

## THOUGHTS ON HELL

Joseph A. Munitiz

**I**N SHARP CONTRAST to earlier times, today it is rare to hear sermons that refer to hell. Most believers tend to feel embarrassed when their secularist friends mention it. And many would admit sympathy with Hans Küng when, in his usual forthright way, he declares, 'For me the doctrine of eternal punishment has no part in a religion of love'.<sup>1</sup>

For centuries there was a widespread belief that many were condemned, so that Ignatius in his contemplation on the Incarnation depicts how the Trinity,

... gazed on the whole surface or circuit of the world, full of people; and how, seeing that they were *all going down into hell*, they decide in their eternity that the Second Person should become a human being, in order to save the human race (Exx 102).

In the twentieth century a transition took place. Development in our knowledge of the human psyche, calling into question the link between objective evil and subjective guilt, may have been partly responsible. Various theologians put forward 'salvation-optimism' views, such as Hans Urs von Balthasar, in *Dare We Hope that 'All Men Be Saved'?*<sup>2</sup> When criticized, he replied, 'I never spoke of certainty but of the hope (of universal salvation)'.<sup>3</sup> The great Karl Rahner, building on the famous paragraph 16 of the Vatican II document *Lumen gentium*, which recognised that salvation could come through other religions, taught that the biblical

<sup>1</sup> Hans Küng, *Eternal Life? Life after Death: A Medical, Philosophical, and Theological Problem*, translated by Edward Quinn (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 130, quoted in a helpful article by Harvey D. Egan, 'Hell: The Mystery of Eternal Love and Eternal Obduracy', *Theological Studies* 75/1 (March 2014), 52–73. This article provoked a discussion at Campion Hall, Oxford, 15 May 2014, and forms the basis of the present article. Fr Egan himself is a Rahner specialist.

<sup>2</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Dare We Hope that 'All Men Be Saved'*, translated by David Kipp and Lothar Krauth (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1988).

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Egan, 'Hell', 54.

texts that speak of eternal punishment are parenetic, ‘threat discourses’, not intended as predictions.<sup>4</sup>

Neither of these thinkers would deny the ‘true possibility of eternal loss’; they feel the need to respect scripture and tradition, but above all they wish to stress the reality of human freedom—even if the actual denial of God’s love can only be described as ‘an absolute contradiction, metaphysical schizophrenia’.<sup>5</sup> More radical has been the proposal that, to remove the scandal of eternal punishment, one should accept the sinful soul’s annihilation; this suggestion was taken up by Jack Mahoney, who has written of the possible ‘extinction of some humans at death’ as part of the evolutionary process.<sup>6</sup> This involves denying the immortality of the soul and accepting that human beings are capable of ‘total metaphysical suicide’.<sup>7</sup> Other attempts to do away with hell, as traditionally understood, have come, with Hans Küng claiming that it was a purgatorial process,<sup>8</sup> and C. S. Lewis and William Hoyes reducing hell to Sheol and Limbo.<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps the oldest theory that tackled the scandal caused by the traditional teaching on hell is that of Origen, with his views on *apokatastasis*, or universal restoration, whereby all will be saved. This was championed by many theologians, and most recently by Karl Barth. His opinions, expounded at great length in *Church Dogmatics*, try to combine the force of divine grace and that of human free will: the *aporia* is well illustrated by a remark often attributed to Barth, ‘whoever does not believe in apocatastasis is an ox, whoever says he does is an ass’.<sup>10</sup> Harvey Egan outlines a ‘contemporary theology of hell’ using the phrase: ‘eternal obduracy in the face of eternal love’.<sup>11</sup> Basically, his view relies on the experience of mystics (such as St Faustina Kowalska and Nicholas of Cusa) that the presence of God, in particular of Christ, is a consuming fire; thus the pain of the damned is the conjunction of Christ’s love

<sup>4</sup> Karl Rahner, ‘Hell’, in *Encyclopedia of Theology: A Concise Sacramentum Mundi* (New York: Seabury, 1975), 603.

<sup>5</sup> Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* (New York: Seabury, 1978), 102.

<sup>6</sup> Jack Mahoney, *Christianity in Evolution: An Exploration* (Georgetown: Georgetown UP, 2011), 113–116.

<sup>7</sup> Paul O’Callaghan, *Christ Our Hope: An Introduction to Eschatology* (Lanham: Catholic U. of America P, 2011), 209–210.

<sup>8</sup> Küng, *Eternal Life?*, 137–139.

<sup>9</sup> Egan, ‘Hell’, 64–66.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in O’Callaghan, *Christ Our Hope*, 218 n. 138.

<sup>11</sup> Egan, ‘Hell’, 66–73.

with their refusal of it: 'The *presence*—not absence—of the eternal love of God, Christ, the saints and creation constitutes hell for those whose twisted freedom renders them unable to accept and respond to it'.<sup>12</sup>

An important feature of this view is that the whole of creation is involved; Egan's own passionate love of nature comes across very strongly.<sup>13</sup> The final transformation of the cosmos (for which it is now 'groaning') is beyond the reach of those self-condemned by a wilful solipsism, an obstinate self-enclosure. They refuse to accept the love of the universe and of the communion of the saints. The human person is 'spirit-in-world' and it is sheer



The Damned Being Cast into Hell, by Frans Francken the Younger, 1605–1610

hell to be deliberately cutting oneself off from that world. The great advantage of this explanation is that moves away from legalistic and mythological terms to terms that are personal, passionate and pastoral. It shows how both scripture and tradition need to be reinterpreted. They cannot be taken at their face value or one falls into fundamentalism, the begetting error of much lazy thinking.

Above all, Egan frees the discussion from the notion so ingrained in the human psyche that a moral fault is somehow balanced by pain (the crime and punishment conviction). It accepts the mystery of human freedom and acknowledges that we are on the brink of the ineffable. And, therefore, further reflections may not come amiss. A very obvious one revolves around the concept of 'eternal': if time no longer exists, one

<sup>12</sup> Egan, 'Hell', 67–68.

<sup>13</sup> 'Anyone who has ever kissed a killer whale, danced with an orangutan, surfed among porpoises, had pet dogs, seen a sunset at Tanat Lot (Indonesia) and a triple rainbow in central Alaska, and so forth—as I have—could claim that the phrase "creation's loving presence" is a mere metaphor' (Egan, 'Hell', 70).

is forced to acknowledge that concepts of hell involving any form of duration are meaningless. The same question has to be raised about the notion of a continuing human consciousness, once the material support is removed. But more mysterious yet is the concept of sin, in particular of what has been called 'mortal' sin. Harvey Egan opposes 'eternal obduracy' to 'eternal love', one being human and the other divine. Is not such a balancing act (as Barth clearly saw) unjustified? It seems to suggest some equality: but 'You shall become like God' was, after all, a lying temptation.

One final thought can be borrowed from Heidegger's insistence that the purpose of life is to arrive at personal authenticity.<sup>14</sup> The notion of hell that may speak most to the men and women of today is the realisation at the moment of death that one lacks authenticity. One is then thrown on to the mercy of the Maker, whom one has, in a sense, defrauded, and at that moment there is no going back. But, as Christians, we also acknowledge that full authenticity is founded on the Christ who lives in each of us and in our fellow Christians. Authenticity, for us, cannot be solipsistic for, as Christ said: 'I am the vine, you are the branches' (John 15:5).

At the end one sees that Küng was right to reject the presentation of hell as an eternal punishment inflicted by a remorseless God (however useful this may have been as a deterrent). And yet it would be wrong to obliterate 'hell' from religious vocabulary. The appalling truth is that a human being is capable of wilfully wasting the opportunities offered of achieving full authenticity in the body of Christ. The sin against the Spirit has no escape route—at least in human terms.

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<sup>14</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 174.