

POPE FRANCIS ON THE TOPIC

The Vatican communications department has been working overtime the past few weeks. First, its chief communications secretary, Dario Vigano, resigned under pressure after the Vatican admitted to doctoring a photo of a letter from Pope Benedict XVI to bolster Francis's conservative credentials. Now, they're scrambling to contextualize a remark attributed to Pope Francis by an Italian journalist at the newspaper La Repubblica that hell does not exist. Speaking to the newspaper's founder, journalist and atheist Eugenio Scalfari, Francis was quoted as saying of those who die in a state of mortal sin: "They are not punished. Those who repent obtain God's forgiveness and take their place among the ranks of those who contemplate him, but those who do not repent and cannot be forgiven disappear. A hell doesn't exist, the disappearance of sinning souls exists."

If the Pope indeed said those words, the consequences would be catastrophic for the Catholic Church, which — according to its own catechism — "affirms the teaching of hell and its eternity," including "eternal fire," although it stresses that the "The chief punishment of hell is eternal separation from God."

The Vatican immediately critiqued Scalfari's account, saying the quotes in the article were not "a faithful transcription of the Holy Father's words." This is not the first time Scalfari — an avowed atheist — has published a controversial statement attributed to Pope Francis, only for the Vatican to walk it back. Francis's continued relationship with Scalfari, despite these controversies, says as much about Francis's unorthodox approach to the media as it does about Francis's theology.

Scalfari — a longtime friend and intellectual sparring partner of Pope Francis — has frequently boasted of his unorthodox interviewing methods. Scalfari neither uses a recording device, nor does he take notes. Rather, he reconstructs his conversations with the pope from memory, something that has gotten Scalfari into hot water with the Vatican in the past. In a 2013 interview with Scalfari, the pope dismissed attempts at converting non-Catholics to the faith as "solemn nonsense" and said "there is no Catholic God" The Vatican subsequently quietly removed the text of the interview from its website, where it typically features all papal interviews. In 2015, Scalfari reported that Francis wondered aloud if sinners would be "annihilated" instead of damned. (The Vatican denied the quotes should be considered "official texts," because they had not been recorded, and did not feature the exchange on their website.)

In a separate conversation Scalfari attributed to Francis the idea that "all the divorced who asked for the Eucharist would be admitted." a statement which the Vatican promptly denied had ever been made. (Francis has long quietly advocated for divorced and remarried Catholics to be able to receive the Eucharist, something Church teaching currently forbids). **Pope Francis's relationship with Scalfari has made life difficult for the Vatican communications department**

The question of whether Francis did indeed imply there is no hell is, therefore, subordinate to a bigger question: Why does Francis repeatedly engage in interviews with Scalfari, only to later say Scalfari misquotes his words? Catholic columnist Ross Douthat, whose *To Change the Church: Pope Francis and the future of Catholicism*, came out this week, interprets Francis's friendship with Scalfari as a kind of "back door" form of information dissemination. By speaking to Scalfari, Douthat notes, Francis can explore (and, to an extent, "leak" to the public) unorthodox theological ideas while maintaining a veneer of plausible deniability.

“Francis,” Douthat writes, “[sees] an advantage in this sort of deliberately unreliable communication — whether as a form of freewheeling dialogue with a nonbeliever, a means to communicate very informally to supporters, or simply a way to talk casually without the strictures that an actual interview transcript would impose.” Certainly, given Scalfari’s track record, it’s unlikely Francis was unaware of the likelihood that he would be quoted (or misquoted) on sensitive topics. His choice to be interviewed by Scalfari, therefore, is as significant as the exact content of the words the two of them exchanged.

Francis’s attributed views aren’t totally unheard of among Christians

Francis’s reported dismissal of hell ties into a wider theme of his pontificate: celebrating God’s mercy over God’s judgment. And, theologically speaking, Francis’s attributed views are not totally out of left field. Within the wider Christian tradition, theologians have responded to the idea of hell in a variety of ways beyond the traditional view of a “lake of fire.” Alternate interpretations include universal reconciliation (the idea that all souls are ultimately saved) or annihilationism (the idea that unredeemed souls cease to exist).

In the early church of the second, third, and fourth centuries CE — a time of dynamic intellectual inquiry in which church doctrine had not yet reached a codified form — theologians frequently embraced different approaches. Origen of Alexandria and Gregory of Nyssa subscribed to reconciliationist views, for example, while Irenaeus of Lyons took a stance that could be considered annihilationist. In the fifth century, Christian doctrines of hell became more streamlined, in part due to the monumental influence of St. Augustine of Hippo. But, from the mid-19th century onward, modern theologians have been revisiting the idea of a hell that doesn’t look like something out of Michelangelo’s “Last Judgement.” In the 20th century alone, theologians as important as the Reformed Swiss theologian Karl Barth to Lutheran existentialist Paul Tillich to the evangelical Clark Pinnock have explored various models of hell and damnation that challenge or transcend the popular notion of “eternal fire and brimstone.”

Still, most of these modern theologians largely come from Protestant traditions, which lack the same formalized structure and codified doctrine as the Catholic Church. That said, some recent major Catholic thinkers have indeed pushed back on the idea of hell as popularly understood. In the 1980s, Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar, for example, flirted with reconciliation in his book *Dare We Hope That All Men Be Saved?*, while controversial Catholic theologian Hans Kung’s 1984 *Eternal Life* suggested hell should be understood only as the absence of God, not physical torment. But the formal nature of the Catholic catechism has made any official papal pronouncement on the matter tricky.

Francis’s “doublespeak” puts him in a precarious spot

But by participating in a kind of bait and switch — putting forth potentially heretical ideas, then formally denying them — Francis leaves himself open to the charge of disingenuousness. He’s able to signal sympathy for progressive theology, but does not have the responsibility of answering to conservatives or formally advocating for doctrinal change. It’s a canny political move, but one that destabilizes the nature of the Catholic Church as a centralized, formal body: the very thing that sets the Catholic Church apart from other Western Christian denominations.

As I’ve written previously, Francis’s distaste for the bureaucracy of the Catholic Church, and his willingness to engage the secular media to get his message across, can be

both a benefit and a drawback to his papacy. But in this case, Francis may have gone too far in riling his conservative critics while directly challenging church orthodoxy. While the Vatican's solution to the growing controversy has been to deny — once again — Francis and Scalfari's exchange, Francis's consistent reliance on Scalfari as a potential mouthpiece for heterodox thought renders each denial a little less plausible.

In his visit to Fatima on Saturday, Pope Francis warned the half million member congregation to avoid a life that “profanes God in his creatures...Such a life...risks leading to Hell.” In a secular age in which many dismiss the reality of Hell, Saint Padre Pio's acerbic remark is memorable. When asked what he thought of modern people who do not believe in Hell he replied, “They will believe in Hell when they get there.” “The teaching of the Church affirms the existence of Hell and its eternity. Immediately after death the souls of those who die in a state of mortal sin descend into Hell, where they suffer the punishments of Hell. The chief punishment of Hell is eternal separation from God...” (CCC, para.1035)

“Our Lord warns us that we shall be separated from him if we fail to meet the serious needs of the poor and the little ones who are his brethren. To die in mortal sin without repenting and accepting God's merciful love means remaining separated from him forever by our own free choice. This state of definitive self-exclusion from communion with God and the blessed is called ‘Hell’. ..Jesus solemnly proclaims that he ‘will send his angels, and they will gather . . .’ all evil doers, and throw them into the furnace of fire, and that he will pronounce the condemnation: ‘Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire!’” (CCC, para. 1033-1037)

What is Hell like? The young visionaries of Fatima were terrified by the vision of Hell they were given. During the third of the six visions the seers claimed that the Blessed Virgin Mary showed them “a sea of fire.”

“Plunged in this fire were demons and souls in human form, like transparent burning embers, all blackened or burnished bronze, floating about in the conflagration ... amid shrieks and groans of pain and despair, which horrified us and made us tremble with fear,” The literalness of the vision given to the Fatima children corresponds with the terrifying visions experienced by other saints. This article collects some of the saintly insights into Hell.

St. Augustine and St. Gregory the Great taught that Hell was a particular place inside the earth. Modern theologians however have moved on from such a literal understanding. Instead of speaking of Hell as a place they refer to it as a state of being.

In Ludwig Ott's work *The Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, “Hell is a place or state of eternal punishment inhabited by those rejected by God.” Theologian Robert J. Fox wrote: “Hell is a place or state of eternal punishment inhabited by those rejected by God because such souls have rejected God's saving grace.”

This echoes papal teaching on Hell. The Catechism published by Pope Pius X in 1908 defined Hell by using the word “state” alone: “Hell is a state to which the wicked are condemned, and in which they are deprived of the sight of God for all eternity and are in dreadful torments.”

In July 1999 Pope St. John Paul II also said, “the Bible uses ‘a symbolic language,’ which must be correctly interpreted ... Rather than a place, Hell indicates the state of those who freely and definitively separate themselves from God, the source of all life and joy.”

Pope Benedict was less ambiguous, saying in a homily of March 2007, "Jesus came to tell us that he wants us all in heaven and that Hell, of which so little is said in our time, exists and is eternal for those who close their hearts to his love." Did a loving God create an eternal torture chamber? The theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar said that "we must see that Hell is not... not 'created' by God but by the free individuals who choose it." C.S.Lewis famously observed that "the doors of Hell are locked from the inside." In other words, those souls who are in Hell have chosen to reject God.