

Thanks to technology, hell has gained: the potential for and prospect of magna-suffering has increased: A-bomb, H-bomb, neutron bomb, sophisticated delivery systems for missiles (MX, Trident, etc), greenhouse effect, irreversible pollutions of the ecosphere, diminishing supplies for exploding populations, Cancun stale-mates, recrudescant tribalisms and nationalisms, the ever more intense revolution of rising expectations cum demands....But for the American masses--in spite of revived evangelicalism, hell has lost much/all of its afterlife reality and therefore of its sanctional-thisworld force. This thinksheet is about that loss.

1. Today (21 Oct 81), two readings converged: a newspaper and a book. The CAPE COD TIMES has a letter from a suicide's sister, explaining that her brother "took his life and with that gesture attained what he sought: peace." The evidence for the assertion in her sentence's first half was overwhelming: where's the evidence for the assertion in its second half? His body stopped moving: in a sense, a corpse is at peace--but surely she meant more than that.

2. Part of this "more than" is the (endorphinic?) serenity at the last stage of dying, just before death. No one argues for a peaceful afterlife on the ground that corpses don't move, but many today are so arguing from this fact of pre-death serenity.

3. Another part of this "more than" is the current wave of spiritualism (those on the other side telling the grief-stricken "Not to worry, I'm at peace here") and of revivication stories (Moody, Kubler-Ross, etc.--the returnees reporting, with very few exceptions, peace in the great beyond, oceanic tranquility).

4. Still another part of this "more than" is, for many, the belief that death ends all: there is no afterlife, so the dead at at "peace" in the negative sense of the word (which sense applies to the opposition "peace/war").

5. For many, hell hasn't died but has changed residence from that side to this: "We get our hell right here." "Hell is other people" (Sartre), but also the absence of other people (as in the movement, reported in the same newspaper, to eliminate solitary from Mass. prisons on the ground that it's "cruel and unusual punishment"). Flip that: Heaven is other people, but also the absence of other people sometimes! Note also: "Hell here" is the other half of "Heaven here": both cases, no afterlife in moral continuum with this life.

6. Yes, the book: Mary Ellen Chase's JONATHAN FISHER: MAINE PARSON 1768-1847 (Mac/48), a biography of her great great grandfather. The theology of this pioneer preacher-polymath (for he was an American daVinci) was (to use a phrase I picked up from Gerald Heard when I asked him to present to a group his spiritual pilgrimage) "centrally hearted by the doctrine of hell." For him, life--which today is being defined biologically (abortion, etc.)--was defined metaphysically: the human being is not primarily a body or even a person, but a "soul." That soul was seen by him as in danger not of oblivion but of everlasting agony. Not "peace," but the very inner opposite, viz. restless torment.

7. How am I like thee, Jonathan Fisher? Let me count the ways: A Congregational minister in New England, indeed in Mass. (for his sec. of Maine was, during his 40-year pastorate, in Mass.); a "catcher in the rye" evangelist, snatching souls from the brink of hell (with, in my case, latter-day theological modifications as noted below); a daily devout student of the Bible in the original languages; happier in my study than anywhere else (except for being with Loree anytime anywhere doing anything); humming only when working with my hands at tasks gross or fine; every hungering for significant conversation and confrontational action; uncalculating of self-consequences when moved to make a point for truth/love; sober, but every leaning toward joy; not always sufficiently attentive to others' feelings.

8. How unlike him? Reading family devotions, and the lections in public worship, in English: he customarily read the Bible, in both places, in Hebrew-Aramaic-Greek (and sometimes Latin and French)--so the folks could here the original sounds.

9. My modifications of his hell-doctrine? Sorry: another thinksheet.