Comment: *Hell*

Hell is in the news. First the Pope was reported as saying that the picture of hell as a fiery place of torment should not be taken literally; it is, rather, as the Catechism says, a 'state of definitive self-exclusion from communion with God and the blessed' that some people may choose of their own free will by dying in mortal sin. Then a couple of nuns in Colombia took pot shots in the dark at an intruder and unexpectedly killed him; acquitted of homicide, they were reported as remaining concerned that they might end in hell. Finally, the Revd Neil Ross, in the official journal of the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland, contended that Cardinal Basil Hume only feigned interest in ecumenism in order to promote Roman Catholicism across Britain and, more to the point, could not 'have Heaven as his home' since he belonged among those 'who imbibe and live by the great and Christ-dishonouring error of salvation by works rather than by faith in Christ alone'. Such people, regrettably, 'must end their days without "the good hope through grace" which true believers have'. Since 'Purgatory cannot be his abode, for that is a figment of the imagination', there is no alternative but hell.

Mr Ross stood up to outraged protests from the other churches in Scotland—the Scottish Episcopal Church ('appalled'), the Church of Scotland ('Cardinal Hume was gracious in his engagement with Christians of other traditions. No-one who met him could have been anything other than impressed by him'), and the Catholic Church ('Perhaps they are only a bit envious'). No one ventured to take on Mr Ross's theology. He denied that he was denigrating the Cardinal personally: 'I understand that the Cardinal was a warm personality and that he was well-liked'. It wasn't a matter of being a nice man; it was simply a matter of truth: 'This is all about systems. We're dealing with immortal souls here and it doesn't do to beat around the bush about such important issues. My Christian duty to all Roman Catholics is to state what the Bible says about the path to salvation'.

Mr Ross switched between two distinct issues. 'Cardinal Hume was no fool, and I believe that he skilfully exploited his public image'. As a 'politically astute operator', he sometimes 'gave the impression of pursuing an independent line' to that of the Pope—but he acted only 'with a view to advancing Rome's interests'. That prelates in the Catholic Church are, so to speak, 'Machiavellian' (though particularly absurd in Basil Hume's case), is a deeply entrenched conviction in the Protestant psyche. Furthermore, many people, including Catholics, often wonder if Rome's interests are the same as Christ's; and many also wonder about seeming ambiguities in

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Catholic support for ecumenism. But the other issue, beyond politics and inveterate anti-Catholicism, is about salvation by faith alone. It is the 'system': since they believe in meriting salvation by their own works, *no* Roman Catholic has a hope of ending anywhere but in hell.

The Free Presbyterian Church is a tiny remnant, as the outraged dismissively noted. Numbers, however, don't count, in this matter. The Church of Scotland split in 1843 (over the Church's liability to the operation of civil law), creating the Free Church. In 1900 the Free Church formed a union with the United Presbyterian Church, itself the union since 1847 of (most of) the 'New Light' Seceders (descendants of the 1733 Secession led by Ebenezer Erskine) and the 'Relief' Church (formed in 1761 by Thomas Gillespie 'for the relief of Christians oppressed in their Christian privileges' as a result of lay patronage in appointment of ministers). This created the United Free Church, which eventually united with the Church of Scotland in 1929, thus creating the present Church of Scotland. A dissenting minority in the Free Church stayed out of the union in 1900; they now constitute the Free Church—popularly called the 'Wee Frees'. No doubt small in numbers they nevertheless sustain their own theological college and the best theological book shop in Edinburgh. They should not be confused with the Free Presbyterian Church, Neil Ross's church, a breakaway in 1893 from the 'Wee Frees', in protest (amazingly) against their 'liberal' theology.

The fissiparous history of Presbyterianism in Scotland since it was finally established in 1688-89 is even more complicated than this; and the survival of tiny remnants of true believers is quite remarkable. As far as doctrine goes, both Free Church and Free Presbyterian Church are at one in regarding the Church of Scotland as hopelessly 'liberal', in doctrine and morals. They are also both hostile to ecumenism. The Free Presbyterians hold to strict Calvinism. All human works outside the Christian faith are sins; indeed even the good works of Christians are intrinsically evil, though not counted as sins since they are covered by the imputed merits of Christ. And so on. They take their stand on the Protestant doctrine of justification by grace alone, understood as an act of God effected without the co-operation on the sinner's part that they think Catholics require. A man might be a 'warm personality', 'well-liked'. They may only be a tiny minority, surviving in remote villages in the Highlands of Scotland. But their doctrine of hell—their doctrine of God—is the one that once divided Christians in the West. We may be glad that their voice is now so isolated. But it is salutary to be reminded of such doctrinal conflicts among Christians. It can only help to clarify what we do believe, about heaven and hell, about grace and sanctification.

F.K.

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