**HELL**

**is good news of damnation**

What we think about tomorrow (or the next day, or the afterlife) matters because it’s a human power, and not to use our God-given powers is a sad waste. Since we can, we should consider the probable consequences of our behavioral options. That’s *logical*. / What we do has consequences we are responsible for to the extent that we could have anticipated them. That’s *moral*. / God will hold us accountable for our behavior, mindless as well as mindful. That’s *religious*.

1.“Don’t ever talk religion to me. The Man upstairs, if any, will be kind to me.” Our neighbor knew that I’d come to commiserate with him on his 21-year-old son’s suicide, and his preparation for the encounter included his laying on me his view of the afterlife. His view is common among America’s non-religious. Like Rob Bell (if the news of his opinion on hell is accurate), non-religious folk believe that the afterlife, if any, is nothing to worry about. For them, afterlife fear is “no problem.” And, it seems, they have a friend in Pastor Bell, who sooths them in their irreligion and so prevents the gospel (old English for “good news”) which he was ordained to preach. For those whom it shocks into awareness of their sinful alienation from God, hell is “the good news of damnation” (a phrase University of Chicago President Robert Maynard Hutchins used of the atomic bomb made possible by research at his school: the Bomb, he said, was such a horror as to prevent large-scale future wars).

2.When FDR told us in the Great Depression that “We have nothing to fear but fear itself,” he was talking about irrational, sick, immobilizing fear. / And when Alan Greenspan told us that the Great Recession was caused by “irrational exuberance,” he was talking about the absence of a rational, healthy fear. But since human masses are overwhelmed by unpredictable bipolar, manic-depressive tsunamis, economic prediction is even less reliable than the Weather Channel. With mournful, dachshund countenance, Greenspan now pronounces the two words he says forever prevent economics from being a science, even the dismal science: “*human nature*.”

3.But the human sciences, sciences using physical and mental tools previously unavailable, are improving our understanding of human nature. David Brooks’ “Social Animal,” which shows these improvements and applies them to political life, is a novel because he says that while our consciousness writes essays, our unconscious is narrative in form, stories.

4.Heaven/hell is reality in narrative form. Jesus *attacks classism* in telling a heaven/hell “apocalyptic” story of an unnamed rich man & Lazarus, a poor man (Gospel of Luke 16:19-31). The poor man needs hope, and Jesus gives it to him in the form of the dream of timeless bliss in heaven. The rich man needs a nightmare for the way he’s treated the poor man, and Jesus gives him hell in its most horrendous form, namely, endless torture. To take this literally is to misunderstand the apocalyptic genre of literature as radical either/or rhetoric; but to fail to take it seriously is to confuse what is real in the unconscious mind with what is real in the conscious mind.

5.A character in a George Eliot novel refuses to take hell seriously because he thinks of it literally: “Father, I choose. I will not have a heaven haunted by far-off cries from hell. My heart has grown too big with things that might be.” The irony is that, in *reading* this rich man / Lazarus story, George Eliot, a highly sophisticated and socially radical woman, was less sophisticated and radical than Jesus, who *told* it.

6.Another use Jesus made of hell was to teach the *courage* of freedom from fears of what people can do to you. In our current plutocracy, members of Congress are under constant pressure to ask themselves, “Can I get enough money to be re-elected if I do/don’t….?” Yielding to this pressure is a corruption guaranteed in plutocracies. It’s the *fear* of money – of not having enough of it. Add to this the fear of a corrupt people who irrationally demand small government, low taxes, and huge benefits – the *fear* of not having enough votes. The present moral level of the U.S. citizenry, in and out of political office, is inadequate to our Founders’ polity, which assumed “the *fear* of the Lord” as superior to all other fears and as motivation for moral rectitude.

7.Jesus used hell as one dimension of teaching “the fear of the Lord.” Heartening his disciples with courage to continue to preach in spite of persecutors, he says, “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more. But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear him who, after the killing of the body, has power to throw you into hell.” (Gospel of Luke 12:5; similar, Gospel of Matthew 10:28) The authority of God supervenes over all earthly authority, and uniquely extends into the afterlife, where this world’s injustices are rectified.

8.Jesus could not be more clear that God seeks in holy love to save everybody, so we are to love everybody, even our enemies. *Holy* love, moral love, disciplinary love - not the sentimental love that fantasizes a heaven with no hell. Jesus’ heaven/hell stories are in the service of this holy love – in response to the divine command to love God, and your neighbor as yourself.

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