

# SALVATION: A MATTER OF PERSONAL CHOICE

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SALVATION IS a key concept within Christianity, as it is indeed within all the various religions. Salvation in some form or other is what people seek in and through the practice of religion. Yet, pervasive as the concept is in religious literature and in the thoughts of men and women everywhere, there does not seem to be much agreement even among Christians as to what in the concrete salvation really means. As Gustavo Gutierrez remarks in his *Theology of Liberation*, "one of the great deficiencies of contemporary theology is the absence of a profound and lucid reflection on the theme of salvation."<sup>1</sup> Gutierrez himself then tries to remedy this situation by linking the biblical theme of salvation with the striving of oppressed peoples throughout the world for political, economic, and social development—in a word, for growth in human personhood. What remains ambiguous in his presentation, however, is the connection between this new "incarnational" approach to salvation and traditional Christian eschatology—above all, the traditional concepts of heaven and hell as the final destiny of every human being. Other theologians have been alert to this deficiency. The men and women, for example, gathered in 1975 at the Hartford Seminary Foundation in Connecticut condemned the following thesis: "To realize one's potential and to be true to oneself is the whole meaning of salvation."<sup>2</sup>

In all likelihood, this condemnation was not aimed directly at Gutierrez or any other advocate of liberation theology as such, but rather at an implicit orientation in their thinking which might have negative consequences for traditional Christian belief. Yet, despite its obvious shortcomings, liberation theology has awakened contemporary Christians to the need for a fresh perspective on many points of doctrine which might otherwise be falling into desuetude for lack of attention. Chief among these is surely the doctrine of the "last things." As John Shea points out, there is not much enthusiasm today for the Church's teaching on eschatology, even among fervent, churchgoing Roman Catholics: "The religious man does not pine after eternity but labors to build the earth. He leaves the afterlife to afterwards. So caught up in the agony and bliss of this world he is beyond the egocentric worries of a future reward and punishment."<sup>3</sup> But, as Shea also points out, "heaven and hell

<sup>1</sup> G. Gutierrez, *Theology of Liberation*, tr. C. Inda and J. Eagleson (Maryknoll, N.Y., 1973) p. 149.

<sup>2</sup> *Time*, Feb. 10, 1975, p. 149.

<sup>3</sup> J. Shea, *What a Modern Catholic Believes about Heaven and Hell* (Chicago, 1972) p. 9.

touch upon sober truths which the Catholic, although he may not want to look at them, can hardly avoid."<sup>4</sup> Their intimate connection with the deeper question of salvation and the ultimate meaning of human life as such keeps the conscientious Catholic from dismissing them as outdated mythology, derived from the three-storey universe of the ancient world.

Accordingly, I will offer in these pages a new approach to the doctrine of the "last things," with special focus on the concepts of heaven and hell. My purpose will not be to vindicate traditional Christian eschatology vis-à-vis contemporary liberation theology (or vice versa), but rather to present an independent understanding of heaven and hell which might for different reasons appeal to partisans of both camps: both to the "conservative," whose belief in the reality of heaven and hell is absolutely unshakable, and to the "liberal," who is equally convinced that salvation is meaningless apart from human development in this life, growth in personal freedom, etc. A word of caution, however, must be spoken in advance. Since no one in this life can verify from personal experience what it means to be in heaven or hell, this presentation will inevitably be somewhat speculative. But, as the scriptural images of heaven and hell make clear in their own way, mythology plays an important role in human life. That is, whether one's imaginative picture of heaven or hell is consistent in every detail is ultimately less important than the influence which it has, or fails to have, on one's daily life. What I will be striving for in this article, therefore, is an understanding of heaven and hell which may challenge Christians of all persuasions to re-examine their cherished beliefs about the meaning of life and the final destiny of the human person.

#### RECENT THEOLOGICAL OPINION

The first step in this presentation will be to review briefly recent theological opinion on heaven and hell. I have already taken note of Shea's work *What a Modern Catholic Believes about Heaven and Hell* and Gutierrez' *Theology of Liberation*. Both stress the importance of eschatology for the true understanding of Christian existence, but both likewise feel that in its traditional form the doctrine of the "last things" is virtually an anachronism. Gutierrez, for example, suggests that eschatology in the classical sense was never more than an appendix to the central themes of creation and redemption.<sup>5</sup> The new eschatology or theology of hope, however, with its emphasis on realization of the eschatological promises even now in the economic and political order, is, says Gutierrez, "not just one more element of Christianity, but the very key to understanding the Christian faith."<sup>6</sup> In a similar vein, John

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Gutierrez, *op. cit.*, p. 162.

Macquarrie first takes note of the strongly eschatological character of New Testament studies since the ground-breaking research of Johannes Weiss and Albert Schweitzer, but then adds the caution that traditional concepts like heaven, hell, judgment, eternal life, etc., will have to be broadly reinterpreted in order to make sense to modern man.<sup>7</sup>

Likewise, Gregory Baum, Gordon Kaufman, and Juan Luis Segundo underscore the importance of a new, more existential interpretation of the traditional concepts of heaven and hell. Baum, for example, says: "Heaven and hell together constitute Christ's message, declaring the new life to which men are summoned and revealing the crucial importance of some of the decisions that men must make in their history. . . . The message of heaven and hell, then, is not information about another world but saving truth producing a new consciousness in man and affecting his personal history."<sup>8</sup> Kaufman comments: "Eschatological doctrine, far from being superfluous and dispensable speculation, deals with the very foundation of Christian faith."<sup>9</sup> Yet he also believes that the traditional concepts of the Last Judgment, heaven, and hell should not be interpreted as "providing secret gnosis of future events or circumstances. All should be seen as expressions in mythological form of the confidence that God will ultimately succeed in realizing his purposes for history and for mankind."<sup>10</sup> Finally, Segundo emphasizes the "infantile" character of the scriptural images of heaven and hell, but then adds: "We call these images 'infantile' because they are the first stage of a deeper and richer revelation. They are not false, therefore. But one could not overstress the inauthenticity and the problems they are capable of introducing into an adult Christian life, if they do not undergo transformation as man's overall life grows and matures."<sup>11</sup>

All the above-mentioned authors agree, then, that the basic concepts of heaven and hell are central to the Christian tradition, but they also agree that the traditional images of heaven and hell as presented in the Bible are no longer fully credible to many believing Christians, hence that these same images have effectively ceased to motivate the faithful to lead upright lives as in the past. How, then, is one to reinterpret the notions of heaven and hell so that they will function as in the past, namely, as an effective stimulus to good behavior and a deterrent from recognized evil?

<sup>7</sup> J. Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology* (New York, 1966) pp. 313-19.

<sup>8</sup> G. Baum, *Man Becoming* (New York, 1970) p. 100.

<sup>9</sup> G. D. Kaufman, *Systematic Theology: A Historicist Perspective* (New York, 1968) p. 316.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 471.

<sup>11</sup> J. L. Segundo, S.J., *Grace and the Human Condition*, tr. J. Drury (Maryknoll, N.Y., 1973) p. 162.

## THE SOURCES

Perhaps a beginning might be made by taking a closer look at the sources, namely, the Hebrew and Christian Bible and some of the Church documents in which the traditional teaching on heaven and hell was set forth. In the Hebrew Bible Sheol, the abode of the dead, was the ultimate destination of both the good and the wicked.<sup>12</sup> The ancient Israelites, therefore, did not distinguish between heaven and hell as separate places where, respectively, bliss or torment awaited one. Quite the contrary, as Roland Murphy comments, Sheol "meant almost non-existence."<sup>13</sup> That is, the deceased were thought to be asleep; they were not awake enough to experience sharp pain or deep joy.<sup>14</sup> Admittedly, in later Jewish apocalyptic, above all in the Book of Enoch, the dead were thought to survive as conscious individuals who were rewarded or punished for their deeds while in this life; hence different compartments or "hollow places" in Sheol were reserved for the good and the wicked.<sup>15</sup> But, as H. H. Rowley comments, Jewish apocalyptic was politically as well as religiously inspired.<sup>16</sup> It served, in other words, as a vigorous protest against the intolerable political, economic, and social conditions to which the Jewish people were subjected, beginning in the last two centuries before Christ.<sup>17</sup> Hence, from our present perspective it is difficult to say to what extent these vivid images of divine retribution in the afterlife represent a genuine break-through or striking new insight for the Jewish people into God's providential activity in history (and beyond it),<sup>18</sup> and to what extent the same images, above all in their more vindictive overtones, simply reflect the deeply-felt need of a persecuted people to be avenged on their enemies.

Turning now to the Christian Bible, we note how Paul and the Evangelists likewise use apocalyptic imagery to protest against their current situation of oppression and injustice. Paul, for example, in First Thessalonians encourages the Christians to persevere under persecution,

<sup>12</sup> Cf., e.g., D. S. Russell, *The Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic* (Philadelphia, 1964), p. 355; also *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. X. Leon-Dufour, S.J., tr. P. J. Cahill (New York, 1967) p. 205.

<sup>13</sup> R. E. Murphy, O.Carm., "Introduction to Wisdom Literature" (28:37), *Jerome Biblical Commentary*, eds. R. Brown, S.S., J. Fitzmyer, S.J., and R. Murphy, O.Carm. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1968).

<sup>14</sup> Cf., e.g., Is 14:9; Qoh 9:5, 10; Ps 88:10 ff.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. 1 Enoch 21-22: *The Book of Enoch*, tr. R. H. Charles (London, 1960).

<sup>16</sup> H. H. Rowley, *The Relevance of Apocalyptic* (2nd ed.; London, 1947) pp. 16-17.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. B. Prusak, "Heaven and Hell: Eschatological Symbols of Existential Protest," *Cross Currents* 24 (1975) 477: "It was a heartfelt protest against oppression and the existential need for liberation from anxiety and meaninglessness which gave rise to the first statement in Judaism of the idea of retribution after death."

<sup>18</sup> Cf. on this point Russell, *op. cit.*, pp. 355-57, 366-69.

since the Lord Jesus at his second coming "will repay with injury those who are injuring you, and reward you, who are suffering now" (1 Th 1:6-7). Similarly, the Gospel of Matthew quite possibly pronounces its long list of "woes" against the Scribes and Pharisees (Mt 23:13-36) because the latter represent the "enemy," i.e., those who refuse to accept Christ and who persecute those who do accept him. To quote Bernard Prusak, "the Christians in their time of powerlessness adopted the technique which apocalyptic pharisaism had previously employed against its oppressors. They left revenge to God."<sup>19</sup>

Naturally, one cannot dismiss all apocalyptic imagery from the Christian Bible, any more than from the Hebrew Bible, on the grounds that it expresses simply the anguished protest of an oppressed people against their more powerful enemies; for belief in personal immortality would seem to be for Christians a constitutive part of the good news of salvation. Yet reflections such as these should make one cautious in attributing directly to Jesus some of the more obviously vindictive statements in the Gospels about the fires of hell, the pains of the damned, etc. For example, in the same context in which he pronounces his "woes" upon the rich and powerful of this world, the Jesus of Luke's Gospel urges his hearers: "Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate. Do not judge and you will not be judged yourselves; do not condemn and you will not be condemned yourselves; grant pardon and you will be pardoned" (Lk 6:36-37). Furthermore, as Jürgen Moltmann points out, the scandal of Jesus' message to the Zealots and their sympathizers was that, while he vigorously denounced social injustice at every opportunity, "he did not call upon the poor to revenge themselves upon their exploiters nor the oppressed to oppress their oppressors."<sup>20</sup> For all these reasons, then, it would seem better to suspend judgment upon the literal truth and/or total accuracy of the various scriptural images of heaven and hell. They embody a profound truth about the destiny of man which is central to the Judeo-Christian message, but the images themselves have strong mythological overtones.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Prusak, *art. cit.*, p. 482; cf. also R. H. Charles, *Eschatology: The Doctrine of a Future Life in Israel, Judaism, and Christianity* (New York, 1963) pp. 367-68, 399-400. Charles regards Christian belief in eternal damnation for the wicked as an unfortunate legacy of late Judaism which should be replaced by the true Christian perspective, namely, that even the damned, after a period of punishment for their sins, are to be admitted to the bliss of heaven. For my own comments on this point, see the latter part of this article.

<sup>20</sup> J. Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, tr. R. Wilson and J. Bowden (New York, 1974) p. 141.

<sup>21</sup> Still another influence upon the Hebrew and Christian Bible in the matter of the apocalyptic imagery is Greek mythology. For a discussion of this theme, cf. T. F. Glasson, *Greek Influence in Jewish Eschatology* (London, 1961); also Russell, *op. cit.*, pp. 385-90.

Still further reason for caution is given when one examines the official position of the Church's magisterium on heaven and hell. First of all, as the editors of *The Teaching of the Catholic Church* remark, "the position of Christ and his Church in eschatology has not always been proclaimed with the same emphasis at all times and in every decree. Almost always the Church's decrees are aimed at heresies which arise and these mostly concern the last things as they affect individuals."<sup>22</sup> There is, accordingly, an initial difficulty in settling on some given text as representative of the Church's official position in the matter. But even if one collates the principal documents dealing with eschatology, there is, secondly, the added difficulty that the description of heaven and hell therein contained is much more abstract (and therefore far less pictorial) than the language of Scripture. Hence it would seem problematic whether or not the scriptural images of heaven and hell form an essential part of the teaching of the Church on the last things.

To be specific, the teaching of the Catholic Church on heaven and hell seems to be concentrated in four major documents: the Profession of Faith of the Eleventh Council of Toledo in 675 (*DS* 540 [287]), the Chapter on Catholic Faith at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 (*DS* 801 [429]), the Constitution *Benedictus Deus* of Pope Benedict XII in 1336 (*DS* 1000-1002 [530-31]), and the Decree for the Greeks at the Council of Florence in 1439 (*DS* 1304-6 [693]). A summary of the teaching there set forth would run as follows. The blessed in heaven enjoy the beatific vision, i.e., direct contemplation of the divine essence, whereas the damned suffer the torments of hell. The blessed cannot lose heaven any more than the damned can escape from hell. Heaven and hell, moreover, are of eternal duration. No mention is made, however, of the external circumstances of heaven apart from the direct *vision* of God; nor are the pains of the damned specified except with the brief remark in the Decree for the Greeks that the damned will be punished in separate ways: "poenis tamen disparibus puniendas" (*DS* 1306 [693]). May one then conclude that the scriptural images of heaven and hell (e.g., of heaven as a banquet [Is 25:6; Mt 8:11] and of hell as a blazing furnace [Mt 13:42]) are not in themselves constitutive parts of Christian belief in the reality of heaven and hell, hence that other images and symbols might profitably be employed to visualize the afterlife, provided that the fundamentals of Christian belief about heaven and hell, as noted above, are kept intact?<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup> *The Teaching of the Catholic Church*, eds. J. Neuner, S.J., H. Roos, S.J., and K. Rahner, S.J., tr. G. Stevens (Staten Island, N.Y., 1967) p. 413.

<sup>23</sup> For still other attempts to reconceive the afterlife in more contemporary language, cf. R. W. Gleason, S.J., *The World to Come* (New York, 1958); also X. Leon-Dufour, S.J.,

## A FRESH CONCEPTUALIZATION

Presuming an affirmative answer to this question, I will now proceed to my own conceptualization of heaven and hell. It will be quite consciously an exercise in theological imagination, but not pure fancy. I will try, in other words, to ground my reflections within the framework provided by the constant teaching of the Church. The Baltimore Catechism, for example, in response to the question "What must I do to gain the happiness of heaven," states: "To gain the happiness of heaven we must know, love, and serve God in this world."<sup>24</sup> What remains ambiguous in this otherwise straightforward response is the connection between the knowledge, love, and service of God in this life and man's happiness in the next. Are we, for example, to be rewarded for our life of virtue now by something totally different in the next life? Or is the knowledge, love, and service of God in this life a genuine preparation for eternity, such that heaven itself is fundamentally a confirmation and intensification of the type of life which we are already leading here and now? Certainly the classical understanding of grace as the "seed of life which grows and fructifies for eternity"<sup>25</sup> would lend itself to this second alternative. In any case, for my own purposes I will presume that this latter understanding of heaven and hell is true, hence that the basic pattern of life which human beings pursue here and now in this world will have a decisive influence on what they enjoy by way of salvation in eternity.

People, for example, who have come to know and love the triune God in this life will surely know and love the divine Persons in the next. The intensity of the beatific vision will, moreover, be directly proportionate to the ardor with which these same individuals sought affective union with God in this life; for each will be rewarded with God's loving presence to the degree that he/she really desires it.<sup>26</sup> But what is to be said of those for whom "God" is a meaningless concept in this life? For many of them,

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"Par-delà la mort," *Etudes* 337 (Nov. 1972) 605-18. There is, to be sure, a much more extensive literature on death as the moment of transition from time to eternity. Two well-known works to which I will make reference later are K. Rahner, *Zur Theologie des Todes* (Freiburg, 1968), and L. Boros, *The Moment of Truth*, tr. G. Bainbridge (London, 1962).

<sup>24</sup> *A Catechism of Christian Doctrine: Revised Edition of the Baltimore Catechism*, No. 3 (Paterson, N.J., 1941) p. 4.

<sup>25</sup> H. Rondet, S.J., *The Grace of Christ*, tr. T. Guzie, S.J. (Westminster: Md., 1968) p. 220. Rondet is referring here to an expression of Thomas Aquinas in the *Summa theologiae* 1-2, q. 114, a. 3, ad 3, but in his opinion it recapitulates the Johannine and Pauline understanding of grace as a new life, pledge of eternal glory, etc.

<sup>26</sup> Here one might object that, according to the Roman Catholic doctrine of purgatory, the souls of the just are purified so as to respond more freely and openly to God's love in heaven (*DS* 1580 [840]; 1820 [983]; cf. also Gleason, *op. cit.*, pp. 100-106). Yet the purification process in purgatory presumably does not eliminate the possibility of different degrees of happiness in heaven.

this will presumably mean that they will continue to lead “godless” lives in eternity as well. Life apart from God, after all, is the quintessence of what is traditionally meant by hell. My particular contention here, however, would be that the three divine Persons will not condemn such individuals to hell against their own will, but rather that They (Father, Son, and Spirit) will simply allow these people to choose what they want. If salvation for them, as represented by a lifetime of more or less deliberate choices, does not include union with the triune God as one of its principal components, then the three divine Persons will not force Themselves on Their reluctant creatures but instead allow them to pursue basically the same self-centered lives in eternity as they did in this life.<sup>27</sup> Admittedly, there is a problem here with other individuals who through no fault of their own, i.e., through “invincible ignorance,” fail to come to a knowledge and love of the triune God in the course of their lives and thus enter eternity psychologically unprepared for a life of union with God. Here we must presume with Pius IX in his encyclical letter *Quanto conficiamur moerore*, that the three divine Persons in Their mercy and goodness will most certainly find a way in which to compensate these people for their life of virtue in this world.<sup>28</sup> Perhaps at the moment of death they will be given a new understanding of what they have been pursuing by way of human perfection in this life and thus will be in a position to choose a life of union with God on the very threshold of eternity.<sup>29</sup> The principle I wish to uphold, however, remains constant: the three divine Persons will not force us against our will into a life of union with Themselves. If we deliberately choose to ignore God in this life, we cannot expect miraculously to enjoy the beatific vision in the next.

Similarly, those who have really striven to know and love their fellow human beings in this life should experience an even greater sense of community with these same people in heaven. Those individuals, on the other hand, who are relatively self-centered now, i.e., isolated from or deliberately hostile to their neighbor, will quite possibly experience much the same reserve and hostility toward others in eternity. New friendships, of course, should be possible in eternity as part of one’s ongoing growth and development as a person.<sup>30</sup> But the basic attitudes of

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Gleason, *op. cit.*, p. 116: “The man who dies in unrepented mortal sin damns himself. For hell does not issue from an arbitrary decision of God. It is the direct and logical prolongation of man’s own will to sin.”

<sup>28</sup> Cf. *DS* 2866 (1677).

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Boros, *op. cit.*, pp. 99–105.

<sup>30</sup> Cf., on the contrary, Gleason, *op. cit.*, p. 153: “One often wonders if there will be progress and an evolution of happiness in heaven. There will not be progress, because heaven is the infinite attainment of all our hopes, even the hope of progress itself.” According to my presuppositions, however, heaven is eternal life. Life implies growth and



openness or hostility to deeper personal relations will presumably be fixed by one's history of personal friendships in this life. Everyone, in other words, will be basically the same person later as he/she is now. Only the external circumstances which in this life impeded the full exercise of our personhood will be removed.

To be specific, those who in this life have worked at loving God and their fellow human beings will surely be quite happy later, since they will then be free to love without any of the extrinsic limitations or distractions of our present human condition: e.g., separation from loved ones in space or time, psychological stress or physical illness, etc. Individuals, on the other hand, who have in this life chosen a more self-centered existence will likewise be free to pursue their special interests, at least in imagination and desire. Far from being truly happy with this arrangement, however, they will presumably suffer from acute boredom or ennui; for, since the range of their interests in this life was so narrowly circumscribed and since in eternity the "time" available to them for whatever they wish will be literally endless, they will inevitably find that "time" hangs heavy on their hands. Furthermore, since by their decisions in this life they have effectively excluded any possibility of union with God or a deeper interpersonal relationship with their neighbor, no relief from that never-ending preoccupation with themselves and their own petty interests would seem to be in sight.

Robert Gleason suggests that the damned will be psychologically torn apart by the conflict between *person* and *nature* at the core of their being: "As nature and being it [the soul in hell] still must seek God with all the energies of its being. But as a free being it continues to reject God as it did in life."<sup>31</sup> Paradoxically, however, this seems to bring the damned into a deeply interpersonal relationship with God even against their own will; for hate as the dialectical opposite of love is an intense human emotion which binds the one who hates to the object of his/her hate just as firmly as love unites the lover with his/her beloved. According to my hypothesis, however, no such primitive feelings move the minds and hearts of those in hell. They feel, to be sure, no pain at the loss of the beatific vision or the lack of warm human relationships. But the very absence of such deeply human needs and desires is, as a matter of fact, the "punishment" which they inflict on themselves as a result of a life of self-indulgence.<sup>32</sup>

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development. Hence there must be growth and development for human beings in eternity, though within the parameters already fixed by the type of person one has become in this life.

<sup>31</sup> Gleason, *op. cit.*, p. 122.

<sup>32</sup> In his book *Love and Will*, psychologist Rollo May contends that one of the major problems facing men at present in our sexually permissive Western society is paradoxically

By way of contrast to Gleason, Karl Rahner's distinction between *person* and *nature* seems to confirm my hypothesis. Rahner says, for example, in an article on concupiscence, that any free choice of man "tends to the end that man should dispose of himself as a whole before God, actively make himself into what he freely wishes to be. Thus the end to which the free decision is orientated is that everything which is in man (nature), hence the involuntary act as well, should be the revelation and expression of what man as person wishes to be; thus that the free decision should comprehend, transfigure and transfuse the spontaneous act, so that its own reality too should no longer be purely natural but personal."<sup>33</sup> The finality of human existence, therefore, is that we should become persons, fully individuated human beings. Nature, that which we have in common with all other human beings, is a necessary condition for the realization of our personhood while in this life. In eternity, however, this personalization (or individualization) of our common human nature will presumably be complete, so that we will finally be the persons we always wanted to be in virtue of the more or less free decisions which we made while in this life.<sup>34</sup> That is, since the time of probation (or formation as a person) will be at an end, concupiscence, the spontaneous impulses of our bodily nature, will be completely subordinate to our free decisions as persons. Further growth and development as a person will still be possible, but only within the limits which we already set for ourselves in this life. Repentance—in the sense of a total reorientation of one's ideals as a person—will be impossible.

Rahner touches on this last point when he argues: "repentance is only possible where man's immoral free decision has not the power so exhaustively to impress evil upon his being that no starting-point for a new decision remains over from which a fresh redisposition of the

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apathy, and with it, as an inevitable consequence, sexual impotence (cf. Rollo May, *Love and Will* [New York, 1969] pp. 13–63). If this be true, it would seem to offer indirect empirical evidence for the validity of my hypothesis, namely, that people in hell are apathetic because of an antecedent life-decision for unrestricted self-indulgence.

<sup>33</sup> K. Rahner, S.J., "The Theological Concept of Concupiscence," *Theological Investigations* 1 (tr. C. Ernst. O.P.; London, 1961) 365. Cf. also Rahner's "The Dignity and Freedom of Man," *Theological Investigations* 2 (tr. K.-H. Kruger; Baltimore, 1963) 235–63; likewise, "Man as Spirit," in *Hearers of the Word*, tr. M. Richards (New York, 1969) 53–68. Other references could be cited, but these suffice to make clear Rahner's basic anthropology.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Boros, *op. cit.*, pp. 25–31; Rahner, *Zur Theologie des Todes*, p. 30; C. Geffré, O.P., "La mort comme nécessité et comme liberté," *Vie spirituelle* 108 (1963) 264–80. All these authors regard death as the moment of final decision for a human being. But it is clear that their remarks apply with equal force to the afterlife, understood as the practical living-out or fruition of that final existential decision. Not every major theologian, however, is in agreement with this hypothesis of death as the moment of ultimate personal decision. Cf., e.g., W. Pannenberg, "Tod und Auferstehung in der Sicht christlicher Dogmatik," *Kerygma und Dogma* 20 (1974) 176–77.

elements of the human person could ensue. One's own morally wrong decision can only be experienced as inner distress and condemnation when it does not succeed in removing from one every resistance offered to it by what is given prior to freedom (by the 'nature')."<sup>35</sup> Rahner, of course, is thinking here of persons still in this life, i.e., of individuals who do not yet have perfect dominion over their natures. For my purposes, however, his remarks indirectly confirm in a striking way the hypothesis I have elaborated above. That is, because, as Rahner says, persons with perfect dominion over their natures have no metaphysical basis for repentance or a change of heart, we can suitably conclude that all human beings in eternity are basically "content," i.e., satisfied with themselves as the persons they have become and now are. Some individuals, to be sure, will have good reason to be content, since they will have found a high degree of self-fulfilment in union with God and their fellow human beings. Yet even the basically self-centered person will perforce have to be "content," since he/she will be unable, because radically unwilling, to change his/her predetermined pattern of existence.<sup>36</sup>

#### SUPPORTING ARGUMENTS

At first reading, this might seem to be an absolutely preposterous idea, one which completely undermines the traditional notion of heaven and hell; for there is no hell—everybody seems to be in the "heaven" of his/her choice. Upon further reflection, however, there are a number of good reasons to take this hypothesis seriously. First of all, Christians have always had trouble reconciling the justice and the mercy of God. How can an all-loving and all-merciful God condemn human beings to an eternity of punishment for sins committed during the few years of their life on earth? On this hypothesis, however, the triune God does not condemn anyone to hell. Rather, out of deep respect for our freedom as human beings, the divine Persons allow us to choose our own mode of salvation. They would much prefer, of course, that we find salvation in and through union with Themselves and our fellow human beings; indeed, Their personal providence over us during the course of our mortal lives is directed precisely to that end. But if, in the final analysis, we seek out and deliberately choose a more self-centered pattern of existence, They will accept us just as we are. That is, Father, Son, and Spirit will

<sup>35</sup> Rahner, *art. cit.*, p. 367.

<sup>36</sup> Rahner has this remark about the radical profession of evil: "man could also be happy by making a heroic and radical profession of evil and by wholly delivering up his being to it (even though he may suffer 'physical' pain at the same time); only the evil man who is too cowardly and weak to be wholly evil would be the unhappy one" (*ibid.*, p. 367, n. 2). The people in hell have presumably made this radical profession of evil and thus "enjoy" some kind of happiness or contentment, even as, from another perspective, they experience acute boredom or ennui in the practical living-out of that decision.

let us have our own way, since only thus are we truly free and accountable for our decisions as persons.

A second reason in support of this hypothesis is that it does not reduce moral responsibility on the part of Christians and others who have always believed in heaven and hell, but rather, quite paradoxically, intensifies it. Since we can no longer expect a radical transformation from one type of person into another either at the moment of death or in virtue of some limited stay in purgatory, then it seems that we are more responsible here and now for what we will be as persons later, i.e., for all eternity. There may be, to be sure, a debt of temporal punishment still to be remitted after death and before admission into heaven, as the Church teaches at the Council of Trent.<sup>37</sup> But the remission of temporal punishment is clearly not meant to constitute a moral miracle, i.e., a total transformation of character, such as would invalidate my hypothesis about salvation as basically a matter of personal choice. Nor would deathbed conversions as such argue against my case, since the overt conversion in that instance would presumably be the climax of a much longer, hidden process of reconciliation taking place within the individual and known only to himself/herself and God. What my hypothesis, on the other hand, exposes as romantic nonsense is the naive belief that one can at the last minute "steal" one's way into heaven, after the example of the "good thief" on Calvary. The divine Persons respect us far too much as free and intelligent human beings not to give us in the end what we really want as salvation. The big question in life, however, is what do we really want or, in the words of Paul Tillich, what is our "ultimate concern"?<sup>38</sup> In this respect, the understanding of heaven and hell suggested here may help one to formulate that critical question for oneself early in life rather than at the moment of death.

A third argument favoring this hypothesis would be that the scriptural notion of heaven and hell as separated from each other by divine decree (cf. Lk 16:26) could be suitably reinterpreted in favor of the idea that the three divine Persons leave human beings completely free to choose their companions after death. If, then, there is an "abyss" between heaven and hell, it is the abyss created by the damned themselves in their persistent refusal to join the company of the elect. Joining these others in "heaven" (here understood as a specific place) would mean renunciation of thought- and behavior-patterns to which they became accustomed during their life on earth and which are "second nature" to them now. This is, of course, what they are psychologically unable to do, for the reasons suggested above. Hence they consciously choose to separate themselves from those who are more unselfish in their behavior-

<sup>37</sup> Cf. *DS* 1580 (840).

<sup>38</sup> Cf. P. Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York, 1958) p. 1.

patterns and seek out instead the company of those who, like themselves, lead a basically self-centered existence. "Hell" (once again understood as a specific place) is thus created not by divine decree as rather by human free choice.

C. S. Lewis expresses basically the same idea in a story entitled *The Great Divorce*. The story begins with the author wandering the streets of a drab, semi-deserted town at dusk. Boarding a bus with other people, he finds to his astonishment that they all are air-borne within a few minutes. The bus takes them to a brightly-lit grassy plateau in the sky where they disembark. Here the author discovers for the first time that he and all his fellow passengers are Ghosts, shadowy transparencies of flesh-and-blood human beings. Those whom they meet on the plateau, however, are full-bodied Spirits in the peak of health. Each of the Ghosts finds someone whom he/she knew in this life. They converse for awhile, with the Spirit in each case urging the Ghost to stay there and not return to the drab existence in the town below; but invariably the Ghost chooses to break off the conversation and to return to the bus for the trip below. The author meets a philosopher Spirit who enlightens him on the drama taking place between the Spirits and the Ghosts. The Ghosts are free to join the company of the Spirits in heaven, but first they must admit their need for God's love and be prepared to live unselfishly with their neighbors. This, however, they find too threatening to their present existence, however dull and disappointing it might be in itself; hence they reject the chance for true joy and happiness. Thus, says the Philosopher Spirit,

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." All that are in Hell choose it. Without that self-choice there could be no Hell. No soul that seriously and constantly desires joy will ever miss it. Those who seek find. To those who knock it is opened.<sup>39</sup>

A fourth and final argument in confirmation of our hypothesis might be drawn from the way in which it unexpectedly illuminates traditional Christian belief in this life as a time of probation. According to my hypothesis, once this life is ended, the human personality is basically formed and human beings must live with themselves as the persons they actually have become. John Macquarrie, on the other hand, argues that even in eternity the sinner "never gets to the point of complete loss and so never gets beyond the reconciling activity of God."<sup>40</sup> While I would concur with Macquarrie that eternal life is not a static perfection but rather an ongoing growth in perfection for those who possess it,<sup>41</sup> I would

<sup>39</sup> Cf. C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (New York, 1946) p. 69.

<sup>40</sup> Macquarrie, *op. cit.*, p. 327.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 322-23; also cf. n. 30 above.

still have to disagree with his further conclusion that the sinner could possibly be reconciled with God after death. As I see it, the basic issue is not that the divine Persons would be reluctant to forgive one of Their creatures beyond a given time limit, but that the creature himself/herself would not accept forgiveness, even if it were gratuitously offered to him/her. The basic attitude to God, in other words, would be already fixed by the character of one's relationship to the divine Persons in this life. Hence the creature would spontaneously reject as spurious any new overtures from the divine Persons for greater familiarity with Themselves, just as that same individual would presumably treat with suspicion any unexpected offers of friendship and familiarity from fellow human beings. Macquarrie's underlying objection, accordingly, to "the idea of a hell where God everlastingly punishes the wicked, without hope of deliverance"<sup>42</sup> is invalidated in virtue of my hypothesis. God does not pass judgment on the sinner; the sinner passes judgment on himself/herself at the moment of death. Whatever "punishment" comes to the sinner in virtue of his/her sins is self-inflicted. Put in other terms, the three divine Persons always stand ready to forgive the sinner, but the sinner remains forever unwilling to be forgiven.

#### CONCLUSION

In summary, then, if one accepts the hypothesis elaborated in these pages, a new way to interpret the traditional Christian doctrine of heaven and hell can be expressed as follows. Human beings are called by God to become fully individuated persons and thus freely to choose their own mode of salvation. The three divine Persons, to be sure, deeply desire that we find our salvation in and through union with Themselves and our fellow human beings. But ultimately They will ratify whatever we choose by way of a personal life-style, an individualized salvation. Hence it is most important that men and women reflect seriously here and now on the practical consequences of their free decisions, since every choice contributes in some measure to what they already are as persons and to what they will enjoy by way of personal salvation in eternity.<sup>43</sup>

Thus stated, this understanding of heaven and hell should be acceptable to Christians of both an eschatological and an incarnational

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 327.

<sup>43</sup> There is, of course, no way to verify this hypothesis in the present life. Yet some form of indirect verification of the theory might be available, given the way people seem to behave in this life. Is it not true, e.g., that we human beings gradually assume a definite "character" in virtue of the personal decisions we make over a lifetime? Furthermore, do we not as a rule become somewhat insensitive to the limits of our self-chosen character as life goes on? If all this be true, at least in the majority of cases, then it seems altogether plausible that, as suggested above, we enter eternity with relatively fixed personalities and that our happiness in the next life will be radically contingent upon the type of person we have become in this life.

bent of mind; for heaven and hell are clearly presented as the extraterrestrial realities which the Church's magisterium has always proclaimed them to be. Yet salvation is just as evidently linked with the development of human potentialities in this life, so that one and the same process of personal growth spans both time and eternity. On a pastoral level, moreover, the arguments offered here may assist Christians of both persuasions to face the reality of death and judgment with new hope and with greater confidence in God's loving kindness toward us; for, as Scripture says, "love will come to its perfection in us when we can face the day of Judgment without fear . . . because to fear is to expect punishment, and anyone who is afraid is still imperfect in love" (1 Jn 4:17-18).