Hell, Population Zero

Daring to Hope that All Will Be Saved

Albert B. Hakim

The history of the church has not been kind to the notion of universal salvation. Though there have been a good number of theologians who defend the hope that, in the end, all may be saved, the main line of the church's teaching for centuries has been that hell will not be empty: it will be populated by throngs of unrepentant sinners. The biblical images of hell were well known to early Christians and gave a striking view of what was in store for the damned. Such an image was presented by Jesus' parable in which the poor man Lazarus is received into the bosom of Abraham after his death while Dives is sent to Hades to suffer the unending torments of fire. Jesus also said that when the Son of Man finally separates the sheep from the goats, he will say to the goats, "Depart from me, you cursed, into everlasting fire which was prepared for the devil and his angels." Though hell is not mentioned in the earliest formal decrees of the church, a creed mistakenly attributed to St. Athanasius declared what was in time to become the traditional view of hell: Anyone who does not hold to the Catholic faith in its entirety will "without doubt perish forever," and "those who have done good will go to eternal life but those who have done evil will go to eternal fire."

This pessimistic eschatology received support from St. Augustine in the early fifth century and has exerted great influence ever since. Augustine drew a bleak picture of human nature from a literal reading of scriptural passages about the fallen state of man. On this view, unredeemed humanity was totally deserving of condemnation, having been thoroughly corrupted by original sin. The twenty-first book of Augustine's *The City of God*, completed in the year 425, offers a a particularly severe presentation of this stark vision. Augustine's intention is to defeat the unbeliever who denies the eternity of the fires of hell because the human body would naturally burn away in its entirety. On the contrary, says Augustine, in faith we can count on God's power to prevent the body's disintegration so that it "can persist in the torments of everlasting fires." Later, he adds, "I have sufficiently argued that it is possible for living creatures to remain alive in the fire, being burnt without being consumed, feeling pain without incurring death; and this by means of a miracle of the omnipotent Creator." Imagine, if you can, invoking a miracle at the hands of a loving God to guarantee that the torments of the damned will last for all eternity!

Any sin, for Augustine, is an unspeakable offense against God; particularly offensive was the sin of the first man who was singularly graced with an intimate "enjoyment of God" and who stood as the progenitor of the human race. His impiety in abandoning God was so great that it "merited eternal evil" in consequence of which "the whole of mankind is a 'condemned mass' [*massa damnata*]; for he who committed the first sin was punished, and along with him all the stock which had its roots in him." According to Augustine, no one has the right to criticize that retribution as unjust, and the fact that some are released from it through the free bounty of God is ground for heartfelt thanksgiving.

The same severe doctrine of hell has been affirmed time and again in official church documents. The Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 declared that, at the end of time, "all will receive according to their deeds, good or evil, the former to their everlasting glory with Christ, the latter to perpetual punishment with the devil." In his constitution of 1336, *Benedictus Deus*, Benedict XII solemnly defined that "the souls of those who die in actual mortal sin go down immediately after death into hell and suffer the pain of hell." The Council of Florence in 1442 maintained that "not only pagans, but also Jews, heretics and schismatics" are precluded from salvation for they "will enter into eternal fire" unless they embrace the Catholic Church before their death. Similar declarations on hell and salvation were issued by the Council of Trent in the sixteenth century. Vatican I reinforced them in the nineteenth century. Vatican II did not revisit the solemn definitions of hell by earlier councils, but it did at least affirm that, yes, atheists can be saved.

Since then, several official documents have underscored the traditional teaching about what's in store for unrepentant sinners. In the *Letter on Certain Questions concerning Eschatology* of May 17, 1979, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith insisted that there would be "eternal punishment

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for the sinner, who will be deprived of the sight of God, and that the punishment will have a repercussion on the whole being of the sinner." *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, published in 1994, contains what may be the most recent official word on the existence and meaning of hell:

> The teaching of the Church affirms the existence of hell and its eternity. Immediately after death the souls of those who die in the state of mortal sin descend into hell, where they suffer the punishments of hell, "eternal fire." The chief punishment of hell is eternal separation from God, in whom alone man can possess the life and happiness for which he was created and for which he longs. (1035)

Fra Angelico, The Harrowing of Hell*, circa 1437–1446*

But from the first centuries of the church on, there have always been theologians who dared to hope that hell would remain empty. A full century and a half before Augustine's time, Origen of Alexandria (185-251) wrote in defense of universal salvation. Origen was one of the first exegetes of Sacred Scripture and has been called the "inventor of theology as a science." In his youth, his well-to-do Christian family had been subject to religious persecution. He persevered in his faith and went on to establish a school for catechetical instruction while pursuing his own scholarly studies. Later, in Rome, where Christians were again being persecuted, he was imprisoned and tortured. He died a year after being released, from injuries inflicted on him by his torturers.

Just like other Greek-speaking theologians in the early church, Origen looked for support in the ancient Greek philosophical tradition. One important concept in this tradition was the cosmic harmony between one and many. Particularly attractive was the vision offered by the pre-Socratic Pythagoras, mathematician and mystic, who saw the unity of the cosmos as analogous to the unity of numbers. All numbers proceed from the number one in such a way that every number continues to be its own self even as it maintains its unity with all other numbers and with its origin; it is one-with-the-One. This is coupled with the idea that whatever proceeds from its origin is destined to return to it. Origen transposed this cycle to Christian theology: creation by God, man's fall, separation from unity, the Incarnation, redemption, reconciliation, and return to unity. This return is what Origen called the *apokatastasis*—a compound term (a*po-kata-stasis*) meaning the moving away from a state of ruin toward renewal. The word is used but once in the Bible, in Acts 3:21, and has been variously translated as "universal restoration" (New English Bible), "all is restored anew" (Ronald Knox), and "the restitution of all things" (the King James and Douai-Rheims Bibles).

Origen thus presented his view on universal salvation as an essential part of the total Christian vision, and borrowed his word for it from Sacred Scripture. Just as all things were one-with-God at the creation, so will they be at the end. This restoration will be fulfilled in the actual contemplation of God: "there will be but one activity, the apprehension of God," as he puts it in his *Commentary on John*. Rowan Greer clarifies this statement, "Origen does not say that the End is the same as the Beginning. It is *like* the Beginning because the original harmony is restored. But the Restoration is upon a higher level. It is the perfection from which the rational natures can never fall." For Origen, the restoration of all things has no limitation. All means all. Every intelligent being, human or angelic, will see God. It is not surprising that his teaching on universal salvation provoked the opposition of certain authorities who, as the historian Eusebius reports, were scandalized at the "outrageous tenet" that even the devil would be saved.

Of a piece with universal salvation is Origen's idea of the divinization of man, which rounds out the whole Christian

economy. If the mystery of God includes his will to make the divine human in the Incarnation, it also includes his will to make the human divine in the *apokatastasis*. Origen found support for this idea in the words of Jesus reported in John: "The glory which thou hast given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and thou in me, that they may become perfectly one" (John 17:22–3). For Origen, divinization was the culmination of the cycle of return: God's "coming down" to assume human nature was complemented by the "raising up" of human nature to the divine:

> With Jesus there began the union of the divine with human nature so that the human, by communion with the divine, might rise to be divine, not in Jesus only, but in all those who believe and take up the life that Jesus taught, which elevates man to friendship with God and communion with Him. (*Against Celsus*, Book III, 28)

Origen became a leading figure in the liberal tradition on universal salvation that included a number of church fathers like Clement of Alexandria, Gregory of Nyssa, Theodore of Mopsuestia, and Gregory Nazianzen. In the centuries that followed, this tradition persisted alongside the predominant doctrine about hell. Certain theologians hung on to the conviction, rooted in the virtue of hope, that somehow salvation belonged to all. According to Hans Urs von Balthasar, it was St. Thomas Aquinas who first made the claim that the virtue of hope, based on faith and nourished by love, would open up salvation not only for oneself but for all universally. This hope-centered brand of salvation theology is supported in recent times by three highly respected Swiss theologians: Karl Barth, Hans Küng, and Balthasar.

Barth, Balthasar, and Küng all agonize over the question of universal salvation, which they treat not just as a theological puzzle but as a genuine mystery. Because we cannot answer the question with absolute certainty, it finally has to be left—in humility and hope—to the judgment of a loving God.

Karl Barth was one of the great Protestant theologians of modern times. Balthasar and Küng both had a deep respect for him, acknowledged his influence, and enjoyed his personal friendship. Küng delivered his eulogy in 1968, and Barth referred to Balthasar as a "shrewd friend." Barth's 1956 essay "The Humanity of God" shows just how close he came to a belief in universal salvation without quite getting there. To recognize God in his totality, Barth claimed, is to recognize him in his sovereign togetherness with man: "Who God is and what He is in His deity He proves and reveals not in a vacuum as a divine being-for-Himself, but precisely and authentically in the fact that He exists, speaks, and acts as the *partner* of man…. God's *deity*, rightly understood, includes His *humanity*." This togetherness, he continues, is the very being of Jesus Christ: "It is when we look at Jesus Christ that we know decisively that God's deity does not exclude, but includes His *humanity*." In Jesus Christ "the fact is once for all established that God does not exist without man."

One consequence of the humanity of God has particular importance for the question of universal salvation: The dignity belonging to man in virtue of the eternal will of God: "We have to think of *every human being*, even the oddest, most villainous or miserable, as one to whom Jesus Christ is Brother, and God is Father." The Creator is faithful to man even if the man or woman in question is "a rebel, a sluggard, a hypocrite.... The Word of God announced good news to the poor, liberation to the imprisoned, sight to the blind, justification and sanctification and even a call to service to sinners, whether gross or refined." Barth himself asks whether this description of God's universal fidelity also implies universal salvation, and, though he responds to this question with three very positive "observations" favoring a profound hope for universalism, he cautions us "to detect no position for or against that which passes among us under this term."

Thirty years after the appearance of Barth's "The Humanity of God," Balthasar produced a short work that directly addressed the problem: *Dare We Hope "That All Men Be Saved"?*. Though there are some important differences between Barth's essay and Balthasar's, the two reach a similar conclusion. Like Barth, Balthasar gets to the very edge of affirming *apokatastasis* without quite doing so. He feels he has gone as far as theological inquiry can go without impinging on God's freedom. Balthasar stresses the difficulty of reconciling biblical texts that threaten damnation with those proclaiming salvation: "It is generally known that, in the New Testament, two series of statements run along side by side in such a way that a synthesis of both is neither permissible nor achievable: the first series speaks of being lost for all eternity; the second, of God's will, and ability, to save all men." Still, while acknowledging the admonition of divine wrath inculcated in the "Old Testament image of judgment," Balthasar maintains that "hope outweighs fear."

He credits Scripture's universalist texts with an "ineradicable gravity," especially Pauline texts like 1 Timothy 2:4–5: "God our Savior…desires all men to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all." Final judgment belongs to God alone, but for Balthasar there can be no question of God's justice being satisfied apart from his mercy, or his mercy apart from his justice. Balthasar approvingly quotes from Josef Pieper's little treatise on hope: "Only hope is able to comprehend the reality of God that surpasses all antitheses, to know that his mercy is identical with his justice and his justice with his mercy."

Like Barth and Balthasar, Hans Küng too comes close to proposing universal salvation. And like them, he enlists the virtue of hope to support the idea. In his book *Eternal Life*, Küng's critical discussion of hell begins with Jesus' own words about hell, which, according to Küng, were figurative rather than literal: terms in the New Testament pertaining to final judgment—words like "hell," "eternal," 'fire"—are to be taken as metaphors warning sinners of the delicate edge they're dancing on. They are "meant to bring vividly before us here and now the absolute seriousness of God's claim and the urgency of conversion in the present life," Küng writes. No one should dismiss his or her responsibility to meet the demands of conversion, but how each of us meets them "remains a matter for God as merciful judge" in his "all-embracing final act of grace." Like Balthasar, Küng maintains that judgment of the individual is in God's hands; it would be "presumptuous for a person to seek to anticipate the judgement of this absolutely final authority. Neither in the one way nor in the other can we tie God's hands or dispose of him. There is nothing to be known here, but everything to be hoped."

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What these three theologians show us, however, is that hope is a powerful virtue and not just a matter of wishful thinking. Hope always has its reasons, even earthly hopes. In the everyday sense of the word, a doctor's skill is reason for his patient to hope for a cure, a worker's good job performance a reason for her to hope for a promotion—though such hopes, subject to human limitations, can be disappointed. In the economy of salvation, however, the reason for hope is nothing less than the divine will—profoundly declared in the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus: "For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him" (John 3:17). The clarity of this scriptural passage on God's will reassures not only Christians but all mankind that our hope for salvation will be fulfilled—without exceptions. ■

THREE POEMS

"the quality of mercy"

is a fierce and terrible beauty...
it hungers in its waiting
then consumes our darkest brokenness
even as it invites us to its table

prayer as archeology

i brush away the dirt
then
slowly small things which were once lost
rise out of the earth of my memory
then awake under the spade of silence

a new orleans' liturgy for easter sunday

jackson square
people gather
a juggler works the crowd
as the traffic pulses into morning
music burns bright on every corner
intense as the torches
he tosses in his hands

—Lou Ella Hickman

A member of the Sisters of the Incarnate Word and Blessed Sacrament, Lou Ella Hickman has been a teacher on all levels and has worked in two libraries. She is now a freelance writer as well as a spiritual director. Her poems and articles have been published in numerous magazines and included in After Shocks: Poetry of Recovery for Life-Shattering Events *edited by Tom Lombardo and in* Down to the Dark River *edited by Philp Kolin. Her first book of poetry,* she: robed and wordless, *published by Press 53, was released in September.*