

Today's hell needs no fire

By TIMOTHY O'TOOLE

First published: Saturday, December 31, 2005

It is amazing how the here-and-now can influence the hereafter.

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice stated emphatically that the United States does not conduct, permit or condone torture. Her recent rhetoric may have significant impact on the military and the CIA, perhaps even the IRS.

But the impact is not limited to US government action. A Vatican commission is considering eliminating Purgatory* (if there ever was one), while the very notion of hell is under scrutiny by civil rights groups and liberal theologians.

God is under pressure to provide more reasonable accommodations for those who are denied His Beatific Vision. (Male pronoun used to accommodate my more traditional readers, if there are any).

Hell. Hades. Gehenna. Scheol. Different cultures have expressed different impressions of that perennially punitive place. Dante's Inferno is a classic example, but Gary Larson's Far Side captured more whimsical images, like his cartoon of a tuxedoed maestro being thrust into a cave full of banjo geeks, or the two doors marked "damned if you do" and "damned if you don't."

If there is a Hell -- designed by a wrathful God -- I think its construction and administration were outsourced. Humans have proven capable of creating hell on Earth, be it Auschwitz, Hiroshima, Rwanda, Darfur, North Korea, Abu Ghraib. Not to mention the California freeways, the new Medicare provisions or the music of Phillip Glass. We humans know a few things about inflicting everlasting misery on one another.

We are so handy at creating hell at home, that there is little reason for God to perpetuate the melodrama.

I envision a subtler hell -- one that does not involve ripping of clothing, weeping and gnashing of teeth, fire and brimstone, serpents and pitchforks, HMO forms.

I envision a hell of minor, albeit perpetual aggravations. A land of weak, generic coffee. Limited choices on TV: PBS pledge week interspersed with endless replays of "A Fighter Pilot's Story," highlights of "Fear Factor," golf tournaments, traffic helicopter reports, C-SPAN debates and celebrity chess from Iceland.

In hell, the copier always jams, then crumples your original. The front desk loses your reservation. Your e-mail is inundated with spam. You forget your password. Telemarketers call constantly with incredible free offers on vinyl siding. The only snail mail you receive consists of credit card offers and long distance carrier spiels.

People cut ahead in line at the express register with more than 10 items, then write a check at glacial speed. One of your socks slips down your ankle, while the other sock cuts off circulation. Your Ferrari gets stuck in the slow lane, condemned to drive 1,000 Interstate miles at 24 mph in the rain. The sounds and stings of a solitary mosquito keep you awake all night. Your next-door neighbor has a very loud party, and you are not invited.

In other words, an eternity of minor annoyances. Just enough to get under your skin and distract you from any productive use of your remaining faculties. The little things that bother you now will be there to irk you in perpetuity. Never mind those heavenly choirs, all you will hear is bad karaoke and bubble gum ballads. Lady of Spain on the accordion. Mantovani renditions of Grateful Dead covers.

In this understated inferno, your ballpoint pen skips constantly, making your memoirs look like Morse code. No matter how trivial the activity, you will miss the mark. How appropriate, for the Hebrew word for sin (chait) refers to an arrow missing the mark. It's enough to try the patience of a saint, but they won't be there.

This kinder, gentler hell will be an agony without term limits, but it will meet new federal guidelines for prisoner abuse.

Tim O'Toole of Albany got his theological training at Fordham University. (* He meant Limbo.)