

# **The Problem of Hell Revisited: Towards a Gentler Theology of Hell**

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*Thought and Practice: A Journal of the Philosophical Association of Kenya (PAK)*

*New Series, Vol.3 No.2, December 2011, pp.93-103*

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## **Abstract**

The doctrines of hell and the existence of God seem to pose a formidable paradox for both Christianity and Islam. The paradox can be stated as follows: Given that God is perfect in every sense, how can he allow any of his creatures to suffer eternal perdition? In this paper, I undertake a critical examination of the arguments for and against the doctrine of hell and conclude that on balance, arguments against the existence of hell heavily outweigh those for its existence. This calls for a radical revision of the traditional doctrine of hell. I contend that what is needed is a gentler and more sinner-friendly theology of hell that recognizes God's mercy and infinite patience. Nevertheless, belief in hell can serve the social function of deterring potential sinners from sinning.

## **Key Words**

God, Christianity, Islam, punishment, hell

## **1. Introduction**

The concept of hell as eternal punishment is a central doctrine in both Christianity and Islam, two of the world's greatest religions. The followers of the two religions believe that after the last judgment, all wrongdoers will be consigned to hell to suffer everlasting punishment (with no room for escape), while non-sinners will go to heaven to enjoy a life of everlasting happiness. This is what is referred to as the traditional doctrine of hell. Nevertheless, the two religions also conceive of God as a perfect being: omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent and all loving. The question that immediately arises is this: how can such a God condemn his own creation to a life of endless suffering for sins/crimes committed in a finite duration of time?

In what follows, I will describe the concept of hell as understood in the three Abrahamic religions, namely, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. I will then try to show that the arguments that have so far been proposed to justify eternal punishment in hell are not convincing. I will argue that it is time to abandon the traditional view of hell as a place of eternal torment, and to replace it with a more human-friendly account of the sinner's destiny.

## **2. The Concept of Hell in the Three Abrahamic Religions**

The three Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) all have a doctrine of hell. In Christianity, hell is a place or a state in which the unsaved will suffer the consequences of sin for eternity. Jesus says:

"If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life crippled, than, having your two hands, to go into hell, into the unquenchable fire, [where THEIR WORM DOES NOT DIE, AND THE FIRE IS NOT QUENCHED.] If your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame, than, having your two feet, to be cast into hell, [where THEIR WORM DOES NOT DIE, AND THE FIRE IS NOT QUENCHED.] If your eye causes you to stumble, throw it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye, than, having two eyes, to be cast into hell, where THEIR WORM DOES NOT DIE, AND THE FIRE IS NOT QUENCHED. For everyone will be salted with fire" (Mark 9: 43-49, NASB).

On another occasion, Jesus told his disciples:

"I say to you, My friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that have no more that they can do. But I will warn you whom to fear: fear the One who, after He has killed, has authority to cast into hell; yes, I tell you, fear Him!" (Luke 12:4-5, NASB).

Jesus also declares that at his second coming, he shall judge the nations, welcoming the righteous ones into his kingdom, and sending the wicked ones into the lake of fire (see Matthew 25:31-46). To the unrighteous nations he will say, "Depart from Me, accursed ones, into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels" (Matthew 25:41, NASB). Jesus ends that discourse by declaring that "These [the unrighteous nations] will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life" (Matthew 25:46, NASB).

In Islam, as in Christianity, hell is a place of eternal punishment for unbelievers. The Muslim word for hell is *Jjahannam* (from the Hebrew word *Gehinom*, which literally means the valley of Hinnom). In the Qur'an, hell is described as a place of endless punishment:

Surely (as for) those who disbelieve and act unjustly, Allah will not forgive them nor guide them to a path. Except the path of hell, to abide in it forever and this is easy to Allah (Qur'an 4: 168-169).

The horrors and anguish of hell are also vividly depicted in the Qur'an:

And say: The truth is from your Lord, so let him who please believe, and let him who please disbelieve; surely We have prepared the iniquitous a fire, the curtains of which shall encompass them about; and if they cry for water, they shall be given water like molten brass which shall scald their faces; evil the drink and ill the resting place (Qur'an 18:29).

In another passage in the Qur'an we are told that hell is:

... place of ambush, a resort for the rebellious. A dwelling place for the disbelievers. They will abide there forever. Therein they taste neither coolness nor any drink save boiling water and a fluid, dark, murky, intensely cold, paralyzing, a dirty wound discharge. It is a fitting reward for them (Qur'an 78: 21).

Unlike the other two Abrahamic religions, Judaism does not have a fully developed idea of hell. In part, this is because it focuses more on the life now rather than the life to come. For Jews, hell or *sheol* is not a permanent destination, but a holding place for sinners until the last day of judgment. Those who reconcile with God will eventually be sent to heaven (Keener 1993, 728). Indeed, the Jewish hell is more similar to the Catholic concept of purgatory than the Christian concept of hell (Scwatz 2004).

Thus Christianity and Islam portray hell as a place of eternal torment for unbelievers. The purpose of this paper is to challenge this view of hell.

### **3. Arguments in Defense of Hell**

#### **3.1. The Retributive Defense**

The main justification for hell is retributive. According to the retributive theory of justice, people have to be punished because they have broken the law. Unlike utilitarian justice, which seeks to justify punishment by its alleged future desirable consequences, retributive justice looks at the past in order to determine what to do in the present. From a retributivist point of view, sinners should be punished because all sin is an offence against God; and since God is infinite, the degree of punishment ought also to be infinite.

A major problem with retributive justice arises from its backward looking nature. An adequate theory of justice ought to seek to rehabilitate, incapacitate or deter actual or potential offenders. I agree with Jeremy Bentham's contention that all punishment is evil, and that it should only be permitted if it promises to prevent some greater evil (Bentham 1843, 83). Far from preventing evil, or at least lessening it, punishing sinners in hell for an infinite period of time would make matters worse.

Eternal torture as retributive punishment is incoherent for another reason. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, retributive justice requires that the punishment fit the crime. This is what is sometimes referred to as the principle of equality or in Latin *lex talionis*, which literally means “the law of retaliation”. The point is that punishing a person eternally for sins committed over a finite period of time goes against the well-known principle that says:

If the evil of the punishment exceed the evil of the offence, the punishment will be unprofitable: the legislator will have produced more suffering than he has prevented; he will have purchased exemption from evil at the expense of a greater (Bentham 1843, 397).

To justify eternal punishment, the sinner must have caused infinite harm. However, since human life is finite, no person is capable of inflicting infinite pain on another or harming God himself (Peterson 2010, 67).

### **3.2. The Free Will Defense**

Theism’s main defense for eternal punishment is the argument from free will. According to this view, the torments of hell are not attributable to a defect in God’s benevolence, but to human free will. Hell is a state brought about by, and a natural consequence of, free rejection of God’s love. As such, the fundamental purpose of hell is not to punish people, but rather to honor their choices. Moreover, according to this view, hell is a necessary condition for human freedom. As Richard Swinburne has pointed out, in order for freedom to be genuine, a person must be able to make a choice between good and bad and not just a range of *good* options (Swinburne 1996, 98). Since on this view hell is freely chosen by those who go there, God has no obligation, even as an omnipotent being, to save sinners from it. Hell is therefore not unjust.

However, why would anyone choose to go to hell if he or she could do otherwise? Is the gift of free will so precious that God cannot override it in order to save all mankind from the torments of hell? In his much-discussed article titled “The Doctrine of Everlasting Punishment”, Thomas Talbott argues that no one can willingly choose hell over heaven unless his or her free will is impaired by “ignorance, deception or bondage of desire”. Talbott

maintains that in the face of eternal damnation, God ought to be willing to override a person's freedom:

We still have every reason to believe that everlasting separation is the kind of evil that a loving God would prevent even if it meant interfering with human freedom in certain ways ... he could never permit his loved ones to destroy the very possibility of future happiness in themselves. Just as loving parents are prepared to restrict the freedom of the children they love, so a loving God would be prepared to restrict the freedom of the children he loves ... (Talbot 1990a, 38).

Marilyn McCord Adams arrives at a similar conclusion on the basis that humans are not competent to choose their eternal destinies, and that God would never create a person who he knew would choose an eternal hell (Adams 2000, 43-49). Free will is not so valuable a gift that it justifies eternal torment. Furthermore, as Mackie contends, "God could have created a world in which men freely choose the good" (Mackie 1955, 209). Indeed, it is difficult to understand why God did not create a world free of evil, so that humans could choose only what is good.

Another objection against the free will defense is that the notion of free will seems to be incompatible with God's foreknowledge. As Talbot correctly observes, if God already knows which persons will be irredeemable, he should not create such persons in the first place (Talbot 1990b, 241). The free will defense is also problematic in that going by it, God bears some responsibility if he sets up the levels of well-being that a person receives from his or her choices. In the words of Kershnar, 'if God sets up a system whereby persons who reject him end up suffering, then he has in some sense caused their suffering' (Kershnar 2005, 106).

A more devastating criticism of the free will defense is that free will itself is a misnomer. It has been argued that to be truly free and responsible for our actions, we must be the cause of what we are, including the state of our minds (Pojman 2001, 73). Nevertheless, since no being can be the cause of itself, humans are not *fully* responsible for their sins.

## 4. Arguments against Hell

### 4.1. Argument from Injustice

According to this argument, the existence of hell is incompatible with justice. Hell as traditionally understood involves infinite suffering, and such suffering is unjust since no finite sin deserves infinite punishment. Because humans are finite, they can only commit a finite number of sins, yet hell is an infinite punishment. Eternal punishment is therefore “overkill”. As Swinburne aptly puts it, “whatever the evil, a finite number of years of evil doing does not deserve an infinite number of years of physical pain as punishment” (Swinburne 2002, 305). In sum, consigning sinners to hell would be barbarous vengeance, since no sin can deserve an infinite amount of punishment.

In reply to this argument, some medieval theologians such as St Augustine pointed out that our failure to appreciate the seriousness of sin is what makes us think that eternal punishment is harsh and unjust (Augustine 1972, 977). St Thomas Aquinas maintained that God’s infinite dignity requires that any wrong done against him warrants an infinite punishment (Aquinas 1956, 216). According to this line of thought, the correct punishment for an offence should be proportional to the status of the wronged individual.

Nevertheless, as retributivists would say, the severity of punishment ought to be determined by the amount of harm done to the victim, and not by the status of the wronged individual. If, for example, one person robs the president of a country and another robs a peasant, the punishment meted out on the two offenders should be similar. In any case, an omnipotent being cannot be harmed. Therefore by condemning sinners to eternal perdition, God would be punishing them for actions that had no effect on him. Besides, even if by sinning we wrong God, it does not follow that we deserve infinite punishment. Because God is omnipotent and infinite, no wrongdoing can directly cause an infinite loss to him.

## **4.2. Argument from the Incompatibility of Hell and Heaven**

The argument from the incompatibility of hell and heaven can be traced back to the nineteenth century philosopher and founder of modern theology, Friedrich Schleiermacher. According to Schleiermacher, the damnation of even a single person would make it impossible for the inhabitants of heaven to experience eternal bliss (Schleiermacher 1928, 721). A relatively more recent and elaborate formulation of this argument was given by Peter Kreeft and Ronald Tacelli in the form of a dilemma:

Suppose your spouse or parent or child goes to hell and you go to heaven. Either you know your beloved is in hell or not. If not your heavenly happiness is founded on ignorance. If so, this knowledge must disturb your heavenly happiness. If it doesn't you are selfish, cold and unloving. Thus if hell exists, heaven is ignorant, unhappy or unloving. Heaven cannot be any of these things. Therefore hell cannot exist (Kreeft and Tacelli 1995, 305).

I find the dilemma above difficult to rebut. Indeed, given that God does not lie, he cannot possibly conceal the suffering of the damned in hell from the inhabitants of heaven. Unless the inhabitants of hell are given a chance to escape, there can be no heaven if by heaven we mean a place of eternal bliss.

A critic of the traditional doctrine of hell could also argue that since God is an infinitely compassionate being, he would himself suffer infinite pain were even a single person to be condemned to hell. What is more, since hell is eternal, he would suffer forever. However, this argument is rather weak. As has often been pointed out, God cannot suffer since he is pure actuality and changeless. A God who suffered would be subject to change, and this is impossible (Ahluwalia 2008, 114).

## **4.3. Hell is Inconsistent with God's Love**

According to John Hick, the doctrine of hell attributes to God an insatiable cruelty, and can only be the "product of sinful imagination" (Hick 1966, 98). As the supreme moral being, we should expect God to extend his love and mercy to all creation. In fact he should want all people to be reconciled to him. Similarly, Bukareef and Plug (2005) have plausibly argued

that given God's character, it would be most rational for him to have an open door policy towards the inhabitants of hell, making it possible for them to escape. God's parental love ought to motivate him to extend the provision for reconciliation to him in this way. His divine mercy requires that he be infinitely patient with sinners.

### **5. Belief in Hell as a Deterrence to Sin**

As we have already seen, a major argument against eternal punishment is that it is retributive rather than forward looking, and therefore serves no purpose. I believe that this is a legitimate objection. As earlier noted, an adequate theory of punishment is one that deters the offender from repeating the offence, or deters others from committing similar offences. By its very nature, eternal punishment would neither act as deterrence nor would it reform the offender. Unless there is a possibility of escaping from hell as suggested by Buckareff and Plug (2005), eternal punishment would be meaningless.

However, there is a sense in which *believing* in eternal punishment can have an instrumental value. Indeed, even if belief in hell is not true, it has a social value in helping to deter potential sinners from sinning. Perhaps it should even be encouraged since it helps to regulate and sustain the moral foundation of society.

### **6. Towards a Gentler Theology of Hell**

From the forgoing discussion, it is quite clear that the traditional understanding of hell as a place of eternal torment is no longer tenable. It is not only morally repugnant; it is also unjust because no sin deserves infinite punishment. This picture of hell as a never-ending torture chamber needs to be modified if the justice of hell is to be defended. Alternatively, the idea of hell will need to be discarded altogether. However, I should not be construed to be advocating a version of annihilationism - the doctrine that sinners will be caused to cease to exist. Offering the inhabitants of hell a chance to escape would perhaps be the best solution to the God-hell paradox. Because God is infinitely patient, the opportunities for sinners to repent should also be infinite (Buckareff and Plug 2005, 41). What is more, assuming that

the inhabitants of heaven will have a free will, similar opportunities to repent ought to be extended to them, since there is no guarantee that they will not yield to temptation.

One could also acknowledge the existence of hell, but argue that the amount of suffering that sinners undergo is not intense enough to preclude the possibility of happiness. Effectively this would entail that we abandon the torture-chamber view of hell.

## **7. Conclusion**

In the foregoing reflections, I have considered a number of arguments for and against the existence of hell as a place where sinners will be tormented for ever. I have contended that such a view cannot be reconciled with an account of God as just, loving and all good. Since God's primary motivation is love, he cannot possibly impose endless suffering that precludes the possibility of some degree of happiness on a person or an opportunity for the person to escape from such suffering. This would be a negation of his very nature. We therefore need to modify our theology of hell by taking God's character seriously. His infinite mercy and patience should motivate him to always give a chance to sinners to escape from hell and be reconciled to him. The other alternative would be to reject the doctrine of hell altogether.

Nevertheless, my objection to the traditional doctrine of hell should not be construed as an endorsement of some form of annihilationism, which is the view that after the last judgment sinners will not be subjected to eternal suffering in hell, but will simply cease to exist. Like eternal punishment, annihilationism is morally objectionable. As Kvanvig (1993) rightly points out, even if the fate of sinners was extinction, it would remain problematic because the sentence of being separated eternally from God would still have been inflicted for finite offences. It might also be argued that eternal punishment is better than annihilation in the same way that life imprisonment is better than capital punishment.

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