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THE AFTERLIFE: CUTTING BACK

BY DAVID OWEN

Increasingly, in recent centuries, We have been reminded of a fact that We have tended to overlook: eternity lasts a very long time. Our resources, though “infinite,” are not unlimited. Keeping murderers and warmakers submerged in boiling blood, for example, is manageable in the near term but cannot be sustained for all eternity, since the energy expenditure required to heat blood forever will eventually constrain even Our ability to undertake other desirable projects, such as the continuance of the universe as a whole. We face a similar energy crisis with regard to evil counsellors, whom We have promised to incinerate everlastingly; with regard to blasphemers, sodomites, usurers, and doers of violence against Us, who must be tortured without end on heated sand; and with regard to Count Ugolino, Archbishop Ruggieri, and others who are permanently frozen in ice. The avaricious could conceivably be put to work ceaselessly twisting the heads of diviners and fortune-tellers, or keeping flatterers covered with filth, or cladding hypocrites in leaden mantles, but not even We can unwrite the terms of Our own first law of thermodynamics.

There is trouble in paradise as well—beginning with the fact that the amenities We have provided, though immeasurably burdensome to maintain interminably, are currently perceived by their beneficiaries as “kind of boring,” “not exactly what I was expecting,” or “O.K., I guess” (to cite the three most common responses from a recent opinion sample). It may be that rivers of bright light and ladders of gold seem less impressive to contemporary reviewers than they did to Dante, Blake, and others. Studies have indicated that replacing all such benefits with just two activities not currently offered—sex and golf—would increase consumer satisfaction by many per-

centage points while cutting costs by orders of magnitude. Such a change might also reduce the prevalence of another common complaint—namely, that “all the interesting people are in the other place.”

Still, the problem of unending liability remains. Focus groups have suggested that offering a mere year or two of heavenly bliss, coupled with the threat of a single hour spent bathing in hot pitch and being harassed by demons, would generate ninety-seven per cent of the current program’s salutary effect on mortal behavior. (Interestingly, eternity itself is now perceived as a disincentive by blessed souls with more than two years of college education.) This suggests that severely scaling back Our incentive plan—and its attendant costs—would not lead to a significant diminution in faithfulness, obedience, repentance, or other benefits accruing to Ourselves.

We are deeply reluctant to alter the terms of Our long-established covenant with Our Creation. However, research has shown that Our consumers would accept a wide range of modifications. The damned—who constitute an overwhelming majority of all participants—would, quite obviously, welcome any reduction in their term of torment. Somewhat surprisingly, the saved, too, appear eager to renegotiate. Many participants would be willing to trade eternal life on Our terms for defined benefits of their own choosing, or to be bought out entirely (say, for a full second life at their ideal weight). Encouragingly, Our legal advisers report that even a relatively radical modification of the current terms would not require amendments to any existing documentation, which was intentionally left open to interpretation, and which few participants bother to read in the first place.

Amen, etc. ♦