

It's time to bury the 'sordid legend' of hell



Highland Views
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Guest columnist

For some unknown reason, a nice, smiling lady handed me a book and asked if I would read it. A bit puzzled to see the title, I told her I would take a look. "Meditations on Death: Preparing for Eternity," seems a strange book to give to a perfect stranger, but I've seen worse. Since it's a work attributed to the Catholic saint Thomas á Kempis, I told the woman I'd read his classic, "The Imitation of Christ" while studying Christian mystics in college and seminary. Opening to the Table of Contents immediately told me this was one of those "spiritual scare tactics" often used to hook the fearfully faithful into the kingdom. What "saves" me from these kinds of things is the fact I used to believe some of it. I certainly used to believe in hell. Still, I wasn't fully prepared for the graphic descriptions presented on the pages.

Before I dive into the "heart" of the book, let me say right off that the notion,

doctrine or theology of hell is perhaps the worst invention ever conjured from the imagination of the human mind. In my view, we need to bury the whole sordid legend and let it die. No other concept in all of religious history has caused as much needless pain and suffering than the dogma of divine punishment (the related concept of "sin" is a close second). We might say, hell – or the fear of it – can be more a present than a future punishment.

What does Thomas á Kempis tell his readers? He opens a chapter on "The Torments of Hell" with these wondrous words: "To imagine what the infernal realm of hell is really like is something which entirely exceeds the capacity of the human mind." The horrors are beyond thought and words, yet, based on the "visions" of other saints, he proceeds to present us with fairly descriptive thoughts and words about "this dreadful reality." Keep in mind, he's told us we can't even imagine how bad this place of torment really is, so ... he imagines it.

He describes "a horrible and swirling chaos," a "lightless subterranean cavern," "swarming with hideous phantasms," a "burning and bottomless pit," full of "inextinguishable fires." Does he

have our attention? Is the dread building? We hear it's like an "immense city populated entirely by the damned and by devils." The fire burns, but there's no light. Somehow there's air, and it's filled with the cries of tormented souls. Not only are these fires hotter than any flame on earth, but —wait for it— "freezing cold prevails." It's so terrible that the "burning heat and bitter cold cannot be imagined by the mortal mind." Nevertheless, he continues the imaginative tour of the dark damnable dungeon.

Somehow, each lost sinner will have all their senses so they can experience the utmost pain. But it gets worse. If you sinned with your hands in life, you'll especially feel pain in your hands, and the same for your tongue and all your limbs. You'll live through eternity with all the regrets of a life apart from God. Deathless worms will gnaw at your guilty conscience from the inside. Because you have put a "foolish confidence in your own misguided intelligence or in the wisdom of this world" the "perpetual fires of the abyss" will consume you. For a mere thousand years? No, that wouldn't be enough. The torture will have no end, "not even after a thousand years, or a thousand, thousand years!" To drive home the horror of hell, Thom-

as á Kempis wants us to know the unimaginable suffering will last for an unimaginable length of time. He concludes: "The years of pain shall exceed the number of stars in the sky, the centuries of sorrow will exceed the number of grains of sand on the seashore."

Are we sufficiently horrified? The author goes on to paint a gloomy picture of the Final Judgment, but of course this is not the end for sinners or saints. God's People will enter the Joys of Heaven among the angels and saints for eternity, even as the tortured suffer the cost of their evil ways for the same endless time beyond time.

There you have it, either a "meditation on death" from an esteemed doctor of the Church, or a nightmare that sounds like Dante's "Inferno." As I see it, if a faith or religion can't survive without a hell, it can't be taken seriously in the 21st Century. Anyone who says they believe in a God of Love, who holds to any part of this terrible and terrorizing story, must be asked one fundamental question: What parent would do this to a child they love, even if the child was disobedient?

Chris Highland's books and blogs are presented on "Friendly Freethinker" (chighland.com).