

Can We Say That Anyone Is Definitely ‘Rotting in Hell’?

Many people, even non-believers, know that “canonizing” somebody means naming them a saint. It’s the (Catholic or Orthodox) Church proclaiming—usually after an elaborate process of investigation requiring evidence of miracles as well as holiness—that their souls are in heaven.

But nobody has ever been canonized to hell. The Church does not consider herself authorized to say that anybody in particular has suffered that fate.

Oddly, that doesn’t stop individuals, including many non-Christians, from doing it themselves. There’s a lesson in that.

The latest example comes in the headline of the *New York Post*’s [story about Charles Manson](#), who died in a California prison on Sunday at the age of 83. The headline read: “Charles Manson is rotting in hell.”



Manson’s name is all too familiar to older Americans, and to neo-Nazis of all ages (he wore a swastika tattoo between his eyes). A lifelong, incorrigible criminal with considerable charisma, he formed a mini-cult around himself in the late 60s, eventually directing his followers to kill seven people involved with Hollywood as an act of revenge against the music and show-business industries that had spurned him.

The discussions online—at least the few I’ve seen—would indicate that most people who know about Manson approve of canonizing him to hell. That’s in keeping with what’s become a virtual truism among those who believe there is a hell: Adolf Hitler and a few other historic villains, along perhaps with

an assortment of lesser-known pedophiles and serial killers like Manson, just *have to* be there.

But can people really know such a thing? Most would admit they don't, but are still quite prepared to say something of the form: "If anybody is in hell, X has to be there." It's worth asking why.

Traditional believers hold that hell is the pain of everlasting separation from God. The more sophisticated among them understand that hell is not an arbitrary punishment inflicted by a super-ogre who's angry that certain people spurned his rules while they lived. Hell is for people *who would rather be there* than give and receive authentic love. In effect, the damned damn themselves.

You might think that the people often thought to be in hell are like that. And perhaps they are. But the Church also holds, sensibly enough, that we cannot know that.

For one thing, we do not know how culpable anybody is for their refusal to love, and thus for their surrender to hate. Aversive early experience, mental illness, or even diabolical possession can cripple people's capacity to love without that being their fault. If they aren't culpable, then their wills are not altogether given over to evil.

Does that mean that no truly nasty human being is ever culpable for their character? Of course not. There's quite enough evidence that some people overcome the aforementioned spiritual handicaps to become outstanding human beings. So, to a certain extent, choice plays a role here. It is quite possible to choose, freely, to become incorrigibly evil.

But even bad choices needn't be thought entirely culpable. Many sin out of ignorance or bad conditioning rather than malice. But our natural revulsion against acts of egregious evil makes many of us unwilling to grant that as a live possibility. We just want to lash out and "give those

_____s what they deserve.” Often we don’t want to forgive. We think that would be unjust as well as naïve.

But that overlooks the possibility that divine mercy can be both effective in itself and compatible with justice. It can be effective insofar as the sinner reacts to it with gratitude and repentance. It can be compatible with justice not only in that way, but also when it’s rejected. For mercy rejected only adds to the inner torture of being evil.

Not acknowledging that possibility is a problem in ordinary life as well as bad theology.