Preface

1. Not interesting, merely terrible

'Hell is not interesting; it is merely terrible.' So said Robert Musil, in *The Man Without Qualities*. In reality it could only have 'the attraction of an abyss', he thought. If so little is to be said about it, why are we producing this issue?

In her contribution to this special number Teresa McLean says we are 'just in the middle of a revival of interest in the last things'. Certainly the notion of hell (closely linked, as it nearly always is, to a concern with the justice of God) has taken on an unexpected new lease of life in several very different places: in far-right hawkish evangelicalism, among writers of holocaust theology like Ulrich Simon, and, in an immanentised form, in some liberation theology and theologizing on the Bomb.

Even so, we are not claiming to offer here novel ideas; rather, we are opening up some old debates.

The very mention of hell still stirs up in most moderately educated Westerners a lot of hostility or unease or ridicule. The dwindling in its importance is surely the most startling change in popular religious belief. Yet it has been a very little talked-about change. How far it is the result of cultural changes, how far the result of doubts of the doctrine's tenability—even that is not clear.

In 16th-century Europe nearly everybody believed in the possibility of eternal loss, usually understanding that to mean ending up in the hands of the Devil ('God's hangman', as James I called him). Most, remember, still took it for granted that they were surrounded by an invisible spiritual world. But already by the late 17th century educated Englishmen were beginning to accept a symbolic interpretation of the Devil. And two centuries later, in 1896, Gladstone, speaking of hell, was saying: 'A portion of Divine truth, which even if secondary is so needful, appears to be silently passing out of view.'

Gladstone belonged to a century when there were fairly good reasons for being confident about the human condition. Ours is the century of Auschwitz and Hiroshima, and faith in human progress has been demolished, but of today's Britons only a minority believe in any sort of after-life, and even fewer in 'hell'. With what consequences? In his article in this issue Donald MacKinnon speaks about the danger of supposing that the issues of human life are 'ultimately frivolous'. Just how far is it true that the person who takes hell seriously is likely to take life seriously?

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2. *Hell and the Vatican*

As we surely all know, even inside the Roman Catholic Church, where, not very long ago, a lively fear of hell seemed to prevail, doubts have been spreading. In fact, even 40 years ago Rahner was already writing: 'It has recently been said that the doctrine of hell is beginning to be a truth which no longer has any existential meaning for Christians.'

Officially the Church has not shifted an inch, of course. As Cardinal Ratzinger says in volume 9 of his *Dogmatic Theology,* which has just appeared in English:

> No quibbling helps here: the idea of eternal damnation, which had taken ever clearer shape in the Judaism of the century or two before Christ, has a firm place in the teaching of Jesus, as well as in the apostolic writings. Dogma takes its stand on solid ground when it speaks of the existence of Hell and of the eternity of its punishments.

Down through the ages official statements about eternal loss have in fact been surprisingly terse, but also consistent. The most recent one is the 1979 Vatican document *Recentiores episcoporum synodi,* on the reality of life after death. In addition to confirming what is explicitly said in the creeds, this document says the Church 'believes that there will be eternal punishment for the sinner, who will be deprived of the sight of God, and that this punishment will have a repercussion on the whole being of the person'; and that 'our charity on earth will be the measure of our sharing God's glory in heaven'. Also *Recentiores episcoporum synodi* gives us to understand that the Vatican does not approve of those writers who would equate the death of the individual with the general resurrection. It says that Christ's final appearance is 'distinct and deferred'; regarding us it states that 'a spiritual element survives and subsists after death, an element endowed with consciousness and will, so that the "human self" subsists'.

But affirmations are not necessarily solutions.

3. *Modern thinkers and hell*

This is not the place for going over the traditional arguments for and against the possibility of eternal loss (or, for that matter, universal extinction). But it is useful, if only as background to what today's Christian thinkers are saying on the subject, to call to mind ever so briefly just what has been happening in the churches in thinking about hell since the end of 'the age of faith'.

As the centuries pass we can discern in protestantism, with its emphasis on the individual, a shift in focus. It is a shift away from expectation of a general resurrection to emphasis on the immortality of the soul, which many 18th-century rationalists also believed in. And, to quote Dr Geoffrey Rowell, the idea of hell was 'grossly offensive to the

optimism characteristic of 18th-century natural religion'. In modern times these ways of seeing the after-life have spread among Catholics too.

A very different factor that also undermined traditional thinking on hell was the 19th-century change in penal theory. Punishment increasingly came to be seen as something which should not be retributive but reforming. This conflicted with Augustine's profoundly theocentric way of thinking about the purpose of punishment. In his *City of God* Augustine had given Western Europe a vision of a cosmos made perfect by the punishment of the wicked. Dr MacKinnon writes in his article of the dangers of 'blasphemous anthropomorphism' when speaking about God's 'punishing', but this warning comes rather late. J.R. Thrane has called the descriptions of hell in the tracts for children written by the 19th-century Redemptorist Father Joseph Furniss 'penny-dreadful word-paintings of phosphorescent charnel-house horrors'. Sadism is a dangerous weapon in the apostolate. The sadism that helped to fill the churches of the past has helped to empty the churches of today.

Already, in the 18th century, David Hume was saying: 'The damnation of one man is an infinitely greater evil in the universe, than the subversion of a thousand millions of kingdoms.' A century later J.S. Mill is saying to those who would defend the goodness of a God that condemned human beings to everlasting punishment: 'I will call no being good, who is not what I mean when I apply that epithet to my fellow creatures; and if such a being can sentence me to Hell for not so calling him, to Hell I will go.' More than anything else, it is anthropocentrism that has put a question-mark over the traditional doctrine of hell, and in his article in this issue Gordon Graham discusses the main modern humanist criticisms. And Colin Gunton, in his article here, faces the problems raised by the fact that today there is no common concept of justice, and the doubts theodicy has raised about the justice of God himself.

Lastly, there is the even bigger question how far, if at all, it is possible now to speak about an 'after-life' in any sense, bearing in mind what the philosophers and the human sciences have taught us in this century about the body-soul relationship and about death. It is nearly sixty years since Aldous Huxley said in 'Squeak and Gibber', his amusing essay of 1931 on immortality, 'as Broad has shown, it is hard to construct a logical bridge between the world of morality and the world of scientific truth' and the moral argument in favour of immortality is 'a hopelessly ramshackle structure' that can only be crossed 'by those who wear the wings of faith and therefore have no real need of its support'.

Arguably, 'what you really are' only God can completely know as it is the sum-total of a human life-time, a bodily life lived in a social world. In what sense, if any, could this life-time be capable of any further

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development—i.e. conscious personal existence of *any* kind—'beyond' death? The idea in fact would seem to make no sense unless there is a caring and creating God; even then, whatever we might be would have roots in this earthly bodily life. (The idea that this life is merely something preparatory to a non-bodily existence is, from our knowledge of what the human being is, surely increasingly difficult to defend?) We can see ourselves as having a role in the creative process. Being loving, in other words. And in doing this, 'God's work', we believe we can come, through God's mercy, to share God's eternal life. Assimilated to God's own life we would be complete, it is part of our nature to 'have a conscious personal existence', and so that is how we would be.

But, even assuming we can make faith-commitments of this kind, does it any longer make sense to talk of 'hell'?

4. Teilhard, Rahner, Schillebeeckx

At the core of all debate about hell is hidden away the question of the seriousness of our journey through this world—what do we imagine it is all for. And, linked to that, the question of God's justice, the question so much modern Western theology will not or cannot cope with. It is here considered by Professor Gunton and, from a rather different angle, by Dr MacKinnon. And what have major 20th-century Catholic theologians had to say at all interesting about hell? Here there is only room to mention Teilhard de Chardin, Karl Rahner and Edward Schillebeeckx.

Surprisingly, perhaps, in *Le Milieu Divin* (1927) Teilhard acknowledges—with pain—the possibility of eternal loss in the cosmos as he visualises it: on the last day Christ will segregate those who have made themselves 'factors of dissociation'.

Of Rahner's thoughts on our ultimate destiny most original (and most controversial) is his idea, aired in *On the Theology of Death* (1961), that at death the soul becomes pancosmic, while preserving its conscious personal identity. Generally, Rahner is remarkably cautious in what he has to say about our end. Regarding hell itself he states in *Foundations of Christian Faith* (1976) that all a person needs to know about it is that he 'cannot say that absolute loss as the conclusion and outcome of his free guilt is not a possibility with which he has to reckon'. This open possibility, though, is

> not necessarily the doctrine of two parallel ways ... Rather, the existence of the possibility that freedom will end in eternal loss stands alongside the doctrine that the world and the history of the world as a whole will *in fact* enter into eternal life with God.

Schillebeeckx has this year published an article 'Straffende Gerechtigheid of Liefde?' in the Flemish journal *Tijdschrift voor Geestelijk Leven* (vol. 44, pp. 179—193). He is, he says, only making a

hypothesis in it—he writes with some hesitation. He thinks that it is possible for a human being to make a definitive choice for evil. But he does not think that there is a hell in the same was as there is a heaven; like Rahner, he stresses that there is no symmetry. He believes that God 'leaves the evil-doers to their own logic'. People have a relationship to their own deeds; God only guarantees that the deeds will bear fruit. If a person isolates everybody, he will be isolated himself. Schillebeeckx believes that final salvation—i.e. heaven—takes shape from what human beings achieve on earth as salvation for their fellow human beings in brotherly love. If living with God now is the basis for eternal life, absence from the life-giving community is the basis of eternal death. Extinction is the logical result of an unloving life. So the idea of a punishing God can, he thinks, be rejected. Schillebeeckx's conclusion and Dr Graham's conclusion in this issue are very close to each other.

5. Alternatives

Where does all this lead?

Assuming we both believe in the Christian God and yet, unlike the fundamentalists, take seriously what the sciences have taught us about ourselves and our world, if we are not at least *trying* to be loving (in other words, do not at least *try* to make of our lives what we have reason to believe that our nature calls us to make of them, as briefly outlined in (3) above) it looks as if there could be two possibilities. Either, our lives having then no eternal value, we become extinct (the suggestion being made by, for example, Dr Schillebeeckx and Dr Graham). Or we get what we want. In that case (and the only thing to do here is to slip into imagery) we stay eternally an anomaly, for then we are for ourselves solely ... and therefore *against* ourselves—sealed in an interminable pursuit of self, one might say. And that would be 'hell'.

Of the two alternatives, the second might be the more just one. It would be just to us. It would affirm the justice of God.

This is quite as far as a Preface can go. Our contributors, in their different ways, set out to clear the ground, facing the modern objections to the very idea of 'hell' and seeing if a more adequate language can be found for speaking of it today. Some voices that could be increasingly important in the future of the debate are not represented here at all: neither the voice of holocaust theology nor of theology of liberation. And Teresa McLean is the only Roman Catholic contributor here; Urs von Balthasar's voice is an important one in the background, but in these pages you will hear Barth more often than you will hear Aquinas or Denziger. There are limits to what can be said in an issue like this about a question as fundamental as 'What does it mean not to be saved?'. Some matters will be taken up again when, as we hope, we produce an issue on heaven.

J.O.M.

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