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No hell? That's an unnerving thought

by Mariam Williams

At the Intersection

Author's note: The following column presents my thoughts after seeing the play "The Christians" by Lucas Hnath. Like all the other shows running at the 38th annual Humana Festival of New American Plays, this play hasn't been produced anywhere else in the world, and no one knows if it will ever be seen on any stage again. I have revealed as little as I thought possible about the show's plot and dialogue. Also, though I see parallels between the play and the true story of Carlton Pearson, I haven't seen anything from the playwright or reviewers stating that the play is based on a true story.

"Why is hell so important to people, anyway?"

A theologian and friend asked me this in casual lunch conversation more than year ago when I mentioned having seen something a while back on a news program about a minister who told his congregation he had received a revelation from God that there is no hell and that all, Christian or not, are reconciled with God through Christ.

This revelation is the topic of the play "The Christians" by Lucas Hnath. It is a powerful, riveting production that handles a complex and intellectual debate in a relatable way and that, more importantly, shows the human and real consequences of choices based in spirituality.

At one point in the show, a congregant who feels conflicted about the pastor's revelation poses a scenario: If someone were to murder her son, would she, her son and the murderer all be in heaven together?

For the characters in the play, the audience and anyone who has ever considered or reconsidered belief in an afterlife, it was a troubling question because it points to a much bigger concern than that of one's final place of rest. The question allows you to think God might be unjust.

I'm honest enough to admit that there are people -- some long dead and others outliving far more decent human beings -- I don't want to share heaven with. Most Christians won't say this, but there are people whose souls we know must be empty at best, hell-bred perhaps at worst. There are people who carry out actions you know they couldn't possibly do if they had any sense of God, or karma, or balance, or any basic regard for humanity, even though they may use religion to justify their atrocities.

For those people, I need justice, and I think most other people do, too. We want "a special place in hell" reserved for them, like their own little corner with a dunce cap made of fiery thorns, torture devices used in transatlantic slavery and gallons of alcohol for the open wounds those devices create. Sure, before death, those people could be enduring torment we don't see; after all, you can't inflict misery on others without damaging yourself. But what if they don't feel the erosion of their own humanity? What if they feel nothing? What if they knowingly prospered from other people's suffering? What if the only comfort those who suffered at their hands have taken is their future separation from them -- the victim vindicated in heaven, the tormenter thirsty in hell, begging for a drop of water and seeing his former victim at peace with God? Even if there's no hell, couldn't they just die instead of getting eternal joy and peace? Everybody gets the same reward at the end? Really?

The thought of no hell offends a human sense of justice, but then, I thought, so does forgiveness. After the play, I found myself wishing I could ask the conflicted congregant: "Would it make a difference if someone in your church's prison ministry met with this man and converted him to Christianity? All his sins would be forgiven, even the murder of your son, right? And then you all of you would be family, too, because we're all brothers and sisters in Christ." Now that's a downer.

The play stops at 75 minutes, but the conundrums and paradoxes could go on forever. In jotting down some thoughts after returning home from the play, I realized my religion wasn't equipped to handle these questions. The Bible wouldn't provide answers. If I had relied on the Bible, then like the characters in the play and theologians in real life, I would have found just as much evidence to support one answer as I would have another. That bothers a lot of people enough to disregard Christianity or monotheism all together, but I came to the conclusion: "Trust God." I hate when people tell me to do that, but it's the answer to every uncertainty. "Trust God. He knows and understands. You don't."

The play also asks, "How do you know it's God?" That's a whole other conundrum to keep you up tonight.

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[Mariam Williams is a writer born and raised in Louisville, Ky., where she's received numerous arts awards. When not working in the field of social justice research and taking graduate courses in women and gender and Pan-African studies, she blogs at RedboneAfropuff.com. Follow her on Twitter: @missmariamw.]

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