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The Hell of Non-Being

Paul Blackman

In the following article, Dr Paul Blackman examines what the recent Doctrine Commission's Report on Salvation has to say about Hell. He reminds us of the way Hell has been understood in the classical literary tradition, and connects this to both biblical and theological reflection. His conclusion is that the Doctrine Commission's analysis is semi-Pelagian, and needs to be rethought in the light of the arguments which he presents.

Sartre has replaced Dante as our eschatological authority.

Raymond Firth *The Fate of the Soul* 1955

The Mystery of Salvation,¹ the new report from the Doctrine Commission of the Church of England, has some excellent things to say about various aspects of soteriology. Its emphasis on the material character of the final state is a much needed corrective to a deep-seated dualism in the Western tradition. The careful exploration of the implications of the new creation sets the subject of salvation in a holistic, world-affirming context which enables one to deal with the reality of creation in a more biblical manner than is so often the case.

However, on the subject of Hell the report falls severely below the biblical teaching. This is by no means accidental. A complete system of theology is set out that has no room for the biblical picture of punishment.

Death

My old cat is dead
Who would butt me with his head.
He had the sleekest fur,
He had the blackest purr.
Always gentle with us
Was this black puss,
But when I found him today
Stiff and cold where he lay,
His look was a lion's,
Full of rage and defiance:
O! He would not pretend
That what came was a friend

1 *The Mystery of Salvation* (London: Church House Publishing 1995)

But met it in pure hate.
Well died, my old cat.

Hal Summers (b 1911) *My Old Cat*

Death is horrible. It is the last enemy (1 Cor 15:26). It is no friend, because it is only 'welcomed' when its evil companions of decay, disease or depression have so dehumanised their victim that *life* is seen as the enemy rather than death. The theological decisions made about death in the report effectively determine how the report ends up.

The Bible makes it clear that death is God's punishment for sin. Death is thoroughly unnatural. Death is not a part of the original creation, but a specific curse placed upon the created order by the Creator in response to the evil of Adam and Eve. Romans 8:20-21 makes this quite clear: the creation was subjected to a bondage of corruption, unwillingly, and thus needs (and looks forward to) the redemption that centres upon the children of God. Death is not even the inevitable result of separation from God, as if it lay within the range of possibility of humanity to bring death about by rebelling against God.² The Bible (Is 40:6-7) teaches us that we die because the Holy Spirit causes us to die. God the Spirit is both the Life-Giver and the Death-Bringer. God does not stand at a polite distance while (so-called) natural processes inexorably work death upon his creatures. God is personally involved in meting death out upon his creation as the conscious display of his hatred and anger against human sinfulness. The fact that the whole cosmic order, embracing plants, bacteria, fish, mammals, birds, even stars and planets, is included in this order of death or bondage to decay is why there is need for a new creation. 2 Peter 3 sets out a picture of the whole universe being purified by fire on the Day of God so that a new heaven and a new earth may be established out of the old order, a home for righteousness.

The Mystery of Salvation is a systematic rejection of that picture of death and the working out of an alternative vision of the problem from which we are saved.

The report begins in a thoroughly traditional fashion: 'In Christian terms, the peril from which humanity has to be, and has been, saved is the power of sin and its consequence, death'.³

However, whatever the report means by that sentence is superseded by its true picture of the problem: 'death cannot be the wages of sin in the sense that physical death would not have happened apart from human sin'.⁴ So,

2 Cf p 43 of the report.

3 P 2

4 P 53

what was the consequence of the Fall? The report does think it is very important to make a clear distinction between creation and Fall. A failure at this point would undermine the fundamental goodness of the creation. If God is to rescue us from evil and death then a doctrine of the Fall is required.⁵ The report is very keen to emphasise that God does not save us from the universe, but saves us in and with the universe.⁶ 'But we can still maintain', it says⁷, 'that death as sinful human beings experience it, as the fate of the godless and godforsaken, is given its fatal and fateful character by the fact that human beings have turned away from God the source of life.'

So before 'The Fall' death was not fatal! What was it then? Could you sleep death off or would a few days in bed clear it up? What was death, the final enemy, doing in the creation before the entrance of sin? Is the report buying into a very strong version of supralapsarianism such that God already meted out the punishment of death and corruption upon his creation well in advance of the Fall, so committed was he to bringing about a new creation?

What is the status of redemption in this picture? Did God deliberately make a sloppy job of the original creation precisely so that he would have to redeem us from his poor workmanship? Apparently so: 'the evils that come upon us purely as a result of the physical nature of our world – earthquakes, floods, some forms of disease, and so on – cannot as such result from the fall'.⁸ The report assures us that humanity in its innocence would not have experienced these physical evils in such a bad way, but does not specify how one could have a particularly enjoyable case of cancer or be thrilled by being covered in molten lava in a volcanic eruption.

Perhaps agnosticism is the best course once one has clearly made a wrong turn and does not want to admit it: '[Physical evils] are inevitable in a physical creation like that of which we are a part, though we cannot fully tell how they would have affected us had we not turned from God'.⁹ Given that the report is rightly insistent that the new creation is nothing less than the redeemed old creation, then we can look forward to a whole eternity of diseases, earthquakes, flood and volcanic eruptions to spice up our state of glorification. Perhaps this is unfair in that the report is quite sure that all 'the sorrows and pains of the world' will be finally healed in the creation of the new heaven and the new earth. Similarly, it realises that a simple replay of this creation is not good enough.¹⁰

5 Pp 52 and 54

6 Pp 81 and 82

7 P 53

8 P 53

9 P 54

10 See p 191.

It seems that *The Mystery of Salvation* leaves us with a nasty dilemma about death. It tells us that death was the very engine of God's creative process throughout the billions of years of pre-human cosmic history.¹¹ Yet, at several points the report wants to blame death on sin and exonerate the Creator from the terrible pains of death and corruption that lie so deep in this present age. Nevertheless, it seems that the deepest commitment of the report is to the model of death as natural. Never does the report indicate that death is at all unnatural or that there was ever a creation that was free of death. 'It is not that tragedy is absent from the world. The inevitability of it is at the very heart of God's decision to create.'¹²

The only way the report can escape this dilemma is by proposing that the fundamental problem with the old creation was that God had allowed it to exist as 'something "other"'¹³ given the freedom to be itself. The new creation on the other hand will be freely reconciled to God in Christ, a spiritual cosmos, given new properties beyond those of the old creation. Are we to understand this arrival at the right answer by a hideously wrong route as a kind of process theology? Did God have to try out a universe as 'something "other"' before discovering that such a venture was never really viable? Did God learn from his mistakes? By radically undermining the logic of the Bible's theology the report is left in deep confusion about the relationship between creation, fall and redemption.¹⁴

Punishment and Atonement

It is impossible that anything so natural, so necessary and so universal as death, should ever have been designed by Providence as an evil to mankind.

Jonathan Swift (1667-1745) *Thoughts on Religion*

11 See p 188:

The present creation is characterised by disease and disaster, with mortal transience as the necessary cost of new life. An evolutionary universe, allowed by its creator to explore and realise its God-given potentiality, cannot be otherwise. The same processes of cellular variation which produce new forms of life will also produce the possibility of malignancy.

12 P 130

13 P 194

14 Of course, if the Fall is denied its biblical reality and reduced to an undefined existential qualifier, then the doctrine of original sin is lost too. The Pelagianism of the report at this point is incredible:

In baptism we are symbolically moved out of the sphere of influence of 'fallen humanity', all those social influences around us that incline towards sin and which are prior to any conscious choices of our own. Then instead of being subject to such 'original sin', all the sin that is prior to any reflection on our part, we are granted the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives, there to conform us to the image of Christ, the definitive human being, will we but let him.

How biblically uninformed Swift was at this point. The Bible makes it clear that death is an evil, a final, unavoidable enemy who hunts us down by the power of the Spirit of God in order to work upon us the consequences of what we are and what we have done. The whole order of Adam, embracing the race that he fathered and the cosmos for which he was responsible, is defined as a world under the malign say of Satan (2 Cor 4:4). There will come a time when even death itself will be consigned to the fires of Hell as the fitting conclusion to this nemesis of human evil.

The doctrine report is very uncomfortable with the biblical view of punishment as the remedy for guilt. As we have seen, it is the fundamental belief of the Commission that death is an unavoidable consequence of creation.

If death is not part of God's careful anger against sin, then what significance can be given to either animal sacrifice in the Old Testament or the death of Christ in the New Testament? Why does God insist on death if sin is to be forgiven? Is it just because he wants to make sin seem bad, or rather is it not because he has established a principle from the creation of the universe that sin must be paid for by death? If the death of animals is simply an unavoidable fact of creation what significance can be given to the behaviour of the people of God all through the Old Testament?

So often the idea of propitiatory sacrifice is dismissed as a pagan borrowing. This simply will not do. This principle lies deep in the biblical narrative. Is it not more accurate to talk of the pagan corruption of God's revelation?

The vindication of propitiatory sacrifice cannot be explored here, so we will simply proceed to show how the view of the atonement taken by the report is an obvious outcome of its concept of death.

In the section of the report dealing with 'Images of the Atonement'¹⁵ we are encouraged to distance ourselves from a view of Christ's death that is too focused on seeing Christ as a sacrificially slaughtered offering. Why must we do this? Why is the proper context for Christ's death not the Exodus event of the Passover?

In the appendix things become clearer. Peter Abelard's view of the atonement is suggested as a better model than the juridical one set out in *The Book of Common Prayer*. Before we go further we should make Abelard's theory clear.

Abelard, like Anselm, thoroughly rejects the idea that the devil needed to be paid off if humanity were to be redeemed. He argues that redemption is only for the elect, over whom the devil has no power at all. Thus, the devil can be seen only as a kind of jailor and torturer to whom God has given mankind as a punishment for their evil. Abelard takes it as given that God could forgive sins before the death of Christ. So, why did God the Son need to suffer and die? Abelard imagines that the slaying of the Son of God by human hands could only infinitely increase the trouble that the human race was in. 'If Adam's slight offence required so great an atonement, what atonement will the slaying of Christ require?' Could God be actually pleased with the murder of his Son? Could he forgive a lesser sin on account of an infinitely greater sin? God cannot be paid off with innocent blood for the sins of the guilty. 'Can God have pleasure in the death of his Son, so that through it he should be reconciled to the whole world?'

So, what is Abelard's answer? Obedience to the law cannot make anyone righteous, but in Christ God reveals his love towards us. Because he assumed our nature he was able to be our teacher and example, remaining faithful even through all his sufferings and death. This revelation of the love of God encourages us to love him and is able to awaken this love in us. 'By virtue of our faith in the love of God made manifest in Christ, we are united with Christ, as with our neighbour, by an unbreakable bond of love.' Abelard's key verse is: 'Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much' (Luke 7:47). On the basis on this he argues that the love of God is the ground of our forgiveness. 'Our redemption, therefore, is that supreme love in us, through the sufferings of Christ, which not only liberates from the servitude of sin, but acquires for us the true liberty of the sons of God, so that we fulfil all things from love rather than fear of him who has shown to us such grace that, as he himself declares, no greater can be conceived.' Because Christ's love for others is so great he continues to teach and pray for us before his Father. On account of his righteousness his prayers are efficacious and make up for the lack of merit in our prayers.

A critique of Abelard cannot be given here; suffice it to say that the premise for his position is that God can forgive sin without any need of satisfaction or atonement. For Abelard this rests on his belief that God forgave the Virgin Mary to prepare her to bear Christ. Given that this idea is itself quite unbiblical it is hard to know how seriously to take the rest of his argument. For Abelard the death of Christ does not achieve any change at all between God and humanity. It simply is the ultimate example of God's love for us. Of course, Abelard has virtually no engagement with the Old Testament in his work.

The report has clearly adopted a fundamentally Abelardian approach to the incarnation, ministry, sufferings and death of Jesus Christ. This was necessary because of the fundamentally amoral character of suffering. God has created a universe in which suffering and death are inevitable. We have become alienated from him through our sin and are now left to face the inhospitable life of God's creation without the Creator. But God joins us by the incarnation and shows us how we ought to cope with this inevitable suffering and death. He gives us teaching and a perfect example of the way to do it. His love for us is revealed in this self-giving, and love for him is awakened in us so that we are no longer alienated from God. Thus, according to the report, life in the creation is already (at least potentially) restored to its Edenic 'perfection'.

This sets the stage for our examination of the doctrine of Hell in the report.

Hell

If what has been termed God's all-controlling attribute and emotion are love and personal communion with humanity, then respecting the freedom of others is fundamental for God.¹⁶ Thus, 'no one can be compulsorily installed in heaven'.¹⁷ Apparently freedom is the condition of love. There are so many logical problems here it is hard to know where to start. The report said that this creation was given freedom and independence, but the downside of this was the inevitability of malignant life-forms and suffering. The new creation is no longer to have this independence, but will be freely reconciled to God in Christ. What kind of freedom are we thinking of in this argument? Will the New Creation no longer be free 'to be itself'?¹⁸

Presumably, because we need to be holy and 'such holiness requires our human response... a fruit of our love freely given, won from us by God's transforming love for us'¹⁹, only those who have exercised their freedom to love God now, in the creation in its imperfection, can enter into the new creation. There is a possibility that human beings may so reject God's revelation of his love that they will not be able to get a place in the new creation. 'Love never forces, and therefore there can be no certainty that it will overcome.'²⁰

However, although the report says final judgment 'remains a reality'²¹ it

16 This accounts for the deeply semi-Pelagian character of the report. This aspect of the report desperately need critical appraisal.

17 P 198

18 Pp 194-5

19 P 196

20 P 198

21 P 199

will not take the form of a judgment day when God will pronounce his verdict on everybody. This would be far too juridical and impersonal, so instead the report says that 'the "time" of the new creation is a new time, it need bear no simple or sequential relationship to the time we presently experience. Though we die at different times, we may all enter into our destiny together'.²²

So, what fate awaits those who wilfully reject the revelation of the love of God? 'In the past the imagery of hell-fire and eternal torment and punishment, often sadistically expressed, has been used to frighten men and women into believing.'²³ Jesus, along with many Christians, should not have done this because, although he was the revelation of the love of God, yet he was surely guilty (though the report does not single him out) of professing 'appalling theories which made God into a sadistic monster and left searing psychological scars on many'.²⁴ The report thinks that the worst religion of all is a religion of fear. There has been a growing sense over the past two hundred years, we are told, that the picture of God who consigned millions to eternal torment is far removed from the revelation of God's love in Christ. Who has a growing sense of this? Is it the increasingly anti-Christian society that has been emerging over the past two hundred years? Is it the 'cultured despisers of Christianity'? Is it the mythical university educated German intellectual? Were the biblical writers of the Old and New Testaments, together with the Christian Church for 1800 years, really so confused about the God revealed in Jesus Christ?

The report is uncomfortable with dismissing the idea of hell altogether, interestingly not because this would go against the teaching of Jesus, but because 'the reality of hell... is the ultimate affirmation of the reality of human freedom'.²⁵ Hell is not eternal torment, but simply the choosing of what is not God and thus of non-being. In other words 'annihilation might be a truer picture of damnation than any of the traditional images of the hell of eternal torment'.²⁶

The report ends here because of its view of death, punishment and atonement. Death is not punitive but merely the natural end of life in this creation. There is nothing wrong with death. So what threat can God possibly offer to humanity? A new kind of death has to be imagined, that of non-being. Instead of death being the gate to some other form of life, death is now either the gate to the new creation or else the end of existence. If God is interested only in freely-chosen, loving relationships,

22 P 196

23 P 199

24 P 199

25 P 199

26 P 199

then there is no point in resurrecting people only to consign them to an eternity of weeping and wailing. God is not angry at sin. He does not demand that justice is done. Surely not.

2 Thessalonians 1:5-10 might make relevant reading for the Doctrine Commission. There we are told that God will repay with affliction those that afflict the Church. Why will God do this? Is he a sadistic monster or perhaps he is the definition of sanity, justice and truth? Perhaps God loves righteousness so much that he will not allow wicked people to trample it underfoot with impunity? Perhaps Jesus Christ, the ultimate example of God's love, thinks it is right to appear from heaven in the midst of human history with mighty angels in flaming fire 'inflicting vengeance upon those who do not know God and upon those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus?' (verse 8). Perhaps God is quite other than the last two hundred years have felt him to be and will cause the non-Christian to 'suffer eternal destruction'?

Behind the view of Hell the report takes is a modern, liberal view of God that has lost its offensive character. God is not polite, nor is he a believer in liberal democracies. God is not a moral philosopher nor is he interested in maintaining our 'freedom' at all costs. God has nothing to gain from us and nothing to lose. He has freedom and has freely chosen to propitiate himself with respect to the sins of his people. What he says goes, whether anyone freely chooses it or not, and at the end of this world he will call everyone, without exception, from the grave to stand before him. Those clothed in the righteousness of Christ will enter into the New Creation. Those who stand in their own righteousness will be cast out into outer darkness where they will weep and wail for ever and ever.

The Bible repeatedly tells us to fear God. We evangelise because we know the *terror* of the Lord. We know that what God has threatened he will do, and we recall the creation and the flood, as 2 Peter 3 tells us to do, in order to clarify our thinking on this over against 'the scoffers'.

Conclusion

There is much about the *Mystery of Salvation* to be thankful for. The section on the Trinity and salvation has much to offer the Western tradition that has so often been guilty of a closet (at best) Unitarianism and the emphasis on the physical character of eternal life cannot be repeated too often.

However, underlying so much of its theological work is a thoroughly unbiblical concept of God. It is a God who has been scrubbed clean of all that offends modern moral sensibilities. Whenever the report resists the excesses of modernity or post-modernity it does so as if it is doing it only

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because it has to, not because it wants to.

Evangelicals are often accused of being obsessed with Hell, but if we talk about it a lot (probably not enough) it is only because we know that in this doctrine many features of biblical Christianity come to the surface. It is a test of the kind of God believed in, of the way the world is, of the sinfulness of sin and the importance of righteousness.

I waited for His Holiness to get up, but he made no move. There was a silence; only the nose-picking disciple kept up his activities. So I embarked on an anecdote – about the Jesuit priest who was asked how he would reconcile God's all-embracing love with the idea of eternal hell, and who answered: 'Yes, Hell does exist, but it is always empty.'

I suppose my motive in telling the story was to make him smile again. He did, then said, still smiling: 'We have no eternal Hell in Hinduism; even a little practice of *dharmā* will go a long way in accumulating merit.' He quoted a line from the *Gita* in Sanskrit.

Arthur Koestler (1905-83) *The Lotus and the Robot:*
an audience with the Sankaracharya of Kanchi Kamakoti Peetam

PAUL BLACKMAN who has a doctorate in systematic theology is an ordinand at Oak Hill College.