

HEAT AND LIGHT: DAVID BENTLEY HART ON THE FIRES OF HELL

R. TRENT POMPLUN

In 1899, André Castelein had the temerity to suggest that God might save more than half the human race. In retrospect, the Jesuit's suggestion should not have seemed so inflammatory. Arguments about the relative numbers of the saved and the damned had long been commonplace in scholastic theology. Be that as it may, Castelein aroused the ire of two Redemptorists who published a rebuttal, bringing George Tyrrell to pen a now-famous riposte.

I read (Tyrrell writes), in a recent number of an ecclesiastical periodical, that two eminent theologians have satisfactorily refuted the work of another theologian defending the opinion that the majority of mankind will be saved. It might not at first sight, and apart from the grave authorities, patristic and otherwise, on the opposite side, seem an altogether rash and extravagant opinion that, out of some fourteen hundred millions of the present population of the globe, something less than seven hundred millions should perish everlastingly; or, to put it in other words, that only forty-nine *per cent.* of the people we meet any day in London are doomed to eternal flames. Still, we may more than suspect that this lax theologian, sadly weak in the devotion to hell, and with a strong *Sacré Cœur* or anti-Calvinist bias, really meant, in the naughtiness of his heart, much more than he dared to say; that, given an inch, he had it *in petto* to take an ell, and, once over the crest of the hill, to run down the other side at a gallop.¹

Perhaps it is premature to compare David Bentley Hart to George Tyrrell. If nothing else, both have a talent for invective, and no one doubts their anti-Calvinist bona fides. Should anyone accuse Hart of laxity, *That All Shall Be Saved* will not exculpate.² Hart, alas, is sadly weak in his devotion to hell. Nor has he hidden his naughtiness *in petto*. He proclaims the universal salvation in Jesus Christ of every man, woman, and child, the ten thousand things, even the entire cosmos; he shouts it from the rooftops, he has taken the crest. It remains for infernalists everywhere to stop him before he gallops down the hill.

I.

Universalism, the belief that all men and women will be saved, has grown from a mystic teaching, hidden from the many and whispered in the dark, to a flame war of epic proportions. Now, heat shed in debates about universalism—even in shouty caps—is nothing new. After World War II, Peder Myrhe, a doctoral student at Pacific Union College, could write that the introduction of the idea of eternal torment into the words *'olam*, *aiōn*, and *aiōnios* would “make

¹ George Tyrrell, “A Perverted Devotion,” in *Essays on Faith and Immortality* (London: Edward Arnold, 1914), 158-71, here 168. The original was published in the *Weekly Register* of December 16, 1899.

² David Bentley Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved: Heaven, Hell, and Universal Salvation* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2019).

R. Trent Pomplun

Department of Theology, University of Notre Dame, 130 Malloy Hall, Notre Dame, IN, 46556, USA

Email: rpomplun@nd.edu

God a cruel tyrant, compared to whom the most ingenious tormenters in modern concentration camps would be mere amateurs.”³ Michael McClymond’s *The Devil’s Redemption* and David Bentley Hart’s *That All Shall Be Saved* represent but the latest clash in this long battle.⁴

For proponents of universalism, Hart’s new book might well be the David to McClymond’s Goliath. It gathers the old briefs, imbues them with new energy, and unleashes them with extreme force. For Hart, two millennia of dogmatic tradition have distorted the understanding of hell found in the Bible and the early Church. Reflecting on two simple questions, however, can bring us closer to the “obscure origins of the Christian conception of reality” (2): Can any finite rational creature truly reject God freely and with eternal finality? Can a God who creates a world in which the final loss of anyone is possible be the Transcendent Good, or indeed any good at all? Hart dispenses fairly quickly with the objections that Scripture teaches a doctrine of final punishment or that universalism was condemned at the Second Council of Constantinople. He is more concerned to refute philosophical defenses of hell, especially variations on the so-called free will defense. He advances four arguments. First, the notion that a rational agent in full possession of his or her faculties could freely and finally reject God is logically incoherent. Second, a final state of eternal torment could neither be a just sentence nor a just punishment, no matter how depraved the individual in question. Third, even if such a fate might be just in some abstract sense, the God who would permit it could not be perfectly good. Finally, hell’s perpetuity renders other aspects of the Christian faith, particularly orthodox Christology and eschatology, meaningless.

Hart’s arguments, if not wholly new, are exceedingly clever. His first meditation, assuming God to be the transcendent origin and transcendental end that makes every creature and action possible, establishes the final judgment as the act by which God brings all things to the final end for which he created them. Hart’s second meditation uses the traditional Scriptural defenses of universalism to show that any punitive eschatological horizon must be both finite and enclosed within the broader restoration of all things in Christ. The third meditation turns to Gregory of Nyssa’s notion of the *plērōma* of all human beings to establish that all humanity, created according to the image of God, is at once the eschatological reality fashioned to be the body of Christ. If, Hart argues, there is no true human unity except in the concrete solidarity of all human beings created in God’s image and likeness, then there is no way for persons to be saved *as persons* except in and with all other persons. The final meditation on creaturely freedom completes the circle. If freedom is nothing less than a being’s power to flourish as what it naturally is and to become ever more fully what it is, perfect creaturely freedom is found not in indeterminacy but in the eschatological reality in which God is all in all. Conversely, anything that separates us from the end for which we were created, even our power of choice, is bondage. If human nature really required the capacity to reject God freely and finally, then Christ would not be fully human at all.

³ Peder Margido Myhre, “The Concept of *Olam*, *Aion*, and *Aionios* in the Light of the Biblical and Certain Other Related Languages,” Diss. Pacific Union College (Angwin, California, 1947), 160-61, quoted in Ilaria L. E. Ramelli and David Konstan, *Terms for Eternity: Aîōnios and Aîdios in Classical and Christian Texts* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2013), 59.

⁴ For an excellent review of McClymond, see Roberto J. De La Noval, “Divine Drama or Divine Disclosure? Hell, Universalism, and a Parting of the Ways.” *Modern Theology* 36, no. 1 (January 2020): 201-10.

This short summary does not do justice to the richness of Hart's arguments, some of which duck, weave, and develop over several chapters. The most moving in my estimation are the arguments that hinge on fatherhood (53-54, 80, 86, 151). Hart's meditations are united by one master argument, namely, that the principal terms of any argument to support final perdition—justice, punishment, freedom, love, eternity—cannot be integrated into a stable philosophical synthesis without destroying the Christian conception of God. "The more any one of these words comes to be associated with a clear and distinct idea," Hart says, "the more subversive it becomes of the harmony of the whole" (33). The consistent application of this insight allows Hart to stack his arguments, the weight of each adding to the force of the whole. The design is ingenious, and the effect devastating.

II.

Many of Hart's arguments—or at least variations on them—will be familiar to veterans of these battles. Here the similarities between Hart and Tyrrell are instructive. Both authors are universalists with a keen sensitivity to moral obliquity; both diagnose theological pathologies they see manifest in Calvinism and neo-Thomism; both believe these pathologies to have led to the decay of Western Christianity; and both attempt to cure the modern church of its ills by the steady application of forceful argumentation. Both also happen to be wonderful stylists. As a matter of fact, "A Perverted Devotion" anticipated several of the arguments in *That All Shall Be Saved*.

The ostensible subject of Tyrrell's essay was devotion, which he understood as a special *attrait* towards some particular point of Catholic teaching. A devotion to hell could be no more than an attraction to divine Justice, but every devotion, Tyrrell noted, is liable to perversions and excess. Tyrrell diagnosed Tertullian in the following words:

Here what may have originally been a love of God's justice, a sympathy with the divine indignation, quickly degenerated into an angry and egoistic vindictiveness, a hatred of wrongdoers and misbelievers, ostensibly, as opponents of truth and right; really, as his own personal opponents—as members of a hostile party, section, clique. Tertullian was yet orthodox in his own eyes, and in those of others, when he dwelt with a cruel gleefulness on the prospect of contemplating hereafter the torments of his adversaries in hell; but the seed of death was already in him—charity had no part in his thought, and faith next to none; it was a mere outbreak of personal vindictiveness, of the pent-up heat generated by acrimonious controversy (160-61).

Tyrrell, too, was no fan of Calvinism, which ever tends to take predestination to be "luminously self-evident," while casting doubt upon God's goodness and wisdom (164). And Tyrrell was especially alarmed by the callous manner with which neo-Thomists deployed a "pert rationalism" to explain away compassionate regard for the damned. "If," he wrote, "there is intellectual provincialism and narrowness in being surprised that the absolute view of things, as known to God alone, and as revealed by Him, should seem utterly unintelligible from our little corner of immensity, there is still a greater degree of mental and moral obliquity in one who finds in such a doctrine as that of hell no perplexity for his reason, no shock to his affections, no violation of his sentiments" (162).

Some rhetorical flourishes are nearly identical. If Hart remarks that Abba Macarius's concern for the damned made him appear "immeasurably more merciful than the God he worshipped" (11), Tyrrell could grouse that the Calvinist doctrine of predestination "causes man to appear more just, more kind, than his Maker, thus allowing the river to rise higher than the source" (163). If, for Hart, some Christians find hell "practically the best part of the story" (28), Tyrrell does him one better: "He that touches their hell, touches them in the apple of their eye" (165). Nor are Hart and Tyrrell similar only in their flourishes: both deploy what early modern philosophers called arguments of moral necessity to great effect. Compare their respective considerations of the possibility that God might allow the damnation of a single human being. Tyrrell says, "*Magis et minus non mutant speciem*. 'More and less do not change the quality.' . . . The real difficulty proposed to our faith in the doctrine of hell, is that God, foreseeing that even one soul should be lost eternally, should freely suffer things to take their course when He could . . . have hindered the tragedy. The mere multiplication of the offense is of little concern" (169).

Hart, taking a cue from Jorge Luis Borges's "Three Versions of Judas," pushes the same meditation to its blasphemous extreme:

We need not imagine, in traditional fashion, that the legions of the damned will far outnumber the cozy company of the saved. Let us imagine that only one soul will perish eternally, and all others enter into the peace of the Kingdom. Nor need we think of that soul as guiltless, like Vanya's helpless child, or even as mildly sympathetic. Let it be someone utterly despicable—say, Hitler. Even then, no matter how we understand the fate of that single wretched soul in relation to God's intentions, no account of the divine decision to create out of nothingness can make its propriety morally intelligible. This is obvious, of course, in predestinarian systems, since from their bleak perspective, manifestly, that poor, ridiculous, but tragically conscious puppet who has been consigned to the abyss exists for no other purpose than the ghastly spectacle of divine sovereignty. But, then, for the redeemed, each of whom might just as well have been denied efficacious grace had God so pleased (since no one merits salvation), who is that wretch who endures God's final wrath, forever and ever, other than their surrogate, their redeemer, the one who suffers in their stead—their Christ (84)?

Hart, incidentally, is especially good at mimicking old sermons on hell. Developing his argument on personhood, he asks,

Can we imagine . . . that someone still in torment after a trillion ages, or then a trillion trillion, or then a trillion vigintillion, is in any sense the same agent who contracted some measurable quantity of personal guilt in that tiny, ever more vanishingly insubstantial gleam of an instant that constituted his or her terrestrial life? And can we do this even while realizing that, at this point, his or her sufferings have in a sense only just begun, and in fact will always have only just begun (203-04)?

Readers unfamiliar with the conventions of early modern sermons might think that Hart is simply parodying James Joyce. As a matter of fact, Joyce took Fr. Arnall's hair-raising sermon from *Hell Opened to Sinners*, a collection of meditations by the Jesuit Giovanni Pietro Pinamonti (1632–1703). Tyrrell would have heard similar sermons during his own spiritual exercises as a Jesuit, if not those of Pinamonti himself, who was very popular among English-speaking Jesuits in the late nineteenth century. Tyrrell takes a similar tack, bemoaning such preachers' "studies

of celestial mechanics, their aeonian calculus, piling century upon century and age upon age; sitting down breathless at times to rejoice in the reflection that they have only just begun" (168).

This is not to say that Tyrrell anticipated all—or even most—of Hart's arguments; in many respects, Tyrrell is a perfect model of the "hopeful universalist" whom Hart criticizes in *That All Shall Be Saved*. Even so, the similarity in their reasoning and in their rhetoric gives rise to a problem. The casual reader of *That All Shall Be Saved* might come away with the impression that universalism is rare in the West. It is not. Although Tyrrell's essay was censured (surprise, surprise), universalism found supporters among Catholic theologians and—if one believes that the doctrine is not condemned by other authorities—was given voice in *Gaudium et spes*, *Redemptoris missio*, and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Here, I think a few points of clarification are in order.

III.

Hart reserves a special animus for Thomism and Thomists; at times, he almost makes it sound like they are required as part of their formation to spit on the graves of unbaptized infants. Must the universalist—or at the very least, the Catholic universalist—abandon Aquinas and the scholastic tradition? Hart does not say. He appears to lay blame at the foot of a broadly sketched Augustinianism, but at no point does he equate the entirety of Western theology with this tradition. He even says some nice things about John Duns Scotus. Hart does, of course, remark on the tormented genius with which Western theologians have embellished their views of hell. That fact, I think, is indisputable.

Still, whatever the failings of individual Thomists, Hart overstates his case. Aquinas, like other medieval theologians, affirmed that God's mercy was not bound by the administration of His sacraments. And, if most Catholic theologians did not accord unbaptized infants the fullness of glory, neither did they revel in those infants' suffering. That God might sanctify an infant in the womb before baptism, as He had Jeremiah and John the Baptist, was a common teaching. Many scholastics also rejected a purely natural frame of reference in determining questions about the fate of unbaptized infants. Durandus of St. Pourçain, for example, explicitly says that God saves infants *ex speciali gratia immediate sine sacramentis*. And—to be completely fair to the Thomist tradition—we largely owe the slow retreat of rigorism on this very issue to Cajetan, who popularized the opinion that infants might be saved through the faith of their parents. Narrowly escaping censure at the Council of Trent, deemed *contra fidem* by Bellarmine and heretical by Suárez, Cajetan's position made inroads slowly, being formalized in Ignazio Ludovico Bianchi's *De remedio aeternae salutis pro parvulis in utero matris clausis sine baptismo morientibus* (1768) and defended in the writings of Johann Baptist von Hirscher (1788–1865), Thomas-Marie-Joseph Gousset (1792–1866), Heinrich Klee (1800–1840), and Herman Schell (1850–1906). Cajetan's teaching continued to be discussed in the major Thomistic manuals of the twentieth century, gaining its greatest exposure in the quintessential neo-Thomist Ludwig Ott (1906–1985) before being adopted by the International Theological Commission in 2007.

Hart slightly exaggerates his case against the "hopeful universalism" of contemporary Roman Catholic theologians as well. Hans Urs von Balthasar can hardly be an example of the "seeker tentatively and timidly groping his way toward some anxious, uncertain, fragile hope" (66). Nor does Balthasar quite maintain that we are "forbidden by piety, doctrine, and prudence"

(102) from attempting to decide between those Scriptural passages that describe universal salvation and those that describe eternal torment. Balthasar certainly sees life and death as two paths set before us, but he also indicates that the former passages represent the eschatological perspective afforded by the resurrection, whereas the latter represent the existential perspective of the sinner under judgment. The Biblical passages cannot be synthesized in such a way that one group negates the other, but neither are the two horizons equal in all respects. Hart's eloquent account of John's Gospel, in which all things are judged and redeemed in Christ's crucifixion and resurrection, also bears more than a superficial resemblance to Balthasar's account of the *triduum*. Hart strikes much closer to Balthasar when he shows the ineptitude of arguments that assume God hazards the risk of losing some of his creatures when creating them (85-86). It would also be a mistake—although Hart does not make it himself—to assume that a Catholic universalist would need to adopt Balthasar's approach to these topics. Henri de Lubac and Jean Daniélou, for example, propose models of corporate salvation quite like the one advanced by Hart.

IV.

How far, then, might a Catholic theologian travel this path with Hart? Quite far, in fact. The language of hell in our magisterial documents is every bit as complicated and confusing as the language of hell in Scripture. And Hart's master argument applies equally well to the terms that seem so clear to us—damnation, pain, punishment, and so forth. When shorn of later theological accretions, the term *damnatio* refers strictly to the sentencing, not the sentence itself, just as we say someone is "sentenced to seven years hard labor." *Supplicium*, another term for punishment that appears frequently in magisterial documents, refers to the act of kneeling, often to receive punishment, but just as often to beg for mercy—the very meaning that "supplication" retains in modern English. Both *damnatio* and *supplicium* can mean "suffering" or "punishment" by metonymy, of course, but both refer to concrete acts or events that are finite. Even *poena*, which is everywhere rendered "pain" or "punishment," can mean "price," "payment," or "recompense." The word always carries strong connotations, however, of expiation and satisfaction. Still, the problem remains: The magisterial documents characterize hell's *poenae* in terms of *aeternitas* and *perpetuitas*, two terms that seem exceptionally clear, even luminously self-evident. Have we reached a dead end for Latin universalism? Not quite.

The Vulgate translates both *aiōnios* and *aīdios* as *aeternum*. Scholastic theologians, however, understood *aeternitas* and the related term *aevum* to translate *aiōn*. As a result, the meanings of *aeternitas* and *aevum* vary widely in medieval texts. Often the terms are interchangeable, sometimes they are distinguished, but rarely are they clear. Albert the Great took *aeternitas* to denote eternity in the proper sense but used *aevum* to indicate beings with "created eternity," like angels. Duns Scotus believed *aeternitas* an incommunicable attribute of God that could not be predicated of creatures at all. Theodoric of Freiberg, defining *aeternitas* as the measure of divine intelligences, held God to possess not *aeternitas*, but *superaeternitas*. Interpretations of *aevum* were similarly varied. Bonaventure understood *aevum* to be a particularly exotic form of space-time in which the future arrives, but the past is never lost. (I say "space-time" because not every theologian accepted Aquinas's opinion that angels—the typical inhabitants of *aeva*—were incorporeal.) As speculation about *aevum* became more sophisticated, theologians conceived even more exotic forms, such that any given *aevum* found its measure—its intelligibility—only in a higher, ontologically richer, *aevum*.

This little bit of scholastic trivia is actually quite important for limning the possibilities of Latin universalism. If each *aevum* is nested in other, higher *aeva*, then the inhabitants of lower *aeva*, be they angels or human beings, cannot of their own power comprehend higher *aeva*. Human beings, submerged in our own peculiar space-time, cannot understand the aeviternal space-time of the lowest angel without supernatural assistance, just as that angel cannot conceive higher angels' *aeva* without being illuminated by a superior, super-celestial light. From our own little corner of immensity, the *aevum* of an angel, or the purifying fire through which we might have to pass for our sins to be purged, while finite, is yet incalculable. It is perfectly in keeping with the Latin to say that hell's *poenae aeternae* last an *aevum*—or in Greek an *aiōn*—that is to say, they last a finite eschatological measure that we cannot calculate ourselves. We may rest assured—and tremble—that God, being infinitely just, has determined their duration accordingly. We may also pray that in dying to sin in faith, we may be saved from this terrifying eschatological trial.

On this reading, even the most rigorist authorities—say, the Synod of Valence, the Synod of Arles, the Fourth Lateran Council—can to be read to support universalism without undermining the New Testament's repeated references to the *ignis aeternus*. On this reading, too, the aeonian calculus, long misused, might be redeemed and repurposed, if not restored to its original sense. To say that the sinner receives *poenae aeterni supplicii*, then, is to say no more than that the sinner will bend the knee in the incalculable age that stands between death and the resurrection. The soul of one who dies in actual mortal sin descends to hell immediately to pay the price; nonetheless, on the Day of Judgment all appear in their bodies before Christ's tribunal to give an account of their deeds, that each may receive good or bad according to what one has done in his or her body. If that price is incalculable but finite, we have every reason to believe and to hope that, the price paid and the sin expiated, the sinner will be redeemed and receive good in his or her body. Indeed, on this reading, the incalculable age between death and the resurrection might well be seen for what it is: a great mercy, a compassionate boon, the Father's never-ending invitation to make amends, a welcoming of the prodigal, no matter how far they have wandered or how much they have spent.

Let us conclude by restating Hart's master argument in a more Latin idiom. Our common ideas of *poenae aeternae* are not just philosophically incoherent, but philologically suspect. Were any *poena* equal to God's own eternity, it would expiate. Were it equal to God's eternity but somehow rendered incapable of providing expiation, it would no longer be a *poena*. The price we could not pay would be greater than the price God did, and our sin would be greater than His Love. The consummate perspicacity of this argument is the great—and I hope lasting—contribution of *That All Shall Be Saved*. Whether Hart has insulted his adversaries or not matters not a whit to his argument, and readers would be advised to focus their energies on its theological, philosophical, and philological foundations rather than on the heat of the battle itself.