

J U S T G E T O N
W I T H E T E R N I T Y ...

WHY ANNIHILATIONISM APPEALS TO ME

These wretches, who never were alive, were naked, and much stung by gadflies and by wasps that were there. These streaked their faces with blood, which, mingled with tears, was harvested at their feet by loathsome worms.

—Dante *Inferno*

AN ESSAY BY STUART MCGREGOR

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I was looking down at this lake of fire that went on for ever. It was knee deep on the souls who stood within it, and the screams of pain and the sound of the fire burning created a terrifying din that would never fade into the background of the familiar. And I started to descend closer to the lake where I was able to observe two particular souls of the damned. They accidentally backed into each other and turned around. Absolute horror reclaimed one of their shadowy faces taking ownership as if at the point of death again.

“I know you!” it exclaimed, “Auschwitz, 1944—you’re the German bastard that killed me . . .” I saw the desire for revenge, but the utter hopelessness of the situation was that nothing could ever make the German soul more miserable than it already was—the searing heat was far more painful than any ethereal punch that any other soul might throw. Suddenly for the Jew though, Hell hurt even more.”

This essay is a continuation of another essay I have written explaining my theodicy. The following is an excerpt from it:

“The cost of evil is just too great” cry many theodicians.¹ They conclude that at the very least any eschatological redemption of the cost of evil seems, from this side of the eschaton, as somewhat of a Pyrrhic victory—God’s Economy of Good is bankrupt.² How can God make up for Auschwitz, even in ultimate redemption?³

The ultimate conclusion I came to was that our perspective of evil must be wrong. If the goodness and all-powerful nature of God cannot be compromised, then all that is left in the triad of the theodicy is to redefine evil. I conclude:

Evil is fluidly defined . . . I have no concept of the economy of God save for the eschatological redemption in which I have faith. I believe that it will all be alright in the end.⁴

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This is the crunch. My theodicy rests entirely on the understanding that there is some kind of ultimate redemption in the future which is the Christian hope so prevalent in the apocalyptic writings. But I never considered the idea that the German and the Jew might meet up in torment.

For connections that hopefully will become clearer, I want to propose that my theodicy requires an annihilationist view of hell to be complete. That only when the wicked are done away with completely, does the economy of goodness right itself. This essay is not an exhaustive examination of tradition or biblical data, but a brief appraisal of annihilationism to this end.

A S T R A N G E H O P E

The hypothetical situation represents a strange eschatological hope. Reconciling how this can be divine justice is problematic. One current view holds that the basic assumption is wrong here. That the punishment of hell is because we miss the mark, fall short of God's standard (Romans 6.23) and in God's eyes one cannot be close enough on one's own merit. Hence the reason for the work of the cross, that when accepted through repentance as redemption, it enables us to be embraced by God and declared righteous. This is though, only redemption for individual expressions of evil.

The corporate evil that was committed at Auschwitz is not simply a collection of individual evils amassed into one locus. There were corporate dynamics at work that would both demoralise a nation and mobilise another. I suspect that it is too simplistic that this can be reduced to the group dynamics of certain individuals—it probably started there, but it escalated into something larger than any of them would have thought possible.

From it we can see that the traditional "four spiritual laws" approach to evangelism is somewhat defective in its narrowness and individualism. In this system the real tragedy appears to be not the evil that took place at Auschwitz but can be traced back to the suffering's lack of decision regarding the salvation offered by Christ. Clearly they have rejected Jesus and so get their just deserts in hell. In the emphasis on individual crisis conversion, morality is rendered meaningless, what is good and what is evil are determined solely by a decision "for Christ". Essentially, the sinner's prayer is the only qualification for redemption.

By extension then, the evil of Auschwitz is rendered meaningless because the real tragedy is not that 4 million people were put through a human super-grinder over a four year period, but that they did not know Jesus in the evangelistic sense. Put in such stark terms it is easy to see how Christians

are perceived as more interested in the salvation of the intangible than in assisting with the pragmatic concerns of the inhabitants of this world.⁵

If our lack of evangelism is the real tragedy of Auschwitz then there is no way that I can see that the economy of God is balanced. It does not account for the evil that took place, not even remotely. It is disturbingly trite and it is a strange hope.

Moral economy cannot be constricted to a momentary response to an evangelist. Surely we cannot polarise our morality from our redemption, for it is our lack of morality that creates the need for redemption and the implication that we are totally depraved from birth would suggest that our immorality is moot before we even sin. In the end, this kind of thinking projects the possibility of an amoral faith.

T H E P R O B L E M O F P E R P E T U A L E V I L

If we accept that all will work out in the end, I find it difficult to see how this marries up with the notion of eternal torment. Think for a moment of a loved one who has not converted and is in hell. This thought is reprehensible enough without introducing the voyeuristic idea that we can watch those who tormented us on earth be tormented in hell. Could heaven really be like this—a place where the saved can be tangibly reminded of the fact that they are not like the damned? Jonathan Edwards suggests it is so, but that this would not cause those in heaven to grieve because “. . . they will have the greater sense of their own happiness, by seeing the contrary misery.”⁶ I do not share his speculative optimism except that other souls could be unrecognisable after death.⁷ We cannot really know, but this is an area that the annihilationist view makes more palatable.

Furthermore, Clarke Pinnock suggests that God would be sadistic to allow the perpetual coexistence of heaven and hell and that it is inconsistent with his nature to allow enduring punishment. The idea that God would *perpetually*⁸ sustain a place where the wicked dwell seems inconsistent with his holiness:

The idea that a conscious creature should have to undergo physical and mental torture through unending time is profoundly disturbing, and the thought that this is inflicted upon them by divine decree offends my conviction about God’s love.⁹

Keeping Hitler tormented forever is not destroying his evilness and say he were punished for all the combined years of grief he caused to all the

families who lost loved ones, even eternity is too long¹⁰. Would it not be better to be done with the judgement and get on with eternity?

A R G U M E N T S A G A I N S T

There is a strong case for rejecting the literalist perspective. John Walvoord comes off badly in his defence of this position simply because the literal position requires the unnecessary reconciliation of incompatible metaphors.¹¹ The classic example is in Jude where vs. 7 speaks of Hell being eternal fire and then in vs. 13 an eternity of black darkness. Countless other examples could be regarded as hyperbole and are open to non-literal interpretation.¹²

So even if the imagery is by and large metaphoric, there is still the tradition to contend with that the metaphors describe an eternal sustained punishment of the wicked. Millard Erickson maintains that scripture is clear on eternal punishment¹³ citing Isaiah 66.24 where “. . . their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched . . .”—a verse reiterated by Jesus in Mark 9.43–48. I do not see that these passages “make it clear that the punishment is unending” for the simple reason that though the worm and fire do not die, they are feeding on a corpse. How a dead corpse is actually punished is a mystery since it does not recognise the inflictions set upon it for it is, well, a lifeless corpse. I think that these verses speak more about the contempt with which God will mete out his justice upon the wicked who deserve it and to illustrate this point the authors draw upon ancient battle rites of the victors.

More objections to annihilation are raised from reference to the parables and apocalyptic writing. I think that formulating definitive doctrine about the empirical nature of anything from apocalyptic writing is perilous—there is a sense that we can feel what the writings say, but not actually know what they are talking about.¹⁴

It is true that several parables mention some kind of destruction or punishment. For example, the parables of the Weeds (Mt 13.24–30, 37–43), the Talents (Mt 25.14–30), the Sheep and the Goats (Mt. 25.31–46) and the Wedding Feast (Mt. 22.1–14) to name but a few. Often appeals are made to the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31) with complete disregard for its genre. There is no doubt that the parables that depict divine punishment are accurate in their warnings as far as metaphor will allow, but to extract literal, or in the case of Luke 16 some would argue, actual depictions of the afterlife is hermeneutically perilous. Parables are a story for a purpose and should not be used for constructing dogma that are not the primary focus

of their message. By all means use a parable to work out what the kingdom of heaven might be like, but it is absurd to use the parable of the sower as an example of God's ordained method of sowing seed. So when appeals are made to the parables for defining the nature of hell they are overextending their metaphoric or hyperbolic nature.

There is no disagreement about the origin of the word for Hell that is often used in the New Testament. The word *gehenna* is derived from the valley of Hinnom, which lies south of Jerusalem. It is the place where sacrifices were once offered to Molech (2 Kings 16.3; 21.6) and also served as the garbage heap for the city¹⁵—including the disposal of the bodies of criminals.¹⁶ It was a place not only of stench but of humiliation. Consider this when Jesus is offering his ideas about hell with colourful language—the only way to describe and emphasise a place that we cannot know this side of death. In short, Jesus is saying that Hell is the most dreadful place. It makes perfect sense that Jesus would use the metaphoric language of the day to reinforce the message, that Judgement is coming, salvation is to be desired and the pathway is repentance. As Pinnock observes,

Jesus' words on the subject are poised to underline the importance of the decision that needs to be made here and now and not to deal in speculations about the exact nature of heaven and hell . . .¹⁷

Whilst this has been a very brief look at only a few of the hermeneutical issues surrounding the concept of eternal punishment, it ought to be clear that the variance of interpretive approaches makes supporting either argument justifiable and even, heaven forbid, evangelical.

What then are we left with? Stott suggests that we accept that annihilation is at the very least a viable alternative to everlasting punishment¹⁸ allows us to move on to other theological methods.

M O T I V A T I O N F O R E T E R N A L P U N I S H M E N T

It puzzles me as to why annihilationism is so reprehensible in evangelical circles. Perhaps this is a result of a reasonably sanitised society where horrific and barbaric events do not enter the normal sphere of life. Evil as expressed in brutality is not common and so our concept of Hell is not fuelled by vengeance for our dead. It would be interesting to see what backgrounds were represented by the annihilationists and traditionalists—it is not too speculative to see a link between the victim and type of vengeance to be meted out.

I can only speculate, but I wonder how much the idea of the wicked sustaining infinite torture tickles the barbaric instincts of the human psyche.¹⁹ I can only raise questions here because I suspect that a theologian being honest about their own innate barbarism would be a scarce thing indeed.

Nevertheless, consider how torture is a demonstration of power and control. It would follow that for God to mete out eternal torture would be a revelation of his divine and eternal power. But for humans, torture is reprehensible simply on the grounds that it is sadistic, is inhumane and reduces dignity. Torture is an extreme form of manipulation and its primary end is humiliation and powerless subjugation. Its aim is to bend the will of the tortured to that of the torturer. It possesses tangible horrors that make the prospect of eternal torture somewhat terrifying.

Perhaps there are parallels to be drawn with our social ideas of justice. The parallels between life-sentence in prison (eternal punishment) vs. capital punishment (annihilation) seems to make sense on a crude level. I have often found that “the bad guy always gets it” story line in the movies is not really that just. If the perpetrator of an heinous crime dies at the hands of the superhero without ever having to give account for his²⁰ actions, I feel cheated. It’s not fair that he hasn’t suffered. But I am forced to juxtapose the existential disempowerment from his death with the prospect that he may escape from a prison or the judicial system and still exist as evil. I know it’s only a movie, but it’s the closest thing to barbarism I can find. Perhaps if the criminal were actually the murderer of my child I would feel quite happy if he met an untimely death—I do not know because I cannot fully comprehend this. But my point is this: our disposition toward either traditionalism or annihilationism is probably closely linked with how we feel about the justice systems of society and its reflection of what we perceive to be the justice of God. We need to ask ourselves, to what extent does annihilation constitute punishment for the wicked deeds in this life? The answer to this question I believe will reveal our understanding of the shape of Hell.

I prefer annihilation because not even Hitler deserves eternal punishment. It makes more sense that God, who takes no delight in his judgement as he would want all to be saved, will put an end to evil and be done with it—“Now that that’s sorted, let’s get on with the business of eternity!”

I do not accept that annihilationists are challenging the very fabric of the inerrancy of scripture,²¹ however, I do suspect that annihilationists are challenging individual and intuitively defined ideas of justice.

I could see that annihilationism is reprehensible to some because it could be seen as representing a placid ‘nothingness’—which is non-emotive and soft. As Carl Sagan, the quintessential atheist, whilst battling terminal cancer confessed “I would love to believe that when I die I will live again . . . But as much as I want to believe all that . . . I know of nothing to suggest that it is more than wishful thinking.” And his wife writes about how, at the point of death, she saw in him “nothing but the unflinching reality of what was true.” She concludes the book by reflecting on the indebtedness felt by some members of the academic establishment toward her late husband: “They allow me to feel, without resorting to the supernatural, that Carl lives on.”²² In this sense acknowledging that there was nothing to follow this life Sagan found some comfort, though ironically, still in the land of the living, his wife did not. For Sagan, there was comfort in oblivion.

Consider the impact that this ‘soft’ approach to death would have on traditional forms of evangelism. Without the threat of Hell, the historically tried and tested “Fire and Brimstone” approach to evangelism is impotent. Walvoord would be disappointed as he states that the doctrine of eternal punishment “. . . is a spur to preaching the Gospel, to witnessing for Christ, to praying for the unsaved and to showing compassion on those who need to be snatched as brands from the burning.”²³ This is the lesser form of the Jonathan Edwards style of preaching about hell in his famous and often quoted sermon on *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*:

The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked: his wrath towards you burns like fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else, but to be cast into the fire; he is of purer eyes than to bear to have you in his sight, that the most hateful venomous serpent is in ours . . . yet it is nothing but his hand that holds you from falling into the fire every moment.”²⁴

It is an understatement to say that this is not an image of God that many Christians in the West would indulge themselves with. But it does graphically illustrate the tangible horror in store for an unrepentant heart. Such scaremongering into the faith as though there were no benefit other than eternal salvation is not something I hold dear to my heart.

In this age of internalised authority the Christian message of existential redemption needs to be formulated. Appeals to the heyday of the threat of Hell being an incentive to follow Christ are misdirected. The resistance to a doctrine, a word I hesitate to use, of annihilation is based squarely in a Christian expression that lacks a well thought out redemption of the now. In

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other words, we need to discover the pragmatic, non-eternal benefit to our lives. This is where the Good News ought to be targeted at.

C O N C L U S I O N

I think that there is a two fold purpose for the annihilationist reconciliation of the accounts in God's moral economy. First there is the punitive, where "The wages of sin is death (Romans 6.23) This maintains a motive for evangelism and dispenses with universalism. We do want for people to have life now and after death. Traditionalists and I agree on this. However, the tremendous amount of hope that I have in "it all working out in the end" as the rubber stamp to my theodicy lies in the second purpose i.e. there is the eternal disposal of evil. Evil will be destroyed and we can get on with God in the business of eternal living.

If God is going to make it alright in the end, surely that must exclude a coexistence with all that has made it wrong in the first place.

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FOOTNOTES

¹ John Roth, *A Theodicy of Protest*—an essay in the reader edited by Stephen T. Davis, *Encountering Evil*, (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), 10

² Stephen Davis, *Free Will and Evil*—an essay from the reader *Encountering Evil*, 78

³ Stu McGregor, *Auschwitz and Flowers*, [http://home.clear.net.nz/pages/stu.mcg/essays/Auschwitz and Flowers.pdf](http://home.clear.net.nz/pages/stu.mcg/essays/Auschwitz%20and%20Flowers.pdf), 2002

⁴ Stu McGregor, *Auschwitz*

⁵ See the stark contrast on evangelism vs. works as offered by Julian Batchelor's editorial in *Why Ministries International*, Vol. 3, Issue 1, May–July 2002.

⁶ *Select Works of Jonathan Edwards. Volume II: Sermons*, (Banner of Truth Trust, 1958), 254

⁷ Which raises many other issues that cannot be discussed here.

⁸ I can see the objections to this on the grounds that God has sustained our sinful and imperfect world, but I contend that this is with redemption in mind. The traditionalist view holds no such hope.

⁹ Clarke Pinnock, *The Conditional View*, an essay in William Crockett's, *Four Views on Hell* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 164

¹⁰ Showing mercy to Hitler does feel trite, but this is a luxury I am afforded with being two generations after the event

¹¹ David L. Edwards and John Stott, *Essentials: A Liberal-evangelical dialogue* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1988), 314

¹² For a detailed examination of the scriptural evidence of Hell see Edward William Fudge, and Robert A. Peterson, *Two Views of Hell: A Biblical and Theological Debate*, Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 24–79

¹³ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1983), 1238

¹⁴ And I am sure that I incur the wrath of all the literalists in the world for that statement, but in this essay there is simply no room to provide a complete account in support of this argument.

¹⁵ Pinnock, *Conditionalist*, 146

¹⁶ John Walvoord, *The Literal View*, an essay in Crockett, *Hell*, 20

¹⁷ Pinnock, *Conditionalist*, 145

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¹⁸ David L. Edwards and John Stott, *Essentials*, 320

¹⁹ Perhaps there is an eternal significance of turning the other cheek.

²⁰ Usually a male in the movies I watch!

²¹ Walvoord, *Response to Clark H. Pinnock*, an essay in Crockett, *Hell*, 167

²² Carl Sagan, *Billions and Billions : Thoughts on Life and Death at the Brink of the Millennium*, 1st ed. (New York: Random House, 1997), 227–232.

²³ Walvoord, *Literal*, 28

²⁴ Clyde E. Fant, Jr. and William M. Pinson, Jr., *20 Centuries of Great Preaching. Volume Three: Wesley to Finney*, (Waco, Texas: Word, Incorporated, 1971), 63