

Heaven and Hell in the Afterlife Prospects of LGBT People

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If two self-identified heterosexual men walk down most streets in our country and decide to express their friendship by holding hands -- as they do in many cultures around the world -- what is likely to happen to them?

They will be treated the way gay men are in our culture with what I call the big six -- the means by which a culture installs, enforces, and prevents change regarding the roles that it supports -- violence, threats of violence, ridicule, humiliation, isolation, and rejection.

Whether it's gender roles, sexual orientation, race, or class roles, these six are what people experience in a culture regularly to keep them from being who they might be if a culture such as ours were not so heavily invested in the roles.

What such an example tells us, is that the history and presence of oppression and discrimination against LGBT people has nothing to do with who they are in love with or who they are in bed with, and everything to do with installing, in America's case, gender roles.

Now these six means of doing so -- violence, threats of violence, ridicule, humiliation, isolation, and rejection -- are a summary definition of the doctrine of hell in the US. And to the extent that we have all been conditioned to fit into these roles, we have in some way, somewhere down deep, experienced the fear around them. We have an experience, though we might not have thought of it, that the doctrine of hell can tap into every time it's invoked.

I'm an historian of religions not a theologian. I'm not therefore going to put in a plug for either heaven or hell now. Historians, after all, are not good with the future. We drive madly into the future while looking into our rearview mirror.

What I've been interested in however is the hardest question for a historian to answer -- Why?

Why are people stuck -- religiously and otherwise? Why -- given whatever evidence there is out there, whatever science says about something, whatever answers have been given to objections for years -- why do people not change their minds?

Over a quarter of a century ago, all the major professional psychological organizations declared that homosexuality is not an abnormality. Biblical scholars for at least two generations have been responding to anti-LGBT interpretations of the Bible. LGBT people have been out and around all over the place for at least a generation so that people who wanted to see them could see that there is no such thing as "the gay lifestyle."

So, why are we still dealing with this issue? Why are LGBT people not so mainstreamed that it doesn't matter? Why is it still a political football that even truncates our current president? Why are so many people still stuck?

That was the question I explored in *Scared Straight*. As long as it's bad to be a gay man or a lesbian in our culture, so long will our culture be able to use that to maintain the gender roles off of which it makes money and maintains power.

But I also wanted to ask why people are so stuck on certain religious positions that they won't, even can't, change when that religion denigrates them, hurts their family members and friends, and even destroys some of their potentially closest relationships.

Why would they stay with institutions that demean them and their friends, treat them as second-class citizens, and even claim they have an "objective disorder?"

It wasn't the inspiration of Karl Marx saying, "religion is the opiate of the people" that gave me the clue. It was the realization that religion for many people functions in a certain way in their lives, and it can continue to function that way even after they have rejected it.

Popular addiction specialist and family systems speaker, John Bradshaw, put it this way: "The high of righteousness is similar to the high of cocaine." And he knew them both personally.

So, I observed that for many people religion --

- is mood-altering.
- it prevents them from fully feeling an extremely low self-concept.
- it protects them from the criticisms of those who think they're wrong.
- it keeps them from feeling what they would need to feel to change their circumstances.
- it relieves them of the blame for any negative results of their actions by blaming a transcendent Other.
- it blames the family members and those hurt by it for the problems it causes.
- it tells them their value is not based upon what they think of themselves.
- it provides user activities to keep them busy, so that "the action is the distraction" as they say in recovery groups.
- it duplicates what addiction theorists call "addictive thinking."
- it ultimately takes over one's life.

So, I wrote *When Religion Is an Addiction*.

Some people loved the book but forgot there was a "when" in the title. Their reaction to religion was so negative that they could see no use for it at all.

Some people didn't like my emphasis upon a process addiction -- like gambling -- because they felt it demeaned drug or alcohol addiction. It was as if they needed to keep

these ingestive addictions as REAL addictions and not have anything competing with them.

Some said, if this is so, then anything can become an addiction. But my answer to that is: no, anything cannot be an addiction. In fact no THING is an addiction.

An addict, in fact, can be very creative in what she or he uses for their fix. It's an addict who wants to blame a thing – the wine or the cigarette, or the drug.

But the person is the addict – essentializing the thing (whether it's chemically additive or not) takes the focus away from them as a responsible human being. The person for some personal reason is doing the behavior or using the thing.

So, I want to talk about the function of two of the elements, heaven and hell, common to popular religion in the US and their relationship to LGBT people. And when we are counseling those who have been told these are their prospects, even though they have rejected them, we have to understand the power they can still hold.

For their comfort, we have to tell a new story.

I'm going to concentrate on the doctrine of hell. With polls of Americans indicating that between 54% and 80% of us believe in hell, we still have to face the fact that the idea is all around us. Whether we agree with it or not, we are in its midst.

But let's be clear about what the idea says, so clear the we can feel it – the model of what it is finally to be loved in the Universe (a heavenly Father) says that we deserve an eternal level of punishment that is so extremely horrible we cannot imagine it. It says that even those this heavenly person in his modeling of what loving us is, is all powerful as well as all loving, he cannot, or will not, end the punishment he has created for us.

In its most common form this teaching says that we deserve this punishment just by being born and that there is nothing about us, or nothing we can do, based upon who we are to deserve better treatment. In order to get out of this predicament we must be accepted by some Other who will do the right, the just thing, only if we fulfill the conditions this person who loves us lays down. Even the modern so-called liberal theologian, Paul Tillich defines faith as “accepting our acceptance *in spite of the fact that we are unacceptable.*”

When I was studying the addiction literature for writing *When Religion Is an Addiction*, I was reminded that a “low self-concept” is a common basis for addiction.

But a low self-concept as counselors tend to use it is predicated on the idea that we are better than the concept we have of ourselves that is affecting our lives. Counselors might want to improve one's self-concept because they believe it should be better than the one their client as of her- of himself.

The doctrine of hell is different. For the doctrine of hell, this lowest of low self-concepts is saying that the low self-concept is accurate -- not a misunderstanding about ourselves at all -- and it is the judgment of the ultimate judge of the universe.

It's like the old saying: "you're not paranoid, everyone really is out to get you."

Now this is a horrible teaching to personalize. Even C.S. Lewis, who wrote as a defender of the doctrine of hell admitted that: "We are told that it is a detestable doctrine -- and indeed, I too detest it from the bottom of my heart -- and are reminded of the tragedies in human life which have come from believing it." (*Problem of Pain*, 119)

Lewis knows it's despicable, and senses that anyone would see this as an awful, awful idea. You would think that it would be rejected out of hand by anyone, and easily erased from the unconscious of anyone as a disgusting, perverse, sadistic, inhumane idea.

But, not so. It is widely embraced. And that's because, in spite of the attempts by Lewis and others to argue logically to convince everyone for the need for hell in their psyches, the appeal and persistence of the doctrine, as in most cases, isn't its logic. It's its familiarity.

First, the doctrine is all around us. It's in the majority of our churches and even other religious institutions. One cannot turn on even a news channel without its representatives who personify the doctrine, reinforcing by their presence if not their words at the time, the accepted nature of the idea. It's as if the majority of authorities are behind it.

A 2007 study by Media Matters for America found that on the three major television networks, the three major cable news channels, and PBS, right-wing religious leaders were interviewed, quoted, or mentioned almost 3.8 times as often as other religious leaders on *all* issues.

When people who outspokenly represent, even personify, the doctrine are there in front of us, they stand there reinforcing the doctrine of hell without even teaching it. Silence is consent -- so when liberal voices are on, they never contradict the doctrine by their presence much less their words because they aren't representing the dominant picture of religion.

In addition, liberal religious leaders aren't even close to having a similar omnipresence -- no place to contradict hell or other doctrines outside their own congregations. Their services and sermons are not televised or broadcast on radio at all like those of conservative and fundamentalists on mainstream TV and radio as well as on pro-hell networks and stations dedicated to maintaining an overwhelming presence.

Second, the idea of hell is persistent and deep because it finds a warm place in many people based upon how they were raised as children. It's a part of the widespread way we have brought up children in our culture. And this way, which psychologist and child

specialist Alice Miller calls “poisonous pedagogy,” is more widespread than we’d like to admit.

Dealing with this doctrine sounds like the nightmare of an abused child who’s been told it deserves the violent and shaming punishment a parent dishes out for it’s own good. Let me quote Miller from her 2001 book, *The Truth Will Set You Free*:

“There are countless theological explanations for the motives behind God’s inscrutable counsels, but in all too many of them I see a terrorized child trying hard to interpret the mysterious actions of the parents as good and loving, even though the child cannot fathom them – indeed, has no chance of fathoming them.”

Such an understanding of hell and its childhood origins is well-discussed by Princeton Professor of Pastoral Theology, Donald Capp in his book, *The Child’s Song: The Religious Abuse of Children* (1995). You’d have to read his full book to understand why Capps says what we might not want to hear. Listen to his words:

“I believe that many religious ideas that children are taught cause them emotional torment and are therefore inherently abusive. I further suggest that one reason children will internalize God via physical punishment is that they simultaneously experience religious ideas as inherently tormenting.”

Third, the idea of hell is a persistent fear even in those who reject it because it symbolizes the means by which a culture installs cultural roles related to gender, class, sexual orientation, race, etc. As I mentioned when I began, hell is basically a cosmic symbol for our fears of what will happen if we don’t conform – violence, threats of violence, ridicule, humiliation, isolation, and rejection.

A friend of mine who’s a professor of art history once told me that for art historians there are no good portrayals of heaven around the world and numerous good one’s of hells. Portrayals of heaven appear trite, while those of hell appear passionate. Whether it’s Eastern or Western culture, the pressure of conforming to the culture through the “big six” is there.

Fourth, the personal and institutional purveyors of heaven and hell weren’t just some other, unrelated people over there. The institutions involved provided so much that came with the doctrine that one must give up in order to let it go:

- a community of acceptance;
- a settled definition of who the person is as a human being, as a man or as a woman;
- a sense of certainty in the midst of a fast-changing world where change seems frightening;
- a view of reality that included eternal punishment for any dissenters;
- identification with one’s parents, one’s ethnic identity, or a shared set of past human struggles and accomplishments;

- a “comfortable” familiarity with psychological dynamics found in organizations and relationships that often reproduce those in their own dysfunctional families of origin;
- a chance to affirm spirituality or something larger or more than they find in the material, consumerist world;
- the emotional and other rewards and respectability associated with attention and even leadership;
- a chance for men in particular to live in a space that accepts attributes and interests that the surrounding culture considers “unmanly, sissy, gay, queer.”

These provisions were all integrated closely with the source, ideas, and purveyors of the doctrine of hell. Giving up the doctrine feels like giving up these inter-twined, relied upon comforts.

No one in our society has been told and is continually told they deserve hell more than the LGBT person. No young conservative (that’s the majority) church attendee who will grow up to realize their sexual orientation will send them to hell, has not sat again and again absorbing the words of the teaching of hell from childhood. And no other group is more constantly reminded on television and elsewhere that people can still get away with defaming and condemning them.

Only in the last quarter of a century could one have even heard an alternative. The best LGBT people had from the pulpits was silence. And previous to the rise of the Metropolitan Community Church the only institutions that accepted LGBT people were the bar and the bathhouse

So, no wonder when I speak to people who have physically “left” the institution that told them they deserved hell, they can’t let go. While an outsider like me is wondering why they still need to prove that their old institution is wrong (“protesting, me thinks, too much”), they seem to still be hard at work at it rather than so letting go that they’re discussing other issues.

If a healthy attitude toward any issue is one of relaxed learning, I seldom hear that response from my brothers and sisters when they hear others still say they deserve eternal punishment. I see anger and obsession with the old teachings and those responsible.

For LGBT people, relating to the doctrine of hell is all that straight people must deal with to feel comfort in what they face after death around this issue -- and more.

Change requires the hearing of a new story. And the counselor will have to embrace and re-tell it in the face of all the others.

This doesn’t mean arguing or proving anything. The counselor must have so settled the issue in their own life that they don’t bring their dealings with them. Cleaning up our own relationships to this doctrine and the religious view that teaches it is the first issue for the counselor.

But then it IS time for intervention. In spite of the teaching that one should be neutral on the subject of religion, the counselor has to make her or his position clear for the sake of the LGBT person.

If I don't believe the doctrine of hell is true, I must say I disagree with the idea. I don't get into arguments over the Bible, tradition, or church authorities. I merely provide an alternative view by saying:

"I know people believe that, I want you to know that I don't."

And when someone wants to argue, we don't. We merely repeat something that takes total responsibility for our position: "I know there are people who believe that, but I don't."

We ourselves don't blame or get involved with discussions of God, the Bible, tradition, or any other authority. We speak from our own story. We intervene with the witness that there is someone right here who disagrees with the dominant teaching without the need to defend ourselves.

Not doing so is to consent with the dominant view that is likely to be there, expressed or not – silence, or presenting no opinion, is not neutrality. It is consent to the dominant construction.

As Sarah Schulman writes in her recent book *Ties That Bind: Familial Homophobia and Its Consequences* (2009): "Remember, the therapeutic position as currently constructed is itself a position that rests its power on withholding, cut-off and unaccountability.... Silence, refusal, cut-off, and withholding in the dialogic power relation of family, state, love, and cultural representation are not neutral actions, They are aggressive, hostile, abusive actions. They create an on-going infliction of pain that is not deserved."

But let me go further. Let me not merely object but recommend we tell alternative stories. There are many possibilities. But since this is about hell, let me suggest a religious one even though I'm just an historian and not a member of any clergy.

What if we saw LGBT people as actually icons, even a parables, for their religious institutions. What if we spoke of them as embodiments, yes, incarnations, of what is most important in the universe when all else is fading, when the office, the financial status, and the worries of life fade away.

If there is anything important to most religions it must be love. And, in fact, LGBT people embody and have embodied the importance, the price, the centrality of that which "endures when all else fades" -- love. LGBT people have endured, and continue to endure, everything in order to love. That is no small message, and one that deserves retelling.

Lesbian Anglican priest M.R. Ritley writes of it in Christian terms – let me quote her with my own additions: “We are people defined by our loves. It is a wholly Christian message: Love is *always* costly; [and] love is worth the cost. We are living icons of love’s indestructibility; we who have loved despite two thousand years of suffering and terror. Nothing – not physical abuse or moral sanctions, not expulsion from our families [our jobs and our communities, not the loss of friendships or children], not even threat of death [or actual death] – has kept us from loving. This, if anything, is an icon we all need to contemplate from time to time, a living reminder that in the end, love can endure and outlast every other thing.” (with L. William Countryman, *Gifted by Otherness: Gay and Lesbian Christians in the Church*, 2001)

It’s all about stories -- and this is the story of LGBT people, a story they need to hear in a world that has offered them, on top of all else, the threat of hell.

LGBT people provide a parable for all of us, don’t they? They embody the risks of proclaiming that in the end there is nothing more important than love, nothing more valuable than love, and nothing so costly as love. To love at all is a very bold and amazing thing in a world where fear predominates.

And when we think of the founder of the Christian religion and LGBT people throughout history, we see embodied lesson that we often hear quoted at wedding ceremonies: “And now abideth these three: faith, hope and love, but the greatest of these is love.”

Libby Roderick, “Holy Thing to Love”

Written when a very dear friend was dying of cancer and she sung at an AIDS vigil. The chorus and one verse:

It’s a human thing, a holy thing, to love what death can take
It’s a human thing to love the thing whose loss will cause your heart to break
It’s a funny thing we can’t stop ourselves even as we wait for the final hush
It’s a human thing, a funny thing, a holy thing to love....

Have you seen how the world move on?
Every hand we touch will go
Every face we cherish will disappear
Taking everything that we used to know
But somewhere deep inside our bones
We must be tied to the morning star
For knowing that our hearts will break
We love each other all the more.

It’s a human thing, a holy thing, to love what death can take
It’s a human thing to love the thing whose loss will cause your heart to break
It’s a funny thing we can’t stop ourselves even as we wait for the final hush
It’s a human thing, a funny thing, a holy thing to love.

May such a story not only be what LGBT people hear but a message we can borrow from LGBT people to embrace as we leave this scene.