

APOCATASTASIS IN PATRISTIC THEOLOGY

JOHN R. SACHS, S.J.

Weston School of Theology

RECENTLY I SURVEYED in this journal the treatment of universal salvation and the problem of hell in current Catholic eschatology.¹ Virtually all theologians emphasize the universal scope of God's saving will and move beyond a view of divine justice which seems to separate it from and pit it against God's love and mercy. Many stress that while we believe that heaven is indeed (already) a reality, hell is, at most, a real *possibility*. After all, the Church which reverences the saints refuses to say that even one single person is or will be in hell.

These are significant and desperately needed corrections to the pessimistic and threatening exaggerations of much past theology and popular piety. Still, most Catholic theologians refuse to embrace a doctrine of universal salvation outright, not only because it would seem to have been condemned rather strongly and consistently by the magisterium but also because they believe that to do so would be tantamount to denying the reality of human freedom. Most admit and insist upon a fundamental tension or dialectic between the sovereignty of God's universally saving act and human freedom which must embrace it freely. Within the limits of Catholic "orthodoxy" what is encouraged by most is a strong and active *hope* that all will be saved.

To some, such a change in perspective may seem to be merely another example of modernity's relentless dilution of the gospel, a superficial optimism that refuses to acknowledge the power of evil in our world and our responsibility for it. In fact an ancient Christian instinct or sensibility for the power of divine grace, precisely in the face of the grim reality of human evil, lies at the heart of this "new" attitude. For reasons of space, I could only indicate this briefly in the previous article. In this one, therefore, I would like to turn, in some detail, to those patristic theologians who first grappled with these issues. I undertake the modest task of assembling some of those early voices and letting them speak. I shall focus on the two great Alexandrian theologians, Clement and Origen, and on the Cappadocians, Gregory of Nazianzus and Gregory of Nyssa.

¹ "Current Eschatology: Universal Salvation and the Problem of Hell," *TS* 52 (1991) 227-54.

CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA

Although Origen counts as the chief representative of the doctrine of apocatastasis, in actuality it is Clement (d. between 211–216), Origen's predecessor at Alexandria, who first presents this doctrine, thereby providing a foundation for the thought of his famous successor.² In order to understand this particular teaching, it should be seen in the context of his view of the nature and purpose of divine punishment in general. Clement has no doubt that everyone will be judged by God according to his or her deeds, not only at a "great and final judgment" but apparently also at other "preliminary judgments."³ The fate of unbelievers is compared to the chaff of wheat "which is driven from the face of the earth by the wind."⁴ He speaks in a very traditional manner of the penalty of "external punishment by fire" which awaits those, for example, who fail in generosity and thereby neglect the needy who are the beloved of God.⁵ And yet, in actuality, such punishing fire seems neither simply punitive nor eternal for Clement. It is not like the devouring fire of everyday life, meant to destroy the sinner, but a "discerning" or "rational flame" which serves to sanctify the sinful souls who must pass through it.⁶

According to Clement, God's absolute goodness implies that punishment can only have a pedagogical, purifying, and healing function, not only in this life, but after death as well. God does not take vengeance, for that would be simply to return evil for evil. But in loving providence God "chastens with a view to the good" of all, much as a father or teacher disciplines a child.⁷ Clement speaks of two methods of correction, the "instructive" and the "punitive" or "disciplinary." God "corrects" for three reasons: that those corrected may become better than their former selves; that by their example, others may be deterred from sin; and that those who have been injured by another's sin may not be lightly despised and easily suffer further hurt at the hands of sinners.⁸ Thus for Clement, punishment serves both a personal and communal good. Referring to those heretics who, like deaf adders,

² See Brian Daley, *The Hope of the Early Church* (New York: Cambridge Univ., 1991) 44–47; and G. Müller, "Origenes und die Apokatastasis," *Theologische Zeitschrift* 14 (1958) 174–90. Both have been very helpful sources for many text references used in this exposition.

³ *Stromateis* VII 2.12.5 (Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten drei Jahrhunderte [GCS] 17.10.4). It is hard to know whether these preliminary judgments are to occur before or after death.

⁴ *Strom.* IV 24.154.4 (GCS 15.316.30 f.).

⁵ *Quis dives salvetur* 33.3 (GCS 17.182.4).

⁶ *Strom.* VII 6.34.4 (GCS 17.27.5 ff.). ⁷ *Strom.* VII 16.102.5 (GCS 17.72.18–22).

⁸ *Strom.* IV 24.154.1–2 (GCS 15.316.22–28). Compare *Paed.* III 8.43.2–4 (GCS

refuse to listen to the true wisdom of the gospel, he expresses the hope that even they might nonetheless find healing in the "divine discipline" of God before the final judgment, and thus turn away from the path to condemnation.⁹ All believers who have sinned after baptism will likewise be subjected to discipline, whereby their sinful deeds are purged.¹⁰

This involves far more than a merely external or "forensic" process. In what can be a long and painful process of purification, Clement holds that sinners will be moved to inner conversion, "constrained to repent by necessary chastisements"¹¹ even though, somewhat paradoxically, he suggests that God's omnipotence can accomplish this without curtailing human free will.¹² In fact, thinking always of the deterministic dualism of the gnostics whom he opposed, Clement was as concerned to stress the role of free human cooperation as to emphasize the priority and power of God's saving love.¹³ God does not save us against our will.

This process brings to completion the divine pedagogy unto true virtue and knowledge already begun in the earthly life of grace, for in saving righteousness, God always works "to promote the improvement of each however possible."¹⁴ Once delivered from all punishment which had to be suffered as a "salutary" chastisement due to sin, the soul finally attains "that perfect end which is without end" in the contemplation of God "with true understanding and certainty" and is thereby transformed, healed, and divinized in a "final restoration." This is what Clement calls "apocatastasis."¹⁵ He uses the term in a variety of contexts but in general it seems to refer to the end or final perfection of a process of growth in the spiritual life, rather than in the narrower sense of a *universal* restoration that the term acquired especially after Origen.¹⁶ Nonetheless, his whole theology of divine punishment leads precisely in that direction.

In a certain sense, this interpretation of eschatological suffering is

12.261.21 ff.) and *Paed.* III 8.44.2 (GCS 12.262.10 ff.). These texts speak of God as a "benign Educator" whose punishments and rebukes upon sinners serve as a forceful means of restraining them from evil, strengthening them in their endurance against sin, and converting them to the life of grace.

⁹ *Strom.* VII 16.102.3 (GCS 17.72.9–16).

¹⁰ *Strom.* IV 24.154.3 (GCS 15.316.28 ff.).

¹¹ *Strom.* VII 2.12.5 (GCS 17.10.2–5).

¹² *Strom.* VII 2.12.1 (GCS 17.9.22 f.).

¹³ See *Strom.* VI 12.96.2 (GCS 15.480.12 f.).

¹⁴ *Strom.* VII 2.12.3 (GCS 17.9.28 f.).

¹⁵ *Strom.* VII 10.56.2–5 (GCS 17.41.15–23). Compare VII 10.57.1 (GCS 17.41.29 ff.).

¹⁶ See GCS 39.262 which lists 16 occurrences.

the forerunner of the doctrine of purgatory which developed in Christian theology. But unlike many others who followed him in the long history of discussion and dispute surrounding this doctrine, Clement sees the sufferings of purgatory not as some kind of retributive justice for those who are saved though not perfect, but as the expression of God's healing and perfecting love. In all of God's works, even in the punishment of "hell," God only wills and works the salvation of God's creatures. "It is essential that the providence which manages all be both supreme and good. It is the power of both which dispenses salvation—the one correcting by punishment, as supreme, the other showing kindness in the exercise of benefice, as a benefactor."¹⁷ The notion of a God who punishes punitively in eternity is repugnant to Clement because it contradicts God's own self-revelation in Christ the Logos, who as the divine pedagogue "has mercy, trains, encourages, warns, saves and protects" us.¹⁸ God's only work is to redeem humanity.¹⁹ This saving work has no end. God never gives up on the sinner. Clement can be confident that in the end everyone will receive help and healing, since "all things are ordered, both generally and particularly by the Lord of the universe toward the salvation of the whole."²⁰

In summary, then, there are four principles basic to Clement's approach: (1) the absolute supremacy and goodness of divine providence; (2) the fact that God's plan of salvation is not directed merely toward individuals but to the whole of humanity; (3) the power of God to persuade human freedom; and (4) the pedagogical, purifying nature of divine punishment.

ORIGEN

Without a doubt, Origen (ca. 185–251) is the theologian whose name is identified with the term "apocatastasis" and the teaching about universal salvation. Perhaps this is due to the rather extreme form of the doctrine which many claim Origen to have taught and which church authorities condemned.²¹ In some places, namely, Origen seems to

¹⁷ *Strom.* I 17.173.5 (GCS 15.107.20 ff.) cited in W. E. G. Floyd, *Clement of Alexandria's Treatment of the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Oxford Univ., 1971) 40.

¹⁸ *Protrepticus* I 6.2 (GCS 12.6.30 ff.). ¹⁹ *Prot.* IX 87.3 (GCS 12.65.12 f.).

²⁰ *Strom.* VII 2.12.2 (GCS 17.9.26 ff.). This is certainly true of human beings. Concerning the possible conversion and salvation of the demons, W. Floyd points out that, while Clement uses traditional language concerning the fires of hell which are prepared for Satan and the demons, he does not appear to think that their rejection of God is irreversible (*Clement* 72–73). In at least one passage, Floyd finds a hint that he entertained the possibility that they might yet change their minds and turn to Christ at the final judgment; see *Paed.* III 8.44.4 (GCS 12.262.21 ff.).

²¹ The first important condemnation of Origenist theses occurred at the Provincial

deny the existence of an eternal hell by suggesting that in the end, the whole creation will be brought to a single end in which all of God's enemies (including Satan and the demons) will be overcome and thereby find salvation in Christ.²²

As much as Origen may have been sympathetic to and influenced by Neoplatonic and Stoic cosmologies, his theology is rooted in the Scripture. Origen's whole theology is focused upon the creative and saving power of the divine Logos, who is stronger than every sin and whose divine power will heal all, so that the final end of all things will include the destruction of evil.²³ Commenting upon Romans 11:36, he explains that just as the being of all things has its origin and continuing existence in Christ, so also does it find its final destiny in him.²⁴

The final healing transformation and perfection of all things is not merely the result of a natural cosmological process, but the direct result of God's loving, saving action in the cross and resurrection of Christ. The cross is not merely an ethical example of pious death for believers, but the beginning of an ontological victory of God's love over evil and the devil in a new and perfect creation.²⁵ The victory of God's saving will is in no way due to some kind of "necessity" which would be imposed upon God (a tendency in the philosophical systems of Origen's time), but is the expression of the sovereign freedom of God.

The universal scope of God's saving action is particularly evident to Origen in 1 Corinthians 15:23–28. As he interprets it, this text speaks of the final end (v. 24) both as the promised destiny of creation and history and as the subjection of all Christ's enemies including death, and presumably, therefore, the real powers of death, the demons.²⁶ Origen understands the subjection of all to Christ not only in the negative sense as the destruction of his foes or the annihilation of their

Council of Constantinople in 543: "If anyone says or holds that the punishment of the demons and of impious men is temporary, and that it will have an end at some time, and that there will be a complete restoration (*apokatastasis*) of demons and impious men, *anathema sit*" (DS 2301).

²² *De principiis* I praef. 6.1 (GCS 5.79.3 ff). See also *Com. in Rom.* 5.10 (PG 14.1053A13–B7; *Com. in Rom.* 9.41 (PG 14.1243C4–1244A15); *Com. in Jo.* 1.16 (PG 14.49C7 ff.).

²³ *Contra Celsum* VIII 72 (GCS 2.289.6 ff.).

²⁴ *C. Cels.* VI 65 (GCS 2.135.13 ff.).

²⁵ G. Müller, "Origenes" 182; also his "Ungeheuerliche Ontologie: Erwägungen zur christlichen Lehre über Hölle und Allversöhnung," *Evangelische Theologie* 34 (1974) 256–75, at 262.

²⁶ Origen often identifies death with Satan. See Henri Crouzel, *Origen* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1989) 262; Lawrence Hennessey, "The Place of Saints and Sinners after Death," in Charles Kannengiesser and William L. Peterson, eds., *Origen of Alexandria: His World and His Legacy* (Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame, 1988) 293–312, at 307.

power, but as something positive and having soteriological significance.²⁷ Those who are subjected to Christ form a community of which Christ is the head, in whom there is plenteous redemption and through whom, therefore, God will be all in all. This, he says, is "what is called apocatastasis," giving his own definition to a term that had already been used at least by Clement.²⁸

In other places, Origen does not seem so sure about the final rehabilitation of the demons. In the *Treatise on First Principles*, he asks whether they "could, by virtue of their free will, become converted in future aeons, or whether their evilness, habitually ingrained for so long as to have become, so to speak, natural, would prevent this" and leaves it up to his readers to decide. He himself seems inclined to believe that such a repentance is possible.²⁹ In his *Letter to Friends in Alexandria*, however, Origen denies ever having taught the final conversion and redemption of the demons (a position, he said, only a lunatic would hold) and accused his opponents of falsifying his writings.³⁰ In a rather traditional manner, he speaks of the destruction of the demonic powers in eternal fire³¹ and allows that the devil could become so thoroughly "a liar by nature" as to destroy virtually any possibility of a free act of repentance and so bring about self-destruction.³²

Most scholars admit that the matter is not at all clear and that there is no conclusive evidence that Origen definitively held the radical form of apocatastasis which has come to be associated with his name.³³ Thus, leaving aside the question concerning the fate of the demons, we must consider how Origen understood the nature, purpose, and dura-

²⁷ In *De Princ.* III 6.5 (GCS 22.286.12 ff.; 22.287.2 f.) Origen explains that the "destruction of the last enemy" does not mean the "annihilation of his God-given substance" but the "destruction of his rebellious will." Thus the devil is destroyed "not so that in the future he might not exist, but that in the future he will no longer be "enemy" and "death." See Crouzel, *Origen* 262.

²⁸ *Comm. in Jo.* 1.1.91 (GCS 4.20.11-12).

²⁹ *De princ.* I 6.3 (GCS 5.83.9-84.6). ³⁰ H. Crouzel, *Origen* 262.

³¹ *Hom. in Jos.* 8.5 (GCS 7/2.340.20-341.5); 14.2 (GCS 7/2.381.4 ff.).

³² *Comm. in Jo.* 20.21(19).174 (GCS 10.353.17-25); see H. Crouzel, *Origen* 263.

³³ So H. Crouzel, *Origen* 262-66; Henri de Lubac, "Du hast mich betrogen, Herr" (Einsiedeln: Johannes, 1984) 84-85. Hans Urs von Balthasar, who follows Crouzel and de Lubac, also cites other authorities who share this view. See his *Dare We Hope "That All Men be Saved"?* [with *A Short Discourse on Hell and Apokatastasis: Universal Reconciliation*] (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1988) 58-62. This book is a translation of three pieces: *Was dürfen wir hoffen?* (Einsiedeln: Johannes, 1986); *Kleiner Diskurs über die Hölle* (Ostfildern: Schwabenverlag, 1987); and "Apokatastasis," *Trierer theologische Zeitschrift* 97 (1988) 169-82.

tion of eschatological punishment of human sinners. This is the real issue at stake for a doctrine of universal salvation.³⁴

For Origen, as for Clement, there is no doubt that sinners will be punished. Consciously following the Church's rule of faith, he says that the soul, after its departure from this world, will be rewarded with an "inheritance of eternal life" or given over to the "punishment of eternal fire," depending on its deeds.³⁵ Those who "remain in their sins" will finally be "swallowed up by death."³⁶ Even the intercession of the saints and martyrs, otherwise so important for Origen, is of no use at all for those who remain obstinate in sin and refuse to turn to the Lord. He acknowledges the "general agreement" that the fate of such is final.³⁷ In places, he seems to defend the existence of the "eternal fire" and "outer darkness" by introducing the notion of the common good, suggesting that God punishes not out of cruelty, but like a doctor who must sometimes cut off a limb in order to preserve the health of the body as a whole.³⁸

But even so, one can detect the softening nuances of Origen's own convictions. For Origen, the threat of punishment seems to have a *pedagogical* function. Without it, men and women could scarcely be restrained from every sort of evil and the floods of sin that would follow. This, he suggested, is how many threatening passages of Scripture are to be understood. The Logos, accommodating himself to the masses who read the Bible, "wisely utters threatening words with a hidden meaning to frighten people who would not otherwise be able to turn away from the flood of their sins."³⁹ Aware of the consequences of their actions, they may be moved to a life of holiness and fear of the Lord.⁴⁰ While a threat depends on the real possibility of its execution for its deterring effect, it would seem that Origen has his doubts. This is, perhaps, indicated when he speaks of the "hidden meaning" of such threats. He often says that the Scripture speaks about punishment in a way appropriate to the ordinary Christian. Some words are suitable

³⁴ Even supposing the existence of Satan and other demons, the Creed reminds us that the fate of the demons is not a proper question for soteriology, which concerns the salvation of the human world ("for us and for our salvation").

³⁵ *De princ.* I praef. 5 (GCS 5.11.11–12.4). Compare *Hom. in Jer.* 19 (18).15 (GCS 3.176.1) and *Hom. in Lev.* 14.4 (GCS 6.485.24 ff.), in which Origen appeals to the parable of Lazarus and the rich man.

³⁶ *Hom. in Lev.* 5.3 (GCS 6.339.3 ff.).

³⁷ *Hom. in Ez.* 4.8 (GCS 8.368.25 ff.). See Henri Crouzel, "L'Hadès et la Géhenne selon Origène," *Gregorianum* 59 (1978) 291–329, at 314.

³⁸ So H. Crouzel, "L'Hadès" 312–13, citing *Hom. in Jer.* 12.4–5 (GCS 3.91.19–93.2).

³⁹ *C. Cels.* V 15 (GCS 2.16.22 ff.).

⁴⁰ *C. Cels.* VI 26 (GCS 2.96.12 ff.).

for children or foolish persons. Evidently Origen thought there were deeper truths concerning the nature and end of divine punishment which were not well suited for discourse with simpleminded believers.⁴¹ A hint of this is found in his citation of Isaiah 48:9: "For my name's sake I will show my anger; I will bestow my honors on you, so that I will not utterly destroy you."⁴²

When Origen comments on Matthew 10:28 (and Luke 12:45), he admits that it is God who "can destroy both the body and the soul in Gehenna" but emphasizes that while the text speaks of human beings who do in fact kill, it says of God only that God *can* destroy the sinner. How could God actually do such a thing, he wonders, "since the Savior has come to seek and save those who perished"? In view of Christ's saving act, Origen seems inclined to doubt the eternal character of divine punishment.⁴³ If there are some texts in which he speaks of Gehenna as a definitive state, there are many others which seem to view it as a purifying chastisement.⁴⁴

It is in this context that Origen speaks of the "flaming sword" through which all must pass.⁴⁵ A "purifying fire" will be kindled upon earth, especially upon those who are in need of healing.⁴⁶ Those who have sinned after being baptized with the Holy Spirit must be baptized in fire.⁴⁷ The divine fire will try to cleanse sinners in the "second resurrection." Having been made clean, they shall receive good things and be saved in Christ.⁴⁸ Responding to Celsus, who sadistically caricatured God as a cook applying the fire, Origen calls God a "benefactor of those who are in need of pain and fire."⁴⁹ In God's providence, sinners find necessary purification and healing in the "ministry of punishment . . . fittingly applied by God until an appointed end."⁵⁰

⁴¹ See *C. Cels.* V 16 (GCS 2.17.21 ff.). ⁴² See *C. Cels.* V 15 (GCS 2.17.3 ff.).

⁴³ So H. Crouzel, "L'Hadès" 311, citing *Commentariorum Series* on Matthew 208, 210 (GCS 12.100 f.).

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 313. Crouzel suggests that despite some texts which speak otherwise, Origen really "cannot conceive of divine punishments other than as medicinal and merciful, leading to the improvement and conversion of those stricken" (*ibid.* 325–26). L. Hennessey makes a clear distinction between the eschatological fire which purifies (and, therefore, ends) and the *eternal* fire of Gehenna, which is suffered by the demons and the hardened, unrepentant sinners ("Place of Saints and Sinners" 295–96, 305). But even he seems to admit that such a distinction, while present, is not hard and fast (*ibid.* 296). The character of divine punishment is closely connected with the issue of its eternity, and we shall shortly consider some of Origen's hesitations about calling divine punishment eternal.

⁴⁵ *Hom. in 1 Rg.* (1 Sm.) 28.10 (GCS 3.294.15).

⁴⁶ *C. Cels.* V 15 (GCS 2.16.6 ff.).

⁴⁷ *Hom. in Jer.* 2.3 (GCS 3.19.12 ff.).

⁴⁸ *C. Cels.* V 15 (GCS 2.16.18 f.).

⁴⁹ *Hom. in Jer.* 2.3 (GCS 3.19.22–20.9).

⁵⁰ *C. Cels.* V 16 (GCS 2.17.30–18.2).

In a great many texts, Origen in fact identifies this testing, proving fire with God.⁵¹ God is a "consuming fire" which purifies the soul of its sins as a smelter's oven separates the lead from the gold.⁵² This leads to the destruction not of sinners but of the evil which has filled sinners. Origen can assure his readers that the believer with true insight understands that God's judgment is at once an act of purifying, saving mercy, for God only punishes sinners in order to save them from their death-dealing entanglement with sin and to prepare them for the eternal happiness which God has prepared for them.⁵³

Perhaps no text brought this out for Origen as well as 1 Corinthians 3:11–15. According to Crouzel, he commented on it thirty-eight times in those writings that we know.⁵⁴ The work of each will be tested by fire on "the Day." Then it will be revealed just what sort of edifice one has built on the foundation of Christ: whether of gold, silver, and precious stones, or of wood, hay, and stubble. If the work survives, the person will receive a reward; if it is burned up, the person will suffer loss, though ultimately be "saved, but only as through fire" (v. 15).⁵⁵ There is a certain *lack* of parallel here which seems congenial to Origen's thought: reward and punishment are not merely equal, parallel alternatives. In fact, "punishment" seems directed toward ultimate "reward."⁵⁶

There is, however, another way in which Origen understands the nature and significance of the fire of Gehenna, the eternal or inextinguishable fire, and the outer darkness spoken of by the Scriptures. Perhaps because of earlier writers, who (for pedagogical reasons?) focused upon the sensible torments suggested by these biblical images, often in gruesome detail, the Marcionite and gnostic heretics of Ori-

⁵¹ H. Crouzel, "L'exégèse origénienne de 1 Cor. 3,11–15 et la purification eschatologique," in Jacques Fontaine and Charles Kannengiesser (eds.), *Epektasis: Mélanges patristiques offerts au Cardinal Jean Daniélou* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1972) 273–83, at 278. See also Hennessey, "Place of Saints and Sinners" 302.

⁵² *C. Cels.* IV 13 (GCS 2.283.1).

⁵³ Like Clement, Origen often argues that punishment for sin is not punitive, but remedial. In this eschatological process of correction, purification, and instruction the soul is made capable of the true and beatifying vision of God. On the "school of souls," see B. Daley, *Hope of the Early Church* 57, and L. Hennessey, "Place of Saints and Sinners" 303–4.

⁵⁴ *Origen* 263. "L'exégèse" 273–74.

⁵⁵ On the symbolic meaning of wood, hay and stubble as referring to sins of different gravity, together with the difficult problem regarding the final fate of serious sin[ner]s, see H. Crouzel, "L'exégèse" 276–78.

⁵⁶ It is true that Origen sometimes seems to hold that the state in which a person dies is definitive, like a potter's vessel fired in the oven; see *Hom. in Jer.* 18.1 (GCS 3.151.4 ff.).

gen's time were quick to accuse God of cruelty and injustice. Origen frequently sought to defend God's goodness and justice by insisting that the fire of hell was nothing more than the intrinsic consequence of sin itself, not an additional punishment meted out by an angry, vengeful God.⁵⁷ Sinners, therefore, will suffer in different degree and manner because of the inner nature of their deeds, not because God inflicts different penalties.⁵⁸

On the day of judgment, when face to face with God, in the purity and perfection of the divine love, sin will manifest its own true nature with a burning clarity. Sinners themselves will be their own accusers and the evil they have done will ignite within them, as a fever takes hold of a person who has indulged in bad food or intemperate, unhealthy behavior.⁵⁹ Thus, "each person is punished by his own fire," a fire of his own making, not a fire which "was previously kindled by another, or which preexisted."⁶⁰ We see here a shift away from the image of a divine chastiser to the insight that final punishment and suffering arises from sinners themselves.

Can such a fire really burn eternally? The answer to this question is of central importance for understanding Origen on the subject of apocatastasis. A number of different perspectives emerge in his thought. First, simply with respect to the word and concept of the eternal, Origen often notes the ambiguity of the word "eternal," pointing out that *aiōn* and *aiōnios* can mean duration without end or simply a very long period of time, an "age" or an "aeon," which would have an end.⁶¹ In Scripture, he says, "eternity" sometimes refers to a certain length of

⁵⁷ At times, Origen himself can use gruesome metaphors, like that of wrenched joints and separated body members. But he makes it clear that the soul suffers only the "pain and torture of its own dividedness and the punishment of its own inconstancy and unorderedness," suffering which is intrinsic and necessary because it arises from being "outside the order and harmony for which it was created by God"; see *De princ.* II 10.5 (GCS 5.179.1 ff.). Even so, Origen is convinced that after these sufferings, the soul will surely be strengthened, solidified, and restored; see *de princ.* II 10.5 (GCS 5.179.8 ff.).

⁵⁸ See *De princ.* II 10.4 f. (GCS 5.177.1).

⁵⁹ *De princ.* II 10.4 (GCS 5.177.10 f.). For the background to the spiritual interpretation of the eternal fire, see L. Hennessey, "Peace of Saints and Sinners" 308–9. This notion reflects the approach of many contemporary Catholic theologians. See, e.g., Karl Rahner, "Guilt—Responsibility—Punishment within the View of Catholic Theology," in *Theological Investigations* 6 (Baltimore: Helicon, 1969) 197–217.

⁶⁰ *De princ.* II 10.4 (GCS 5.177.5 ff.), commenting upon Isaiah 50:11 ("Walk in the light of your own fire and in the flame which you all enkindle in yourselves.") B. Daley, *Hope of the Early Church* 56 also refers to *Hom. 3 in Ez.* 7 and *Hom. in Lev.* 8.8.

⁶¹ G. Müller, "Origenes" 185 cites a text explaining the deterring power of the threat of punishment in which Origen speaks of "the punishments which in the Word [i.e. the Bible] are called [reading *onomazomenon aiōnion* as "so-called" or "spoken of as"] eternal" (*C. Cels.* III 78 [GCS 1.269.19 f.]).

time, to the fact that we simply do not know the end or, finally, to the fact that something has no end in the *present* world (while there will be an end in the future world).⁶² While Origen does not hesitate to say that the life of the saints will last forever, he comes to no such certainty with regard to the punishments of hell.⁶³ He seems quite unwilling to understand the "eternity" of heaven and hell in the same way.

This becomes clearer when one recognizes that for Origen, eternity is fundamentally a Christological reality, not merely an abstract philosophical concept concerning timelessness.⁶⁴ God alone is eternal, and creatures can participate in eternity only by "being with the Lord." Only life in Christ is eternal in the strict sense of the term.⁶⁵ Origen argues that death cannot be eternal since it is the very contrary of life, which *is* eternal (in Christ).⁶⁶ Thus, eternal life and eternal death are not simply alternative forms of eternal "existence."

Finally, Origen expresses his doubt concerning the eternity of the fire of Gehenna in a consideration of human freedom and its relationship to the Logos. We have already seen that Origen understands the punishment of sins from two different perspectives: as the purifying, healing act of God which has as its goal the salvation of the sinner (God as the purifying fire), and as the intrinsic suffering and torment which results from sin (the self-enkindled fire of the sinner). Origen refuses to attribute purely punitive motives to God's action. Thus, insofar as eschatological punishment is considered an act of God (or, for example God's own fire), it can only be purifying, healing, and finally saving. It would seem that the only way Origen could conceive of an eternal fate of damnation would be from the perspective of the fire enkindled by the hardened, obdurate sinner. Finally, therefore, the real possibility of final and eternal hell seems founded on the freedom with which God has endowed rational creatures.

Origen, particularly in the *Treatise on First Principles*, goes to great lengths to emphasize the importance of human freedom and its response to God's grace. God saves no one against his or her will; God does not force or manipulate.⁶⁷ And yet, Origen seems unwilling to view human freedom as a power equal to or commensurate with divine

⁶² See H. Crouzel, *Origen* 244, who cites *Comm. in Rom.* 6.5 (PG 14.1066C12 ff.). Also G. Müller, "Origenes" 184.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ In order to establish this important point, G. Müller, "Origenes" 185 cites *Comm. in Rom.* 6.5 (PG 14.1067C4 ff.).

⁶⁵ *Comm. in Rom.* 6.5 (PG 14.1067A14 ff.).

⁶⁶ *Comm. in Rom.* 5.7 (PG 14.1037A1 ff.).

⁶⁷ H. Crouzel, *Origen* 264.

freedom and love. Origen expresses the conviction that the Logos will overcome all obstacles in the soul, and so renew and refashion it "to his own perfection" that each individual "simply by the exercise of his freedom will choose what the Logos wills and will be in that state which he has chosen."⁶⁸ Origen bases his conviction on 1 Corinthians 15:23–28, where Paul speaks of the subjection of all things under Christ. He will subject all rational creatures to himself through *persuasion*, not through constraint, and thus bring their freedom to fulfillment in obedience to the divine will.⁶⁹ In actuality, the possibility that the free creature can completely and finally close itself off from God seems to pale in comparison with Origen's faith in the absolute goodness of God and the persuasive power of God's love, which never ceases desiring to heal, restore, and save the sinner.

In the end, Origen's statements on this matter cannot be brought into a coherent, systematic harmony. They evidence his recognition of a tension which is basic to Scripture itself: on the one hand, the eternal graciousness and love with which God approaches all sinners; on the other, the freedom of the creature which God respects. However, it is possible to say that despite some texts which indicate the possibility of final, eternal damnation (or uncertainty about it), the vast majority of Origen's statements express his conviction about the noneternity of hell and the final salvation of all human beings.⁷⁰

In summary, the texts we have referred to present arguments in favor of universal salvation from five key perspectives. (1) The creative and saving power of the Logos: just as all things have their origin and continuing existence in Christ, they shall find their final destiny in him. (2) Closely related to this is the notion of final subjection of all Christ's enemies and the final subjection of all in Christ to God, so that God will be "all in all." (3) The strictly theological (Christological) character of eternity: God alone is eternal; therefore, only life with Christ is eternal in the strict sense of the word. (4) The infinite goodness and the persuasive power of God's love vis-a-vis human freedom. (5) The pedagogical, medicinal character of divine punishment: if punishment is remedial rather than punitive, how can it be eternal? God punishes to heal and save, not to condemn and destroy.⁷¹

⁶⁸ C. Cels. VIII 72 (GCS 2.288.25 ff.).

⁶⁹ See H. Crouzel, "L'Hadès" 324 f.

⁷⁰ See *ibid.* 329; B. Daley, *Hope of the Early Church* 132–34.

⁷¹ G. Müller identifies six different arguments for a doctrine of universal salvation present in Origen and influential on all subsequent discussion. (1) "Monist-speculative": God alone is the final principle of reality, making an eternal dualism impossible. (2) "Gnostic-ontological": all created reality bears the stamp of divinity in its being and must therefore necessarily return to a state of final unity and harmony in the Godhead.

While it cannot be said that Origen presents a coherent, systematic doctrine of apocatastasis (and, arguably, at least not of the sort eventually condemned by the Church), his work does represent the first major "theology of hope" for the salvation of all. The heart of his theology is a deep conviction about the *universality* of God's saving will and a fundamental confidence in God's ability to carry it out.

GREGORY OF NAZIANZUS

For a short while Origen's ideas found echoes in the writings of other important theologians. Like Origen, Gregory of Nazianzus (329/30–ca. 390) holds that sinners will be judged and punished for their transgressions both in this world and in the next.⁷² Actually, it is our own sins which will condemn us before God. On the day of visitation, he says, God will "reason with us and oppose us and set before us our sins, bitter accusers . . . calling us to account for the honor of the image which has been confused and contaminated by sin."⁷³ In this vein, Gregory insists that the chief suffering of the condemned is spiritual in nature and consists in alienation from God, and the "boundless shame of conscience" which understands what this means, and its own responsibility in bringing it about.⁷⁴ Like a worm shall be the everlasting memory of our wickedness.⁷⁵ Like Origen, Gregory interpreted Isaiah 50:11 as referring to the intrinsic interior suffering which is brought about by sin itself: "Let us not walk in the light of our fire and in the flame which we have enkindled."⁷⁶

But whether punishment is understood as the intrinsic result of sin (and therefore something that sinners do to themselves) or as a subsequent action of God following judgment, in many passages Gregory stresses its *remedial* or *purifying* character. When explaining the reason for suffering and divine chastisement, he suggests that God in his mercy wishes to instruct us and divert us from the path to death. Gentle reproof and the first elements of a scourge "to train our early years" may give way to the "prelude of his torments," the "flaming fire," the "final scourge." Threat of punishment and the actual blow

(3) "Platonic-pedagogical": punishment for sins serves only to purify and train, and cannot, therefore, be eternal. (4) "Psychological-antiindividualist": Christ will free all people from hell because he could not be blessed so long as a single creature suffered such punishment. (5) "Biblical-exegetical": passages such as Rom 5:12–21, 11:32, 36; 1 Cor 15:26–28; Phil 2:11; Col 1:19–20; Eph 1:10. (6) "Christocentric": the resurrection of Christ is a divine work greater than the first creation and establishes a new creation which will be perfect in every respect ("Ungeheuerliche Ontologie" 261–62).

⁷² *Oratio* 16.5 (PG 35.940D2–941A2).

⁷³ *Or.* 16.8 (PG 35.944D1–945A5).

⁷⁴ *Or.* 16.9 (PG 35.945C13–16).

⁷⁵ *Carmina* 1.2.15.100 (PG 37.773).

⁷⁶ See *Or.* 40.36 (PG 35.409D3–5).

alike, he says, beginning with what is light but proceeding to what is stronger, serve to instruct us in the way of the good.⁷⁷ Like Origen, he finds support for his convictions in 1 Cor 3:12–15. The divine fire will test everyone's works and consume everything unworthy of everlasting life.⁷⁸

In a way reminiscent of Origen, Gregory can even identify the divine fire with Christ. "For I know a cleansing fire, which Christ came to send upon the earth, and he himself, anagogically speaking, is called fire. It destroys what is material and evil and he would kindle it quickly, for quickly would he do us good, since he even gives us coals of fire for our aid."⁷⁹

In some passages, it is true, he seems to speak of eternal punishment in a traditional way. He speaks, for example, of the "roaring fire" and "eternal darkness far away from the light" which await the unjust on the Last Day.⁸⁰ He warns that it is better "to be punished and cleansed now than to be handed over to the torment to come, which is a time of punishment not of cleansing . . . for in Hades there is no confession or reformation for the dead. God has limited life and action to this world and scrutiny of it to the next."⁸¹

Nonetheless he often hesitates, suggesting the possibility of the final purification and rehabilitation of the sinner because of the enduring mercy of God. After referring to the punishing "fire of Sodom" which is "poured down on all sinners," the fire which is "prepared for the devil and his angels," the fire which "comes from the face of the Lord to burn up his enemies about him," and finally to that more fearful "unquenchable fire" which is "eternal for the wicked," like "the worm that does not sleep" (all of which, he says, have the power to destroy), he allows that some might prefer to imagine this fire more "humanely" as is "worthy of the punisher."⁸² What makes Gregory hedge here, even in face of the biblical language concerning (eternal) punishment is his conviction that punitive punishment is simply unworthy of God. And if punishment is remedial in nature, it hardly seems possible that it could be eternal.

Something of Gregory's underlying attitude is evident, I think, in his condemnation of Novatianist rigorism concerning the possibility of the postbaptismal forgiveness of sins. Novatian and his followers are re-

⁷⁷ See *Or.* 16.6 (*PG* 35.941D4–944A11). ⁷⁸ See *Or.* 3.7 (*PG* 35.524B12–17).

⁷⁹ *Or.* 40.36 (*PG* 36.409D5–412A6). ⁸⁰ *Carm.* 1.2.15.99 (*PG* 37.773).

⁸¹ *Or.* 16.7 (*PG* 35.944B15–C2). See *Or.* 40.6 (*PG* 36.412A6–7), where he also speaks of a "fire which is not cleansing but punishing."

⁸² *Or.* 40.36 (*PG* 36.412A7–B2). Compare *Carm.* 2.1.1.545 ff. (*PG* 37.1010).

buked because in denying the possibility of forgiveness they ignore the example of the mercy of Jesus who desires mercy rather than sacrifice and forgives sins until seventy times seven.⁸³ "Condemnation that will never forgive . . . is evil," he says, "because it strangles by its severity."⁸⁴ In receiving back into the community those who have fallen away, charity must be the supreme principle: "where there is any doubt, let humaneness (*philanthrōpon*) prevail."⁸⁵ Gregory, it would seem, cannot really imagine less from the merciful Lord in judgment. Even though he concedes that he would not receive unrepentant sinners back, he hopes that even they might be "baptized by fire in the last baptism, which is more painful and drawn out and consumes wood like grass."⁸⁶

In the *Fourth Theological Oration* (30.6), Gregory refers explicitly to the apocatastasis and by it he means the divinizing union of all rational creatures with God. Like Origen, he understands the human being as *imago Dei*⁸⁷ eschatologically and not simply protologically. At the end human creatures will at last attain to that perfect image of God according to which they were created. "God will be all in all in the time of the apocatastasis" when we are "completely formed according to the image of God (*holoi theoeideis*)."⁸⁸ Significantly for Gregory, this process entails not only the perfection of the individual but the unification and transformation of the entire human race in the body of Christ.⁸⁹ He is the new Adam in whom humanity *as a whole* finds salvation. "We have . . . the Law, the Prophets and the very sufferings of Christ, through which we all—not merely one without the other—have been restored. We, who share in the same Adam and were deceived by the serpent and killed by sin, have been saved by the heavenly Adam . . ."⁹⁰ This process begins with the assumption of a human nature by the Logos and will reach its eschatological completion when all, without exception, are formed to Christ in the glory of the resurrection. "Coming in human nature to restore humanity, he spread out his holy bodily form to the ends of the earth and gathered mortals and formed them into one. He placed this one into the arms of the great Godhead after he had washed away all stain with the blood of the Lamb and, as leader of mortal humanity, lifted them up on the path to

⁸³ See *Or.* 39.18 (*PG* 36.356B12–C2).

⁸⁴ *Or.* 39.18 (*PG* 36.356C4–7).

⁸⁵ *Or.* 39.19 (*PG* 36.357B2 f.).

⁸⁶ *Or.* 39.19 (*PG* 36.357C7–9).

⁸⁷ For extensive text references, see Heinz Althaus, *Die Heilslehre des heiligen Gregor von Nazianz* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1972) 53.

⁸⁸ *Or.* 30.6 (*PG* 36.112B7–9).

⁸⁹ See H. Althaus, *Heilslehre* 145.

⁹⁰ *Or.* 33.9 (*PG* 36.225B12–17).

heaven.⁹¹ This, he says, is the final perfection toward which all strive. Concretely, of course, this does not dispense with, but rather demands both asceticism and charity in Christian life, for divine grace and human free will work together, not apart.⁹²

In summary, the strong leanings toward apocatastasis which we find in Gregory are grounded in (1) his understanding of God's mercy and humaneness as it is revealed in Christ; (2) his general tendency to view divine punishment as remedial or purifying in character rather than as punitive; and (3) the universalism of his basic anthropology and soteriology, rooted and articulated as it is in the concrete, communal concepts of "image of God" and "body of Christ."⁹³ In the end Gregory "offers a cautious, undogmatic support of the Origenist position."⁹⁴ Both Origen and (as we shall now see) Gregory of Nyssa argued more clearly and forcefully against the eternity of hell.⁹⁵

GREGORY OF NYSSA

Gregory of Nyssa (ca. 335–394) also shares Origen's hope for universal salvation, developing and nuancing many of his ideas while rejecting those theories which he finds untenable. Among the latter would be Origen's theory about the preexistence of souls and a precreation fall,⁹⁶ the purely immaterial nature of the resurrection as a return of all spirits to their originally purely spiritual condition,⁹⁷ and

⁹¹ *Carm.* 1.2.1.161–67 (PG 37.535), cited in H. Althaus, *Heilslehre* 144.

⁹² See Donald Winslow, *The Dynamics of Salvation: A Study in Gregory of Nazianzus* (Cambridge, Mass.: Philadelphia Patristic Foundation, 1979) 167. Also H. Althaus, *Heilslehre* 146–206 ("Die subjektive Aneignung des von Christus bereiteten Heils").

⁹³ Like Origen and Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory also views evil as a deprivation of the good and, therefore, as having no real substance in itself. Unlike Origen and Gregory of Nyssa, he does not seem to have used this to argue for the noneternity of evil. See H. Althaus, *Heilslehre* 63–64.

⁹⁴ B. Daley, *Hope of the Early Church* 84. D. Winslow thinks otherwise (*Dynamics of Salvation* 165–67).

⁹⁵ So H. Althaus, *Heilslehre* 209.

⁹⁶ Constantine N. Tsirpanlis, "The Concept of Universal Salvation in Saint Gregory of Nyssa," in *Greek Patristic Theology: Basic Doctrines in Eastern Church Fathers I* (New York: E.O. Press, 1979) 41–56, at 42–43. This paper (which was originally presented at the International Conference on Patristic Studies in Oxford, September 7, 1979), together with B. Daley, *Hope of the Early Church* 85–89, provided much helpful material for the following exposition. See also J. Daniélou, "L'apocatastase chez Saint Grégoire de Nysse," *Recherches de Science Religieuse* 30 (1940) 328–347, at 341.

⁹⁷ Jean Daniélou, *L'être et le temps chez Grégoire de Nysse* (Leiden, 1970) 206–7, 223–24. Whether Origen in fact held such a position is disputed. See H. Crouzel, "L'apocatastase chez Origène," in *Origeniana Quarta: Die Referate des 4. Internationalen Origeneskongresses, Innsbruck, 2–6 September 1985*, ed. Lothar Lies (Innsbruck-Wien: Tyrolia, 1987) 282–90, at 285–87; and Brian Daley, "The Ripening of Salvation: Hope for

the possibility that the blessed might yet sin, thus opening the door to a seemingly endless cycle of falls and restorations.⁹⁸ Gregory speaks of a final apocatastasis in several places. In its most general sense, it refers to a "renewal of all things" in which the entire creation ("earthly flesh together with the soul") will ascend into the heavenly realm.⁹⁹ This entails a restoration of all things to their original condition before the appearance of sin, and, consequently, the total destruction of evil.

The "restoration of all things in the good"¹⁰⁰ is an idea which was well represented in the philosophy of his time. Stoic thought envisioned a return of all things to their origins and in Plotinus we find the notion that all emanation from the divine Oneness proceeds until it reaches a necessary limit, a turning point (*epistrophē*) both ontological and ethical in nature, whereupon longing for the divine Oneness directs the process of return and ascent.¹⁰¹

Gregory's concern, however, is distinct and specific. Unlike those philosophies which understood the return of rational souls to an original Oneness and Goodness as an escape from the evil of material existence into a purely spiritual realm, Gregory stresses the biblical conviction concerning the original goodness and final eternal destiny of the material world. All of creation longs for its creator and will eventually turn toward the one who governs all because human beings, the rational creatures which stand at its head, are created in God's own image (as soul *and* body). As such, they have the unique capacity "to participate in the divine things" and are constituted by the desire to do so. For Gregory, human nature must have something in it akin to the divine goodness which it was made to enjoy. By virtue of a "certain affinity with the divine" mingled with human nature, God draws humanity to God's own self.¹⁰²

Although sin threatens to destroy humanity's nature and destiny as God's image, Gregory is convinced that this capacity cannot be frustrated eternally.¹⁰³ This is, however, not simply because of an inherent

Resurrection in the Early Church," *Communio* 17 (Spring, 1990) 27–49, at 37–38. Both suggest that Origen only objected to the grossly materialistic conception of the resurrection held by his opponents, insisting instead upon the radical (spiritual) transformation (not destruction) of the body.

⁹⁸ See B. Daley, *Hope of the Early Church* 86.

⁹⁹ So J. Daniélou, *L'être et le temps* 222, who cites *De oratione dominica* 4 (PG 44.1165C-D).

¹⁰⁰ *In psalmorum inscriptiones* 2.14 (Greg. Nyss. opera [GNO] 5.155.11).

¹⁰¹ See H. Urs von Balthasar, "Apokatastasis," in *Dare We Hope* (above, n. 33) 223–54, at 245.

¹⁰² *Or. cat.* 5 (PG 45.21C-D, at C8–10).

¹⁰³ So B. Daley, *Hope of the Early Church* 87.

quality or characteristic of the human soul, for on its own, fallen humanity is incapable of attaining its divinely willed end. It is true that Gregory says that the "divine good is not apart from our nature" but within it, like the Kingdom of God.¹⁰⁴ However, this good has been encrusted and nearly immobilized by sin. Human efforts can go only so far to remove the "rust" and "disfigurement" of sin. Only the "great gift of God" can restore the human person to its original, God-willed beauty. The divine good within it, once restored, will be the means by which God leads the human creature back to God's own self. Gregory encourages the faithful to light the candle of reason and to search for the "lost coin" of the divine goodness within, like the woman in the parable. The end and goal of life is a "restoration [*apokatastasis*] to our original state, which is nothing other than a likeness to the divine."¹⁰⁵ Final restoration and fulfillment will, therefore, be a *divine* action in which God brings creation to its perfect actualization and fulfillment by destroying evil and restoring fallen humanity to its true and original nature as God's own image.¹⁰⁶

So, unlike the cyclical conception which lies at the heart of Stoic theories of *apokatastasis*, Gregory's hope and conviction concerning final restoration is based upon the definitive character of the new creation, precisely as God's act.¹⁰⁷ According to Gregory this takes place at the general resurrection of the dead, for "the resurrection promises us nothing other than the restoration of the fallen to their original state."¹⁰⁸ Thus, the meaning of "*apokatastasis*" often coincides with resurrection.¹⁰⁹

In several places, referring to Paul, especially to Philippians 2:10, Gregory speaks of the "final restoration of all things" when "all rational creatures look to the one who governs all."¹¹⁰ According to his interpretation, this apparently includes the fallen angels as well, so that after a long period of time, evil will be completely and finally eliminated and all voices will be one (*homophōnos*) in confessing the

¹⁰⁴ *De virginitate* 12 (GNO 8/1.300.12 ff.).

¹⁰⁵ *De morte* (GNO 9.51.16–18).

¹⁰⁶ *De virgin.* 12 (GNO 8/1.300.25 ff.). ¹⁰⁷ J. Daniélou, *L'être et le temps* 222.

¹⁰⁸ *De opificio hominis* 17.2 (PG 44.188C11–13), referring to the argument of Jesus with the Sadducees (Lk 20:27–40). Reinhard Hübner, *Die Einheit des Leibes bei Gregor von Nyssa: Untersuchung zum Ursprung der "physischen" Erlösungslehre* (Leiden: Brill, 1974) 44 n. 51, correctly notes that this text is fundamental to Gregory's entire theology. For several other textual references, see B. Daley, *Hope of the Early Church* 85.

¹⁰⁹ See J. Daniélou, *L'être et le temps* 224–26.

¹¹⁰ *Dialogus de anima et resurrectione* (PG 46.69C2–4).

lordship of Christ."¹¹¹ Gregory views this as necessary because of the initial unity of all creation in the good.

Like Origen, he also finds support for his conviction in the Pauline vision of the final subjection of all things to Christ, and in Christ to God (1 Cor 15:25–28), when “every creature of God will become what it was from the beginning, before it had absorbed any evil.” Admittedly, this happens only after going through the fire of purgation.¹¹² Although in some places he speaks of the exclusion of sinners from the City of God, and in other places refers to the threat of eternal punishment,¹¹³ he seems confident that God’s plan will in fact be realized in every creature, not only for all living persons who have become sinners, but also for those who have already been condemned to hell. In this, he clearly shares the hope and vision of Origen.¹¹⁴

¹¹¹ See *De tridui spatio* (GNO 9.285.7–286.12), in which the three days of the paschal triduum are related to the threefold victory of Christ over evil in man, woman, and the serpent. See also *Or. cat.* 26 (PG 45.68D9–11; 69B11 f.). Compare *Or. cat.* 32 (PG 45.81A1–2) where he refers to the final *synpnoia* (breathing together) and *harmonia* (harmony). Daniélou claims that this final *symphōnia* (a specifically Pauline version of apocatastasis) has nothing to do with Origen’s theory. He even insists, “one can’t even say that [Gregory] holds the thesis of universal salvation” (*L’être et le temps* 224). But he does admit that Gregory’s doctrine included the beatitude of all humanity (“L’apocatastase” 347). Tsirpanlis (*The Concept of Universal Salvation* 49–50) points out the contradiction here, citing Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Présence et Pensée: Essai sur la philosophie religieuse de Grégoire de Nysse* (Paris: Gabriel Beauchesne, 1942) 59. At least two issues are involved in this seeming contradiction. First, the relationship between Origen’s thought and Gregory’s. Daniélou is anxious to disassociate Gregory’s theology from what he believes is Origen’s theory and the unacceptable influences of Greek (especially Stoic and neo-Pythagorean) thought. Of special concern are elements of Origen’s cosmology and anthropology. He seems to think that central to Origen’s theory of apocatastasis is the notion that all rational creatures will return to their original (preexistent) state as pure spirits. We have already noted above (n. 97) that H. Crouzel and B. Daley argue against such an interpretation of Origen. In any case, it is not intrinsic to the notion of apocatastasis itself, of which there is no single universal notion anyway. Secondly, there is the issue of the difficult concept of eternity, which we have already seen in Origen (see J. Daniélou, “L’apocatastase” 347). Balthasar claims that the terms *aion* and *aionion* in Gregory do not mean infinite but a finite and determined (if long) lapse of time (after death) (*Présence* 58 n. 4). This is also what B. Daley seems to suggest (*Hope of the Early Church* 89). P. Zemp argues that while the expression *aidiotes* has a very precise philosophical and theological meaning (referring to the eternity of God and created spirit), the biblical term *aionios* (frequently used to describe eschatological punishment) has no precise definition (*Die Grundlagen heilsgeschichtlichen Denkens bei Gregor von Nyssa* [München: Hüber, 1970] 21–26).

¹¹² *In illud. . . tunc ipse* (GNO 3/2.14.5–7).

¹¹³ For example, see *Or. cat.* 40 (PG 45.104D10 ff.) and *De infantibus* (GNO 3/2.87.11). On the problem of the term “eternal,” see above, n. 111.

¹¹⁴ See B. Daley, *Hope of the Early Church* 86–87, who cites several important texts,

As much as Gregory emphasizes the gracious priority of God's saving action in the Incarnation (and, finally, in the resurrection), he also views God's final victory over evil as assured, because, like Origen, Gregory was inclined to see evil as a perversion of the good, rather than as something which had a real substance of its own. Unlike the good, it can never be absolute and unlimited. Therefore, he argued, it must eventually have an end. Evil has not in fact always existed and it cannot exist forever.¹¹⁵ Since God is the origin and final orientation of all creatures, the sinner must reach a limit when all the evil he or she can do is done; at that point the individual can turn once again toward the good. While others, notably Origen, had already suggested that the grace of true conversion in an individual's life often came at a point when the infection of sin, like a severe fever or a festering abscess, had reached its breaking point, Gregory applied this metaphor to the collective history of the world.¹¹⁶ Gregory argued that the Incarnation came precisely at the point when human evil had reached its limit. The resurrection of Christ is the definitive revelation that the power of sin has been broken.¹¹⁷

If the finitude and defeat of evil are revealed in the resurrection of Christ, it is nonetheless necessary for the rational creature freely to turn to God and embrace once again the divine love in whose image and for whom it has been created.¹¹⁸ The fact that human evil reaches its own limit does not of itself make God's grace and human freedom irrelevant.¹¹⁹ On the contrary. Because of sin the natural capacity of the sinner for God has been grossly distorted, and true freedom has been radically compromised by habitual sin. In order for human freedom to be liberated and the human person to attain the goal for which it has been created and with which it has been gifted in Christ, it must

including *In cant. hom.* 15 (GNO 6.468.15–469.9), and *De vita Moysis* 2.82 (SC 1.54). As Daley points out, referring to Daniélou's close textual analysis in "L'apocatastase," this last text is particularly interesting because of the existence of textual variants in which all references to universal salvation are omitted. This is most likely due to the rejection of such theories by later theologians, in the wake of the Origenist controversies.

¹¹⁵ *Inscr. Ps.* 2.8 (GNO 5.101.2–4). For an illuminating treatment of the whole problem of evil and Gregory's conviction that it must necessarily reach a limit, see the chapter "Comble" in Daniélou, *L'être et le temps* 186–204. Daniélou observes the same principle in Origen, *Comm. in Jo.* 2.13 (GCS 10.69.14 ff.), who in a basically Platonic argument, concludes that evil cannot possess being.

¹¹⁶ J. Daniélou, *L'être et le temps* 195.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.* 200.

¹¹⁸ See Hübner, *Einheit des Leibes* 102. For a good treatment of the relationship between grace and freedom, see Verna E. F. Harrison, *Grace and Freedom according to St. Gregory of Nyssa* (Lewiston, N.Y.: Mellen, 1992).

¹¹⁹ V. Harrison, *Grace and Freedom* 246–47.

undergo a long and painful process of purification. This process includes both traditional ascetical practices and also divine chastisement, including, if necessary, a final purifying fire after the resurrection. God does not punish "in hatred or revenge for a wicked life"; such sufferings are only a way for God "to separate the good from the evil" and "attract it into the communion of blessedness."¹²⁰

Thus for Gregory, as for Origen, divine punishment is not punitive but pedagogical. God cleanses human nature and restores it to its natural goodness as an image of God, according to which it is naturally attracted to the infinite goodness of God and is capable of choosing and clinging to God. Finally purified in the eschatological flame and no longer impeded by the sin and mutability of earthly existence, human beings will persist in the good of God's love eternally.

One final point is worth noting. Central to Gregory's eschatological vision of a final and universal restoration in the good is the *communal* nature of salvation.¹²¹ While each man and woman is created in the image of God, the image of God nonetheless comes to its fullness or *plērōma* only in the human race as a whole.¹²² For Gregory, the perfection which God intended in the creation of the human race is found in the total Christ.¹²³ According to Balthasar, this is the heart of Gregory's whole theology of the Incarnation.¹²⁴ The victory of Christ precisely as the second Adam must entail the salvation of all human beings. Christ has been raised in our flesh and so the "resurrection of this member passes to the whole as if the whole were a single living

¹²⁰ *De an. et res.* (PG 46.100B13–15).

¹²¹ On this point see J. Daniélou, "L'apocatastase" 345–47.

¹²² *De opif. hom.* 16.16 f. (PG 44.185A15–B13).

¹²³ See J. Daniélou, "L'apocatastase" 343; Balthasar, *Présence* 59. For a good discussion of the complex issue of the relationship between individual and species as image of God, see Hübner, *Einheit des Leibes* 47–51, 67–94. Werner Löser offers an excellent discussion of Hübner's critique of Balthasar's interpretation of Gregory; see his *Im Geiste des Origenes: Hans Urs von Balthasar als Interpret der Theologie der Kirchenväter* (Frankfurt: Joseph Knecht, 1976) 113–18.

¹²⁴ Balthasar speaks of what he calls the ontological and physical unity of human nature according to Gregory. "According to Gregory, the true bearer of God's image is not the individual soul but the one and only nature of humanity as a whole, of which individual human beings are only an expression and representation. Christ, inasmuch as he became an individual human being, also assumed and divinized this universal human nature and through it, all human beings are in immediate, ontological communion with him. . . . The Incarnation will thus be totally completed only when the entire human nature in all of its members has become pervious for the grace of the Incarnation, when from the body of 'Adam' there appears the Mystical Body of Christ" (*Der versiegelte Quell*, 2d ed. [Einsiedeln: Johannes, 1954] 20–21; cited by W. Löser, *Im Geiste des Origenes* 111–12).

being" because of the "continuity and oneness of the nature."¹²⁵ Otherwise the Body of Christ cannot attain its divinely willed fullness.

In summary, then, following P. Zemp, we may say that Gregory's doctrine of apocatastasis is logically based on four fundamental aspects of his thought: (1) the unity of the human race in its fullness; (2) the personal unity of all rational creatures; (3) the finitude and destruction of evil; and (4) the infinite goodness of God.¹²⁶

CONCLUSION

It would be hard to overestimate the importance and influence of Origen for patristic eschatology and for the history of theology in general. This is true not only with respect to the enormous achievements which entered into the mainstream of the Christian tradition. It is also true regarding those controversial aspects of his thought which met with strong opposition and sometimes official condemnation. Among them would be his ideas concerning the preexistence and fall of souls, the nature and form of the resurrected body, the eternal cycle of world aeons, the possibility of subsequent falls and redemptions, and, of course, the notion of apocatastasis, or universal salvation. Paradoxically, it is perhaps his great popularity, especially among some groups of monks in the Egyptian desert (Didymus the Blind and Evagrius Ponticus), which occasioned growing critique of his ideas and led to his eventual condemnation. As Balthaser points out, "the stream of Origenism, as it became wider and wider, also became more and more shallow."¹²⁷

Literalist interpretations of his writings, preoccupations with certain extreme areas of speculation in his theology, and attempts to find within or force upon Origen's thought a rigid system (which could only ignore or deny the subtleties and ambiguities in his thought)—all this led to a movement of "Origenism" which had less and less to do with the thought and spirit of the man whose name it bore. By the year 400, a list of teachings reputed to be in Origen's work and judged to be heretical was compiled under the direction of the Bishop of Alexandria. By the middle of the sixth century, the controversy reached a high point in the heated debates of different groups of Palestinian monks. Certain sympathizers of Origen were expelled from their monastery for abandoning the sound doctrine of the Church for pagan philosophical speculations.

In 543, supported by the anti-Origenists, the Emperor Justinian wrote to the Patriarch of Constantinople, attacking a series of teach-

¹²⁵ *Or. cat.* 32 (PG 45.80B9–C3).

¹²⁶ P. Zemp, *Grundlagen* 200.

¹²⁷ *Origen: Spirit and Fire*, trans. Robert J. Daly, S.J. (Washington: Catholic University of America, 1984) 1–2.

ings associated with Origen's thought, in particular the preexistence of souls, the spherical shape of the resurrected body, and the temporal nature of all punishment due to sin. In the same year, a provincial synod, meeting at the emperor's court subsequently condemned these teachings, and its decrees were signed by the Eastern patriarchs and by Pope Vigilius. In 553, just before the official opening of the Second Council of Constantinople, the assembled bishops issued fifteen anathemas condemning Origenistic theology, again at the instigation of Justinian.

But it would be unfair to call the theses condemned fair representations of Origen's thought. According to Daley, they embody a "radicalized Evagriian Christology and cosmology, and a doctrine of *apokatastasis* that went far beyond the hopes of Origen or Gregory of Nyssa. They envisage not only a spherical, ethereal risen body . . . but the complete abolition of material reality in the world to come . . . and the ultimate absorption of all created spirits into an undifferentiated unity with the divine Logos, so that even the humanity and the Kingdom of Christ will come to an end. . ."¹²⁸ In fact, Origen is not explicitly mentioned. Origen's fate, however, was sealed. And, until recent attempts to reexamine his thought and rehabilitate this great theologian, most notably by Hans Urs von Balthasar, Origen's work was for the most part considered to be heretical. That included, of course, his doctrine of apocatastasis.

Augustine, who had such an enormous influence on the history of theology, completely rejects any notion of universal salvation and goes to great length in defending the eternity of eschatological punishment.¹²⁹ Later, Thomas justifies the eternity of divine punishment by appealing to God's justice and mercy.¹³⁰ He even suggests that the happiness of the blessed is all the greater when they behold the misery which they have escaped.¹³¹ The Church continued to condemn theories of universal salvation in various contexts. Lateran IV (1215), against the Albigensians, affirmed the eternity of heaven and hell. In *Benedictus Deus* (1336), Benedict XII defined that those who die in mortal sin go down into hell immediately after death. In our own day, the Letter of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on Certain Questions Concerning Eschatology (1979) has reaffirmed the traditional teaching.

It is impossible to determine how much an effect some of Origen's more extreme theories had in provoking a negative reaction to his

¹²⁸ B. Daley, *Hope of the Early Church* 190; see H. Crouzel, *Origen* 178.

¹²⁹ *City of God* 21.17–27.

¹³⁰ *Summa theologiae* 3, Suppl., qq. 97–99.

¹³¹ See *ibid.* q. 94; compare *Sent.* 4, d. 47, qq. 1 and 2; 4, d. 50, qq. 1 and 2.

eschatology, especially the notion of apocatastasis. However, I believe Müller is right in suggesting that other elements of his teaching were the principle causes of his eventual condemnation.¹³² I would not want to suggest that the traditional position which developed and solidified after his condemnation is to be viewed simply as a reaction to the bizarre elements of his thought. The central issue has always been the Church's affirmation of human freedom and responsibility before God.

But we have seen that Origen was not alone in presenting weighty reasons for his hope that all would be saved. Before him Clement and afterwards Gregory Nazianzus and Gregory of Nyssa argued in the same direction. It is notable that none of them were condemned; indeed they continue to be held in high esteem. None of them denied human freedom and responsibility. Each of them at times has rather traditional things to say about eschatological punishment. But what really motivated them was an even stronger conviction about the infinity and incomprehensibility of God's goodness and mercy, revealed and bestowed in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. There, rather than in the philosophical currents of their times, is where, ultimately, each of these theologians founded his hope that all will be saved. Thus, their thought exhibits a certain dynamic tension—not an abstract, neutral tension that sees God's saving grace and human freedom as equal forces opposite each other, but rather a tension with a definite center of gravity, the eternal mercy and universal saving will of God.

In retrospect they might be called the "minority report," but their instincts have proven correct insofar as much of their reinterpretation of the nature and purpose of divine punishment and what might, at the very least, be called a justified "bias" in the direction of universal salvation have become part and parcel of contemporary Catholic eschatology. Theological efforts of today, which attempt to correct the pessimistic exaggerations of the past and the frightful images of God to which they gave rise, are not to be dismissed as a modern "sellout" or watering down of the gospel. I hope I have shown how deeply rooted they are in early Christian theology. The history of theology shows how difficult it is to systematize Christian belief in both the reality of human freedom and the sovereignty of divine grace. Indeed, theological reflection on the nature, possibilities, and limits of human freedom remains an important task for the future. But in the end, these patristic voices, echoed as they are in much current theology, remind us that we may and must *hope* that all will be saved. And the "reason for our hope" (1 Pet 3:15) is the incomprehensible mystery of God's love itself, not a perfect theological synthesis.

¹³² See "Origenes" 189.