

Hell and the goodness of God¹

WILKO VAN HOLTEN

Department of Philosophy of Religion, Utrecht University, P.O. Box 80105, 3508 TC Utrecht, The Netherlands

Abstract. In this paper I contribute to the ongoing debate on hell in three ways: (1) I distinguish between three questions that play a key role in any discussion of the doctrine of hell; (2) I argue positively for the need of a doctrine of hell for Christian theism; (3) after evaluating several theological positions, I argue that the doctrine of hell should be construed as intrinsically bound up with the Christian conviction that God is love and wants to live with human beings in a relationship of mutual love and fellowship. From this perspective on hell I provide some fresh criticisms on the positions of John Hick, Thomas Talbott, and Charles Seymour.

I

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary theological reflection the doctrine of hell has again become a burning issue! After having been the subject of thoroughgoing debates in former centuries,² the doctrine has gained renewed attention, especially from philosophical theologians. This interest in the doctrine of hell originates from a rather negative motivation, however, since the dominant view of hell (eternal punishment) is widely held to be untenable. Many theologians have rejected the classical doctrine because of moral, theological, cultural, and conceptual considerations, or they have at least substantially altered it. As Richard Bauckham observes: 'Since 1800 ... no traditional Christian doctrine has been so widely abandoned as that of eternal torment'.³ Similarly, in a recent publication by the Commission of Doctrine of the Church of England it is stated that 'over the last two centuries the decline in the churches in the Western world of a belief in everlasting punishment has been one of the most notable transformations of Christian belief'.⁴

Why is it that the traditional doctrine of hell⁵ has been so widely rejected? The most forceful – and in my view valid – argument against it is that the

¹ The research for this paper was funded by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO).

² See on the historical controversies over the doctrine of hell: D. P. Walker *The Decline of Hell: Seventeenth-Century Discussions of Eternal Torment* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964); Geoffrey Rowell *Hell and the Victorians: A Study of the Nineteenth-Century Theological Controversies Concerning Eternal Punishment and the Future Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974).

³ R. J. Bauckham 'Universalism: a historical survey', *Themelios*, 4 (1979), 48.

⁴ *The Mystery of Salvation: The Story of God's Gift: a report by the Doctrine Commission of the General Synod of the Church of England* (London: Church House Publishing, 1996), 199.

⁵ On the exact description of what is constitutive for the traditional doctrine of hell see Jonathan Kvanvig *The Problem of Hell* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 19, 25ff. I take the traditional view to be eternal conscious punishment of the wicked.

idea of eternal punishment is not compatible with the perfect goodness of God. If God is perfectly good, he cannot do something which is unjust, i.e. punish finite human sins with everlasting punishment.⁶ Thus, the 'problem of hell' is foremost a *moral* problem. It is the validity of this moral problem which poses the need for a reinterpretation of the classical doctrine. Although there is a considerable measure of consensus pertaining to the untenability of the traditional concept, there is less unanimity as to what an adequate Christian alternative looks like.⁷

Confusion has sometimes entered the recent debate about hell by not always clearly distinguishing between the sorts of questions that are dealt with in this debate. In any comprehensive study of the doctrine of hell, I suggest, a distinction should be made between the following three questions: (1) is Christian theism in need of a doctrine of hell in the first place?; (2) if so, how are we to incorporate a doctrine of hell into our theology?; and (3) what is the nature of hell like according to Christian theism? For the present I will largely ignore this latter question. There is a simple reason for this: speculating about the 'furniture of heaven and the temperature of hell' amounts to little more than guesswork. We will never know what hell is like until – God forbid! – we end up there. And even then (for example, if hell is extinction) it is questionable whether there is much to 'know' in hell. The most a theologian can do, in my view, is answer the third question indirectly, i.e. look to the form of the faith as a whole and then decide which of the available imaginative pictures of hell are compatible with it.

The other two questions, however, can and should be answered. In this article I will argue positively for the need of a doctrine of hell for the Christian faith (section II); and inquire into various theological positions, and ask whether they succeed in developing a doctrine of hell that is compatible with the perfect goodness of God (sections III–VI).

II

THE NEED OF A DOCTRINE OF HELL FOR CHRISTIAN THEISM

Not all within the Christian tradition seem to be convinced that Christianity is indeed in need of a doctrine of hell. Some have argued that

⁶ See e.g. Marilyn McCord Adams 'Hell and the God of justice', *Religious Studies*, 11 (1975), 433–447; Thomas Talbott 'Punishment, forgiveness, and divine justice' *Religious Studies*, 29 (1993), 151–168; Kvanvig *Problem of Hell*, 27–55; John Hick *Death and Eternal Life* (London: Collins, 1976), 198–201; *idem*, *Evil and the God of Love* (London: Macmillan, 1966), 377–385. For a clear and concise formulation of the moral objection to hell see Charles Seymour 'Hell, justice and freedom', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 43 (1998), 69–70. In fact, Seymour thinks the doctrine of everlasting punishment can be defended against the argument from justice by supposing that the damned continue to sin forever in the afterlife, and hence are punished everlastingly for these sins. However, I think this proposal should not be accepted for it implies that God's eschatological universe would be permanently marred by an element of sin and evil.

⁷ Some still defend the traditional doctrine (though their number is decreasing); some hold the doctrine of conditional immortality (annihilationism); others postulate some doctrine of purgatory; yet others teach universal salvation, either as hope or as dogma.

the Christian faith can be interpreted coherently without it. They have suggested, in other words, that we do not lose something substantial if we simply extinguish all talk of hell from theological discourse. Perhaps the most popular way to accomplish this is to dismiss the notion of an afterlife as a prerequisite for Christian theism altogether, and consequently interpret the Christian faith as a profoundly this-worldly oriented religion.⁸ Apart from the emaciated version of Christianity that would probably result from such a profound revision, I will argue that giving up the doctrine of hell runs counter to serious theological concerns.

First of all, the traditional doctrine of hell is at least *prima facie* supported by scripture and tradition. The imagery portrayed in such parables as those of the sheep and the goats (Matthew 25), and of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16), the language of fire and brimstone in the Book of Revelation, as well as many other references in the teaching of Jesus, have usually been interpreted by the Christian church as scriptural evidence for the traditional doctrine of hell.⁹ Though it might well be questioned, of course, whether these texts can only be interpreted so as to support the traditional doctrine, consonance with tradition is a virtue in philosophical theology.¹⁰ Rejection of traditional sources of authority threatens to reduce philosophical theology to subjective speculation, to abandon religiously fruitful insights, and to leave Christianity with no clear identity and content.

Secondly, we cannot do without the doctrine of hell because it fulfils an important function within Christian theology. For the existence of hell guarantees that ultimately justice will triumph in God's universe. Justice demands that evildoers who have escaped their punishment in this life should be punished in the life hereafter: wrongdoing should be rectified.¹¹ In view of this, the existence of hell is *entailed* by the goodness of God, since justice is part of his goodness. In fact, the original context which gave rise to the doctrine of hell in the first place (i.e. Maccabean martyrdom) is one of a desire for retributive punishment in the midst of oppression and persecution.¹²

Thirdly, the doctrine of hell cannot be abandoned because it is intimately

⁸ See for example Grace Jantzen 'Do we need immortality?', *Modern Theology*, 1 (1984), 33-44, who argues that 'the belief in immortality is not so central to Christian thought and practice as is often believed, and indeed that a rich Christian faith does not require a doctrine of life after death...' (33).

⁹ Cf. Peter Geach *Providence and Evil* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 123: 'If the Gospel account [of Christ's teaching] is even approximately correct, it is perfectly clear that according to that teaching many men are irretrievably lost'. Similar claims are made by Richard Swinburne in 'A theodicy of heaven and hell' in Alfred J. Freddoso (ed.) *The Existence of God* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 52 and William Lane Craig in '"No other name": a middle knowledge perspective on the exclusivity of salvation through Christ', *Faith and Philosophy*, 6 (1989), 176.

¹⁰ See on this point Vincent Brümmer *The Model of Love: A Study in Philosophical Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 22-24.

¹¹ Cf. M. M. Adams 'Hell', 436; endorsed by Kvanvig *Problem of Hell*, 15-16 and Marcel Sarot 'Immortality or resurrection? a reply to D. Z. Phillips's (paper presented at the 11th conference of the European Society for the Philosophy of Religion, Swansea 1994).

¹² Cf. Alan E. Bernstein *The Formation of Hell: Death and Retribution in the Ancient and Early Christian Worlds* (London: UCL Press, 1993).

bound up with other doctrines in Christian theology, such as the Incarnation and Redemption through Christ. It is rather difficult to see what the point of Christ's work is if hell drops out of the picture. Jerry Walls says:

Christianity is primarily a scheme of salvation. Its main thrust is a message of how we can be saved from our sins and receive eternal life. Salvation, however, is not inevitable. One may choose to remain in sin and refuse to accept God's offer of salvation. Here is where hell comes in: it is the alternative to salvation.¹³

Indeed, as Kvanvig points out, even if it could somehow be shown that through the redemptive work of Christ it is inevitable that all are saved, 'Christianity must include an account of *what would have happened to humanity* apart from God's intervention in Christ'.¹⁴ A form of Christianity without hell would therefore require a profound reinterpretation of the most fundamental tenets of the faith as a whole. This is a rather high price to pay.

For these reasons then, Christian theology cannot do without the doctrine of hell; at least it can do without it only at a considerable conceptual price.¹⁵ On the other hand, given the moral untenability of hell as it stands, we cannot do with it either. This results in a serious dilemma, for it means we cannot do with, nor without the doctrine of hell. In the remainder of this article I will inquire into possible solutions to this dilemma. How can we account for the existence of hell in a way that is compatible with the goodness of God? This brings me to my second question as to how the doctrine of hell should be incorporated into the whole of our theology. I will investigate four positions in succession.

III

HELL AND DIVINE MORAL GOODNESS

The problem of hell arises on the assumption that God is *morally perfect*, i.e. that God always does what is morally right.¹⁶ However, this is not the only way the concept of divine goodness can be analysed. Some have denied that

¹³ Jerry Walls *Hell: The Logic of Damnation* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), 6-7; Kvanvig *Problem of Hell*, 14-15.

¹⁴ Kvanvig *Problem of Hell*, 17.

¹⁵ On the enterprise of philosophical theology as the inquiry into the conceptual price-tag of doctrinal revisions see Brümmer *Model of Love*, 25-26.

¹⁶ Cf. Richard Swinburne *The Coherence of Theism* rev. edn. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 184ff.; Edward R. Wicrenga *The Nature of God: An Inquiry into Divine Attributes* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 202-212. God's perfect goodness in philosophical reflection is generally thought to consist of two conceptually distinct elements: moral goodness (goodness in the narrow sense) and metaphysical goodness (goodness in a wide sense). In a narrow sense God's moral perfection includes, among others, the virtues of being loving, merciful, just, faithful, and the virtue of doing no wrong. In a wider sense calling God good indicates the fullness and completeness of his being, his self-sufficiency, and freedom from want or deficiency of any kind. This latter goodness encompasses his goodness in the narrow sense insofar as love, mercy, justice, faithfulness, etc., are all part of the fullness of being which God, as the supreme being, enjoys. On the concept of 'divine goodness' and the way the two mentioned elements are related to each other see Paul Helm 'Goodness', in Philip L. Quinn and Charles Taliaferro (eds.) *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 243-249.

God's goodness entails that he is morally good. It has been argued that, since God is the Creator and sustainer of the universe, He cannot be said to live up to certain moral standards. God should rather be thought of as being somehow above or beyond morality. Thus Brian Davies argues that:

... there is surely something odd in the suggestion that to call God good must be to say that he is morally good. For if we are talking about the maker and sustainer of creatures, must it not, rather, be true that God can be neither morally good nor morally bad?¹⁷

The expression 'God is good' must be taken here in another, i.e. metaphysical sense.¹⁸

To be clear, this position tries to resolve the dilemma between the doctrine of hell and the goodness of God not by adjusting the view of hell, but by reinterpreting the concept of divine goodness. Insofar as the untenability of hell depends on thinking of God as a moral agent, this problem would not even get off the ground if theists do not have to regard him as such. For no matter what horrendous and morally repugnant things (as far as ordinary human judgement is concerned) God were to inflict on his creatures throughout eternity, he would (could) not in a strict sense do anything wrong or unjust. The 'moral problem' with hell would cease to exist, for the notion would simply fail to make any sense at all. The real question, then, is whether it is possible for the theist to surrender God's moral goodness. I will argue that doing so conflicts with some central tenets of the Christian faith.

First of all, it conflicts with the doctrines of divine *impeccantia* and *impeccabilitas*. These doctrines are usually interpreted to mean that God will not and cannot will or bring about anything evil. Thus Aquinas, for example, held that 'God cannot will any evil. It is therefore evident that God cannot sin'.¹⁹ Taken in their natural meaning these doctrines express the common Christian claim that God never does what ought not be done. As St John says: 'God is light and in him is no darkness at all' (I John 1:5). But if the notion of God being a moral agent simply does not make any sense, these doctrines likewise fail to have any content. How, then, can the Christian ever be sure that God will not do anything morally evil, say, commit genocide, or, for this matter, let some people burn in unquenchable fire forever?

Davies tries to avoid this conclusion by denying that God has 'fingerprints': 'God, of course, cannot murder innocent people. He cannot be singled out and accused of doing anything which, were Fred to do it, would

¹⁷ B. Davies *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* rev. edn. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 49.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 48: '[T]heologians have taught that ... God is good because he somehow contains in himself the perfections of his creatures, all of which reflect him somehow'. The reference to Thomas Aquinas is unmistakable here.

¹⁹ Thomas Aquinas *On the Truth of the Catholic Faith: Summa Contra Gentiles* II.25.22, transl. with an introduction by James F. Anderson (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1956), 76.

get him condemned for murder in a law court. God has no fingerprints'.²⁰ However, this effort to free God from responsibility for moral evil, is bought at the price of freeing him from responsibility for any act whatsoever, apart from creating and sustaining the universe. For if you deny that God can be responsible for murder because he has no fingerprints, he cannot be held responsible for the good things people receive in their lives either. But this runs counter to another central tenet of theistic belief, namely the claim that God *acts* in the world. Christians usually interpret a variety of events in their lives and the world as particular acts of God. This religious activity presupposes that God is actively involved in the events in question, and that they would not have happened without his divine agency.

It will not do at this point to interpret God's responsibility for these latter events as a primary cause working indirectly through secondary causes (i.e. natural events and human actions), for doing so would make God equally responsible for evil events as well. Even stronger, this move would make all talk of divine agency vacuous for it excludes the possibility of identifying particular events as acts of God as distinct from the rest which we ascribe to other agents.²¹ As Peter Donovan puts it with respect to religious experiences:

The God-is-working-through-it-all position fails to do justice to the key experiences of the founders and great figures of religious traditions, and also the high points in the lives of the believers which they take to be particular experiences of God as *active and present to them in particular*.²²

John Calvin seems to be making the same point when regarding God's providence he observes that 'it would be senseless to interpret it [providence] after the manner of the philosophers, that God is the first agent because he is the beginning and cause of all motion ... For ... in this way God's *particular* goodness toward each one would be too unworthily reduced'.²³ A position like the one advocated by Davies thus leaves us with some deistic, rather than theistic concept of God.

For these reasons, then, belief in God's moral goodness is essential to Christian theism. And it is precisely this conviction which makes the traditional doctrine of hell so unsettling for many Christian believers. Moreover, the theist should have no problem at all in admitting that God cannot violate the requirements of morality²⁴, and hence has moral obligations. Indeed, from the fact that God is Creator it does seem to follow that he has (moral)

²⁰ Davies *Introduction*, 51.

²¹ Cf. Vincent Brümmer 'Farrer, Wiles and the causal joint', *Modern Theology*, 8 (1992), 7ff.

²² P. Donovan *Interpreting Religious Experience* (London: Sheldon Press, 1979), 110.

²³ John Calvin *Institutes of the Christian Religion* Book I.16.3, J. T. McNeill (ed.) (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 200. [italics WvH]

²⁴ I am aware that there is a great deal of disagreement among philosophers as to how the 'cannot' here has to be understood. However, that problem need not concern us here.

obligations to that which he has made (for example, to keep any promises he makes to it).²⁵ Let us now turn to a second and related position.

IV

HELL AND CALVINISM²⁶

Calvinism likewise stresses that God as Creator is fundamentally distinct from his creation. This is usually expressed in the doctrines of divine sovereignty, providence and predestination. These doctrines are taken to mean that God has supreme power over everything that exists, and that he determines all events according to his will. Thus Calvin says: 'God [not] idly observes from heaven what takes place on earth, but... he governs all events'.²⁷ And in the *Westminster Confession* it is stated that 'God, the great Creator of all things doth uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all creatures, actions, and things from the greatest even to the least, by his most wise and holy providence'.²⁸ Given Calvinism's commitment to these doctrines, in addition to the conviction that some people will suffer damnation (which is taken to be a revealed truth), Calvinism is led to the conclusion that both the salvation of some (the elect) as well as the damnation of others (the non-elect) is encapsulated in the eternal decree of God:

By the decree of God, for the manifestation of his glory, some men and angels are predestinated unto everlasting life, and others foreordained to everlasting death... Those of mankind that are predestinated unto life, God, before the foundation of the world was laid, according to his eternal and immutable purpose, and the secret counsel and good pleasure of his will, hath chosen in Christ unto everlasting glory... The rest of mankind, God was pleased... for the glory of his sovereign power over his creatures, to pass by, and to ordain them to dishonour and wrath for their sin, to the praise of his glorious justice.²⁹

In the same vein Calvin ascribes both the salvation of some people as well as the damnation of others to the positive will of God:

God is said to set apart those whom he adopts into salvation; it will be highly absurd to say that others acquire by chance or obtain by their own effort what election alone confers on a few. Therefore, those whom God passes over, he condemns; and this he does for no other reason than that he wills to exclude them from the inheritance which he predestines for his own children.³⁰

²⁵ Swinburne *Coherence*, esp. 185.

²⁶ In this section I use the term 'Calvinism' generically. Although the view is primarily associated with the work of John Calvin, it denotes a position which was essentially held in common by key figures in Western Christian theology such as St Augustine, St Anselm, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Jonathan Edwards, and also some Roman Catholic theologians. My exposition of Calvinism is mainly based on the *Westminster Confession*. Calvinism largely represents the classical option in Christian theology. The traditional doctrine of hell as well is largely derived from it.

²⁷ John Calvin *Institutes* I.16.4, McNeill (ed.), 202.

²⁸ Ch. V sect. I; cf. also ch. III sect. I: 'God from all eternity did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass'.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, ch. III. sect. III-V, VII.

³⁰ *Institutes*, III.23.1 McNeill (ed.), 947.

Now, if the idea of eternal punishment is itself already morally repugnant, it is all the more so when it is inflicted on people who have been predestined thereunto, for this implies that they are not in a position to choose their own fate. Indeed, it seems unspeakably wicked to make men's performance of certain actions causally necessary (by divine decree), and then torment them everlastingly as a punishment for having performed them! Moreover, the Calvinistic doctrine of hell seems to have as its implied premise that God does not *want* the salvation of all.³¹ This is in contradiction to the salvific will of God.³² It seems to be fair to say, then, that in this frame of thought God's goodness is severely compromised (for this reason Calvinism is sometimes even referred to as Devil-worship). However, Calvinists are usually very reluctant to concede this implication and insist that God is good and just nevertheless. One wonders, therefore, how Calvinism deals with this apparent inconsistency.

At least two responses are common in this connection. First of all, it is pointed out that God's treatment of the damned expresses his sovereignty over his creation. Thus Pierre Jurieu, for example, claims that even if it were true that Calvinism 'shows us a cruel, unjust God punishing and chastising innocent creatures with eternal torments', this would not detract from God's glory because:

... it raises the Divine to the highest degree of greatness and superiority that can be conceived. For it abases the creature before the Creator to such a point, that in this system the Creator is bound by no sort of law with regard to the creature but can do with it as seems good to Him, and make it serve His glory in any way He pleases, without it having the right to gainsay Him'.³³

However, apart from the fact that I fail to see how ascribing cruelty to God contributes to his glory, the theist should feel no need to heighten God's greatness at the expense of all else (especially his goodness).

Secondly, it is common in Calvinism to point to the inadequacy of ordinary human judgement in the light of revelation. With regard to the doctrine of hell in particular it is often claimed that no matter how difficult the doctrine appears to us, God is nevertheless just in treating the damned the way he does because Scripture tells us so. Thus Martin Luther admits that to human reason God's judgements seem harsh and unjust, but in response to this intuition he says that 'one must separate widely our way of thinking from God's truth, and take care that we do not make God a liar, but far rather allow that all men, angels, and devils will be damned than that

³¹ See e.g. John Hick's comment on Calvinism in *Hick Evil*, esp. 132: 'God could, if He so desired, bring all the finite persons whom He has created into the ultimate fellowship of His kingdom. But He does not so desire'. For a more comprehensive treatment of Calvinism on this point see Walls *Hell*, 57-70.

³² See e.g. Ezekiel 33:11; 1 Timothy 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9.

³³ P. Jurieu *Histoire du Calvinisme: Ou Apologie pour les Reformateurs* (Rotterdam 1683), quoted in D. P. Walker *Decline of Hell*, 199-200.

God should not be truthful in His words'.³⁴ One evangelical thinker on hell, John Wenham, puts it like this: 'For the Christian one simple sentence of revelation must in the end outweigh the weightiest conclusions of man-made philosophy'.³⁵ To this latter statement I can only respond by quoting the following adage of Stephen T. Davis: 'Like it or not, we are stuck with these limited minds of ours; if we want to be rational we have no choice but to reject what we judge to be incoherent'³⁶ – and I would add to that, what we judge to be morally repugnant. It is questionable, then, whether God's goodness according to Calvinism amounts to much. One is inclined to think that it is merely verbal. But merely calling God good and just does not make him so.

V

HELL AND UNIVERSALISM

A more promising way out of the dilemma mentioned above is offered by universalism. Universalism maintains that, although hell might exist as a possibility, no one actually ends up there since all will be saved. Hell, if it exists at all, is empty. It seems that if it can somehow be shown that it is inevitable, or necessary, or even just factually true that all will be saved, the existence of hell is compatible with God's perfect goodness. In this section I will inquire into three distinct universalist proposals.

John Hick on universalism

Hick bases his doctrine of universalism on the goodness and omnipotence of God: if God is perfectly good he wants to save all, and if God is omnipotent he can save all. Both these properties of God ensure that all will be saved. Therefore, Hick repudiates the idea of eternal punishment for this doctrine has as its implied premise either that God is only limitedly good (he does not want to save all) or he is only limitedly sovereign (he cannot save all).³⁷ The problem with this argument, of course, is that it apparently cannot be reconciled with genuine human freedom. For if humans have such freedom,

³⁴ In a letter (1522) on the question whether it is possible to be saved for someone who dies without faith. Cf. M. Luther *Werke* (Kritische Gesamtausgabe, Weimar, 1966), Bd. 10–2, 322: 'Aber hyrauff zu antwortten, muß man unszer duncken und Gottis warheyt gar weyt sundern und yhe darob halten, das wyr Gott nicht lügen straffen, sondern viel eher zu lassen, das alle menschen, engel unnd teuffel verloren werden, denn das Gott nicht sollt warhafftig seyn ynn seynen wortten'.

³⁵ J. Wenham *The Enigma of Evil* (Guildford: Eagle Inter Publishing Service, 1994), 70–71. For evangelical thinking on hell see William Crockett (ed.) *Four Views on Hell* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992); Nigel M. de S. Cameron (ed.) *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell: Papers Presented at the Fourth Edinburgh Conference on Christian Dogmatics 1991* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992); David G. Moore *The Battle for Hell: A Survey and Evaluation of Evangelicals' Growing Attraction to the Doctrine of Annihilationism* (Lahan: University Press of America, 1995); John R. W. Stott & David Edwards *Essentials: A Liberal Evangelical Dialogue* (Downer Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 1988), esp. 313–320.

³⁶ Stephen T. Davis *Logic and the Nature of God* (London: Macmillan, 1983), 16.

³⁷ Hick *Evil and the God of Love*, 377–385.

it seems there is at least the logical possibility that some people will resist God's offer of grace and consequently thwart his saving purpose. Genuine human freedom seems to prohibit drawing the universalist conclusion.

In response to this objection Hick distinguishes between *logical* and *factual* possibility. He agrees that it is indeed problematic to assert that God by logical necessity will save all people. This would amount to denying significant human freedom. On the other hand, Hick argues, it is difficult to imagine that God in the end will not in fact succeed in winning the free response of each individual. He bases this claim on two additional premises. First, on the basis of Augustinian anthropology: humans are created in the image of God and this entails that their whole being seeks fulfilment in relation to him (which makes it unlikely that they will resist their own good forever). Secondly, on the basis of the postulation of infinite afterlife possibilities of reform for all those not yet saved; i.e. an 'intermediate state' in which God continues to offer his grace, and tries to urge people into salvation in a variety of ways. Thus, Hick affirms that 'despite the logical possibility of failure, the probability of His success [to save all] amounts, as it seems to me, to a practical certainty'.³⁸

It seems to me that by providing these additional premises Hick succeeds in developing a consistent doctrine of universalism. However, notwithstanding the inner coherence of his account, I deem it problematic. A first problem concerns the notion of an 'intermediate state'. In Hick's view the duration of the 'intermediate state' could be endless, depending on the time it takes to win the free response of all. However, this brings in an important problem, for continually (perhaps eternally) delayed consequences are no consequences at all. Hick might respond to this that the supposition of there being an intermediate state is justified by the fact that 'the absolute contrast of heaven and hell, entered immediately after death, does not correspond to the innumerable graduations of human good and evil'.³⁹ However, there is also an ordinary human intuition telling us that the choices we make in our lives (be they good or bad) do matter to us, to others, and to the world; and that they can really make an ultimate difference. Especially the finitude, temporality and definiteness of human life and death seem to forbid the conclusion that, in the end, it will all come down to the same.

Secondly, it would seem that God, in treating people the way Hick proposes, would not take human freedom very seriously after all. For is there actually a real choice to make? Although God in Hick's model would not in a strict sense override human freedom, he would at least be patronizing human beings, treating them 'for their own good', rather than granting them choices. More still, as Vincent Brümmer comments on this kind of uni-

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 380; see also Hick *Death and Eternal Life*, 250–259 for a more detailed analysis of the problem of human freedom in relation to universal salvation. ³⁹ Hick *Death and Eternal Life*, 201.

versalism, it 'means that God does not accept the final consequence of the fact that he has made us persons. ... God would ultimately fail to take the rejection of his love seriously'.⁴⁰

A third difficulty concerns Hick's appeal to the Augustinian doctrine of *imago dei*. The plausibility of this argument depends on whether one considers this doctrine an adequate interpretation of human nature. I think it would be fair to say that the Christian mind is profoundly divided at this point. At least Augustine himself, at the end of his life, seems to have become more and more impressed by the impact of sin on human nature. Apart from this one-sided appeal to Augustinian thought, I am inclined to be less certain than Hick that in the end all will come to see that the ultimate good and happiness for human beings consists in a relationship with God. Perhaps I find it less unimaginable that some people are so stubborn and so unwilling to surrender their will to God (to convert), are so caught up in pride and self-determination, that they may come to agree with Milton's Satan in *Paradise Lost* that it is 'better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heav'n'.⁴¹ It should not be ruled out in advance that some people choose decisively against God.⁴² It is difficult to imagine how this works out if one is subjected endlessly to the infinite love of God presented to one in a variety of ways. But even so, I fail to see how mere extension in time could alter the situation. Hick might respond to this that in the 'intermediate state' God has more resources available to free people from their bondage to sin and selfishness than he has here and now. But if this is so, we may well wonder why God cannot act similarly in people's earthly lives as well. Presumably, an omnipotent God could make himself more manifest to people as the only source of life and happiness, or show his love to them more abundantly right now.

Thomas Talbott on universalism

In a much discussed paper Thomas Talbott has also argued forcefully in favour of universalism.⁴³ Talbott basically advances two arguments to establish what can be properly labelled 'necessary universalism'. First of all, he contends that the choice for hell is 'impossible because unreasonable'. No person, he argues, can ever make such a choice out of free will, because no one can ever have any positive motive for freely choosing eternal misery for oneself:

The picture I get is something like this. Though a sinner ... sees clearly that God is the ultimate source of all happiness and that disobedience can produce only greater and greater misery in his own life as well as in the life of others, [he] *freely* chooses

⁴⁰ Vincent Brümmer *Speaking of a Personal God: An Essay in Philosophical Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 64.

⁴¹ John Milton *Paradise Lost* book I, line 263, Christopher Ricks (ed.) (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1989), 12. Some have even supposed that the inhabitants of hell enjoy a kind of satisfaction (distorted though it may be) in their opposition to God.

⁴² On the concept of a 'decisive choice' in this connection see Walls *Hell*, 89ff., 117ff.

⁴³ Talbott 'The doctrine of everlasting punishment', *Faith and Philosophy*, 7 (1990), 19-42.

eternal misery (or perhaps eternal oblivion) for himself nonetheless. The question that immediately arises here is: what could possibly qualify as a motive for such a choice? As long as any ignorance, or deception, or bondage to desire remains, it is open to God to transform a sinner without interfering with human freedom; but once all ignorance and deception and bondage to desire is removed, so that a person is truly 'free' to choose, there can no longer be any motive for choosing eternal misery for oneself.⁴⁴

This is a mixed argument and we do well to analyse it in detail. Whether the choice for hell is indeed incoherent, depends on how such a choice is construed. If it is construed as a choice for everlasting residence in a medieval torture chamber, no one could ever be rational in freely choosing to go there. But is a choice for hell anything like that? I do not think so. The claim that hell exists is not, as Talbott suggests, a claim about some fact of experience. I suggest that it should rather be construed as the counterpart of another Christian tenet, i.e. the insight that God is the ultimate source of happiness. This, too, is foremost a metaphysical claim, deriving from the inner coherence of Christian theism, rather than a claim about some obvious fact of experience. Thus, the coming to see that God is 'what we really want' is entirely wrapped up in the Christian faith as a whole, and not available apart from other convictions of Christian theism that give it life. Similarly for hell. A choice for hell is not in the first place a choice for unpleasant experiences (eternal misery), but the alternative to being saved by God. For this reason I have difficulty with Talbott's claim that a sinner 'clearly sees that God is the ultimate source of all happiness', while still freely choosing hell. Because the coming to see this is precisely what changes a person into a theist. (And presumably the same applies to the insight that disobedience to God only produces misery.) It is therefore rather contradictory to claim that someone sees God as the ultimate source of happiness, and obedience to his will as the highest good, while at the same time choosing to live his life apart from God (i.e. chooses not to be saved by God).

Particularly interesting in Talbott's argument, furthermore, is the idea that God can free someone from ignorance, deception or bondage to desire, without interfering with human freedom. It is very questionable whether this is so. To start with ignorance and deception, it is difficult to see how God could correct our false beliefs without interfering with our freedom.⁴⁵ People have different total views of life and the world, some accounting for the existence of God and the possibility of life after death, others not. Those alternative total views may in principle be equally adequate systems to interpret our experience of the world and make sense of human life. Although profoundly different, people can be completely *rational* and *justified* in their alternative ways of looking at things. In the words of John Hick:

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁴⁵ For this argument I am indebted to Kvanvig *Problem of Hell*, 79–80, and Walls *Hell*, 129–131.

From our present standpoint, the universe is religiously ambiguous. Alternative total views confront one another, one interpreting religious data naturalistically and the other religiously. Each may in principle be complete, leaving no data unaccounted for; and the acceptance of either arises from a basic cognitive choice or act of faith. Once the choice has been made, and whilst it is operative, the alternative global view is reduced to a bare logical possibility.⁴⁶

Given this functional adequacy of different 'pictures', it is difficult to see how God can correct someone's views, which, from a theistic point of view, are mistaken. For how is God supposed to do that? Should he send an angel to someone, assuring him that hell really exists, and warning him to flee from the wrath to come? Someone may simply reject such experiences as nightmares or hallucinations and be perfectly rational in doing so. As Walls puts it: 'Self-deception is not a matter of lacking information, but rather a matter of not attending to what one knows, or of suppressing it and refusing to act on it'.⁴⁷ For this reason it is not clear that God can simply remove our ignorance or deception if we are completely rational and justified in believing the way we do. Presumably, an omnipotent God could somehow 'break through' the misunderstandings and wrong beliefs of people unambiguously. But doing so, it seems to me, amounts to overriding human freedom.

Then there is also Talbott's argument that God can free people from any bondage to desire, so that they will not do the irrational (i.e. choose hell for themselves). This argument is no less problematic than the former. To start with, not all (if any) people live up impeccably to standards of rationality. As a matter of fact, people sometimes simply do the irrational thing. Secondly, it is not the case that freedom requires the absence of desires. On the contrary, most of our actions are bound up with our having desires, intentions, goals, plans, motives, and the like. So, the mere fact that we have desires does not interfere with human freedom.⁴⁸ But more importantly, if God frees persons from their bondage to bad or evil desires, it is not necessarily true that they will choose good over evil. Even if bondage to desire is broken, the desires themselves remain. Consequently, when a person is cured from a certain addiction, he or she is then free to develop it again.⁴⁹ Richard Swinburne might well be right in his analysis of human nature that 'many of men's strongest desires are for lesser goods'.⁵⁰ It remains a possibility that perfectly free people choose not to fight against their bad desires, but choose self-exaltation or self-determination over anything else. A question that presents itself at this point is this: if God can liberate humans by freeing them from bondage to bad desires, why does he not annihilate our evil inclinations

⁴⁶ Hick 'The rationality of religious belief', in R. D. Geivett & B. Sweetman (eds.) *Contemporary Perspectives on Religious Epistemology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 315-16.

⁴⁷ Walls *Hell*, 131.

⁴⁸ For this argument see Kvanvig *Problem of Hell*, 81-83.

⁴⁹ Seymour 'On choosing hell', *Religious Studies*, 33 (1997), 251.

⁵⁰ Swinburne 'A theodicy of heaven and hell', 47. Swinburne thinks this is part of what is involved in original sin.

altogether and endow us with a strong desire to pursue the good? The answer to this question, as it seems to me, is that, by doing so, God were to override human freedom, since it would take away men's ability to make a genuine choice between good and bad. For these reasons, then, Talbott fails to make plausible the claim that the choice for hell is incoherent.

However, he advances a second argument to establish necessary universalism. Hell, he argues, is so great an evil that even if someone were to choose it against reason, a loving God would override human freedom and prevent it from happening:

We still have every reason to believe that everlasting separation is the kind of evil that a loving God would prevent even if it meant interfering with human freedom in certain ways. ... So, a loving God ... could never permit his loved ones to destroy the very possibility of future happiness in themselves. Just as loving parents are prepared to restrict the freedom of the children they love, so a loving God would be prepared to restrict the freedom of the children he loves.⁵¹

In the final section of this paper I will argue that freedom is something more important than the harm that might result from the misuse of it. But there is a more fundamental problem with Talbott's argument here. I take him to be saying that hell is so excruciatingly bad, that *in view of this, the importance of human freedom is played down and outweighed*. The point of the analogy with a loving parent, then, is that God should not allow his child to get into a situation which he knows is disastrous (e.g. playing in the middle of a railway line), even if this is what the child really wants. However, apart from the fact that we are not like immature children when it comes to our choice for hell, this interpretation raises the question as to why a loving God would create so cruel a possibility in the first place. If hell is a place of 'eternal misery' without the 'very possibility of future happiness', then presumably God is responsible for its existence. But why would God create this place, if his love requires him to prevent anyone from ending up there? This looks rather inconsistent.

Universalism and the love and omniscience of God

A third version of universalism bases the salvation of all on the omniscience and the love of God. Defenders of this view argue something like this: if God is omniscient, he has infallible foreknowledge of all things that may come to pass in human history. Therefore, he must know in advance which persons, if created, will choose salvation and which not. If God is also perfectly loving, then his love requires him to abstain from creating those persons whom he knows will, if created, not choose salvation. Hence, it is necessarily true that all created persons will be saved.

⁵¹ Talbott 'Eternal punishment', 38.

The success of this argument depends, of course, on the question whether divine foreknowledge is compatible with human freedom. However, the notion of infallible foreknowledge, as this argument requires, has recently become the subject of profound criticism.⁵² Since the relation between divine omniscience and human freedom belongs to the most intractable problems of philosophical theology, space does not allow me to go into that debate here. Rather, I would like to raise an objection against this kind of universalism, on the assumption that the premises on which it relies are true. My point is this: I am not sure whether God's love entails that he may not create persons with libertarian free will, all the while knowing that they will not be saved. If his infallible foreknowledge is compatible with the creature's freely choosing damnation, then presumably, God is not to blame for it. The creature's choice against God might still be totally due to the creature, and contrary to God's will. After all, this is precisely how in many versions of Christian theism people's ordinary evil choices are justified. Therefore, the argument seems to be arbitrary in drawing the line where it does – i.e. with hell and not a bit earlier. On the basis of the same argument we could equally well expect a loving God to abstain from creating an individual which he knows will, if created, be responsible for the premature death of six million fellow creatures – to mention only one instance.

Before we proceed to the final section of this paper, let me just very briefly summarize the result of my inquiry thus far. All efforts proposed to solve the dilemma between the existence of hell and the goodness of God I have found inadequate, though for different reasons. The conceptual price to pay, if we were to make either of these positions our own, is too high. Perhaps at this point we do well to mention an important methodological remark which Jonathan Kvanvig makes in his book on hell. He points out that in developing a coherent doctrine of hell we should be cautious of what he terms 'the problem of arbitrariness', i.e. affirm a picture of hell that is 'arbitrarily selected from a gallery of alternatives'.⁵³ When it comes to hell, Kvanvig maintains, 'some reason is needed to think that the resulting doctrine is true'.⁵⁴ In order to accomplish this, it must not merely be shown that hell is compatible, but also intrinsically bound up with the most fundamental Christian conviction about God: that he is love, that he wills the good for all created persons, and that he does all that is in his power to accomplish this good for them – for this, Christians maintain, is the very image of God that we glimpse in Christ. Arriving at such a view is only possible, I suggest, if we start from a radically different perspective, the perspective of human freedom.

⁵² See e.g. Vincent Brümmer *What Are We Doing When We Pray? A Philosophical Inquiry* (London: SCM Press, 1984), ch. 3; Richard Swinburne *Coherence*, ch. 10; W. Hasker *God, Time and Knowledge* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989); Peter Geach 'The future', *New Blackfriars*, 54 (1973), 208–218; N. Pike 'Divine omniscience and voluntary action', *Philosophical Review*, 64 (1965), 27–47.

⁵³ Kvanvig *Problem of Hell*, 55.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 56.

VI

HELL AND SIGNIFICANT HUMAN FREEDOM

In this section I will argue that the possibility of going to hell is ultimately entailed by the fact that God has created human beings with libertarian free will. Given this freedom, they can resist God's offer of love and salvation forever – irrational though it may be. So, given his choice to create free individuals, even an omnipotent and perfectly good God cannot guarantee the presence of all in heaven. But if this is so, the question is urgent as to why we should put so much weight on libertarian free will. For, as we have seen, this is precisely one of the main stumbling-blocks faced by the efforts discussed thus far in getting rid of the problems surrounding the doctrine of hell. If, in other words, we did not have to value significant human freedom so much, hell would perhaps not be so problematic after all.

A first consideration in this connection is provided by Richard Swinburne. He thinks that libertarian freedom, and the responsibility it brings with it, is intrinsically so valuable, that a perfectly good God ought to create humans with this freedom, even if this entails the possibility that they misuse that freedom to make the worst choice possible, and choose hell for themselves. Consequently, God should respect that freedom, and let a person freely damn himself: 'Free will is a good thing, and for God to override it *for whatever cause* is to all appearances a bad thing God has no right to prevent people from destroying their own souls'.⁵⁵

There is a fundamental value judgement at stake here, which is difficult to assess. It is difficult to see that the value of libertarian freedom is such that it outweighs even the possibility of going to hell. Remember that Talbott contends precisely the opposite, because he thinks eternal happiness with God is more valuable than the freedom to choose our own fate in the all important matter of our eternal destiny, so that God must eventually override our freedom to ensure it. Now how are we to choose between these two contradictory value judgements? We naturally ask why, according to Swinburne, freedom is so much better than eternal happiness with God in heaven? Why is it so valuable that people are ultimately free to reject God? Even in the case of ordinary moral evils we would not be surprised if the sufferer wished humans had never been created with libertarian freedom in the first place. This free will defence is therefore morally insensitive.⁵⁶ As Charles Seymour evaluates Swinburne's position: 'The silent implication is that free choice alone is so valuable that it outweighs all the evil in this world. ... Such a view ... shows coldness toward the terrible reality of suffering and

⁵⁵ Swinburne 'Theodicy of Heaven and Hell', [italics WvH], 49.

⁵⁶ This point has been developed in relation to ordinary moral evil by Vincent Brümmer in *Personal God*, 128–151.

must be rejected. Free choice is not valuable enough in itself to outweigh the evils in this world'.⁵⁷

It is possible for Swinburne to counter, of course, that libertarian freedom belongs to us by virtue of our being *persons*. It is a good thing, he might say, that we have this freedom, not merely because of its intrinsic value alone, but also, and more importantly, because we need it in order to be a person. It is a good thing, he might argue, that we are responsible for the development of our own characters, even if this entails the possibility of putting ourselves beyond the possibility of salvation. In the words of John Zeis:

That created persons are essentially free beings is in fact the grounding principle of the explanation of hell. ... What is not often noted in discussions of free choice is that persons not only have the capacity for freely choosing what to do, they also have the capacity to choose what kind of person to be.⁵⁸

However, as a theodicy for hell this 'personal being defence' is hardly convincing. For even in this second case we might still wonder why being free to choose hell is so valuable. True, it might be difficult to imagine what kind of beings we would be if we lacked such freedom, but it is not obvious why God could not have created us without such freedom in the first place, and what justifies his having done so.

A more satisfactory theodicy of hell can be developed, however, by looking at the value of human freedom from a different perspective. It is at the heart of Christian theism that God is a God of love and that He wants to live in a relationship of mutual love and fellowship with human beings. From the perspective of human beings the participation in this relationship is the highest good and ultimate happiness: 'Man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever'.⁵⁹ Now in order to enable human beings to enter into such a relationship with him, God necessarily needs to create them as persons who have the freedom to respond to his love – for love presupposes freedom. However, this freedom in turn necessarily entails the very possibility of rejecting God's love decisively. This, I suggest, should be thought of as the choice for hell. From a theistic point of view this is the worst thing that can ever happen to an individual: being apart from God forever. Therefore, paradoxical though it may sound, the very *possibility* of people going to hell is created by God in order to enable human beings to gain the highest good. Without the possibility of hell there is no ultimate happiness. In this sense, both heaven (union with God) and hell (separation from God) flow essentially from God's love for humanity. Note that the distinction between

⁵⁷ Seymour 'On choosing hell', 259.

⁵⁸ John Zeis 'To hell with freedom', *Sophia*, 25 (1986), 43–44. With this analysis of character formation Zeis and Swinburne want to make intelligible that in virtue of our being persons it is possible that we become totally depraved and hence are fit for hell. Personally, I am not too sure about this. My point here is merely that freedom is not only valuable in itself, but also valuable as a means for some other valuable thing, i.e. character formation.

⁵⁹ *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, q. 1.

possibility and *actuality* is fundamental here: in order to accomplish the actuality of the union of love with him, entered into freely, God logically cannot do otherwise than allow for the possibility of hell.⁶⁰ It seems to me, that viewed from this perspective, the existence of hell is compatible with God's perfect goodness and love for what he has created.

It should be stressed that nothing in this view on hell implies that anyone actually ends up in hell. It merely maintains that this is a logical possibility. Nor does it imply that the nature of hell should be associated with eternal torments or anything like that. Such conceptions of hell are not reconcilable with God's perfect goodness. Apart from a very literal interpretation of some passages of scripture, there is nothing in Christian theism that compels us to believe in hell as a place of eternal punishment. There is no reason why a perfectly good God wants or needs even a single creature to suffer (everlastingly). What I do maintain, however, is that, from the perspective of the Christian faith, being apart from God's love forever, amounts to being in hell. This implies that hell, properly understood, should not be conceived of as a *place* to which people are consigned by God, but as a self-chosen *condition*. As Jerry Walls claims:

Christianity is ... the extraordinary opportunity to live before God, in conscious relationship to him. The choice of evil is fundamentally the preference of something else to this good. It is because the good is so wonderful that something as objectively terrible as hell is possible. Perhaps the choice of hell is intelligible partly because anything chosen in favour of such a relationship to God could only be hell in comparison.⁶¹

It is only in view of this that we can come to see why, according to Christian theism, hell is the worst thing that could ever happen to anyone. However, this is very much a Christian claim which, apart from the Christian form of life, probably fails to make good sense.⁶²

Needless to say, of course, that appeal to God's justice cannot rescue traditional talk about hell in terms of eternal punishment for human sins. Hell is not a proof of how seriously God takes human sin; it rather proves how seriously he takes human freedom. What God's justice *does* seem to imply, however, is that he will punish some after death, whose earthly lives warrant it (albeit within the limits of his goodness) – for some of the demands

⁶⁰ In this account of hell I presuppose that heaven and hell are the exhaustive and mutually exclusive afterlife possibilities, so that if heaven is not possible, hell is necessarily the only alternative. I know there are different views available here (purgatory, limbo, reincarnation), but for convenience's sake I will simply ignore these alternatives here.

⁶¹ Walls *Hell*, 137–138.

⁶² Charles Seymour in 'Hell, justice and freedom', 76–77 deems a 'separationist view of hell' like the one I defend here problematic because he thinks separationists are not able to sustain the claim that without God happiness is impossible. However, this criticism arises only if one overlooks the fact that this claim (like the claim that ultimate happiness consists in being in the relationship with God) is foremost a metaphysical claim, deriving from the inner coherence of Christian theism as such, rather than a claim about some (obvious) fact of experience.

of God's goodness are demands of justice. The latter could be seen as a moderate interpretation of the traditional notion, which medieval theologians designated as *poena sensus*.⁶³ This would seem an accurate way of doing justice to the function the doctrine of hell fulfils within Christian theology.

VII CONCLUSION

In this paper I have distinguished between three different questions which play a key role in the discussion about the doctrine of hell. After having argued positively for the need of a doctrine of hell for Christian theism, I have inquired into several theological positions that try to solve the dilemma between the untenable doctrine of hell and the goodness of God in one way or another. My conclusion is that – for different reasons – the conceptual price to pay for these proposals is too high. In the final section of this paper I have pointed out how the doctrine of hell should be incorporated into the Christian faith as a whole. A theodicy for hell, in my view, must be based on libertarian free will. Efforts to solve the problem of hell that play down the importance of human freedom have devastating consequences for the faith as a whole, for they threaten what is at the heart of Christianity: that God wants to live with the persons he creates in a relation of mutual love and fellowship. In order to hold this concern upright, the very possibility of people 'going to hell' must be preserved. Yet, whether there are any who make this worst choice possible, only God knows.⁶⁴

⁶³ On this term see Richard A. Muller *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms Drawn Principally From Protestant Scholastic Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 1989), 229; Roy J. Deferrari *A Latin-English Dictionary of St Thomas Aquinas* (Boston: St Paul Editions, 1960), 797.

⁶⁴ I would like to thank Marcel Sarot for his comments on an earlier draft of this paper.