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## Modern Theological Debates of Hell in the USA

### Abstract

Among the differing Christian denominations there are various viewpoints regarding hell. This article presents differing viewpoints of the theological questions concerning hell that have been debated over the last ten years (2010–2020) in the United States in the theological arena as well as the popular press. The positions of annihilationism, universalism, and the traditional viewpoint are to be surveyed. The differing philosophical, theological and biblical viewpoints are presented for each general category. The article strives to give a general overview of the various theologies and to show that such theological investigation is of urgent importance for Christians today.

**Keywords:** Hell, annihilationism, universalism, traditional viewpoint

### Streszczenie

#### Współczesna debata teologiczna o piekle w USA

Wśród różnych wyznań chrześcijańskich istnieją rozmaite poglądy na temat piekła. W artykule przedstawiono różnorodne stanowiska teologiczne dotyczące piekła, nad którymi debatowano w ciągu ostatnich dziesięciu lat (2010–2020) w Stanach Zjednoczonych na płaszczyźnie teologicznej oraz w prasie popularnej. Badane są tutaj: anihilacja, uniwersalizm i tradycyjny punkt widzenia. Dla każdej generalnej kategorii przedstawiono różne teorie filozoficzne, teologiczne i biblijne. W artykule starano się zaprezentować ogólny przegląd rozmaitych teologii, aby pokazać, że takie teologiczne dociekania powinny być niezwłocznie podjęte, bo mają bardzo ważne znaczenie dla współczesnych chrześcijan.

**Słowa kluczowe:** piekło, anihilacja, uniwersalizm, tradycyjny punkt widzenia

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Discussion in the United States regarding the nature of hell over the past ten years has been mainly limited to protestant theological debates, primarily over the nature of hell. The three main currents of thought in these debates are: annihilationism, universalism, and the traditional viewpoint. Within each of these general categories there are a myriad of varying beliefs. Over the past several decades the majority of authors who have argued their viewpoint on hell have been non-denominational evangelicals. A viewpoint that is becoming more common, and one that Pope Francis was accused of professing in 2018 by the Italian journalist Eugenio Scalfari in *La Repubblica*<sup>2</sup>, is annihilationism, the belief that in the end all sinners will simply be annihilated or destroyed. This statement, of course, immediately sent the press into a frenzy with headlines such as; “Pope Francis reportedly denies the existence of hell. Vatican panics.”<sup>3</sup> or the rebuttal in the *Catholic Review*; “Pope Francis believes in hell—and he needs to stop talking to Eugenio Scalfari.”<sup>4</sup> Of course a plethora of articles such as these can be found with a simple search of the internet. These types of situations illustrate an all too real problem; many Christians are not clear on what is meant by hell and the average Catholic does not really know what the Church actually believes.

Among Christians today the lively debate regarding hell involves discussions on the question of hell’s existence, its nature, and its purpose. There is a strong voice claiming that the threat of hell is something the Church uses to control people or that an all good and loving God is not

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<sup>2</sup> E. Scalfari, *Il Papa: È un onore essere chiamato rivoluzionario*, “*La Repubblica*”, 28.03.2018, [https://rep.repubblica.it/pwa/intervista/2018/03/28/news/il\\_papa\\_e\\_un\\_onore\\_essere\\_chiamato\\_rivoluzionario\\_-192473492/](https://rep.repubblica.it/pwa/intervista/2018/03/28/news/il_papa_e_un_onore_essere_chiamato_rivoluzionario_-192473492/) (4.10.2020) and the Vatican’s response: The Press Office of the Holy See, “Vatican News”, 30.03.2018, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2018-03/pope-francis-article-repubblica-press-release.html> (4.10.2020).

<sup>3</sup> T.I. Burton, *Pope Francis reportedly denies the existence of hell. Vatican panics*, “Vox” 30.03.2018, <https://www.vox.com/2018/3/30/17179952/pope-francis-hell-vatican-interview-scalfari-italian> (4.10.2020).

<sup>4</sup> C.R. Altieri, *Pope Francis believes in hell—and he needs to stop talking to Eugenio Scalfari*, “The Catholic World Report”, 30.03.2018, <https://www.catholicworldreport.com/2018/03/30/pope-francis-believes-in-hell-and-he-needs-to-stop-talking-to-eugenio-scalfari/> (4.10.2020).

congruent with the concept of hell. The debate is so lively in the United States that the well-known magazine “National Geographic” published an article titled “The Campaign to Eliminate Hell” claiming that “... the number of Americans who believe in the fiery down under has dropped from 71 percent to 58 percent.”<sup>5</sup>

This also presents a pastoral problem as many Catholics are not informed on this topic but are indeed interested in it. The growing confusion among Christians today begs for an answer. There is a need for the clarification of the doctrine of hell, its roots, and its necessity in the spiritual call to conversion for all Christians. Because Catholic means universal and whole, theological investigation into this question will also bring Catholic theologians into the wider Christian debate, which can be a way to seek unity among all Christians.<sup>6</sup> This article will briefly review each of the above beliefs about hell.

## 1. Annihilationism

In May of 2020, *Time* magazine published an article titled; “What Jesus Really Said About Heaven and Hell”.<sup>7</sup> In this article Bart D. Ehrman espouses the notion of annihilationism, or the idea that at the end of time

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<sup>5</sup> M. Strauss, *The Campaign to Eliminate Hell*, “National Geographic” 13.05.2016, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/news/2016/05/160513-theology-hell-history-christianity/> (7.09.2020). In 2020 “Time” magazine published the article *What Jesus really said about Heaven and Hell* claiming that 58% of Americans believe in a literal hell regardless of religious persuasion. See: B.D. Ehrman, *What Jesus Really Said About Heaven and Hell*, “Time” 8.03.2020, [https://time.com/5822598/jesus-really-said-heaven-hell/\(7.09.2020\)](https://time.com/5822598/jesus-really-said-heaven-hell/(7.09.2020)). These numbers were derived from a Pew Research study published in 2015 that showed that the differences along denominational lines as well as those who were not Christian or were not religious or were atheistic. Among Christians the highest percentage (93%) of those who believe in hell are historically black Protestants. See: C. Murphy, *Most Americans believe in heaven... and hell*, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/11/10/most-americans-believe-in-heaven-and-hell/> (3.10.2020).

<sup>6</sup> In fairness to Catholic theologians, the 20th century saw a discussion amongst theologians as to hell and its meaning. Theologians such as Hans Urs von Balthasar, Karl Rahner, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI), Jean Cardinal Daniélou, and Hans Küng have all written considered the eschatological question.

<sup>7</sup> B.D. Ehrman, *What Jesus Really Said About Heaven and Hell*, “Time” 8.05.2020, [https://time.com/5822598/jesus-really-said-heaven-hell/\(13.09.2020\)](https://time.com/5822598/jesus-really-said-heaven-hell/(13.09.2020)).

there will be an earthly reign of Christ, the living and the dead will be gathered for judgment and “[t]he multitude who had been opposed to God will also be raised, but for a different reason: to see the errors of their ways and be judged. Once they are shocked and filled with regret – but too late – they will permanently be wiped out of existence.”<sup>8</sup>

The theological belief called annihilationism has a strong following among Evangelicals in the United States.<sup>9</sup> The idea is that in the end, those who reject God are not punished in an everlasting fire or suffer for eternity in hell, rather, after being judged they will be destroyed, annihilated, or simply cease to exist. The term itself is derived from the Latin *nihil* meaning “nothing”.<sup>10</sup> Theologians who hold this viewpoint believe that there is no life after death for sinners. Instead, the sinner would be raised, judged and then destroyed. “Annihilation then is a term designating theories which contend that human beings may pass or be put out of existence altogether.”<sup>11</sup>

The thought behind this belief is varied. One of the primary reasons for this mode of thinking consists in the belief that, while hell, in itself, is in accord with the justice of God, the idea that an all loving God would torture a person for eternity is not. That God should behave in this matter goes against the very idea of God’s justice. God’s justice, it is claimed, would “fit the crime”. The very idea that a temporal crime would result in an eternity of punishment does not fit with justice as outlined in the Bible. It is clearly stated, “you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth...” (Ex. 21:23–25).<sup>12</sup> “The idea that a sin committed by a finite being deserves infinite punishment is incompatible with this principle.”<sup>13</sup>

Along with God’s judgment is God’s mercy, with which, Annihilationists argue, the traditional view of hell is in conflict. As Clark Pinnock

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<sup>8</sup> B.D. Ehrman, *What Jesus Really Said About Heaven and Hell*, “Time” 8.05.2020.

<sup>9</sup> J. Sanders, *Raising Hell about Razing Hell: Evangelical Debates on Universal Salvation*, “Perspectives in Religious Studies” 40 (2013) no. 3, p. 270.

<sup>10</sup> C. H. Pinnock, *Annihilationism*, in: *The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology*, ed. by J.L. Walls, Oxford 2008, p. 462.

<sup>11</sup> C. H. Pinnock, *Annihilationism*, p. 462.

<sup>12</sup> C.H. Pinnock, *Annihilationism*, p. 471; J. Sanders, *Raising Hell about Razing Hell: Evangelical Debates on Universal Salvation*, “Perspectives in Religious Studies” 40 (2013) no. 3, p. 271.

<sup>13</sup> J. Sanders, *Raising Hell about Razing Hell*, p. 271.

writes: “Any doctrine of hell has to pass the moral test. Elimination/annihilation can do so because it does not envisage everlasting torture.”<sup>14</sup> He also poses questions such as: If we are supposed to strive to be as God is, should we be just as merciless in our vengeance? How can God be boundless in his mercy and yet so “insatiably cruel”? How can a God who tortures people for all eternity be reconciled with God the Father of Jesus? And finally, how can this contradiction be explained if, on the one hand, Jesus asks us to love our enemies (Matt 5:43–48; Luke 6:27) or to forgive our neighbor (Matt. 18:21–22) and then, on the other hand, is “planning to wreak vengeance on his own enemies for all eternity?”<sup>15</sup> And Pinnock is not alone, other Evangelicals are asking the same question. It is not the question of hell itself to which the Annihilationists rebel, it is the enduring everlastingness of the punishment therein that they find morally and emotionally objectionable.<sup>16</sup>

Annihilationists also use biblical evidence to back up their claims. Pinnock outlines the Old Testament arguments: “In Psalm 37, we read that the wicked will fade like the grass and wither like the herb (v. 2) and that they will be cut off and be no more (9–10). They will perish and vanish like smoke (20) and will be altogether destroyed (38).”<sup>17</sup> The New Testament evidence is also brought forward. In the Gospels Jesus says: “fear God who can destroy both body and soul” (Matt. 10:28). St. Paul writes: “They shall suffer the punishment of eternal destruction and exclusion from the presence of the Lord” (2 Thess. 1:9);<sup>18</sup> “because the one who sows for his flesh will reap corruption” (Gal. 6:8); or that “God will destroy that person” (1 Cor. 3:17); “This is proof to them of destruction” (Phil. 1:28); and, “Their end is destruction” (Phil. 3:19). Peter also

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<sup>14</sup> C.H. Pinnock, *Annihilationism*, p. 470.

<sup>15</sup> C.H. Pinnock, *Annihilationism*, p. 470.

<sup>16</sup> “In the past twenty-five years this view has been endorsed by a number of evangelical thinkers, such as John R.W. Scott, John Wenham, Clark Pinnock, Stephen Davis, and Edward Fudge” (J. Sanders, *Raising Hell about Razing Hell*, p. 270.)

<sup>17</sup> C.H. Pinnock, *Annihilationism*, p. 464–465.

<sup>18</sup> This translation is from the following article. R. McCullough, *The Darkling Lights of Lucifer: Annihilation, Tradition, and Hell*, “Pro Ecclesia” 22 (2013) no. 1, p. 66. It is interesting to note that others translate eternal destruction as eternal ruin. See: <https://bible.usccb.org/bible/2thessalonians/1> (20.10.2020).

speaks of destruction saying that those who “introduce destructive heresies... will bring swift destruction on themselves” (2 Pet. 2:1). With even stronger language and more explicitly he states: “The present heavens and earth have been reserved by the same word for fire, kept for the day of judgment and of destruction of the godless” (2: Pet. 3:7). Less convincing, yet often cited, is Rev. 20:14: “Then Death and Hades were thrown into the pool of fire. (This pool of fire is the second death.)” References to Sodom and Gomorrah used by Peter (2 Pet. 2:6) and Jude (Jude 7) or to the great flood (2 Pet. 3:6–7) are also used to support the argument.<sup>19</sup> And finally, St. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15:22–28, which is often cited by both Universalists and Annihilationists, with his “triumphal cry that once Christ has put all his enemies under his feet—culmination with that final foe, death—God will truly be all in all.”<sup>20</sup> Intimating that once all the sinners are destroyed, all who are left will be with God.

In conjunction with the biblical evidence which upholds the view that in the end sinners will be eliminated is the fact that humans are mortal.<sup>21</sup> Only God is immortal (1 Tim. 6:16). Because of this, according to Annihilationists, it must be that humans who die in grave sin, cut off from God, must be destroyed for only God can give the gift of immortality and it can only be acquired by faith (1 Cor. 15:53).<sup>22</sup> As Pinnock states: “Immortality is not a human characteristic.”<sup>23</sup> There is a view within annihilationism that sets this in relief using the concept of time and as such maintains continuity with orthodoxy. The idea is that those cut off from God at death continue in a state of dying so there is not a point when they are not. That is to say, “[t]he damned are dying; they have not died, nor are they yet to die. Theirs is the moment of death, falling timelessly from

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<sup>19</sup> See: C.H. Pinnock, *Annihilationism*, p. 464–467; J. Sanders, *Raising Hell about Razing Hell: Evangelical Debates on Universal Salvation*, “Perspectives in Religious Studies” 40 (2013) no. 3, 270 and R. McCullough, *The Darkling Lights of Lucifer*, p. 66.

<sup>20</sup> R. De la Noval, *The Fork in the (Final) Road: Universalist and Annihilationist Eschatologies--And What Ultimately Divides Them*, “Pro Ecclesia” 25 (2016) no. 3, p. 315–320; C.H. Pinnock, *Annihilationism*, p. 471.

<sup>21</sup> See: C.H. Pinnock, *Annihilationism*, p. 462–463.

<sup>22</sup> R. De la Noval, *The Fork in the (Final) Road*, p. 270. And C.H. Pinnock, *Annihilationism*, p. 469.

<sup>23</sup> C.H. Pinnock, *Annihilationism*, p. 469.

God's sustaining presence..."<sup>24</sup> This view, the Annihilationists maintain, is well expressed by C.S. Lewis when he says that hell is "the outer rim where being fades away into nonentity."<sup>25</sup>

As with all viewpoints on hell, there must be some form of interpretation in order to render the theory. With annihilationism this is done in several ways. First, the idea that hell is referred to in Scripture as "unending fire" and "eternal punishment" is addressed and acknowledged, however, both expressions are either interpreted as divine judgement (not punishment)<sup>26</sup> or as figurative language.<sup>27</sup> Annihilationists suggest that Jesus does not speak about hell but rather speaks admonishingly as a warning.<sup>28</sup> The proponents of this theory suggest that annihilationism "makes better sense biblically, anthropologically, morally, judicially, and metaphysically"<sup>29</sup> than other explanations of hell. They also believe it does not diminish human free will. God still allows the sinner to choose to walk away and the resulting annihilation is no less terrifying than the traditional viewpoint.<sup>30</sup>

## 2. Universalism

In April 2011 the cover of *Time* magazine addressed the topic of hell and its existence by asking, "What if There is no Hell?"<sup>31</sup> The article was inspired by the Evangelical pastor Rob Bell who stirred debate within the community by suggesting the possibility of universal salvation. In other words, he seemed to be suggesting the idea that in the end God will save every person and no one will suffer eternal damnation in hell. In his book

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<sup>24</sup> R. McCullough, *The Darkling Lights of Lucifer*, p. 65, 68.

<sup>25</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, London 1957, p. 115. Quoted in: C.H. Pinnock, *Annihilationism*, p. 474.

<sup>26</sup> J. Sanders, *Raising Hell about Razing Hell*, p. 270.

<sup>27</sup> G. LeMarquand, 'The Hell You Say': *Salvation and the Final Judgment*, "Anglican Theological Review" 95 (2013) no. 1, p. 107; C.H. Pinnock, *Annihilationism*, p. 464.

<sup>28</sup> C.H. Pinnock, *Annihilationism*, p. 464.

<sup>29</sup> C.H. Pinnock, *Annihilationism*, p. 472.

<sup>30</sup> C.H. Pinnock, *Annihilationism*, p. 472.

<sup>31</sup> J. Meacham, *What if there is no Hell?*, "Time" 25.04.2011, <http://content.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,20110425,00.html> (15.10.2020).

*Love Wins a Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*,<sup>32</sup> Bell suggested that no person would be damned to hell, or that hell does not exist. While, Bell never stated this universalist belief overtly the community inferred this conclusion and a very long debate ensued.

The universalist belief is not new. It hails from the early centuries of Christianity.<sup>33</sup> In relation to this belief, most cite the second century theologian Origen as the influential voice that brought the idea fully into the Christian debate. In recent years theologians have defended Origen's theology stating that it did not actually culminate in *Apokatastasis Proton* or the "restoration of all beings to their original state in God"<sup>34</sup> but suggested a hope for it. In Protestant and Catholic theology, Karl Barth and Hans Urs von Balthasar are two examples of modern theologians who have expressed the same hope yet were accused of proclaiming a belief in universalism.<sup>35</sup> Of course, there are traditional religions which currently have proponents of this belief, such as Eastern Orthodox theologians Kallistos Ware and Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeyev of Russia.<sup>36</sup> Universalism itself claims that in the end all will be saved, redeemed or restored in God, some even go so far as to say that Satan will also be redeemed. As with any of the theologies mentioned, there is not one dogmatic belief that could be stated as the predominant view of universalism<sup>37</sup> although most agree on the following points.

First, as with annihilationism, is the belief that a truly loving God would damn no one to hell. The idea that God, in his infinite love, would do such a thing goes contrary to love. God finds "no pleasure in the death of the wicked" (Ex 33:11). This biblical statement is interpreted to apply

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<sup>32</sup> R. Bell, *Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*, New York 2011.

<sup>33</sup> J.R. Sachs, *Current Eschatology: Universal Salvation and the Problem of Hell*, "Theological Studies" 52 (1991) no. 2, p. 227.

<sup>34</sup> G.R. McDermott, *Will All Be Saved?*, "Themelios" 38 (2013) no. 2, p. 232.

<sup>35</sup> See: M. Henry, *Does Hell Still Have a Future?*, "Heythrop Journal" 56 (2015) no. 1, p. 120–135.

<sup>36</sup> G.R. McDermott, *Will All Be Saved?*, p. 235.

<sup>37</sup> D. Tidball, *Can Evangelicals Be Universalists?*, "The Evangelical Quarterly" 84 (2012) no. 1, p. 19.



to all people and therefore God wants every person to be saved.<sup>38</sup> Another question is why would God, who created man *ex nihilo*, create him in the first place if he knew that even one person would be damned for eternity. This question is extended further philosophically by saying that God is under no obligation to create anyone, so why create a person who would be forever moving away from God to suffer eternity in hell?<sup>39</sup> Along with this reasoning Thomas Talbott posits the following philosophical argument: “(1) God is love and therefore must love all his creatures... (2) If God is love, he must will the salvation of all he loves... and (3) since God is all-powerful, he will achieve all his purposes, which includes the salvation of all.”<sup>40</sup>

There are other universalist arguments, including the rebuttal to traditionalist arguments for freewill, in which universalists state, as Talbot does, that humans would freely choose to be saved once they know what it is that God has to offer.<sup>41</sup> In relation to freewill is the question of sin and evil. In this regard, those who crucified Christ did not know what they were doing (Lk 23:34), and as such it follows that those who sin are not freely choosing to sin. A person must be free in order to be emancipated from sin.<sup>42</sup> Freewill, it is argued, depends “on what exactly humans are and what precisely sin is.”<sup>43</sup>

The biblical evidence used to uphold the universalist argument abounds. The most commonly used arguments include St. Paul’s statement that just as Adam brought condemnation upon all through his one transgression, so Christ brings life to all through his righteous act (Rom. 5:18),<sup>44</sup> or as all die in Adam, all are brought to life in Christ

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<sup>38</sup> T. Stratton and J. Erasmus, *Divine Determinism and the Problem of Hell*, “Perichoresis” 16 (2018) no. 2, p. 8.

<sup>39</sup> R. De la Noval, *The Fork in the (Final) Road*, p. 316.

<sup>40</sup> G.R. McDermott, *Will All Be Saved?*, p. 237.

<sup>41</sup> G.R. McDermott, *Will All Be Saved?*, p. 237.

<sup>42</sup> See: R. De la Noval, *The Fork in the (Final) Road*, p. 319; and G.R. McDermott, *Will All Be Saved?*, p. 237.

<sup>43</sup> R. De la Noval, *The Fork in the (Final) Road*, p. 319.

<sup>44</sup> See: H.U. von Balthasar, *Dare We Hope “That All Men Be Saved?”: With a Short Discourse on Hell*, 2nd, transl. by D. Kipp, L. Krauth, San Francisco 1988, p. 8–9; J.R. Sachs, *Current Eschatology*, p. 240; and J. Sanders, *Raising Hell about Razing Hell*, p. 270.

(1 Cor 22–28).<sup>45</sup> St. Paul’s use of the word ‘all’ gives weight to the argument. It is also argued that God will reconcile the world to himself in Christ and will not count their transgressions against them (1 Cor 5:19).<sup>46</sup> And, of course, God exalted Jesus so that all in heaven, on earth and below the earth will kneel before him (Phil 2:9–11).<sup>47</sup> And finally the powerful statement that God “wills everyone to be saved and come to knowledge of the truth” and that Christ “gave himself as ransom for all” (1 Tim 4–6).<sup>48</sup>

### 3. Traditional

The final category is what would be termed the traditional view. In this view hell is a very real possibility for everyone and there may (or may not) already be souls in this “place”. In this group there is also division among beliefs ranging from theologies stemming from the Augustinian idea of predestination exhibited in Evangelical Calvinism, that there are some elect who will be saved and some who will be (already are) damned to hell, to the Catholic view, that while hell is a very real possibility we cannot know for sure that there has been or will be anyone damned to hell.<sup>49</sup> Of course the Church also teaches that anyone who dies in a state of mortal sin will immediately descend to hell.<sup>50</sup> These

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<sup>45</sup> See: J. Sanders, *Raising Hell about Razing Hell*, p. 276.

<sup>46</sup> J. Sanders, *Raising Hell about Razing Hell*, p. 276.

<sup>47</sup> See: J. Sanders, *Raising Hell about Razing Hell*, p. 276; G.R. McDermott, *Will All Be Saved?*, p. 237–38; T. Stratton and J. Erasmus, *Divine Determinism and the Problem of Hell*, p. 7.

<sup>48</sup> See: T. Stratton and J. Erasmus, *Divine Determinism and the Problem of Hell*, p. 7; also, von Balthasar discusses this at length in several places in H.U. von Balthasar. *Dare We Hope That All Men Be Saved?: With a Short Discourse on Hell*, p. 8, 17, 26, 104, 109.

<sup>49</sup> The Catechism of the Catholic Church states that: “God predestines no one to go to hell; [Cf. Council of Orange II (529): DS 397; Council of Trent (1547): 1567.] for this, a willful turning away from God (a mortal sin) is necessary, and persistence in it until the end. In the Eucharistic liturgy and in the daily prayers of her faithful, the Church implores the mercy of God, who does not want “any to perish, but all to come to repentance”: [2 Pet 3:9]. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1037, Vatican 1997.

<sup>50</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1035. “The constant teaching of the Catholic Church supports the idea that there are two classes: the saved and the damned. Three general councils of the Church (Lyons 1, 1245; Lyons II, 1274; and Florence, 1439) and Pope Benedict XII’s

traditional views on the nature of hell can be heard in many different forms and also pose difficult theological problems.

One theology of the end times is reflected in the popular book series *Left Behind*<sup>51</sup> published between 1998–2007. This series stems from a Fundamentalist belief in the Rapture: “The pre-tribulation rapture is a theological position that maintains Christ will appear in the clouds to instantly catch (take away) the church before the seventh week of Daniel’s prophecy begins.”<sup>52</sup> This belief is based on 1 Thess 4:13–18 and Mt 24:39–42 and is in agreement with millennialism or dispensationalism. While dispensationalism has many forms<sup>53</sup> two of its defining factors are “an expectation of the imminent return of Christ in the Rapture” and “an emphasis on apocalyptic and millennial expectation.”<sup>54</sup> These interesting aspects of dispensationalism or millennialism<sup>55</sup> do not form another outlook on the existence of hell. The expectation is that those who are not saved will, in fact, go to hell, but it does play into the theological question because this belief makes way for the salvation of Israel and the conversion of souls during Christ’s millennial reign on earth.<sup>56</sup>

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bull *Benedidus Deus* (1336) have taught that everyone who dies in a state of mortal sin goes immediately to suffer the eternal punishments of hell. This belief has perdured without question in the Catholic Church to this day and is repeated almost verbatim in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC §1022, 1035). Several local councils in the Middle Ages, without apparently intending to define the point, state in passing that some have actually died in a state of sin and been punished by eternal damnation. A.R. Dulles, *The Population of Hell*, “First Things” 133 (2003), p. 37.

<sup>51</sup> T. LaHaye and J.B. Jenkins, *Left Behind*, Wheaton 1995–2007.

<sup>52</sup> D. Mappes and W. House, *A Biblical and Theological Discussion of Traditional Dispensational Premillennialism*, “Journal of Ministry & Theology” 17 (2013) no. 1, p. 52.

<sup>53</sup> See: M.S. Sweetnam, *Defining Dispensationalism: A Cultural Studies Perspective*, “Journal of Religious History” 34 (2010) no. 2, p. 191–212; D. Mappes and W. House, *A Biblical and Theological Discussion*, p. 5–56; R.G. Clous, *Fundamentalist Theology*, in: *The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology* (Oxford Handbooks), ed. by Jerry L. Walls, Oxford 2007, p. 263–279.

<sup>54</sup> M.S. Sweetnam, *Defining Dispensationalism: A Cultural Studies Perspective*, p. 198.

<sup>55</sup> Millennialism can also be divided into many different types or beliefs. For a brief overview of the nuances and differences see: D. Mappes and W. House, *A Biblical and Theological Discussion*, p. 5–56.

<sup>56</sup> See: M.S. Sweetnam, *Defining Dispensationalism: A Cultural Studies Perspective*, p. 191–212.; D. Mappes and W. House, *A Biblical and Theological Discussion*, p. 5–56; R.G. Clous, *Fundamentalist Theology*, p. 263–279.

The question of God's love and hell, as seen above, is the problem of reconciling a loving God with such an egregious punishment. Similar to the idea of the millennial rule of Christ, is a theory of hell and its punishment as remedial. There are evangelicals who firmly believe that God continues to seek sinners even after death giving Christ's descent into hell (Eph. 4:9 and 1 Peter 4:6) as evidence.<sup>57</sup> In this belief an all loving, all knowing and all powerful God would have the ability to extend grace to lost souls in hell and they in turn would be able to accept this grace and escape.<sup>58</sup> This is not a new conception. This has been seen in the Eastern church since the early days of Christianity.<sup>59</sup>

The Catholic approach turns the tables, so to speak, and looks at the question in a different way. It is not God as a punisher who is lying in wait to trap a weak and unsuspecting man, but instead God as love who wants nothing more than our salvation. Hell, then, is a man's walking away from God, of his own free choosing. John Sachs sums up modern Catholic belief with five propositions: 1) Human beings are free to reject God. 2) As such, hell is a self-chosen state and not a punishment inflicted by God. 3) Neither Scripture nor the church claim that anyone is or will be in hell. 4) Heaven and hell are not equally possible outcomes due to God's universal saving will that has been revealed through Jesus Christ. 5) It is impossible to know the outcome of Christ's final judgement, however, because of the saving action of Jesus we can and must hope that all will be saved.<sup>60</sup> Here the predominate voice is that which defends the free will of each person. God so loves man that he allows man the freedom to choose against God. "To believe in God and not hell is ultimately to disbelieve in the reality of human choices."<sup>61</sup>

The biblical evidence is most convincing, especially when it comes to the words of Christ. Some, such as Pinnock, have argued that Jesus

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<sup>57</sup> J. Sanders, *Raising Hell about Razing Hell*, p. 273–274.

<sup>58</sup> A.A. Buckareff, A. Plug, *Escaping Hell but Not Heaven*, "International Journal for Philosophy of Religion" 77 (2015) no. 3, p. 247.

<sup>59</sup> J. Wessling, *How Does a Loving God Punish?: On the Unification of God's Love and Punitive Wrath*, "International Journal of Systematic Theology" 19 (October 2017) no. 4, p. 441.

<sup>60</sup> J.R. Sachs, *Current Eschatology*, p. 233–242.

<sup>61</sup> R. Douthat as quoted in: M. Henry, *Does Hell Still Have a Future?*, p. 129.

says nothing about the nature of hell stating: “One could not call Jesus a hell-fire preacher.”<sup>62</sup> On the other hand, Gregory MacDonald says: “I think it is quite clear that Jesus’ contemporaries would not have thought he was a universalist of any variety.”<sup>63</sup> Either way, the biblical evidence shows that Jesus did, in fact, say something about hell. He speaks of “eternal fire” (Mt 18:6–9; 25:41), “eternal punishment” (Mt 25:46); “fiery furnace” (Mt 13:42; 13:50), and Gehenna (Mt 5:22; 10:28; Mk 9:42–48). Of course, all of the biblical evidence outlined above to support the annihilationist theory has, through the centuries, been understood as applying to the traditional viewpoint of hell as well. Avery Cardinal Dulles says: “The New Testament does not tell us in so many words that any particular person is in hell. But several statements about Judas can hardly be interpreted otherwise.”<sup>64</sup>

## Conclusion

The above has been an extremely truncated investigation into the discussions regarding hell in the last ten years in the United States. All of these topics individually could be written on and extensively elaborated. However, it is clear that currently there is enough interest in the topic that the popular press is addressing the issue. While scholarship is also addressing it, popular non-academic writers are flooding the market with works that sing to the desire of all to simply do away with the ugliness of hell and have it replaced with something a bit more palatable, whether that be universal salvation or one thousand years of Christ’s reign allowing sinners to repent.

At the same time the historical voice of many denominations have flatly declared that certain sinners would be damned to hell for all

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<sup>62</sup> C.H. Pinnock, *Annihilationism*, p. 464.

<sup>63</sup> Authorship is unclear. This quote is can be found in: D. Tidball, *Can Evangelicals Be Universalists?*, p. 25. However, Tidball cites the following in regard to this work: *The Evangelical Universalist* was published under the pseudonym G. MacDonald (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2006). A collection of historical papers was subsequently published entitled, *All Shall be Well: Explorations in Universal Salvation and Christian Theology, from Origen to Moltmann* (Cambridge 2001).

<sup>64</sup> A.R. Dulles, *The Population of Hell*, p. 36.

eternity. As Schillebeeckx correctly points out, the Council of Florence pronounced those outside the Church would be damned to hell.<sup>65</sup> Later Vatican II reversed this when it pronounced that people outside the church may achieve eternal salvation even if they do not know Christ but seek to do the will of God with a “sincere heart.”<sup>66</sup> The historical confusion must be addressed, and theologians must take this question seriously with the upmost urgency because ultimately this is not a question of the nature of hell but rather a question about the nature of God.

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<sup>65</sup> See: H. Denzinger, A. Schönmetzer, *Enchiridion symbolorum, definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum*, Freiburg i. Br. 1967, no. 1351; the text is inspired by Fulgentius, *Regula verae fidei ad Petrum* 35, 79, Migne, PL 65, 70 as quoted in: E. Schillebeeckx, *The Collected Works of Edward Schillebeeckx*, Vol. 10: *Church: The Human Story of God*, Loc. 391.

<sup>66</sup> Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, no. 16. See: E. Schillebeeckx, *The Collected Works of Edward Schillebeeckx*, Vol. 10: *Church: The Human Story of God*, Loc. 391.

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