

Confessions of a Would-Be Annihilationist

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WANTING TO BE CONVERTED, BUT NOT QUITE BEING ABLE TO MANAGE IT

It's a strange situation to find oneself in! But I can think of no better way to describe my sensation on attempting a study of the two main views of hell: as *ongoing suffering* (the 'traditional' view); or as *extinction* (the 'annihilationist' or 'conditional immortality'¹ view).

The question of hell must gnarl away at the mind of every thoughtful and orthodox Christian; it certainly did at mine. But, to my shame, I shelved it for more than 30 years before eventually deciding to try to tackle it head-on. In common, I suspect, with many, I had taken lazy refuge in what might be called the standard C. S. Lewis line – that hell is the chosen destiny of those who refuse to yield to God, that 'the doors of hell are locked on the *inside*'.² Not, of course, that this line is without truth; but its danger is that it allows one to sidestep the sheer enormity of the doctrine, to shovel it away into the periphery of one's mind with a subconscious 'So that's all right, then', and to focus on more congenial aspects of the Christian faith. Most of us probably regard hell a belief rather than a conviction – something, that is, to which we subscribe out of dutiful orthodoxy, rather than something which grips us as an integral part of our faith. Surveying my own practice as a pastor and teacher, and comparing it with that of others, it seemed clear that like the revels of Hamlet's Denmark the teaching of hell was something more honoured in the breach than the observance, something genteelly ignored in most Christian and not least evangelical circles,

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rather as a polite middle-class family might disdain to acknowledge the existence of the drains. Deep down, one wondered if we really believed it at all.

FACING HELL

To their credit, there were those who (whatever we might think of their views) were not prepared to be so supine, and brought the issue back before the minds of evangelical readers – the pugnacious John Blanchard,³ presenting an unabashed and no-nonsense account of the traditional view; the sensitive and passionate John Wenham,⁴ 'outing' himself as an annihilationist after decades of agonizing; most of all, perhaps, Edward Fudge,⁵ emerging as the chief standard-bearer for the annihilationist cause; and the painstaking David Powys⁶ with

¹ Though not technically the same the terms are often treated as interchangeable, as they amount ultimately to the same thing: extinction.

² C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (Fontana: first published by Geoffrey Bles, 1940), 114, emphasis original.

³ John Blanchard, *Whatever happened to Hell?* (Evangelical Press, 1993).

⁴ John Wenham, 'The Case for Conditional Immortality' in N. M. de S. Cameron (ed) *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell* (Paternoster, 1993).

⁵ Edward Fudge, *The Fire that Consumes* (Paternoster, 1994; original full-length version 1982).

⁶ David Powys, *'Hell' - a Hard Look at a Hard Question* (Paternoster, 1997).

his fall-scale defence of that view. The Evangelical Alliance has made a valuable contribution in its recent report,⁷ which attempts to describe the present state of play, and which represents fairly both sides of the debate. The relevant literature, as Powys' bibliography makes plain, is large and growing, especially when we take account of books written in past generations by scholars less squeamish about the subject than we tend to be.⁸ What follows is a reflection, from a pastor's point of view, on some of the main issues: (1) a look at the decline of the traditional view; (2) an attempt to understand why that view stubbornly persists nonetheless; (3) a survey of some traditionalist attempts to make the doctrine more palatable; and (4) an enquiry into what precisely is at stake in the discussion.

THE DECLINE OF THE TRADITIONAL VIEW AMONG EVANGELICALS

While liberal Christians have long been comfortable with an annihilationist – or, still more, a universalist – position, it is remarkable how rapidly annihilationism has seeped into the evangelical community. The image of a dam being breached comes to mind; and in the opinion of many the point at which the breach took place was with the publication of *Essentials*, the dialogue between David Edwards and John Stott, in which the evangelical elder statesman committed himself, albeit with some hesitation, to an annihilationist point of view.⁹ From being no more than a possible evangelical option, annihilationism has become the preferred view of most.

What factors have contributed to this shift? At least five may be identified.

(i) The ambiguity of the biblical language

On the face of it, the language of the New Testament could hardly be clearer. Jesus, for example, speaks of 'the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels' and of 'eternal punishment' (Matt. 25:41, 46). Most Bible-readers assume that 'eternal' (*aionios*) essentially means 'never-ending'. But the word is more complex than this. While not necessarily lacking a temporal sense, it is as much to do with the character of the age (*aion*) of God's kingdom as with a temporal scheme – ie, the word is *qualitative* as much as *quantitative*. Fudge in fact pleads for the coining of a new English word altogether (he suggests 'aionic' or 'aionian') in order to release the term from unhelpful connotations.¹⁰

Likewise, Rev 14:9-12 speaks of the punishment of the person who 'worships the beast... and receives his mark...': 'He will be tormented with burning sulphur... And the smoke of their torment rises for ever and ever. . .' What could be clearer? But at least two issues arise. First, it is generally recognized that the language of Revelation is heavily symbolic, and therefore cannot necessarily be taken literally. And second, it is pointed out that John here is echoing the language of Old Testament prophecy, for precisely the same thing is said of Edom ('its smoke will rise for ever') in Isa. 34:9-10, where clearly the meaning cannot be literal.

There is more to the New Testament language of condemnation than meets the ear!

⁷ *The Nature of Hell* (Acute, 2000).

⁸ For example, E. B. Pusey, *What is of Faith as to Everlasting Punishment?* (Oxford, 1880); W. G. T. Shedd, *The Doctrine of Endless Punishment* (Nisbet, 1886); H. E. Guillebaud, *The Righteous Judge* (published privately, 1964).

⁹ Hodder and Stoughton, 1988, 315-320.

¹⁰ *The Fire that Consumes*, 11.

(ii) Discredited views of hell

The passages just quoted make it plain that the New Testament, however understood, contains vivid language concerning the fate of the lost. And there have been periods of history when this language has been pressed into starkly literal service; one has only to read a few lines of Dante's *Inferno* or look at some of Michaelangelo's frescoes – sinners neck-deep in flame, or dragged naked into the pit by demonic figures – for this to be clear. Most people's perception of hell, in all probability, has been shaped more by this kind of art and literature than by a reading of the New Testament. But when such a perception finds its way onto the pages of serious theological writing its sheer grotesqueness shows up the problems of an over-literal understanding. The Venerable Bede described his vision of a man in hell: 'The flames of fire gushed out from his ears and eyes and nostrils and at every pore.'¹¹ Teaching of this nature was not unusual. And lest we imagine that it belongs only in centuries gone by, we might take note of the contemporary John Walvoord: 'Scripture never challenges the concept that eternal punishment is by literal fire.'¹² Of a different order, but perhaps equally hard to stomach, is Blanchard's characterisation of hell as a place where God and the unsaved eye one another eternally with mutual loathing: 'God will hate the wicked with a perfect hatred, the outcome of his holiness, righteousness and justice. The wicked will hate God with a sinful hatred, the result of his corruption, depravity and vileness.'¹³

In light of such interpretations it is not surprising if many Christian people have felt it necessary to jettison the whole idea of hell.

(iii) The reticence of Paul and the Fourth Evangelist

It has often been pointed out that the most severe utterances concerning hell come from the lips of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels or from the Book of Revelation. The corollary of this is that, not putting it too baldly, Paul and the writer of the fourth gospel virtually have no doctrine of hell at all.

Paul certainly has much to say about God's 'wrath' and 'judgement': no one could accuse him of having a sentimental view of God. But to a large extent he leaves undefined what this wrath and judgement consist of. According to Rom. 2:8, for example, the unsaved will experience 'wrath and anger' (*orge kai thumos*), but what this means in practice is left unclear. Paul favours terms such as 'death', and 'destrac-

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tion', both of which are loaded with ambiguity, and which some take as meaning extinction. Perhaps Paul's most vivid passage is 2 Thess. 1:5-10. Speaking of the persecutors of the Thessalonian church, he says that they will be 'punished with everlasting destruction (*olethros aionios*) and shut out from the presence of the Lord...' Annihilationists latch onto the idea of 'destruction' as implying non-existence – though the word can equally mean 'ruin' or 'downfall' – and also onto the idea of banishment and 'exclusion': surely, to be banished from the presence of the source and giver of all life can only mean extinction? Whatever Paul's precise meaning may be, there can be no doubt that there is no developed idea of hell. (And, if Luke's account of Paul's ministry in Acts is to be believed, neither does the idea

¹¹ Quoted by Blanchard, 124.

¹² Defending the traditional view in W Crockett, *Four Views on Hell* (Zondervan, 1992), 28.

¹³ *Whatever happened to Hell?*, 162.

figure in his preaching, either to Christians within the church or to unbelievers outside it.)

The same may be said of the Fourth Gospel. Lostness amounts to 'death' as opposed to 'life', the forfeiture of what humanity was designed to enjoy in the presence of God. It is enough to say that, apart from the occasional reference to judgment or condemnation (the *anastasis kriseos*, 5:29) or to perishing ('...whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life', 3:16), this writer has very little to say.

Of course one could take the view that the words of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels, plus the Revelation passages and one or two other scattered references in Hebrews, 2 Peter and Jude are more than enough to establish a doctrine of hell. And perhaps indeed they are. (How many passages are required to 'establish' any doctrine?) But still it remains puzzling that two such prominent contributors to the New Testament should be so largely silent on the subject.

(iv) The demise of the doctrine of the immortality of the soul

An important emphasis of Fudge, Powys and others who maintain an annihilationist view is that there is no biblical support for the idea that the human soul is intrinsically immortal. This idea has provided a strong underpinning for the traditional doctrine of hell: for if the soul is indeed immortal by nature then presumably it has to 'go' somewhere on death; it cannot cease to exist. If, on the other hand, the soul is not naturally endowed by God with immortality, it is reasonable to think of it as fading away at death (hence the appeal to 'conditional immortality', ie, immortality conditional on the decision of God to grant it).

The current consensus is that the doctrine of the immortality of the soul owes more to Greek philosophy than to biblical thinking – indeed, does not the New Testament explicitly state that 'God alone is immortal' (1 Tim. 6:16)? If Paul Helm, a strong advocate of a traditional understanding of hell and also a professional philosopher, is prepared to concede that '...Scripture does not teach the immortality of the soul in so many words',¹⁴ we can be fairly sure that the doctrine rests on extra-biblical foundations. The fact is that the emphasis of the Bible is always on supernatural *resurrection* rather than natural *immortality*.¹⁵ The extent to which the demise of this doctrine damages the traditional view of hell is open to debate: but certainly the church has generally accepted it, and so its undermining has convinced some that another prop of hell as ongoing punishment is removed.

(v) The dilemma of an 'unclean' cosmos

How can God truly be God, and his kingdom perfectly present, as long as there is a gloomy comer of the cosmos where unsaved people are for ever unreconciled to him? This question sums up a major objection to the traditional view. It is, of course, of a philosophical rather than an exegetical nature, and cannot be decided by appeal to biblical texts. Traditionalists tend to emphasize hell as existing primarily for the glory of God: just as the majesty of heaven reflects the glory of his grace, so the horrors of hell reflect the glory of his justice; hence, there is no reason why heaven and hell cannot co-exist. Henri Blocher is prepared to go so far as to say that in hell 'impenitent sinners are "reconciled" to God through the perfection of remorse', that by thus glorifying God they 'reach in a paradoxical way the telos

¹⁴ Paul Helm, *The Last Things* (Banner of Truth, 1989), 118.

¹⁵ This is a major thrust of Powys' book.

of all creatures...'.¹⁶ However much truth there may be in this suggestion, the desire for a 'clean universe' is a natural one, and the co-existence of the two states without end seems paradoxical and disquieting.

Isolating these five difficulties leaves unmentioned perhaps the single over-riding objection most scholars have to the traditional view: what is seen as its sheer monstrosity. The thought, putting it crudely, that God maintains certain people in unending existence for no other reason than to hurt them seems utterly intolerable. Can it really be so? Extinction seems in every way far more merciful, far cleaner, far more satisfying, far more in keeping with a compassionate God. 'Hell [as traditionally understood] is apparently paradigmatic as an example of truly pointless, gratuitous evil' writes J. L. Kvanvig (who nonetheless regards such a view as preferable to annihilationism).¹⁷ Kvanvig quotes the disarming question put to him by a student: 'Why does he [God] get so angry, then, when we just want to be left alone?'¹⁸ Suffering which produces some ultimate good – as when a parent disciplines a child or a doctor operates on a patient – we can well understand; but suffering which produces no such good, given that those experiencing it are fixed forever in their state, offends us by its sheer pointlessness, not to mention its seeming cruelty.

This applies even after we have tried to take some account of the Bible's emphasis on the seriousness of sin (a point which seems to have been missed by Kvanvig's student). On this basis some annihilationists are happy to concede the reasonableness of an element of conscious punishment, should God in his wisdom and justice see fit to inflict it; but such punishment *without end*... this is altogether something else! It is almost as if we are discovering an entirely new kind of God – one might go so far as to say, a God who does not practise what he preaches. The God of the New Testament tells us to love even our enemies; yet he does not extend this grace to his enemies, for surely the action of a loving God would be literally to put his enemies out of their misery? As Clark Pinnock puts it, ongoing torment 'goes far beyond the Old Testament standard of an eye for an eye'.¹⁹ Even more baldly, Nigel Wright writes that 'such a God [would be] inferior to human beings'.²⁰

It is difficult sometimes to avoid the feeling that this kind of instinctive response, almost a gut reaction, is what weighs most with some writers;²¹ the traditional doctrine is, quite literally, too bad to be true.

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THE STUBBORNNESS OF THE TRADITIONAL VIEW

And yet... the traditional view refuses to lie down and die. It is notable that even some of those who embrace the annihilationist position do so with a palpable uncertainty. We have seen this already in relation to Stott, for all that his is the name most frequently cited as clinching the view. The same thing applies to Stephen Travis, whose *Christ and the Judgment of God*²² is a sustained, if not entirely successful, attempt to demonstrate the lack of

¹⁶ Henri Blocher, 'Everlasting Punishment and the Problem of Evil' in N. M. de S. Cameron (ed) *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell* (Paternoster, 1992), 310-311.

¹⁷ *The Problem of Hell* (Oxford University Press, 1993), 3.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 107.

¹⁹ C. H. Pinnock and R. C. Brow, *Unbounded Love* (Paternoster, 1994), 93.

²⁰ N. Wright, *The Radical Evangelical* (SPCK, 1996), 91.

²¹ Pinnock and Wenham are perhaps foremost in the emotional nature of some of their responses.

²² Marshall Pickering, 1986.

retributive ideas in New Testament teaching on divine judgement: 'From this discussion it seems impossible to decide whether the New Testament writers inclined to a belief in eternal torment or annihilation. The evidence perhaps favours the conditionalist view, *but this view involves serious difficulties...*'.²³ A further example is Peter Cotterell, who clearly wants to adopt an annihilationist position, but finds himself unable to take that last step: 'The fact is that however much we may shrink away from ... the doctrine of an eternal hell, that doctrine cannot easily be eliminated from the Scripture'.²⁴ The swashbuckling confidence of writers such as Pinnock and Wenham – a confidence not unfairly reprobated by Carson as 'intemperate'²⁵ – is only rarely to be found. (At risk of playing the psychologist, one is tempted to wonder if its very swashbuckle betrays a basic insecurity.)

Why this stubbornness? What gives the traditional view, in spite of the apparent weaknesses mentioned above, its nagging powers of persistence?

Exegetical considerations

Exegetical considerations inevitably take centre stage. As we have already seen, some of the New Testament language is ambiguous; but this by no means establishes the annihilationist case. A clutch of key passages still poses real difficulties for annihilationism.

(i) The Sheep and Goats (Matt. 25:31-46)

The more one reads this story, the more extraordinarily solemn and sobering it appears. Jesus warns of a sharp division of humanity into the 'blessed' and the 'cursed'; there are, it seems, no shades of grey. And the fate of the cursed is awesomely clear: they are bound for 'the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels' (v. 41); they will 'go away into eternal punishment' (v. 46). The meaning of the admittedly ambiguous word 'eternal' would appear to be fixed in this case by its parallel application to the blessed in v. 46: 'the righteous [will go] to eternal life'. It is inherently unlikely that the same word would carry different meanings in the span of a single verse – and no-one doubts that for the righteous it is (among other things, certainly) a *never-ending* destiny that is in store.

At least two other features of the story catch us up short. First, Jesus seems to want to make it clear that the destiny of the lost is in the most extreme sense an abhorrence: it is the destiny prepared not for human beings at all, but 'for the devil and his angels'. (The John of Revelation re-presents this destiny as 'the lake of fire' (Rev. 20:10, 14, 15), and makes it clear that it is a place of ongoing suffering (20:10). There seems to be no escape from the conclusion that the cursed share the same unending fate as the 'unholy trinity' of Revelation.)

Second, it is striking that the cursed of Jesus' story are not portrayed as people who have done anything particularly wrong; their sins are those of omission rather than of commission: 'I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat...' (v. 42). The suggestion is sometimes made that the horrors of hell, such as they are, are reserved only for the out and out opponents of God and not for 'ordinary' sinners;²⁶ but Jesus' story, frighteningly, appears to give the lie to this. For all we are told, the 'cursed' are respectable and law-abiding people who have simply

²³ Op cit., 68, emphasis added. In *End of Story* (IVP, 1997), Travis is frankly non-committal. But in an earlier book, *I Believe in the Second Coming of Jesus* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1992), 198, he writes: 'If pressed I must opt for the latter [ie, conditional immortality]'.

²⁴ Peter Cotterell, *Mission and Meaninglessness* (SPCK, 1990), 73.

²⁵ D. A. Carson. *The Gagging of God* (Apollos, 1996), 529-530.

²⁶ Powys is one who makes this point in relation to Revelation: op cit. 368-371.

neglected their duty to the poor and oppressed.

In short, this story seems to point clearly in the direction of a traditional understanding of hell – with the added refinement that this destiny awaits the respectably careless every bit as much as the overtly wicked.

(ii) *The Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31)*

Luke doesn't give us the Sheep and the Goats; but *The Rich Man and Lazarus* may be regarded as his equivalent, for it too speaks of the destiny of those who neglect their responsibility to the poor. Once again, the central theme would seem to be that of the absolute divide which exists between the saved and the lost after death.

Or – is it? Remarkably, there are those who refuse to acknowledge any such thing. Kvanvig asserts that '... the point of this story *has nothing to do with the afterlife*'.²⁷ Had he asserted that the afterlife is not the chief point of the story we might have found it possible to agree with him, at least to some extent. But 'nothing to do with...'? This is clearly to overstate the case. Likewise Richard Bauckham writes that '...it is a parable concerned with the single issue of wealth and poverty'.²⁸ Again, this is surely to go much too far. If Jesus really did not intend to convey anything at all about post-mortem existence, his choice of this story would appear to be inept in the extreme. Indeed, Kvanvig admits as much: 'Why Jesus might have chosen such a story to convey this point [ie, that 'even if one were to rise from the dead, they would not believe'] is unclear'.²⁹ Too true!

These quotations make it clear that the scholars find it very difficult to know quite what to do with this stark one-off story. Powys offers a new slant on previous interpretations, regarding it as a kind of *ad hominem* attack on Pharisaic attitudes; the story is essentially 'rhetorical', and the strong retributive tone is designed to 'lampoon' attitudes which Jesus is in reality condemning.³⁰ In short, the story drips with irony: Jesus is using Pharisaic language and Pharisaic imagery in order to condemn Pharisaic views. With admirable humility Powys recognizes that his reading of the story 'is not ...so compelling as to "drive out" other interpretations'.³¹ Fudge says that the story 'portrays at most the intermediate state of a pre-Christian Jew',³² but his view, though shared by some, would seem to command little agreement. What does seem to be generally agreed is that 'it was not the intention of Jesus ... to give a topographical guide to the afterworld'.³³

Whatever. What we know is (if we may put it so) that Jesus got up one morning and decided to tell (possibly recycle) a story about two men who die and go to different fates. And his story, even if only incidentally, is a frightening one: 'I am in agony in this fire', says the rich man. Jesus was under no obligation to tell this story; or, if he wanted to, to

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include this particular detail. This, presumably, was his choice. Trying to work our way into

²⁷ Op cit., 154, emphasis added.

²⁸ R. Bauckham. 'The Rich Man and Lazarus' in *The Fate of the Dead* (Brill. 1998). 105. emphasis added.

²⁹ Op cit. 154.

³⁰ Op cit. 218-227, 289.

³¹ Op cit. 244. While we may indeed admire the humility, it does little to inspire our confidence in the view expressed! One senses that Powys himself is not really quite convinced.

³² Op cit. 126.

³³ G. B. Caird, *The Gospel of Saint Luke* (Pelican, 1963), 191.

his mind-set is, of course, a perilous thing. But, at risk of seeming irreverent, it is perhaps worth saying that Jesus was not unintelligent; he will have known only too well the kind of impact such a story would have made on his hearers. The preceding chapters of Luke have Jesus speaking sometimes to 'the crowd', sometimes to 'Pharisees', sometimes to his 'disciples', so little weight can be placed on guesses regarding a putative audience for his telling of the story. If we can't pronounce on the mind-set of Jesus, no more can we on that of the man on (so to speak) the Capernaum omnibus. But it is hard to imagine any society or community where talk of being *tormented in flames* is not calculated to induce fear. To tell the story with only the kind of sophisticated view in mind that is envisaged by, say, Powys, is akin to someone letting off a bomb and then innocently protesting that he only wanted to cause a bang.

In short, however reserved we might wish to be regarding the precise application of the imagery, it is difficult to dissent from the view of Murray Harris: '...it is not illegitimate to deduce from the setting of the story the basic characteristics of the postmortem state of believers and unbelievers'³⁴ – those 'basic characteristics' being, of course, bliss for the saved and misery for the unsaved. If this is not part of the message of The Rich Man and Lazarus, one can only feel that Jesus has invented or passed on a tale that is at best misleading, at worst downright mischievous. Why give such a hostage to fortune, if it does not contain at least a real kernel of literal truth?³⁵

(iii) *The Gehenna Passages (Matt. 5:22, 29-30; 10:28, Mark 9:43-7; Luke 12:5, etc)*

It is well known that of the twelve references to Gehenna in the New Testament, all but one occur on the lips of Jesus (the other is in James 3:6); it was clearly part of his mental furniture. Typical of these verses is Mark 9:43: 'If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out... (*apelthein eis ten geennan, eis to pur to asbeston*)'. It is usually assumed that the word takes its origin from the Jerusalem rubbish dump with its ever-smouldering fires (though G. R. Beasley-Murray comments that this assumption 'appears to go back to the Jewish scholar Kimchi (c. AD 1200), but is not attested in any ancient source').³⁶

Even if this assumption lacks corroboration, there can be little doubt what the word Gehenna would have conveyed to the Jews of Jesus' day. Powys devotes considerable space to the writings of the inter-testamental period and establishes conclusively the connection with both punishment and pain. A *locus classicus* is Judith 16:17, probably written something over 100 years before Christ: 'Woe to the nations that rise up against my people! The Lord Almighty will take vengeance on them in the day of judgment; fire and worms he will give to their flesh; they shall weep in pain for ever.' The fire and worms are, of course, borrowed from the closing verse of Isaiah, 66:24; what is new here is the association with pain. Admittedly, the actual word Gehenna does not appear; but the verse belongs unmistakably to that range of ideas. Referring to the later rabbinic writings, Powys says: 'Very little is offered by way of description of Gehenna, though its association with burning and punishment remained.'³⁷ Whether this burning and pain were never-ending was a matter of disagreement among the

³⁴ M. Harris, *Themelios* 11, 1986, quoted in Larry Dixon, *The Other Side of the Good News* (Bridgpoint, 1992), 130.

³⁵ As Dixon puts it: even accepting that the story is parabolic, is Jesus 'passing on inaccurate information'? Op cit., 130.

³⁶ G. R. Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation* (Oliphants, 1974), 303. The same point is made by P M Head, 'The Duration of Divine Judgment in the New Testament' in *Eschatology in Bible and Theology* (IVP, 1997), eds K. E. Brower and M. W. Elliott, 223.

³⁷ Op cit., 188.

rabbis; but for some it certainly was.³⁸

The documentation and analysis of the inter-testamental literature provided by Powys and others makes fascinating reading. Yet it is inconclusive when it comes to a discussion of the teaching of Jesus: first, because that literature does not speak with one voice; and second, because such analysis does not satisfactorily answer the key question: in adopting the language of Gehenna, was Jesus rebelling against it or endorsing it? The question is not, What did the rabbis (or whoever) think?; but, What did Jesus think of what the rabbis thought? As we have seen, Powys maintains that Jesus, by taking on an ironic tone, was rebelling against those strands of inter-testamental literature which suggest ongoing post mortem misery. He insists that Jesus' intention 'would appear to have been exhortatory rather than didactic' and that therefore 'The underlying concepts were not thereby condoned or approved'.³⁹ But how do we know this? Such a reading, while no doubt possible, does not compel assent; indeed, one cannot but feel that it is driven by a conviction already held that Jesus could not have taught this view. In a word, the conclusion you come out with depends very largely upon the presuppositions you go in with!

As with the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus, we have to remind ourselves of the obvious: that Jesus was under no obligation to adopt this kind of vivid, pictorial imagery. He could have uttered warnings of a more general kind about the danger of being eternally separated from God. But he chose rather to employ language like, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire'. He spoke in terms of banishment and darkness, tears and the grinding of teeth – and of fire.

If it is objected that, as a first-century Jew soaked in the biblical and inter-testamental literature, such imagery would have been automatic for him – that it was in effect all that was available to him – it may be replied that, as we have noted, Paul clearly did not see it that way; he never so much as mentions Gehenna. Certainly, fire makes an appearance in 2 Thess. 1:7, but it refers to the fire of God's holiness and power rather than to destruction or pain. Likewise, in 1 Cor. 3:13-14 Paul speaks of the destruction of worthless works; he does not refer to the eternal destiny of the people involved. Powys makes much of the silence of the Old Testament regarding the fate of the lost, beyond the fact of their being blotted out; why then should Jesus have risked misunderstanding by echoing literature that goes far beyond anything we find in the Old Testament? It is hard to disagree with the comment of Carson: 'If Jesus had wanted to distance himself from that view [ie, 'Gehenna as a model for eternal, conscious punishment'], and to make his espousal of annihilationism abundantly clear, he certainly forfeited numerous opportunities to do so'.⁴⁰

To summarise, there would seem to be no doubt that Jesus adopted, even with some enthusiasm, a tradition which is extremely hard to reconcile with annihilationism. We can only speculate how literally the Jews of his day would have regarded the fires of Gehenna; perhaps hardly at all: but, however that may be, the implication is strong that Jesus endorsed a view of ongoing after-death existence for the lost in conscious separation from God.

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³⁸ For quotations from 1 Enoch, the Sybilline Oracles and 4 Maccabees, see Head, *op cit.* (see footnote 36), 224-6.

³⁹ *Op cit.*, 414.

⁴⁰ *Op cit.*, 529.

(iv) The Revelation passages

It is with the last book of the Bible that even the most enthusiastic annihilationists concede difficulties. The two main passages are 14:9-12 and 20:11-15, in the latter of which we find the fires of Gehenna replaced by John's characteristic image of the lake of fire. John's words are too well-known to require lengthy quotation, but in order not to miss their force it is as well to cite the words of 14:10b-11 concerning the person who follows the 'beast': 'He will be tormented with burning sulphur in the presence of the holy angels and the of Lamb. And the smoke of their torment rises for ever and ever (*eis aionas aionon*). There is no rest day or night (*hemeras kai nuktos*)...' The emphasis rests on the lake of fire as the destiny of 'the beast and the false prophet' (20:10); but John makes it clear that this destiny belongs too to 'anyone' whose 'name was not found written in the book of life' (20:15). The same point is pressed home in 21:8.⁴¹

We have already referred to the echo of Isa 34:9-10 in these expressions, raising the possibility that they are not to be taken in any literal sense; Fudge, as is to be expected, insists that 'the language is symbolic, and a literal interpretation is impossible'; but his transparent honesty (one of the most attractive features of his book) compels him to recognize the force of these passages, and he can only add somewhat lamely: 'There is no easy solution'.⁴² Powys' attempt to show that the lake of fire is 'an elastic concept' covering various different destinies – 'ongoing torture' only for 'non-humans', annihilation for 'the unrighteous in general' – is not convincing.⁴³ Surely the point of being consigned to the same destiny is to suffer the same fate. No wonder that Powys frankly comments that 'These findings are problematic'.⁴⁴ (No wonder too that E. B. Pusey, writing over a century ago, gave way to some irritation when he remarked that annihilationists 'would do well to consider whether there is any way in which Almighty God could have expressed it [the endless punishment of the wicked] which they would have accepted as meaning it'.⁴⁵)

We might note in passing that Powys' seeming acceptance that the unholy trinity 'are to be despatched to the lake of fire, there to be tortured unendingly'⁴⁶ deals a death blow to the annihilationists' claim that God must ultimately have what we referred to earlier as a 'clean universe'. For a single being, whether human or not, to be left ultimately to a fate of ongoing suffering renders the universe 'unclean'.

It is instructive to survey the various commentaries on Revelation to see how those of annihilationist convictions handle these alarming texts. Caird, for example, insists that the lake of fire is 'the second death, ie, extinction and total oblivion'.⁴⁷ The emphasis on torment he explains as John's metaphorical way of describing the horror of ultimate repudiation by God. P. E. Hughes seems largely to duck the issue by retreating into the general language of destruction.⁴⁸ More rigorous altogether, on the other hand, is G. R. Beasley-Murray: 'That it [the lake of fire] does not have the meaning of annihilation is indicated by 20:10. The lake of fire signifies not extinction in opposition to existence, but torturous existence in the society of

⁴¹ *Pace* Powys, *op cit.*, 369-70, who attempts to differentiate between the fates of the 'unholy trinity', the devil, the beast and the false prophet, and those whom he calls 'the unrighteous in general'.

⁴² *Op cit.*, 193.

⁴³ *Op cit.*, 371.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ E. B. Pusey, *What is of Faith as to Eternal Punishment?* (James Parker), 44; quoted in Blanchard, *op cit.*, 248.

⁴⁶ *Op cit.*, 369.

⁴⁷ *The Revelation of St John the Divine* (A & C Black, 1966), 187.48

⁴⁸ *The Book of Revelation* (IVP, 1990), 163.

evil in opposition to life in the society of God...'.⁴⁹

Exegetical considerations such as these are bound to take pride of place in any attempt to clarify the teaching of Jesus in particular and the New Testament in general. But other considerations also play a part in the debate, and it will be as well to survey one or two of them briefly.

Other considerations

(i) A warning too far?

One simple point is that if oblivion is the most – and the worst – that the unsaved can contemplate, the warnings of the New Testament seem to be over-severe: the lady doth protest too much, methinks. Even Paul, for all his muted treatment of the subject, clearly feels that the judgement of God is an event greatly to be feared. It could be argued, of course (this is the point Caird makes in the passage cited earlier), that the too-late recognition of the realities of God, self and sin is horrible beyond words, and that this justifies the NT vocabulary. But it is hard to avoid the impression, derived from the passages we have looked at, and also from such Pauline texts as the 'judgement seat' passages, Rom. 14:10-12 and 2 Cor 5:10, that something far more severe is envisaged. This impression is strengthened by other New Testament texts: for example, Heb. 9:26-27 and 10:31.

(ii) The motivation of fear

A. Fernando breaks ranks with many writers in seeming unembarrassed by the note of fear which is often struck in the New Testament. As we have seen, there are several texts which on any showing would seem calculated to induce fear, the Rich Man and Lazarus being only one of the most obvious. The question may then be asked, why so many western Christians find such an emphasis distasteful and unacceptable. Fernando makes the observation that in interviewing a number of people, many of them educated and sophisticated, about their conversions, it emerged that for many fear had played a significant part.⁵⁰ The world in which we live is full of horrors, and we need look no further than our own hearts to see the depth of the corruption. But (it might be said) the fact remains, whether we like it or not, that the corrupted consciences of men and women need the astringent sting of fear to bring them to their senses. And what fear arises out of the prospect of extinction?

(iii) Retribution and justice

Allied with this is the whole notion of retribution. Again, many modern writers shrink from attributing this to God: we have already noted Travis' book,⁵¹ which is concerned, to a large extent, to demonstrate its absence from the Bible. But others are by no means so sure. Carson insists that the idea of 'retributive punishment' is 'central' in the Bible, pointing out its relation to justice.⁵² Many people rebel instinctively ('It's just not right!', 'Why should they get away with it?') against the idea that those who have done great evils while on this earth should ultimately be summarily blotted out: wrongs need to be righted; the scales of justice need to be adjusted. As Kvanvig puts the point: '...most of us feel deeply that wrongdoing should be rectified in some way and that those who have suffered need to be recompensed'.⁵³

No-one expresses this conviction better than C S Lewis in one of his most powerful passages.

⁴⁹ Op cit., 304.

⁵⁰ *Crucial Questions about Hell* (Kingsway, 1991), 157.

⁵¹ *Christ and the Judgment of God* (Marshall Pickering, 1986).

⁵² Op cit., 533.

⁵³ Op cit., 15.

It is too long to quote in full, but in essence Lewis asks his reader to imagine a thoroughly amoral and corrupt man who gets away scot-free

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throughout his life, causing untold hurt to others, and hardening his heart against conversion. Lewis asks: '...what destiny in the eternal world can you regard as proper for him? Can you really desire that such a man, remaining what he is (and he must be able to do that if he has free will) should be confirmed for ever in his present happiness – should continue, for all eternity, to be perfectly convinced that the laugh is on his side?'⁵⁴ The annihilationist might well reply, No, I don't desire this – let him be extinguished! But the point that Lewis is making is that that is not enough: like Abel's blood, the offence of that man's life cries out to be avenged. Lewis explicitly rejects the thought that 'it is only your wickedness – only spite...' that makes you feel this way. No, he says, there is in even our corrupted consciences a desire to see wrongs not simply blotted out but actively righted: the desire for vengeance may be wrong 99 times out of a hundred, but the last case may very well be justified. It might even be suggested that the decline in the traditional understanding of hell reflects not an increase of sensitivity in our society, as is usually supposed, but rather a lessening: we just don't care any more about right and wrong, good and evil. J. L. Walls comments that the traditional belief 'may reflect a profound moral sensitivity'.⁵⁵

(iv) Human dignity and freedom

Of all the recent writers on hell it is perhaps Walls who places most emphasis on the idea of freedom as God's great gift to humanity. He insists that for it to be true freedom it must be allowed to have full rein, wherever that may lead – even to the point expressed by Milton's Satan: 'Better to reign in hell than to serve in heaven'.⁵⁶ Walls rejects the idea that it is psychologically impossible for a human being consciously to choose evil rather than good. Josef Goebbels, he notes, has a sombre entry in his diary, 'be hard, my heart, be hard', at a point when he feels himself tempted (!) towards compassion for the Poles as the Nazis invade their country.⁵⁷ For whatever reason, whether it be weakness or downright wickedness, people are capable of choosing the evil rather than the good.

Interestingly, Walls points out the fascination this idea seems to exert on secular writers and dramatists. He quotes Graham Greene's character Scobie, in *The Heart of the Matter*, as choosing evil 'with his eyes open'.⁵⁸ Shakespeare too affords all manner of examples, none more so than the unspeakable Aaron in *Titus Andronicus* who, at the point of death, laments all the vile things he will never now be able to get around to doing.⁵⁹ Yes, perhaps 'life is 'smaller' than fiction', as Walls suggests.⁶⁰ But it is striking that writers such as these should mine a vein so akin to the Bible – Pharaoh and Judas are only the two most obvious examples that spring to mind – just at a time when so many in the church are back-tracking on this emphasis. If nothing else, a traditional belief in hell emphasizes the seriousness with which God takes each individual. The decisions we make, the kind of lives we live, the people we become matter. Walls echoes Kierkegaard: 'God has given to each one of us the task of

⁵⁴ Op cit., 108-9, emphasis original.

⁵⁵ J. L. Walls, *Hell: the Logic of Damnation* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), 31.

⁵⁶ John Milton, *Paradise Lost* 1:263, quoted by Walls, op cit., 87.

⁵⁷ Quoted by Walls, op cit., 121.

⁵⁸ Op cit., 113.

⁵⁹ William Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus*, Act 5 scene 1, lines 141-4.

⁶⁰ Op cit., 115.

becoming a self. This is a responsibility we cannot avoid...'.⁶¹ We may be inclined to play down our own significance and importance; apparently God sees things otherwise. And who are we to argue?

The annihilationist may well be tempted to respond to all this with some impatience, pointing out that a measure of divine punishment may very well be meted out to the unsaved; what is intolerable is the duration of it. But as we have seen, the danger of annihilationism is that ultimately it gives comfort to the finally impenitent, and it can be argued that this is still more intolerable.

It appears, then, that for both exegetical and for other broader reasons, the traditional view is hard to dispose of comfortably.

ATTEMPTS TO RENDER THE TRADITIONAL VIEW MORE ACCEPTABLE

The emphasis on human freedom is clearly crucial for the traditionalist case. It has led to various interesting and more or less plausible speculations aimed at rendering that case more acceptable. This is where we find the imaginations of the philosophers in particular (though not exclusively) running free.⁶² Some of their suggestions may be put forward very briefly in the form of questions.

(i) Does annihilationism call in question God's integrity?

It is proposed that for God to annihilate the creatures he has made would be to violate their dignity and freedom. Walls goes so far as to suggest that perhaps the unsaved would prefer not to be annihilated, and that therefore it may be 'an act of mercy for God to allow them to retain their existence',⁶³ albeit one so far short of God's ideal. Chan, likewise, comments: 'Annihilation means the unmaking of free, created agents. It means the taking away of that freedom which defines the structure of the moral relationship between God and man. It brings into question the integrity of creation.'⁶⁴

God's respect for human beings, it would seem, is greater than we have begun to grasp – unimaginably, breathtakingly so! This seems hard to swallow. Yet... who knows? According to Plutarch, the ancient Greeks viewed annihilation as a worse horror than eternal punishment,⁶⁵ so perhaps what seems unthinkable to us should not be too quickly dismissed. But it needs to be borne in mind that the stress on human freedom can be taken too far: after all, could it not be said that God violated our freedom in the act of making us in the first place (he never asked our permission – so far as we know!)? Why then should he do so in the act of unmaking us? We are forced to the brute recognition that on any theistic view of the world we are ultimately at the disposal of God.

(ii) Are the lost happy in hell?

Perhaps the lost are actually in some sense content in their lost condition; after all, in rejecting

⁶¹ Op cit., 118.

⁶² Most notably Kvanvig and Walls in the books cited; P. Geach, *Providence and Evil* (Cambridge University Press, 1977); C. S. Lewis, who in both *The Problem of Pain* and *The Great Divorce* (Fontana: first published by Geoffrey Bles, 1946) writes more as a philosopher than as a theologian; and Simon Chan, 'The Logic of Hell: a Response to Annihilationism' in *Evangelical Review of Theology*, 18 (1994).

⁶³ Op cit., 137.

⁶⁴ Art cit., 27.

⁶⁵ See Fudge, op cit., 123.

God's advances they have got what they wanted. This thought lies at the heart of Lewis' extraordinary fable *The Great Divorce*, where the shades in hell are grumpily content with their lot, and irritably reject any suggestion of being liberated from it. Walls similarly writes: '...perhaps they [the lost] experience a certain perverse sort of satisfaction, a distorted sense of pleasure'.⁶⁶ One might like to think so; but honesty compels one to recognize that the Bible seems to offer little support for such an idea.

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(iii) Do the lost continue to sin in hell?

Carson speculates: 'What is hard to prove, but seems to me probable, is that one reason why the conscious punishment of hell is ongoing is because *sin is ongoing*'.⁶⁷ And again: the lost 'hate and attract retribution, they still love only themselves and attract retribution, they are neither capable of nor desirous of repenting, and attract retribution'.⁶⁸ Certainly, if this were the case, it would have the effect of somewhat easing the horrors of hell; and it may be said to gain a measure of support from Rev 9:20-21, where the impenitent, in spite of all the torments visited on them in this life, still refuse, Pharaoh-like, to submit to God. But it is hard to see how ongoing sin can be squared with the conviction that one day 'at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow'.

(iv) Can a lost state also be a fulfilled state?

Blocher comes as close as anybody to squaring the circle. As we have noted,⁶⁹ he suggests that the 'pleasure' of hell is that of remorse: '...impenitent sinners are "reconciled" to God through the perfection of their remorse'.⁷⁰ Or again: 'If sinners ultimately glorify God, they do reach in a paradoxical way the *telos* of all creatures as such'.⁷¹ Again, it would be helpful to feel that this was so; but it has to be admitted that the scriptural warrant for such a view is virtually non-existent.

(v) Is hell a journey rather than a state?

Still further removed from any biblical foundation is Kvanvig's idea that 'Hell is an after life journey towards annihilation'⁷² – albeit, Kvanvig hastens to add, with no guarantee that the journey will ever be completed. This does indeed seem to be wanting to have it both ways: to maintain some kind of traditional view, but to marry it with annihilationism. Lewis seems to harbour some kind of similar hope: '...Our Lord, while stressing the terror of hell with unsparring severity usually emphasises the idea not of duration but of finality... whether this eternal fixity implies endless duration – or duration at all – we cannot say'.⁷³

(vi) Is time to be thought of in a completely different way in the after-life?

Whatever plausibility the previous suggestion may have would seem to depend on speculations regarding the nature of time in the after-life. One difficulty we encounter when we consider heaven and hell is that we naturally envisage them as running side by side on, as it were, parallel lines; how else can we think, after all, given our present imprisonment in linear time? But who is to say what time is like on the other side of death?

⁶⁶ Op cit., 126.

⁶⁷ Op cit., 533, emphasis added.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 534.

⁶⁹ Above, 6.

⁷⁰ Op cit., 311.

⁷¹ Op cit., 310.

⁷² Op cit., 152.

⁷³ *The Problem of Pain*, 114-5.

Geach (as well as offering the memorable, if not entirely helpful, suggestion that hell is 'literally... one damned thing after another') speculates regarding the nature of time in the after world: '...a man condemned to hell might look forward to a series of miserable experiences of which he could say with truth "This will never end"; and nevertheless the saints might one day be able to say of him and of all the damned "Thank God that's over"'.⁷⁴ Lewis too looks for help in this respect, but he prefers to enlist the language of geometry: '...we probably ought to think of eternity as a plane or even a solid' rather than as a 'mere prolongation of time'.⁷⁵

It is, of course, extremely difficult to imagine what in practice such speculations might mean – indeed, to dismiss the thought that this is mere word-play. But the fact is that we do not and cannot know what lies beyond this life, and perhaps the only real comfort we can derive is in the possibility of a different kind of time altogether, for it is the *duration* of hell, as traditionally understood, which causes most offence.

We have briefly surveyed these suggestions to see if they go any way towards mitigating the traditional view. Possibly they do; but honesty compels us to admit that they do not get us off the exegetical hook; one would like to think they may be right, but ultimately we are bound to recognize that scripture offers scant support.

Disappointing though it may be perhaps it is better, with writers such as Helm and Carl Henry, to cut the Gordian knot and simply affirm that, by definition, whatever God does is right and that therefore '...whatever happens in hell is just; no-one can or will justifiably complain about hell or the fate of its inhabitants'.⁷⁶ Such an approach leaves unsatisfied our quest for understanding and rationalisation; but perhaps there comes a point where we can go no further. 'God does not stand under justice as a norm but is himself the norm...'.⁷⁷ The massive gulf between what seems to us to be right and what the Bible seems to teach is troubling and unsettling; but there comes a point where we have to bow the head.

WHAT IS AT STAKE?

Does it actually matter to know in any kind of detail what the afterlife is like? Someone has quipped that there is no need to inquire into either 'the furniture of heaven or the temperature of hell'. But this appears too much like a cop-out: the question cannot in all integrity be so easily disposed of. If nothing else it is surely important that the church should speak with a clear and convincing voice to the non-Christian world. So the question arises: what is at stake in this debate? A number of issues may be briefly highlighted.

(i) A loss of credibility for the church?

The cynic might suggest that the church is not exactly overloaded with credibility as it is. But a major shift in doctrine such as is proposed by the annihilationists can only do further damage. Powys, Fudge and various other writers have demonstrated that annihilationist ideas

⁷⁴ Op cit., 148-9.

⁷⁵ *The Problem of Pain*, 111.

⁷⁶ Helm, op cit., 112.

⁷⁷ Carl Henry, 'Is it fair?' in *Through no Fault of Their Own*, eds W. V. Crockett and J. G. Sigountos (Baker, 1991), 254.

were more common in the early church than is sometimes supposed.⁷⁸ But the suggestion that such views have a strong historical pedigree is not convincing. 'Until the nineteenth century almost all Christian theologians taught the reality of eternal torment in hell... It must have seemed as indispensable a part of universal Christian belief as the doctrines of the Trinity and the incarnation.'⁷⁹ If Bauckham's summary is correct, as seems to be generally agreed, it would suggest that the annihilationists are often guilty of special pleading. Certainly, it is they who have to work hardest in their handling of the biblical texts; the question is bound to arise, is it credible that the great majority of Christian thinkers down through the centuries have misunderstood the most natural sense of those texts?

Still more, history indicates that annihilationism is a belief

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more readily associated with sects and fringe groupings of the church such as the Seventh Day Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses.⁸⁰ It cannot be said that this does not matter. If indeed the modern church is (in reality if not in intention) capitulating to the views of sectarian groups, what does that say about 2000 years of Christian witness? Of course, the truth must be pursued wherever it may lead; but it is an uncomfortable thought for the annihilationist that God apparently has allowed his church to remain largely in error for almost the entirety of its history on an issue as important as this. Does the church owe the unbelieving world a fulsome apology?

(ii) A reshaped Christianity?

Allied with this observation is the recognition that it is impossible radically to modify a major strand of Christian thought without altering the character of the whole thing: Christianity simply becomes a different type of religion. Kvanvig sounds this warning clearly: 'Innovation in religious matters has its price... when religious traditions become too malleable, the labels attached to them – 'Christianity', 'Islam', 'Judaism' – come to be more akin to the labels for political parties...';⁸¹ ie, they become, at least in the perception of outsiders, mere titles without substantial content. Walls makes the same point: '...the [traditional] doctrine lends substance or moral import to other vital religious concepts';⁸² in short, drop it and the whole theological landscape is changed for ever. In the style of 'New Labour', perhaps 'New Christianity' is born!

Again, some might say that this does not matter; what is important is the truth, however uncomfortable the traditionalist might find it. And opinions will differ anyway on how radical would be the change introduced into the character of Christianity by a 'hell-free' doctrine. But beyond doubt it would not be insignificant. It can be argued that in the last three or four decades, especially in the western world, Christianity has become a far more 'this-worldly' thing than previously. What used to be known as the 'social gospel' would seem to have won the field, not least among evangelicals, with an increasing emphasis on the betterment of

⁷⁸ See also E. E. Ellis, 'New Testament Teaching on Hell' in *Eschatology in Bible and Theology*, eds K. E. Brower and M. W. Elliott (IVP 1997), 199-205. Ellis' view is challenged in the same volume by T. Gray, 238.

⁷⁹ R. Bauckham, 'Universalism: A Historical Survey', *Themelios* 4.2, quoted by R A Peterson, *Hell on Trial* (P and R Publishing, 1995), 97.

⁸⁰ See Chan, op cit., 22.

⁸¹ Op cit., 13-14.

⁸² Op cit., 8.

society as against the salvation of the individual. Rightly or wrongly, this is a trend which can only be abetted by annihilationism, with its implied view that what happens after death is not actually all that important.⁸³

(iii) A threat to evangelism?

Would a general acceptance of annihilationism among evangelicals sound the death knell for evangelism? There are those who would say Yes. And they might well add that, again, it doesn't really matter; if the traditional view is wrong, and evangelism suffers as a result – well, so much the worse for evangelism. Some have pointed out that a number of evangelical annihilationists – Stott and E. M. B. Green are prominent examples – do not seem to have lost any of their evangelistic zeal as a consequence of their views. But perhaps it is a decade or two too early to ask the question: old habits die hard! It may be in, say, twenty years' time, when annihilationism has been drip-fed into the veins of mainstream evangelicalism over a sustained period, that the effect on evangelism will have become clearer. Still, as hinted earlier, it is difficult not to feel that already the effect is becoming apparent.

(iv) An acceleration of moral decline?

Some argue that the traditional doctrine of hell is needed for the moral health of society. Especially in the essentially materialistic western world, the incidence of child abuse, violence, drug-taking, crime in general, and what some would see as a general coarsening and desensitising of society are serious causes of concern. The view of Fernando, that fear is a legitimate and indeed necessary element in evangelism, was noted earlier. The same may well apply to the whole notion of right and wrong in society: putting it bluntly, fallen human beings need the fear element in order to keep them in line. Fernando says that 'since men gave up believing in hell, widespread observable moral consequences have ensued in a way that demands 'the attention of both theologian and sociologist''.⁸⁴

There are clearly dangers here, not least the possibility that a doctrine is taught not because it is true, but because of its social usefulness (a charge sometimes levelled at nineteenth-century preachers). Few would advocate a return to the old hell-fire and brimstone preaching of a former generation, typified famously by Jonathan Edwards' sermon on 'Sinners in the hands of an angry God'.⁸⁵ But there can be no denying that the Bible is not short of threats of punishment, and it may well be that, however offensive the idea is to the mind-set of the liberal west, sinful human nature does indeed need the stick as well as the carrot.

In short, there seems no doubt that the stakes are high in the hell debate. To abandon some form of the traditional view is not only problematic in terms of biblical exegesis, but has other significant consequences. This is not a matter merely of fine tuning; a whole replacement engine is in view.

⁸³ See, for example, Wright, op cit., 88: 'The concern... is whether making the matter of personal salvation the primary or defining issue is itself helpful or whether it causes the neglect of other necessary matters' (emphasis original), for a good example of this trend. (One wonders if 'necessary' is a euphemism for 'more important'.)

⁸⁴ Op cit., 134. The final words are a quotation from S G F Brandon's *The Judgement of the Dead*, 1967, 193-6.

⁸⁵ This can be found in Iain Murray, *Jonathan Edwards. a new biography* (Banner of Truth, 1987).

CONCLUSION

Both logically and emotionally the traditional doctrine of hell is virtually intolerable. But if we are to allow scripture to control our thinking it is hard to see any escape from it. Some disquieting questions arise in our minds.

(i) Do we need a rethink regarding the nature of God?

It is impossible to study the biblical texts relating to hell without finding ourselves face to face with the most ultimate of all questions: Just what kind of God is God? A God of mercy, grace and compassion, of course; the whole of the Bible makes that clear, the Christ-event supremely; but, it would strangely seem, a ferocious God as well. Indeed, if we are honest, there are times when we find ourselves thinking, 'I'm not sure if I entirely like this God.' From a human perspective he seems to act in ways which can only be described as vindictive. Of course, there is in one sense nothing new in this. All of us from time to time find ourselves asking 'Why does God allow such a thing?' when we hear of some new horror – a child tortured to death, say, or a massive famine wiping out thousands of already wretched and miserable people. Again, if we are honest, our perplexity has not a little admixture of

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anger in it. In principle, hell is only the same question writ largest of all. Yet who are we to question the rightness of what God does? (This is intended as a purely pragmatic, not only a reverential, question.) He, after all, is God! We have little choice, however unsatisfactory it may seem, but to fall back on the thought that if God does something it cannot but be right: '...we can be satisfied... that whatever happens in hell is just; no-one can or will justifiably complain about hell or the fate of its inhabitants'.⁸⁶ Cold comfort, perhaps; but perhaps it is the only comfort we can find.

(ii) Do we need a rethink regarding ourselves?

Are we guilty of not taking ourselves seriously enough? The question is relevant because, if the traditional view is right, it would seem that God places a far higher value on his creatures than we do ourselves. When we grapple with thoughts of burning and weeping, of banishment and gnashing of teeth, and then think of the inoffensive-looking man we sat opposite on the underground today, scratching his nose and reading his paper, do we not blink? Can it really be that this destiny may be for this person? Yet God alone knows the truth behind the front. What we may see as a scrap of insignificant humanity, God would appear to see as entirely different: something either god-like or demonic in the making. And again, who are we to question his perception? The fact is that we are moral beings; the things we do and say matter: and our maker will one day be our judge. It sometimes seems as if our world is dying not of overt wickedness so much as of trivialisation; and the doctrine of hell can act as a chief counter to this. We matter – infinitely.

'It is a dreadful thing to fall (*phoberon to empesein*) into the hands of the living God,' says the writer to the Hebrews. Whatever that dread may consist of, the conception of hell is calculated to push us towards the living of serious and holy lives: and that much, in itself, is gain. For the rest, a point is reached where silence is best. No, the annihilationist case cannot

⁸⁶ Helm, *op cit.*, 112.

be dismissed out of hand, and I for one would be delighted if it turned out to be correct. But there are strong reasons for doubting that it will.

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