

HELL, THE CANADIAN BRASS, & THE CHRISTIAN RELIGIONS

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Not many days ago, our host & hostess in Ft.Lauderdale took us to a secular concert, the famous "Canadian Brass," in a sacred space, viz Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church. At the intermission, the senior minister, Jas. Kennedy (whose late Sunday worship has many hundreds of television outlets), strode forth & quoth in substance thus:

While we are all enjoying this splendid performance, I am saddened at the thought that some of you who are here tonight will go to hell. It's entirely unnecessary, but you will do it. It's unnecessary because God in Jesus Christ has made it unnecessary by providing forgiveness of sins through the blood of the Cross. But while you don't have to go to hell, some of you will because you will, till the day you die, continue to reject God's offer of salvation. I'm here to plead with you to repent, & accept God's offer, & leave this place tonight not just with happiness over having heard a good concert, but with joy because you have been forgiven & are bound for heaven....

1 That 8,000-member church is, in Ft.Lauderdale, the place to go for culture & that Christian religion, which is one of the authentic, NT-supportable Christian religions that together make up "Christianity." Likewise, all the Jewish religions together make up "Judaism." Why the variety? Because of the Bible's **open paradigm**, many stories interwoven within one Story, many ways--then & through the ages & now--of telling the one Story. (And even different narratologies. Eg, Mircea Eliade tells the story as medium for expriencing awareness of the sacred, heaven touching earth. And Hans Frei is for letting the meanings emerge without too much cogitation about truth inabstract or in metaphysics. And Paul Ricoeur sees the biblical stories as making truth claims, & uses them to challenge philosophers working within nonbiblical paradigms.)

2 Now, doubtless many nontraditionally religious in Kennedy's concert audience had no afterlife problem in their heads when he told them they had one. Some of them believed there's no afterlife, period; others, that "you go to a better place" (a sentimental notion strengthened, of late, by pseudoscientific discursi on "near-death experiences"). But the current issue of U.S.NEWS & WORLD REPORT gives some support to Kennedy's religion (ie, version of Christianity). On the cover, the word "HELL" is almost as large as the word "GOD" was on LIFE's last '90 issue. And the subtitle suggests the possibility of going to a worse place when you die.

3 Can we say what's happening? **Ethics** is back, so hell--afterlife ethics--is back. The eudemonistic (happiness-oriented) time we've been living through is, as are all such times, nonethical--or, to use one of its favorite words, "nonjudgmental." The nonjudgmental attitude comports with nondiscriminatory behavior. To eudemonistic ethics, the only thing wrong/bad/evil is to call anything/anybody wrong/bad/evil. "Everything is permitted," as it says in Karamazov. Using tax money to exhibit a crucifix in urine is not to be complained about to NEA or any other branch of government. A thirteen-year-old child with the child she's given birth to constitutes "a family," no euphemism intended. The sadistic denigration of women in movies is protected by artistic license. But now, throughout our culture, we've entered a revolt against the revolt against ethics. Even the afterlife is being re-ethicized: moral responsibility/consequences for our this-life behavior continue into the afterlife. There's a moral continuum between this world & the next. This adds **solemnity & dignity** to human life here & now.

4 While I'm happy about the return of hell, I must point out these **dangers**:

(1) The narcissistic danger. A few Sundays ago, somebody put a \$100,000 check on the plate in that church: the congregation is decidedly upper-income, full of folks who've made it by taking care of themselves, looking out for #1. Avoiding hell & gaining heaven requires no shift in mentality. The biblical concept of conversion is far richer than this.

(2) The orphic danger. Excessive otherworldliness trivializes this world, diminishing the significance of its concerns, relativizing the woes of the oppressed in body & mind, rejoicing in the soul's wealth to the neglect of the wellness of society.