


Hell: Educationally in post-secular societies

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Many countries around the world, including Australia, have secularism expressed in their identity. However, as these secular nations (as they understand themselves) shift into post-secular societies, it raises questions around the place and content of religious education and instruction in secular settings: particularly in regard to the shadow side of theological views, such as on the matter of hell. Acknowledging the valuable contribution religious education offers by providing a space for children to question and search for meaning, how or indeed should hell be taught to children in public (secular) schools?

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: In the context of the secular and/or non-religious public reflex in society, there is a tension on the place of religious thought in secular educational settings. As scrutiny increases of what, and how, religious material is shared and taught, especially to children, the role and place of hell in this space must be reviewed. This study provides a basis for Practical Theology in post-secular societies, utilising the Australian context, to do so.

Keywords: hell; religious education; post-secular; spiritual abuse; spirituality.

Introduction

Western culture today has clearly moved away from the model of Christendom and towards secularism; yet the desire for spiritual and religious guidance and learning is still present: perhaps more sought after and stronger than ever before (Smith & Denton 2009:28). Western societies have begun exploring the benefits of religious education; looking at how religious education can contribute to a creative primary curriculum that develops young people as successful learners, confident individuals and responsible citizens (Erricker, Lowndes & Bellchambers 2010:1).

Studies in Europe and Britain have challenged earlier research linking the teaching of religion to increased prejudice; instead revealing that children with some religious education are actually more tolerant than those who have not received such teaching. Such studies also revealed that the study of religion helps to develop inclusive attitudes towards cultural difference (Erricker et al. 2010:1). As such, educational programmes are being implemented in Britain and France to continue exploring the social benefit claims of multi-faith world religion and beliefs studies, although Australia has a reticence to do so. In Australia, it is argued that education in or about religion raises difficult questions for plural democracies (Byrne 2009:26). This, however, leads to potentially uninformed methods of teaching on matters that have adverse effects on a child's spiritual development.

In the current debates around religious education in some areas of the Western world, while criticising the deficits of conventional religious education as being too cognitive, the new awareness that religion can use more active methods of learning has led to a wide-ranging pedagogic and didactic discourse (Zee & Lovat 2012:19). This discourse is beginning to show how religion, as a part of the classroom environment, can provide the richest sources of information and understanding of other minds, guide and instruct people on how to live, function and inter-relate in a world of multiple forms and to provide the best foundation for a child's ultimate life choices (Zee & Lovat 2012:99).

The fact that children can obviously contemplate religious ideas has real-world ramifications. This is evidenced in their 'understandings of other minds, their biases to detect agency, their purpose-based explanations of origins, their dualistic notions of death, their acceptance of non-natural causality, and their spiritual emotions and experiences' (Erricker, Lowndes, & Bellchambers 2010:16).

While accepting that secularisation has marginalised the importance of religion, a child's ability to form religious concepts is important. Therefore, it is a field of study, regardless of one's

ontological views: both to religious educators, and those who worry that religious education is religious indoctrination. In New South Wales (Australia) government primary schools, one may say that special Religious Education (SRE) acts as the *de facto* Religious Education programme (Firth 2022:79).

Secularism

The word 'secular' comes out of the Latin *saecularis*, [generation age] and was used in Christian Latin to denote people, activities or a period considered to be worldly or non-religious (Stelten 1995:236). Yet there are many more impulses from and on religion that are alive in these societies (such as when people, who identify themselves as religiously non-adherent in surveys, at times pray) (Lombaard 2018:3), even though these impulses are often unacknowledged.

Secularism was viewed as an alternative worldview to religion (Wilson 2020:12) and proposed an optimistic and positive view of secular progress to replace it (Iversen 2013). As the religious and secular paradigms began to change in society, religion came to be associated with such negative connotations as diminished attendance and affiliation, antiquated ritual and obligatory adherence, while secularists promoted science: endorsing it as offering more accepted truths. They did so because both religion and science make claims about reality that rest on 'truth statements' about the universe. Religion, as a construct, differs from science by also apportioning morality, purpose and meaning (Coyne 2021), whereas secularists were able to promote science based on the idea of 'scientific objectivity': the idea that scientific claims, methods, results and even the scientists themselves are not prejudiced or manipulated by 'particular perspectives, value judgments, community bias or personal interests' (Reiss & Sprenger 2020). The idea was that religious claims are subjective (Courtois 2011:27), while scientific claims, being objective, faithfully explained and correctly described some aspect of, or facts about, the world, and that it was 'the task of scientists to discover, analyse, and systematize these facts' (Reiss & Sprenger 2020). Although secularisation separated religion from public life, it did not provide satisfactory or acceptable answers and responses to human needs (Ebejer 2018:5).

Today, our communities are trying to make sense of diverse and distinctive manifestations and revelatory moments of the divine that they encounter or are challenged by. Across various disciplines including Anthropology, Architecture, Art History, Biblical Spirituality, Communication Studies, Medicine and Musicology, changes are occurring that reveal new sensitivities and awareness around spirituality and religion (Firth 2022:107). This is leading to an increased interest in religions: ancient, new and alternative. This Implicit Religion is so conscious of, and receptive to, the experience of faith commitments (the fundamental measure of validity in the emergent post-secular context), a post-secular environment moves us past the closed secularist suppositions and assumptions and enables us to see faith active in society (Lombaard 2016:260).

Religious education offers a space to question

Each question a person thinks or asks, and the answers such questioning may elicit, is unique to the moment in time they are asked. A space for questioning is like a shared, collective wisdom that everyone can take part in (Dawson 1996:8). While this space is not boundless (as it is bound by the horizon of the question asked), it is only unbound because the answer is unresolved and awaits a conclusive or critical answer by the asker (Wierciński 2011:259). It is through questioning that we develop meaning, as meaning is socially constructed 'out of interaction between human beings and their world' (Crotty 1998:42). It is through such questions, and the responses one receives, that create new ways of understanding and thinking, which in turn reframed the paradigm by which a person's chosen answers become their reality (Leiviskä 2015:581). This is a part of our spirituality: a defining component of the personality of an individual from birth to death (Kurjak & Chervenak 2006:167) and gives a sense of connection to something bigger than ourselves, essentially helping us answer the questions: where do I personally find meaning, connection and value?

A space for questioning within the classroom enables children to explore questions about their beliefs and perceptions of God, themselves, their world and others: while allowing them to choose their own answers to such questions. This enables healthy growth and development in their spirituality; for spirituality generally involves a cognitive framework and perspective that empowers people to make sense of 'a broad range of experiences, and to find meaning and significance in them' (Watts 2011:172). As such, to understand meaning is to acknowledge it as the answer to a question, for the structure of questioning is embedded in all experience: 'we cannot have experiences without asking questions. Recognizing that an object is different, and not as we first thought, obviously presupposes the question whether it was this or that' (Gadamer 2006:368).

Two stories from the research by Firth (2022) into SRE, the *de facto* Religious Education programme in New South Wales Government primary schools show how Anglican SRE is sometimes experienced as a pathway that leads students to be open and want to explore questioning that may be previously closed to them:

As a child I never had a lot or any real opportunity to ask my parents about God, and was brushed aside whenever I asked if God was real. It was also a real struggle to be able to get my parents to sign my consent form to allow me to go to Scripture as a child in year 6. I can remember sitting in the room and a lovely lady would come in once a week and tell us about the stories in the bible through the use of puppets. This was a great way to get everyone's attention and she would always give us a chance to ask as many questions as we liked at the end of the Scripture. This meant a lot to me as I got to ask the questions I never got to ask or was afraid to ask my parents. [What has remained with me from my SRE experience is] having the chance to ask questions freely and being answered truthfully. This was also a

very important time for me to learn about Christianity since I had no real opportunity at home to ask either of my parents about what is meant to be a Christian. SRE gave me some confidence in choosing to be religious at all [Danielle, 20, F, 06]. (Firth 2022:167)

Danielle's experience encapsulates the importance and benefit of a space for question that Religious Education (in any form) offers. It was in the space for questioning provided by SRE that Danielle was able to have a space for her questions to finally find meanings: after all this space was even able to include her past questions as well as the answers others had given, such as by her parents even in their silence (Gadamer 2006:294). Another participant in the research by Firth (2022), Dylan, told a similar story to illustrate what had most remained with him about his SRE experiences and what aspect resonated with him:

I remember asking the SRE teacher about hell and they weren't allowed to talk about hell but I didn't know that until much later and she said that hell was the opposite of heaven and heaven was where God is and hell is where God is not... Understanding what humans are and what our end will be, like where we're going [Dylan, 23, M, 03]. (Firth 2022:170–171).

Dylan recalls experiencing a space for questioning, a space where answers were given that allowed him as a questioner to create his own meaning from the answers given. Part of his experience was the inclusion of information from a later date that gave additional weight to the authenticity of the teacher not closing down his space for questioning (eds. Kizel & Lee 2016:3). This space for questioning gave access for exploring the meaning of life and the reality of death: a topic of times avoided in Western educational settings. This enabled Dylan to look at questions about the *death of other* and also the question of *death of self*: that is, the question of a point in time where he would no longer exist in the world. 'Being towards this possibility, as a Being which exists, is brought face to face with the absolute impossibility of existence' (Heidegger 1962:299). A reality of being in this world is that at some point we will be faced with our own mortality ('it is appointed for people to die once') (Heb 9:27).

Yet while Religious Education (in any form) can offer such a positive space, this must also be monitored for poor teaching skills, inappropriate information and coercive language as evidenced by times when children had been told: 'that Hindus are "cows"', or 'that not reading the Bible daily results in damnation to hell' (Byrne 2009:32).

Threats and fear in a space to question

Not all the responses in Firth's research (2022) were positive. One respondent, Brit, raised questions about 'threats and fear':

I remember once being told by a woman that if I didn't go to church regularly then I would go to hell... They should stop the threats and fear. I think the problem though is that whatever they teach them, is I wonder how relevant it is to them and relate to them [Brit, 20, F 06]. (Firth 2022:175).

What is concerning is that this statement came from someone who had in more recent years participated in SRE and also that this one memory triggered such a response to her interpretation of SRE in general, which is a strong indicator of a reaction to memories of a past traumatic experience. This highlights the concern that religious groups and people have used the threat of hell to terrify, manipulate and control believers (and potential believers) for a significant length of time (Barash 2020:38). When healthy and positive formation of a person does not occur, one becomes unable to look beyond the self and raise their horizons towards something universal: from which their own particular being is determined in measure and proportion. When students are unable to ask questions and have a real space for questioning, then their horizons are diminished. There are unknown effects of the shadow cast by a fear and threat of hell on Brit's life and also on how she views herself and her place in God's great story and indeed even as to how she perceives herself and her actions as good or evil as a consequence of this.

This threat of hell to terrify, manipulate and control believers (and potential believers) has been a tool used to force a particular mindset and worldview onto others for some time, and this story plays out across societies:

When I was twenty-six, I found out I was going to hell. Young, impressionable, and without a strong faith, I listened intently as the pastor of a church I was visiting described in graphic detail the torturous, unquenchable flames that would burn human bodies – including, I presumed, mine – forever and ever. He spoke of worms eating away at decaying flesh, total darkness without the presence of God, and worst of all, no release from those horrors for all eternity. I certainly didn't want to be one of those unfortunate many to feel the flames licking at my feet soon after leaving life in this world. So I took out the proper fire insurance and asked Jesus to save me from my sins and, therefore, from eternal torment in hell. (Baker 2014:39).

However, in New South Wales (Australia), Brit's teacher may have been acting entirely in accordance with the Anglican SRE curriculum in introducing hell as it is not banned from discussion. This question is specifically raised in an Anglican Volunteer SRE Teacher Orientation Information Booklet under the heading: *What If A Child Asks About A Contentious Issue Such As Creationism Or Hell?:*

You should avoid focusing on violence, evil spirits or hell in your lessons. Some children genuinely want to know about these things, as they hear adults talking about them, while others might be trying to 'stir' or get attention. In terms of the heaven/hell question, the short answer is that it's not anyone's place to decide who goes to heaven or hell – that's up to God. (Volunteer SRE Teacher Orientation Information 2015:11)

This does not give teachers of SRE firm limitations, clear theological resources or studies to define appropriate discourse on evil or hell: let alone with children. This problem is further exacerbated by the fact that SRE lessons skirt close to the shadow of hell. This can be seen in the focus of the lessons from Term 1 unit: *God is our Creator who loves us and saves us* (from the A1): *Knowing God our Creator* (SRE lessons [2019]):

'Duration: Term 1 (1–10 weeks)

Focus: These lessons will help students to understand how we learn about God through the Bible and how God provided a way for us to know him. Each lesson will encourage students to understand that from the beginning, God had good plans for his world and created people to rule it obediently. God holds people accountable for rejecting his ways, yet also provides the way for people to be saved from the consequences of this rejection. For all who trust in God's salvation there is the promise of a renewed relationship with God forever.'

If SRE teachers are not trained to carefully engage with children in a healthy and appropriate conversation about life, death, the afterlife, there will always be the danger that these lessons will lead children to ask the question about hell and be given unhealthy, inappropriate or damaging answers to such questions (Carter Andrews et al. 2018:205). This further raises the concern about hell being brought into conversation with developing minds: particularly those of young children.

Research by Chalwell, Horarik and Noone (2015) included topics that looked at the issue of presenting Christian ideas of hell and after-life consequences of not accepting Jesus to children and/or students. Their research flagged an underlying issue being that SRE lessons are informed by sacred text, and sacred text is neither designed to be a curriculum for Religious Education nor a book designed as a set text (De Castell 1990:111). How the truths contained within this sacred text are interpreted, and how they should be taught appear differently for each SRE teacher (Chalwell et al. 2015:125). Data collected from SRE teachers revealed how some avoided certain texts and topics, whereas others felt the need to teach those topics as part of SRE:

Joshua reveals a careful consideration of what should and should not be taught in SRE. This may be because he understands that as a guest in the school there are some aspects of his faith that may be less acceptable to the hosts, or he may consider it inappropriate content for the students that he is teaching. Either way, he is wary about the appropriateness in this context of some aspects of his faith. This wariness makes him potentially vulnerable as he teaches the truth as he understands it; especially if a student directly asks him what he thinks about the devil. Joshua counters his earlier claim when he says that; "I might have discussed [the devil] with the sixth graders because they were asking questions, there would be no withdrawal, I would call a spade a spade, I say you can believe this or you can't, I believe this and the facts that I know are those. (Chalwell et al. 2015:126)

The fact that the understanding of the SRE teacher reinforces how they exchange knowledge and skills in an educational context affirms the concern of how healthy (or unhealthily) such topics are being presented and enforced.

Hell: What is it?

The idea of hell arises out of thought processes linked to the idea of good and evil. The quest for motive and a search for exceptional categories of motive, as in *evil* or *good* are present from the earliest civilisations and written records of the Ancient Near East (Kitts 2017:165): the context out of which

the Hebrew Bible itself emerges. These emerged both as qualities of actions and of persons. After all, in a theistic society that understands a deity as *good*, and who is present with the power to bless and heal, then where does evil, sickness and death come from and why do these affect those whom claim relationship with such a deity? (Brown 2021:3). And, once one begins down this thought process: how does one conceive of such a deity in relation to an increasingly ambivalent experience of the world? (Late & De Moor 2000:3). Answering and seeking answers to these questions is a part of the human condition.

Judaism says very little about either heaven or hell, but Judaism does contain numerous cases of divine retribution: usually as a consequence of human behaviour, for in Jewish thought, generally the *evil inclination* is in humanity (Smith 2021:95). This can be seen in the expulsion from Eden for the disobedience of Adam and Eve (Gn. 3:14-24); the flood imposed because of the wickedness of the human race whose every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil (Gn 6–7); the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah because of their wickedness (Gn 19:23–29). There is a clear dualism in experience: there is an evil side to nature and human life (Caldwell 1913:29). Indeed, these divine actions more closely define their understanding in the idea the Ancient Near Eastern *mythos* of creation: a *mythos* that originates from the idea that humans are (in some sense), in a world composed of opposing (and challenging) powers of good and evil: where there is a god of good and a rival evil force. God's rival is how Satan was originally conceived of in these cultures: with the emergence of this figure in early Judaism from ancient Near Eastern influence (Huber 2011). The earliest version of the word *satan* (as far as the linguistic archaeologists have been able to discover), is *Shatan*. It does not mean an evildoer or demon, but simply *adversary* (Caldwell 1913:32).

The written records of the Ancient Near East express the fundamental conviction that it is only *experience* that can really teach us about evil and its meanings: such as in the Epic of Gilgamesh, where Gilgamesh, a wise and brave man (Gilgamesh, the lord of kullab, who performs heroic deeds for Inanna) (Pritchard 2016:37), is tormented by the problem of evil and the reality of human suffering. This interpretation and the origins of good-evil and/or God-satan dualism in the Ancient Near East was first picked up in biblical literature in the book of Job. Within the story of Job, we see an attempt to use an individual's experiences to try and help answer deep and profound questions around divine justice, suffering of the innocent and retribution (Bullock 2007:82). This seeking of such answers plays out in the physical and emotional suffering of a man named Job (the protagonist to whom the story is named after) and how people around him attempt to justify and assist Job in answering these questions (Atkinson 1991:9).

The story opens showing Job living in the land of Uz as a prosperous, wealthy man with a comfortable life and a large

family. The story then shifts to a heavenly realm, giving the reader the ability to see a parallel reality where Yahweh and a heavenly host engage far from the prying eyes of mortals. This scene reintroduces Job as a man of exemplary faith and piety, 'blameless and upright', 'fearing God and avoiding evil' (Job 1:8). Here Yahweh asks Satan for his opinion of Job's piety. This Satan advances and then poses the question of whether there is such a thing as disinterested righteousness: after all, if Yahweh rewards righteousness with prosperity, will people not simply act righteously out of selfish reasons? (Job 1:9–10). Satan asks Yahweh to test this by removing the prosperity of Job: the most righteous of all God's servants (Walton 2008:336). Yahweh gives Satan permission to take away Job's wealth and material comforts. Flowing from this scene, Job then experiences a complete reversal of being a prosperous, wealthy man with a comfortable life and a large family. Job nonetheless praises God: 'naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I go back again. Yahweh gave, and Yahweh has taken away; blessed be the name of Yahweh' (Job 1:21). This statement also shows a theological understanding from the Ancient Near East¹ and should be understood in light of the Egyptian idea of death as a *return* to the womb of the mother goddess (Hays 2012:607). Indeed, it is proposed that the substructure of the Egyptian tomb was designed to be the uterus of the Mother Goddess Nut:

[S]ubstructure of the Egyptian tomb is imitating the female genitalia. The so-called false-door is just a stony representation of the human valva. The long corridors of the tomb are a representation of the human vagina. Death in ancient Egypt could be defined as a return to the uterus i.e. a state of latent life. (Hussein 2001:25)

The imagery of death as a return to a goddess' womb is also a typical motif in Ancient Egyptian funerary texts (Assmann 2005:165): such as the image of the goddess Nut as the one who gives birth to the deceased king as her son 'Nut, this Osiris here is your son, whom you have made revive and live.' (Allen 2005:35). The 'constellation of coffin and corpse as the union of mother and child' (Assmann 2005:166) is further seen in the outer sarcophagus of Merneptah (13th c. New Kingdom):

I am your mother, who nurses your beauty,
I am pregnant with you in the morning,
and I deliver you as Re in the evening.
I carry you, you being on my back,
I elevate your mummy, my arms under you,
I continually take your beauty into myself.
When you enter me, I embrace your image,
I am the coffin that shelters your mysterious form. (Assmann 2005:166)

The imagery of the earth as the womb from which the sea 'burst out' is touched on again later in the creation context of

1. In the Sumerian story *Enki and Ninmah*, the lesser gods, burdened with the toil of creating the earth, complained about their hard work to the primeval mother Namma. So, she roused Enki, her son, the god of wisdom and urged him to create a substitute to free the gods from their toil. Namma then kneaded some clay, placed it in her womb and gave birth to the first humans.

Job 38:8 reinforcing a common biblical and Ancient Near Eastern trope of God's cosmogonic battle with the Sea (see: *Enuma Elish* [Babylonian]; *Baal's battle with Yām* [Ugaritic]).

As God is just, Job's friends see his suffering and assume he must be guilty of some wrongdoing. Job, knowing he is innocent, concludes that God must be unjust. He retains his piety throughout the story, seen in Job's response as he sits in ashes, and his wife prompts him to 'curse God and die', to which he says: 'We accept good things from God; and should we not accept evil?' (Job 2:9–10). This contradicts the Satan's suspicion that Job's righteousness is because of the expectation of reward. Job does make clear that he agrees with his friends that God should and does reward righteousness.

Sheol: The land of the dead

Throughout this story, Job understood his afflictions as being only relevant while among the living: while he is alive. Literally, Job cries out to God for restoration from his state of suffering to a state of peace. In death, he will become, like all others who die and have died: 'hidden' from all afflictions of the earth. In the graves' state of non-life, all punishment, feeling and suffering were eliminated (Caldwell 1913:29).

Sheol is a dark place, dusty, earthy place (Job 17), far beneath the earth (Job 11). All who died, good and bad, went to Sheol, where they existed as shades, carrying on in a faded and grimmer version of everyday life (Taylor 2000:322). Rewards, in the form of divine blessing, come through progeny: the gift of children, to continue one's house and name (Campbell 2022). The Book of Job challenges the belief and idea that God uses retributive justice to reward virtue and punish vice. This parallels life. In the everyday world, reward and suffering are demonstrably unmerited and are not an indication of the moral and virtue standing of the individual (Brueggemann 2002:201). It raises the idea that there is not only a force of good that gives abundance and blessing but also a force of evil that seeks to take or destroy abundance and blessing (Crețu 2022:169).

As such we see a battle for good and evil: both in people and the world, but there is no concept of each force dwelling in an afterlife. Characters in this story do not ever learn about the wager that occurred in heaven between God and the Satan in the opening scenes. Instead the fight concerning good and evil is fought by choices people make. This calls one to ponder: am I of the good or the evil? To know which one serves, and irrespective, and in spite of, how people are acting and fighting out this battle, it is for good (godly) people to be relentless in their opposition to injustice and innocent suffering, wherever it appears and not be silent in the sight of wrong, but protest and call it out (Balentine 2021:210).

Shift with Zoroastrianism

The idea of an exciting afterlife occurred after the end of the Babylonian captivity in the 7th c. BCE, starting 597 BCE when Zoroastrian ideas begin taking root in Judaism. These ideas had become prevalent and commonplace by the time of the

Maccabean crisis in the 2nd century BCE. It was these Zoroastrian ideas that led to an alteration of Jewish ideas about the afterlife. This included a belief in an apocalyptic judgement by God at the end of time and a resurrection for those found to be righteous (Taylor 2000:323). This shift, seen in the Book of Enoch, morphs Sheol from a ubiquitous realm of all the dead into an afterlife divided ethically into regions as an envisaged way of resolving an unjust world (Trueman 2020), where the elect rise again to have light, joy, peace and inherit the earth (1 En 5:7). This would later morph even further into separate afterlives: with the elect, the godly, moving high above the earth and into Heaven; with the un-elect, the evil, remaining in Sheol deep under the earth and this place becoming heavily embellished with fire and brimstone as a place of eternal punishment.

Eternal punishment

A focus on New Testament literature draws attention to a growing focus on God's retributive predisposition: 'Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him' (Jn 3:36) and 'Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience' (Eph 5:6). This draws a stark contrast as to what one can expect after this life. Those who do not live a godly life clearly face this retribution and a place in *Gehenna* (oftenimes translated as Hell).

In Jerusalem, below the Old City walls, there is a ravine that starts off as a gentle, grassy, between hills before quickly descending south into the rocky earth. This ravine eventually becomes a steep, rocky penetration, shallow caves and pits (pockmarked by hollowed-out chambers and narrow crypts) mar its far side. Scorches and smoulder from trash fires are everywhere. This is the Valley of the Sons of Hinnom: *Gei Ben Hinnom*. This was shortened to Valley of Hinnom (*Ge Hinnom*) and ultimately became *Gehenna* in English (Raphael 2001:430). The Hinnom clan (a non-Jewish family) predated the First Temple period and established the locale as a place of abomination. Deep angular cuts into the flat scorched stone held the pagan altars known as *Tophet*: roasting place (Gilmour 2019:64). *Tophet* altars are named for the noisy drum that devotees of the god Molech would beat to drown out the ghastly cries of the tormented screams of babies and children immolated, burned alive, in sacrifice in front of their own willing parents: including some of the kings of Judah who chanted macabre incantations in gruesome celebration at the spectacle (Jr 7:31). Because of this, the prophet Jeremiah cursed the spot (Jr 19:2-6).

During the time of the Roman occupation that frames the events and development of New Testament and early Christian writings, crucifixion had become commonplace (Halperin 1981:36). If a crucifix was required for another victim, then Roman soldiers, if they had not been given prior instructions regarding the body, would remove the previous crucified victim from the crucifix and lug them to *Gehenna*, where their carcass would be callously thrown onto the

Jerusalem's rubbish heaps, covered with sulphur powder, and left to rot and burn (Kroonenberg 2013:18). As such, the Hellish images of unending torture and fire as punishment for an evil life draws much of its visage from this hideous acreage; *Gehenna*, a place where both the body and soul could be destroyed (Mt 10:28) in 'unquenchable fire' (Mk 9:43). *Gehenna* also happens to be just a short walk from the path of righteousness that leads to the Temple Mount: marking a clear parallel between good and evil (Bernstein 2017:243). This visage, and the threats of being sent to such a place, grew and developed in story and imagery throughout the Middle Ages (Foucault 2003:30) and left a lasting, indelible impression on the teaching and preaching of hellfire and damnation (Yoder 2003:54).

The fact that religiously we have changed our views, understanding, expression and focus of the afterlife and hell, means that have both the ability and precedent to do so in future.

The effects of Hellish teaching

The reason religious groups utilise the teaching of hell is that it encourages and coerces people to remain a member of the faith community so that they can avoid the fate of those who turn away from God and do not accept God's love: eternal damnation and suffering (Świeczarz 2019:210). This has led to allegations that religion is predominantly and centrally fear based (Russell 1927). This allegation arises from the fact that threats of eternal damnation in hell psychologically play on the instinctual human fears and terrors of the unknown; the human fear and sometimes phobia of, death and dismemberment; and the anxiety inducing concern of a loss of identity (Westcamp 2020:115). Ultimately, a reality is that fear, guilt and hate are heavily interwoven and out of this cruelty is born (Jones 1929:383). This realisation goes some way to contextualising the amount of cruelty and abuse perpetuated by religious groups throughout history (Harvey & Woodhead 2022:80).

Teaching and promoting the threat of hell has deep psychological effects on people. The impact of certain religious words, such as punishment and damnation, has been found to influence people's social behaviours and attitudes even if they do not realise it (Yilmaz & Bahçekapili 2016:79). Studies have shown that people are less likely to cheat in games if they believe in retributive gods (Shariff & Norenzayan 2007:803). This is because having come to accept and/or believe in the existence of invisible supernatural entities that have a fixated interest in morality, they may be relentlessly and incessantly watching and judging and with the power to punish with hellfire and eternal torment in this world and in the afterlife, one must be on guard and hypervigilant at all times (Johnson 2005:410).

Spiritual abuse is currently an underexamined phenomenon: particularly manifested by the limited research that explores the subjective, internal event. Although there is minimal research into the effects of teaching about hell, especially to

children, and none of that research is supportive of such an idea (Stephenson & Piven 2015:127–145). Instead such research raises the view that teaching children to believe in hell as a real, horrific place to which they might be sent by God, is not only be intellectually irresponsible but immoral and a form of abuse (Dawkins 2002:9): albeit a form of abuse in which the effects are not immediately evident in the way that, for instance, physical abuse is. However, spiritual abuse is a complex, multidimensional and profound experience that is both process and event: distressing the biological, psychological, social and spiritual domains of a person (Ward 2011:899). Spiritual abuse is:

The act of making people believe – whether by stating or merely implying – that they are going to be punished in this life and/or tormented in hell-fire forever for failure to live life good enough to please God and thus earn admission to heaven. (Purcell 1998:227)

Abuse including spiritual abuse causes trauma (Ellis et al. 2022). The impact and outcomes of trauma are significant. The behavioural consequence of the spiritual abuse that forms trauma can lead to diminished performance within personal and social realms (Woodhouse, Brown & Ayers 2018) and impact psycho-relational functioning (Price et al. 2013). Such trauma, resulting from deliberate harm, deepens depression severity and increases the chances of developing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Bell et al. 2019). Throughout childhood, contact, exposure and experience of trauma can extensively and persistently modify and adjust psychological, social and cognitive development (Hyland et al. 2017). If the trauma occurs during childhood, then the attainment of interpersonal relatedness skills is likely to be disrupted. This series of skills incorporates the yearning for affiliation, and as such, in adulthood, will result in impaired and poor, social functioning, especially for adults with psychosis (Stain et al. 2014). A further effect of the trauma created by experiencing spiritual abuse is that it increases the probability of a child growing to have diminished trust towards supportive others and may lead to rigid or intransigent negative beliefs about them or develop into an insensitivity to social rewards (Coleman 2003) and increases the risk of alcohol abuse and behavioural addictions (Konkolý Thege et al. 2017).

The threat of hell is also viewed as a potential breach of human rights:

If a religious group were to impose Hell as an exit cost upon a child member, then (providing the child believes in the actuality of the cost) such an act, if permitted by a signatory state, would most likely constitute a violation of Article 14 of the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. (Luck 2012:4)

Stephenson and Piven (2015) brought into light the reality of discussing behaviours, acts and attitudes that lead to hell:

That such acts justify the contempt of his parents, friends and all the angels in Heaven; and that he will ultimately be taunted and pricked by the devils with pitchforks for all eternity in the fires of Hell, then the child is not only being misled by questionable metaphysical notions, but is potentially being traumatized by a

host of other psychologically-masticating conflicts. (Stephenson & Piven 2015:130)

By being inculcated with the concept or image of a God or heavenly being who watches over them and sees all their mistakes and wrong doings, children can develop an intense and long-lasting dread of being watched and judged (Stark 2002:619). It also leads people to a harsher and more critical judgemental-ism of others: particularly if they could be categorised as ‘different’ in some way (Saleam & Moustafa 2016:1149). This can be seen in increased levels of covert racial prejudice and negative emotion concerning other ethnic and racial groups (Johnson, Rowatt & LaBouff 2010:119). Apart from developing negative images or views of themselves, on physical, emotional and spiritual levels, children who have been brought up with this sense of hell can also grow to despise and be angered by other people who do not have such a punitive or puritanical morality and desire to enforce this mindset onto others (Michaud 2015:160) and display an aggressive animosity towards people or groups of people who do not conform and inhibit their living and lifestyle to parallel that of those who live in a fear of eternal damnation in hell (Gereboff et al. 2009:175).

Conclusion

People, across time and cultures, search for the mystery of meaning: attempting to make sense of life, death and the universe. In the attempt to do so, holy sites have been established or built, creating architectural wonders to connect and communicate with ancestors or worship spirits; mark times and seasons: the shifting of stars; to revere and venerate deities or to honour the splendour and majesty of nature: an evocative relationship to sacred rocks, waters, forests and mountains. Religious Education and Instruction in secular settings, done well, offers children an opportunity to awaken to their own openness to questions of the meaning of their own existence and being and begin to engage in this lifelong confrontation with the question of the meaning of their own absolute impossibility of existence and death. It is clear that children need to be given the tools to understand the role of religion in the world and in their own society but from a human rights perspective, children must be protected from indoctrination from teachers of Religious Education and Instruction and the threats and coerce practices used to compel them to join or remain a member of a faith community: such as to avoid eternal damnation and suffering. Children must be protected from spiritual abuse that plays psychologically on innate instinctual fears and terrors of the unknown, of death and dismemberment and the anxiety inducing concern of a loss of identity. Such fear weaves guilt and hate together and produces cruelty. The effects of the trauma this creates are long lasting and have significant impact on the individual and community, including on how people live and engage with others.

Spiritual journeying and spiritual imagining are a part of what it means to be human. Religious Education and Instruction

provide a valuable contribution to this process through offering a space for children to question and search for meaning. There is a fundamental aspect, a magical component of Religious Education and Instruction, which takes it beyond the normalcy of a regular school subject. In the ordinariness of such lessons, there is something important conveyed. The seeds planted in these lessons, and the space provided to question and form meaning, give children a resource that will help them act, engage, interpret and then respond to the world they find themselves inhabiting. These small seeds draw people towards deeper things that give meaning to their existence. The key theological understanding of the triumph of Christian love; this story of a God who loves, should be imbedded into Religious Education and Instruction curricula, to enable children to shape a future world we could only dream of exploring.

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