a clip from a previous Jerry Falwell interview. In it Falwell makes a dire prediction about Donahue’s fate:

“I believe what Jesus said in John 14:6. He said, ‘I am the way, the truth, the life, no man cometh unto the Father—no man—but by me. And that means Gentiles, Baptists, Catholics, Jews, Muslims, and TV hosts, all to go hell without Christ.’”

On the other hand, two of Donahue’s guests spoke passionately about open-mindedness and the importance of withholding judgment on such matters. For them, the answer to the question, “Do you have to be a Christian to get into Heaven?” was “No,” but for the other three guests, the answer was a clear “Yes.”

Regardless of how thoroughly we have come to understand religion’s development in human history and its use of scare tactics to manipulate and control, we continue to believe the darkest and most frightful aspects of it. Many continue to cling to a foreboding future for those who do not share their beliefs. Few, however, can match the scorn of Westboro Baptist Church. On their Web site GodHatesAmerica.com, one finds this assertion:

“Face it! They’re in hell! Coretta Scott King is in hell with her husband, and no amount of caterwauling or glorifying her whoredoms will change that fact. She kicked the righteous blacks off the Freedom Train to make room for her feces-eating fag friends, and God will never forgive her for it. Deal with it!”

Understandably, one may regard these ideas and organizations as “fringe,” but fringes reflect certain core principles of a larger body, and in any case, belief in hell itself is not a fringe belief. Seventy percent of Americans affirm its reality.

Behind the Label of Faith

For many, exclusionary convictions such as those represented by belief in hell are self-evidently destructive and divide people rather than move them closer to “truth.” For someone seeking answers, however, the fiery rhetoric of damnation is as prominent as any other doctrine. The baffling array of religious claims made by believers are so numerous, and the theological shadings among

them are sometimes so subtle that one may traverse *acceptance* to *exclusion* seamlessly. That is to say, behind the label “Christian,” one finds an unbroken chain tying the most open-minded to the most exclusive believer. The label both obscures and represents the spectrum. Labels, in fact, can create division when there is no actual divide.

Since many believers claim exclusive privilege (e.g. eternal life, salvation) based on their faith and their holy books, they are typically *perceived* as claiming that privilege. In other words, when people proclaim, “I am a Christian,” it is natural and logical to assume they believe that Christ and his teachings are somehow special, and that the Christian Bible is of greater importance (for them) than other texts. We should not underestimate the effect of this perception and its ability to divide. It is as if these folks were saying, “I am one of *these*, and if you are not, then I am not one of you.” Such is the shrouding effect of labels.

At some point we ought to consider the real and perceived meanings of our self-identification, to understand what it represents historically, doctrinally, and to the world. Those who suspect their faith does not have an exclusive hold on Truth, God, and Heaven or Hell, perhaps a rethink is in order. If Christ is not the only path to God, perhaps you are not “a Christian” after all; if neither is Mohammed, perhaps you are not an “a Muslim.” I certainly do not suggest that Christianity or Islam can be so easily defined, and in fact, I suggest the opposite. Labels encompass so much complexity and have such checkered pasts, it may be time we had the courage to drop them and simply learn to say, “I don’t know.”

Belief in hell is a clear illustration of the exclusivity that some religious principles engender. These principles are, as seen in popular Christian media, inextricably tied up in the faith, its texts, and its traditions. By being honest about what we believe, and by having the strength to resist the labels that our upbringing and religious celebrities urge on us, we may yet begin to melt the divisions propagated through the ages—in this world and in the next.