

# Hell: The Mystery of Eternal Love and Eternal Obduracy

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[tsj.sagepub.com](http://tsj.sagepub.com)**Harvey D. Egan, S.J.**

Boston College

**Abstract**

The author helps redress the absence of serious theological thinking on the biblical and church doctrine of hell and indirectly contradicts current mythological caricatures. He first evaluates diverse views from history up through the twentieth century. He then argues that an orthodox contemporary theology could understand hell as the eternally loving presence of God, Christ, angels, saints, animals, vegetation, and material creation to the damned, the eternally obdurate, whose obstinate use of their freedom has rendered them incapable of receiving and responding to this loving presence.

**Keywords**

annihilation, apocatastasis, freedom (human), hell, limbo, purgatory, salvation optimism, salvation pessimism, sheol, wrath (God's)

**A**lthough hell and its punishments are salient aspects of New Testament teaching, there has been relatively little contemporary theological reflection on this seemingly impenetrable doctrine.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, most contemporary Christians—both those who accept and those who reject the existence of hell—imagine it as a

1. Paul O'Callaghan's book, *Christ Our Hope: An Introduction to Eschatology* (Washington: Catholic University of America, 2011), provides an excellent synthesis of the manifold views of the last things. However, if one checks the numerous footnotes in the section on hell (189–221), one finds that little, if any, theological reflection on this truth of the faith has taken place in the last 20 or more years.

**Corresponding author:**

Harvey D. Egan, S.J.

Email: [egan@bc.edu](mailto:egan@bc.edu)

demon-filled place of eternal tortures in the style of Hieronymus Bosch or Albrecht Dürer.<sup>2</sup> Not willing to cede the theological discussion to those who hold such beliefs, I intend to describe and evaluate a number of views on hell. I then present my own understanding of it as the mystery of the eternally loving presence of God, Christ, the saints, and creation to the damned, whose eternally obdurate use of their freedom to reject love has rendered them incapable of receiving and responding to it.

## Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's Poetic Prayer on Hell

Students I taught in a graduate seminar on Christian mysticism enthusiastically embraced Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's view expressed in *The Divine Milieu* that the new heaven and the new earth will result from an evolutionary process guided and copenetrated by God so that Jesus Christ becomes the "All-in-everything."<sup>3</sup> Teilhard's acceptance of hell's reality, however, so upset some students that they accused him of having a "lapse of faith" and quoted Hans Küng: "For me the doctrine of eternal punishment has no part in a religion of love."<sup>4</sup>

Teilhard understands, of course, that the facticity of hell "affronts" reason as a "scandal of eternal uselessness and eternal suffering." Nevertheless, this mystic-scientist of evolution insists that imperfection, sin, and evil are not merely bumps in the evolutionary process. Teilhard writes of "certain monads" that deliberately reject the power of God's evolutionary attraction and become "dark presences," "evil beings," and "malign things" that intermingle with God's "luminous presence." Therefore, the light flowing from God's fiery love in the divine milieu also contains "an outer darkness."<sup>5</sup>

Revelation alone forces Teilhard to accept hell's existence. "I shall accept the existence of hell on your word," he prays, "as a structural element in the universe." On the basis of the biblical evidence, Teilhard confesses Jesus Christ not only as a "center of attraction and beatification," but also as the one who "separates and judges."<sup>6</sup> This underscores the only two final possibilities for human beings: eternal happiness in the face-to-face encounter with God or eternal torment in the outer darkness of God's fiery love. Thus, for him, the "fire that unites in love" is also the "fire that destroys in isolation."<sup>7</sup>

2. For an excellent example of contemporary derision provoked by caricatures of hell, see the editorial "Hell: A Very Rough Guide," *Economist* 405.8816 (December 22, 2012) 25–28.
3. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Divine Milieu* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968) 155.
4. Hans Küng, *Eternal Life? Life after Death a Medical, Philosophical, and Theological Problem*, trans. Edward Quinn (New York: Crossroad, 1991) 130. Rob Bell, best-selling author and pastor, has been vehemently denounced by right-wing Evangelicals for allegedly moving away from "biblical Christianity" by questioning the existence of hell. See Rob Bell's *Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Has Ever Lived* (New York: HarperOne, 2011).
5. Teilhard de Chardin, *Divine Milieu* 147.
6. *Ibid.* 146.
7. *Ibid.* 146, 149. I prefer to say that the fire that unites in love is also the fire that excruciates in isolation. John of the Cross writes of the Holy Spirit's "fire of love" as a "sweet cautery" and "delightful wound" (John of the Cross, "The Living Flame of Love," in *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh, O.C.D., and Otilio Rodriguez, O.C.D., rev. ed. [Washington: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1991] stanza 2, nos. 1–6, pp. 657–59).

The powers of evil, in Teilhard's view, cannot diminish the divine milieu's perfection. The damned may be excluded from its luminous and beatifying aspects but not from the divine milieu itself. "They lose it," he writes, "but they are not lost to it."<sup>8</sup> Hell adds an accent, a gravity, and a contrast to the divine milieu that would not exist without it. On the other hand, Teilhard is certainly orthodox when he prays, "But you [Lord] have forbidden me to hold with absolute certainty that any single person has been damned."<sup>9</sup>

## The Salvation Optimism of Hans Urs von Balthasar and Karl Rahner

Student rejection of the doctrine of hell prompted me to assign Hans Urs von Balthasar's classic work, *Dare We Hope That "All Men Be Saved"?*<sup>10</sup> The massive criticism and praise this book received made Balthasar the most prominent of all salvation-optimistic theologians.<sup>11</sup> To his critics who accuse him of denying hell's reality, he replies, "I never spoke of certainty but of the hope [of universal salvation]."<sup>12</sup> To those who find the church's teaching on hell absurd, he maintains that if one takes the Christian faith seriously and respects Scripture, eternal damnation is "an ultimate possibility, our feelings of revulsion notwithstanding."<sup>13</sup> To Balthasar's emphasis on Scripture and the Christian faith, I would add *human freedom*.

Balthasar points out the obvious to his readers: two salient series of texts in the New Testament exist side by side but resist reconciliation in an overall synthesis. The first

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8. Teilhard, *Divine Milieu* 148. Thomas Aquinas also argues that hell does not detract from heaven: *Summa theologiae* (hereafter *ST*) 3 supplement, q. 94, a.1.
  9. Teilhard, *Divine Milieu* 147.
  10. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Dare We Hope That "All Men Be Saved"?*, trans. David Kipp and Lothar Krauth (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1988).
  11. Regarding the criticism, see Ralph Martin, *Will Many Be Saved? What Vatican II Actually Teaches and Its Implications for the New Evangelization* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012); it is a detailed analysis of *Lumen gentium* no. 16, which emphasizes the salvation-pessimism stated in this section's last paragraph: "Rather often men, deceived by the Evil One, have become caught up in futile reasoning and have exchanged the truth of God for a lie, serving the creature rather than the Creator (cf. Rom. 1:21, 25). Or some there are who, living and dying in a world without God, are subject to utter hopelessness." Chapter 6 contains trenchant criticisms of Balthasar's position.
  12. Balthasar, *Dare We Hope* 18. Balthasar stresses, too, that he is "quite comfortable" in the company of other prominent salvation-optimistic scholars: Gisbert Greshake, Romano Guardini, Walter Kasper, Hertmann-Josef Lauter, Karl Rahner, Joseph Ratzinger, Reinhold Schneider, and Hans-Jürgen Verweyen.
  13. *Ibid.* 237. N. T. Wright contends that the rejection of hell is a "massive denial of reality by cheap and cheerful Western liberalism" (*Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* [New York: HarperOne, 2008] 180). Avery Dulles writes convincingly that Scripture, the majority of the Fathers, and both the constant conciliar and theological traditions teach authoritatively that hell exists, that it is eternal, and that it begins immediately at the sinner's death. A very long, but unofficial, tradition also maintains that few are saved. See Avery Cardinal Dulles, "The Population of Hell," *First Things* 133 (May 2003) 36–41.

series alerts us to the possibility of being eternally damned;<sup>14</sup> the second alerts us to God's will and power to save everyone.<sup>15</sup> The first set was uttered, for the most part, by the preresurrection Jesus and directed at the lost sheep of Israel.<sup>16</sup> The second set, broadly speaking, comes from the Apostle Paul and the Evangelist John and has a postresurrection perspective. Balthasar cautions, however, "that this distinction can be drawn only with caution, and not categorically."<sup>17</sup>

Balthasar insists that the salvation-pessimistic texts weaken but do not invalidate the salvation-optimistic ones. The pessimistic texts awaken Christians both to life's utter seriousness and to the grandeur of human freedom. For this reason, he applauds the teaching on hell as gospel, that is, good news.<sup>18</sup>

The optimistic texts, on the other hand, disclose God's victorious love and mercy revealed through Christ's life, death, and resurrection that make even hell part of the universe accepted by Christ. Balthasar joins with Paul in asking what can separate us from the love of Christ (Rom 8:29), which imparts a love that hopes all things (1 Cor 13:7). He unites with Ignatius of Loyola in the meditation in the *Spiritual Exercises* (nos. 52–53) that ponders hell, but in the light of the crucified Christ with whom the exercitant speaks. Because of Christ's victory, "mercy triumphs over judgment" (Jas 2:13). Thus, Balthasar writes, "I would like to request that one be permitted to hope that God's redemptive work for his creation might succeed. Certainty cannot be attained, but hope can be justified."<sup>19</sup>

Balthasar contrasts his thinking on the possibility of universal salvation with that of Augustine and Karl Barth. In Balthasar's view, Augustine emphasizes hell because of the Christian laxity of his day. Even great sinners, Augustine claims, are filled with such a presumptuous hope that they do not fear hell. Balthasar maintains that Augustine's emphasis turned into polar opposites what Paul viewed dialectically: sin and grace—with Augustine the theologian of original sin overshadowing Paul the theologian of grace. Balthasar wonders how this theological giant, "still at the center of the Church," can know enough about hell to "transfer a real possibility into an objective certainty."<sup>20</sup>

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14. Mk 1:24; 3:15, 29; 9:29 12:29; Mt 5:25–26; 7:23; 8:12; 10:28; 11:21–22; 12:32; 13:42, 50; 16:16; 18:34; 22:51; 25:12, 30, 41; 1 Cor 6:9–10; 15:56; Eph 6:12–13; Heb 6:4–8; 10:26–31; Rev 20:9, 14; 21:8.
  15. Jn 12:31–32; 16:23; Rom 5:20; 8:39; 9:23; 11:26, 32; 1 Cor 15:57; 2 Cor 5:20–21; Ti 2:11; Eph 1:10; Phil 2:10–11; Col 1:20; 1 Tm 2:3; 4:10; Heb 9:28; Jas 2:13; 2 Pt 3:9; 1 Jn 4:17.
  16. Wright maintains that the majority of these texts refers not to afterlife but to Rome's impending onslaught that would turn Jerusalem into the garbage heap, Gehenna (*Surprised by Hope* 176–77).
  17. Balthasar, *Dare We Hope* 29.
  18. Greshake states that the biblical teaching on hell is the good news of a "genuine humanism" ("Himmel—Hölle—Fegfeuer im Verständnis heutiger Theologie," in *Ungewisses Jenseits? Himmel—Hölle—Fegfeuer*, ed. Gisbert Greshake [Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1986] 80).
  19. Balthasar, *Dare We Hope* 187.
  20. *Ibid.* 70–71, 97, 164. The section on Augustine and Origen is especially well done; see 47–72, 225–47.

Several times in *Dare We Hope*, Balthasar accuses Barth of also turning into a certainty what we can only hope for: the possibility of universal salvation.<sup>21</sup> He reminds those who flirt with *apocatastasis*—the declaration of the assured restoration of all in hell, demons and humans alike—that “we stand completely and utterly *under* judgment, and have no right, nor is it possible for us, to peer in advance at the Judge’s card.”<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, Jesus Christ is the judge who brought judgment under the aspect of hope.

It is somewhat paradoxical, however, that Balthasar praises those early Fathers who stress that God’s purposes must be fulfilled even against all opposing obstacles, even to the point of accepting universal salvation.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, his view that Christ suffered more than anyone possibly could, and that his descent into hell conquers evil, puts him very close to the Barthian position he criticizes. And yet Balthasar confesses that he has no certainty about whether all will be saved, but because of Christ’s resurrection one can hope that all will be saved.

Balthasar quotes at length from Edith Stein, now Saint Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, who speaks glowingly of faith in God’s limitless love and grace, which “justifies *hope for the universality of redemption*, although . . . the *possibility* of eternal damnation also persists.”<sup>24</sup> Stein admits that human freedom places limits on God’s omnipotence, but not, however, on God’s mercy, which “descends to everyone.”<sup>25</sup> Although Stein contends that it is possible to reject even divine mercy, in reality it is “infinitely improbable.”<sup>26</sup> Divine freedom, in her view, can neither break nor neutralize human freedom but may very well outwit it.<sup>27</sup> Balthasar shares her optimism.

Karl Rahner is another well-known salvation-optimistic theologian who claims that the most significant teaching of the Second Vatican Council is the salvation-optimism found in *Lumen gentium* no. 16.<sup>28</sup> Rejecting both a “premature optimism” and any theory—especially *apocatastasis*—that trivializes the relationship between God and human beings, Rahner holds the conviction that the biblical texts concerning the possibility of eternal suffering are “threat discourses,” parnetic, and admonitory, not predictions of coming events.<sup>29</sup> These texts are a call to conversion, a summons to redirect our lives in the light of a real possibility of eternal ruin. However, they say nothing of how many are damned, if any.

If Christians must take seriously the paradox that God is both three and one, that the immutable God *became* human, and that Jesus is the God-Man, Rahner argues that they must also face this paradox: God wills the salvation of all (1 Tm 2:3–4 is his favorite

21. Ibid. 45, 94, 154, 197.

22. Ibid. 166, emphasis original.

23. Ibid. 237. Balthasar mentions Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Gregory Nazianzen, Gregory of Nyssa, Evagrius Ponticus, Diodore of Tarsus, Theodore of Mopsuestia, Isaac of Nineveh, Maximus the Confessor, and John Scotus Eriugena. Balthasar’s epilogue (225–54) is an excellent treatment of *apocatastasis*.

24. Ibid. 220, emphasis original.

25. Ibid. 219.

26. Ibid.

27. Ibid. 221.

28. Martin also sharply disagrees with Rahner. See *Will Many Be Saved?* chap. 5.

29. Karl Rahner, “Hell,” *Encyclopedia of Theology* (New York: Seabury, 1975) 603.

text), yet eternal ruin is a possibility. God's victorious, irreversible, and visible yes to the human condition reached its highpoint in Christ's life, death, and resurrection and trumps every human no. In short, "we must," Rahner writes, "maintain side by side and unwaveringly the truth of the omnipotence of the universal salvific will of God, the redemption of all by Christ, the duty of all men to hope for salvation, and also the true possibility of eternal loss."<sup>30</sup>

Because of his deep respect for both Scripture and tradition, as well as because of his theology of human freedom, Rahner rejects "any sly look at a possible apocatastasis."<sup>31</sup> Perpetual obduracy, the possibility of hell, springs from the essence of freedom that, in his view, is the ability to will what is final and conclusive. "Everyone must say to himself or herself," Rahner writes, "I can be lost, and only through my own freedom."<sup>32</sup> God's universal salvific will respects the freedom of the human person who has the ability to decide against God forever. Thus, it is not God who casts out and says "depart" to the sinner; it is the sinner's free no to God that attempts to cast God out and make God depart. In more metaphorical terms, this means that the "gates of hell" are locked from the inside.

Rahner stresses, however, that the yes and the possible no<sup>33</sup> to God, are not parallel realities. "This 'No'," he writes, "really closes itself and says 'No' to the transcendental horizon of our freedom, and at the same time lives by a 'Yes' to this God."<sup>34</sup> Thus, the freedom to deny God affirms the God who bestows freedom. Hell is an absolute contradiction, metaphysical schizophrenia, and its sufferings flow from the creature's existing as a living contradiction, analogous to the excruciation caused by the contradiction between an addict's healthy self-love and love of the addictive substance. Rahner reminds his readers, however, that the magisterium has never definitively taught that someone has in fact ultimately chosen to reject God.<sup>35</sup>

The German bishops' catechism for adults shares the position of Rahner and Balthasar: "Neither Holy Scripture, nor the Church Tradition of Faith asserts with

30. Ibid. 603–4.

31. Ibid. 604.

32. Karl Rahner and Karl-Heinz Weger, *Our Christian Faith: Answers for the Future*, trans. Francis McDonagh (New York: Crossroad, 1981) 119.

33. Michael Schmaus views sin as the most radical form of liberty (*Justification and the Last Things*, vol. 6 of *Dogma* [New York: Sheed & Ward, 1977] 267). Rahner understands sin as the most absurd and contradictory use of freedom.

34. Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, trans. William Dych, S.J. (New York: Seabury, 1978) 102. John R. Sachs argues that since a decision against God flows from human freedom and not grace, it can never be definitive. Rahner's position on freedom, on which Sachs depends, contradicts this. Moreover, in Rahner's view, all freedom is radicalized by grace, and a graced fundamental option against God is indeed possible. See John R. Sachs, S.J., "Current Eschatology: Universal Salvation and the Problem of Hell," *Theological Studies* 52 (1991) 227–54.

35. Although Stephen Bullivant shares Rahner's salvation-optimism, he argues that such optimism is likely only if one accepts the ancient teaching of Christ's descent into hell, where Christ preaches to the righteous of the nations. For Bullivant, something like this must happen after death to make explicit faith possible. Stephen Bullivant, *The Salvation of Atheists and Catholic Dogmatic Theology* (New York: Oxford University, 2012) esp. 77–114. Bullivant fails to grasp that Rahner's theology of transcendental revelation as the gnoseological dimension of the supernatural existential is the foundation for a profound theology of implicit faith.

certainty of any man that he is actually in hell. Hell is always held before our eyes as a real possibility, one connected with the offer of conversion and life.”<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, in a general audience on July 28, 1999, Pope John Paul II echoes this view:

Damnation remains a real possibility, but it is not granted to us, without special divine revelation, to know which human beings are effectively involved in it. The thought of hell—and even less the improper use of biblical images—must not create anxiety or despair, but is a necessary and healthy reminder of freedom within the proclamation that the risen Jesus has conquered Satan, giving us the Spirit of God who makes us cry “Abba, Father!” (*Rm* 8:15; *Gal* 4:6).<sup>37</sup>

## Hell as Annihilation

By appealing to biblical texts that stress a “sin unto death” (1 Jn 5:16), the “second death” (Rev 2:11; 20:6, 14; 21:8), and those who can “kill both the body and soul in hell” (Mt 10:28; Lk 20:36), some Christians attempt to remove the scandal of eternal punishment by reinterpreting it as annihilation.<sup>38</sup> For example, the sixteenth-century Socinians, the seventeenth-century sect of the “gospel of gratuitous salvation,” the Jehovah’s Witnesses, Friedrich Schleiermacher, the English theologian F. D. Maurice (d. 1872), some twentieth-century Liberal Protestant theologians, and a number of evangelical theologians, including Anglican John Stott (d. 2011), Church of Christ elder Edward Fudge, Open Theists Clark Pinnock and John Sanders, as well as Philip Edgecombe Hughes and others hold this opinion.<sup>39</sup> An Internet search of “annihilation”

36. Catholic Church, *The Church’s Confession of Faith: A Catholic Catechism of Faith*, originally published by the German Bishops’ Conference, trans. Stephen Wentworth Arndt, ed. Mark Jordan (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1987) 346.

37. John Paul II, General Audience, July 28, 1999, [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/audiences/1999/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_aud\\_28071999\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/audiences/1999/documents/hf_jp-ii_aud_28071999_en.html). The 2010 joint Catholic–Lutheran statement is also optimistic about salvation: “Our churches affirm the possibility of eternal loss, that human persons could be removed from the presence of God for all eternity. The possibility of loss is not to be ascribed to any will of God to damn some while redeeming others. God wishes the salvation of all. The possibility of loss points to the importance of a living faith in God. Those who refuse God’s mercy can only live in the hell of their own self-enclosure. What is opposed to God cannot enter God’s kingdom. Our churches also pray for all people. In accord with such prayer, this dialogue affirms the hope that no one will be lost from the community of the saints. We are confident in entrusting every person to the one Judge who died for their sins” (*The Hope of Eternal Life: Common Statement of the Eleventh Round of the U.S. Lutheran–Roman Catholic Dialogue*, ed. Lowell G. Almen and Richard J. Sklba [Minneapolis: Lutheran University, 2010] nos. 133–34).

38. For an overview, see Alistair Mason, “Universalism,” in *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought*, ed. Adrian Hastings, Alistair Mason, and Hugh Pyper, with Ingrid Lawrie and Cecily Bennett (New York: Oxford University, 2000) 733–34; Charles H. Pinnock, “Annihilationism,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology*, ed. Jerry L. Walls (New York: Oxford University, 2008) 462–73. For arguments in favor of annihilation, see Bruno J. Korošak, *La vita eterna: Compendio di escatologia* (Rome: Pontificia Università Urbaniana, 1983) 74; and Thomas and Gertrude Sartory, *In der Hölle brennt kein Feuer* (Munich: Kindler, 1968) 61–248.

39. O’Callaghan, *Christ Our Hope* 208–10, esp. n. 97; Tony Gray, “Destroyed Forever: An Examination of the Debates concerning Annihilation and Conditional Immortality,” *Themelios* 21.2 (January 1996) 14–18.

uncovers an astonishing number of Christian popularizers and preachers who embrace this view. Even the late Richard John Neuhaus speculated that “since evil does not have independent ontological status but is the absence of good, perhaps the fate of Judas is that of total annihilation.”<sup>40</sup>

The logic and merit of this view, despite its flaws, are underscored by the theology of Thomas Aquinas, John Duns Scotus, Karl Rahner, Karl Barth, and others who maintain that even without sin, God would have become incarnate.<sup>41</sup> They further contend that Adam’s transgression should have annihilated creation, such is sin’s destructive might. However, because God created in view of the incarnation and the risen Christ as the seed of the new heaven and earth, the power of Adam’s sin to annihilate was held in check.

British Jesuit theologian Jack Mahoney presents an intriguing, contemporary understanding of annihilation based on evolutionary theory. He stresses the possibility of some people not surviving beyond death, but of simply ceasing to exist once they die, because death and dissolution is the universal evolutionary presupposition for all living things as a condition for genetic mutations to occur in their replacements. Only by truly following Jesus, that is, by being “christified,” he contends, will we achieve in this life the evolutionary escape velocity that lifts us into eternal life. Otherwise we fall back into the nothingness that as material creatures we are doomed to succumb to anyway.

The achievement of Jesus in struggling loyally through death to an afterlife, and his offer to communicate this to others, can be recognized as a new phase of existence for humans that cannot necessarily be presumed to be applied to every one of these automatically. Indeed, the extinction of some humans at death could be seen as almost the normal evolutionary expectation implied in the idea of the survival only of those who are equipped for that purpose. Moreover, it would be much more in accord with divine mercy to allow condemned sinners to slip into annihilation than have them live in torment for eternity.<sup>42</sup>

To maintain this position, however, Mahoney denies the soul’s immortality:

The common experience of death as the prospect of annihilation, without any comforting Hellenistic presupposition of the soul’s natural survival after death, can now exercise its full devastating impact while also creating a space for a religious hope that entry into a new form of human life may be accessible at least to some through the evolutionary achievement of Jesus in himself conquering death.<sup>43</sup>

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40. Richard John Neuhaus, “Will All Be Saved?,” *First Things* 115 (August/September 2001) 77–80, at 79.

41. See Jean-Pierre Torrell, O.P., *Saint Thomas Aquinas*, vol. 2, *Spiritual Master*, trans. Robert Royal (Washington: Catholic University of America, 2003) 71–74, 207–11.

42. Jack Mahoney, *Christianity in Evolution: An Exploration* (Washington: Georgetown University, 2011) 113–14.

43. *Ibid.* 116.



The annihilation theory, however, cannot be maintained for a number of reasons. It overlooks the fact that God alone can annihilate. By appealing to the unique power of God, this view is ultimately an unsatisfactory *deus ex machina*. Paul O'Callaghan correctly stresses that God not only loves and rejects nothing that God creates (Wis 11:24–25) but also “constitutes humans as immortal beings.”<sup>44</sup> He further argues that the annihilation theory confuses the distinction between nature and grace and that human beings are incapable of “total metaphysical suicide.”<sup>45</sup> Dutch Calvinist theologian Hendrikus Berkhof describes this theory as a “defeat of God’s love, though hidden by an act of force.”<sup>46</sup> Rahner rejects this theory, too, because God respects human freedom and “does not release one from a definitive state.”<sup>47</sup> Moreover, a number of contemporary theologians and philosophers, including Pope Benedict XVI, argue persuasively for the immortality of the soul and soundly refute the view that this dogma is a Greek deformation of Christianity.<sup>48</sup> Finally, the Catholic Church authoritatively teaches the immortality of the soul<sup>49</sup> and “the existence of hell and its eternity.”<sup>50</sup>

### **Apocatastasis: Origen, Lessius, and Karl Barth**

Origen, the best-known proponent of universal restoration, allegedly taught that we can be certain that humans and demons alike will be saved (Acts 3:21). On the basis of 1 Corinthians 3:13–15, this philosophical-theological titan argues that the fire of God’s love rooted in the human and angelic creature cannot be extinguished and in the end consumes the sins of even the most hardened sinner. Origen’s Neoplatonic assumptions prompt him to understand evil as nothingness itself. Furthermore, because human freedom is never definitive, hell is medicinal and temporary. Although his opponents

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44. O'Callaghan, *Christ Our Hope* 209.

45. *Ibid.* 209–10.

46. Hendrikus Berkhof, *Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Study of Faith*, rev. ed., trans. Sierd Woudstra (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986) 536.

47. Rahner, “Hell” 604. Also see his “On Christian Dying,” in *Further Theology of the Spiritual Life*, Theological Investigations 7, trans. David Bourke (New York: Herder, 1971) 285–93. Rahner writes of the human person as a being of personal freedom who finds definitive fulfillment in theological death, that is, dying either into Christ’s redemptive death or into perdition.

48. See Gary R. Habermas and J. P. Moreland, *Beyond Death: Exploring the Evidence for Immortality* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1998); Joseph Ratzinger, “The Immortality of the Soul and the Resurrection of the Dead,” in *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, 2nd ed., trans. Michael Waldstein, ed. Aidan Nichols (Washington: Catholic University of America, 1988) 104–58.

49. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Washington: US Catholic Conference, 1994) no. 366; J. Neusner, S.J., and J. Dupuis, S.J., *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church*, 7th rev. ed., ed. Jacques Dupuis (New York: Alba House, 2001) nos. 410, 421.

50. Ludwig Ott maintains that the existence of hell and its eternity are *de fide*. *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, 4th ed., ed. James Canon Bastible, trans. Patrick Lynch (Rockford, IL: TAN, 1960) 479–82. Although never solemnly defined by a council or a pope, on the basis of church documents, I maintain that the doctrine of hell’s existence and its eternity has been taught definitively by the ordinary universal magisterium. See Neusner and Dupuis, *Christian Faith* nos. 17, 20, 26, 506, 2301, (2303), 2307, 2317, 2323 a–c.

accused him of teaching that even the demons would be saved, Origen counters that “not even a madman would accuse me of this.” His later writings, however, leave this question open.<sup>51</sup>

Although refuted by John Chrysostom, Augustine, and other Fathers, and condemned by the local council of Constantinople in 563, Origen’s *apocatastasis* theory never completely died out. For example, ninth-century Irish philosopher John Scotus Eriugena contended that evil cannot coexist eternally with God and in the end will succumb to grace.<sup>52</sup> Flemish Jesuit theologian Leonardus Lessius (d. 1623) also embraces *apocatastasis* by pinpointing two serious problems with the teaching of perpetual damnation, which he judges to be “Christianity’s most impenetrable mystery.” Why should someone, he wrote, not be able to repent in the next life, who has not managed to do it here? How does created freedom become forever obdurate? Also, why should a finite act, or a finite series of finite acts, cause an eternal, infinite state?<sup>53</sup> Did not Christ preach even to the spirits in prison (2 Pt 3:9; 1 Pt 3:19; 4:6) and want everyone to repent and be saved (1 Tm 2:3)? And more recently German exegete Wilhelm Michaelis defends universalism.<sup>54</sup>

Reputable exegetes maintain, however, that there is no biblical basis for *apocatastasis*.<sup>55</sup> Many scholars, some already mentioned, hold that human freedom is indeed capable of an eternal fundamental option against God, although one can hope that it will not be so exercised. And Berkhof correctly argues that conversion after death is a “pious fantasy” that relies on a dubious interpretation of a few biblical texts while ignoring others. It also does not solve the problem because the logic of this position allows for a possible eternally alternating yes and no to God.<sup>56</sup> Moreover, the church’s authoritative and constant teaching rejects *apocatastasis*.

The centerpiece of the Swiss Reformed theologian Karl Barth’s thinking is the election of all human beings from and for all eternity through God’s all-powerful grace revealed in Jesus’ death and resurrection and present in the miracle of the church’s faith.<sup>57</sup> Scripture discloses, in his view, only one certain triumph of hell, the handing over of Jesus. God allowed hell’s victory over Christ in order that it would never again be able to triumph over anyone else.<sup>58</sup> In Jesus Christ, as the rejected one, God makes himself rejected in him. Jesus’ descent into hell embraces the fate of those handed over

51. See O’Callaghan, *Christ Our Hope* 134, 171, 195; and Balthasar, *Dare We Hope* 244.

52. John Scotus Eriugena, *De divisione naturae* 5.28–29.

53. Leonardus Lessius, *Tractatus de beatitudine, actibus humanis et legibus*, *Opera* 3/1, ed. Ignatz Neubauer (Paris: Lanier, 1852) 395.

54. Wilhelm Michaelis, *Die Versöhnung des All: Die frohe Botschaft von der Gnade Gottes* (Berlin: Haller, 1950).

55. Pierre Grelot, *Le monde à venir* (Paris: Le Centurion, 1974) 120. Wright (*Surprised by Hope* 177) also denies that the Scriptures give any evidence for universalism.

56. Berkhof, *Christian Faith* 536.

57. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G. W. Bromiley, T. F. Torrance, trans. G. W. Bromiley et al. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1957) II/2 295, 265.

58. *Ibid.* II/2 496.

to God's wrath and he alone suffers our eternal damnation.<sup>59</sup> "The fate of those handed over to God's wrath," Barth writes, "is embraced by Christ's descent into hell."<sup>60</sup> However, certainty of salvation cannot be had because the handing over of Jesus is really a warning and a remembrance of him who suffered God's wrath for everyone.<sup>61</sup>

Unlike other scholars who contend that human freedom may be obdurate enough to cause eternal punishment, Barth argues that we cannot be certain of *apocatastasis* because of the "freedom of divine grace."<sup>62</sup> On the other hand, in the light of God's victory in Christ, "we must not lose sight of the hope of the future deliverance of the rejected at the very frontier of perdition."<sup>63</sup>

Barth understands the state of affairs between Jesus and Judas as the salient form of the situation between Jesus and everyone, between God's election and rejection of human beings. Noting that Jesus could not protect Judas—Satan enters into him—Barth writes of an "unresolved contrast" between Jesus' absolute care for the church and the world, and Judas's tragedy. However, for Barth, Christ's grace once again trumps all else: "there are no limits to the grace of Jesus Christ even with regard to Judas. [The New Testament] sets Judas against the brightest radiance of this grace."<sup>64</sup> On the other hand, Barth insists that the New Testament "does not use even a single word to suggest that Judas is an example of *apokatastasis*."<sup>65</sup>

Barth's oft-quoted statement, "whoever does not believe in *apocatastasis* is an ox, whoever says he does is an ass,"<sup>66</sup> underscores his position. In other words, one may hold a universalistic position but not preach it. The subtlety and seemingly contradictory nature of Barth's dialectical position on *apocatastasis*, however, becomes apparent when we read that "a grace that reaches and embraces each and every one would not be free grace, would not be divine grace. But if it is divine grace, how can we impede God from reconciling everyone?"<sup>67</sup> To my mind, Barth most clearly illustrates his view with these words: "The Church will not then preach an *apocatastasis*, nor will it preach a powerless grace of Jesus Christ or a wickedness of people which is too

59. Bernard Sesboüé argues that such thinking attempts to comprehend the incomprehensible and is really a disguised form of *apocatastasis*. "Bulletin de théologie dogmatique: Christologie," *Recherches de science religieuse* 59 (1971) 88–89.

60. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/2 496.

61. *Ibid.*

62. *Ibid.* 417.

63. *Ibid.* 496.

64. *Ibid.* II/2 476. German exegete Rudolf Schnackenburg also maintains that one cannot conclude from Scripture that Judas is damned. See "Prädestination I: Aussagen der Schrift," *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*, 3rd ed. (Freiburg: Herder, 1994) 8:cols. 661–62, at 662.

65. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/2 476.

66. Karl Barth, *Dogmatik im Dialogue*, vol. 1, *Die Kirche und die letzten Dinge*, ed. F. Buri (Gütersloh: Mohn, 1973) 314; quoted by Paul O'Callaghan, *Christ Our Hope* 218 n. 138.

67. Karl Barth, *Die Botschaft von der freien Gnade Gottes* (Zurich: Evangelisches Verlag, 1947) 8; quoted by Paul O'Callaghan, *Christ Our Hope* 218 n. 138. Rahner's view of grace as both free and universal contradicts Barth's understanding of grace.

powerful for it. But without any arbitrary dualism, it will preach the overwhelming power of grace and the weakness of human wickedness in the face of it.”<sup>68</sup>

## Hell as Purgatory: Hans Küng and Hendrikus Berkhof

Hans Küng asks whether postmortem hell possibly corresponds to earthly hells, for example, Auschwitz and Hiroshima.<sup>69</sup> He argues that the promulgation of hell’s eternal tortures flows from the church’s desire for power over souls that led to the violent persecution of unbelievers, Jews, and heretics. Jesus was not a hellfire preacher, Küng asserts, but one who used the imagery and language of his time to exhort and admonish his hearers. God is love, demons do not exist, and eternal punishment is a “monstrous idea.”<sup>70</sup>

Küng approves of both Barth’s emphasis that God alone is a person’s future and Paul’s teaching that “God has bound everyone over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all” (Rom 11:32). In Küng’s view, death is dying into God’s cleansing, purifying, liberating, and enlightening arms. Hell is therefore temporary, a purgatory, “the encounter of the unfinished person, still immature in his love, with the holy, infinite, loving God; an encounter which is profoundly humiliating, painful, and therefore purifying.”<sup>71</sup>

Wright and some other New Testament exegetes flatly deny that the Scriptures give any evidence of hell being a purgatory.<sup>72</sup> The constant teaching of the church also contradicts Küng’s position.<sup>73</sup> Moreover, Scripture, the church’s authoritative teaching, and many theologians, *pace* Küng, maintain that demons do exist.<sup>74</sup>

With a view of universal salvation close to Küng’s, but with far more theological nuance, Berkhof stresses the biblical tension between salvation-pessimistic and salvation-optimistic texts.<sup>75</sup> In his view, these texts disclose not only the importance of both decision and election but also our ignorance: we simply do not know whether anyone

68. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/2 477. Berkhof (*Christian Faith* 537) is of the opinion that Barth wants it both ways and refuses “to draw the ultimate consequences” of his position.

69. Küng, *Eternal Life?* 129.

70. *Ibid.* 132–36.

71. *Ibid.* 137–39. With reference to Matthew 20:1–16, Neuhaus maintains that “the master’s reproach to the disgruntled laborers in the vineyard (‘Do you begrudge my generosity?’) notwithstanding, there is something that seems not right about the idea that Hitler or Chairman Mao or (enter your favorite villain here) should get to heaven without paying a steep price for their crimes here on earth. . . . So maybe they have thousands of years (as we reckon time) in purgatory” (“Will All Be Saved?” 79).

72. Wright, *Surprised by Hope* 178.

73. For a good summary, see *Catechism of the Catholic Church* nos. 1033–36; and Dulles, “The Population of Hell” 36–41.

74. Heinrich Schlier, *Principalities and Powers in the New Testament* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1961); Karl Rahner, “The Devil,” *Encyclopedia of Theology* 341–44; Harvey D. Egan, “The Demonic,” in *Christian Mysticism: The Future of a Tradition* (New York: Pueblo, 1984) 347–54; *Catechism of the Catholic Church* nos. 391–95.

75. The pessimistic texts are: Mt 8:12; 12:42, 50; 22:13; 24:51; 18:8; 25:41, 46; 1 Thes 2:16; 2 Thes 1:9. The optimistic texts are: Rom 5:12–21; 11:25, 30–32, 36; 1 Cor 15:22, 28; Eph 1:10; Phil 2:11; 1 Tm 2:4; 1 Jn 2:2. Berkhof’s lists are far from complete.

is damned. Our duty is to call people to conversion and to leave the matter up to God who is the “greatest justice” and the “highest love.”<sup>76</sup> In the end, Berkhof asks, what ultimately will be forced to yield? Divine faithfulness or human unfaithfulness?<sup>77</sup> Emphasizing Romans 11:32 (“that [God] may have mercy on them all”), Berkhof insists that “the darkness of rejection and God forsakenness cannot and may not be argued away, but no more may it be eternalized. For God’s sake we hope that hell will be a form of purification.”<sup>78</sup> In short, more cautious than Küng who simply and categorically reduces hell to purgatory, Berkhof expresses the hope of universal salvation, that hell will be a temporary form of purification—congruent with the view of the salvation-optimistic theologians already mentioned.<sup>79</sup>

### C. S. Lewis and William Hoye: The Reduction of Hell to Sheol and Limbo

The depiction of hell in C. S. Lewis’s novel *The Great Divorce*<sup>80</sup> has found its way to the highest levels of theological scholarship.<sup>81</sup> The novel describes the bus ride of ghostlike denizens of hell, the “gray city,” to the foothills of the new creation. On their arrival, the residents and environment overwhelm them with the plenitude of their reality. Luminous figures assure them that if they repent, they will become more “solid” and more “comfortable.” The few who stay experience the transformation of the new creation. Those who return to the gray city, after giving various excuses for not entering heaven, find life there not much different from their former joyless earthly life. However, their evil side becomes increasingly pronounced and in time takes over their entire being—with some ghosts whispering their fear of the “night” that will eventually come.<sup>82</sup>

William Hoye focuses on Lewis’s parable and on often-neglected texts of Thomas Aquinas to develop an intriguing theology of hell.<sup>83</sup> The devil, in his view, sinned

76. Berkhof, *Christian Faith* 536.

77. *Ibid.* 536.

78. *Ibid.* 536.

79. Wright denies, however, that the Scriptures give any evidence of hell being a purgatory (*Surprised by Hope* 178).

80. C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (San Francisco: HarperCollins 2001).

81. See Wright, *Surprised by Hope* 180; William Hoye, *The Emergence of Eternal Life* (New York: Cambridge University, 2013) 109–10; Melanie Bender, “Und sie werden weggehen und die ewige Strafe erhalten, die Gerechten aber das ewige Leben’ (Mt 25,46): Die Hölle in der christlichen Theologie,” *Trierer theologische Zeitschrift* 2 (2010) 129–48, at 135.

82. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/2 496, writes that Christ’s utterances on hell are warning that Christians “stand in the shadows, and of themselves they cannot escape from these shadows.” Bender, “Die Hölle in der christlichen Theologie” 144 n. 32, explicitly links Barth’s shadows with Lewis’s ghosts when Lewis writes of shadow-like sinners who avoid the light to become the rejected ones, shades, who no longer have their own identity.

83. Hoye, “The Compatibility of the Dogma on Hell with the Foregoing Argumentation,” in *The Emergence of Eternal Life*, part 3.9, 104–10. Also see Hoye’s “Sünde, Dämonen, und Gottesliebe nach Thomas von Aquin,” in *Die Mächte des Guten und Bösen: Vorstellung im XII. und XIII. Jahrhundert* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1977) 206–34.

cognitively through an absence of consideration by seeking his own good, but not in accordance with the proper rule and measure of things. The devil lacks nothing in the natural order but is deficient in the supernatural order because the demon neglected the necessity of divine grace. Hoye maintains that hell is simply a deficiency in someone who does not desire eternal life. Sin is a lack of grace, not its opposite, and contains within itself its own punishment: an objective loneliness that is not subjectively felt. Satan is not even aware of his guilt.

Hoye argues, moreover, that the damned are deficient in something so fundamental that its absence is not even missed. Hell is a tragedy that lacks even the awareness of itself. The damned have all they want, but they want too little. Damnation, to this Thomist, is falling short of one's possibilities, yet neither knowing nor regretting it. The damned neither hate nor are conscious of their suffering. These "zombies" are deficient in love and not conscious of life's ultimate meaning.<sup>84</sup> In more technical Thomistic terms, hell is the fulfillment of an underdeveloped natural desire for happiness (*desiderium naturale*).<sup>85</sup> Subjectively considered, the damned are actually fulfilled; objectively, their satisfaction with a lesser good punishes them. However, they are not conscious of the lesser quality and intensity of their happiness. In my view, Hoye has reduced hell to limbo.

Although commendable for their attempt to demythologize hell, Lewis and Hoye have actually remythologized it. Their position, in my view, is a contemporary retrieval of Greek Hades, Jewish Sheol, and Christian limbo. I would argue that God created every rational creature—even subhuman creation itself—with an ineradicable desire for *ipsum esse*, Is-ness itself, God. Perhaps Augustine best expresses this metaphysical hunger: "You . . . made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you."<sup>86</sup> Aquinas also stresses that insofar as God is the universal good of all, even the damned (both human and angelic) love God more than they love themselves.<sup>87</sup> The contradiction between a creature's natural desire for God and its sinful choosing of something less causes both the objective and the subjective sufferings of the damned. Some

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84. Georges Bernanos writes, "The sorrow, the unutterable loss of those charred stones which were once human beings, is that they have nothing more to be shared" (*Diary of a Country Priest* [London: Catholic Book Club, 1937] 177). Wright is of the opinion that the damned "become at last, by their own effective choice, beings that once were human but now are not, creatures that have ceased to bear the divine image at all. . . . Those creatures that still exist in an ex-human state, no longer reflecting their maker in any meaningful sense" (*Surprised by Hope* 182–83, emphasis original). I maintain, however, that hell's sufferings flow from one's inalienable creation in God's image as intellect and will and of one's inability to be rid of it. Rahner also wrote of a "despairing involvement" in daily life, mired only in the world and in oneself, with an "unadmitted despair" about life's ultimate meaning (*Foundations* 33, 48). The person regresses to the "level of a clever animal." Balthasar writes of the damned as "un-persons," "person-dissolving," as "self consumption in eternity," and as "perversion per se" (*Dare We Hope* 146–47).

85. This is also Bender's position ("Die Hölle in der christlichen Theologie" 142).

86. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (New York: Oxford University, 1991) 1.1.

87. Thomas Aquinas, *ST* 1, q. 60, a. 5, ad. 5; see also *ST* 1, q. 60 a. 4 ad 3; q. 60, a. 5, arg. 5; q. 60, a. 5c; *Quodlibet* 1, q. 4, a. 3 co.

Scholastic theologians even speculated about the possibility of a purely natural creation in which only natural sin, virtue, punishment, and fulfillment would exist. And if one assumes with some contemporary theologians that the natural desire for God is graced, freely opting for a lesser good cannot produce subjective satisfaction and happiness. Moreover, Thomists hold that the higher the degree of being, the higher the degree of consciousness, a consciousness that in the case of the damned is replete with eternal suffering. The natural and graced immense longing of every human being for God can never be extinguished. How can a spiritual creature miss the one thing necessary and be unaware of it? One might ask, cynically, whether God died to prevent us from being satisfied with an unfulfilled natural desire for happiness.

## A Contemporary Theology of Hell

I propose now my own theology of hell. In the film, *The Story of Adele H*, a young woman falls madly in love with a military officer. Although he rejects her advances, she pursues him obsessively and uses all her wiles to have him love her—even following him by ship when he is transferred. Her insane love becomes his hell. Francis Thompson's poem *The Hound of Heaven* also treats of God's obsessive love for us. Both examples—with qualifications—are an analogue for the suffering of the damned: eternal obduracy in the face of eternal love.<sup>88</sup>

There has been no final and conclusive teaching by the Catholic Church on the nature of the sufferings of hell. A contemporary Catholic theology might understand it, therefore, as the love of God, of Christ, of the saints, and even of creation for the damned and their eternal, adamant refusal of it. This means that God, Christ, the saints, and creation itself do not cast the lost from their presence.<sup>89</sup> Hell is the paradox that God, Christ (who died and rose even for the damned), the saints, and creation itself continue to love eternally even the condemned, and that this constitutes their torment. God is love.<sup>90</sup> Only an anthropomorphic theology could argue that God can cease to be love. And Christ is this ceaseless love incarnate whose mystical body is the saints.

88. Italian mystic Camilla Battista da Varano writes that God is hell to sinful humans. Catherine of Genoa teaches that hell is a person's unwillingness to submit to the purging action of Pure Love, preferring rather to remain trapped in the tortures of self-love. Julian of Norwich maintains that a Trinity of love cannot be wrathful. Therefore wrath is the obdurate person's experience of love filtered through sin. See Bernard McGinn, *The Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism: 1350–1550* (New York: Crossroad, 2012) 311, 323, 442.

89. Joseph Ratzinger, "Hölle," *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*, 11 vols., 2nd ed. (Freiburg: Herder, 1960) 5:446–47; Rahner, "Hell" 602.

90. The fourteenth-century English anchoress-mystic, Julian of Norwich, writes emphatically that she "saw no wrath in God" and that God cannot forgive because God cannot be angry. In her view, "wrath is nothing else but a perversity and an opposition to peace and to love. And it comes from a lack of power or a lack of wisdom or a lack of goodness, and this lack is not in God but it is on our side. For we through sin and wretchedness have in us a wrath and a constant opposition to peace and to love" (*Showings*, trans. and intro. Edmund Walsh, O.S.A., and James Walsh, S.J. [New York: Paulist, 1978], Long Text, chaps. 48–49, pp. 262–64).

Psalm 139:8 states it well: “If I ascend to heaven, thou art there! If I make my bed in Sheol, thou art there!” The Apostle Paul also teaches that nothing—not even sin, I would add—“can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 8:39). I agree, therefore, with Teilhard whose prayer professes that “the fires of hell and the fires of heaven are not two different forces, but contrary manifestations of the same energy.”<sup>91</sup> Balthasar expresses the same position when he maintains that the “absolute naysayers” continue to be embraced by the fire of absolute divine love, that the fire of God’s love is experienced as wrath by anyone who attempts obdurately to reject it.<sup>92</sup>

The catechism of the German bishops also stresses that “God himself in his holiness is a consuming fire for evil, deceit, hate, and violence (Is 10:17).”<sup>93</sup> The Dutch catechism contains the same idea: “For the obdurate, God’s love becomes forever a fire of remorse and embittered resentment.”<sup>94</sup> Aquinas, too, writes of hell as a binding, constricting, restrictive, and enclosing fire.<sup>95</sup> Berkhof maintains that God is a consuming fire that is either blissful or damning, that God’s eternal wrath is “something that is forced upon God as the reverse side of his (spurned) love.”<sup>96</sup> Similarly, Tillich writes of “hell as having being only insofar as it stands in the unity of divine love.”<sup>97</sup> During their dark night of the spirit, Christian mystics experience God’s loving presence as an excruciating rejection and absence.<sup>98</sup> Saint Faustina Kowalska, to give one example, attests to feeling “completely abandoned by God” and to the devil’s taunt: “You have been rejected by God.” “This word, *rejected*,” she writes, “becomes a fire which penetrates every nerve to the marrow,” and that casts her “headlong into great despair.”<sup>99</sup> In short, the *presence*—not absence—of the eternal love of God, Christ, the saints, and creation constitutes hell for those whose twisted freedom renders them unable to

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91. Teilhard de Chardin, *Divine Milieu* 149.

92. Schmaus writes that the damned live in the presence of God’s immutable and inescapable judgment (*Justification and the Last Things* 256). Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/2 27, emphasizes that God’s yes to the human situation cannot be escaped. Balthasar contradicts himself when he dismisses as a “dead end” the view that God “continues to love eternally even those he has condemned and . . . this constitutes their torture”—yet affirms the position that “by him who rejects the fire of God’s love that fire can be experienced only as a consuming one” (*Dare We Hope* 253, 147).

93. Catholic Church, *Church’s Confession of Faith* 347.

94. *A New Catechism: Catholic Faith for Adults*, trans. Kevin Smyth (New York: Seabury, 1973) 481.

95. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles* 4, chap. 90.

96. Berkhof, *Christian Faith* 132, 135.

97. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1963) 1:284. Tillich asserts, however, that one may hold a universalistic position but must preach about the possibility of eternal damnation (*ibid.* 3:416).

98. See Harvey D. Egan, *Soundings in the Christian Mystical Tradition* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2010).

99. *Divine Mercy in My Soul: The Diary of the Servant of God Sister M. Faustina Kowalska, Perpetually Professed Member of the Congregation of Sisters of Our Lady of Mercy* (Stockbridge, MA: Marian, 1987) nos. 98, 101.



accept and respond to it. To paraphrase Meister Eckhart, only the *Nit* (No) to Love in one's being burns.<sup>100</sup>

### *The Christological Dimension of Hell*

Little has been written about the christological aspect of hell, despite Teilhard's Christocosmic vision. The fifteenth-century mystic Nicholas of Cusa, commenting on 1 Corinthians 3:10–15 and on Hebrews 12:29, professes Christ to be the "purest fire," "the spiritual fire of life and understanding that consumes all things and takes all things into itself and so proves and judges all things, as the judgment of material fire, which tests all things. All rational spirits are judged in Christ, just as every thing flammable is judged in fire."<sup>101</sup>

German New Testament exegete Joachim Gnilka argues that the testing fire found in 1 Corinthians 3:10–15 is no fire at all, but the coming Lord.<sup>102</sup> Joseph Ratzinger also views 1 Corinthians 3:10–15 christologically and contends that Christ himself is the judging fire who transforms and conforms us to his own glorified body. In the transition from death to eternal life, Jesus' purging fire frees our closed-off heart and renders us capable of perfect union with God, Christ, and the entire communion of saints.<sup>103</sup> The willful solipsism of the damned, however, makes them incapable of this transformation.

I hold the position that the postmortem encounter of the damned with Christ the "judging fire," the "purest fire," who died and rose for them—and loves them still—is an aspect of the suffering of the lost.<sup>104</sup> The dark side of Christ's fiery love is hell to those who try in vain to reject it. Even the demons quake in the presence of Christ and cry out in fear: "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God" (Mk 1:24).

Ratzinger mentions the fire of the judging Christ in conjunction with the communion of saints. Almost nothing has been written about hell with respect to the communion of saints. Ratzinger argues that hell is "real, total loneliness . . . that the word 'love' can no longer penetrate."<sup>105</sup> No "thou" can reach into this state

100. Sermon 5b: *In hoc apparuit charitas dei in nobis*, in *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense*, trans. and intro. Edmund Colledge and Bernard McGinn, pref. Huston Smith (New York: Paulist, 1981) 181–85, at 183.

101. Nicholas of Cusa, *On Learned Ignorance* nos. 233–34, in *Selected Spiritual Writings*, trans. and intro. H. Lawrence Bond, pref. Morimichi Watanabe (New York: Paulist, 1997) 192.

102. Joachim Gnilka, "Fegfeuer II: Lehre der Schrift im Neuen Testament," *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*, 3rd ed., vol. 4, cols. 50–51, at 51.

103. Joseph Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, 2nd ed., trans. Michael Waldstein, ed. Aidan Nichols (Washington: Catholic University of America, 1988) 229, 232.

104. The noted Evangelical theologian, Donald G. Bloesch, is of another view. He writes of hell as a "sanitarium for the sick who are ministered to by Jesus Christ." Christ's presence mitigates their sufferings. See Donald G. Bloesch, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology: Two Volumes in One* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2006) II:225–26.

105. Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, trans. J. R. Foster (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2004) 300–301. See also Ratzinger, "Hölle" 449; and Medhard Kehl, "Hölle," *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*, 3rd ed., 5:cols. 230–38, at 234: "a universal torpor and denial of all life and all relationships in an absolute egocentricity" (my translation).

of loneliness.<sup>106</sup> Rahner also views hell as an obstinate self-enclosure.<sup>107</sup> Created for communication with others, but freely contradicting the deepest demands of their social nature by immuring themselves in their own willful isolation, the damned suffer because they are eternally loved by the saints. As stated in 1 Corinthians 6:2, “the saints will judge the world.” The damned will be in the presence of the entire communion of saints who will love them throughout eternity—a love they will find horrific because of their willful obduracy. The saints will eternally love whatever God has created and loves, and this includes the damned.<sup>108</sup> The lost ones will also suffer from their realization that many saints during their lifetime would have gladly suffered the pains of hell on earth, if they could eliminate a postmortem hell for others.<sup>109</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre’s assertion that “hell is the other” is true for the damned.<sup>110</sup> Catherine of Siena maintains that the eternally tormented rich man of Luke 16:19–31 begs Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his five brothers—not to do them a good deed, but to prevent his suffering even more at their hands, should they end up where he is.<sup>111</sup> It is both disappointing and surprising that little thinking has been done about the communion of saints in connection with hell.

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106. Ratzinger, *Introduction* 228.

107. Rahner, “Hell,” *Dictionary of Theology* 295. See also O’Callaghan, *Christ Our Hope* 82 n. 12.

108. Whatever exists is good and is preserved in existence and loved by God. The mystic Angela of Foligno, a thirteenth-century Franciscan tertiary, understood not only how God indwelt her soul but also how God “is present in every creature and everything that has being, in a devil and a good angel” (Angela of Foligno, “The Memorial,” chap. 9, step 7, in *Complete Works*, trans. Paul Lachance, O.F.M. (New York: Paulist, 1993) 212, emphasis added).

109. Balthasar, *Dare We Hope* 214–18, writes of saints who grasped hell’s reality and strove all the more for a love that would eliminate it.

110. This is the well-known key point in Jean Paul Sartre’s drama, *No Exit*. Thus, I do not share the opinion of Schmaus, who maintains that “there is no community of the damned; every lost soul exists in such frigid isolation that he is not even aware of whether there are other souls in hell. No activity of a social nature is possible in this state” (*Justification and the Last Things* 255).

111. Catherine of Siena writes, “When human life comes to an end the will that was free is bound. So for the dead the time of earning is past. If they end in hatred, guilty of deadly sin, by divine justice they are forever bound by that chain of hatred and remain forever obstinate in their evil, which keeps gnawing away within them. And their suffering grows continually, especially at the sight of others whose damnation they have brought about. This was taught you, for example, in the rich man who when he was damned begged that Lazarus might go to tell his brothers still on earth how he was suffering. His motive was not love or compassion for his brothers (for he had lost charity and was incapable of desiring what was good). Nor was it my honor or their salvation (for I have already told you that the damned can do no good for others and curse me because they ended their lives hating both me and virtue). What then was his motive? He was the eldest, and he had encouraged the same wretchedness in them that he himself had lived. So he had led them toward damnation. And he saw the suffering that would fall on him if they should come like him to this excruciating torment, gnawing away at themselves forever with hate because they had ended their lives in hate” (*The Dialogue*, trans. and intro. Suzanne Noffke [New York: Paulist, 1980] chap. 40, p. 82).

## The New Creation Aspect of Hell

Because Rahner understands the human person as “spirit-in-world,” he disagrees with the view that the soul at death becomes acosmic, that is, that it goes somewhere not of this world. When the soul surrenders its limited bodily structure at death, it becomes “pancosmic,” all-cosmic, even more open to God’s one creation, more deeply connected to creation, more radically spirit-in-world, and a codetermining factor of the universe itself.<sup>112</sup> Although Rahner moved away from his pancosmic theory later in life, he never accepted Aquinas’s view of the separated soul and emphasized that this present earthly body is simply the way spirit relates to this world now, a relationship that endures even after death. Applying this theory to Jesus’ resurrection, Rahner writes that it “is like the first eruption of a volcano which shows that in the interior of the world God’s fire is already burning, and this will bring everything to blessed ardor in his light. . . . Already from the heart of the world into which he descended in death, the new forces of a transfigured earth are at work.”<sup>113</sup> For Rahner, Jesus’ resurrection is “the irreversible and the embryonically final beginning of the glorification and divinization of the *whole* of reality.”<sup>114</sup> Creation, therefore, is not only deified but also christified.

Rahner is therefore in harmony with the biblical teaching that God created all things from, through, and in Christ (Jn 1:3; Rom 8:6; 11:26; Col 1:16) and proclaimed that everything created is “very good” (Gen 1:31). Although God cursed creation because of Adam’s sin (Gen 3:17),<sup>115</sup> God redeemed and transformed it through the risen Christ, the seed of the new creation (Gal 6:15; 2 Cor 5:17; Rev 21:5). Had it not been God’s plan to unite and to hold all things together in Christ (Eph 1:10; Col 1:17), Aquinas, Scotus, Rahner, and Barth, as mentioned above, speculate that sin would have annihilated the universe. Because of the “groaning in travail” of all creation (Rom 8:22), what counts now is waiting for the new heaven and the new earth in which righteousness dwells (2 Pt 3:13; Rev 21:1). Rahner emphasizes, therefore, not only an individual, bodily resurrection, not only one of the entire human race, but also of the cosmos. Because of Jesus Christ, the first born from the dead, Rahner knows that, through death, *he* shall rise bodily, *we* shall rise bodily, and the *world* will rise, gloriously transformed.

For this reason, I maintain that one aspect of hell will be the loving presence of the deified and christified new heaven and new earth to the eternally obdurate. Anyone who has ever kissed a killer whale, danced with an orangutan, surfed among porpoises, had pet dogs, seen a sunset at Tanat Lot (Indonesia) and a triple rainbow in central Alaska, and so forth—as I have—could never claim that the phrase “creation’s loving presence” is a mere metaphor.

112. Karl Rahner, *On the Theology of Death*, trans. C. H. Henkey (New York: Herder, 1961) 19–21, emphases added.

113. Karl Rahner, “A Faith That Loves the Earth,” in *Everyday Faith*, trans. W. J. O’Hara (New York: Herder, 1968) 80–81.

114. Karl Rahner, *More Recent Writings*, Theological Investigations 4, trans. Kevin Smyth (Baltimore: Helicon, 1966) 129, emphasis original.

115. C. S. Lewis provocatively suggests that the violence in the animal kingdom would be far less if Adam had not sinned (*The Problem of Pain* [New York: HarperOne, 2001] 132–47).

In his “Contemplation to Obtain Divine Love,”<sup>116</sup> Ignatius Loyola instructs a person to reflect on how love manifests itself in deeds, not words, and in mutual sharing and communication. One is to ponder how God “dwells in” and “works” through “the heavens, elements, plants, fruits, cattle, and all the rest” (nos. 236–37)—for us.<sup>117</sup> In the meditation on sin (nos. 55–61), one is to ponder how “all creatures” allow “me to live and preserve me in life.” One should also meditate on how the angels protect us, how not only the saints intercede and pray for us but also “the heavens, the sun, the moon, the stars, and the elements; the fruits, the birds, fishes, and animals” (no. 60). I contend that one aspect of hell’s torments will be God’s eternal loving self-communication in and through God’s creatures even to the terminally narcissistic damned.

Denis Edwards’s book *How God Acts*<sup>118</sup> presents an exceptionally profound study of the deification and christification of creation. Because Jesus Christ is part of the material, physical, biological, and human world, his life, death, and resurrection have deified and christified *all* creation. In short, God will do for the entire cosmos what God did for Christ at Easter. Edwards emphasizes how Christ makes *all* things new (Rev 21:5) and why “*every* creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea” will be heard saying, “To him who sits upon the throne and to the Lamb be blessings and honor and glory and might forever and ever!” (Rev 5:13).<sup>119</sup>

With Aquinas and Bonaventure, Edwards comprehends the diversity of creatures as the result of the abundance of divine goodness. In one provocative section of his book, Edwards expresses “hope for animals.”<sup>120</sup> Citing Matthew 10:29, which speaks of God’s loving providence even for the lowly sparrow, Edwards writes that individual animals are known and loved by God, that the Holy Spirit is interiorly present to each creature, enabling it to exist and to act, that animals participate in some way in Christ’s redemptive work, that each animal abides forever in God’s living memory, and that thus we have hope that animals will participate in risen life through Christ. If so, the loving presence of the animal kingdom to the damned will be a dimension of their sufferings.

Scripture teaches that there is a resurrection for both the just and the unjust (Acts 24:14–15), a “resurrection of judgment” for evildoers (Jn 5:29). Thus, “many of those

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116. *The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius*, trans. and comm. George E. Ganss, S.J. (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1992) nos. 230–37.

117. Rejoicing in creation as a theophany is, of course, as old as the Psalms. St. Francis of Assisi’s *Canticle of Brother Sun* is another paean to the interconnection of all creation as a single theophany. My favorite, however, is penned by Dominican mystic Henry Suso (d. 1366). In his work, *The Exemplar*, Suso complains that his sins keep him from praising God. “Dear Lord,” he writes, “the frogs in the ditches praise you. And if they can’t sing, at least they croak.” God assures him that “there was never a creature so small or so great, so good or so bad, nor will there ever be one, that did not praise or show that I am worthy of praise” (*The Little Book of Eternal Wisdom* chap. 24, in *Henry Suso: The Exemplar, with Two German Sermons*, trans., ed., and intro. Frank Tobin [New York: Paulist, 1989] 287).

118. Denis Edwards, *How God Acts: Creation, Redemption, and Special Divine Action* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010).

119. *Ibid.* 159–60, emphasis added.

120. *Ibid.* 159–66.

who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt” (Dan 12:2). One aspect of the so-called fires of hell, Rahner argues, is “the cosmic, objective aspect of loss.” If the beatific vision brings with it “an openness and sharing love and bliss with the glorified environment,” he writes, then “loss means a definitive contradiction of the abiding and perfected world. And this contradiction will be a torment.”<sup>121</sup> Schmaus too remarks “that in the second coming of Christ the world will undergo a transformation into the transparent expression of the divine love. The soul estranged from God must find such a world doubly alien and totally hostile.”<sup>122</sup> The willful self-immuring of the damned against the eternal glory of the new creation—which includes angels, humans, animals, vegetation, and matter itself—contradicts their cosmic nature and causes one aspect of hell’s sufferings.

## Conclusion

This discussion began by focusing on contrasting positions of those who express certainty that hell does not exist and those who believe that few are saved. Both Scripture and the church’s long tradition favor the latter position, although the church does not unequivocally teach that anyone is damned. The views of Balthasar and Rahner, who hope that everyone will be saved, seem to dominate the contemporary theological horizon. It is striking, too, that the documents of Vatican II contain not a single reference to hell, even when speaking of eschatology. According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, “In hope, the Church prays for ‘all men to be saved’ (1 Tim 2:4),” and at another point declares, “The Church prays that no one should be lost.”<sup>123</sup> Both John Paul II and Benedict XVI likewise affirm the hope that no one will be lost from the community of the saints. Even Dutch Reformed theologian Berkhof expresses the hope that hell will be a transitory form of purgation.

The striking transition from an almost two millennia salvation-pessimistic position to a relatively recent salvation-optimistic one occurred for numerous reasons. First, there is the growing theological consensus that implicit faith, baptism of desire, and membership in the church by desire are sufficient means of salvation. Second, there is now more awareness that grave objective evil does not necessarily mean subjective guilt. Thus, the implications of invincible ignorance are more profoundly appreciated. Third, the Catholic Church has officially sanctioned the view that non-Christians and unbelievers can be saved. For example, Vatican II’s *Nostra aetate*, the Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, states that “the Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions,” and that they “often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men and women” (no. 2), and in *Ad gentes*, the Decree on the Church’s Missionary Activity, Vatican II promotes the view that “in ways

121. Rahner, “Hell” 603. See also Rahner, “He Descended into Hell,” *Further Theology of the Spiritual Life*, Theological Investigations 7 (New York: Herder & Herder, 1971) 145–50. Rahner also views as “pointless” speculation about hell as a place. However, if the human person is always spirit-in-world, there must be a bodily, thus, earthly, component to damnation.

122. Schmaus, *Justification and the Last Things* 256.

123. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* nos. 1821, 1058.

known to himself God can lead those who, through no fault of their own are ignorant of the gospel, to that faith without which it is impossible to please him” (no. 7).<sup>124</sup>

I disagree with views that preemptorily reduce hell to purgatory (Küng), to Sheol (Lewis), or to limbo (Hoye). Accepting the position that one can hope for the salvation of everyone, I argue that a theology of the sufferings of the damned must focus on the multidimensional person that we are as spirit-in-world, as a self-aware and free creature, who is also a social, bodily, and earthly being created to see God. Hell’s torments, therefore, embrace every dimension of the human person: unique individual, social, bodily, worldly, and God-orientated. Thus, an orthodox and contemporary theology of hell could understand hell as the eternally loving presence of God, Christ, angels, saints, animals, vegetation, and material creation to the damned, the eternally obdurate, whose obstinate use of their freedom has rendered them incapable of receiving and responding to this loving presence.

Hell’s paradox resides in the possibility of inalienable eternal love confronting immutable eternal adamancy. Rejected love is experienced as wrath. The owl looking at the noonday sun experiences only suffering. I also maintain, with previously mentioned thinkers, that the damned cannot escape from the fiery love of God, Christ, the saints, and creation in the divine milieu, the new creation. What should be a fire that transforms and glorifies everything in the divine milieu transmogrifies the damned into mystical slag, the “outer darkness” of the divine milieu.

This view shifts the theological discourse away from extrinsic, legalistic, and mythological terminology to intrinsic, personalistic, and more pastorally useful categories. It underscores hell as a dimension of the mystery of human freedom. No one is “in hell” who does not want to be.<sup>125</sup> Metaphorically speaking, the gates of hell are locked from the inside. It also provides a theological, christological, anthropological, and cosmological foundation for a contemporary and orthodox understanding of hell. I also share Rahner’s view that emphasizes the “hiddenness of the last things” and worshipping “in silence by moving beyond all images into the ineffable.”<sup>126</sup>

### Author biography

Harvey D. Egan, S.J., received his ThD from the University of Münster and is now professor emeritus at Boston College. His areas of special interest are Karl Rahner and Christian mysticism. He has recently published “Evelyn Underhill Revisited,” *The Way* 51.1 (2012); “In Purgatory We Shall All Be Mystics,” *Theological Studies* 73.4 (2012); and “The Mystical Theology of Karl Rahner,” *The Way* 52.2 (2013). In progress is an essay entitled “The Hellish Consciousness of the Mystics” and another essay on diabolical mysticism.

124. *Vatican Council II*, ed. Austin Flannery, rev. ed. (Northport, NY: Costello, 1996). See also Francis A. Sullivan, S.J., “Vatican II and the Postconciliar Magisterium on the Salvation of the Adherents of Other Religions,” in *After Vatican II: Trajectories and Hermeneutics*, ed. James L Heft with John O’Malley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012) 68–95.

125. Catherine of Genoa writes that “as for paradise, God has placed no doors there. Whoever wishes to enter, does so. All-merciful God stands there with His arms open, waiting to receive us into His glory” (*Purgation and Purgatory: The Spiritual Dialogue*, trans. and notes Serge Hughes, intro. Benedict J. Groeschel, pref. Catherine de Hueck Doherty [New York: Paulist, 1979] 78).

126. Rahner, *Foundations* 434.