

IT'S A DEVIL OF A JOB BEING SATAN NO ONE CAN DECIDE JUST HOW MUCH DEVILRY IS REQUIRED PROFILE HELL, THE POPE HAS PROCLAIMED, DOES EXIST, THUS CONTRADICTING HIS PREDECESSOR OLD NICK'S NOT BOTHERED - HE'S ALWAYS IN AND OUT OF FASHION The Sunday Telegraph (United Kingdom) April 1, 2007 Sunday

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BYLINE: William Langley

Was there a touch of devilry in Pope Benedict XVI's announcement last week that hell is for real? Sensitive to the concerns of sinners, modern churchmen have taken to playing down the risks of eternal damnation, arguing that God, even if he once permitted such a thing, would now be signed up to current sentencing guidelines.

Back in the early 1990s, Benedict's predecessor, John Paul II, in an address to the Vatican Council, rejected the notion of a literal, living hell, arguing that the fiery pit was more a symbol of man's willful separation from God: "Rather than a physical place," said John Paul, "hell is the state of those who freely and definitively depart from God, the source of all life and joy."

But in a speech to a parish gathering outside Rome, Benedict, 79, a pontiff with little time for the namby-pambyism of the modern priesthood, stood this position on its head, declaring that: "Hell exists, and is eternal, even if nobody talks about it much any more."

Behind his remarks was a growing sense of irritation among Church traditionalists that hell has fallen out of fashion, and that the afterlife, having been cleaned up and de-fanged, is now being sold as a kind of dream holiday-in-perpetuity, with heaven as the ritzy new resort, and hell the eyesore slum that was knocked down to accommodate it.

Unfortunately, Satan isn't displaced so easily. He may, indeed, be thoroughly enjoying his temporary lack of profile, for as the Kevin Spacey character says in *The Usual Suspects* (albeit without acknowledgements to Baudelaire): "The greatest trick the Devil ever pulled is convincing the world he didn't exist."

Polls show that far more people now believe in God than believe in Satan, yet for hundreds of years it would have been considered illogical, not to mention heretical, to accept the existence of one without the other. Hell and the torments thereof were what happened to you if you strayed from the path of righteousness, but today's theologians, reluctant to frighten their dwindling congregations, have effectively written Satan out of the script. The Church of England, never knowingly out-trended, dismissed the existence of hell as far back as the 1970s, and its leading figures rarely even refer to Satan or his realm.

Many clerics now embrace the notion of universal salvation, which holds that God would not abandon his sinners, and even if, in extreme cases, he had to, it would only be with the purpose of reclaiming them later. "All flesh shall see the salvation of God," says Luke (3:6). What this amounts to, complain the conservatives, is a whole lot of carrot and no stick, and Benedict's outburst should perhaps be seen as a sign of frustration at the increasingly "no fault" nature of modern scriptural interpretation.

For Satan, whatever his shortcomings, has done a fiendishly good job of licking the human race into shape. He figures, in varying degrees of scariness, in

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every significant religion, and what Anthony Burgess called "the vestigial fear of hell" has arguably done far more, down the centuries, to establish and maintain codes of civilized behavior than all the laws ever passed.

The Devil first appears in early Hebrew scriptures as a mysterious supernatural being named as ha Satan, which roughly translates as "the adversary", or "the opposer", although his opposition stops well short of confronting God's will. In the Book of Job he is given the task of testing Job's loyalty, and although the tests are severe there is little suggestion of malevolence. It is around five centuries later that Satan first emerges as an overt enemy of God, apparently banished from the divine hierarchy. "How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer... how art thou fallen to earth? And thou saidst in thy heart: 'I will exalt my throne above the stars of God'... but yet thou shalt be brought down to hell, into the depth of the pit" (Isaiah, 14:12-15).

Various accounts of the Devil's fall, or, arguably, rise, can be found in the ancient scriptures, but as the American scholar Elaine Pagels writes in *The Origin of Satan*, there is a strikingly common thread to them: "All agree on one thing; that this greatest and most dangerous enemy did not originate (as we might have expected) as an outsider, an alien or a stranger. Satan is no distant enemy; on the contrary, he is an intimate enemy - one's closest relative, older brother, or trusted colleague - the kind of person upon whose goodwill and loyalty the wellbeing of family and society depends."

Most Christian scholars believe that Lucifer, the brightest of the angels, rebelled against God and tried to seize control of heaven for himself. Cast out, he took his revenge, using the serpent to tempt Adam and Eve into original sin, and has been scheming ever since to win souls for his infernal kingdom. Yet not everyone has seen him as the embodiment of evil.

John Milton's epic, *Paradise Lost*, portrays Satan with conspicuous sympathy as an agitator for greater democracy and freedom under the tyrannical and inflexible regime of God ("Heaven's awful monarch"), and suggests ("Better to reign in hell than serve in heaven") that his integrity survives the fall.

Several plausible attempts have been made since to restore his reputation. Professor Henry Ansgar Kelly, a University of California medievalist and biographer of Satan, describes him as "a cosmic outlaw" arguing that the early Church, abetted by artists and scholars, conspired to blacken his character, with the aim of keeping the masses under the Church's thumb. Far from stewing in the Stygian pit, says Professor Kelly, Satan is still out among us in the role of heaven's enforcer. "He is like the government heavy. His main job is to test human beings, and accuse them of their misdeeds, but he is cynical and overzealous in his duties," says Kelly.

Exoneration should be the least of Satan's worries. His real problem - and, to some extent, Pope Benedict's - is that too few people now believe in the whole idea of divine punishment. The cracks began to show as early as the 18th century, when science, already gnawing at the tenets of creationism, established that volcanic eruptions were not, as had been widely assumed, evidence of hellish fury. Unconvinced by the research, a team of Russian monks launched an unsuccessful mission to dig to the centre of the earth.

It got worse for Satan. The image of the scaly demon with horns, pointy tail and toasting fork, bathed in the sulphurous glow of the pit, became a comedic caricature. Once wary of anything discernibly religious, Hollywood discovered the commercial value of the Devil with movies such as *Rosemary's Baby*, *The Exorcist* and *The Omen* series. Next, the notion of evil itself came under philosophical challenge, and writers such as Solzhenitsyn, in *The Gulag Archipelago* and Arthur Miller in *The Crucible*, dismissed the idea that true wickedness could be anything other than man-made.

Bad as things may look from down there, Satan has no need to despair. Our notion of hell has simply moved on with the times, and even as we claim to worry less about him, the state of the modern world plays tidily into his claws. More sceptics means more guests, and as the Pope reminds us, there's plenty of room for everyone.

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