

The Goodness of God and the Conception of Hell

Gordon Graham

One interesting feature of contemporary Christianity is that some of the ideas which play a central part in popular religion, play little or no part in religious thought. There are in fact a good many such ideas (demonology and the active intervention of the saints for instance), but in this paper I am concerned with only one, namely 'hell'. The idea of hell figures prominently in the preaching and beliefs of many evangelical Christians, the popularity of whose Christianity can hardly be doubted. Yet for the most part hell has no place in modern theology. It is not just that modern theologians are inclined to downplay the idea, or give 'liberal' interpretations of it, as might be said to be the case with miracles or the Resurrection, but that very largely they are simply silent about it.¹

It should be obvious that this is a feature peculiar to modern Christian thought. Earlier ages talked a great deal about hell, and even the Victorians made extensive use of it, so it is interesting to ask why this should be so. Conceived of as a question about the mentality of religious thinkers and their changing social role, any answer to it must obviously involve psychological and sociological investigation of some sophistication, but this is not the only way we can address the matter. There is at least some reason to think that the concept of hell has dropped out of theological discourse, whatever its place in popular religion, just because theologians and philosophers think it ought to. If so, we can ask whether they are right, and in fact this is the topic of my contribution to this symposium.

I shall not, however, address the arguments of particular authors, for the number of explicit discussions of the topic is very small. Nor can the views of individual writers necessarily be taken as representative of more general currents of thought. Instead, I shall attempt to draw out and examine certain background assumptions which, I believe, enjoy a currency sufficiently wide to make explicit appeal to hell difficult, and perhaps inconceivable, for any modern Christian thinker who wants to be taken seriously within the community of intellectuals.

Arguments against hell

The idea that hell is not a respectable topic is an assumption to be found nor merely in most modern theology, but in the related fields of clinical psychology and ethics. Indeed its disappearance, in my view, has a good deal to do with the influence that these other subjects have had upon theology, especially in North America, and I shall be concerned to examine some of these connexions. Together they have led to a convergence of opinion that 'hell' is an outmoded concept, for which modern thought can have no use. And indeed this conclusion is borne out in part by the relegation of hell to the writings of evangelical revivalists, who frequently understand themselves to be advocating a return to 'old fashioned' religion.

The idea that hell is *outmoded* is most evident, perhaps, in the theological objections to it. Modern theology stresses the boundless *love* of God, one feature of which is his forgiveness of sinners however deep their depravity, and there are evident difficulties in making this compatible with an ability or desire on his part to condemn some of them to everlasting torment. Indeed, the idea that God should be willing to inflict pain and suffering without limit seems to attribute to him a disposition which we would have no difficulty in recognizing to be itself morally depraved in any human being.

Of course, before we can conclude that all idea of hell should be abandoned, we need some reason to accept this modern conception of God. But this can readily be found, I think, if we take a progressive view of religion, the view, that is to say, that there is progress in our understanding of the ways of God, just as there is in our scientific understanding of nature and the cosmos.

Protagonists of 'old-fashioned' religion are often inclined to reject a progressive view of religion on the basis of their belief in revelation. But there need be no conflict here. Though process theology has encouraged us to think of our knowledge of God as revealed progressively, we can attribute the development not to revelation itself (which, let us assume, is final), but to our grasp of it. Sometimes, no doubt, the suspicion that theologians want to be able to pick and choose amongst revealed truths according to what they like and dislike is well founded, but there is no more of a contradiction in supposing both that God's revelation has been given once for all and that we may hope to understand it better than ancient peoples did, than there is in supposing that human anatomy, which our biology enables us to understand much better than did that of the ancients, is nonetheless the very same anatomy.

If we do take this progressive view, two consequences generally follow. First, the idea of clearcut religious *error* becomes implausible. If our understanding of God develops slowly and somewhat uncertainly,

then there will always be as much reason to regard any putative heresy as a new insight as there will be to regard it as a distortion of the truth. This means, not only that it would be wrong for us to damn those who differ from us in their religious opinions, but that it would be no more reasonable of God to condemn them than it would be to condemn those whose best scientific efforts turn out, in the end, to be erroneous. Secondly, it becomes easy to think that the more brutal actions and attitudes attributed to God, especially in the Old Testament, constitute a mistaken interpretation of the religious experience which gave rise to them², though it should be added that the idea of hell as we generally understand it does not make much of an appearance in the Old Testament. But the general line of thought—that just as progress in morality consists in the development of less coarse and brutal sentiments, so progress in religion consists in abandoning unrefined and primitive religious conceptions (and with them the conception of hell)—has a compelling ring to it.

Thus a different understanding of theology, even revealed theology, can lead us to abandon talk of hell. The parallel just drawn between religion and morality, however, brings us to another major argument against hell, one that has more to do with morality than theology. Hell is supposed to be the result of wicked conduct as well as mistaken belief, and its employment requires a confidence in the wrongness of the actions for which it is the punishment which much modern moral theory thinks misplaced. In former times, and in other places, people were convinced that certain actions were *taboo*, but now we see, or so it is said, that there are no actions absolutely beyond the Pale, just because there are no absolute rights and wrongs. As one writer on pastoral theology has put it:

moral considerations ... are not arbitrary and external in their rigidity, rather they are guideposts along life's way as man's moral sensitivity and social experience have developed them.³

The idea that there are no fixed and final rules about how we may or may not behave squares nicely with some other rather obvious social changes. Some behaviour, notably sex outside marriage and homosexuality, contraception and abortion, which were formally thought categorically wrong and as a result were widely condemned,⁴ have come to win a widespread measure of social acceptance, usually because of the belief that all of them can have a part to play in fulfilling human relationships. About these particular examples there is, no doubt, much to be said, but considered merely as illustrations of a general theme, they do indeed seem to bear out the contention that none of the things for which hellfire was formally reserved *warrants* eternal damnation.

The mention of human relationships calls attention to the third source from which doubts about the concept of hell arise, and this is

clinical or pastoral psychology. Psychology of one form or another has had a very profound effect upon contemporary Christian thought about human conduct and human relationships, again especially in North America. Its influence, in my view, has not always been benign, partly because the tendency has been to mix, even sometimes replace, the somewhat puzzling language of religion with the professionalized jargon of analysis and psychodynamics, without any compensating increase in illumination. However this may be, the tendency for Christian moralists to turn to contemporary psychology is very marked, and one effect of it has been to reinforce beliefs about the relativity of morality with the supposed findings of empirical psychology. In particular, the concept of 'client-centred' therapy, which, in the words of its creator Carl Rogers, encourages the individual to

perceive himself as an evaluator of experience, rather than regarding himself as existing in a world where the values are inherent in and attached to the objects of his perception⁵

rather obviously carries with it the implication that any conception of externally constituted limits on what is acceptable in human belief and behaviour, and for which reward and punishment might be appropriate, is inconsistent with the most recent understanding of the human psyche.

But there is more to it than psychology's subscription to the relativity of value. The idea of hell gives licence to the scourge and makes fear of retribution of paramount importance in the motivation of godly conduct, whereas most modern counsellors and educational psychologists agree that the most unhelpful approach to the personal problems of others is judgemental and condemnatory, and the most unhealthy spur to human behaviour is fear. Not surprisingly, therefore, Christian writers who are persuaded of the virtues of modern psychotherapy have been anxious to disassociate themselves from this traditional part of their religion.

The force of the arguments

What force is there in these arguments? To many people they will appear so obviously correct, and to others so clearly to have at least the right conclusion, that there is not much point in disputing them. Closer examination will show, however, that this widespread assumption is in fact rather ill-founded.

It is best to take the arguments in reverse order, because it is the last that seems weakest. It rests crucially upon the findings of modern clinical psychology, and these are now generally recognised to be much weaker than their immense popularity at one time led people to suppose. Even some of the most enthusiastic of Rogers' followers, for instance, have

started to have second thoughts.⁶ This is partly because empirical investigation into the actual results of the therapeutic methods implied by modern psycho-therapy, and of psychologically inspired teaching methods, has fallen far short of showing them to be successful⁷, and in turn this raises a question about the theories of human motivation that underlie them. Perhaps it is not true, after all, that fear of condemnation is an unhealthy motive.

Certainly fear *itself* is not. Everything depends upon context. The burnt child is right to fear the flame. This is the healthy response of a well adjusted human being, and someone who 'loves' fire to the point of becoming an arsonist or a masochist is clearly psychologically deviant. The general embargo on fear, in other words, is simply too general. We *ought* to fear some things. No one really doubts this, but if it is the case, what more proper object for fear is there than eternal damnation, *if there is such a thing*. This way of putting it shows, I think, that what is really at work in much of the doubt about hell is not a general, psychologically inspired view of the appropriateness or desirability of fear as a motive for human action, so much as a doubt whether the fires of hell really are a danger to us in the way that more ordinary flames are. But this takes us away from psychological questions and (leaving aside ontological questions) back to arguments of the first two types.

The second argument against hell, it will be recalled, rests upon the idea that there is nothing known with sufficient certainty to be so loathsome that it could warrant eternal punishment. There are in fact two aspects of this argument, the first having to do with moral knowledge and the other with the nature of punishment. The first of these is the more important here, however, because the idea that there is no sure and certain truth in moral matters, that there is nothing rightly called moral knowledge, is an assumption of secular morality which has come to be shared so widely by Christian moralists that arguably Christian morality in the twentieth century has been altered out of all recognition by its predecessors.

On what is this scepticism about moral knowledge based? Though there is not space here to examine this large topic fully, there are three strands of thought which are of special interest since they so often make their appearance in contemporary pastoral and moral theology. First there is what may be called the fear of absolutism. What is meant by absolutism in this context, however, is not altogether clear. Generally it is taken to mean that there are no actions or types of action which are wrong in every conceivable circumstance. Suppose this is true. It does not follow that we are never in a position to make unqualified, objectively true moral judgements about the conduct of individuals. From the fact, if it is one, that we cannot declare theft, say, to be always and everywhere wrong, it does not follow that there is always something

to be said in favour of any specific piece of thieving. It follows that even if one is anxious to renounce moral absolutism, one need not renounce a belief in the objectivity of moral judgements and hence of moral knowledge. And this conclusion is reinforced by the observation that the normal alternative to absolutism—consequentialism—necessarily makes individual judgements objective since it construes their rightness or wrongness in terms of the consequences they actually have.

The second motivation to moral scepticism in contemporary thought is the desire to avoid being, so to speak, a moral busybody. To the liberal mind, pronouncing on the wickednesses of others, especially to their faces, is morally distasteful, and moreover usually quite ineffectual where there are real difficulties of a personal or emotional kind. The contrast is often drawn between helping sinners and preaching at them. But this view of the moral scourge is plausible only over a limited range of cases, usually having to do with sexual morality. The sort of case that sustains the objection to moral preaching is that of the Victorian or earlier moral puritan, who pounces with relish on the fornicator and publicly denounces him, all in the name of doing him good⁸. What the puritan exhibits, it is said, is an unhealthy concern with the state of other people's souls, so much so that dubious psychological motives are usually hinted at.

But if we shift the focus to a range of cases—physical cruelty or the use of psychological terror for gross personal ends, for instance—the picture changes. To condemn these things, and to do so publicly, far from being regarded as an unpleasant display of moral censoriousness, is normally regarded as an act of moral courage. And rightly so, but this implies that what is wrong with the puritan is not that he exhibits a concern with the morality of others, but that he lends an absurd importance to a certain range of actions. Whatever one thinks of fornication, it surely pales to relative insignificance beside the actions of a Hitler or a Pol Pot, and in these cases it is much less plausible to assert that we do not know for sure whether or not they are wrong.

The third strand of thought which feeds doubts about moral knowledge and certainty focusses upon the existence of moral disagreement. If moral beliefs were objective, the argument goes, there would be some convergence in moral beliefs. But, in fact moral beliefs vary radically over time and place and show no sign of convergence. People just do differ on moral questions and there are no incontestable methods of solving their disagreements. Again this is rather a large topic on which a great deal has been written in recent years and very little of it can be dealt with here. It is important, however, and perhaps sufficient for present purposes, to make two points. First, from the fact of disagreement nothing necessarily follows about objectivity because we can always explain it as disagreement between truth and error. In natural

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science, where there is not the same degree of scepticism, there is a great deal of disagreement, but this is generally explained as part of the process of arriving at the truth. Secondly, relativists are often allowed to go unchallenged on their central claim that there is widespread moral disagreement, because it is taken to be obvious. But in fact, differing social forms may exhibit the same underlying values, and frequently do. Moreover, there *is* a large measure of convergence. Who, in the modern world, publicly advocates the moral desirability of enslavement, an institution whose moral acceptability was assumed with almost as widespread agreement in times past as its condemnation is in times present? In short, the extent of moral disagreement is, arguably, greatly exaggerated, and if so, we have no more reason to doubt the possibility of objectivity and truth in morality, than in science and philosophy⁹.

If all this is correct, the two arguments against hell considered so far—that fear is a psychologically unhealthy motive and that hell requires a confidence and certainty which morality cannot supply—are seriously weakened. Despite a widely prevailing assumption to the contrary, there is no good reason to deny that it is sensible to fear divine retribution for actions which we know beyond reasonable doubt to be wrong. The only argument left, therefore, is the first, namely that hell is incompatible not with our knowledge of human psychology or the state of morality, but with the nature of God.

Why should we think that the idea of hell is not worthy of God? According to the first argument we consider it is inconceivable that a Being should consent to the, literally, unending torment of one of his creatures and still be called a God of love, and the strength of this contention is in part borne out by the rather evident weaknesses in attempts to avoid it.

For instance, it has not infrequently been argued that responsibility for the everlasting torment is to be laid not at the door of God but at the door of those who undergo it, because they ‘bring it upon themselves’. In my view there is indeed something important to be said along these lines, but for the moment we may observe that this suggestion could not solve the problem with which we are concerned. If everlasting torment is so morally repellent as to be inconsistent with the idea of a loving God, it is equally inconsistent whether or not God is directly responsible for the administration of the torment, or indirectly responsible by creating a universe in which this is a possible outcome.

An alternative strategy might argue that the love of God for His creation need not extend beyond death. So long as it is true that God would not exact such punishments upon living creatures, He is for us a God of love. But out *post mortem* condition is different, because further change in the dead is impossible. The mark of the damned is not merely that they have put themselves on the opposite side to God, but that they

have done so for ever, and hence may rightly be hated for ever by God. Again, it seems to me, there is something right about this line of thought, but however that may be, it will not do as a straightforward way out of the difficulty we are considering. If God's treatment of the dead is to be considered a punishment for wrongdoing, clearly the person who undergoes that treatment must be the same person as the wrongdoer. In other words, if the idea of punishment is to survive at all, there must be a continuity of identity between living and dead, and this means that we cannot identify God's creation exclusively with the living. If, therefore, God is said to love his creation, this must apply to its members *post mortem*, as well as in this life.

It looks, then, as though the conflict between the idea of hell and the goodness of God remains. But it does so only so long as we persist in thinking of hell as perpetual torment. This is of course the popular picture, but why should we continue to accept it? We should do so only if there is no other way in which the fundamental idea of hell can be captured or expressed. But, as I shall try to argue, this is not so.

The idea of hell

Hell is the opposite of heaven. Those who look forward to heaven think of it as a world in which 'there is neither pain nor grief but life eternal'. If it is to be enjoyed by human beings, however, there must be some sense in which (by the agency of God no doubt) we are preserved in existence even when 'in the sight of the unwise' we have seemed to die. God's goodness to us, on this understanding, consists in preserving us till the moment of resurrection to a life in heaven. But it is precisely this very feature that seems so objectionable about the traditional idea of hell, according to which God keeps those whom he hates in existence, and then raises them from the dead not for their own good, since they are past redemption, but just so that he may torment them. If, therefore, we are to preserve the idea of heaven and modify the idea of hell, we must cease to think of them as opposites, and thus conceive of hell as annihilation rather than torment.

The view of hell as being removed from the love of God for ever by annihilation arguably is not out of line with the main stream of Christian thought, but it has not enjoyed a high degree of popular acclaim chiefly because annihilation has seemed to many to represent too poor a retribution for sin, and to be more of a half-way house between heaven and hell. But this, I think, is a mistake, and if we take the idea of annihilation seriously we will begin to see how the idea of hell and the goodness of God might be made consistent.

The basic notion of hell is this: it is the worst possible outcome in the

fortunes of a human being. This is why we have reason not only to fear it, but to fear it more than anything else. When, in the past, people have wanted to represent the awfulness of hell graphically, it is not surprising that they have turned to familiar forms of the undesirable—physical pain and psychological anguish mostly—and depicted hell as a place or condition where these agonies are greater that could be experienced anywhere else. Such representations are often objected to because they are crude and lurid, and for this reason the whole idea of hell is rejected, but more important to my mind than the details of the picture is the fact that traditional beliefs conceive of hell as *something which is inflicted upon us*. In fact, however, it would be just as true to the basic idea, if less graphic, to think of it as *something which we lose*.

What is the greatest loss a human being can sustain? The answer, most people would agree, is the loss of life itself, that is, death. In concurring with this answer, however, it is of the greatest importance to see that death is not an even in our lives, not something we suffer, or something that happens to us, but rather the end of all suffering and happening. It is, in short, annihilation, the coming to nothing. Now almost every civilization has had some idea that ordinary everyday death, despite appearances, is *not* the end, and that we can face physical death with the hope of continuing our existence in some other way. In fact the Christian religion goes further than this, holding out the prospect both of a life without end, and one that far surpasses in quality and character anything this mortal life might offer us.

Eternal life conceived of in this way, however, cannot be more than a profound *hope* for human beings because, despite the pretensions of some North American morticians, there is nothing human beings on their own can do to secure it. Such is the gloomy consequence of that most familiar of all major premises 'All men are mortal'. How then can it be reasonable to hope for immortality? The Christian answer is that God is willing, and of course able, to secure it for us—or at least some of us.

If only some of us, what is the principle of selection to be? Orthodox answers to this question vary, but we may reasonably summarise all of them as saying 'Those who love God'. For those who do not, the opposite fate awaits, namely eternal death, and this represents the greatest possible loss for any human being since, unlike ordinary mortality, which we may hope to overcome through the mercy of God, this is annihilation past all hope.

If all that has been said so far is correct, we can conclude that hell conceived of as loss rather than suffering need be no less fearful than the more traditional picture. Death is not an experience in our lives, and not therefore something we suffer, but we still have good reason to fear it (and to fear it more than most sorts of suffering). Likewise even when we have conceded that hell is not an experience, not something we will

undergo, but rather death for all eternity, we still have reason to fear it, and, given its eternity, reason to fear it even more.

Hell and the goodness of God

All this might be accepted and yet the fundamental question remain: if hell, however conceived, is still the most terrible fate than can befall us, how can we attribute it to the action of a loving God? Here is one way¹⁰.

At death our characters are fixed, partly by our actions and partly by the state of our understanding. The only possible change is that which the traditional notion of purgatory implies—God, who is himself wholly good, purges us of those characteristics which, being either wicked or erroneous, obscure the Beatific Vision. But the effect of purging will be more or less radical depending upon the place that those characteristics have in our personality as a whole. Those whose hearts are fixed ‘where true joys are to be found, will emerge from the process purified and, moreover, truly themselves. Those whose hearts are fixed on the evil, the false and the ephemeral will fade into nothing. They will, in short, be annihilated. In this way eternal death comes about, not as an act of vengeance or even retribution, but through the actions of a God who wills only the good.

This is, of course, nothing more than a sketch of a possible way of thinking¹¹, but if all that preceded it is correct, it is, I believe, enough to show that the force of the traditional notion of hell can be made consistent with the fundamental goodness of God.

Conclusion

I have argued that some familiar lines of thought which have played a major part in eliminating the concept of hell from modern theological thought are unconvincing, and that to the most telling of these—the belief that hell and the goodness of God are inconsistent—there is an answer. But, however persuasive the counter-arguments presented have been, rather obviously they can constitute only half the story. In addition to making room for the *idea of hell in modern theology*, we need positive reasons in favour of employing it.

One of these has been mentioned already. Popular religion has not altogether ceased to speak of hell, and though theology must play some reformatory role in everyday religious belief, its proper task is to refine the notions it finds there rather than abandon them completely. Theology is a living discipline only so long as it is not wholly divorced from the religion of which it is the theology. Secondly, if theology is to speak convincingly to the experience of the twentieth century it must

address the horrors that are to be found there. We will fail to take seriously the holocaust, the Stalinist purges and so on, if our conception of God's goodness attributes to him a desire or tendency to treat equally the victims and the perpetrators.

- 1 I have been able to find only three papers on this topic in the main English-language philosophical and theological journals for the last eight years, and extended discussion of it in only two books in English of the same period.
- 2 Whether or not successful re-interpretations of all the episodes we might like to deal with in this way can be arrived at is a difficult question that cannot be dealt with here (and cannot in any case be dealt with in *general*.)
- 3 C.D. Kean, *Christian Faith and Pastoral Care* (London, 1961), p. 41.
- 4 And of course are still *officially* so regarded by many established churches.
- 5 Carl Rogers, *Client Centred Therapy* (Boston, 1951) p. 20.
- 6 See, for instance, Thomas C. Oden, *Care of Souls in the Classic Tradition* (Philadelphia, 1984) This book is a recantation of his earlier enthusiasm for Rogers, whose client-centred therapy, he thought, embodied a Christian theology.
- 7 There have been a good many empirical studies of the efficacy of psycho-therapy. It is clear from them that its efficacy is much disputed.
- 8 Though, as a matter of fact, recent historical studies appear to show that, in Scotland at any rate, puritan attitudes to sexual licence in the 18th century do not fit the popular picture.
- 9 This is not to say, of course, that objectivity cannot be doubted in these areas of thought. But the line of argument with which we are concerned must make uncertainty a special feature of *moral* thought, if it is to generate any implications for moral judgement.
- 10 I owe this line of thought to conversations with my colleague Mr A. J. Ellis.
- 11 There are interesting lines of thought to be explored here in connexion with recent developments in the philosophy of personal identity.