Introducing the Theme

Though the number of Christians in Western societies is declining, many areas of our daily life are still influenced by Christian thoughts, expressions and images, sometimes without people being aware of it. This, we submit, is also the case with the idea of hell, even though Christians themselves seem to be reconsidering the doctrine. It has become a moot point to what extent hell – understood as the state of being eternally and painfully separated from God in punishment for sins committed during life on earth – is part of the biblical message. The Bible says surprisingly little about the netherworld, in either Old or New Testament. As this volume will demonstrate, there is a long distance between the more or less neutral netherworld in biblical texts, and our modern (Christian) concept of hell as a place of torture for sinners. The most widely used Dutch Bible translation (the Nieuwe Bijbelvertaling of 2004) makes this clear by not using the term ‘hell’ at all. And while the Catholic Church still asserts the real possibility of going to hell, the Magisterium does not proclaim with authority whether this possibility is ever actualised.¹

Despite the fact that Christian belief in the reality of hell is wavering, representations of hell abound in modern daily life. Classic depictions of hell that have had a lasting influence include La Divina Comedia by Dante Alighieri (fourteenth century) and William Blake’s The Marriage of Heaven and Hell (1790). Various aspects of these representations have left traces in today’s modern culture. In literature and film, hell functions as an unearthly place² where sinners are punished for ever. Films such as What Dreams May Come (1998) and Sin Noticias de Dios (2001) also paint a picture of hell, the former as a doomed place full of negative experiences and feelings, the latter as a maximum


² For obvious reasons, contemporary theology and Church doctrine do not insist that hell is a place. Pope John Paul II: ‘Rather than a place, hell indicates the state of those who freely and definitively separate themselves from God’ (Catechesis referred to in the previous footnote).
security prison where gangs make each other’s life a misery. And among video games, *Doom 3* (2007) and *Dante’s Inferno* (2010, which are of course based on Dante’s Divine Comedy) can be cited, where nightmarish monsters torture the poor souls.³

Many expressions containing the word ‘hell’ are still used today as well. ‘Go to hell’ is used to express severe dissatisfaction with one’s interlocutor. ‘When hell freezes over’ means a powerful ‘never ever’. And when someone’s back is giving him hell, it really hurts. When you work like hell, you work extremely hard. And when you scare the hell out of someone, the subject of your action is probably not going to be very grateful for it. ‘Hell’ has a negative connotation in all these idiomatic expressions. The word ‘hell’ can be used as a swearword, to add emotional emphasis to questions, e.g. when some asks ‘where the hell have you been?’ instead of ‘where have you been?’ It is often best to avoid such hellish terms, but the road to hell is paved with good intentions.

The present volume is not about hell in general or its influence on contemporary culture, but about Christ’s descent into hell as it appears in the Apostles’ Creed. ‘He descended into hell,’ the Apostles’ Creed professes. But what are Christians who recite this Creed supposed to believe in when they profess their faith in the descent into hell? Or, to put the same question more poignantly, what is at stake if people deny the descent? Would it make any difference if we did *not* believe in the descent? What does the term ‘hell’ mean in this context? Is ‘hell’ a dark hole in the earth, without any light, that sarcastically describes the non-existence of the dead as shades? Is ‘hell’ a fiery place of never-ending torture for those who have led unreconciled lives? And, whatever hell may be, what business did Jesus Christ have there? Whom did he visit there, and why? What are the sources of belief in the descent? How did the early Church interpret this belief? What influence has this article of faith had on contemporary theology and culture?

2 Why the Apostles’ Creed? Why the Descent into Hell?

This volume is intended as the first in a series that explores theological questions that arise from the Apostles’ Creed. Why the Apostles’ Creed? And why start with the descent into hell? To begin with the first question, we must start

---

³ For more information about the influence of hell on contemporary culture, see Frank G. Bosman (ed.), *Hemel en hel: Beelden van het hiernamaals in het westers christendom* (Heeswijk: Abdij van Berne, 2012).