

## HELL AND DAMN-NATION

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The topic for today actually began with the thought that it is good on occasion to consider the principle ideas on which this liberal religious community is built. Unitarianism is, from my perspective, a historical anomaly that has less meaning in this century than in the formative years in which persons were actually burned at the stake for suggesting that the doctrine of the Trinity was something less than established fact. Universalism, while being itself a historical development many centuries in the making, and also a heresy worthy of persecution at the hands of Orthodoxy, is to my way of thinking, still very relevant to the times in which we now find ourselves.

The title, “Hell and Damn-Nation,” was actually a gut reaction to the realization that the word, “damnation,” was so conveniently hyphenate-able with, what I would coin, a high degree of “punage”. Having been exposed to so many hellfire and damnation sermons as a child, it is difficult to believe that I had overlooked such potential for so long. Of course, at the time I was cringing under such tutelage, I was absolutely convinced that a literal, burning lake of fire really did exist, and I would have shuddered to have used the word damn in any fashion. And I would have shuddered even more to use it in conjunction with **nation**, at least in conjunction with my nation, the great shining city on the hill overlooking the wasteland of the less virtuous peoples of the earth.

The pursuit of a sermon this past week has taken me on some old paths, leaf covered and grown over from lack of travel, at once familiar and yet littered with new colors of understanding never before seen. There are two sources for much of today’s reflection. One is Alice K. Turner’s book, The History of Hell, a comparative religion text published in 1993, and the other is Paul Tillich’s, Systematic Theology. Tillich, my theologian of choice in seminary, provides some theological fodder for thought, while Turner gives a historical sketch of the development of the doctrine of eternal damnation.

The earliest known accounts of the Land of the Dead were written almost 4,000 years ago in the area where hell has been recently revitalized, now known as Iraq. Much of the landscape familiar to more modern depictions of Hell was present in the earliest descriptions. It is sufficient for our purpose merely to make note of the fact that descriptions of hell go back to the

very beginning of literature and history. Most of what the New Testament has to say about hell can be traced to other religious traditions. The more one reads, the more one realizes that the writer of Ecclesiastes' admonition that "there is nothing new under the sun" could not be better illustrated than when speaking of hell.

Judaism seems to have been rather slow in developing a doctrine of hell that in any way had much bite to it. Sheol in the Old Testament was simply the place of the dead. Early Judaism considered the dead unclean and not to be fooled around with. They were simply cut off from the hand of God. As Hellenistic influences began to change Judaism, an afterlife and a hell of sorts developed, but not nearly to the extent as in Christianity.

While hell or some facsimile thereof, is a theme common to many, indeed most of the world religions, Christianity raised the ante significantly. Hindus, says Turner, number up to several million hells, Buddhists count from eight to several thousand, yet neither of them holds that hell is an eternal residence of cruelty and punishment. Christianity, for much of its history has held that hell is exactly that, a place where many, if not most of the children of this earth are going to be forever more, which is a very long time. It is so long, that when we were children, we were not allowed to say "forever more", a proscription that I have yet to understand.

Around the beginning of the Common Era Hell begins to take on epic proportions, an ever-expanding territory of the most hideous cruelty one can imagine, and this escalation of Hell's importance in Christian thought has extended through many centuries.

Turner states, "The landscape of Hell is the largest shared construction project in imaginative history, and its chief architects have been creative giants—Homer, Virgil, Plato, Augustine, Dante, Bosch, Michelangelo, Milton, Goethe, Blake and more." She does not deign to mention all the creative diminutives such as Hal Lindsay or the creators of that best-selling "Left Behind" series, who keep the imagery of hell before the populace in our day.

Before we switch to the examination of hell's theological antidote, Universalism, let us bring the discussion up to date. We all know that the uneducated masses up through the 19<sup>th</sup>, and perhaps even the 20<sup>th</sup> century believed in Hell, but surely we of the 21<sup>st</sup> century have outgrown this fantasy. Let me just set the record straight with regards to Americans.

A Gallup Poll released in June of 2004 showed the following.

81% of Americans believe in heaven and 70% believe in hell. Those figures were up from 72% and 56%, respectively since 1997.

The poll also showed that belief in heaven or hell is stronger among Republicans, frequent churchgoers, southerners and those with a high school diploma or less. More than three-fourths of Americans—78%--believe in angels, up from 72% in 1994. Belief in the devil was up to 70% in 2004 from 58% in 1994.

I think Hell actually sells better than heaven. It stirs the imaginative fancy and meets the entertainment needs of the human psyche better than depictions of peaceful existence in some ethereal heaven.

As another indication of the prevalence of hell in the mainstream of American thought, listen to this Reuters news release dated July 27<sup>th</sup>, 2004.

“Economists searching for reasons why some nations are richer than others have found that those with a wide belief in hell are less corrupt and more prosperous, according to a report by the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis. Researchers at the regional Federal Reserve Bank acknowledged the importance of productivity and investment in the economic process but looked at some recent unconventional efforts to explain differences in national prosperity. The St. Louis Fed drew on work by outside economists who studied 35 countries, including the United States, European nations, Japan, India and Turkey and found that religion shed some useful light. In countries where large percentages of the population believe in hell, there seems to be less corruption and a higher standard of living, the St. Louis Fed said in its July quarterly review.

“For instance, 71% of the U.S. population believe in hell and the country boasts the world’s highest per capita income, according to the United Nations Human Development Report and 1990-1993 World Values Survey.”

The Federal Reserve report was entitled, “Fear of Hell Might Fire Up the Economy.” This report was later ridiculed as a ridiculous use of sadistics, or statistics, I am not sure which.

Let me just point out two major fallacies. One is the arrogant assumption that the United States is less corrupt than poorer countries. Poorer countries often simply have not learned how to legalize their corruption with campaign finance laws and corporate welfare. Surely the researchers had heard something about the Savings and Loan scandal of the 80’s and the rash of corporate scandals in the early days of this century. Another fallacy is to equate per capita income with quality of life. How many Bill Gates does it take to skew per capita income? In fact, real wages in the United States have been declining for decades while the number of millionaires, billionaires, and ironically, the poor, homeless, and incarcerated have been skyrocketing.

The fact that the highest rates of belief in hell are among the lowest educated is evidence that poor education is good for the economy too. It is no wonder education budgets are being cut to the bone. It is in the best interest of the economy.

Now, what about the theological antidote to hell? Universalism. Where did this come from? I am not going to give a full history of Universalism this morning, but I will point to some early roots of our movement, and then look to Tillich to give some modern theological girding.

My own belief is that Universalism arose out of the prophetic tradition of the Old Testament, and I will give you just one example that, conveniently, also provides some insight into the question of why the doctrine of Hell is so attractive in the first place. It is the story of Jonah. Now you know that Jonah was the guy who was supposedly swallowed by a great fish. But there is much more to the story than being swallowed and then barfed up by the bass of your worst nightmare. Jonah you see, was a bigoted, provincial, hateful man who wanted nothing more than to damn the Ninevites to hell and back so he could damn them all over again. The problem, which landed him in the belly of a fish, was that he was refusing to go and preach to the Ninevites so they could be spared destruction. Now I hope we are not worried about being literal here. This is a morality play of an early Universalist. Here was a writer who believed that the good news of God's steadfast love was for everyone, even the Ninevites. I am quite sure the writer was very aware of the attractiveness of the damn-nation. Who among us have not felt that our way is the best way, our people the best people, our flag the best flag? And who among us have not been tempted to say, "to hell with the others?"

It was out of this prophetic tradition that included the likes of Amos and Hosea that the teachings of Jesus arose. The most definitive characteristic of God is Love, not judgment.

The early Church struggled with this very question. Before the imposition of orthodoxy by the Roman Councils of the fourth century, there was a clarion call of Universalism in the teachings of Origen of Alexandria, who lived from the middle of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century to the middle of the 3<sup>rd</sup>. He became a headmaster of the Christian Catechetical School in Alexandria at the age of 17. He was influenced greatly by the middle platonian school, especially the Jewish scholar, Philo of Alexandria. His link to our heritage is found in his doctrine of *Apokatastasis panton*—the restoration of everything, the restoration of the cosmos.

He developed this thought from the teachings of the Greek Heraclitus who said that "the beginning and the end are common", that is they are the same.

He also drew on scriptures such as I Cor. 15: 28 which speaks of God as “All in All” *panta enpasin*, **Everything to Everyone**. Origen was a quintessential liberal in that he used scripture, reason and dialectic to support humane doctrines, rather than narrow dogmatism.

Now let me turn to a modern liberal of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Paul Tillich. He uses theological language here, but it is the language of a theological humanism in that it affirms the essential goodness of all Being, including human being.

“Ontologically,” says Tillich, “eternal damnation is a contradiction in terms. It establishes an eternal split within Being itself. The Demonic, whose characteristic is exactly this split, has reached co-eternity with God; the nonbeing has entered the very heart of being and love.” (Systematic Theology, p. 285, I) (Ontology is the study of the nature of being itself.)

He goes on to say that, “Divine Love is the final answer to the questions implied in human existence, including finitude, the threat of disruption, and estrangement.” (p. 286, I)

Somewhere, in one of his sermons I remember reading years ago,

Tillich declares, “Love exerts its greatest force when it overcomes the power of estrangement, even the estrangement of death.”

Love is present and heals where Love is seriously accepted. Salvation for Tillich, for Origen, even for that cantankerous Apostle Paul, is universal or it is not salvation at all. The origin of that word “salvation” is *salvas*, “healed.” Tillich says that salvation means reuniting that which was estranged, giving a center to that which is split. (p. 166, I)

Listen to Tillich’s language and forgive him the exclusive use of the masculine. (He died too early for feminist theologians to enlighten him) Listen to the way in which he seriously accepts the responsibility and gravity of the existential human condition and yet refuses to allow that existential condition to overcome grace and the essential unity of the goodness of Being.

“The *Telos*, (end) of man as an individual is determined by the decisions he makes in existence on the basis of the potentialities given to him by destiny. He can waste his potentialities, though not completely, and he can fulfill them, though not totally.” (p. 406, II)

To propose the wasting to be complete and eternal would be a denial of grace as it would be to propose the fulfillment to be such; the former leading to damnation, the latter to *hubris*. (Pride)

Tillich continues, “Thus the symbol of ultimate judgment receives a particular seriousness. The exposure of the negative as negative in a person may not leave much positive for eternal life. It can be a reduction to smallness; but it also can be an elevation to greatness. It can mean an extreme poverty with respect to fulfilled potentialities, but it

can also mean an extreme richness of them. Small and great, poor and rich, are relative evaluations. Because they are relative they contradict the absolute judgments that appear in religious symbolism, such as “losing or winning,” “being lost or being saved,” “hell or heaven,” “eternal death or eternal life.”.... Absolute judgments over finite beings or happenings are impossible because they make the finite infinite.” (p. 406-7, II)

This realization of the impossibility of elevating what is finite to the level of the infinite is the foundation of Origen’s doctrine of *Apokatastasis panton*—the restoration of everything, and it is the affirmation of the infinite power of love that is the foundation of Universalism within the Christian tradition. In very simple terms, the Ground of our Being is love and that love is Unconditional or it is not love at all.

If Being, as being, is Good, then nothing that is can be completely evil. If something “is”, if someone “is”, if it has being, then it must be included in the creative divine love. The essential unity of Being denies the eternal designation of hell. Tillich says, “Whoever condemns anyone to eternal death condemns himself, because his essence and that of the other cannot be absolutely separated.”

Is this not what Jesus meant when he commanded, “Judge not, lest ye be judged.” He was not speaking of judgment from another but rather asserting that judgment of the other was judgment of the self.

Now, enough of hell, what about that damn-nation? I simply want to point out this morning that if we are to take universalism seriously, the concept of the nation-state is damned to the temporal and cannot participate in the eternal. Tillich, a refugee from Nazi Germany, knew full well the danger of elevating that which is finite to the status of infinite. The biblical writers were aware of the damnable nature of the state as well. All one has to do is to return to the period when the debate about nationhood was being waged with regard to kingship and all that goes with it. The inevitable result of the worship of the state is the damn-Nation of war.

Let me now share with you another way of thinking about the choices we make within the limits of our existential condition. Thomas Merton wrote,

"As long as we are on earth, the love that unites us will bring us suffering by our very contact with another because this love is the resetting of a body of broken bones -- even saints cannot live with saints on this earth without some anguish between them. There are only two things men can do about the disunion with other men -- they can love or they can hate. Hate recoils from the sacrifice and sorrow that are the price of resetting bones -- it refuses the pain of reunion." (inscribed on a plaque in New Harmony, IN)

The problem with hell and the problem with the damn-nation are identical. They both refuse the pain of reunion. Universalism is an antidote to hell and an antidote to nationalism. It is the proclamation of the universal family of life whose common blood is the unconditional love from which we have come and to which we shall return.

May we know and share the Universal Love which is the heart of all Being.