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A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_churchman\\_os.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php)

# Death and Destiny

ALAN M. FAIRHURST

It is not surprising, on the basis of the New Testament, that Christians came early to believe that man's destiny is decided for better or worse by the time he dies, and without chance of further probation, because the New Testament in this respect reflects in many passages this general apocalyptic expectation, with its doctrine of the last judgement.<sup>1</sup> The teaching of Jesus in the synoptic gospels does not afford grounds for any easy optimism about the future life,<sup>2</sup> and, despite the efforts of Marcion to cut out the Jewish gospels, Matthew took pride of place, mirroring apocalyptic teaching. As 2 Clement wrote c.150, 'For after we have departed from this world, we can no longer make confession, or repent any more in that place.'<sup>3</sup> Ignatius, Justin and Tertullian all gave similar teaching.<sup>4</sup> The more optimistic view of the world to come arose in Alexandria, where Platonic influence was strongest, due to Clement of Alexandria (c.150-c.215). He based his hope for the dead not only on the general character of God, but also on his interpretation of the descent into hades in 1 Peter 3:19f.: 'So I think it is demonstrated that God being good and the Lord powerful, they save with a righteousness and equality which extend to all that turn to Him, whether here or elsewhere.'<sup>5</sup> He was followed by Origen (c.185-c.254), who 'never abandoned a formal belief in the conventional doctrines of the general resurrection, the last judgement, heaven and hell: but he placed them in so extensive a vista of leisurely purgation and age-long spiritual adventure for the soul *after death* that they lost almost all their significance.'<sup>6</sup> He came to teach universalism, including the possible salvation of Satan, in order to controvert the charge of ultimate dualism made by the troublesome Valentinian heretic named Candidus.<sup>7</sup> His universalism rested on the creative goodness of God, Christ's atoning work, and the possibility of conversion 'so long as the creature remains rational and free.'<sup>8</sup> Origen's view of God's punishment as educative and medicinal was also a strong factor, and although he was conscious that universalism was not very obvious in Scripture, he found it 'at the end of chs.ix-xi of Romans as the necessary climax of the argument.'<sup>9</sup> Although the teachings of Origen were ultimately condemned by the church in 543 at the Fifth General Council, when it received a formal letter on the subject addressed to it by Justinian,<sup>10</sup> Gregory of Nyssa also expounded 1 Corinthians 15:28 like Origen in a universalist sense and became both a bishop and a saint of the church (c.330-c.395). He took the view that 'ultimately both the souls in hell and the devils will

return to God',<sup>11</sup> and his eschatology has been fully researched by Angelos J. Phillips.<sup>12</sup> He believed in purification following the judgement of the wicked,<sup>13</sup> in which the sin of the ungodly will be completely destroyed, but not their being.

However, the influence of Origen and Gregory of Nyssa was not as powerful as that of Augustine of Hippo (354-430), following in the severe attitude of men like Cyprian (d.258), who argued: 'Once gone forth from hence, there is no more place for repentance; no satisfaction can be accomplished; it is here that life is either lost or saved.'<sup>14</sup> Origen's reputed theology worried Christians, because he believed both in free will so strongly that he envisaged the possibility of further falls by Christians in the world to come, and in the possibility of the salvation of the devil and his angels. Augustine saw this weak point:

For he lost even the advantage of being thought merciful when he imagined real sufferings for the saints, to pay the penalty of their misdeeds, and a false happiness, in which they would not have the true and sure joy of eternal good, that is, a joy without fear of loss.<sup>15</sup>

Although there were other Christians with more optimistic views about the possibilities of repentance and salvation after death, whom Augustine controverts in the *City of God*,<sup>16</sup> Augustine's rigorist views prevailed. The Council of Florence defined the traditional teaching in 1442, making use of the strong words of Augustine's disciple, Fulgentius of Ruspe (468-533):

The holy Roman Church firmly believes, professes and proclaims that none of those who are outside the Catholic Church—not only pagans, but Jews also, heretics and schismatics—can have part in eternal life, but will go into eternal fire, 'which was prepared for the devil and his angels', unless they are gathered into that Church before the end of life.<sup>17</sup>

The Reformers generally accepted the finality of death, but, having rejected any idea of purgatory for Christians, were left with the stark alternative of heaven or hell. It was not long before this led to discussions on eternal torment by some Anabaptists and others in the sixteenth century who embraced universalism,<sup>18</sup> and to the seventeenth-century discussions.<sup>19</sup> These were partly caused by the revival of Origen's influence (whom Erasmus preferred to Augustine),<sup>20</sup> but also by the freer philosophical enquiry released by the Reformation and the Renaissance. Universalism was finding many advocates in America by the end of the eighteenth century,<sup>21</sup> and in Germany gained the powerful support of the great theologian F. D. E. Schleiermacher (1768-1834), who emphasized feeling as the basis of religion, and saw the existence of contrary doctrines in Scripture, to be held in unresolved tension.<sup>22</sup> From then on the story in England is

well told in Geoffrey Rowell's book.<sup>23</sup>

In England, the turning-points of the debate were three.<sup>24</sup> The first was the dismissal of F. D. Maurice from his two professorships at King's College, London in November 1853 for refusing to attach the meaning of never-ending duration to the phrase 'eternal punishment' in Matthew 25:46.<sup>25</sup> He had written in *Theological Essays* in 1853 about the meaning of the word 'eternal' in the New Testament.<sup>26</sup> He felt obliged to believe in 'an abyss of love which is deeper than the abyss of death.'<sup>27</sup> Ironically, there is now an F. D. Maurice chair of moral and social theology at King's College, and he is the mentor of many modern theologians.

The second turning-point was the suspension from his duties of the clergyman H. B. Wilson in 1862 in the Court of the Arches for daring to hope that all would be saved, in *Essays and Reviews* in 1860. The Privy Council overturned that decision in 1864, declaring:

We are not at liberty to express any opinion upon the mysterious question of final punishment, further than to say that we do not find in the Formularies... any such distinct declarations of our Church upon the subject as to require us to condemn as penal the expression of hope by a clergyman, that even the ultimate pardon of the wicked, who are condemned in the day of judgement may be consistent with the will of Almighty God.<sup>28</sup>

The omission of Article 42, condemning universalism, from the Thirty-nine (whatever the reason for it) must have helped this ruling. So outraged were eleven thousand of the English clergy by the Privy Council's judgement that they signed a declaration in 1864 which asserted that the Church of England believed and taught that the 'punishment' of the 'cursed', equally with the 'life' of the 'righteous' is 'everlasting'.<sup>29</sup>

The third turning-point was F. W. Farrar's sermon on "'Hell"—What it is Not', preached in Westminster Abbey in 1877 on the text 'For this cause was the gospel preached also to them that are dead' (1 Peter 4:6) and published in *Eternal Hope* in 1878. Pusey had hoped that others would answer Farrar, but, as they did not do so to his satisfaction, he replied himself in 1880, when he was eighty years old, in a formidable work of scholarship consisting mostly of quotations from patristic writers and showing that they believed in eternal punishment. He cited eighty-four witnesses,<sup>30</sup> in addition to the testimony of martyrs,<sup>31</sup> and detailed evidence relating to the condemnation of Origen.<sup>32</sup> In his reply to Farrar he deals with the words used for 'eternity' in the New Testament,<sup>33</sup> and with what Jews understood by 'Gehenna' in the time of our Lord.<sup>34</sup> Farrar responded by arguing that the punishment in Matthew 25:46 is corrective, against Pusey's view that it is for ever and therefore presumably not corrective.<sup>35</sup> He drew attention to the use in Matthew 25:46 of the word *kolasis* for

'punishment', which is distinguished in classical Greek from *timoria*, that latter being used for vindictive or retributive punishment.<sup>36</sup> He contended that the word 'eternal' did not necessarily mean 'endless',<sup>37</sup> as Pusey had maintained.<sup>38</sup> Farrar had also strongly affirmed and defended the view that the fate of every man is not irrevocably determined at death.<sup>39</sup> He was very sceptical about death-bed repentances, which were supposed to involve many of mankind.<sup>40</sup> Although his books may have robbed him of the chance of becoming a bishop,<sup>41</sup> he became Dean of Canterbury and was not suspended. The tide of opinion had turned.

Meanwhile, the third option for Christians of 'conditional immortality' was growing in support, as men recoiled from the doctrine of eternal torment. It had a pedigree going back to the New Testament,<sup>42</sup> and its leading advocate in the nineteenth century was the Congregationalist Edward White.<sup>43</sup> The theory did not assume the immortality of soul. It rather maintained that the incarnation of the divine logos of God was 'TO GIVE LIFE ETERNAL TO MANKIND'.<sup>44</sup> White showed that the New Testament texts relating to 'Gehenna' and 'punishment' could be understood in terms of annihilation, as fire destroys.<sup>45</sup> He cited patristic support<sup>46</sup> and argued that the theory was a better motive for evangelism than eternal torment.<sup>47</sup> In an age when theories of punishment were influencing penal reform in a liberal direction, it appeared to offer fairer punishment for temporal sins. It fitted in with ideas of the survival of the fittest.<sup>48</sup>

A prominent evangelical of the Church of England in the nineteenth century who sought to reinterpret the doctrine of eternal punishment was T. R. Birks, secretary of the Evangelical Alliance, vicar of Holy Trinity, Cambridge, and finally successor to F. D. Maurice in the chair of moral philosophy at Cambridge. An effort to expel him from the Evangelical Alliance failed in 1868, though sixteen members of the Alliance resigned.<sup>49</sup> Birks taught that the punishment of the lost combined 'with the utmost personal shame and humiliation and anguish the passive contemplation of a ransomed universe and of all the innumerable varieties of blessedness enjoyed by unfallen spirits and the ransomed people of God.'<sup>50</sup>

Thus the Protestant world found itself in a new situation where the three theories of eternal punishment, universalism and conditional immortality were all being held side by side, and reacting on each other. Each claimed support from Scripture, and was eager to trace earlier supporters. Schleiermacher's theory of antinomies had now come more to be accepted in practice, so that major treatments of the subject must discuss the three possibilities and the various combinations and permutations in the same work. Salmond's *The Christian Doctrine of Immortality*<sup>51</sup> is an excellent example of this, with considerable attention also being given to the views of other religions, and earlier beliefs of mankind. It is one of the last and most noble

defences of the traditional doctrine. Leckie followed with his masterly book *The World to Come and Final Destiny*,<sup>52</sup> which was more indicative of the line twentieth-century thought would take:

One may conjecture that those who in all ages have entertained hopeful thoughts regarding the future of the human race have not really been inspired by direct sayings of Jesus, or even by inferences drawn from general principles which underlie His teaching, but rather by the influence of His personality, His attitude to men, His doctrine of God, and especially His Cross and Passion.<sup>53</sup>

A more popular treatment of the subject was Paterson Smyth's *The Gospel of the Hereafter*, which was first published in 1910 and was in its forty-second impression in 1964. It stresses both 'Probation in This Life' and 'Ministry in the Unseen Life'.<sup>54</sup> H. R. Mackintosh, writing in 1914, estimated that most English-speaking clergy were universalists at heart,<sup>55</sup> and, prior to the second World War, Percy Dearmer launched a scathing attack on the idea of everlasting punishment, attempting to discredit apocalyptic.<sup>56</sup>

The revival of biblical theology in the twentieth century, and the strength of biblically based churches, have ensured the continuance of the traditional belief among some Protestants, but support among Church of England evangelicals has grown steadily for conditional immortality.<sup>57</sup> Despite the powerful and persuasive advocacy for universalism by John A. T. Robinson<sup>58</sup> and many others, the doctrine continues to be challenged.<sup>59</sup> A new guide has arisen to lead us through the intricacies of twentieth-century biblical theology on eschatology: Stephen H. Travis has at last provided the Christian student with a lucid exposition of the main subjects treated under eschatology, including apocalyptic.<sup>60</sup> S. G. F. Brandon and John Hick have both produced extensive comparisons of the eschatology of the main religions, among many others.<sup>61</sup> More practical help to Christians in England, confronted by so many followers of other religions, is given by the Evangelical Alliance to promote a truly Christian approach.<sup>62</sup> This does not speculate about those who have not heard about Christ: '...the Scriptural answer must be, "Go and tell them"'.<sup>63</sup>

The comprehensiveness of the Church of England on eschatology was underlined by the report *Doctrine in the Church of England*, eventually published in 1938 by the Commission set up in 1922. The Commission considered the question posed by the decisiveness attached to death in the traditional scheme, and, after considering 1 Peter 3:19-20, continued rather in line with Leckie:

But if we extend this hope, as many feel bound to do, to a general expectation of further opportunities of grace for all, it will not be on account of specific declarations of Scripture, but rather as an inference from the Christian doctrine of God as a whole.<sup>64</sup>

The Chairman was William Temple, whose own views on occasion tended to universalism. But perhaps more influential have been the views of a layman, C. S. Lewis, who rejected his master George Macdonald's universalism in *The Great Divorce*<sup>65</sup> and earlier in *The Problem of Pain*.<sup>66</sup>

Francis Glasson and Richard Bauckham have both written perceptive articles on the change of Christian teaching on human destiny.<sup>67</sup> The fact that they wrote from different angles confirms the historical development. Modern Churchmen would attribute this to the progressive revelation of the Holy Spirit.<sup>68</sup> Such supposed revelation can see the severe sayings in Matthew as inspired by hatred of the Jews, and that the light of divine truth in the Bible is 'obscured by the fog and smoke of human blindness and hatred.'<sup>69</sup> There has always been a strain of liberal Christianity.<sup>70</sup> But what of Rome?

Officially, all is the same, to judge from Karl Rahner's monograph *On the Theology of Death*:

Death brings man, as a moral and spiritual person, a kind of finality and consummation which renders his decision for or against God, reached during the time of his bodily life, final and unalterable.<sup>71</sup>

Peter Geach employs all his skill as a logician in defending eternal punishment,<sup>72</sup> and Travis cites other Roman Catholics to the same effect.<sup>73</sup> But, as usual, it is Vatican II which raises the questions. In practice it is argued that nothing has changed. But Hans Küng is surely right in drawing attention to the contrast between what was cited above from the Council of Florence in 1442 and what was promulgated in the Decree of the Church (*Lumen Gentium*) on 21 November 1964:

... the plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator ... Nor is God himself far distant from those who in shadows and images seek the unknown God, for it is He who gives to all men life and breath and every good gift ... and who as Saviour wills that all men be saved (cf. 1 Tim. 2:4).

Those also can attain to salvation who through no fault of their own do not know the gospel of Christ and His Church, yet sincerely seek God and, moved by his grace, strive by their deeds to do His will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience. Nor does divine Providence deny the help necessary for salvation to those who, without blame on their part, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God, but who strive to lead a good life, thanks to His grace. Whatever goodness or truth is found among them is looked upon by the Church as a preparation for the Gospel. She regards such qualities as given by Him who enlightens all men so that they may finally have life.<sup>74</sup>

But how are they saved, if it has to be in this life? Ladislaus Boros, like Newman, has suggested that it is in the moment of dying.<sup>75</sup> But we saw that Farrar, with the greater knowledge of death-bed oc-

casions that Victorians had, doubted this. Hick is also very critical of a decision made in the moment of death:

Commonsense is then against it. We know that a large proportion of all human beings who have ever been born have died in infancy, their minds and their characters not yet sufficiently developed for them to make a spiritual choice of eternal significance. Further, the conditions of a person's life, as these are determined by his biological inheritance and by the influence of the family and the wider social matrix of his early development, are often such as to make it virtually impossible that God's purpose for him will be fulfilled by the hour of his death.<sup>76</sup>

Boros' theory would have accommodated Vatican II to traditional teaching, but Hick's critique is powerful, and it seems more plausible to posit some kind of paseschatology, in which salvation can take place after death.<sup>77</sup> Of course there are problems of spatio-temporal existence that then arise, but they seem less artificial than theories of people being 'anonymous Christians' here, when clearly many have no desire to be.<sup>78</sup>

The notable feature of Vatican II is its change of emphasis, typified by the fivefold repetition of 1 Timothy 2:4<sup>79</sup>, with the tone set by Pope John:

Nowadays, however, the Spouse of Christ prefers to make use of the medicine of mercy rather than that of severity.<sup>80</sup>

... the plan of God, who wills all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth (1 Tim. 2:4).<sup>81</sup>

It reflected his own generous and loving nature. Vatican II is in many ways a masterly statement of both the love of God and the missionary task of the church, a task which Anglican theologian John Macquarrie has so grievously repudiated in his rejection of the evangelism of those of other religions.<sup>82</sup> If this is due to his universalism,<sup>83</sup> then it reveals a great weakness in his theology, because J. A. T. Robinson in his famous debate with T. F. Torrance denied that universalism cuts the nerve of evangelism.<sup>84</sup> Hick likewise lacks the great emphasis on the person of Christ which characterizes Vatican II and its missionary impetus. If salvation is to be obtained in the world to come, it must still be through Christ, as Clement of Alexandria maintained.

The extension of opportunity through the preaching in hades in 1 Peter has been firmly rejected in the major study of the subject by the Jesuit W. J. Dalton.<sup>85</sup> His exegesis of 1 Peter 4:6 (Farrar's text) favoured the interpretation that the dead referred to were Christian dead.<sup>86</sup> But F. W. Beare understands the 'dead' in 1 Peter 4:6 to mean 'all the dead from the beginning of time, all that are to stand before the judgement seat of Christ.'<sup>87</sup> Many Protestant scholars follow this view.<sup>88</sup> And although Hans Küng accepts Dalton's



## CHURCHMAN

exegesis of 1 Peter 3:18ff. as referring to disobedient spirits to whom Christ proclaimed his victory while ascending to heaven, he included 1 Peter 4:6 as evidence of a reconciliation for all and mercy for everyone,<sup>89</sup> together with I Corinthians 15:24-28 and Romans 5:18. However, Küng is happier appealing on more general grounds to the saving efficacy of the cross as having power also in the world to come, along with Origen and J. A. T. Robinson:<sup>90</sup>

The possibility for mankind before or outside Christianity...can be affirmed without appealing to the mythological idea of Jesus preaching in limbo. The universal significance of the vicarious suffering on the cross is not dependent on an unprovable journey of suffering or triumph on the part of Jesus to an *a priori* inconceivable lower region.<sup>91</sup>

Küng considers that 'The "eternity" of the pains of hell ("fire") affirmed in a number of New Testament metaphors remains subordinated to God and his will', and that 'There are some New Testament texts, not balanced by others, which suggest that the consummation will bring about a reconciliation of all and mercy for everyone.'<sup>92</sup>

Küng is critical of what Vatican II says about other religions. He maintains that the world religions can be called ways of salvation only in a relative sense, not simply as a whole and in every case: 'They do not offer *the* truth for Christians.'<sup>93</sup> His analysis of the situation is far more searching than that of John Macquarrie, and he is less dogmatic than many on universalism:

To say that God *must* save all men (universal reconciliation) and *must* exclude the possibility of a final removal of man from his presence (hell) is to contradict the sovereign freedom of his grace and mercy. But it is likewise wrong to suppose that God *could not* save all men and—so to speak—leave hell empty.<sup>94</sup>

Küng and Vatican II show that the developments in Protestant thought have not been ignored by Rome.

The National Evangelical Anglican Congress held at Keele in 1967 rejected universalism by stating:

Scripture has no place for a universal salvation, or the possibility of a further successful probation in a future life for those who reject Christ in this.<sup>95</sup>

Roman Catholic dogma only makes, in theory, allowance for 'invincible ignorance' of true religion:<sup>96</sup>

Whosoever, therefore, knowing that the Catholic Church was made necessary by God through Jesus Christ, would refuse to enter her or remain in her could not be saved.<sup>97</sup>

In conclusion, we are faced today with a rapidly developing under-

standing of death and destiny, leaving aside the legion of books on death itself. The old assumption of the finality of death for human destiny is still the official teaching of the Roman Catholic Church, but seems to have been undercut by Vatican II. After surveying many views, and various possibilities regarding space and time hereafter, Travis considers that 'There is room...for differences of opinion, room for reverent agnosticism.'<sup>98</sup> In no theological field can we ignore Christian tradition. But perhaps we should consider, to avoid Origen's uncertainty, that those in hell are still in time, while those in Christ are partakers of that life which is eternal, from which nothing can ever separate them.

Michael Paternoster believes that hell can become purgatory.<sup>99</sup> The story of the 'harrowing of hell' is very ancient, and has played a prominent part in Christian tradition.<sup>100</sup> In the Orthodox Church, the drawing of Adam out of hell by Christ is the well-known subject of some of the most famous frescos. Whatever the mode of our existence hereafter, the conviction of Christ's conquest of death, so strong in the Orthodox Church, is certainly weakened if death is to impose the limit to the saving work of God. As J. A. T. Robinson observed: "'Death, where is thy victory?'" On this reckoning, it would seem, over ninety in every hundred.'<sup>101</sup> The currently popular theory of conditional immortality also has serious difficulties. As Geoffrey Lampe once remarked, we do not expect a doctor to solve his problems by cutting his patients' throats when he cannot cure them. And the death penalty today among civilized people is still far from being considered an appropriate punishment, which perhaps lies at the heart of the 'Death of a Princess' controversy. The Alexandrian tradition of God as healer and educator both here and hereafter is one that will not be disposed of easily. More consideration will need to be given to the meaning of spiritual death, and to the saying of Jesus: 'He is not God of the dead, but of the living; for all live unto him.'<sup>102</sup> The embracing of conditional immortality looks rather uncomfortably like an escape from a difficult moral problem.

Each of the three viewpoints mentioned has its own strengths and weaknesses, which have been ably pointed out by a number of writers.<sup>103</sup> To hold any one viewpoint dogmatically, without giving due weight to the others, can lead to an unbalanced position, (even though J. A. T. Robinson calls the undogmatic position 'that most subtly unbiblical'<sup>104</sup>), and may turn out to be wrong. If this paper has seemed to favour universalism, that is natural enough in view of the historical development. But the dominical sayings in the gospels strongly support the other two views,<sup>105</sup> and the rest of the New Testament may be less promising for liberals than they suppose.<sup>106</sup>

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## NOTES

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- 34 *ibid.*, pp.48-106.
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- 47 *ibid.*, pp.506-21.
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- 49 *ibid.*, pp.123-9.
- 50 *ibid.*, p.126. Also cited in section on T. R. Birks by E. H. Plumptre, op.cit., p.230, who likens Birks' language in various passages on this subject to that of F. D. Maurice.
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## CHURCHMAN

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- 68 A. M. G. Stephenson, *The Modern Churchman*, vol.XIII, no.1, October 1969, p.145.
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- 71 ET, Herder & Herder, New York 1965, p.26: refs. given in support of statement *Denzinger* 457; 464; 493a; 530f.; 693; John 9:4; Luke 16:26; 2 Cor.5:10.
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- 79 *Documents of Vatican II*, op.cit., pp.35, 139, 593, 661, 717.
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- 89 Küng, op.cit., p.370, p.658, n.85.
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- 92 *ibid.*, p.369f.
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- 95 Sec.1, para.11.
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- 99 *Thou Art There Also: God, Death and Hell* (SPCK, London 1967) p.155. This work contains much useful historical analysis.

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