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Patristic Views on Hell – Part 2

In the second part of his article on the patristic understanding of Hell Dr Keith concentrates his attention on the influential figure of Augustine.

Key words: Theology; early church; eschatology; Hell; Augustine.

As we move from the treatment of Hell in Origen to that in Augustine, we soon become aware that we have almost entered into a different world. This is all the more surprising when we consider that both men owed a lot to Platonist philosophy. In either case their debt was different—itself an indication that we must not assume an uncritical acceptance by patristic writers of the leading philosophical ideas of their day.

Augustine readily accepted the doctrine of Hell as he understood it to be taught in the Bible. It was not for him a matter for debate or even pious speculation. Thus we find him treating Hell in considerable detail at the end of his vast work The *City of God* where he finds it appropriate to describe of the destinies of all, both those who belong to the City of God and those who do not. Similar themes are also handled in his *Enchiridion*, the nearest Augustine came to writing a short manual of Christian doctrine.[1] These writings reveal Augustine's sensitivity to the difficulties posed by biblical eschatology for the pagan mind of his day. But he was probably even more concerned as a pastor to guard the church against various attempts from within to water down the full implications of Hell. To Augustine everlasting punishment not only was within God's power, but was an assured reality, seeing that both the prophets and Christ himself had testified to it.[2] Professing Christians needed to be reminded of this and so to be urged that their presence in church should not be construed as a licence to sin.[3] That would mean they were self-deceived with a deliberate disregard for Christ's words—'I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter

1 Book 21 of *De Civ. Dei* is specifically devoted to this theme, while sections 66–112 of the *Enchiridion* are generally relevant to the subject of judgment.
2 *De Civ. Dei* 21:9.
3 Augustine *De Cat. Rud.* 48.

the kingdom of heaven'.[4] Augustine took a pessimistic view of the African church of his day—'In our times many forms of sin . . . are now so openly and habitually practised, that not only dare we not excommunicate a layman, we dare not even degrade a clergyman, for the commission of them.'[5] This observation caused Augustine such distress that he feared his experience might be that of the Apostle Paul with the Galatians—'I fear for you, that somehow I have wasted my efforts on you.'[6]

Perspectives on God's Justice

At a personal level Augustine had few problems with the doctrine of Hell, except perhaps in the specialised case of unbaptised children. To him it was a central scriptural teaching. To deny it, or even to suggest that Hell was a threat which would never in the event materialise, was to impugn God's veracity. It was equally out of place to question God's justice in consigning demons and men to Hell; for the justice of God was a basic datum of revelation. 'That there is no injustice in God must be an unshakable conviction in a mind of rational piety and steadfast faith.'[7] Augustine emphasised the inscrutability for men in this world of divine judgment—something which Scripture, notably at Romans 11, as well as experience indicated. But it was important to Augustine that at the final day of judgment all the perplexities of God's judicial dealings would be resolved with regard not only to Hell but also to all God's interim acts of judgment and the manifest inequalities among men.[8] He also contended that the redeemed will at that time be made all the more keenly aware how much they owe to the grace of God. But for the present enigmas will remain about God's dealings with men; it is part of the character of faith to trust that behind it all is the hand of a just God who will one day bring all his dealings to light.

It is true that Augustine could suggest that human and divine perspectives on justice might be different. But the significance of this should not be exaggerated. Human perspectives on justice are distorted by our personal involvement in sin, not because of any intrinsic difference between divine and human justice. That was why it was vital to Augustine that on the day of judgment all human puzzles about God's justice should be removed. Thus it is only from our present perspective that eternal punishment may appear harsh and unjust (dura et iniusta) simply because we humans have been so weakened in our

4 Mt. 5:20 cited at *De Civ. Dei* 20:9 and 21:27.
5 Augustine *Enchiridion* 80.
6 Gal. 4:11 cited at *Enchiridion* 79.
7 *Ad Simplicianum* 1:16, where Augustine quotes Ro. 9:14. Cf. *De Civ. Dei* 12:28.
8 Augustine *Enchiridion* 94–5; *De Civ. Dei* 20:2.

sensitivities and understanding that we fail to grasp how serious the first sin (of Adam) really was.[9] Again, if we were to look at sin more generally, we would be inclined without the guidance of Scripture to make wrong conclusions about which sins are heinous and which less so.[10] Familiarity with particular sins makes us treat them with contempt. Sins appear in their proper colours only when we have no experience in them. But a human sense of justice does remain which is analogous to the divine justice. Augustine was confident that even the doctrine of election was perfectly in accord with human instincts of justice. There could, he argued, be no injustice in God forgiving the sins of some but not forgiving others. After all, human creditors can decide with perfect justice to remit the debts of some but not of others. It would be presumptuous of the debtors to decide by themselves whether it was appropriate to pay up or not. So, none can complain of God forgiving the sins of some, but holding others to account when God has not compelled them to sin in the first place.[11]

While Augustine cannot and does not attempt to prove the justice of Hell, he was concerned to present good grounds for God's severity.[12] It was Adam who first sinned and brought the judgment of death (not just physical death but every other form of death as well, including the second death of Hell) on himself and all his posterity, who were in some sense in his loins at the time of his Fall. This was the way in which mankind was afflicted with the contagion of sin and became liable to the sentence of death. The idea of the intrinsic unity—even the involvement of the whole human race—in Adam seems to have posed less of a problem in Augustine's day for theodicy than it does in our own with its excessively individualistic understanding of the human condition.[13]

The problem of justice turned more on the original sentence passed on Adam. Augustine approached this question from several angles. He pointed to the unique status of Adam. The higher his privilege, the greater his sin in forsaking that status.[14] He had before him the promise of immortality, but he threw it away by his act of disobedience. Nor

9 Augustine *De Civ. Dei* 21:12.

10 Augustine *Enchiridion* 78–80.

11 Augustine *Ad Simplicianum* 2:16.

12 There is perhaps a hint of such a rationale at *De Civ. Dei* 21:12 'at factus est malo dignus aeterno qui hoc in se peremit bonum quod esse posset aeternum'. But this point is not developed and should not be taken as a definitive position.

13 Cf. Plutarch's remarks at *Moralia* 559d–560a, where clearly he believed that sometimes children were punished for the sins of their fathers. Augustine himself was sure from Scripture that children suffered for the sins of their fathers, but was prepared to leave it an open question whether the guilt of any other ancestors (Adam, of course, excepted) was imputed—*Enchiridion* 46–7.

14 Augustine *De Civ. Dei* 21:12.

was there anything in him compelling him to sin; his will was sound and not yet impaired. There was no inner tension with his desires or appetites pulling him in a different direction from his will. In all these respects Adam was in a unique position which none of his physical descendants have enjoyed. The ease of avoiding the sin underlined its seriousness and the justice of the consequent sentence. From another angle, God had provided Adam with an excellent environment which combined an abundance of things to promote his well-being with a lack of oppressive and difficult rules. God gave him one short and easy command to obey with this intention—'to impress upon this created being that he was the Lord; and that free service was in that creature's own interest.'[15] The corresponding sin of disobedience was all the more serious in that it was entirely without any good reason. Augustine viewed obedience as the key to the relationship between man, the rational creature, and his Creator—'obedience is in a way the mother and guardian of all other virtues in a rational creature, seeing that the rational creation has been so made that it is to man's advantage to be in subjection to God, and it is calamitous for him to act according to his own will, and not to obey the will of his Creator.'[16] That is not to deny that this act of disobedience might be analysed from other perspectives. Elsewhere Augustine identified within Adam's single transgression elements of such diverse sins as pride, blasphemy, murder, spiritual fornication, theft and avarice![17] No theologian since the apostolic age and very few since then have ever offered such an extensive analysis both of the gravity of the first sin and of its devastating effects on man's relationship to God or even to himself. For Augustine not only was original sin a disastrous historical reality, but so too were the innumerable actual sins which proceeded from the original sin. One of the most serious aspects of God's retribution, he believed, was that disobedience should multiply in further acts of disobedience.[18]

Augustine did not shrink from severe conclusions. God could with perfect justice have withheld hope of pardon from mankind as a whole, as in fact he had done with fallen angels. But God had been willing to save some of mankind. Augustine was convinced that it would have been impossible for God to have saved the whole of mankind or even the majority of them as that would have obscured the truth of God's just retribution.[19] As a result, the redeemed, a large number in their own right though less than the damned, would be grateful for

15 Ibid. 14:15.
16 Ibid. 14:12.
17 Augustine *Enchiridion* 45.
18 Augustine *De Civ. Dei* 14:15.
19 Ibid. 21:12.

their entirely undeserved deliverance.[20] Augustine accepted that even those dying in infancy or in the womb were tarnished by original sin. If they died unbaptised, they would have to be consigned to Hell, but (he added) to the lightest possible condemnation. He plainly had difficulty with this conclusion as is revealed by his inconsistency in saying that these children are to be sent to hell and yet denying that it would have been preferable for these children never to have been born.[21] Augustine was particularly sensitive to the suffering borne by many children in this world without apparently any good reason, let alone their fate if they passed from this world unbaptised. These difficulties surfaced in a letter to Jerome—'But when we come to the punishment of little children, I am bewildered by great perplexities, and I am quite at a loss for an answer. I refer not only to the punishment which results from the condemnation which inevitably falls on them if they depart from the body without the sacrament of Christian grace, but the suffering which takes place before our eyes in this life and brings us sorrow . . . We are forbidden to say that these things happen without God's knowledge, or that he is powerless to resist what causes these things, or that he causes or permits them unjustly . . . There is a rational soul in that physical organism which is punished with such bitter suffering. God is good; God is just; God is omnipotent: only an utter madman could doubt this. Therefore some just cause must be assigned for terrible suffering of small children.'[22] Augustine's basic conviction that in spite of appearances to the contrary God is just came to his rescue at what is obviously a weak point in his system. But the weakness in his position is as much due to the vital place given to baptism in the process of salvation as in anything more directly germane to issues of judgment and eternal punishment.[23]

Attempts to Tone Down the Nature or Duration of Hell

Augustine thought it appropriate to devote some space in *The City of God* to countering attempts to modify the nature of Hell—attempts he encountered in his own pastoral work.[24] His own position was distinguished by scrupulous adherence to the precise terms of Scripture. Some compassionate (misericordes) Christians might wish to exalt God's own compassion by the suggestion that God would in his mercy

20 Augustine *De Corrept. et Grat.* 28.
21 Augustine *c. Julianum* 5:44.
22 Augustine *Ep.* 166:10.
23 Augustine did not always hold such a high view of baptism—cf. G. L. Bonner *St Augustine of Hippo: Life and Controversies* (The Canterbury Press, Norwich 1986) 382.
24 Cf. Augustine's remark at 21:18 about those whom he had met in conlocutionibus nostris.

put a time limit to the torment of those who were really worthy of eternal punishment.[25] They believed they had scriptural support for this position in Psalm 77:9, where they read a future tense, 'Will God really forget to be merciful? Will he in his wrath restrain his compassion?', and applied these words to the future judgment. But Augustine pointed out, if compassion is the supreme consideration with God, it ought not to be restricted to humans, but should be extended to the devil and his angels. And yet to allow this would be in direct contradiction to Scripture. The texts Matthew 25:41 and Revelation 20:10 made it clear that eternal punishment is in store for the devil and his angels. Where Scripture spoke so plainly, it was presumptuous to invoke considerations of compassion in support of a contrary view, 'There can be, I say, no stronger reason than this; that the Scriptures, which never deceive, say that God has not spared them, that in fact he has already condemned them to be thrust into the prison of nether darkness, committed for safe keeping there and for their punishment at the last judgment when the eternal fire will receive them, in which they will be tortured for ever and ever'.

The objectors Augustine had in view were hardly disposed to release the devil and his angels from eternal torment. (Origen was distinctly out of favour at this time!) But Augustine went on to argue that it would be arbitrary to suppose the Scriptures are correct in consigning the devil and his angels to eternal punishment, but are misleading when they indicate that wicked men will go to a similar destiny. Augustine also pointed to Matthew 25:46 where Christ included punishment and life in the one sentence with the same adjective 'eternal' in both cases. Exegetically it would be monstrous to suggest that with life 'eternal' meant one thing and with punishment something rather different, seeing that they occurred in the same sentence. Augustine, therefore, held to the doctrine of eternal punishment because he believed it was clearly taught in Scripture. At the same time he pointed out that for theologians to extend the bounds of God's compassion or even to compete with one another in giving God an ever greater compassion in effect moved them further and further from the tenor of Scripture.[26]

Augustine claimed some respect for the above group who believed in a temporal end to the sufferings of the damned. He was, however, much harsher with others who believed God would be merciful to all men in response to the prayers of the saints on the Day of Judgment.[27] They gave lip service to the doctrine of Hell by agreeing that there

25 Ibid. 21:17.

26 Perhaps Augustine may approach the philosophical position that the whole idea of mercy with no limits whatsoever is an absurdity. But he draws away from any philosophical base and prefers to anchor himself firmly to the words of Scripture.

27 *De Civ. Dei.* 21:18.

would be those worthy of eternal punishment. On the day of Judgment, however, the sentence would not be executed because the saints who had been taught to pray for their enemies would now go about this task with redoubled zeal since they were perfected in holiness. God, they supposed, would be committed to restraining his wrath in mercy and to hearing the prayers of his saints. As a result no humans would be sent to Hell. But Augustine concluded that this group had simply devised a belief which would justify their continuing in wickedness with impunity. If the worst came to the worst, the saints could always bail them out with their prayers.

While it is unnecessary to go into the details of Augustine's reply, certain aspects of his position do deserve mention. Augustine did not altogether rule out the notion of prayer for the dead, whether by the saints on earth or by the saints in glory. There was a longstanding tradition in the church for Christians to remember in prayer certain of their dead. Augustine himself had been enjoined to do this by his mother shortly before her death.[28] Far from being unenthusiastic about this, Augustine actually went as far as to urge all readers of *The Confessions* to remember both his mother and his father at God's altar.[29] A scriptural basis was found for this practice in 2 Maccabees 12:39–45 where it is recorded that Judas Maccabaeus paid the cost for sacrifice to be made in Jerusalem for the sins of those who had died fighting in battle on his side.[30] To this Augustine added Matthew 12:32, which he interpreted as indicating a time after death for the forgiveness of sins as well as a time before death, and 1 Corinthians 3:12–15, where he tentatively suggested that the fire which was to burn up the works of some men would take place in a period between bodily death and the last judgment.[31] (Certain believers needed to be purged of worldly ambitions before they were ready for heaven.) Though Augustine did in this way concede the possibility of *post mortem* cleansing and forgiveness, his primary concern remained that of ensuring scriptural safeguards. Paul's words at 2 Corinthians 5:10 made it plain that the judgment of each individual man or woman depended on his or her deeds in this world. There was, therefore, no hope that anyone who died impenitent or unbaptised could improve their standing after death.[32] The same would apply to professing Christians who persisted in gross sin. Augustine was, however, prepared to recognise a category of people 'who have been reborn in Christ and whose life in the body has not been so

28 Augustine *Confessions* 9:11–12. Cf. his treatise *De Cura Pro Mortuis*, especially section 3.
29 Ibid. 9:13.
30 Protestants will regard 2 Maccabees as apocryphal, but ought not to forget that for Augstine it was part of the canon of Scripture.
31 Augustine *De Civ. Dei* 20:25; 21:13, 24 and 26.
32 Ibid. 21:25.

evil that they are judged unworthy of such mercy, and yet not so good that they are seen to have no need of it'.[33] When it came to specifying the sort of people involved, Augustine admitted to great perplexity. Perhaps they would include baptised people whose lives in other respects fell short but who gave alms to poorer saints who in turn would be inspired to pray for their benefactors. Augustine was aware of the dangers of being too specific; this might lead and had in fact already led many to espouse a bare minimum of piety. It seemed to Augustine on reflection that there might be a divine purpose in keeping these things secret. He approved the advice of one shrewd commentator on the laxity which this form of broader hope was engendering. Rather than trying to find others to intercede for us, 'we should be better employed in taking care to lead good lives so as to join the number of the future intercessors for others' salvation.'[34]

If Augustine encountered difficulties both intellectually and pastorally with the idea of the dead somehow being benefited by the living, his reluctance to dispense altogether with the belief is a measure of its general acceptance within the church of his own day. He restricted himself to imposing or rather trying to impose what he saw as firm scriptural guidelines. In due time what in Augustine were only tentative ideas were elaborated into a full-scale doctrine of Purgatory.[35] If at first it was suggested that there were believers in some form of Purgatory who could be aided by the eucharist, by alms and by prayers from the living, inexorably precise details were later added and formed into a dogmatic system. Sins were classified into the venial and the non-venial, while claims were made as to the sort of penance which would compensate for individual sins. Augustine would have deplored such a development. He demonstrated a shrewd pastoral instinct when he foresaw that this would lead to no more than the avoidance of the greater sins and a search for those who would carry out the necessary penitential works after death. By the time the Middle Ages were well advanced concern about Purgatory had eclipsed the fundamental distinction between Heaven and Hell.

Augustine also encountered the idea that the biblical threats of Hell were in the last resort not based on any real intention by God to consign men to Hell.[36] This was in effect the position taken by those who insisted that God would have mercy on all human sinners in response

33 Ibid. 21:24—'his quorum in Christo regeneratorum nec usque adeo vita in corpore mala gesta est ut tali misericordia iudicentur digni non esse, nec usque adeo bene ut talem misericordiam reperiantur necessariam non habere'.

34 Ibid. 21:27.

35 Cf. the hesitant remark of *Enchiridion* 69. Curiously Augustine's own comments are becomng more definite by section 110 of the same work.

36 Augustine *De Civ. Dei* 21:24.

to the intercession of the saints. They went on to suggest that threats of Hell were no more than an expression of God's verdict that certain sinners were worthy of an eternal punishment. There were a few subtle hints in Scripture that God would eventually have mercy on all humans, but by and large Scripture maintained a discreet silence on this so that through fear of eternal punishment many would reform their lives and so that there would be saints with power to pray for those who had not corrected their lives.

Surprisingly perhaps, Augustine did not try to answer this on the basis of God's veracity, but argued that this understanding of Scripture was misguided.[37] There was abundant evidence from Scripture that God overthrew sinners in one of two ways—either by punishing the men themselves, as with the Sodomites, or by destroying their sins through the repentance of the sinners, as was the case with the Ninevites of Jonah's day. Though he did not elaborate on this, Augustine implied that God's principles in the Final Judgment will be the same as he has exercised throughout human history. He did not, therefore, in context give a sufficiently detailed answer to those opponents who might want to say that God's interim judgments are all intended to pave the way for mercy at the Final Judgment. But Augustine, it seems to me, does have the weight of Scripture behind him.[38] The judgment of Hell does not come as a bolt out of the blue for which men have been totally unprepared by the events of this life. God's wrath has been manifest in many ways, not least in the dire consequences of Adam's sin and in the irrevocable sentence of condemnation passed against the devil and his angels. The latter consideration weighed much more heavily in Augustine's day than it does in ours; for there were few who questioned the reality of the demonic.

Augustine was keen for pastoral reasons to stress that Hell really was eternal. For one thing he believed that the fear of Hell actually helped many to make a first step toward true piety. That piety may have been imperfect in the sense that it fell short of the perfect love which casts out fear, but it did often mark a genuine beginning.[39] Moreover, he believed that a diminished doctrine of Hell brought diminished standards of piety and a false hope within the church.[40]

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37 But compare Augstine's remark at Ibid.—'eos qui putant minaciter potius quam veraciter dictum: Discedite a me, maledicti, in ignem aeternum . . .' No doubt, it was largely for tactical reasons that Augustine did not see fit to expand here on God's veracity.

38 Cf. Augustine *De Civ. Dei* 21:14 for the view that the whole of this mortal life was punishment, though Augustine did not mean unmitigated punishment.

39 Augustine *Hom in 1 Joh.* 4:17–21. Augustine identified the true fear of God as the fear that God might forsake you—not fear of punishment.

40 This is a particularly prominent theme at Ibid. 21:23

The same consideration motivated his concern to argue that Hell involved eternal torment of the body as well as of the soul. He realised that pagans had problems conceiving of a body which was supposed to be endowed with immortality and yet at the same time was being tormented by endless pain.[41] This attitude was also reflected in certain Christians who took the never-dying worm and the unquenchable fire of Isaiah 66:24 entirely of the remorse and pain of the soul with no implications for the body. Augustine contended that eternal torment of the body would be different to anything experienced in this life where pain and bodily endurance would be in conflict until their tension would be resolved in one way or another. Either pain would win and death would remove all feeling or else nature would win and good health would see an end to the pain. But in Hell the conflict engendered by the pain of the body (as well as of the soul) knows no such resolution. Even in this world we see instances where continuing physical life is compatible with a great degree of suffering and where certain animals may live in the midst of fire. It would, therefore, hardly be beyond God's power to fashion a body which could experience pain endlessly. Thus, death will take on a new character in the afterlife—'The first death drives the soul from the body against her will; the second death holds the soul in the body against her will. But both these deaths have this in common, that the soul suffers against her will from her connection with the body.'[42] There were the terms in which Augustine elaborated on the 'second death' as he believed that loose thinking on this subject promoted false hopes.

Assessing Augustine's Contribution

In formulating his teaching about Hell, Augustine showed no desire for originality or even for extending the doctrine of the church, though his very thoroughness in working out the implications of Scripture did mark an extension. His concern was by accurate exposition of Scripture to overthrow the claims of those who had taken certain passages out of the Bible and used them to soften the rigours of the Bible as a whole. Only with pagans (who, of course, would not have accepted Scriptural authority) did Augustine invoke extra-biblical arguments. And here he was concerned exclusively with what we might term a scientific issue—whether it is possible for a material body to maintain an eternal existence while being tormented. (Here we have a parallel to pagan objections to the resurrection of the body and the notion of a spiritual body.) There was little objection. It seems, from outsiders to

41 Ibid. 21:2–10 deals at length with this issue—an indication of how important it was to pagans.

42 Ibid. 19:28.

Hell on the ground that it was unjust or because it appeared to contradict the love of God. Sensitivities on this score were more likely to be felt in Christian circles though in fact there is no evidence from this time of anyone formulating directly the issue of the consistency of Hell and a God of love.

It is difficult to be precise as to Augustine's influence on the future formulation of Christian doctrine simply because he strove so consistently to let Scripture speak for itself. Augustine may have confirmed the conclusions others would naturally have drawn from the plain teaching of Scripture. We can see that Augustine was mirroring developments elsewhere in his most controversial idea in this sphere—the notion of a category of Christians who will have to go through a sort of Purgatory after death. The same may well have applied to his less controversial statements. Augustine was also able to assume general dismissal in the western church of Origen's view, and by hinting that Origen was more consistent than the 'humanitarian Christians' off his day who wanted divine mercy to extend to all mankind but not to fallen angels, Augustine successfully identified them with an already discredited position. Moreover, Augustine made it abundantly clear that it was to misrepresent the God of the Bible to ascribe to him unlimited mercy, whether to men or to demons. As a corollary to this, Christians had to reject the Platonist position that all God's punishments are essentially corrective, because there was a real category of people who in the last resort would not be corrected.[43]

Augustine's constructive contribution to the doctrine of Hell came as an offshoot of his teaching about original sin. For Augustine Adam's sin in the Garden of Eden was not something of antiquarian interest or even a neat piece to fit into a large theological jigsaw; but it was a monstrous, unjustified act against both the goodness of God and against man's own best interests. In itself it merited eternal punishment. Anyone who finds Augustine's position harsh or bizarre is likely to find the root of the problem here. Augustine's view of original sin was foundational in his own account and was to exercise an enormous influence over the western church. Yet even here Augustine could have claimed to be developing traditional church teaching. In the Pelagian Controversy he regularly appealed to the church's practice of baptising infants as a recognition that they were all tainted with original sin. Augustine's harsh position on unbaptised infants has understandably caused dismay, but must be seen as peripheral. It is more germane to his doctrine of baptism than to his doctrine of eternal judgment. Hence it cannot be used to undermine the latter.

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43 Ibid. 21:13.

We might perhaps wish that Augustine had more extensively explored the inter-relation between two complementary Scriptural truths—the corporate solidarity of the human race in Adam's sin and the individual responsibility encapsulated in the statement 'the soul who sins is the one who will die' with its detailed exposition in Ezekiel 18. But Augustine did not do so. And it is noteworthy that he maintained a deliberate agnosticism on a related issue, the origin of the human soul, even though it was a source of keen debate in his own day.[44]

Augustine did not feel the need to develop this line of thought because the character of human life from its earliest stages in childhood gave to him overwhelming evidence of the reality of the condemnation which had befallen Adam and his descendants. 'What else is the meaning of the dreadful depth of ignorance, from which all error arises, which has taken to its bosom, so to speak, all the sons of Adam in its dark embrace, so that man cannot be freed from that embrace without toil, pain and fear?'[45] It was a fundamental principle with Augustine that the punishment for the original disobedience was further acts of disobedience. Sin, in other words, contained within itself the seeds of its own punishment, not least in the gross ignorance of the truth. Augustine had a particularly sharp eye for the first manifestations of sin in children.[46] Infancy was characterised by its ignorance of the truth, while boyhood saw the emergence of those vain desires which would multiply into adulthood, unless they were checked by grace. Augustine could refer from bitter personal experience to the severe chastisements to which youngsters of his time were liable at the hands of schoolmasters and other elders.[47] He viewed these as a grim necessity determined by the youthful reluctance to learn and endorsed by the wisdom of Scripture. He took no rosy-eyed view, however, of the motives of those who imposed the punishment; generally the lessons they were inculcating were worthless! As for adults, the miseries which were their common lot were too numerous to mention. It is a mark of Augustine's strength of feeling that he spoke metaphorically of the hell of this life (ab huius tam miserae quasi quibusdam inferis vitae) from which men can be redeemed only through the grace of Jesus Christ. There was no need, therefore, to argue the case that every human life was blighted in some way as a consequence of sin.

The miseries of this life were also clear evidence that God's threats in Scripture had to be taken seriously. If the threat contingent upon

44 G. R. Evans *Augustine on Evil* (Cambridge, 1982) 124–5.

45 Augustine *De Civ. Dei* 22:22. But compare 22:24 as evidence that Augustine also had a keen eye for the many blessings of this life.

46 Evans *op. cit.* 130.

47 Augustine *Confessions* 1:9.

Adam's disobedience turned out much worse than he could have anticipated, other scriptural threats had to be treated with equal seriousness. This included the threat of the second death (or Hell) to which the first death and the manifold calamities of this life pointed in some way.

The Demonic and Divine Mercy

A modern reader may well be surprised at the prominence given by Origen and Augustine to the demonic (and the angelic world in general) in their treatment of sin and its punishment. Today there may be a tendency to dismiss en bloc as superstitious nonsense the views of Christians and pagans from the early centuries of the Christian church on the subject of demons. It is true that they derive from a thought world very alien to our own. It is also true that these ancient writers knew much less than they claimed on the subject. We would have to dismiss certain of their views as pre-scientific and extra-biblical speculation. But we must be careful not to proceed too far in over-reaction. The Christians, after all, derived their views of he demonic largely from Scripture itself. Surprisingly, they also shared some attitudes with their pagan contemporaries, notably on the power and manifestations of the demonic, though they criticised the status and reverence which the pagan world was inclined to give them.

Moreover, for all their outward show of reverence pagan attitudes to the demonic were distinctly ambiguous.[48] While it was generally recognised that some demons were evil, pagans usually postulated some demons who were good.[49] Yet, pagans were clearly afraid of the phenomenon of demon possession and were correspondingly impressed with the powers of those Christians who showed some success in the exorcism of demons.[50] At heart pagans disliked demons. For Christians, of course, all the demons were evil. They bore considerable responsibility for the evils that afflicted men, not least for the prevalence of false religion. Indeed, some would have gone so far as to say that they were the prime enemies of mankind. In such a background it was perfectly natural for Augustine to recall that the condemnation of the demons, including Satan their leader, was assured and irrevocable.[51] If these demons had been created as good angels with free will to use or abuse and had in the event abused their free will, then Augustine felt it appropriate to consider their judgment

48 We might add confused—cf. Evans *op. cit.* 101.
49 Augustine *De Civ. Dei* 9:19.
50 R. L. Fox *Pagans and Christians* (Penguin, Harmondsworth 1986) 327–30.
51 For a detailed account of Augustine's views see Evans *op. cit.* 99–111.

alongside that of humans. It followed that if the divine mercy were to be invoked to ensure that no human spent eternity in Hell, the same ought to be done for demons. Yet that, as Augustine well knew, would have been an unpalatable view at his time. The very hint that Origen allowed for the devil's salvation proved his undoing in many minds. Clearly, unlimited mercy on God's part was unthinkable in a world where the demonic was very real.

This is not to say that we can readily accept the close analogies which Origen and Augustine in their different ways drew between demonic and human sin. They made demonic sins either the primaeval sins which in due course were imitated by others or simply human sins on a grander scale. Here they were confident they could find Scriptural warrant for a description of Satan's first sin, and they might elaborate a more general doctrine of sin from this. Modern scholars would be much more cautious in deriving any sort of scheme of the the fall of angels from the biblical evidence.[52] But one point where Scripture does speak of angelic sin involves a limitation on God's mercy. The angels who sinned are punished irrevocably.[53] Augustine was right to draw attention to this in his denial of an all-embracing divine mercy, while Origen for his part did have justification for raising the question as to how this relates to the final triumph of Jesus Christ when he brings all his enemies beneath his footstool.

Perhaps one reason why it has proved so attractive in recent times to dispose of Hell is the prevalence of a mistaken view of humankind. Man has been seen as an isolated creature set in a universe distant from God and at the mercy of an unfavourable environment. Hence, he has seemed more sinned against than sinning. Yet such a view is light years away from that of the Bible, which asserts that God is not distant from man since 'in him we live and move and have our being'.[54] If God appears distant, that is the fruit of man's joining a wilful rebellion in the heavenly realm against God. Far from being the victim of circumstances, man has sided with the prince of darkness against God. Of course, that is not the end of the story. But it does put Hell into a different light. Hell is created first and foremost for the devil and his angelic minions who have sought by every means at their disposal to involve mankind in the death and torment that await them. God has striven and is striving to woo humans back to their true allegiance to himself; but those who persist in darkness will find themselves consigned to the same fate as the devil and his angels. This may also help to explain why in the patristic era there was little, if any, discussion of the issue of Hell

52 Cf. Henri Blocher *In the Beginning* (Inter Varsity Press, Leicester 1984) 41–2.
53 2 Pt. 2:4 and Jude 6 are key texts. Cf. Mt 8:29; 25:41; Jas 2:19; Rev. 20:10.
54 Acts 17:28.

and a God of love. God had demonstrated his love for mankind in the lengths he had gone to counter the devil's schemes and to save men from the devil's fate. God was effectively the supreme philanthropist.[55] He had sought to rescue men from their spiritual enemies. Those few people who were prepared to consider the possibility of the devil's salvation did not do so out of kind feelings for the devil or even from a concern to safeguard God's love. They were more concerned with the tidiness of their system, particularly with the eventual triumph of Christ's kingship and a final culmination in good for every aspect of God's creation. But they ran against the tide of popular opinion, and (we may suspect) their theology suffered as much from this as it did from being unscriptural.

The Nature of Punishment

Any consideration of Hell entails the idea of retributive justice. Yet, this notion was not widely explored in the Early Church. The reasons for this deserve some investigation, especially as there was no lack of theories about punishment. In fact, they figure prominently in Origen and Augustine. But first it may be useful to create an analytical framework with the help of some modern philosophical approaches to punishment.[56]

Almost every serious theory of punishment contains a retributive element in the modest sense that anyone qualifying for punishment must have done something to deserve it. This is commonly distinguished from a strong retributivist stance which treats the imposition of a penalty as self-justifying. Here the key idea is that the infliction of proportionate injury is necessary to blot out the original wrong. But there are at least two stances on punishment which reject the strong retributivist viewpoint. One of these alternatives proposes the deterrent effect as the vital element in punishment. The other asserts that suitable punishment in fact benefits the sufferer; it frees or cleanses his soul from injustice. In other words punishment is to be corrective.

Origen went decisively for the latter viewpoint—a stance he shared with the Platonists of his day. But the greatest influence on Origen was probably not the Platonists but the Scriptures, from which he derived a view of God's character (the judgments of God had to be good as well as just) and of God's ultimate purpose (to bring everything into willing subjection to himself). In seeing correction as implicit in all divine punishment, Origen shows his tendency to universalise from

55 Cf. the apostle Paul's language at Tit. 3:4.

56 In the following paragraph I use the summary analysis in the article on 'Punishment' in *New Dictionary of Theology* (Inter Varsity Press, Leicester 1988) 547–9.

the experience of the believer, who finds that all chastisement is for his ultimate good.[57]

Augustine's view on punishment is harder to classify. He certainly established a retributivist base when he emphasised that Adam's sin merited Hell for Adam and all his descendants.[58] He went further into retributivist territory when he rejected the Platonist claim that all punishment was essentially corrective, but did give them credit for their confidence that all sin was to be punished. Sometimes Augustine even stressed the immediacy of such punishment (in terms of a hardening in the heart or suchlike), though he did acknowledge that generally some time would elapse before the public exposure of the sin and its open condemnation.[59]

But Augustine did not exclude a corrective element from some punishments. With his view of life on earth in its current form as a judgment, he could hardly have denied this—for the believer at least! Nor did Augustine deny a deterrent element. Many of the redeemed, he believed, are brought to a due fear of God through his just but horrendous judgments set forth in Scripture and in their own contemporary history.[60] To this Augustine added what we might call a demonstrative aspect. He believed that Scripture identifies Hell as the destiny for the majority of mankind because this is the way God can best demonstrate to the redeemed both what they have deserved (if they were judged in strict justice) and how much they owe to his grace for their redemption. Eventually they will come to see clearly that they cannot claim any merit of their own. To justify this emphasis on the public demonstration of God's justice Augustine invoked the language of Romans 9, where the verbs 'show' (*endeixasthai*) and 'make known' (*gnorisai*) are used of God's dealings both with the vessels of wrath and the vessels of mercy.[61] Since the apostle Paul had cited the example of the Pharaoh from the early chapters of Exodus, Christians could see from this historical illustration the fundamental features of the divine justice and mercy, though a full revelation is to be reserved for the Day of Judgment.

Here Augustine highlighted a biblical truth of some importance. But he was on less secure ground when he insisted that God could vindicate his justice only if the majority of men are to be condemned to Hell. He seems to have implied that those who are ultimately to be redeemed will actually need the lesson of understanding that the

57 This is the thrust of the *locus classicus* on God's chastisement of the true believer—Heb. 12:5–11. Cf. the important general statement of 1 Cor 11:32.

58 Augustine *Enchiridion* 99.

59 For the idea of God's immediate response see *De Lib. Arb.* 3:44.

60 E.g. The devil's condemnation acts as a warning to Christians—Ibid. 3:76.

61 Augustine *Ad Simplicianum* 2:18.

majority of their fellow-humans are to be condemned. Presumably Augustine thought that he was being faithful both to Scripture and to the sad facts of human experience; but in the process he has presented the impression of a God who has had to browbeat the redeemed into a proper acknowledgement of the grace shown to them. Would it really have been so difficult for God to convince the redeemed of his grace if they were the majority of mankind?

But there remains a gap in Augustine's account of punishment or of divine justice in general. This is particularly evident in Book 21 of *The City of God*, where Hell, as the ultimate destiny of the city of the devil (civitas diaboli), is set out as the theme under discussion. It is here that Augustine showed that the Platonist insistence on the corrective nature of all punishment must be wrong, but surprisingly he did not proceed to sketch out his alternative. In the context he set himself the essentially pastoral task of removing all doubts within the Christian community as to the reality and eternity of Hell. Presumably he believed that earlier in the work he had provided an adequate rationale for the retributive justice suffered by those in Hell. He had pointed to the enormity of Adam's sin and to the justice of the consequent sentence. More precisely, he had identified the relationship between the Creator and the rational creature (man) as the key to understanding the sentence which had befallen the human race. Man, endowed as he was with free will, could either have looked to God (who exists supremely) or he could have regarded himself as his own light, which meant in effect forsaking God. The latter, which was the step made by Adam, took him away from his true being and brought him nearer to nothingness.[62] The immediate fruits of sin were apparent in man's own constitution; he was no longer in control of what he did. He became the slave of his appetites. Thus, Augustine effectively found common ground with Origen in pinpointing an immediate harmful effect on the soul of sin. Undeniably there is much truth in this picture, which resembles that presented in the latter part of Romans 1; but it can sometimes be so emphasised as to lose sight of the external divine sentence. Origen was more guilty of this omission than Augustine. Moreover, Origen inclined to the view that the process of decline in the soul would never become irreversible. Augustine did not agree. But he did not go to the opposite extreme and contend for a sort of sliding-scale with a point at which sin became irremediable. God did not, after all, assign pardon on the basis of the degree of sin involved. It was God's gracious sovereign election which determined on whom mercy was to be shown.

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62 Augustine *De Civ. Dei* 14:13.

We might perhaps have expected Augustine to argue that Hell was the inevitable outworking of the bad choice of mankind in forsaking his true good. But though this might seem logically to follow from certain of his remarks, it is a conclusion from which he drew back. The first sin, he held, made man's being less real than it would otherwise have been, but it did not mean that man loses all being.[63] Again, in his *Enchiridion* Augustine remarked that if Hell was no more than alienation from the life of God and exclusion for ever from his favour, it would be torment enough.[64] But at the same time Augustine acknowledged that Hell, as set out in the Scriptures, did involve something more—the infliction of anguish on body and soul at the hands of a just God. Thus Augustine recognised the disintegration of the personality and the execution of a divine sentence as two distinct aspects of Hell. He did not, however, work out the link between the two.

One way in which Augustine might have developed this link would have been to explore the notion of the divine wrath. The apostle Paul, after all, in Romans 1 identifies the divine wrath at work in the current situation with the debasing of man's moral and spiritual faculties as well as his natural instincts. But the divine wrath was not examined thoroughly by Augustine or by most writers of the patristic age, because they were handicapped by largely philosophical notions of deity which sought to rid God of every trace of passibility, and even more to exempt him from those passions which so often demean mankind.[65] Numerous treatises from the pagan world had outlined the ugly consequences of anger and offered advice as to how it might be held in check.[66] Against this background Christian writers were not keen to stress divine anger, though the Scriptures did not let them ignore it altogether. Augustine was fairly typical in suggesting that the divine anger did not imply some agitation in the mind of God (perturbatio animi), but was merely a way of describing God's determination to implement a just judgment. Effectively, for Augustine talk of the divine wrath was an anthropopathism—a view which had also been supported by Origen.[67]

One Christian writer, however, went significantly further—Lactantius, a North African predecessor of Augustine, with whose writings he was familiar. Lactantius devoted a short treatise to God's anger (*De Ira Dei*) in an attempt to show that on pagan premises alone the idea of divine wrath was perfectly reasonable, however much pagan theology of his day tried to play down the notion. Lactantius

63 Ibid.
64 Augustine *Enchiridion* 112.
65 C. Ingremeau *Lactance: La Colère de Dieu* (Sources Chrétiennes, Paris 1982) 16–22.
66 Ibid. 45–7.
67 For Augustine's views on divine anger see Ibid. 23–4.

was unexceptional in arguing that God's anger did not reflect his surprise or his being knocked off balance by some unforeseen evil twist of events. But he did break new ground in contending for an emotional element in God's wrath, including hatred for the sight of his own good laws being trampled underfoot.[68] He defined proper anger as 'an emotion of the mind which arouses itself for the restraining of faults'.[69] This definition combined an emotional thrust with a distinctive aim, that of correction. Lactantius developed the latter aspect elsewhere with the thesis that whereas anger was improper among equals, it was entirely appropriate when a superior was obliged to bring a recalcitrant inferior to book.[70] Indeed, a superior who failed to be angry in such circumstances would be at fault. God, as our Superior, had every reason to be angry whenever we stepped out of line. But though Lactantius believed in an eternal Hell, he did not address the question as to how this particular manifestation of divine wrath could match the essentially corrective purpose he had identified for healthy anger.[71] Or perhaps Hell was not linked to the divine wrath at all.

If Lactantius was swimming against the tide both of popular philosophical theology and of Christian theology in advocating an emotional aspect to the wrath of God, it is surely significant that even he did not think of linking this wrath with the sentencing of men and demons to Hell.[72] Where Lactantius failed to give a lead, even less can we expect help in this area from other patristic writers. This must remain one unfortunate consequence of a virtually all-pervasive view of divine impassibility. Hell had to be embraced under the theme of God's justice—and we might add, a totally dispassionate justice.

Abstract

In his approach to the doctrine of Hell Augustine was influenced in part by a desire to address pagan doubts about the scientific possibility of a body being in a state of everlasting torment. But an even greater concern was prompted by various pleas within the church to tone down the Scriptural evidence for an eternal Hell. Augustine believed that if any of these pleas were accepted, dire pastoral consequences would be involved.

68 Lactantius *De Ira Dei* 20:5–7.

69 Ibid. 17:20—ira est motus animi ad coercenda peccata insurgentis.

70 Ibid. 24. Cf. *Div. Inst.* 6:19.

71 For Lactantius' belief in Hell see *Div. Inst.* 7:20–1.

72 Lactantius, in fact, rejects vindictive justice on the part of God, at least in the sense that God responds to a hurt he has received. He does this on the ground that it is impossible for God to be hurt in this way—*De Ira Dei* 17:13–4.

Alongside his response to the various critiques of Hell, Augustine laid much stress on the seriousness of Adam's original sin. He also rejected the Platonist view, effectively endorsed by Origen, that all divine punishments are essentially corrective. Augustine felt no need to give a detailed rationale for God's justice, which he saw as a datum of revelation and a matter of faith for the believer. It was, however, a weakness in Augustine (and the patristic period generally) that he was content to work with a model of divine anger which stripped it of any passionate element. This foreclosed the possibility of tying God's wrath more closely to the outworking of God's justice.