

Hell in the Twentieth Century

Tony Gray

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Many would argue that although twentieth century society no longer believes in a literal hell as a place of eternal retribution, this generation and those before it have seen enough of hell on earth to more than make up for this unbelief. Innocent suffering continues on a massive scale. Millions have perished at the hands of cruel tyrants. Is this not what we mean when we speak of 'hell'?

Yet it is the very fact that much of the suffering we witness is thoroughly unjust which has led some to reconsider that terrible idea, the doctrine of hell. Perhaps it was considerations such as these that influenced the ancients to develop their view of the afterlife in the first place.¹ As the twentieth century draws to a close, maybe these thoughts will once again bring hell back into the public consciousness.

Ghost, a recent and hugely successful hit at the box-office, was one in a line of many Hollywood films that depicted a belief, or perhaps more correctly a desire, which seeks the execution of justice. When the evil character in the film has finally been tracked down and accidentally killed, we see his shadow descend beneath the ground, dragged down by darkened spirits. Punishment is coming to the one who chose evil. Although such a film may not be a good starting point for a theology of hell, it is perhaps indicative of the revival that hell is having in some areas today.

Recent surveys have demonstrated that hell, in some shape or form, is still a widely held belief at the popular level. In 1991, U.S. News and World Report published the results of a religious survey under the title 'Hell's Sober Comeback'. 65% of people asked in the United States still believed in the doctrine of hell. Other figures back this up: Ireland 50%, Northern Ireland 78%, Canada 38%, Italy 36%, Spain 27%, Great Britain 25%. Other European countries did not fare so well, but the belief still survives: France 16%, Belgium 15%, Netherlands 14%, West Germany 13%, Denmark 8% and Sweden 7%.² So, despite historical studies charting changing attitudes towards belief in hell (D. P. Walker's *The Decline of Hell*³ concerning the seventeenth century, and Geoffrey Rowell's *Hell and the Victorians*⁴), popular belief still maintains its hold.

Therefore, the gulf between the academy and the church, on this issue at least, still exists as glaringly obvious. Universalism, the belief that all will be saved ultimately, is widely accepted by some of the most prominent and influential theologians of our time. However, the *apokatastasis* doctrine hides a multitude of approaches and presuppositions, and it becomes clear that modern universalists cannot necessarily be grouped together under the same label. Thus John Hick's brand of universalism is distinctively different from that advocated by John Robinson. Hick's belief is put in a decidedly pluralistic structure (where there are many ways to the 'Real' in the process of 'soul-making' which we know as human life), whereas Robinson's universalism is dependent on Scripture and the atonement (grace is offered unconditionally to all as a result of

¹ See Alan Bernstein's study, *The Formation of Hell* (London: UCL Press, 1993).

² Figures quoted from Hans Kung, *Credo* (London: SCM, 1993), p.174.

³ London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964.

⁴ Oxford: Clarendon, 1974.

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the work of Christ).⁵ Ultimately most versions of universalism appeal to the omnipotence of God and his love. Such love cannot ultimately be refused, and the eternally patient God will never give up on any of his creatures. Such hope is characteristic of many who, although not dogmatically universalist, present the doctrine as the possible, nay the probable, ultimate outcome. Thus John MacQuarrie states that,

‘we utterly reject the idea of a hell where God everlastingly punishes the wicked, without hope of deliverance... Rather, we must believe that God will never cease from his quest for universal reconciliation.’⁶

Nevertheless this century has not seen hell without its advocates. The work of C. S. Lewis is the most obvious, and possibly the most influential. He explicitly writes on the subject in *The Problem of Pain*,⁷ where he deals with common objections to the notion of eternal torment. His main lines of defence include the argument from free-will (a theme to run throughout twentieth century accounts of hell), and an appeal to the way in which a sinful nature can turn in on itself, ultimately rejecting God. This theme is brought out with great strength in a short essay entitled ‘The Trouble With ‘X’...’⁸ yet perhaps most memorably in the characters and scenarios Lewis draws in *The Great Divorce*.⁹ Although a work of fiction, Lewis’ dramatisation works powerfully, depicting a bus ride from the ‘grey town’ into heaven. Here the narrator observes a series of encounters between the shadowy ‘ghosts’ and the solid ‘bright people’. The story climaxes when George MacDonald, Lewis’ old mentor, is brought onto the scene, and the following discussion elicits a summary of Lewis’ doctrine of hell:

‘There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, ‘Thy will be done,’ and those to whom God says, in the end, ‘Thy will be done.’¹⁰

Although it may be hard to demonstrate conclusively the effect which Lewis has had on the doctrine of hell in modern theology, references to his material constantly appear. Whether due to his influence or not, the issue of human free will was to become a major player in the doctrine of hell.

Dialectical thought continues to influence theology, and no more so than in discussions of hell. The issue of whether Karl Barth embraced universalism is still disputed, and a distinguished line of scholars who either defend or attack Barth’s position continues to grow (for examples of only some of these, Bettis and Torrance have argued that Barth was not a universalist, whereas the likes of Brunner, Berkouwer and even Hick have attacked his position at different points). More recently, John Colwell has once again tried to exempt Barth from the charge of universalism, taking the debate on to a further stage.¹¹

⁵ For their respective positions see J. Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (London: Macmillan, 1966—rev. edns., 1977 & 1985), and J. Robinson, *In The End God* (London: SCM, 1950). This distinction between different types of universalism and their origins has been helpfully made in a recent article by Trevor Hart, ‘Universalism: Two Distinct Types’, in *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell*, Ed. Nigel M. de S. Cameron, (Carlisle and Paternoster, 1992) pp. 1-34.

⁶ John MacQuarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology* (London: SCM, 1977), p.366.

⁷ The Century Press, 1940.

⁸ In W Hooper, ed., *God in the Dock* (London: Fount, 1979), pp. 74-8.

⁹ Geoffrey Bles, 1946.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p.67.

¹¹ See John Colwell, *Actuality and Provisionality: Eternity and Election in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Edinburgh: Rutherford House Books, 1989).

Whatever else may be said of Barth it is clear that he was extremely hopeful about the final outcome. That is, he hoped that universalism may be true, and he hoped that ultimately hell would not persist as a reality. This theme of hope has been used widely with great influence by two of this century's leading Roman Catholic theologians, Karl Rahner and Hans Küng. The influence of the dialectic is clear, yet their emphasis on human free will (as opposed to Barth's emphasis on God's sovereign free will) means that universalism can never be assured. Hell may in fact be a result for some who choose to reject God forever. Yet even when stating this as a possibility, both Ming and Rahner are hopeful—

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Küng hopeful by trusting God's all-powerful love, and Rahner hopeful by trusting in the fact that Christ's death was for the *whole* world.

It is these themes of freedom and hope that re-emerge in recent philosophical discussions of eternal punishment. The philosophy of religion has itself seen something of a renewal, and with it has come fresh interest in the doctrine of hell. Two prominent journals, *Religious Studies and Faith and Philosophy*, have carried a continuing debate between William Lane Craig and Thomas Talbott on the possibility of eternal damnation. Craig attempts to use the concept of Middle Knowledge to explain why God may have created some he knew would choose to be without him forever. Talbott, on the other hand, argues that universalism is in fact the only biblical and Christian option available. Other philosophers such as Eleanor Stump and Richard Swinburne have also entered the discussion of a doctrine many thought to have been long dead and buried.

In the past four years two major works have appeared arguing for the logical coherence of the doctrine of hell. Both Jerry Walls' *The Logic of Damnation*¹² and Jonathan Kvanvig's *The Problem of Hell*¹³ use human free-will as the key to their doctrine of hell. Noticeably, they also hint at the possibility of repentance after death—in fact, their systems would collapse if this were not possible. In this they are again embracing a positive hope from which a former age may have distanced itself. Both works are detailed and tightly argued, and although holes may appear at times they have undoubtedly played a part in re-establishing hell as a matter for serious debate. Not only do they wish to argue that the doctrine of hell is both coherent and plausible, but also that it is central to the Christian faith. With this claim the debate moves into a higher key, for it is no longer an 'optional-extra' but a doctrine integral to the church's witness.

This claim, of whether hell is an 'optional-extra' or not, became central to the investigation by the Methodist Faith and Order Committee into 'whether the preaching of universalism is Methodist doctrine'. The report to Conference carefully lined up the evidence for and against universalism—thus elements of judgement in the teaching of Jesus are paralleled to supposedly universalist texts in Paul; Wesley's insistence on God's universal offer of grace is balanced with his emphasis on human freedom and his evangelistic fervour; and current testimony from the catechism, the hymn book and the Service Book appears similarly undecided. In its theological conclusion the report reaffirms both God's universal offer of grace, such that 'universal salvation, must, therefore be a possibility', and also human freedom and responsibility, such that although 'God does not assign us to hell... we bring it upon ourselves but we are allowed to reject God's love eternally.' The report affirms that 'Grace involves God in an ultimate risk and must allow the possibility that the joy of heaven

¹² Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992.

¹³ Oxford: OUP, 1993.

will never be complete.' In answer to the original question, the report never defines universalism as a heresy, whilst at all times it upholds the importance of human freedom.

The Methodist Church continues to hold in tension the universality of God's persistent love and the freedom of human beings to reject that love eternally. Preaching should reflect this and from time to time one or other emphasis held in tension may be stressed. Nevertheless the Methodist Church has been right not to adopt as part of its

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official teaching the doctrine that 'all people will inevitably be saved.'¹⁴

There are many other areas where hell is once again being discussed. Most influential may prove to be the debate amongst evangelicals, who because of their heritage remain deeply concerned with the role of hell in evangelical activity. The question for evangelicals concerns the nature of hell. That is, will hell consist of eternal conscious torment, or will God in fact choose to annihilate the wicked? (Note that the common bedfellow of annihilationism is the doctrine of conditional immortality, holding that human immortality is conditional on our response to God, rather than on any innate possession of this quality, and thus the fate of the lost would be ultimately to cease to exist.) This discussion has prompted a vast amount of literature, not least because one of evangelicalism's most noted and influential statesmen, John Stott, went on record as tentatively believing the annihilationist doctrine.¹⁵ The fact that even those outside the conservative wing of the church have considered hell in these terms may mean that this particular debate is set to continue for some time yet.

Martin Marty has written of how hell has become 'culturally unavailable',¹⁶ and this may well be true to a certain extent. Nevertheless, hell has made a comeback—both in popular religion, and in theological discussion. Although statistics do not exist which may be compared with the recent polls concerning belief in hell, the abundance of modern literature in itself shows that interest has grown. This is born out by the difficulty encountered in trying to find a single theological book dedicated to the doctrine of hell in the middle part of this century,¹⁷ whereas today new works are emerging every year. Many still find hell distasteful, vindictive, harmful, and even unchristian. Yet the hope and possibility that, in the end, justice will be done, is characteristic of many recent discussions. This, combined with an emphasis on the possibility of human freedom ultimately to reject God, and with the hope that God's scope of love will be larger than we ever imagined, may lead to a doctrine of hell that will not only suit the twentieth century, but lead us on into the next millennium.

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<http://www.theologicalstudies.org.uk/>

¹⁴ 1992 report on Universalism, presented by the Faith and Order Committee to the Methodist Conference, p.122.

¹⁵ John Stott and David Edwards, *Essentials: A Liberal Evangelical Dialogue* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1988), p.320.

¹⁶ 'Hell Disappeared. No One Noticed. A Civic Argument', *Harvard Theological Review* 78 (1988), pp.381-98.

¹⁷ Michael Paternoster's *Thou Art There Also* (London: SPCK, 1967) stands almost alone in its time as it concentrates solely on the doctrine of hell.