

Unitarian Universalist Congregation of the South Jersey Shore

## **Hell Is a Human Invention**

**June 20, 2021**

**Lay speaker Barbara Miller**

This sermon was inspired by a song of the same name by Amanda Udis-Kessler. You will hear the entire song later, and here is the first verse:

You hear them preach it all over this town:

Where you will land when you die.

Some will go up and most will go down:

So much for the sweet by-and-by

But I won't be taken by claims I'm forsaken

For sins too outrageous to mention.

Not that I'm pure, but of this I am sure: Hell is a human invention.

Hell is a human invention.

I asked Amanda, why did you write this song? Here is her response:

*"I live in Colorado Springs, the "Evangelical Vatican" of the U.S.*

*Focus on the Family is here, along with New Life Church and just tons and tons of Evangelical congregations, all very right-wing politically. I've been here since 2003. ... I had heard from friends who were K-12 teachers that their students reported being threatened that they would be going to hell because they weren't Christian, were the wrong kind of Christian, or (sometimes) were gay. The Evangelical message was very loud and prominent in Colorado Springs and so I wanted to offer a strong message in opposition to that message. I am trained as a sociologist (I have a sociology PhD) and one of my areas of focus was the sociology of religion. So that line about social control not being good for one's soul is where my sociological self and liberal religious spirit meet up."*

Today, I offer a very broad overview of various religions' claims about hell, and also share the views of some of you who spoke with me. I am only touching the surface of the surface on certain major religions: Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam.

I did not investigate the afterlife beliefs of pre-colonial, indigenous people. I do not intend to be disrespectful of religions in speaking so briefly about their beliefs, or past beliefs. I also don't mean to imply that every member of a faith shares the views described here. This month's worship theme is play, and this will be a playful approach.

If you are willing, please indicate by raising your hand, if you at any time in your life, believed in a literal hell. Click through gallery view on your zoom screen to see responses.

First, Christianity.

I spoke with many of you who grew up Christian, mostly Catholic, and some Protestants. The by-birth Catholics had the most vivid memories of hell stories from childhood: A place of fire and torment where you would spend eternity if you had committed enough of certain kinds of sins, which are classified as mortal (serious) or venial (less serious).

Victor Maene, who attended Catholic school for 12 years, recalls questioning the hell of Catholicism even before he began school, at the age of 4. To quote Victor, "I never bought it." Apparently, the attempts of educators and family members to instill fear don't work with some of us. Other congregants recalled being told by a priest or minister that a family member or friend who had died was now residing in hell, and that information did not sit well, inspiring them to leave their church.

Ron Hutchison, who attended a Baptist Church in Nashville as a child, recalls Hell being a presence in Southern culture, hearing it preached in church, and being told by peers

that you could go to hell for this or that act. As an aspiring scientist, by the time he entered college, he had totally dropped the concept of hell, but now wonders how it affected his growing up to have heard so much about hell in his younger years.

My brother-in-law Fred, a life-long Lutheran, tells me that hell is no longer any part of religious instruction in the Evangelical Lutheran Church.

When I asked him “What about the book of Revelations where I read, “If anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire,” he replied “Revelations doesn’t count.”

Lutheranism is a much more diverse denomination than we may realize. Contemporary Lutherans in the ELCA are focused on God’s grace and demonstrating Christ’s love in our world. Fred’s church, in Butler PA, has a very active outreach to the homeless in that community, running a weekly free meal program. Now, there are two other main branches of Lutheranism: Missouri Synod and Wisconsin Synod, which are more conservative, and persist in keeping Hell very much alive, as well as condemning what they refer to as homosexuality and not ordaining women.

The big surprise for me preparing this sermon was that Plato invented hell as we know it. After the death of his pal Socrates, he grew discouraged. He saw that philosophy alone could not bring about a just society without violence. Plato’s invention of hell was a way for citizens to have a new system of rewards and punishments in the hereafter, thus it was a coercive device to promote a civil society. In Plato’s *Republic*, he introduced the myth of Er. The warrior Er was slain in battle, but came back to life on his funeral pyre to speak to the living of what he had seen while he was dead. Basically, he saw a meadow with two openings to heaven and two openings to hell. The myth of Er is worth investigating; check it out in Plato’s *Republic*.

Eventually, under the influence of Augustine, around AD 430, the concept of endless conscious torment was brought into general acceptance by the Catholic Church in the

Western world. From this time, the Christian Church purported that souls were immortal and consequently the lost would experience endless fires of punishment.

No sermon about Hell would be complete without a mention of Purgatory.

Some believe that the concept of purgatory began around 1160 when the word is first found as a noun. The tradition of purgatory as a place of transition where souls may go to be cleansed of sins dates back even before the time of Jesus. The worldwide practice of caring for the dead and praying for them contributes to their afterlife purification. This practice appears in early Judaism as well as medieval Chinese Buddhism.

Rev. Dawn reminds me that purgatory was used as a sort of medieval church fund-raiser, since you could pre-pay your way out in the form of indulgences. We might check this out to support our budget... if we could come up with some form of ... never mind!

A few years back there was a rumor that Pope Francis declared that Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory no longer exist. Apparently a 93 year old atheist and journalist friend of the pope made these claims based on conversations they had had. The Catholic Church quickly stepped in to deny these claims. They affirmed the 3 destinations of the afterlife, though instead of fire and brimstone, Hell is now considered eternal separation from God.

I asked our friend Anne Bullen, a member of Beth Israel Synagogue, what she thinks about Hell. Anne is a founder of Mosaic Interfaith Fellowship.

Anne writes:

*I'll give a very Jewish answer—there is no real agreement. Among Reform and Conservative Jews, Hell is not on the radar at all and though there is an afterlife concept, it is not a meaningful tenet of weekly Jewish prayer and is rarely discussed. As someone who grew up Catholic I've always noticed Jews pay very little attention to Heaven and none to Hell at all. The phrase "life everlasting" is built into funerals and yahrzeit (the anniversary of the Hebrew date of death). The*

*world to come is noted but we do good deeds to have a life of meaning here versus a ticket to heaven later.*

*In general, Reform and Conservative Jews focus on the earthly realm and going "all in" while we're here.*

*The old-school concept of God as judge and jury is still central to the high holidays, and the cleansing of self-denial during Yom Kippur is the pre-cursor to Catholic confession.*

Anne directed me to a sermon by Rabbi Perlin at Temple B'nai Shalom in Fairfax Virginia. I would propose that the question of this sermon, "Is there a heaven or hell in Judaism?" is not a Jewish question. It is a Christian question, posed to Jews, or posed about Jews, to see how we compare with the Christian view of the afterlife, which contains a clear view of heaven and hell. Truth be told, most Jews never think about this question and really don't care.

So, if we cannot "KNOW" for sure whether there is a realm beyond this corporeal life, I propose that all discussions of the afterlife tell us more about our values and beliefs in this life.

What does Islam have to say about Hell?

The Qu'ran contains conflicting testimony about the eternal (or not) nature of Hell.

"They will long to leave the Fire, but never will they leave there from; and theirs will be a lasting torment." (*Quran 5:37*)

But another sacred source says: "Verily a day would come over hell when there shall not be a single human being in it" (*Kanzul Ummal Vol. VII, page 245*). The image is given of the arm of God sweeping hell clear of everyone (except unbelievers) and taking them up into heaven.

I asked my friend Mehwish, who is Muslim and grew up in Pakistan, what she learned of hell in her religious instruction. Her first impressions of religion and therefore hell were

taught by her mother in the home and included the idea that at death there is a reckoning of sins versus merits.

Mehwish writes:

*The decision could be based on something as little as +/- 1 sin, which leads you to your eternal abode. As a child, I envisioned it like a basketball scoreboard.*

*Apparently suffering through hellfire is a way to redeem oneself, if you are a Muslim who believes in one God. Once you have suffered enough, you can look forward to entering heaven.*

Schools were the primary source of religious instruction. In addition, she and her sister had a female tutor who taught them how to pronounce words in the Qu'ran, but because they did not understand Arabic, so it was not really religious instruction. That happens primarily in the school system.

Some of the most delightful and vivid imagery is used to describe hell. Just look at Dante's *Inferno*, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and Jonathan Edwards' *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*.

Islam describes a bridge over which everyone must pass after death. Under the bridge is the fiery hell. My understanding is that righteous people have no problem crossing on their way to Jannah (heaven) but for sinners, it is believed the bridge will be thinner than hair and sharper than the sharpest sword, impossible to walk on without falling below to arrive at their destination of Jahannam or hell.

What is Hell? Dennis Bohn, Dharma teacher of our UU Sangha, says of the Buddhist view of hell, "It depends" on what school of Buddhism is practiced in their area of the world, and to some degree, on the individual. In traditional Buddhist belief, there are 6 different realms a person can be born into. The best of these being the god realm, and the worst the hell realm. There are 8 cold hells and 8 hot hells, called Narakas. Three of the Narakas are described by the different sounds the teeth make when chattering, like at-at-at or hu-hu-hu or ha-ha-ha. The good news is that you can work out your

karma and eventually be released from the Hell Realms. The bad news is that each realm is millions of years long.

In the canonical text, the Buddha talked about being reborn in Hell as a result of unwholesome actions. When asked by the Brahmin householders of Sola why it seems that certain individuals, after death are in a state of deprivation, residing in an unhappy destination; and some individuals reappear after death in a happy place, the Buddha answers by specifying exactly what actions result in which afterlife, going into great detail. People end up in hell not because of the judgment of a great being, but as the direct result of their accumulated actions. That is their karma.

According to Dennis, most modern Buddhists of his acquaintance have little to do with hell, but view it metaphorically. To quote from buddhism.info:

*...Buddhism does have its own concept of heaven and hell. Unlike other religions, these places are non-permanent, mental states of mind. In other words, many Buddhists believe that wise people make their own heaven while foolish people create their own hell.*

Hinduism: Here, as in Islam, I found contrasting views of hell. From hinduwebsite.com:

*Hinduism does not believe in an eternal hell. However, hellish states of mind and woeful births do exist temporarily for those who think and act wrongfully. They consist of fear, hate, jealousy, bigotry and anger, and are brought about by one's own thoughts, actions and deeds. But they are not eternal and can be changed by positive karma.*

Contrast that rather gracious view with the 28 different hells described in the Wikipedia article on Hinduism, each Hell is tailor-made, specific to the individual sinner and their sins:

**Kumbhipaka** (cooked in a pot): A person who cooks beasts and birds alive is cooked alive in boiling oil by the Yamadutas. Yamadutas are beings who inform the person that

they have died and escort them to hell for as many years as there were hairs on the bodies of their animal victims.

Honestly, the other Hindu hells are too gruesome to mention here.

To sum it up: traditional Christianity: Hell is eternal; Islam, Hinduism: eternal or temporary according to your source of information; Buddhism: determined by karma and you can definitely work your way out; Judaism: basically, meh? For all faiths, most modern believers see hell symbolically, and not as a literal place.

Some big questions remain for me: If Plato essentially created the Christian hell, what about the cultures that had hell before the time of Plato? Could Hell be an archetype that is part of human psychology? If so, what purpose did it serve for early humans?

My conversations about Hell showed one very obvious tendency: the younger the person, the less impressed they are by the idea of hell. When I asked Cyrus and Max Safonof - they replied with a shrug.

On a personal note, I have been having nightmares, which I rarely experience, while preparing this sermon. If thinking and talking and writing about hell can cause a mature adult this much anxiety, I think it's a very bad idea to share this notion with children.