

CURRENT ESCHATOLOGY: UNIVERSAL SALVATION AND THE PROBLEM OF HELL

JOHN R. SACHS, S.J.

Weston School of Theology, Cambridge, Mass.

THE PURPOSE of this article is to take a fresh look at the ancient and much misunderstood theme of apocatastasis. Increasing contemporary use of the apocalyptic language of hell, hand in hand with the alarming appeal and growth of fundamentalism, sectarianism, and integralism, suggest the urgency of this endeavor. After first surveying the checkered history of this theme from biblical times to the present, I will, second, state and describe the central points of current Catholic theology on these issues. It manifests a remarkable degree of consensus. Third, I shall turn more closely to the highly original thought of Hans Urs von Balthasar, whose approach seems most challenging. Fourth, I shall raise a question concerning the ability of human freedom to reject God definitively. Finally, my conclusion will stress how a properly understood Christian universalism is not only consonant with several central strands of Christian belief, but is also profoundly relevant to the religious and cultural developments of the present age.

THE DOCTRINE OF APOCATASTASIS

The doctrine of apocatastasis, commonly attributed to Origen, maintained that the entire creation, including sinners, the damned, and the devil, would finally be restored to a condition of eternal happiness and salvation. This was an important theme in early Christian eschatology.¹ Even before the Christian era, of course, the idea of an *apokatastasis pantōn* was well known in ancient religion and philosophy. In Eastern thought especially, one finds a predominantly cyclical conception of time and history according to which the end always involves a return to the

¹ See, for example, Brian E. Daley, "Patristische Eschatologie" in *Handbuch der Dogmengeschichte IV/7a: Eschatologie. In der Schrift und Patristik* (Freiburg: Herder, 1986) 84-248, as well as an expanded English version recently published, *The Hope of the Early Church: A Handbook of Patristic Eschatology* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ., 1991). J. W. Hanson, *Universalism, the Prevailing Doctrine of the Christian Church during its First Five Hundred Years* (Boston and Chicago: Universalist Publishing House, 1899) is still useful. For general background on the term and its history: A. Oepke, "Apokathistēmi, apokatastasis" in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* 1.387-93; Chr. Lenz, "Apokatastasis" in *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum* 1.510-16; F. Mussner and J. Loosen, "Apokatastasis" in *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche* 1.708-12.

perfection of the beginning.² The idea of a final and definitive obliteration of evil and a corresponding beatification of all creatures is found in Parsiism. Over the course of several hundred years, the rigid dualism between good and evil, for which this religious tradition was known, gave way to the notion in ancient Persian philosophy of a final victory of the good and a fiery process of renewal in which the whole world would be perfected and made eternal.³ In Stoic philosophy, too, we find forms of this idea. After the present world is destroyed in a cosmic conflagration, a new world would appear, perfecting the former in even the smallest details. Origen's works evidence great familiarity with these ideas.⁴ Cicero hoped that ultimately all men and women would live eternally in the Milky Way in their true, divine identity.⁵ In Gnostic thought, one finds the basically cyclic pattern of an original spiritual fullness of all being, a subsequent "fall" (resulting in the creation of the material world), and the appearance of a redeemer figure from the spiritual realm who leads the fallen creation back into its original and true divine fullness.⁶ The notion that all things, especially the human soul, emanate from the divine One until they eventually reach a turning point for final return is characteristic of Neo-Platonism.⁷

Turning to the Scriptures, we find that language about final restoration is notably scarce. This is not surprising, for the biblical conception of time and history is markedly linear. History is established by virtue of God's action and promise, primarily in the covenant. By virtue of God's promise, a real future is established precisely as fulfillment of the covenant promise (creation, covenant, David and the prophets, Jesus, Church, end-time). It is true that beginning with the prophets, we find a belief that God would reestablish the integrity of the covenant and restore Israel politically; this, however, is not simply a return to an initial state of harmony and perfection but a new future which God has promised to establish.⁸ This is surely the background of the disciples' question in

² See Heinrich Gross, *Die Idee des ewigen und allgemeinen Weltfriedens im alten Orient und im Alten Testament* (Trier: Paulinus, 1956).

³ G. Muller, "Origenes und die Apokatastasis," *Theologische Zeitschrift* 14 (1958) 175 f; *TDNT* 1.392.

⁴ For references see Muller, "Origenes" 176.

⁵ Brian Daley, "Apokatastasis and 'Honorable Silence' in the Eschatology of Maximus the Confessor," in *Maximus Confessor*, ed. Felix Heinzer and Christoph Schonborn (Fribourg: Editiones Universitaires, 1982) 309-39, at 309.

⁶ Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Apokatastasis," in *Dare We Hope "That All Men Be Saved"?* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1988) 223-54, at 230.

⁷ *Ibid.* 226.

⁸ *Ibid.* 227 f. In the Old Testament, the verbal form (*apokathistēmi*) became a technical term for the restoration of Israel to its own land by God (*TDNT* 1.388). As is clear from the later prophets, this restoration is not understood as the perfection and fulfillment of

Acts 1:6 and the sense of Peter's sermon in the temple to the Jews (Acts 3:21), where we find the only instance of the term *apocatastasis* in the New Testament. There *apokatastasis pantōn* refers to the fulfillment of God's covenant promise to Israel, of "all that God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old."

While the fulfillment of God's promise is not simply a return to a primordial state of perfection,⁹ it is the accomplishment of God's eternal plan from the very beginning.¹⁰ Moreover, the preaching and actions of Jesus suggest that the fulfillment of the covenant with Israel involves all of humanity and the world as a whole. God intends and accomplishes this salvation in Christ for all men and women. Thus, while neither the term nor the concept of *apocatastasis* plays a significant role in the Bible, there are many texts in the New Testament which speak about universal salvation, at least in the sense of the universal scope of God's saving action in Christ and its effective power.¹¹

On the other hand, the Scriptures make it quite clear that every individual person will finally stand accountable to the judgment of God for what he or she has done in life, and for that receive eternal reward or eternal punishment.¹² Paradoxically, it would seem that both the universality of salvation and the inescapable threat of damnation seem to have been a part of Jesus' own preaching.

Belief in human freedom and the conviction that human beings, finally accountable before God, will be rewarded or punished according to their deeds in this life, is not unique to Christianity. As we have seen, the notion of a final state of perfect and universal peace, reconciliation, and

Israel alone. God's eschatological kingdom was to be universal in scope; through Israel all the nations would be called to enter into it. The reappearance of Elijah would signal the coming of the Messiah and the dawn of the end-time, which would bring final peace and harmony.

⁹ See F. Mussner, "Die Idee der Apokatastasis in der Apostelgeschichte," in *Lex Tua Veritas: Festschrift für Hubert Junker* (Trier: Paulinus, 1961) 293-306.

¹⁰ See Eph 1:3-10, esp. v. 4: "...even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world"; Col 1:15-20; 1 Pet 1:19 f.; and Rev 13:8, which Balthasar takes to refer to the "Lamb slain before the foundation of the world" (*Mysterium Paschale* [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990] 34 f.).

¹¹ "Universalist" texts frequently cited include: Rom 5:12-21, 11:32, Eph 1:10; Phil 2:10 f.; Col 1:20; 1 Tim 2:4 f.; 1 Tim 4:10; Tit 2:11; Heb 9:27 f.; 2 Pet 3:9; John 6:37-39, 12:32, 16:33, 17:2.

¹² Among the many parables, perhaps the best example and certainly the one which, through art and architecture has had the greatest influence upon Christian piety, is the judgment scene of Matt 25:31-46. See also Matt 13:24-30, 36-43; 13:47-50; 18:23-25; 22:1-14; 25:1-13; Luke 16:19-31. Compare Rom 2:2-11; 1 Cor 3:11-15; 2 Cor 5:10; 2 Thess 1:5-10, as well as the numerous references to Gehenna (Matt 3:12, 5:22, 18:9), "eternal fire" (Matt 18:8), "furnace of fire" (Matt 13:42, 50), and "outer darkness" (Mt 8:12, 22:13).

happiness is also known in many other religions and world views. Christianity, however, may be the only faith which seems to profess both. Both the reality of human freedom and the absolutely sovereign and universal saving act of God in Christ are central to the Christian faith. Neither may be denied; one may not be played off against the other. The history of theology shows how difficult it has been to understand the relationship between the two.

From the very beginning, the notion that God's eternal plan for the world and its salvation could fail—that, in sin, human freedom was capable of finally and eternally resisting God's grace—was difficult for many to accept. What would that make of the gospel itself, the proclamation of Christ's victory over sin and death? Origen, the first truly great Christian theologian, wrestled with this problem, wondering which was greater, human freedom (and its ability to reject God) or God's love for sinners. Without trying to force his different opinions into a rigidly systematic position, we find a clear and eloquent expression of hope and confidence in the final efficaciousness of God's universal saving will.¹³ Thought by some to have taught the eventual conversion and salvation even of the demons, Origen's school of thought was condemned by the Provincial Council of Constantinople in 543.¹⁴ Nonetheless, several other important patristic authors, such as Clement of Alexandria and Gregory of Nyssa, argued for some form of apocatastasis and were not explicitly condemned. Subsequently, Christian theology seems to have placed most stress on human freedom, divine judgment, and eternal reward or punishment. By the fifth century, the threat of eternal punishment is explicitly mentioned in various symbols of the faith.¹⁵

The hope that God's universal saving will would in fact be accomplished, that all individual persons would be saved, became nothing more than the slimmest of theoretical possibilities. The pessimistic views of Tertullian and Augustine,¹⁶ who saw the vast mass of humanity as on

¹³ So Henri Crouzel, *Origen* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1989) 257–66; "L'Apocatastase chez Origène," in *Origeniana Quarta: Die Referate des 4. Internationalen Origenes-kongresses, Innsbruck, 2–6. September 1985*, ed. Lothar Lies (Innsbruck-Wien: Tyrolia, 1987) 282–90; "L'Hadès et la Géhenne selon Origène," *Gregorianum* 59 (1978) 291–329.

¹⁴ Müller, "Origenes" 189, makes the interesting suggestion that it was Origen's apparent notion of recurring world-periods (an idea directly contradictory to the biblical understanding of salvation history) that led to his condemnation, rather than his teachings concerning an apocatastasis.

¹⁵ See the so-called "Faith of Damasus," often falsely attributed to the fourth-century Bishop of Rome or to Jerome, and the "Quicumque vult," the late fifth-century symbol of faith, falsely attributed to Athanasius.

¹⁶ See especially *The City of God* 21.17–27, where Augustine defends the eternity of eschatological punishment at great length.

the road to perdition, struck deep roots. Indeed, it would seem that since the Middle Ages, the threat of eternal punishment has played a more dominant role in Christian preaching and popular piety than the good news of the world's salvation in Christ! By the time of the great scholastic theologians, elaborate justifications for hell and its torments, usually based on the requirements of divine justice, appear as an answer to questions concerning their relationship to God's loving mercy and the final beatitude of the saved.¹⁷

Throughout history, however, we find a continued interest in the doctrine of apocatastasis, itself a sign that an important truth has been in danger of being lost, a truth every bit as important as that which early church condemnations were trying to defend.¹⁸ Despite the enormous influence of Luther and Calvin, various forms appear even in Protestant theology since the seventeenth century, notably in the work of Jakob Böhme, Friedrich Schleiermacher, and, in our own century, Karl Barth. As is to be expected, Catholic representatives are few, the nineteenth-century German theologian Hermann Schell being an exception.

Turning to recent Catholic eschatology, one finds that the theme of apocatastasis continues to merit reflection. Not surprisingly, theologians follow official church teaching concerning hell. In presenting and explaining the Church's doctrine, however, current theology tries to address two significant pastoral realities. First, for many centuries, the doctrine of hell has had an exaggerated place in the theology and preaching of the Church. For many Christians, the "good news" of the kingdom became the "bad news" about judgment and punishment. Then, in reaction to the excessively juridical and often monstrous images of God which had been prevalent for so long, it has become common to ignore the topic of hell altogether or to deny its existence outright as incompatible with God's love and mercy. Some would suggest that the excessive pessimism about salvation which often characterized the Church since Augustine

¹⁷ Thomas justifies the eternity of divine punishment in terms of God's mercy and justice. See especially *ST* 3, Suppl., qq. 97-99. In Question 94, he even raises the question concerning the sense of eternal punishment from the perspective of the blessed and suggests that their happiness is all the greater when they behold the suffering which they have escaped! Compare *Sent* 4, d. 47, qq. 1 and 2; 4, d. 50, qq. 1 and 2.

¹⁸ See Esteban Deak, "Apokatastasis: The Problem of Universal Salvation in Twentieth-Century Theology" (Ph.D. diss., Toronto: Univ. of St. Michael's College, 1979). Also Richard J. Bauckham, "Universalism: A Historical Survey," *Themelios* 4/2 (January 1979) 48-54; Wilhelm Breuning, "Zur Lehre von der Apokatastasis," *Internationale katholische Zeitschrift* 10 (1981) 19-31; and Gotthold Müller, "Ungeheuerliche Ontologie: Erwägungen zur christlichen Lehre über Hölle und Allversöhnung," *Evangelische Theologie* 34 (1974) 256-75. For an extensive bibliography, see G. Müller, *Apokatastasis pantōn: A Bibliography* (Basel: Missionsbuchhandlung, 1969).

has been replaced by a naive optimism about salvation which trivializes human freedom and ultimately undermines moral responsibility. The challenge, therefore, has been to identify the true meaning and the proper place of hell in the proclamation of the gospel about the world's salvation in Christ. Among Catholic writers, Hans Urs von Balthasar is prominent as one who, in several recent books and articles,¹⁹ has considered this problem and offered penetrating reflections on the nature of Christian hope. After examining the Scripture and the Church's liturgical, doctrinal and theological tradition, Balthasar concludes that while we may not claim to know the final outcome of human decision and divine judgment with certainty, we may hope that all will be saved. Indeed, it is our duty to do so. Only thus can the disciple truly express the loving solidarity of Christ, who died for all. As we shall see, his is a pointed, but not extreme, position, quite consonant with Church teaching and the thought of most other major Catholic theologians. This makes the negative criticism which his writing has evoked from some Catholic quarters all the more alarming.²⁰

Appealing to Scripture, his opponents have claimed that we may not hope for universal salvation, because it is certain that some will in fact be damned. Such a view is usually based on a false, literalist interpretation of biblical texts and is clearly incompatible with official church teaching, but it is not uncommon. Moreover, once one is certain that there will in fact be a hell, one usually finds little difficulty in imagining just who will be among its inhabitants. There are the saved and the damned, the insiders and the outsiders. Such an attitude seems inimical to the "exceedingly abundant hope" with which believers are blessed by God in the Spirit (Rom 15:13) and often produces a self-righteousness that has little to do with the love for sinners so evident in the life of Jesus. This makes it all the more important to consider anew the ancient theme of apocatastasis and the problem of hell.

¹⁹ *Was dürfen wir hoffen?* (Einsiedeln: Johannes, 1986); *Kleiner Diskurs über die Hölle* (Ostfildern: Schwabenverlag, 1987); "Apokatastasis," *Trierer theologische Zeitschrift* 97/3 (1988) 169-82 (Collected, ET: *Dare We Hope "That All Men be Saved"?* with *A Short Discourse on Hell* and *Apokatastasis: Universal Reconciliation* [San Francisco: Ignatius, 1988]); *Theodramatik IV: Das Endspiel* (Einsiedeln: Johannes, 1983), esp. 243-93. Balthasar's interest in eschatology and in this question in particular was already strong several decades ago. See "Christlicher Universalismus" and "Umrisse der Eschatologie," in *Verbum Caro: Skizzen zur Theologie I* (Einsiedeln: Johannes, 1960) 260-75, 276-300 (ET: "Christian Universalism" and "Some Points of Eschatology," in *Word and Redemption* [New York: Herder and Herder, 1965] 127-45, 147-75); "Abstieg zur Hölle" and "Eschatologie im Umriß" in *Pneuma und Institution* (Einsiedeln: Johannes, 1974) 387-400, 410-55.

²⁰ See *Dare We Hope* 13-19, 163.

CURRENT CATHOLIC ESCHATOLOGY

The position held by virtually all Catholic theologians who have recently written on these themes may be summarized under five propositions.²¹

1) *Because human beings are free, they are able to reject God. Therefore, hell is a real possibility.* Fundamental to the biblical vision, G. Greshake reminds us, is the belief that all human beings without exception are created and called by God into a personal relationship of love with God. God's free gift of self in love is the final peace, happiness, fulfillment, and salvation of humanity. Human beings find grace and final salvation, therefore, only by freely accepting God's gift of self in such a relationship of love and living out its implications in the concrete events of their lives.²² Because they are free, they can also turn away from God by rejecting such a relationship and refusing to live according to the promise and demands of God's justice.²³ This is the essence of sin and the reason why hell is a real possibility, for hell is nothing more than the final state of one who has definitively refused to live his or her life with and in God.

God wishes nothing except to be the final salvation of the creatures God has made, but precisely because salvation consists in a personal relationship of love, it cannot be forced upon anyone. Love can exist only when it is freely given *and* freely received. God's absolute, eternal love, especially for the sinner, even for the sinner who radically refuses to acknowledge and embrace that love, cannot change or grow weak. But neither can it force the one it loves to love in return. Force is the very opposite of love. "God never by-passes human freedom in order to release people from the results of their free decisions."²⁴ Thus, one cannot play off God's justice and mercy in order to secure a "happy ending" by

²¹ Important recent works on eschatology include: Gisbert Greshake, *Gottes Heil—Glück des Menschen* (Freiburg: Herder, 1983); Zachary Hayes, O.F.M., *Visions of a Future: A Study of Christian Eschatology* (Wilmington, Del.: Glazier, 1989); Medhard Kehl, *Eschatologie* (Würzburg: Echter, 1986); Josef Ratzinger, *Eschatologie: Tod und ewiges Leben* (Regensburg: Pustet, 1977) (ET: *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life* [Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 1988]); Herbert Vorgrimler, *Hoffnung auf Vollendung: Aufriss der Eschatologie* (Freiburg: Herder, 1980). See also Wilhelm Breuning, "Systematische Entfaltung der eschatologischen Aussagen," in *Mysterium Salutis* 5.779–890. Albert Gerhards, ed., *Die größere Hoffnung der Christen: Eschatologische Vorstellungen im Wandel* (Freiburg: Herder, 1990), while not a systematic treatise on eschatology, is a good collection of essays which treat a number of important issues from exegetical, dogmatic, philosophical, liturgical, and pastoral theological perspectives.

²² Gisbert Greshake, *Gottes Heil* 249–51.

²³ Breuning, "Systematische Entfaltung" 851

²⁴ Hayes, *Visions* 187.

suggesting that with infinite love, God must “overlook” the hateful choice of the sinner. God’s justice is God’s merciful love, but, precisely as love, it must do justice to the free choice of the other.²⁵ God has created human beings as free creatures and respects human freedom unconditionally.²⁶

Even though human beings often attempt to evade responsibility and therefore avoid being taken seriously, God cannot not take creatures seriously. Because human beings are free, Christianity recognizes a godlike dignity in them. No other ideology takes human beings this seriously. In this sense, the Church’s teaching about hell says: “You count. You have ultimate significance. What you do in your life is not meaningless; it has final worth.”²⁷ Seen from this perspective, “the possibility of hell is the most radical theological statement about the nature of human freedom.”²⁸ Whether or not human beings are capable of persisting in such radical rejection of God is a question which we shall consider below.

Most theologians point out that such considerations are not designed to resurrect a religion of fear; instead, they may be seen as an effort, from the perspective of Christian faith, to call attention to the ultimate sense and seriousness of human freedom. The gospel of God’s universal, saving love may not be watered down into a drug-like assurance that, regardless of what we do, “in the end God will make everything all right,” any more than it may be distorted into the perverse announcement that God will condemn most of the world to hell.

²⁵ See Balthasar’s treatment of the unity of divine mercy and justice in *Dare we Hope* 148–57.

²⁶ Ratzinger, *Eschatology* 216.

²⁷ A. Keller, *Zeit—Tod—Ewigkeit* (Innsbruck, 1981) 126 f., quoted by Greshake, *Gottes Heil* 271.

²⁸ Hayes, *Visions* 182. In *Foundations of Christian Faith* (New York: Seabury, 1978), Rahner emphasizes that the real freedom given to the human creature, and therefore its capacity radically to refuse God, in no way limits the sovereignty of God, since this is not something that merely “happens” to God, but is something made possible by God’s free decision. Nonetheless, he makes the interesting observation that “in his absolute sovereignty and without contradiction at least from our perspective, God can establish freedom as good or as evil freedom without thereby destroying this very freedom. The fact that as subjects of a freedom still coming to be we do not know whether or not God has so established all freedom that it will reach a good decision, at least finally and ultimately, is something to be accepted in obedience as a fact we know from experience, just as we have to accept our very existence in obedience” (105). His formulation is unusual and cautious. He usually insists that human freedom is “the freedom to say ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to God” (100). In other words, if freedom could not say a final “no” to God, it would not be freedom. But here he seems to leave another possibility open. All human freedom could be established by God in such a way that it will reach a good decision. This would evidently be a conception of freedom which did not entail the possibility of a final “no” to God.

2) *Hell is, therefore, the self-chosen state of alienation from God and not an additional punishment inflicted by God upon the sinner.* We have seen how the seriousness of human freedom and responsibility before God is clearly expressed in the biblical descriptions of the final judgment which leads either to eternal reward or to eternal punishment. Responding to the problem of how divine punishment, especially eternal punishment, can be consonant with God's loving mercy, contemporary theologians, like many patristic authors, suggest that punishment for sins is not simply an additional, extrinsic act by God. Unlike punishment in the secular, juridical sphere, which is imposed from without by another (the judge), and consists in a penalty which has no intrinsic connection with the particular crime committed (paying a fine or serving time in a prison), the divine punishment of sin may be viewed as "a connatural consequence of guilt flowing from the proper nature of guilt and need not be specially added by God."²⁹ God does not torture the sinner in order to avenge Godself or seek retribution from the sinner through punishment. Rather, punishment is the suffering which is immanent to sin itself, something which the sinner brings upon himself or herself, the inevitable consequence of turning away from God.³⁰ Even the final punishment of hell which awaits the sinner who refuses to repent is not so much a sentence imposed by God, as something which the sinner creates for himself or herself by determining to live apart from God.³¹ To turn away finally and completely from God, who alone can give peace and life, inevitably means eternal suffering and death. "If sin is fundamentally the failure to love, then hell can be seen as the final fixation in that state."³²

Thus, one should not say that God has created hell. If anything, hell is the creation, or better, the "antcreation" of the sinner, who obstinately refuses God's divine will and eternal purpose in creating.³³ Hell is something of the sinner's own doing; it is freely chosen, radical self-isolation and, therefore, quite literally, the sinner's undoing. Salvation, or heaven, is to be with God, or to be "in Christ," and so with all those who are in Christ. Hell is not, by some kind of logical symmetry, being with Satan, the demons, and the other damned. Hell is being with no one at all. In this sense, one should not conceive hell as a place or

²⁹ Karl Rahner, "Guilt—Responsibility—Punishment within the View of Catholic Theology," in *Theological Investigations* 6 (New York: Seabury, 1974) 197–217, at 215.

³⁰ Greshake, *Gottes Heil* 254.

³¹ Kehl, *Eschatologie* 294.

³² Hayes, *Visions* 182, following Michael Schmaus, *Dogma 6: Justification and the Last Things* (Kansas City/London: Sheed and Ward, 1977) 254.

³³ Balthasar, *Dare We Hope* 53–55; compare Johann Auer, "Siehe, ich mache alles neu": *Der Glaube an die Vollendung der Welt* (Regensburg: Pustet, 1984) 98.

condition, already possibly inhabited, which exists before one's decision *via-à-vis* God and into which one might possibly be consigned. Hell is what I might become personally, not something which we may objectify and "ponder on how many perish in this hell and how many escape it."³⁴

According to Rahner, God may be called the punisher of sin to the extent that God has created the objective structures of the human world according to which human beings find salvation only in relationship with God, and perdition when such a relationship is rejected.³⁵ Greshake sees this not as a merely mechanical, automatic process but as an expression of God's ongoing personal providence. When the Bible pictures God as personally punishing sin, as full of wrath for sinners, it tells us that God does not remain uninvolved in or indifferent to the sinful state of humanity. God wills the life and well-being of the sinner absolutely and unconditionally. Therefore, God providentially wills the suffering or punishment intrinsic to sin as something which can bring sinners to their senses and deter them from sin in the future, much in the same way that pain prevents or at least warns us from putting our hand in a fire.³⁶ Like many patristic authors³⁷ modern theologians view the suffering brought about by sin to have a remedial and therapeutic dimension. The threat of eternal punishment as the intrinsic consequence of a radical rejection of God ought to have a deterring force.

Thus, God is not the giver of salvation *and* damnation. God wills only the salvation of all men and women. Heaven is what God chooses for humanity and what humanity must choose to receive. Hell is not something which God can choose for anyone; it is what one who rejects God chooses for himself or herself. Thus heaven and hell may not be viewed as equally possible alternatives from God for human beings at the end of their lives. Speaking of final judgment, Ratzinger insists: "Christ inflicts pure perdition on no one. In himself he is sheer salvation. . . . Perdition is not imposed by him, but comes to be wherever a person distances himself from Christ."³⁸ God has only one thing to bestow, namely, God's own self as the world's salvation. The basis for a "negative finality" as opposed to "positive fulfillment" at the end of life can only lie in the human sinner, not in God.³⁹ Still, it is clear that the "theodicy" question remains: how could a loving God create a world in which human freedom

³⁴ Balthasar, *Dare We Hope* 190.

³⁵ Rahner, "Guilt" 215; also Greshake, *Gottes Heil* 255

³⁶ Greshake, *Gottes Heil* 256.

³⁷ For examples, see Daley, "Patristische Eschatologie" 122 (Clement of Alexandria), 131 f. (Origen), 152 (Gregory Nazianzus), 156 (Gregory of Nyssa).

³⁸ Ratzinger, *Eschatology* 205 f.

³⁹ Kehl, *Eschatologie* 294.

has the capacity to damn itself eternally? Would not the (self-)annihilation of the sinner be both a more just and more merciful fate?⁴⁰

3) *Though final damnation remains a possibility with which every individual must reckon, neither Scripture nor church teaching claims that anyone in fact has been or will be finally lost.* First a few remarks regarding Scripture. Many scholars have pointed out the particular hermeneutical problems involved in the interpretation of those biblical texts which speak of the "last things." In a highly important essay⁴¹ Rahner pointed out that eschatological statements have a form and dynamic of their own and must be interpreted accordingly. He distinguished between genuine eschatological statements, which speak about the futurity of the present situation of judgment and salvation in Christ, and (false) apocalyptic statements, which claim to report or predict some additional, completely new event concerning the future end of the world, in a way that attributes even now a kind of a- or supra-historical reality to it. In this terminology, an apocalyptic understanding is either phantasy or gnosticism and has nothing to do with the truth of Scripture.⁴² The correct direction of interpretation is always from the present to the genuine future of that present reality, not from a future event pointing back into the present.

⁴⁰ Already suggested by patristic writers, this idea has been presented again recently by Edward Schillebeeckx, *Church: The Human Story of God* (New York: Crossroad, 1990). For entirely understandable reasons, he voices reservations about "superficial" theories concerning universal salvation inasmuch as they "trivialize the drama of the real course of events between oppressed and oppressors, between the good and the evil in our human history" (136). Instead, he suggests that those who are evil "not so much through theoretical denial of God as through a life-style which radically contradicts solidarity with fellow human beings and precisely in that way rejects God" will simply cease to exist at death. That, and not everlasting torture, is hell. Such persons, together with all memory of them, will be totally obliterated, for there is absolutely nothing in them which can have a future in God. "God does not take vengeance; he leaves evil to its own, limited logic" (138). There can be no kingdom of hell; in the end, there is only the one kingdom of God. "The 'eschaton' or the ultimate is exclusively positive. There is no negative eschaton" (139). In his earlier works, Schillebeeckx already suggested that only what is of love is capable of being raised from the dead by God. Still, he does have his doubts about whether such a "fundamental, definitive sinner" actually exists (137), and I think this is an important point. Is it really possible to imagine a human being utterly devoid of good, so completely evil that there is absolutely nothing for God to heal and fulfill in the resurrection? One could not even speak of a truly human person unless there had been at least some minimal, mutual experience of love. And if this were so, despite all the ways it may have been denied or deformed subsequently, how could its reality, if only in the memory of others, be obliterated? For a counterargument based on God's fidelity to creation see Kehl, *Eschatologie* 294-96.

⁴¹ "The Hermeneutics of Eschatological Assertions," in *Theological Investigations 4* (Baltimore: Helicon, 1966) 323-46.

⁴² *Ibid.* 336 f.

Thus, biblical texts which speak of the future, like those which speak of origins, are etiologial. They attempt to speak of the future (or past) on the basis of what is experienced in the present. The Bible always speaks about the end of world and its history only insofar as it speaks of what has taken place in the Christ event and the future implications of this event.

Eschatological texts of the Bible are not anticipatory reports of what will happen at the end of the world. They cannot give us information about future events, at least in the sense that they disclose facts about free actions in the future, either God's or ours, as if they were already directly seen and decreed by God, and therefore somehow already existent.⁴³ It is difficult to see how such a state of affairs would be compatible with either divine or human freedom.

Matthew 25, for example, does not give us information about an eternal hell after death, as if we could conclude that it has already been determined that a certain number will in fact be saved (the sheep in the story) and a certain number will in fact be damned (the goats). Texts like this have a paraenetic function which impresses upon the hearers the critical urgency of their own situation as a situation of judgment.⁴⁴

Jesus' parables do not contain a threat that in fact some are going to be damned, but they do confront the hearer with the real possibility that if he or she does not repent and embrace the gospel, he or she will be lost.⁴⁵ They do not predict what is in any case certain to happen, but what will happen if one spurns Christ. Such stories issue a clear warning: Don't let this happen to you.⁴⁶ Thus, eschatological descriptions concerning final judgment are best understood as ways in which the Bible speaks about human freedom and responsibility before God.⁴⁷ Properly understood, therefore, such biblical texts offer no proof whatsoever that anyone will in fact be damned. The preaching of the gospel, on the lips of Jesus and in the ministry of the Church, is an "open situation."

Church teaching confirms this by insisting that the free response of human beings is not predetermined and by condemning theories of double predestination. A review of the rather modest pronouncements by the magisterium concerning hell⁴⁸ shows that the Church teaches the "real-

⁴³ Ibid. 334.

⁴⁴ See Karl Rahner, "Hell" in *Sacramentum Mundi* 3 (New York: Herder, 1969) 7.

⁴⁵ Greshake, *Gottes Heil* 272.

⁴⁶ Balthasar, *Dare We Hope* 32 f.

⁴⁷ Hayes, *Visions* 181.

⁴⁸ According to the Provincial Council of Constantinople (543) the punishment of the demons and impious will have no end (DS 411). Lateran IV (1215) states that the dead will rise and receive, according to their works, eternal reward with Christ or eternal punishment with the devil (DS 801). Lyons II (1274) states that those who die in mortal sin or with original sin only go down immediately (*mox*) to hell (*in infernum*) but suffer different

ity" of hell only in the sense that those who die in the state of mortal sin enter into eternal punishment immediately upon death. At the same time the Church has refused to assert that anyone in fact has died or will die in such a state.

One final observation. Precisely because eschatological texts speak about the real possible future of present reality and experience, they must speak of the possibility of final damnation.⁴⁹ The reality of sin makes it quite clear that human beings can and do reject God. The possibility of hell is anchored in our present experience of sin. It is nothing more than the possibility that the sinner might choose finally and definitively to persist in such rejection.⁵⁰

4) *The real possibility of hell must be understood in terms of the gospel of God's universal saving will, which is revealed and effected in Jesus Christ. Thus heaven and hell are not to be considered equally possible outcomes, either for humanity as a whole or for individual human beings.* The real possibility of damnation about which Scripture and church teaching speak must be understood in the context of the gospel as a whole. The gospel, however, is not simply a parallel prolongation of the Jewish doctrine of the two ways, the affirmation of a final judgment before God leading either to eternal reward or punishment. Christian faith is not distinctive because it believes that human beings are morally responsible and accountable but because it believes that God has overcome human sin and reconciled the world to Godself.⁵¹ Therefore, according to Rahner, "the eschatology of salvation and of loss are not on the same plane."⁵² As Hayes puts it, the "possibility of hell stands in sharp contrast with the affirmation of the *reality* of heaven."⁵³

For Rahner, this is true in two senses. First, "we know in our Christian faith and in our unshakable hope that, in spite of the drama and the ambiguity of the freedom of individual persons, the history of salvation as a whole will reach a positive conclusion for the human race through

punishments (DS 858). In *Benedictus Deus* (1336) Benedict XII said that the souls of those who die in actual mortal sin go down immediately to hell (DS 1002). Florence (1439) reaffirmed Lyons II (DS 1306). The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (1979) has recently affirmed an "eternal punishment for the sinner, who will be deprived of the sight of God, and that this punishment will have a repercussion on the whole being of the sinner."

⁴⁹ Rahner, "Hermeneutics" 338, 340.

⁵⁰ Hayes, *Visions* 181 f.

⁵¹ Karl Rahner and Karl-Heinz Weber, *Our Christian Faith: Answers for the Future* (New York: Crossroad, 1981) 122.

⁵² "Hermeneutics" 338.

⁵³ Zachary Hayes, "Hell," in *The New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Joseph A. Komonchak, Mary Collins, and Dermot A. Lane (Wilmington, Del.: Glazier, 1987) 459.

God's own powerful grace."⁵⁴ Secondly, since grace is not "merely the offer of the bare *possibility* of salutary acts, but must be acclaimed as triumphant, because rendered efficacious by God," it can and must proclaim that some who have died in Christ have attained salvation; but it may not make such an assertion about the actual damnation of any individual.⁵⁵

Thus, Christian eschatology speaks in principle of "only *one* predestination" and has but one central affirmation, "the victory of grace in redemption consummated." It speaks of possible damnation only insofar as the "sure triumph of grace" cannot provide the human person with "already fixed and acquired points in his estimation of an existence which is still to be lived out in the boldness of freedom."⁵⁶

In a similar way, Balthasar speaks of a "change of the ages" (*Äonenwende*) in Christ which supersedes the "symmetrical" Old Testament doctrine concerning final reward and punishment and establishes a fundamental "asymmetry" between the reality and possibilities of human sin and the ever-greater grace of God, which always already encompasses it.⁵⁷ The cross and resurrection of Christ are (already) God's final judgment upon, and victory over, sin and death and the revelation of the "reward" of eternity. Therefore, the "symmetrical" concept of retribution in the Old Testament (the "two ways" of judgment) collapses. A "fundamental *asymmetry*" now exists, since anything which follows upon it can only be the working out of what is already contained in the cross and resurrection of Christ.⁵⁸

As Balthasar points out, many "universalist" texts in the New Testament express such an "asymmetry." None reflects upon it better than Romans 5, which stresses both the surpassing power and the universal scope of God's saving grace.⁵⁹ Moreover, because Jesus himself is God's judgment, he is the one who will come at the end as judge. In this "the Old Testament image of judgment—which, with few exceptions, is strictly two-sided—may well have become clearer (the Judge is the Savior of all), and . . . as a result hope outweighs fear."⁶⁰

⁵⁴ *Foundations* 435. Compare 444: "Rather the existence of the possibility that freedom will end in eternal loss stands alongside the doctrine that the world and the history of the world as a whole will *in fact* enter into eternal life with God."

⁵⁵ "Hermeneutics" 340.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Theodramatik* 4.246–53.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* 251.

⁵⁹ *Dare We Hope* 183–86. Compare Greshake, *Gottes Heil* 271 f. On Romans 5 and related texts, see M. Eugene Boring, "The Language of Universal Salvation in Paul," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 105/2 (1986) 269–92. For a less sympathetic judgment: N. T. Wright, "Towards a Biblical View of Universalism," *Themelios* 4/2 (January 1979) 54–58.

⁶⁰ Balthasar, *Dare We Hope* 44; on the "asymmetry of grace" and the "symmetry between promise and threat" in the Old Testament, see *Theodramatik*, 4.247 f. One should not draw

From the perspective of human freedom, too, there is reason to stress the asymmetrical relationship between final salvation and damnation. In the analysis of Karl Rahner, human freedom is not simply the neutral capacity to choose among options, in particular to either accept or reject God. For, "God has not created freedom as the possibility of the creative positing by a subject of what is good and evil but as the possibility of creatively positing what is good."⁶¹ Strictly speaking, human freedom is the capacity to choose God. Its (super)natural end is loving union with God; any other possibility must be understood as inherently against its inner nature, and therefore an inner contradiction. Freedom fails to attain itself in "bad freedom" and, in view of the fact that God has already "freely decided on the victory of love and salvation," is therefore "subject to a peculiar powerlessness which makes it once more impossible to regard the evil decision as an equal realisation of freedom and responsibility on the same plane as the free decision for good."⁶²

Following Rahner, Greshake concludes that because the human person is innerly equipped and oriented to choose God and finds his or her appropriate "place" only in heaven, "hell is not only that which should not be, but also, so to speak, that which is much 'more difficult' to attain."⁶³ I shall return to these suggestions at the end of this essay.

5) *Certain knowledge about the final outcome of judgment for individuals is impossible, but because of Christ's victory over sin and death, we may and must hope that all men and women will in fact be saved.* As we have seen, Catholic theologians follow the official teaching of the Church in maintaining that the human creature can definitively reject God and therefore be eternally lost. Most note that the doctrine of apocatastasis is to be rejected because it trivializes human freedom. If there is anything new or significant about the manner in which traditional teaching is now presented (aside from the fact that all forms of Augustinian double predestination and Jansenist exclusivism are clearly and strongly rejected), it is the distinctly Christological perspective which dominates. While affirming the anthropological truth regarding human freedom and

too sharp a contrast between the Old and New Testament here. As Medard Kehl points out, especially in the time before the fall of the Southern kingdom and the beginning of the exile, the prophets, using traditional material, emphasize that God's coming judgment is not the last word. Israel's future is assured in the blessing of the remnant, through whom the whole people, and finally the entire world, will be blessed. It is "not conceived simply as an open alternative between curse and blessing, according to the behavior of the people, but as the sure and lasting appearance of blessing after curse" (*Eschatologie* 110).

⁶¹ "Guilt" 210.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Gottes Heil* 272.

responsibility, contemporary theology stresses the fact that, because of God's action in Christ, human freedom exists concretely in the realm of grace, which undergirds and carries it. Thus Rahner suggests that it would be wrong to view human freedom as "so autonomous that it cannot be seen as embraced by God's more powerful freedom and his mercy."⁶⁴ While it is impossible to know the final fate of individuals, Christian faith, professing the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ as history's *eschaton*, nonetheless proclaims that "the history of salvation as a whole will reach a positive conclusion for the human race through God's own powerful grace."⁶⁵ Such a conviction in faith is the ground for the hope that all men and women individually will in fact be saved.

Thus Rahner, like virtually every other contemporary Catholic theologian, explicitly rejects a "positive, theoretical doctrine about an apocatastasis" but at the same time argues for an "unshakable hope" that in the end all men and women will in fact enjoy eternal life.⁶⁶ Even as they consider the real possibility of hell, Christians may hope—not know—that as a result of the exercise of their freedom in God's grace, "which dwarfs and also redeems all evil," in fact "hell will not in the end exist." This is a hope which they may have "first for others and therefore also for themselves."⁶⁷

HANS URS VON BALTHASAR

No one has argued more forcefully for the possibility and the necessity of such hope than Hans Urs von Balthasar, who notes that even the prayers of the Church's liturgy express the universal scope of Christian

⁶⁴ *Our Christian Faith* 121.

⁶⁵ *Foundations* 435.

⁶⁶ *Foundations* 435. Compare: Balthasar, *Theodramatik 4: Das Endspiel* 292 f.; Breuning, "Systematische Entfaltung" 850, 860 f.; Greshake, *Gottes Heil* 273; Hayes *Visions* 188; Kehl, *Eschatologie* 297; Ratzinger, *Eschatologie* 217 f.; Vorgrimler, *Hoffnung* 161. Leo Scheffczyk, "Apokatastasis: Faszination und Aporie," *Internationale katholische Zeitschrift* 14 (1985) 34–46, is an exception. Arguing against current attempts to revive this ancient doctrine in new forms, he seems to reject the sort of "asymmetry" of which these theologians speak in relationship to the two possible outcomes of the final judgment. Moreover, he finds approaches which argue for the hope for the salvation of all (despite the real possibility of hell) problematic, because they seem to be based upon an imprecise understanding of the supernatural virtue of hope, which must rest on the "foundation of divine faith." Since "faith does not contain the promise of the non-existence of hell, it cannot give rise to supernatural hope. Hope for beatitude is possible only for the believer herself (and for the other who is bound with her in supernatural love) . . ." (44). Balthasar provides the best critique of such a narrow notion of hope. Surely the hope that believers may have that all will be saved does not necessarily depend upon the promise that this will be so. For such (supernatural) hope, it is sufficient that faith "knows" that God loves all creatures and wills that they be saved and "knows" nothing which positively excludes that this might happen.

⁶⁷ Rahner, *Our Christian Faith* 120 f.

hope quite explicitly.⁶⁸ Following Kierkegaard, Balthasar emphasizes that damnation is something which each person, strictly speaking, must consider as a real possibility for himself or herself alone, not for others, since hell, in essence, is the sinner, utterly alone, as one who has rejected God.⁶⁹ Here, of course, it is one's life as a whole which is at stake, not merely the state one is in at one's last breath. Judgment does not involve a quantitative weighing of good against bad, but a manifestation of what one's basic decision has been. Even where there seems to have been a "pre-dominantly negative basic decision," Balthasar suggests that, in judging, Christ will search to see if anywhere at all there is something which has been or could be receptive to his divine love, even a "small grain of love" as a response to God's love.⁷⁰ Thus, it would seem, there is always hope, for is it really possible to imagine a human life which is and has been utterly and completely devoid of love?⁷¹

But if the cross and resurrection of Christ give me any reason to hope for my own salvation, it is only because there the saving love of God for all men and women is revealed. Thus, despite the long tradition in the West since the condemnation of Origenism, which seemed to reckon quite naturally with the final damnation of some (or most), Balthasar maintains that to hope for one's own salvation and not for the salvation of all would be utterly un-Christian, since Christ died for all men and women.⁷² It is Christ's solidarity with all sinners that requires Christian hope to be universal in scope. "We and They," the saved and the damned, are not and cannot be categories into which faith and hope, if they are truly Christian, divide humanity.⁷³ Thus, according to Balthasar, not only may we hope for the salvation of all, it is our duty to do so; otherwise we are not loving unreservedly and are usually tempted to leave the

⁶⁸ For examples, see *Dare We Hope* 35–38.

⁶⁹ *Dare We Hope* 85–96.

⁷⁰ *Theodramatik* 4.269 f., citing Adrienne von Speyr.

⁷¹ See *Dare We Hope* 57, where Balthasar relates Dostoevsky's parable of the onion from *The Brothers Karamazov* to illustrate the bare necessity of love. An angel is sent to pull up a selfish old woman from the fire of hell by the onion she once gave to a beggar, the single loving deed of her life. But when others around her tried to hold on as well, she kicked them away, screaming that the onion was hers and hers alone. At that moment the onion broke, sending the woman plunging back into the fire.

⁷² Aquinas grounded the hope for the salvation of others in the Christian love which binds all together; he therefore represents an advance upon Augustine, who tended to understand theological hope as pertaining solely to the individual's own salvation. Still, for Aquinas, there is nothing like a hope for the salvation of *all* men and women. See Balthasar, *Theodramatik* 4.289 f.

⁷³ Balthasar quotes Marcel: "For there can be no particularism of hope; hope loses all sense and all force if it does not imply the statement of an 'all of us' or an 'all together' . . ." (*Dare We Hope* 81).

others to their fate. Hope of "heaven for all" is not an "inducement to laziness in our ethical commitment but rather the heaviest demand upon all of us that one can imagine: the decision for a patience that absolutely never gives up but is prepared to wait infinitely long for the other."⁷⁴

The Mystery of Holy Saturday

For Balthasar, the true depth of Christ's solidarity with sinners is revealed in the mystery of Holy Saturday, which in a unique way brings to expression the Christian understanding of universal salvation.⁷⁵ In essence, he challenges the traditional understanding of Christ's descent among the dead, according to which he triumphantly preaches the good news of redemption to the just souls awaiting redemption, destroys the power of death, and throws open the gates of heaven. Holy Saturday, Balthasar suggests, is not Christ's victorious entrance into the underworld, but his utterly dead solidarity with sinners. Obedient to the Father as the expression of God's utterly gracious love for sinners, Christ has identified himself completely with them and their sin. Knowing only that the Father wishes this of him as an expression of God's boundless love for the world, Christ dies as one of them, a sinner, abandoned by God. As God's Son, he experiences the "hell" of the Father's absence in a way impossible for any other person. At the same time, as the one who "descends into hell," Jesus is the expression of the radical unwillingness of God to abandon sinners, even where by definition, God cannot be, insofar as hell means the utter and obstinate rejection of God.⁷⁶

And exactly in that way he disturbs the absolute loneliness striven for by the sinner: the sinner, who wants to be "damned" apart from God, finds God again in his loneliness, but God in the absolute weakness of love who unfathomably in the period of nontime enters into solidarity with those damning themselves. The words of the Psalm, "If I make my bed in the netherworld, thou art there" (Ps 139:8), thereby take on a totally new meaning.⁷⁷

On Holy Saturday, God erects the cross in hell and shows us the unimaginable depths of God's love and fidelity. In this way, Balthasar suggests, "the one who has timelessly closed himself off is opened up

⁷⁴ *Dare We Hope* 212, quoting Hans-Jürgen Verweyen.

⁷⁵ See "Abstieg zur Hölle," in *Pneuma und Institution* 400; *Mysterium Paschale* 148-88; *Theodramatik* 4.243-93.

⁷⁶ Here I have not considered an extremely unusual theory suggested at least once by Balthasar, that hell is ultimately the place not for sinners but for the "unusable remainder" of sin itself, separated from sinners by the power of the cross, thus making hell a "gift of divine grace." See *Theodramatik* 4.287 f., 293.

⁷⁷ *The Von Balthasar Reader*, ed. Medard Kehl and Werner Loser (New York: Crossroad, 1982) 153 [translated excerpt from "Abstieg zur Hölle"].

through the inescapable presence of another, who is just as timelessly near him and calls his presumptuous, seeming unapproachability into question."⁷⁸

Balthasar draws out the consequence of this for the believer in a meditation or suggestion rather than in a theory. Perhaps the vision of the crucified, who is willing to pay any price to be with the sinner, the one who would completely reject him—perhaps this vision of love, greater than which cannot be conceived, is capable of melting the heart even of the hardened sinner.⁷⁹ Thus, suggests Balthasar, God, in the visage of the crucified Son, may have ways of moving even the most obdurate human will, not in a way which would deny or overrun human freedom by force, but could in weakness persuade and compel “in his solidarity from within with those who reject all solidarity.”⁸⁰ For Balthasar this is possible because human freedom is not absolutely autonomous but relative: it is founded upon, and exists within, the mystery of Christ’s freedom, in particular, his free self-identification with sinners.⁸¹ Thus what seems for finite freedom to be a definitive rejection of God need not be evaluated by God as definitive. Such a decision cannot be simply overturned or overpowered from the outside but in such a way that God “accompanies the human person to the most extreme situation of this (negative) choice. This is what happens in the passion of Jesus.”⁸²

What is happening here is not a “theoretical” judgment about two truths: finite human freedom (and its ability to say “no” to God) vs. infinite divine freedom (which, having no such ability to reject the creature, has offered itself in forgiving love as the world’s salvation). On the theoretical plane, there would seem to be two truths, neither of which may be sacrificed.⁸³ The issue which presents itself for “practical” judg-

⁷⁸ *Theodramatik* 4.286.

⁷⁹ In literature, Balthasar finds an example of such power to persuade in the final “conversion” of Raskolnikoff through the presence of Sonja in Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*. See *Theodramatik* 4.285 f.

⁸⁰ *Reader* 153. For this reason, Balthasar calls hell a “christological place” where the sinner realizes that “this (like me) God-forsaken one is so for my sake. In this situation one can no longer speak of any overpowering if, to the one who has chosen (maybe one should say: thinks he has chosen) the complete loneliness of being-only-for-oneself, God himself enters into his very loneliness as someone who is even more lonely” (422).

⁸¹ Citing Adrienne von Speyr, Balthasar suggests that human beings are not infinitely free: “they are free within the greater freedom of God” (*Theodramatik* 4.258).

⁸² *Reader* 152 f.

⁸³ Balthasar makes no effort to resolve this tension. He stresses the fact that human freedom is finite and relative with respect to God’s infinite freedom but also the fact that it is real: God “does not overrule, pressure, or coerce with the omnipotence of his absolute freedom the precarious freedom of the creature” (*Reader* 422). Presuming that this is more than just rhetoric, two words are important here: omnipotence and precarious. It would

ment is concrete in the cross of Christ, more specifically in the mystery of Holy Saturday. There, suggests Balthasar, divine love shows a power which would seem irresistible. Or to put it more carefully: it seems infinitely more probable that the love which reveals itself so radically in the mystery of Holy Saturday has a compelling power (in weakness!) to change the heart of any sinner.⁸⁴

At the end of *A Short Discourse on Hell*, Balthasar tells us that his position is most exactly expressed by Edith Stein, who also will not in principle dismiss the possibility that the free human will can remain perpetually closed to the divine love. However, because of the nature of this love, she argues, “[i]n reality it can become infinitely improbable” for this to occur. Her argument is based on the efficacy of prevenient grace. Grace, she points out, can and does enter the human heart unsought; it must be already present in order to prepare human freedom even to do the good. Thus, it can steal into the heart of the sinner as well, winning ground and repelling the effects of sin. “And to this process of displacement there are, in principle, no limits. . . . Human freedom can be neither broken nor neutralized by divine freedom, but it may well be, so to speak, outwitted. The descent of grace to the human soul is a free act of divine love. And there are *no limits* to how far it may extend.”⁸⁵

Precisely because Balthasar repeatedly and explicitly states that he does not espouse or present a theory of apocatastasis, he goes no further and can go no further than this. Thus, he clearly wishes to push a theology of Christian hope to its very limits, a hope which is universal, free from every form of particularism and elitism, a hope which, Paul assures us, “does not disappoint” (Rom 5:5).⁸⁶

A QUESTION ABOUT HUMAN FREEDOM

As we have seen, contemporary Catholic theologians, following official Church teaching, hold that hell is a real possibility which each person must take seriously, even while emphasizing the hope that we may and must have for the salvation of all men and women. This is because human freedom is viewed as capable of rejecting God finally and irrevocably.

seem that, for Balthasar, part of the “precarious” nature of human freedom, is the questionableness of its ability to definitively reject God, not because of divine “brute force” but because of the far greater compelling “power” of God’s loving self-surrender in powerlessness.

⁸⁴ Compare *Dare We Hope* 210.

⁸⁵ Cited by Balthasar, *Dare We Hope* 219–21.

⁸⁶ *Theodramatik* 4.293. For Balthasar, such hope does not simply dispose of the real fear that the sinner must have of judgment, since in every life there has been sin, and sin is something worthy of damnation.

Still, as far as I can determine, this view of freedom, while clearly presupposed by doctrinal pronouncements concerning universal salvation and the existence of hell, has itself not been the object of dogmatic definition. Most contemporary Catholic theologians have cautiously begun to raise questions about the nature of human freedom and about some of the traditional presuppositions regarding it. Both Balthasar and Rahner, for example, have insisted that the human "yes" and "no" to God are not on the same level. As a conclusion to this study, I would like to focus on human freedom and push these insights further by asking whether or not there are reasons for doubting that human freedom can truly reach final, that is eternal definitiveness in the state of rejecting God. I believe that there are. And if there are good reasons to question the presuppositions concerning human freedom which lie behind the Church's doctrinal pronouncements regarding the existence of hell, it may be possible to speak to the issue of apocatastasis in a new and positive way.⁸⁷

The place to begin is with Rahner's own insistence that human freedom's "no" to God cannot be simply a parallel alternative to a "yes" to God. This seems to imply that freedom is not merely a neutral capacity for definitiveness and finality (in either a yet unspecified "yes" or "no" to God). We may recall that for Rahner, the human person is "the event of a free, unmerited and forgiving, and absolute self-communication of God."⁸⁸ This means that human beings are created expressly as the ones upon whom God freely bestows God's own self in love. Therefore, it would seem to be more accurate to say that human freedom is simply and most radically the capacity for God, not the capacity for *either* God or something else. Human freedom is created for one end alone: God. Only God finally "defines" the human person. Therefore, it would seem that human freedom can attain real finality only when it reaches the definitiveness for which it is specifically created. I am suggesting that the definitiveness and finality about which Rahner and others speak is not merely a "formal" characteristic of human freedom but more importantly, in a certain sense, the "matter" or "content" of freedom's divinely willed end. Human freedom is the "capacity for the eternal"⁸⁹ not simply as neutral *capacity* of choice *which* can become finalized, as opposed to

⁸⁷ In an interview a few years before his death, Rahner himself remarked that he "would still like to have written something about such a teaching on apocatastasis that would be orthodox and acceptable." See Leo J. O'Donovan, S.J., "Living into Mystery. Karl Rahner's Reflections at 75," *America* (March 10, 1979) 179.

⁸⁸ *Foundations* 116.

⁸⁹ "Theology of Freedom," in *Theological Investigations* 6 (New York: Seabury, 1974) 178-96, at 186.

remaining forever revisable. It is quite specifically a *capacity for* the eternity who is God. Human freedom becomes finally and irrevocably definitive only in God, because only in God can it really enter into eternity. As long as human freedom freely rejects God, it would fail to attain that definitiveness and finality for which it was destined.⁹⁰

One could imagine that freedom could persist in such a decision *indefinitely* without for that reason attributing eternal definitiveness to it: it would persist, quite literally, *nondefinitively*. In this sense, one could say that the human person can “decide against God forever,”⁹¹ but that would be something like a state of lasting indefiniteness or nondefinitiveness, not an eternally fixed negative. Moreover, its persistence in a stance of rejection would have to be something which at every moment was an active “effort” against the power of God’s inviting, forgiving love, something quite different from the final “rest” of human freedom which freely and finally surrenders to the power of that love.⁹²

⁹⁰ In describing the “bad act of freedom,” Rahner notes that “God has not created freedom as the possibility of the creative positing by a subject of what is good and evil but as the possibility of creatively positing what is good.” The bad act of freedom, therefore, “fails to attain the most proper and innermost nature of freedom itself” (“Guilt” 210). Is there not reason to suppose that final definitiveness belongs to the “proper and innermost nature of freedom” which bad freedom precisely fails to attain?

⁹¹ *Foundations* 435, here in a sense different, of course, from Rahner’s.

⁹² Several theologians, including Rahner and Balthasar, argue that hell cannot be called “eternal” in the same sense that heaven is eternal, although not in the way that I am suggesting. Balthasar, for example, speaks of hell as everlasting, never-ending duration, “complete withdrawal to the point of shriveling into a disconsolate immovable now,” which is utterly absent of opportunity, future, and desire. Heaven, on the other hand, implies the “highest-possible development” within the “absolute vitality of God” (*Dare We Hope* 133). Of course, Origen, like the Apologists before him, had already argued that human beings can only become “eternal” in God (Christ), since apart from God nothing is eternal (see Müller, “Origenes” 185). It seems possible to me to conceive of human freedom remaining unfixd and therefore subject to change and conversion so long as it does not rest fully in God. One need not think of another life-“time” after death in which human freedom has another opportunity to choose God, as in various forms of reincarnationalism. One could think of a “moment” of encounter which cannot be quantified, not yet eternal, but a transition, a “time” which involves some kind of duration, though not like the time of this world. Compare Ratzinger, *Eschatology* 230.

The event of death itself could be conceived of as such a process, the entrance of the “time” of a person’s whole life into eternity. In this sense, the person would remain somehow in that process of death until that “time” when he or she fully embraced God. It seems conceivable that a person could freely persist in such a state, a very “shadowy” world to be sure, and yet would all the while be capable of turning to the Lord and finally embracing the divine love. This suggestion calls into question not the possibility of rejecting God completely, but the possibility of rejecting God irrevocably and definitively. On the closely related problem of purgatory, see Rahner’s unusual suggestions in “Purgatory,” in *Theological Investigations* 19 (New York: Crossroad, 1983) 181–93.

The fact that during their lives human beings can and do reject God in sin cannot be denied. Because this is so, Rahner is correct to insist that during our lifetime, freedom in the theological sense is always a freedom to say "yes" or "no" to God.⁹³ However, I do not see that it follows that human beings can finally and definitively—eternally—say "no" to God, simply because they can say "no" to God in particular actions or because they can finally and definitively say "yes" to God. This is where I think we must hold a basic "asymmetry." Once human freedom whole-heartedly chooses God, it becomes finally definitive by sharing in God's own eternity. It is the "yes" to God, and this "yes" alone, which makes human freedom eternally definitive in the strict sense. It cannot then not choose God.

It seems to me that the real "point" of Christian doctrine and hope concerning the end is precisely the eternity of salvation: that the blessed really do, finally and irrevocably reach life and fulfillment in God, beyond every power of sin and death. The definitiveness and finality of salvation must be the point and center of Christian eschatology in a way which the nature of "damnation" should not be. The definitiveness and finality of salvation does not logically or factually depend upon or imply the definitiveness and finality of its opposite.

Another consideration which leads me to question the "eternity" of hell, closely connected with what has just been said, has to do with the significance of final judgment in the process by which human freedom reaches definitiveness and finality. The finality which human freedom is ultimately directed toward, like the very possibility of freedom itself, is a gift from God and something which, in the end, is not achieved but received.

It is just in this line of thought that Rahner presents his theology of judgment. There are two important points which manifest its dialectic nature. (1) Human freedom necessarily involves a process of self-definition and self-judgment precisely as the actualization of a fundamental and final stance for or against God. God's judgment (together with "reward" or "punishment") are not merely additional, extrinsic acts of God in relation to such self-judgment. (2) Nonetheless, because human freedom is created and utterly dependent upon God as its source and goal, no human being is capable of making an absolute and final self-judgment. That belongs to God's judgment alone. Therefore, human freedom is created for and called to a finality for which it is truly responsible but which it cannot achieve by itself. It must, in the end, be received in God's final judgment.

With respect to the first point, Rahner points out that throughout life,

⁹³ *Foundations* 99 f.

in all the particular concrete decisions which we make in freedom, we are always taking a stand for or against God and our own truest selves. This, the Scriptures remind us with particular force, is true especially in terms of the way we treat our neighbor, especially the least of the brothers and sisters. In the most fundamental sense, God has already judged the world and the human race. The Christ event is God's judgment of love and mercy in the face of the world's desperate slavery to sin and death. The place where judgment is yet to occur is in our own actions. By what we do, we judge ourselves, in the sense that we are adopting a stance vis-à-vis the God who has already revealed a final word of love to us.

No single choice or action, nor the sum of them all, can constitute a final decision before God, since each decision we make is in principle revisable. According to Rahner and others, a "fundamental option" is something which takes shape in and through the individual, concrete decisions made during the course of a lifetime as a whole and becomes definitive and finally manifest in the process of death.⁹⁴ But the critical question is precisely whether or not such a final option has final, lasting significance. If it does, how does it attain such significance? The decisive meaning of death for the Christian lies fundamentally in the conviction that, in Christ, death is not only the end or whole of a life, but the transition to final transformation and fulfillment of life.⁹⁵ The fact that the whole of a (past) human lifetime manifests a fundamental decision does not of itself imply that such a decision has a real future. This is precisely why Christian faith speaks of judgment (which must be seen in inner unity with the resurrection of the dead) as God's action.

This brings us to the second point. Human freedom, though it tends towards a definitive and final stance vis-à-vis God as the form of its own personhood (its very being or not), cannot attain this finality on its own. This is, of course, evident during life, when human decisions are in principle neither completely self-evident nor irreversible. According to Rahner no one can "adequately reflect objectively and with absolute certainty on his free decisions" and for that reason Catholic doctrine has always insisted that one cannot make a certain judgment about one's state before God, even though it is true that one does "come ever closer" to one's finality in freedom and as a conscious subject.⁹⁶ Such a judgment belongs to God alone: "The total decision in which man finally disposes of the whole of his reality, i.e., posits this totality itself in its freely determined finality, is according to revelation subject to the sole judgment of God."⁹⁷

⁹⁴ See "Guilt" 203 ff.; "Freedom" 186.

⁹⁵ Rahner, "Purgatory" 187; Kehl, *Eschatologie* 262.

⁹⁶ "Freedom" 191.

⁹⁷ "Guilt" 204.

The point Rahner wishes to make seems to be that while we do make real choices vis-à-vis God in our concrete actions, we cannot know with absolute certitude the real depth and implication of anything we do. This does not relieve us of responsibility for our actions, nor can one avoid making practical judgments about what one has done and, consequently, about what direction one's life is taking. But such judgments about oneself and others are at best provisional.

Nothing makes this clearer than human mortality itself. It is not simply a question of the degree of our knowledge about our decisions. It is finally a question of our mortality. Precisely because of death, the human person does not and cannot come to finality by virtue of a radically (one-sided) autonomous decision but only by virtue of God's final act of judgment.⁹⁸ It is only because God comes to us and receives us in death, that there can be any talk of finality and finally fulfilled identity. This is where the biblical doctrine of resurrection is an important corrective to the notion of a "natural" and "neutral" immortality of the soul.⁹⁹

But what is the nature of God's judgment? If there were nothing more to final judgment than the finalizing of our own "fundamental option," if that event were nothing more than the divine declaration that what we have freely made of our life will be so for eternity, if the process of Christian dying were nothing more than a "freezing" of what we have already accomplished (or failed to accomplish!), then the gospel would hardly be good news and we should approach death and judgment with horror. But strictly speaking, God's final judgment can only be the final future fullness of God's forgiving, life-giving judgment in the cross and resurrection of Christ. It cannot be merely a neutral "taking stock"; it is an expression of God's real victory over sin and death, in which anything and everything which has been done in love is saved and perfected by God. Thus, God's final act is a *life-giving* judgment which forgives, heals, purifies, and bestows fullness and, *therefore*, finality upon human life, that final identity for which it was created and toward which it is directed.¹⁰⁰ Human freedom is able to say "yes" to God finally and definitively only because of God's grace, finally at work in the transform-

⁹⁸ "Freedom" 191. Compare Breuning, "Zur Lehre" 31.

⁹⁹ In another context, Rahner notes that the "eschatological idea of Christianity" sees "survival from God . . . and not as emerging from history" ("Purgatory" 189).

¹⁰⁰ See Rahner, "Purgatory" 187: The believer submits to death in the hope that "he falls then into the hands of an infinite, loving God who brings everything to perfection, even though (as far as our experience goes) we surrender ourselves to him as imperfect beings." Compare Kehl, *Eschatologie* 283 ff., who understands the final event of consummation, in its different aspects of judgment, purgatory, and heaven, as a single process of finally coming to one's true identity through God's action. Compare Breuning, "Systematische Entfaltung" 860.

ing, perfecting act of judgment. In a way similar to the "quasi-formal causality" which, according to Rahner, already characterizes the operation of grace throughout life, the final, gracious act of judgment on God's part is truly creative of the finality for which human life longs. It does not create it out of nothing, but it fashions it from the "material" of a free history which has been lived by the creature, the unity in difference of its individual free actions and its fundamental option for God.¹⁰¹ It makes no sense to think of God's final action as bringing a person's freely chosen "no" to God to some kind of fullness and final definitiveness. Sin is a horrible reality but God does not "raise it up" and "save" it for eternity. And it makes little sense to imagine God as simply abandoning the sinner to his or her "no"—just as it makes no sense to imagine that "the saved" are merely confirmed in the state of their imperfect "yes" to God. It makes more sense to suppose that God can bring only a freely chosen human "yes"—only that which is of love, however small, tentative, and fragile—to fullness and, therefore, to definitiveness and finality. In a certain sense, therefore, grace alone is finally definitive and finalizing of the human person and for the human person.

Perhaps one should be content to speak of the indefinite (and so, nondefinite!) persistence or endurance of a free "no" to God, but not of its finality or eternity. As long as human freedom tries to refuse God, it fails to reach the finality for which it is created, for this finality comes not from human freedom in itself, but from and in God. Until human freedom has chosen God, it has not found its way to finality, and therefore cannot be said to be in a definitive, absolutely irrevocable stance against God. Perhaps it can be said that it is yet bound in the realm and process of death.

CONCLUSION

We have seen that there is a clear consensus among Catholic theologians today in their treatment of the notion of apocatastasis and the problem of hell. Christian faith proclaims the reality of the universal salvation revealed and accomplished by God in the death and resurrection of Christ. The real possibility of hell is understood by most to be an expression of the Christian belief in the ultimate seriousness and responsibility of the freedom with which God has endowed humanity. God's offer must be freely accepted; no one can be saved against his or her will.

A properly Christian universalism emphasizes that God wills salvation for all men and women and somehow effectively offers it to them, even where there is no explicit knowledge of Christ or belief in God. It may

¹⁰¹ See Rahner, "Guilt" 204.

not be said that only a preordained number will be saved, and certainly not that some are preordained to be damned. Likewise, it may not be said that even one person is already or will in fact be damned. All that may and must be believed is that the salvation of the world is a reality already begun and established in Christ. Such a faith expresses itself most consistently in the hope that because of the gracious love of God, whose power far surpasses human sin, all men and women will in fact freely and finally surrender to God in love and be saved.

When Balthasar speaks of the duty to hope for the salvation of all, he is articulating the broad consensus of current theologians and the best of the Catholic tradition. Like other theologians, notably Rahner,¹⁰² he intentionally pushes his position to the limit, insisting that such a hope is not merely possible but well founded. There is a fundamental "asymmetry" between God's grace and human sin, between a human "yes" to God and a possible "no" to God. While completely convinced that God's gracious self-offer must be accepted in freedom if saving grace is to be efficacious, and that human freedom is indeed capable of such a response,¹⁰³ I have tried to show that the presumption that human freedom entails a capacity to reject God definitively and eternally seems questionable. And, although this presumption enjoys the weight of the authority of Scripture and tradition, it would seem incorrect to consider this possibility as an object of faith in the same sense that the ability of human freedom in grace to choose God is an object of faith.

It is often objected that a doctrine of universal salvation undermines Christian faith in individual human freedom and final accountability: it doesn't matter what one does in the end since God will make everything right. If one views human freedom according to the suggestions I have made above, I believe that the final responsibility and accountability of human persons is affirmed, not denied. But, in any case, it seems to me that current stress in theology on the hope for universal salvation can counteract the individualistic and juridical conceptions of freedom, accountability, and judgment of previous ages and help us to view human freedom and its salvation in fundamentally communal terms. As *Lumen gentium* reminds us, Christian faith and hope look for the "restoration of all things," when the "human race as well as the entire world . . . will

¹⁰² See M. Carmel McEnroy, "A Rahnerian Contribution Towards an Orthodox Theology of Apokatastasis" (Ph.D. diss., Toronto: Univ. of St. Michael's College, 1984). Of special interest is a letter from Rahner on the subject (Appendix A, 438 f.).

¹⁰³ Rahner once pointed out that salvation of the human person "never takes place without the involvement of this person and the involvement of his freedom," for a "salvation not achieved in freedom cannot be salvation." See *Foundations* 147. I am not questioning the necessary role of human freedom in salvation, but raising a question concerning its nature and scope.

be perfectly re-established in Christ,” and not merely the salvation of individual souls.¹⁰⁴ In a real sense, none of us reaches that perfect destiny for which God has created us, until all of us enter into God’s Kingdom.

A properly understood teaching about the hope that we must have for the salvation of all is needed today, especially in view of the growing fundamentalism, sectarianism, and integralism both within and without the Christian churches. Unfortunately, history shows all too well that once one preaches the existence of hell with the same force as the existence of heaven, one is all too ready to populate it with those whom one condemns and then gives up on. After Judas, Hitler, and Stalin, why not other groups one may find reprehensible: terrorists, abortionists, atheists or gays. As Hans-Jürgen Verweyen writes: “Whoever reckons with the possibility of even only *one* person’s being lost besides himself is hardly able to love unreservedly . . . Just the slightest nagging thought of a final hell for others tempts us, in moments in which human togetherness becomes especially difficult, to leave the other to himself.”¹⁰⁵

Finally, a doctrine concerning the obligation to hope for the salvation of all has an important ethical imperative: we must truly live what we hope for. Thus the hope about which we have been speaking is not merely a hope that all will be restored at some final point, but that already here and now, all men and women are being saved. This hope, then, demands a certain posture not only with respect to future fulfillment, but to present life. Do I live here and now as one who hopes that all are being saved? Hope for the salvation of all requires that radical love and solidarity which Christians recognize on the cross of Christ. It expresses itself in active discipleship which labors for the universal communion of love and justice which God has always intended for the world.

¹⁰⁴ *Lumen gentium* 48.

¹⁰⁵ Quoted in Balthasar, *Dare We Hope* 211.