



# ETERNAL TORTURE

## Divine or Human Vengeance?

BY GREG ALBRECHT

**H**ell is a subject many religious people get all hot and bothered about. It's one of the most disputed and controversial teachings within Christendom. The squabbling is not about the surety of judgment for depravity and wickedness. Most Christians agree that there is and will be divine judgment for evil. The battle for hell is all about specifications, temperature and longevity. The debate involves comprehending and communicating divine justice—and in the process humans export definitions of time and space into eternity.

But the Bible does not suggest that God needs to import our flawed perspectives into the perfection of his eternity. While the Bible is remarkably silent about hell's specifications, cool heads seldom prevail when precise speculations about hell are on the table. When theories such as the degree of suffering that exists in hell, how hot hell is and how long it lasts are under discussion, blood pressures rise and tension fills the room.

Some Christians take the view that hell is the battleground of true faith. Some draw a line in the sand in defense of the hottest kind of hell possible. Any other view of hell is discounted as a liberal, progressive, faith-denying, slippery-slope perspective that owes its existence to soft-headed humans rather than a theology that insists on sinners in the hands of an angry God. In some religious circles, belief in the most excruciating hell that humans can imagine and describe has come to be seen as one of the acid tests of true Christianity.

There are Christians who believe in judgment, but they are not as dogmatic about all of the details. I am one of those Christians. I believe in the judgment of hell, as defined as

eternal separation from God, but I am far from dogmatic about specifics. I believe that the presumed necessity of eternal torture as a vindication and satisfaction of God's wrath is a violent contradiction of God's love and character as revealed in the Bible.

I reject a hell that is defined as retributive justice—the belief that God inflicts suffering on sinners because they deserve it. I reject the idea that God's wrath is appeased by humans (or at least their souls) being slowly roasted on a spit. I do believe that biblical evidence teaches us that God will judge evil, but I remain unconvinced that he will eternally torture anyone, with never-ending physical, mental and emotional punishment.

### Defending Our Own Private Hell?

There is no doubt that scriptures about hell can be interpreted in a variety of ways—and they are. Those conflicting interpretations are informed by the theological and spiritual baggage of interpreters. I have mine, and you have yours. Our baggage may help us arrive at sound theological conclusions, or our baggage may weigh us down and lead us far from the truth.

It seems the view of hell that expositors, preachers and teachers of the Bible wind up with is invariably the

selves as conservative or fundamentalist believe that the very authority of the Bible is on the line in this battle for and of hell. Sometimes called infernalists, they believe that only a literal hell of eternal torture “lines up” with biblical authority. The hell they protect is the hell they have been taught. The hell they protect is the hell that they may need in order to continue the status quo of their religious worldview. Any evidence or logic that challenges their view is discarded.

The hell of eternal torture is the big stick for many religious groups. It is their disciplinary cattle prod they use to threaten and goad their flock in what they define as the right religious direction. While hell characterized by extreme divine prejudice may be a persuasive whip to keep the chain gang in line, it is hardly an effective way to help people come to know God. After all, those people who do enlist because they don't want their behinds left behind are not being attracted to some version of religious boot camp because of God's matchless and supreme love.

On the other extreme, there are Christians who believe that God's judgment for the wicked is, or will be, the equivalent of a quick nuke in the microwave—fast, efficient and rela-

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view they begin with, as they look to the Bible for “proof.” So while we do need to examine biblical evidence, when it comes to hell we need to understand that biblical evidence is often co-opted to accommodate pre-existing belief. Albert Einstein cautioned, “A man should look for what is, and not for what he thinks should be.”

Many Christians who describe them-

tively painless. They see the energy and heat released by nuclear fusion as a metaphor of the painless incineration God will surely mete out on evil. Sometimes called annihilationists, such Christians seem to picture God as a kindly Dr. Kevorkian, administering a lethal injection (that results in a painless death) to sinners on hell's death row.

While I do not believe in a hell of eternal torture, neither do I fully embrace annihilationism. Both fail to address all the biblical evidence, and both fail to fully comprehend our heavenly Father, whose primary and central attribute is love.

Hell is, as I understand it, eternal separation from God, but I believe our physicality and our limitations in terms of logic and language do not allow us to specifically identify the dimensions of God's judgment. I cannot conclude that God's judgment will be retributive, or equal, to the pain and suffering that the wicked may have caused during their lives, for I have no substantial biblical evidence upon which to base such a theory. Most importantly, the nature of God mitigates against the hell of eternal torture.

### Speculations About Hell's Specifications

The literal view of a hell of eternal torture is that it is a place of intense suffering, with heat, fire and smoke as the primary ingredients. This literal view assumes our sensory experiences of fire and destruction as defined by our dimension of flesh and blood are one and the same as eternal pain and suffering.

Is hell a place? Does it exist right now, or will it be fired up at some later time? Dante Alighieri posited hell as a huge inverted cone that pierces to the very heart of the earth. While biblical references to hell include some earthly locations, non-temporal references are also given.

One of the logical arguments about heaven and hell is that for one to literally exist, the other must as well. This logical conundrum has been solved for many Christians by adopting the belief that heaven is defined as eternity

But how can hell be a physical, geographically appointed and bounded "place" (either in past and present eternity or an inferno whose coals of retribution are yet to be stoked) where the physical pain of eternal torture is suffered by disembodied souls?

Some literalists offer the hypothesis that God will equip the souls of those deemed unworthy of heaven with special bodysuits, complete with pain receptors, upon their arrival in hell. This idea (that the God of mercy and grace will actually see to it that souls arriving in hell will be equipped with a body suit, ensuring that they will experience eternal pain) is advanced by otherwise reasonable humans who seem to be overwhelmed with their sincere devotion to religion. According to some, God's wrath must be appeased, so souls arriving in hell will be measured and fitted for bodysuits by God, rather than from Satan's sadistic arsenal of torture toys.

### Eternal Torture—Does it Satisfy God or Satisfy Us?

While such a hell of endless torture can be shocking, when contrasted with a God of love, the eternal torture of hell can also be a teaching that appeals to the human mind. Humanly, we don't like to think that someone will be able to do something "bad" and not have to pay for it. We want to be assured that divine justice means that no one will ever be able to get away with anything. Some speak of God's wrath needing to be satisfied, but this forensic sense of justice is actually a human innovation that only satisfies our human sense of fair play. But we should not transfer our sense of fair play to God and assume he desires to be appeased as we do.

Do you remember when you were a young child, taking pains to point out to your parents something that your sibling was doing that warranted punishment? Your sensibilities were offended at seeing your sibling getting away with something, especially if you had already been disciplined for the same infraction. Your moral equilibrium needed to be satisfied. You may have heard the story of the religious man who used to lie awake at night, unable to sleep, because he was convinced that somewhere, someone was getting away with something.

Eternal torture in hell can comfort us because it reinforces the human desire for justice and fair play. But the Bible teaches that God works in human lives by his grace, not by human definitions of fair play. And the Bible definitely tells us that humans do not always comprehend the magnitude of God's amazing grace.

There is a thin line between "I'm going to see that you get what's coming to you" and "God is going to see that you get what's coming to you." We have our ideas of justice, often based in the Old Testament-based ethic of an eye for an eye, but our ideas remain our ideas. No matter how devoted we may be to a human theologian or a systematic theology that demands the appeasement of God's wrath, this truth remains—how God handles adversaries (his and ours) is his business. Paul reminds us, "Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord" (Romans 12:19).

Many of the hair-raising, spine-tingling, bone-chilling graphic descriptions of hell that I have heard and read come from religious sources and platforms that would condemn the same explicit language, used in another context, as gratuitous and barbarous, pandering to the human lust for bloodshed and violence. But such is the passion to see God's justice that, failing a specific biblical foundation, vigilante justice takes over. Religious lynch mobs roam Christendom, insisting the eternal torture they proclaim is serving God (see John 16:2).

It is religion that insists that those who fail to pass religious muster here on earth will eternally pay for their failure to measure up. Hell is, or will be, says much of Christendom, populated by the "unsaved." Unsaved? Who are they, exactly?

The "unsaved" are identified by many religious groups as those outside of its particular religious boundaries. Some religious groups and its teachers do admit that some who are saved (from the eternal torture of divine wrath) may be outside its organization. But the fact remains that virtually all religions that teach a hell of eternal torture believe that the best chance for eternal safety lies within its denominational walls.

I reject a hardheaded, hardhearted

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spent in God's presence, while hell is eternal separation from God. But the hell-happy literalists are not amused with what they see as prevarication. They insist that such explanations are nothing more than watered down theological mush.

SOME WITHIN CHRISTENDOM ACTUALLY TEACH THAT THE SIGHT OF FAMILY MEMBERS AND LOVED ONES IN HELL WILL NOT TROUBLE THOSE IN HEAVEN, BUT IN FACT THEIR SENSE OF ETERNAL BLISS WILL BE HEIGHTENED BY KNOWING THAT GOD'S JUSTICE PREVAILS...

God of wrath who condemns all those outside of the strict confines of religious borders. Religious dogmatism that insists on eternal damnation seems to be nothing more than a vindication of a human sense of justice. Thus, assuming God to be like ourselves, we can find ourselves dutifully employed as religious travel agents offering one way trips to an eternity of torture—assigning places in hell for those who offend our religious traditions and teachings.

### Does Grace Quench the Eternal Fires of Hell?

One of the great gospel objections to the hottest kind of hell as eternal, never-ending torture lies within the central emphasis of the gospel. Religion depicts “get out of hell free” cards being awarded on the basis of human works. A pre-occupation with hell inevitably drives humans to be self-absorbed. We can start living our lives trying to stay out of hell, living by arbitrary lists of things we ought to do and ought not to do. As we live those lives, we just can't help but notice that others are not trying as hard as we are—and in order to sleep at night we volunteer to help God by making reservations for other people in a hell of eternal torture.

In *The Great Divorce*, C.S. Lewis invites us on a bus with ghosts who have made an excursion from hell to heaven, hoping to take up permanent residency in heaven. They meet citizens of heaven, those whom Lewis calls “the solid people.” One large ghost is astonished to find in heaven a man who, on earth, was tried and executed for murder.

The ghost asks, “What I'd like to understand is what you're here for...you, a bloody murderer, while I've been walking the streets down there and living in a place like a pigsty all these years.”

The solid person tries to explain that the man he murdered as well as himself both found themselves reconciled at the throne of God. But the ghost just can't accept that explanation. His sense of justice is violated. The injustice of the solid person being a resident of heaven and him being doomed to hell overwhelms him.

He yells at the solid person, demanding his rights. “I'm asking for nothing but my rights.... I got to have my rights same as you, see?”

This is the very point to which Lewis wants us to come. He has the solid person respond, “I haven't got my rights, or I should not be here. You will not get yours either. You'll get something far better.” (*The Great Divorce*, C.S. Lewis, HarperCollins, San Francisco, pages 26, 28).

### Biblical Evidence—Literal or Metaphor?

The hottest and longest-kind-of-hell-possible advocates depend on literal interpretations of all biblical passages that speak of hell. In the 14th century Dante Alighieri imagined hell, in his *Divine Comedy*, as a place of terror and torture (see “An Open Letter to Dante” page 4). Dante's hell was a place of sadistic torture, where the wicked writhe in never-ending pain, boiling in blood, while their screams echo across eternity.

Some of the early church fathers believed that the saved, in heaven, could witness, in real time, the torture and torment of the lost. In a similar vein there are contemporary authors and preachers today who theorize that God is present in hell to forever witness his justice being vindicated. Some within Christendom actually teach that the sight of family members and loved ones in hell will not trouble those in heaven, but in fact their sense of eternal bliss will be heightened by knowing that God's justice prevails, and their concern for their earthly loved ones who are being eternally tortured will pale into insignificance by comparison.

When biblical literalism (combined with a corrupted sense of justice) runs amok, preposterous ideas prevail. I cannot imagine how those who enter God's kingdom of heaven by his grace could ever delight in the torture of anyone—let alone their own loved ones! But then I believe in a God who never stops loving us. I also believe that there are many word pictures and metaphors in the Bible, and that while they are inspired by God, God intended humans to read them as he inspired them. God did not inspire the use of metaphors and poetry hoping we would butcher their meaning by taking them literally.

I believe that literal interpretations

of metaphorical and poetic language in the Bible twist and distort the message God has inspired.

When it comes to hell, many read the word translated as “fire” and, understanding how fire works in our mortal setting of time and space, project that same idea into an eternal setting where physical bodies are never consumed.

Of course, upon reading these words some will immediately accuse me of not believing in the Bible. What they really mean is that because I don't interpret the Bible as they do, then I do not accept the authority of the Bible. What they really believe is that because I do not subscribe to nor do I promote their hottest-kind-of-hell, exactly as they do, I must be on the road to heresy and perdition.

But the authority and veracity of the Bible does not rest on an interpretative method that insists on every true statement of the Bible being true literally. An exclusively literalistic interpretation of biblical language neglects to take into consideration the linguistic forms that God used when inspiring the message and words of the Bible. Many literalists confuse the vehicle that brings the message of truth with the message. In so doing, they “strain out a gnat and swallow a camel”—metaphorically speaking, of course! (Matthew 23:24).

For example, when Jesus said, “take the plank out of your own eye” (Matthew 7:5) what he said is true, but it is not literally true. The same principle holds true for many teachings throughout the Bible. When it comes to fire, the actual intended meaning in Scripture is often non-literal. God himself is said to be a “consuming fire” (Deuteronomy 4:24). Many Old Testament passages describe fire around this throne (so fire is and will be an eternal feature of heaven!). The New Testament speaks of Jesus in his glory with eyes like “blazing fire” (Revelation 1:14).

The Gospel of Matthew describes hell as “darkness” and as “fire”—seemingly contradictory definitions if taken literally. Compare Matthew's “darkness” of hell (Matthew 8:12; 22:13; 25:30;) with Matthew's “fire” of hell

(Matthew 3:10,12; 5:22; 7:19; 13:40, 42, 50; 18:8-9; 25:41). The short New Testament book of Jude describes hell as “fire” in verse seven, and then hell as “blackest darkness” in verse 13. Of course, it goes without saying that fire and darkness are polar opposites.

Why, for those who insist on extreme literalism, would eternal torture be a just recompense for a lifetime of sin? Let’s be literal. Hypothetically, let’s presume an individual who is not merely a “normal” sinner who lies and cheats and steals, but a *really evil* person. Let’s assume this wicked and perverse person gets an early start in a lifetime of depravity so that by the end of their life, he or she will have amassed 80 years of foul, heinous acts. How can eternal punishment be considered divine justice?

If we are attempting to literalize hell, in all of its aspects, then would it not be reasonable to consider such a person as deserving (assuming that God asks us to help define his character and his justice—an assumption religion seems to encourage) of no more than 80 years of punishment? Why would we presume to think that God would reward 80 years of evil with an eternity of torture?

### **Make Up Your Own Mind—Think About It!**

It is not within the scope of this brief article to exhaustively examine every biblical text about hell, but to point out that while judgment is clearly taught in the Bible, the specifics of hell’s eternal reality are beyond our ability to understand, for God has not clarified them for us. What he seems to have clearly revealed is 1) that he is a God of love, mercy and grace, 2) that he does and will judge between good and evil, and 3) that heaven is a place of being eternally in his presence and that hell is a place of eternal separation from him. It seems clear that we must not enthrone or deify any perception of hell, however it may service our desire for justice, over the reality of God and his nature.

We must ask how a hell of eternal torture fits within the gospel of Jesus Christ. What does God’s grace have to say about eternal torture? Proponents of eternal torture want us to focus on God’s wrath and his divine justice.

Think of yourself as a crime scene investigator. As an investigator, consider how eternal torture came to be

accepted within Christendom, use the tools of your trade—the teachings of Holy Scripture, the nature of the one true God, and the character of our Lord and Savior revealed to us in the gospel. When compared with the Lamb of God, and his matchless sacrifice for us, do teachings about eternal torture exhibit the telltale signs of human fingerprints more than the divine hand of God?

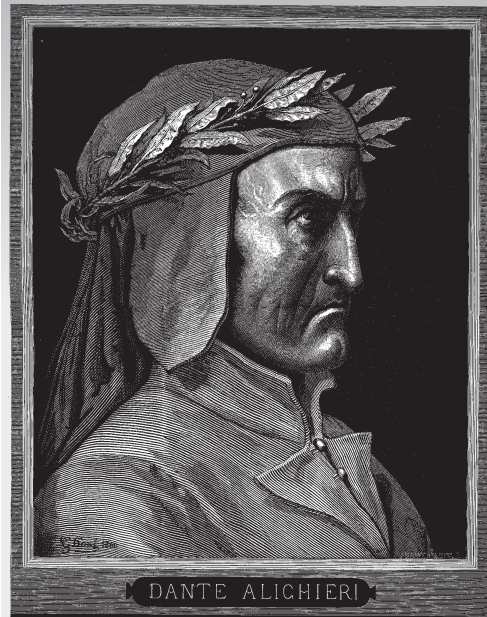
As Christ-centered and grace-based followers of the Master, we realize that Jesus is the ultimate standard when considering problematic and conflicting doctrinal teachings. Is Jesus the source and origin of a literal reality of eternal torture—or should we consider some other source? And don’t forget, motive is always a factor. What motive might humans have, insisting that those who don’t measure up to their religious standards, burn eternally, tortured forever and ever?

There are many other considerations you may wish to study and ponder before you decide what you will believe about hell. Whatever you do, don’t simply allow some religious authority to tell you what you should believe and how you should think. You might want to study the Hebrew and Greek words that are translated into our English word “hell.” As you do, and as you consider a wide variety of passages, you will want to consider the context within which those words are used. After all, an elementary rule of language is that the meanings of words may vary depending on the context in which they are used. You may wish to read and study the arguments for and against different perspectives that Christians take about the subject of hell. I highly recommend *Four Views on Hell*, William Crockett, General Editor, published by Zondervan (1996).

Perhaps we would all be better served to take to heart what God inspired Paul to say, “So don’t get ahead of the Master and jump to conclusions with your judgments before all the evidence is in. When he comes, he will bring out in the open and place in evidence all kinds of things we never even dreamed of—inner motives and purposes and prayers. Only then will any one of us get to hear the ‘Well done!’ of God” (1 Corinthians 4:5, *The Message*). □

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# ΑΠ ΟΡΕΠ LETTER TO DANTE



I hope you’ll be gracious enough to indulge a few constructive comments and suggestions about your imaginary pilgrimage through hell as described in *The Divine Comedy*. Reading your work almost 700 years after you wrote it, it seems to me that your intentions included 1) scaring the hell out of people by giving them a vulture’s eye-view of eternal punishment, and 2) handing down scorching everlasting assignments to some richly deserving (in your judgment) personalities.

Did you know that ever since you first wrote *The Divine Comedy*, many Christians have taken their cues about the realities of hell from your play book? Some today, in their zeal to attract people to Christianity, continue to base their horrific depictions of an afterlife in hell on your work. It would seem that they use you as a role model because they even book advance reservations in hell for others. On several occasions I have been personally assured that reservations have been made in my name.

Let’s cut to the chase. You have contributed to an unnecessary, raging theological brush fire of condemnation with sadistic rhetoric that far exceeds

biblical specifics about hell. Not only do your graphic descriptions eclipse biblical revelations, but it seems to me that these horrific, hyperbolic scare tactics are manipulative—completely unlike the Jesus I know—and are concerned more with controlling people than guiding them to God’s grace.

I occasionally talk with a good friend who is a charter member of his local chapter of the hellfire and brimstone brigade. We both agree that there is a hell, but my hell is not hot enough for my friend. My biblically-based beliefs about the afterlife are of a heaven defined as eternity spent in the presence of God and a hell that is an eternity of separation from God.

But my friend doesn’t think my hell goes far enough to stop people from sinning (I have to tell you that this is a concern that occupies a lot of my friend’s time). To be frank, I think his rigid religious ideas about hell are overly influenced by your contributions. The good news is my friend and I do accept each other as Christians because we both know that believing any particulars about hell have never been, and still aren’t, a core belief of Christianity.

In a recent conversation we came to a rare agreement about hell—we both believe *The Divine Comedy* needs to be updated. He is deadly serious about this undertaking (is that the right word?), but I must be honest, my contributions provide a lighthearted way to demonstrate how illogical and

reader. Comedy today means “funny ha-ha.” If people today want meaningless endless fictional humor, they watch interminable, virtually imperishable re-runs of *Friends* or *Seinfeld*. If your revised *Divine Comedy* is going to make an impact, then you will need to replace comedy in the title with a word like blazing, blistering or roasting. Promote the blood and guts in the title! Remember, if it bleeds, it not only leads, it sells like hotcakes (pun intended).

**B.** While dogmatic detail about hell is speculation at best, I would at least commend your courage in attempting to assign some religious leaders to particular regions of your hell, because, in your estimation, instead of feeding their flock, they fleeced them. But can you see your blind spot? You have no assignments for religious leaders who try to scare people out of hell into heaven.

**C.** Your poetic license offers this inscription on the gate of hell, “All hope abandon, ye who enter in!” Then you describe hell like a huge inverted cone that pierces to the very heart of this earth. You are going to need to revise this hypothesis. At the very least you need to place hell somewhere other than earth, because no scientific evidence exists to prove that hell is where you say it is. Ditto for Mars and the moon.

While we’re talking logic and reason, you really need to consider the fact that it’s not theoretically possible

people into allowing religion to control them. Control is where the rubber hits the road for much of religion.

Allow me to offer more tongue-in-cheek suggestions to update each of your nine rings/circles of torment:

**1) Limbo**, where in your hell, virtuous pagans who just didn’t cut the mustard and barely failed to qualify for heaven are assigned. Your Limbo is inhabited eternally by unbaptized children and non-Christians of every demographic group. You describe them as being generally depressed, and that they often suffer from insect bites and stings.

If you want your new version to frighten people into “doing the right thing,” you’re going to have to turn up the temperature in Limbo. After all, we now have insecticides and anti depressants that can neutralize your slap-on-the-wrist-like Limbo punishments.

Turn up the heat on Limbo! Your Limbo sounds far better than the hell on earth some people are living in right now. Maybe you could tell people that no insecticides or anti-depressants are (or will be) available in Limbo—also, tell them that Limbo television has only one channel that plays everlasting re-runs of *I Love Lucy*. That should motivate them!

**2) The Lustful.** This is your place for those who willingly participated in the sins of the flesh. They are in pitch blackness, blown by fierce winds of unquenchable desire. Maybe one of the reasons we are having so much trouble with lust in the 21st century is because you seem to be soft on this sin compared with others.

**3) The Gluttonous.** Did anyone ever tell you that you could get a job at Disney or Pixar? You have an incredible imagination! You envision the obese who spent their time on earth super-sizing their meals lying on the ground of Hades while being bombarded by rain and hail. Meanwhile, three-headed dogs rip them limb from limb. After reading your vivid description, I can only say that I am relieved that you didn’t know anything about fast food or pit bulls when you wrote. You seriously propose that pedophiles who are among **The Lustful** suffer less in eternity than fast-food addicts? No way, Dante!

**4) The Avaricious and Prodigal.** This is a perfect example demonstrating why you are going to need a mod-

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unbiblical your ideas are. So, just as the Authorized King James Version of the Bible has competition from modern translations, we think you should consult your publishers and let them know that *The Divine Comedy* needs updated language and fresh, contemporary examples. You could call it *The New Divine Comedy*, or *The Revised Divine Comedy*. Here are my tongue-in-cheek suggestions to beef it up:

**A.** First, there’s the word comedy in the title. Your use of the word comedy as a story depicting the triumph of God’s love is lost on the 21st century

for physical torture to cause pain to disembodied souls who inhabit your hell. Even though you write using allegory and metaphor, your work is understood to be literal, and claims like this cause a massive credibility gap for modern readers.

**D.** You suggest that torment intensifies in what you describe as rings or circles of hell. I have to tell you that I predict you will have no problem finding people to underwrite your new version (I think you called them patrons back in your day) because it’s an established fact that fear motivates

ern translation. If you are going to strike fear into people's hearts and keep them out of hell on the strength of what they do and don't do (by the way, ever heard of grace?) then you are really going to need to dumb down this language.

After consulting my dictionary, it seems **The Avaricious** and **Prodigal** would include wealthy people whose egos are over-inflated (to match certain portions of their bodies that are cosmetically enhanced and augmented), including filthy rich athletes who are puffed up with steroids—people who live lives of conspicuous consumption. Is that correct? For some current examples to add to your new version all you need to do is read *People* magazine or *The National Enquirer*.

5) **The Wrathful and Sullen**. You can dumb down this description by explaining that **The Wrathful** are the kinds of people who either appeared on the *Jerry Springer Show* or who watched it faithfully every day. You assign **The Wrathful** to an eternity of attacking each other even as they are thrashing around in a swamp filled with black mud. You do not provide

to hell for **Heretics** several decades ago, judging the condemnation of unbiblical beliefs to be as archaic as the burning of witches in Salem.

While I obviously don't agree with your ruthless and barbarous idea of hell, since you or someone will update your specific ideas of hell, you might consider including a few modern teachers of **Heresy**. For examples of some who try to get in under the radar by flying the flag of Christianity just turn on your television.

7) **The Violent**. There is no Hollywood movie rating for the sickening bloodletting you foresee in this torture chamber. You claim that those who



DID YOU KNOW THAT EVER SINCE YOU FIRST WROTE THE DIVINE COMEDY, MANY CHRISTIANS HAVE TAKEN THEIR CUES ABOUT THE REALITIES OF HELL FROM YOUR PLAYBOOK?

**The Sullen** with inner-tubes or any flotation devices so they are eternally submerged with their eternal "last gasps" of air eternally bubbling up to the surface of the swamp.

You may be on to something! For any parent of a sullen teenager, this threat of eternal submersion in a mud-filled swamp might work wonders. If you could offer even more grisly details on the eternal fate of **The Sullen**, your revised *Divine Comedy* could become the 21st century conservative answer to Benjamin Spock's progressive *The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care* (1946).

6) **Heretics**. According to your muse, **Heretics** are doomed to exist within burning tombs forever. Dante, you have a problem here. Ever heard of "I'm OK, you're OK?" Today, no viewpoint is absolutely bad or wrong or evil—all beliefs are equally virtuous. The greatest wisdom today is accepting that all philosophies and ideas lead to heaven. The New Age closed the road

committed violence against others are eternally submerged in hot blood, those who committed suicide inhabit stunted trees producing poison fruit and those who were violent against God are showered with eternal fire. Your classification of people who were violent against God includes homosexuals (sodomites is your term) and lenders (usurers is your term). This group is sentenced to an eternity of running on hot sand, or even being stretched out on burning sand. You have your work cut out for you convincing 21st century North Americans about this region and its inhabitants.

8) **Fraudulence and Malice**. You have ten separate sub-categories of this region, each one descending further into the depths of hell, with panderers, pimps, seducers, thieves, politicians who abuse their office and hypocrites in general being placed in boiling pitch, trapped in snake pits, covered with filth, being whipped and tortured and jumping from one

hot coal to another. In spite of this nightmare of anguish, these fearful deterrents might be a little more successful if you include some more contemporary well-known examples to spice up your new version.

9) **Traitors and Murderers**. Your last circle is a frozen marsh where Lucifer, Satan the devil, is immersed. You suggest that Satan will flap his wings in a vain attempt to free himself from this ice age, but his efforts merely produce more ice from the frigid wind, further trapping him in this frozen eternal wasteland. This is your most remote and least populated, and hence most exclusive in terms of torture, ring of hell.

Apart from updating the language and terminology, most people, apart from Satanists and witches, are going to agree with you about Satan's fate.

Finally, a request. If you do pursue a new edition, I suggest a new chapter. You can call it "Hell on Earth." You remember Sisyphus—in Greek mythology he was the clever and deceptive king of Corinth. Because of his trickery and lies, Sisyphus was assigned by Hades, the god of the underworld, to an eternity of forever pushing a boulder up a hill in Hades. But every time he got close to the top of the hill, the boulder slipped out of his grasp and rolled back to the bottom again, and Sisyphus had to start all over again.

The fate of Sisyphus is being experienced right now on the surface of this earth, in this physical life—and it has been for thousands of years. It is the sentence of those who work in the salt mines of God-less religion, where religious propaganda convinces them nothing they do will ever be good enough for God.

What we all need, Dante, is more Jesus and less religion. More love and acceptance, less of *The Divine Comedy*. Adding "Hell on Earth" as your final chapter will help readers place the rest of your work in perspective, so that they understand it as the fiction and fantasy that it is.

We all need more grace, less hell. So does *The Divine Comedy*. Call me, Dante. I would love to share the unbelievably good news of the gospel with you—maybe over at Starbucks. I'm thinking you might not like hot coffee, but they do have iced frappachino. □

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