

A Case for Not Hell

A recent op-ed piece in the NYT by the columnist Ross Douthat's made "A Case for Hell"

(http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/25/opinion/25douthat.html?_r=4&hp&adxnnl=1&adxnnlx=1303732863-IWmLST9WUMwBUf4PSyQIuw) My daughter, an avowed atheist, commented "What is this even doing in the NYT? Aren't there like, things going on in the world?". She is working towards a Phd. in linguistics including a lot of study in the area of evolutionary psychology

If the relative importance of other "things going on in the world" was the only criteria for getting in the NYT, then forget whole sections on cooking, style, fashion and even sports - not to mention that linguistics wouldn't even stand a chance in "hell". If the NYT criteria is, and it is, what interests people, then religion and God, an individual's personal lack of interest notwithstanding, is way up there, as the lead in Sunday's op-ed piece makes clear. The lead, "news" is that books on these topics are perennial best sellers.

A thought, I would think, if I was an evolutionary psychologist, is why is religion so compelling for the vast majority of people? Assuming one does believe in God, the point of the article is; is the concept of hell a necessary part of that belief? A further question is; if one does not believe in god and hell what is the mechanism that determines and controls the morality, if there is such a thing, of human behavior?

Douthat's (pronounced "doubt that"?) worst assumption is not that God exists. After all most people do believe there is a God (which does not make it true). Douthat should have stated that assumption more clearly and granted that it was a belief which could not be proved or disproved one way or the other (see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/God>). His most egregious and arrogant assumption, again unstated, is that if God does exist, he/she takes an active role in human affairs. The arrogance of this assumption and most religion is that once they have stated they believe in an all powerful, omniscient, inexplicable, mysterious deity they then go on to tell us what he's thinking. And if we don't agree we will eventually be punished, i.e. hell. Or worse yet they have the right, nay the duty, to punish here and now those who believe differently.

There are a number of writers and thinkers through the ages who believe in a supreme being / creator but do not believe it takes an active interest in human affairs much less keeping a score card to determine which neighborhood one gets to spend eternity in, kind of like a celestial Department of Housing Affairs. Some writers (Karen Armstrong:

The Case for God, The Spiral Staircase; and FB Ali: Thinking About God

<http://turcopolier.typepad.com/files/thinking-about-god.doc>) posit that a supreme being designed and created the entire universe and put people in it with free will to choose their own destinies; to choose between good and evil. The laws this creator designed to govern this universe make it operate better if people do behave properly; good and evil are their own rewards. Further this God has made us the stewards of nature and our fellow man and if we would like ourselves and our progeny to continue enjoy the wondrous benefits of this creation, we will do the right thing. This concept is no more or less a “unfounded”, “scientific” or “provable” than the belief that there is no God or the religious belief in God as a micromanaging ship’s captain. It is simply an attempt to explain things as they are.

The crisis affecting the human relationship with God today is that, while too many believe too little in him, an aggressive minority believes too much. - FB Ali

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