

DARE WE HOPE *for the SALVATION of ALL?*
Origen, St Gregory of Nyssa and St Isaac the Syrian
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“God is not one who requites evil, but He sets aright evil”.
St Isaac the Syrian

1. “Love could not bear that”

There are some questions which, at any rate in our present state of knowledge, we cannot answer; and yet, unanswerable though these questions may be, we cannot avoid raising them. Looking beyond the threshold of death, we ask: How can the soul exist without the body? What is the nature of our disembodied consciousness between death and the final resurrection? What is the precise relationship between our present body and the “spiritual body” (1 Cor 15:44) which the righteous will receive in the Age to come? Last, but not least, we ask: Dare we hope for the salvation of all? It is upon this final question that I wish to concentrate. Unanswerable or not, it is a question that decisively affects our entire understanding of God’s relationship to the world. At the ultimate conclusion of salvation history, will there be an all-embracing reconciliation? Will every created being eventually find a place within the Trinitarian *perichoresis*, within the movement of mutual love that passes eternally among Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?

Sin is Behovely, but
 All shall be well, and
 All manner of thing shall be well.

Have we the right to endorse that confident affirmation of Julian of Norwich, as T. S. Eliot does in the last of his *Four Quartets*?

Let us pose the question more sharply by appealing first to the words of a twentieth-century Russian Orthodox monk and then to the opening chapter of Genesis. The dilemma that disturbs us is well summed up in a conversation recorded by Archimandrite Sophrony, the disciple of St Silouan of Mount Athos:

It was particularly characteristic of Staretz Silouan to pray for the dead suffering in the hell of separation from God... He could not bear to think that anyone would languish in “outer darkness.” I remember a conversation between him and a certain hermit, who declared with evident satisfaction, “God will punish all atheists. They will burn in everlasting fire.”

Obviously upset, the Staretz said, “Tell me, supposing you went to paradise, and there looked down and saw somebody burning in hell-fire—would you feel happy?”

“It can’t be helped. It would be their own fault,” said the hermit.

The Staretz answered him with a sorrowful countenance. “Love could not bear that,” he said. “We must pray for all.”¹

Here exactly the basic problem is set before us. St Silouan appeals to divine compassion: “Love could not bear that.” The hermit emphasizes human responsibility: “It would be their own fault.” We are confronted by two principles that are apparently conflicting: first, *God is love*; second, *human beings are free*.

¹ Archimandrite Sophrony (Sakharov), *Saint Silouan the Athonite*, 48.

How are we to give proper weight to each of these principles? First, *God is love*, and this love of His is generous, inexhaustible, infinitely patient. Surely, then, He will never stop loving any of the rational creatures whom He has made; He will continue to watch over them in His tender mercy until eventually, perhaps after countless ages, all of them freely and willingly turn back to Him. But in that case what happens to our second principle, *human beings are free*? If the triumph of divine love is inevitable, what place is there for liberty of choice? How can we be genuinely free if in the last resort there is nothing for us to choose between?

Let us restate the issue in a slightly different way. On the first page of the Bible it is written, “God saw everything that He had made, and behold, it was altogether good and beautiful” (Gen 1:31, lxx). In the beginning, that is to say, there was unity; all created things participated fully in the goodness, truth and beauty of the Creator. Are we, then, to assert that at the end there will be not unity but duality? Is there to be a continuing opposition between good and evil, between heaven and hell, between joy and torment, that remains forever unresolved? If we start by affirming that God created a world which was wholly good, and if we then maintain that a significant part of His rational creation will end up in intolerable anguish, separated from Him for all eternity, surely this implies that God has failed in His creative work and has been defeated by the forces of evil. Are we to rest satisfied with such a conclusion? Or dare we look, however tentatively, beyond this duality to an ultimate restoration of unity when “all shall be well”?

Rejecting the possibility of universal salvation, C. S. Lewis has stated: “Some will not be redeemed. There is no doctrine which I would more willingly remove from Christianity than this, if it lay in my power. But it has the full support of Scripture and specially of Our Lord’s own words; it has always been held by Christendom; and it has the support of reason.”² Is Lewis right? Does universalism in fact contradict Scripture, tradition, and reason in such a stark and clear-cut way?

2. *Two strands of Scripture*

It is not difficult to find texts in the New Testament that warn us, in what seem to be unambiguous terms, of the prospect of never-ending torment in hell. Let us take but three examples, each consisting of words attributed directly to Jesus.

Mark 9:43, 47-48. “If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire... And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the Kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched” (cf. Mt 18:8-9; Is 66:24).

Matthew 25:41 (from the story of the sheep and the goats). “Then He will say to those at His left hand, ‘You that are accursed, depart from Me into the eternal fire.’”

Luke 16:26 (the words of Abraham to the rich man in hell). “Between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to speak about the life after death except through the use of metaphors and symbols. Not surprisingly, then, these three passages employ a metaphorical “picture language”: they speak in terms of “fire,” the “worm,” and a “great chasm.” The metaphors doubtless are not to be taken literally, but they have implications that are hard to avoid: the fire is said to be “unquenchable” and “eternal”; the worm “does not die”; the gulf is impassable. If “eternal” (*aiōnios*, Mt 25:41) in fact means no more than “age-long”—lasting, that is, throughout this present aeon but not necessarily continuing into the Age to come—and if the gulf is only temporarily impassable, then why is this not made clear in the New Testament?

Yet these and other “hell-fire” texts need to be interpreted in the light of different, less frequently cited passages from the New Testament, which point rather in a “universalist” direction.

There is a series of *Pauline texts* which affirm a parallel between the universality of sin on the one hand and the universality of redemption on the other. The most obvious example is *I Corinthians 15:22*, where Paul is working out the analogy between the first and the second Adam: “As all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ.” Surely the word “all” bears the same sense in both halves of this sentence. There are similar passages in Romans: “Just as one man’s trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man’s act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all” (5:18); “God has imprisoned all in disobedience, that He

² *The Problem of Pain* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1940), 106.

may be merciful to all” (11:32). It might be argued that in these three cases Paul’s meaning is simply that Christ’s death and Resurrection extend to all the *possibility* of redemption. It does not follow that all will or must be saved, for that depends upon the voluntary choice of each one. Salvation, that is to say, is offered to everyone, but not everyone will actually accept it. In fact, however, Paul suggests more than a mere possibility; he expresses a confident [p.197] expectation. He does not say, “All *may* perhaps be made alive,” but “All *will* be made alive.” At the very least this encourages us to *hope* for the salvation of all. C. S. Lewis therefore contradicts St Paul when he asserts as an established fact, “Some will not be redeemed.”

The same note of expectant confidence is also to be heard, yet more distinctly, in i *Corinthians 15:28* (this was Origen’s key text). Christ will reign, says Paul, until “God has put all things in subjection under His feet... And when all things are made subject to the Son, then the Son himself will also be made subject to the Father, who has subjected all things to Him; and thus *God will be all in all.*” The phrase “all in all” (*panta en pasin*) definitely suggests not ultimate dualism but an ultimate reconciliation.

There is also the text from the *Pastoral Epistles* that influenced the Arminians and John Wesley: “It is the will of God our Savior... that all should be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim 2:4). It can of course be pointed out that the author does not here state as a certainty that all will be saved, but merely says that this is what God wants. Are we to assert, however, that God’s will is going to be eventually frustrated? As before, we are being encouraged at least to hope for universal salvation.

It is important, therefore, to allow for the complexity of the Scriptural evidence. It does not all point in the same direction, but there are two contrasting strands. Some passages present us with a *challenge*. God invites but does not compel. I possess freedom of choice: am I going to say “yes” or “no” to the divine invitation? The future is uncertain. To which destination am I personally bound? Might I perhaps be shut out from the wedding feast? But there are other passages which insist with equal emphasis upon *divine sovereignty*. God cannot be ultimately defeated. “All shall be well,” and in the end God will indeed be “all in all.” Challenge and sovereignty: such are the two strands in the New Testament, and neither strand should be disregarded.

3. *God the cosmic physician*

Turning now from Scripture to tradition, let us look first at the author who, more than anyone else in Christian history, has been associated with [p.198] the universalist standpoint, Origen of Alexandria. He is someone who, over the centuries, has been greatly commended and greatly reviled, in almost equal measure. He is praised, for instance, by his fellow Alexandrian Didymus the Blind, who calls him “the chief teacher of the Church after the Apostles.”³ “Who would not rather be wrong with Origen than right with anyone else?” exclaims St Vincent of Lerins.⁴ A striking but typical expression of the opposite point of view is to be found in a story told of St Pachomius, the founder of cenobitic monasticism in Egypt. While conversing one day with some visiting monks, Pachomius was puzzled because he noticed an “exceedingly nasty smell,” for which he could find no explanation. Suddenly he discovered the reason for the odor: the visitors were Origenists. “Behold, I testify to you before God,” he admonished them, “that everyone who reads Origen and accepts his writings will go down to the depth of hell. The inheritance of all such persons is the outer darkness, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth... Take all the works of Origen that are in your possession, and throw them into the river.”⁵ Alas! All too many have heeded Pachomius’ advice, burning and destroying what Origen wrote, with the result that several of his chief works survive only in translation, not in the original Greek. This is true in particular of the treatise *On First Principles*, where Origen expounds most fully his teaching about the end of the world. Here we have to rely largely on the Latin version (not always accurate) made by Rufinus.⁶

Origen, to his credit, displays a humility not always apparent in his leading critics, Jerome and Justinian. Again and again in his treatment of the deeper issues of theology, Origen bows his head in reverent wonder

³ See Jerome’s preface to Origen, *Homilies on Ezekiel*: ed. Baehrens, 318.

⁴ *Commonitorium* 17 (23): tr. C. A. Huertley, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, second series*, 11 (Oxford: James Parker, 1894), 144.

⁵ *Paralipomena* 7: ed. Halkin, 130-32; tr. Armand Veilleux, *Pachomian Koinonia*, Cistercian Studies Series 45-47, 3 vols. (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1980-82), 2:28-29.

⁶ By the same token, how far can we depend upon the total accuracy of the Greek quotations found in Justinian’s *Letter to Menas* and used by Koetschau in his edition of Origen’s *On First Principles*?

before the divine mystery. Not for one moment does he imagine that he has all the answers. This humility is evident in particular when he speaks about the Last Things and the future hope. “These are matters hard and difficult to understand,” he writes. “...We need to speak about them with [p.199] great fear and caution, discussing and investigating rather than laying down fixed and certain conclusions.”⁷

Yet, humble or not, Origen was condemned as a heretic and anathematized at the time of the Fifth Ecumenical Council, held at Constantinople under the Emperor Justinian in 553. The first of the fifteen anathemas directed against him states: “If anyone maintains the mythical preexistence of souls, and the monstrous *apocatastasis* that follows from this, let him be anathema.”⁸ This seems entirely explicit and definite: belief in a final “restoration” (*apocatastasis*) of all things and all persons—belief in universal salvation, not excluding that of the devil—has apparently been ruled out as heretical in a formal decision by what is for the Orthodox Church the highest visible authority in matters of doctrine, an Ecumenical Council.

There is, however, considerable doubt whether these fifteen anathemas were in fact formally approved by the Fifth Ecumenical Council. They may have been endorsed by a lesser council, meeting in the early months of 553 shortly before the main council was convened, in which case they lack full ecumenical authority; yet, even so, the Fathers of the Fifth Council were well aware of these fifteen anathemas and had no intention of revoking or modifying them.⁹ Apart from that, however, the precise wording of the first anathema deserves to be carefully noted. It does not speak only about *apocatastasis* but links together two aspects of Origen’s theology: first, his speculations about the beginning, that is to say, about [p.200] the preexistence of souls and the precosmic fall; second, his teaching about the end, about universal salvation and the ultimate reconciliation of all things. Origen’s eschatology is seen as following directly from his protology, and both are rejected together.

That the first of the fifteen anathemas should condemn protology and eschatology in the same sentence is entirely understandable, for in Origen’s thinking the two form an integral unity. At the beginning, so he believed, there was a realm of *logikoi* or rational intellects (*noes*) existing prior to the creation of the material world as minds without a body. Originally all these *logikoi* were joined in perfect union with the Creator Logos. Then followed the precosmic fall. With the exception of one *logikos* (which became the human soul of Christ), all the other *logikoi* turned away from the Logos and became, depending on the gravity of their deviation, either angels or human beings or demons. In each case they were given bodies appropriate to the seriousness of their fall: light-weight and ethereal in the case of angels; dark and hideous in the case of demons; intermediate in the case of human beings. At the end, so Origen maintained, this process of fragmentation will be reversed. All alike, whether angels, human beings, or demons, will be restored to unity with the Logos; the primal harmony of the total creation will be reinstated, and once more “God will be all in all” (1 Cor 15:28). Origen’s view is in this way circular in character: the end will be as the beginning.

Now, as we have noted, the first of the fifteen anti-Origenist anathemas is directed not simply against Origen’s teaching concerning universal reconciliation, but against his total understanding of salvation history—against his theory of preexistent souls, of a precosmic fall and a final *apocatastasis*—seen as a single and undivided whole. Suppose, however, that we separate his eschatology from his protology; suppose that we abandon all speculations about the realm of eternal *logikoi*; suppose that we simply adhere to the standard Christian view whereby there is no preexistence of the soul, but each new person comes into being as an integral unity of soul and body, at or shortly after the moment of the conception of the embryo within the mother’s womb. In this way we could advance a doctrine of universal salvation—affirming this, not as a

⁷ *On First Principles* 1.6.1; tr. Butterworth, 52.

⁸ For Greek text, see Franz Diekamp, *Die origenistischen Streitigkeiten im sechsten Jahrhundert und das fünfte allgemeine Concil* (Münster: Verlag Aschendorff, 1899), 90; French translation in Antoine Guillaumont, *Les “Képhalaia Gnostica” d’Évagre le Pontique et l’histoire de l’Origénisme chez les Grecs et chez les Syriens*, *Patristica Sorbonensia* 5 (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1962), 144; English translation in Aloys Grillmeier and Theresia Hainthaler, *Christ in Christian Tradition* 2:2 (London: Mowbray, 1995), 404-5. Origen took the term *apocatastasis* from Acts 3:21.

⁹ See Grillmeier and Hainthaler, *op. cit.*, 403-4. It should be noted that there are two sets of anathemas against Origen: the ten anathemas attached to the letter of Justinian to Patriarch Menas of Constantinople in 543, and the fifteen anathemas attached to Justinian’s letter of 553, addressed to the bishops gathered in Constantinople before the opening of the Fifth Ecumenical Council. Distinct from these fifteen anathemas against Origen, there are also fourteen other anathemas dealing with the question of the “Three Chapters,” which were formally endorsed by the Fifth Ecumenical Council; and in the eleventh of these there is a general condemnation of Origen, although without any specific reference to *apocatastasis*.

logical certainty (indeed, Origen never did that), but as a heartfelt aspiration, a visionary hope—which would avoid the circularity of Origen’s view and so would escape the condemnation of the anti-Origenist anathemas. We shall return to this possibility in a moment when considering St Gregory of Nyssa, but let us first explore further Origen’s reasons for affirming a final *apocatastasis*.

It is often claimed that belief in universal salvation, because it considers the eventual triumph of divine love to be inevitable, fails to properly allow for our liberty of choice. This is an objection to which Origen is consistently sensitive. However confident his hope that God’s love will in the end prevail, he is careful never to undermine the vital significance of human free will. While affirming that “God is love,” he does not lose sight of the correlative principle, “Human beings are free.” Thus, when speaking of the subjection of all things to Christ, and of Christ to the Father (1 Cor 15:28), he observes: “This subjection will be accomplished in accordance with various assured methods and disciplines and times; yet it should not be thought that there is some necessity which compels all things into subjection, or that the whole world will be subdued by force to God.”¹⁰ Origen is altogether definite here: there is no compulsion, no force. If God’s love is finally victorious, this will be because it is freely and willingly accepted by the whole of rational creation. Origen’s *apocatastasis* is not simply a deduction from some abstract system; it is a *hope*.

Here we touch upon a difficulty that is frequently felt not only in connection with the final reconciliation at the end of the world but also throughout our Christian experience in this present life. It is tempting to regard divine grace and human freedom as two contrasting principles, the one excluding the other; and as a result we often assume that the stronger the action of grace, the more restricted is the exercise of our human freedom. But is this not a false dilemma? In the words of John A. T. Robinson:

Everyone may point to instances in which he has been constrained to thankful response by the overmastering power of love. And yet, under this strange compulsion, has anyone ever felt his freedom infringed or his personality violated? Is it not precisely at these moments that he becomes conscious, perhaps only for a fleeting space, of being himself in a way he never knew before, of attaining a fullness and integration of life which is inextricably bound up with the decision drawn from him by another’s love? Moreover, this is true however [p.201] strong be the constraint laid upon him: or, rather, it is truer the stronger it is. Under the constraint of the love of God in Christ this sense of self-fulfillment is at its maximum. The testimony of generations is that here, as nowhere else, service is perfect freedom.¹¹

Surely this is true *par excellence* of the victory of God’s love in the age to come. The power that is victorious is the power of loving compassion, and so it is a victory that does not overrule but enhances our human freedom.

Origen’s caution is evident in particular when he refers to the salvation of the devil and his angels. He makes it abundantly clear that he regards this not as a certainty but as a possibility. In his *Commentary on John* he does no more than pose a question: “Since human beings can display repentance and turn from unbelief to faith, shall we shrink back from asserting something similar about the angelic powers?”¹² In his treatise *On Prayer*, Origen limits himself to saying that God has a plan for the devil in the age to come, but we have at present no idea what this plan may be: “God will make arrangements for him, I know not how”¹³ In the work *On First Principles*, the matter is left to the judgment of the reader:

Whether certain of those orders, which are under the leadership of the devil and are obedient to his wickedness, can at some point in future ages be converted to goodness, inasmuch as there still exists in them the power of free will; or whether the evil has become so permanent and deep-rooted that it has become through habit part of their nature: let my reader decide this for himself.¹⁴

Here Origen suggests two possibilities: either the demons still possess the power of free will, or else they have reached the point of no return, after which repentance is impossible. But he expresses no judgment; both

¹⁰ *On First Principles* 3.5.8; tr. Butterworth, 243.

¹¹ *In the End God* (London: Fontana Books, Collins, 1968), 122.

¹² *Commentary on John* 13.59; ed. Preuschen, 291.1-3.

¹³ *On Prayer* 27.5; tr. Greer, 146.

¹⁴ *On First Principles* 1.6.3; tr. Butterworth, 56-57. I have followed Rufinus here; the Greek (from Justinian) is less clear, but the sense is basically the same.

possibilities are left open.

This raises an interesting question, which I once put to a Greek archbishop at the beginning of a four-hour car journey, in the hope that it would help us while away the time. If it is possible that the devil, who must surely be a very lonely and unhappy person, may eventually repent [p.203] and be saved, why do we never pray for him? To my disappointment (for I could not at the moment think of other topics of conversation), the archbishop settled the matter with a sharp and brief rejoinder: “Mind your own business.” He was right. So far as we humans are concerned, the devil is always our adversary; we should not enter into any kind of negotiations with him, whether by praying for him or in other ways. His salvation is quite simply none of our business. But the devil has also his own relationship with God, as we learn from the prologue of the book of Job, when Satan makes his appearance in the heavenly court among the other “sons of God” (Job 1:6-2:7). We are, however, altogether ignorant of the precise nature of this relationship, and it is futile to pry into it. Yet, even though it is not for us to pray for the devil, we have no right to assume that he is totally and irrevocably excluded from the scope of God’s mercy. We do not know In Wittgenstein’s words, *Wovon man nicht reden kann, darüber muß man schweigen*.¹⁵

The strongest point in Origen’s case for universalism is his analysis of punishment. We may summarize his view by distinguishing three primary reasons that have been advanced to justify the infliction of punishment.

First, there is the *retributive* argument. Those who have done evil, it is claimed, themselves deserve to suffer in proportion to the evil that they have done. Only so will the demands of justice be fulfilled: “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” (Ex 21:24). But in the Sermon on the Mount Christ explicitly rejects this principle (Mt 5:38). If we humans are forbidden by Christ to exact retribution in this way from our fellow humans, how much more should we refrain from attributing vindictive and retributive behavior to God. It is blasphemous to assert that the Holy Trinity is vengeful. In any case, it seems contrary to justice that God should inflict an infinite punishment in requital for what is only a finite amount of wrongdoing.

The second line of argument insists upon the need for *a deterrent*. It is only the prospect of hell-fire, it is said, that holds us back from evil-doing. But why then, it may be asked, do we need an unending, everlasting punishment to act as an effective deterrent? Would it not be sufficient to [p.203] threaten prospective malefactors with a period of painful separation from God that is exceedingly prolonged, yet not infinite? In any case, it is only too obvious, especially in our own day, that the threat of hell-fire is almost totally ineffective as a deterrent. If in our preaching of the Christian faith we hope to have any significant influence on others, then what we need is not a negative but a positive strategy: let us abandon ugly threats, and attempt rather to evoke people’s sense of wonder and their capacity for love.

There remains the *reformatory* understanding of punishment, which Origen considered to be the only view that is morally acceptable. Punishment, if it is to possess moral value, has to be not merely retaliatory or dissuasive but remedial. When parents inflict punishment on their children, or the state on criminals, their aim should always be to heal those whom they punish and to change them for the better. And such, according to Origen, is precisely the purpose of the punishments inflicted upon us by God; He acts always as “our physician.”¹⁶ A doctor may sometimes be obliged to employ extreme measures which cause agony to his patients. (This was particularly so before the use of anesthetics.) He may cauterize a wound or amputate a limb. But this is always done with a positive end in view, so as to bring about the patient’s eventual recovery and restoration to health. So it is with God, the physician of our souls. He may inflict suffering upon us, both in this life and after our death; but always He does this out of tender love and with a positive purpose, so as to cleanse us from our sins, to purge and heal us. In Origen’s words, “The fury of God’s vengeance avails to the purging of our souls.”¹⁷

Now, if we adopt this, reformatory and therapeutic view of punishment—and this is the only reason for inflicting punishment that can worthily be attributed to God—then surely such punishment should not be unending. If the aim of punishment is to heal, then once the healing has been accomplished there is no need for the punishment to continue. If, however, the punishment is supposed to be everlasting, it is difficult to see how it can have any remedial or educative purpose. In a never-ending hell there is no escape and therefore no healing, and so the infliction of punishment in such a hell is pointless and immoral. This third understanding

¹⁵ “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent” (from the preface of the *Tractatus logico-Philosophicus*).

¹⁶ *On First Principles* 2.10.6; tr. Butterworth, 143.

¹⁷ *On First Principles* 2.10.6; tr. Butterworth, 144.

of punishment, therefore, is incompatible with the notion of perpetual [p.205] torment in hell; it requires us, rather, to think in terms of some kind of purgatory after death. But in that case this purgatory should be envisaged as a house of healing, not a torture chamber; as a hospital, not a prison.¹⁸ Here, in his grand vision of God as the cosmic physician, Origen is at his most convincing.

4. *An uncondemned universalist*

Origen's longing for the salvation of all had already brought him under suspicion in his own lifetime.¹⁹ Yet there were some among his spiritual descendants who kept alive this universal hope. The two most notable examples are to be found at the end of the fourth century: Evagrius of Pontus, monk in the Egyptian desert, and St Gregory of Nyssa, the younger brother of St Basil the Great. Evagrius upheld and perhaps hardened the full Origenist teaching concerning the preexistence of souls, the precosmic fall, and the final *apocatastasis*; and for this he was condemned along with Origen in 553. Gregory of Nyssa, on the other hand, abandoned Origen's speculations concerning preexistence and the precosmic fall,²⁰ while holding fast to his belief in an ultimate restoration; and, significantly, he has never been anathematized for this, either in 553 or in more recent times. In expressing his hope that all will be saved, Gregory of Nyssa is fully as confident as Origen. His words recall the great [p.206] affirmation of Paul, "and thus God will be all in all" (1 Cor 15:28). "When, through these long and circuitous methods," writes Gregory, "the wickedness which is now mingled and consolidated with our nature has been finally expelled from it, and when all those things that are now sunk down in evil are restored to their original state, there will ascend from the entire creation a united hymn of thanksgiving... All this is contained in the great mystery of the Divine Incarnation."²¹ This final restoration, Gregory clearly states, will embrace even the devil.

Despite this bold claim, Gregory of Nyssa has never been condemned as a heretic, but on the contrary he is honored as a saint. Why should this be so? Perhaps he escaped reprobation because he was Basil's brother. Yet if he was treated differently from his master Origen, perhaps it was because, while retaining Origen's hope in the eventual triumph of good over evil, he abandoned the notion of preexistence and so avoided the circularity of the Origenist scheme. Whatever the explanation, the fact that Gregory has not been anathematized is certainly significant. It suggests that, if dissociated from speculations about a precosmic fall, a carefully qualified expression of universal hope is acceptable, even within the bounds of strict orthodoxy.

St Gregory of Nyssa is one of the patrons of the house of ecumenical studies to which I am attached in Oxford; and personally I am delighted that this should be so.

5. *The scourgings of love*

A third patristic author who dared to hope for the salvation of all was St Isaac of Nineveh, honored and loved throughout the Christian East as "Isaac the Syrian." Although he lived some three generations after the Fifth Ecumenical Council, he was unaffected by the anti-Origenist anathemas associated with it; for, as a member

¹⁸ It is true that Orthodox theologians usually express reservations about the doctrine of purgatory as developed in medieval and post-medieval Roman Catholic teaching; but at the same time most of them allow for some sort of purging or purification after death. See my book (published under the name Timothy Ware), *Eustratovs Argenti: A Study of the Greek Church Under Turkish Rule* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), 139-60. Elsewhere I have suggested that Catholic and Orthodox views on the "middle state" after death are less sharply opposed than appears at first. See my article "'One Body in Christ': Death and the Communion of Saints," *Sobornost* 3:2 (1981), 179-91.

¹⁹ For attacks on Origen in his lifetime, see Joseph Wilson Trigg, *Origen: The Bible and Philosophy in the Third-Century Church* (London: SCM Press, 1983), 206-208; for fourth-century disputes, see Elizabeth A. Clark, *The Origenist Controversy: The Cultural Construction of an Early Christian Debate* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1992); also Guillaumont, *Les "Képhalaia Gnostica."*

²⁰ In *On the Making of humanity*, written ca. 380, Gregory of Nyssa advances a complex theory concerning what is sometimes called "double creation" of the human race (see especially §§16-17), but this is not at all the same as Origen's doctrine of the preexistence of souls, which elsewhere Gregory specifically repudiates (*On the Soul and the Resurrection*, PG 46:109B-113B; tr. Roth, 90-92).

²¹ *Catechetical Oration* 26: ed. Mühlenberg, 67.7-11,13-15.

of the Church of the East,²² dwelling in Mesopotamia far outside the bounds of the Byzantine Empire, he owed no allegiance to the Emperor at Constantinople and did not recognize the Council held in 553 as ecumenical. Possibly he was altogether unaware of its decrees. [p.207] Particularly striking is Isaac's understanding of hell. He insists that the texts in the New Testament about fire, the worm, outer darkness, and the gnashing of teeth are not to be understood literally and in a physical sense. He speaks of hell or Gehenna as "noetic" or "intelligible."²³ Hell is an "effect," not a "substance,"²⁴ while the "outer darkness" is not a place but "the state without any delight in true knowledge and communion with God."²⁵ "There will be psychic weeping and grinding of teeth," says Isaac, "which is a grief more hard to endure than fire."²⁶ The teeth-gnashing in the Age to come, then, so far from being physical and material, signifies an inner and spiritual anguish. I am reminded of the story of the preacher who, in his sermons on hell, dwelt with particular relish upon the gnashing of teeth. Eventually an elderly member of the congregation could bear it no more. "But I have no teeth," she exclaimed—to which the preacher replied severely, "Teeth will be provided."

Isaac had a better answer. In his view, the real torment in hell consists, not in burning by material fire, nor in any physical pain, but in the pangs of conscience that a person suffers on realizing that he or she has rejected the love of God:

Also I say that even those who are scourged in hell are tormented with the scourgings of love.

The scourges that result from love—that is, the scourges of those who have become aware that they have sinned against love—are harder and more bitter than the torments which result from fear.

The pain which gnaws the heart as the result of sinning against love is sharper than all other torments that there are.

It is wrong to imagine that the sinners in hell are deprived of the love of God. . . [But] the power of love works in two ways: it torments those who have sinned, just as happens among friends here on earth; but to those who have observed its duties, love gives delight.

So it is in hell: the contrition that comes from love is the harsh torment.²⁷ [p.208]

When I first came across this passage as a student more than forty years ago, I said to myself: That is the only view of hell that makes any sense to me. God is love, St Isaac tells us, and this divine love is unchanging and inexhaustible. God's love is everywhere and embraces everything: "If I go down to hell, Thou art there also" (Ps 138 [139]:8). Thus even those in hell are not cut off from the love of God. Love acts, however, in a twofold way: it is joy to those who accept it but torture to those who shut it out. In the words of George MacDonald, "The terror of God is but the other side of His love; it is love outside, that would be inside."²⁸

Thus those in hell feel as agonizing pain that which the saints feel as unending delight. God does not inflict torment upon those in hell, but it is they who torment themselves through their willful refusal to respond to His love. As Georges Bernanos observes, "Hell is not to love any more."²⁹ "The love of God," writes Vladimir Lossky, "will be an intolerable torment to those who have not acquired it within themselves."³⁰

²² Often styled "the Nestorian Church," but this is an inaccurate and misleading designation.

²³ *Homilies* 65(64) and 76 (alias Appendix A, §5): tr. Wensinck, 306, 350; tr. Miller, 313, 395.

²⁴ *Homily* 26(27): tr. Miller, 133; Wensinck, 128, renders less clearly, "...facts, not persons."

²⁵ *Homily* 76 (alias Appendix A, §5): tr. Wensinck, 350-51; tr. Miller, 396.

²⁶ *Homily* 6: tr. Wensinck, 60. In Miller (tr.), S7, the word "psychic" does not occur.

²⁷ *Homily* 27(28): tr. Wensinck, 136; tr. Miller, 141. For the most part I follow here the translation of Sebastian Brock in A. M. Allchin (ed.), *The Heart of Compassion: Daily Readings with St Isaac of Syria*, "Enfolded in Love" Series (London: Damon, Longman & Todd, 1989), S3. For a similar view of hell, see Origen, *On First Principles* 2.10.4-5; tr. Butterworth, 141-43.

²⁸ Cited in C. S. Lewis, *George MacDonald.- An Anthology* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1946), 49 (484).

²⁹ *Journal d'un curé de campagne* (Paris: Pion, Le Livre de Poche, 1961), 142.

³⁰ *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, 234.

From this it follows that those in hell are self-enslaved, self imprisoned. Ultimately, states C. S. Lewis,

there are only two kinds of people...those who say to God, “Thy will be done,” and those to whom God says, in the end, “*Thy* will be done.” All that are in Hell, choose it. Without that self-choice there could be no Hell... The doors of hell are locked on the *inside*.³¹

Now if all this is true—if, as Isaac says, those in hell are not cut off from the love of God, and if, as Lewis asserts, they are self-imprisoned—then may it not be that they still have some hope of redemption? (Indeed, the Orthodox Church says a special prayer for them at Vespers on the Sunday of Pentecost.)³² If divine love is constantly knocking on the door of their heart, and if that door is locked on the inside, may not the time come when at long last they respond to love’s invitation and open the door? If the reason for their suffering is that they recognize how grievously they [p.209] have sinned against love, does this not imply that there is still within them some spark of goodness, some possibility of repentance and restoration?

Isaac, for his part, definitely believed that this was so. In the second part of his *Homilies* (previously thought to have been lost, but rediscovered in 1983 by Dr. Sebastian Brock) Isaac speaks of a “wonderful outcome” that God will bring to pass at the end of history:

I am of the opinion that He is going to manifest some wonderful outcome, a matter of immense and ineffable compassion on the part of the glorious Creator, with respect to the ordering of this difficult matter of [Gehenna’s] torment: out of it the wealth of His love and power and wisdom will become known all the more—and so will the insistent might of the waves of His goodness.

It is not [the way of] the compassionate Maker to create rational beings in order to deliver them over mercilessly to unending affliction.³³

Isaac has two main reasons for affirming with such confidence his expectation of a “wonderful outcome.” First, even more passionately than Origen, he rejects any suggestion that God is vengeful and vindictive. This he sees as blasphemy: “Far be it, that vengeance could ever be found in that Fountain of love and Ocean brimming with goodness!” When God punishes us, or appears to do so, the purpose of this punishment is never retributive and retaliatory, but exclusively reformative and therapeutic:

God chastises with love, not for the sake of revenge—far be it!—but seeking to make whole His image... Love’s chastisement is for correction, but it does not aim at retribution.³⁴

As Isaac insists in the second part, “God is not one who requites evil, but He sets aright evil... The Kingdom and Gehenna are matters belonging to mercy.”³⁵ Gehenna is nothing else than a place of purging and purification which helps to bring about God’s master plan “that all should be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim 2:4).

Second, and more fundamentally, Isaac is convinced that “many waters cannot quench love” (Song 8:7). “Not even the immense wickedness of the demons can overcome the measure of God’s goodness,” he writes, [p.210] quoting Diodore of Tarsus.³⁶ Unquenchable and limitless as it is, God’s love will eventually triumph over evil: “There exists with Him a single love and compassion which is spread out over all creation, [a love] which is without alteration, timeless and everlasting... No part belonging to any single one of [all] rational beings will be lost.”³⁷ Here, then, in distant Mesopotamia is one who is not afraid to affirm with Julian of Norwich and T. S. Eliot, “All shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.”

6. *Love and freedom*

³¹ *The Great Divorce: A Dream* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1945), 66-67; *The Problem of Pain*, 115.

³² See above, 35.

³³ *Homily 39.6*: tr. Brock, 165.

³⁴ *Homily 45(48)*: tr. Wensinck, 2,6; tr. Miller, 230.

³⁵ *Homily 39.15, 22*; tr. Brock, 170, 172.

³⁶ *Homily 39.13*: tr. Brock, 169. Isaac also appeals to Theodore of Mopsuestia (39.8: tr. Brock, 166-67).

³⁷ *Homily 40.1, 7*: tr. Brock, 174, 176.

Within the tradition of the Christian East, then, we have identified three powerful witnesses who dare to hope for the salvation of all. Other witnesses could certainly be cited from the West, particularly among the Anabaptists, Moravians, and Christadelphians. Yet it has to be admitted that in East and West alike—but more particularly in the West because of the influence of St Augustine of Hippo—the voices raised in favor of universal salvation remain a small minority. Most Christians, at any rate until the twentieth century, have assumed that the main part of the human race will end up in an everlasting hell: “For many are called, but few are chosen” (Mt 22:14). How far is such an assumption justified? Having looked at Scripture and tradition, let us now invoke reason. Drawing together all that has been said so far, let us marshal three arguments in favor of universalism and four against.

7. *In favor of universal hope*

The power of divine love. As a God of infinite compassion, it is argued, the Creator is not grudging in His mercy and forgiveness but immeasurably patient. He compels no one, but He will in fact wait until each and every one of His rational creatures voluntarily responds to His love. Divine love is stronger than all the forces of darkness and evil within the universe, and in the end it will prevail. “Love never fails” (1 Cor 13:8); it is never exhausted, never comes to an end. This appeal to the invincibility of divine love is the strongest argument in favor of universal hope. [p.211]

The essence of hell. This is basically a restatement of the first argument. As we noted when citing St Isaac the Syrian, hell is not God’s rejection of humankind but humankind’s refusal of God. It is not a punishment which God inflicts upon us, but a state of mind in which we punish ourselves. God does not shut the door against those in hell; He does not withdraw His love from them, but it is they who deliberately harden their hearts against that love. Since, then, those in hell are still enfolded in divine love, it remains possible that they may some day open their hearts to this omnipresent compassion; and, when they do, they will find that God has not stopped loving them. “If we are faithless, He remains faithful; for He cannot deny himself” (2 Tim 2:13). His nature is love, and He cannot cease to be that which He is.

The non-reality of evil. This is an argument that we have not so far had occasion to discuss. “I am He who is,” says God to Moses at the burning bush in the Septuagint version of Ex 3:14; “I am the Existing One” (*ego eimi ho on*). God is Being and Reality, and He is the sole source of all existence. Evil, on the other hand, is in the strict sense non-being and unreality. Evil and sin have no substantive existence, for they are not a “thing” that God has made; they are a distortion of the good, a parasite—not a noun but an adjective. This was clearly shown to Julian of Norwich, who states in her *Thirteenth Revelation*: “I did not see sin, for I believe that it has no kind of substance, no share in being, nor can it be recognized except by the pains which it causes.”³⁸

Existence, then, is good, for it is a gift from God; and everything that exists, by the very fact of existing, retains some link with God, who is the only source of existence. From this it follows that nothing that exists can be entirely and utterly evil. To posit something totally evil would be a nonsense, a contradiction in terms; for such a thing would be altogether unreal and could not actually exist. Even the devil, because he exists, still has a continuing relationship with God. Thus where there is existence, there is hope—even for the devil.

A possible conclusion from this third line of argument is not universal salvation but conditional immortality. At the end God will indeed be “all in all,” not because all rational creatures have been saved but because at a [p.212] certain point the radically wicked have simply ceased to be. Cut off from God, the unique source of existence, they have lapsed into non-being. At the end-time, that is to say, there will be a resurrection to eternal life, but no resurrection to eternal death; or, rather, there will be resurrection to a death that is final but not continuing, for it will entail annihilation.

This notion of conditional immortality has much to be said in its favor. It is an attractive way of avoiding the need to choose between universal salvation and an unending hell. But, although it was held by the fourth-century African author Arnobius of Sicca, it has otherwise little support in earlier tradition. The objection commonly advanced against the “conditionalist” standpoint is that God’s gift of existence is stable and changeless. It is something that He will never withdraw: “For the *charismata* and the calling of God are irrevocable” (Rom 11:29). Within each rational being endowed with free will, there is something unique and unrepeatable; God never does the same thing twice. Shall this uniqueness disappear forever from the universe?

³⁸ *Showings*, ed. Edmund Colledge and James Walsh, *The Classics of Western Spirituality* (New York/Ramsey/Toronto: Paulist Press, 1978), 148.

8. *Against universal hope*

The argument from free will. Because humans are free, it is argued, they are at liberty to reject God. His gifts are irrevocable; He will never take away from us our power of voluntary choice, and so we are free to go on saying “No” to Him through all eternity. Such unending rejection of God is precisely the essence of hell. Because free will exists, there must exist also the possibility of hell as a place of everlasting suffering. Take away hell, and you deny freedom. None can be forced to enter heaven against their will. As the Russian theologian Paul Evdokimov observes, God can do anything except compel us to love him; for love is free, and thus where there is no liberty of choice there is no love.³⁹ Whereas the appeal to the power of divine love constitutes the strongest argument in favor of universal salvation, this appeal to free will is certainly the strongest argument on the other side. Significantly, both parties in the debate, although in different ways, seek their main support from the fact that God is love.

The point of no return. But, it may be rejoined, does not this argument from free will prove too much? If God never takes away from us our liberty [p.213] of choice, and if those in hell therefore retain free will, then is not the possibility of repentance a continuing option for them? To this the anti-universalists commonly reply that there is a point of no return, after which repentance becomes impossible. God does not deprive the damned of their freedom, but the misuse of their freedom becomes eventually so deeply rooted in them that they cannot thereafter change, and thus they remain fixed forever in their attitude of rejection. God has not ceased to love them, but they have rendered themselves incapable of ever again responding to that love.

A parallel can thus be drawn between the saints in heaven and the damned in hell. The saints in heaven have not lost their freedom, but it is no longer possible for them ever again to turn away from God and to lapse into sin. They still have liberty of choice, but all their choices are good. In a similar way the damned in hell still retain a residual freedom of choice, for they have not ceased to be persons. But all their choices are bad, and it is no longer possible for them to ascend to the divine realm. The devil possesses freedom—but not the freedom to repent. In this way, after the Last Judgment there will be a “great divorce,” and the chasm between heaven and hell will remain forever impassable.

The argument from justice. It is contrary to divine justice, so it is often alleged, that the wicked should enjoy the same reward as the righteous; the moral harmony of the universe will be impaired if evildoers do not receive their just recompense. I find this argument far less strong than the two previous arguments. As St Isaac the Syrian rightly insists, our human notions of retributive justice are altogether inapplicable to God.⁴⁰ He is a God not of vengeance but of forgiving love; His justice is nothing other than His love. When He punishes, His purpose is not to requite but to heal.

The moral and pastoral argument. Finally, on the anti-universalist side it is often said that universalism deprives the Christian message of its sense of urgency and underestimates the note of insistent warning present throughout the New Testament. Christ begins His public preaching with the word “Today” (Lk 4:21). “See, now is the acceptable time,” states Paul; “see, now is the day of salvation” (2 Cor 6:2). *Today, now:* it is this present [p.214] life that is our moment of opportunity and decision, our time of crisis, the *kairos* when we make the choices that determine our eternal future. If, on the other hand, we are allowed an unlimited series of further chances after our death, and if in any case we shall all end up in the same place whatever we do in this present life, then where is the challenge in the preaching of the Christian message, and where is the need for conversion and repentance here and now? If the triumph of God’s love is inevitable and there is ultimately nothing for us to choose between, does this not make our present acts of moral decision trivial and meaningless?

Origen is aware of this difficulty. The doctrine of *Apocatastasis*, he advises, ought to be kept secret; for, if preached openly to the immature, it will lead them to become careless and indifferent.⁴¹ No doubt it is for this reason that the nineteenth-century Pietist theologian Christian Gottlieb Barth remarks, “Anyone who does not

³⁹ *L’Orthodoxie* (Neuchâtel/Paris: Delachaux et Niestlé, 1959), 60.

⁴⁰ Compare also the parable of the laborers in the vineyard (Mt 20:3-16). By conventional human criteria God is certainly unjust!

⁴¹ *Against Celsus* 6.26; tr. Chadwick, 341. Thus for Origen the notion of an eternal hell has a certain usefulness as a deterrent, though only in the case of persons at a low spiritual level.

believe in the universal restoration is an ox, but anyone who teaches it is an ass.”⁴² St Isaac the Syrian deals with the problem in a different way. It makes an immeasurable difference to us, he points out, whether we respond to divine love here and now or only after countless aeons. Even though the torment of hell is not everlasting, it remains truly appalling: “Nevertheless [Gehenna] is grievous, even if it is thus limited in its extent: who can [possibly] bear it?”⁴³

If the strongest argument in favor of universal salvation is the appeal to divine love, and if the strongest argument on the opposite side is the appeal to human freedom, then we are brought back to the dilemma with which we started: how are we to bring into concord the two principles *God is love* and *Human beings are free*? For the time being we cannot do more than hold fast with equal firmness to both principles at once, while admitting that the manner of their ultimate harmonization remains a mystery beyond our present comprehension. What St Paul said about the reconciliation of Christianity and Judaism is applicable also to the final [p.215] reconciliation of the total creation: “O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and how inscrutable His ways!” (Rom 11:33).

When I am waiting at Oxford Station for the train to London, sometimes I walk up to the northernmost stretch of the long platform until I reach a notice: “Passengers must not proceed beyond this point. Penalty: £50.” In discussion of the future hope, we need a similar notice: “Theologians must not proceed beyond this point”—Let my readers devise a suitable penalty. Doubtless, Origen’s mistake was that he tried to say too much. It is a fault that I admire rather than execrate, but it was a mistake nonetheless.

Our belief in human freedom means that we have no right to categorically affirm, “All *must* be saved.” But our faith in God’s love makes us dare to *hope* that all will be saved.

Is there anybody there? said the traveler,
Knocking on the moonlit door.

Hell exists as a possibility because free will exists. Yet, trusting in the inexhaustible attractiveness of God’s love, we venture to express the hope—it is no more than a hope—that in the end, like Walter de la Mare’s Traveller, we shall find that there is nobody there. Let us leave the last word, then, with St Silouan of Mount Athos: “Love could not bear that... We must pray for all.”

⁴² Quoted in Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Melody of Theology: A Philosophical Dictionary* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 5. I am grateful to Professor Donald Paul Burgo of Fontbonne College, St Louis, for drawing my attention to this passage. He rightly adds that the ox and the ass were already at the stable in Bethlehem before the wise men had found their way to it.

⁴³ *Homily* 40.7: tr. Brock, 176.