

OPIATE OF THE THEOLOGIAN

by Michael McClymond December 2019 First Things

Not until the nineteenth century did any Christian body make universal salvation its official teaching. The first to do so, the Universalist Church, later merged with another to form the Unitarian Universalist Association. Within the mainstream churches, medieval and early-modern universalists led a subterranean, catacomb existence—isolated figures, often concealing their views—while Christendom in all its major branches preached hell no less than heaven. Following Origen’s lead, universalists preserved a covert gospel, withheld from the masses, who needed hellfire to scare them straight, while a tiny cadre of religious intellectuals saw themselves as the only ones fit to know the truth. Dogmatic universalism—the notion that God must save all human beings—was for centuries not a public tradition but an esoteric one. During the first half of the twentieth century, overt expressions of universalism were rare among acknowledged church teachers, with the exception of certain Russian thinkers such as Sergius Bulgakov. In the 1940s, Jacques Maritain confided to a notebook his private thoughts regarding a larger hope of salvation, and Emil Brunner affirmed without fear of contradiction that *apokatastasis* (universal restoration) is “a doctrine which the Church as a whole has recognized as a heresy.” At mid-century, Catholic theology showed no sign of changing. Yet something shifted during the 1950s and 1960s: Karl Barth’s affirmation of universal election in *Church Dogmatics* allowed universalism to come out of the shadows. Hans Urs von Balthasar acknowledged Origen’s influence and that of “Barth’s doctrine of election, that brilliant overcoming of Calvin.” In the 1970s and 1980s, Catholics discussed “anonymous Christians” and “the unchurched,” while Evangelicals pondered “the unevangelized.” Yet the Catholic-Evangelical pivot to inclusivism would prove to be merely a stepping-stone. By century’s end, the earlier debates over inclusivism had become passé, and the new arena of controversy was universalism, either in a hopeful, Balthasarian vein, which seeks to affirm the possibility of universal salvation, or in an assertive, Moltmannian version, which makes it a divine imperative. Among today’s young Christian theologians, Balthasarian tentativeness is fast yielding to ever more strident affirmations of the necessity of salvation for all—as in David - Bentley Hart’s recent book, *[That All Shall Be Saved](#)*.

Hart charges those who believe in an eternal hell with “moral imbecility.” The language of rude dismissal was something of a guilty pleasure when he deployed it against the “New Atheists” more than a decade ago. Now he is denouncing Dante and everyone else who sustains the age-old tradition of the Church. By his reckoning, their view of God should evoke in us “only a kind of remote, vacuous loathing.” So much for Augustine, Chrysostom, John of Damascus, Aquinas, Pascal, Newman, Chesterton, C. S. Lewis, and Pope Benedict XVI—not to mention innumerable canonized saints of the Church, the great majority of ancient Greek, Latin, Coptic, and Syriac writers, and such Protestant luminaries as Luther, Melancthon, Bucer, Calvin, Hooker, and Edwards. Oddly, Hart now sounds very much like Richard Dawkins. No less than the aging atheist, Hart finds the two-thousand-year Christian tradition not just unbelievable but repugnant and inhuman.

Not only at odds with the tradition, dogmatic universalists who insist that all must be saved have always struggled to support their views with Christian Scripture. Many have chosen simply to ignore the Old Testament and the Book of Revelation, adopting a biblical canon-within-the-canon. Others have created a Pauline canon-within-the-canon, insisting that certain verses point toward universal salvation (1 Cor. 15:28), whereas others plainly do not (2 Thess. 1:9). Perhaps the foremost Pauline scholar alive today, N. T. Wright, has said that the Pauline texts do not support universalism. Certain passages in the Gospels seem to exclude salvation for all: “And someone said to him, ‘Lord, will those who are saved be few?’ And he said to them, ‘Strive to enter through the narrow door. For many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able’” (Luke 13:23–24). “For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few” (Matt. 7:14). “I have guarded them, and not one of them has been lost except the son of destruction [i.e., Judas Iscariot]” (John 17:12).

Universalists apply microscopic analysis to individual verses or even to single words (for instance, *aionios*), while they often miss the larger themes woven through the whole of the Bible (for instance, the “two ways” motif, in which differing ways of life lead to differing outcomes). Psalm 1 states that the righteous person will be blessed by God, while “the wicked will not stand in the judgment.” In Isaiah 1:19–20, the prophet declares: “If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land; but if you refuse and rebel, you shall be eaten by the sword.” Neither passage speaks of heaven or hell, but these early texts suggest different outcomes for different groups. The Son of Man’s separation of “sheep” from “goats,” and their consignment respectively

to “eternal life” and “eternal punishment” (Matt. 25:31–46), should not be read in isolation but should be interpreted canonically.

The Books of Exodus and Revelation suggest another biblical theme that is missing from the universalist repertoire: Evil does not always yield to suasion but sometimes must be overcome by divine power. Pharaoh is not finally persuaded but crushed by Yahweh’s might. So, too, the Beast, the Devil, and the False Prophet are not dissuaded from evil but are seized and cast into the lake of fire. In such cases, the exertion of God’s power to defeat evil is *a good and not an evil thing*. The heavenly saints cry “Alleluia!” when the monstrous wickedness of Babylon is fully and finally brought to an end. Finally, we must consider the biblical portrayal of Satan. Scripture never represents the fallen angels as persuadable in any sense, and they are never commanded to repent. The demons represent a limiting case of the creaturely will that recalcitrantly rejects God, and so they end up in “the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels” (Matt. 25:41). The Christian churches, in their formal liturgies, pray hopefully for the salvation of abandoned sinners but never, it seems, pray for Lucifer. It appears, then, quite certain that some intelligent creatures are finally damned.

How, then, has the historically stigmatized and exegetically questionable theology of universalism come to occupy so prominent a place in Christian thinking in recent decades? The biblical texts remain unchanged, almost two millennia of church tradition continue as before, and scholars today don’t know Greek any better than their forebears. Why, then, do many Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant scholars now read Scripture and tradition universalistically?

Sensing a shift in Catholic thinking on eschatology, Avery Cardinal Dulles wrote about a decade ago:

One wonders on what basis this new theory [of presumptive salvation for the unbaptized] is proclaimed. Do we today have some new insight into the gospel that was denied to all previous generations of Catholics, or are we being swept up by the spirit of the times, which so easily casts aside tradition and substitutes human desires as the norm of truth? We should be slow to change what Popes, councils, and saintly theologians have been teaching for many centuries.

Cardinal Dulles, I believe, was correct in pointing toward the *Zeitgeist*. Pierre Manent, in his FIRST THINGS essay on “[Human Unity Real and Imagined](#)” (October 2012), excoriated a “religion of humanity” and asserted that “every epoch has its secular religion, a perverse imitation of Christianity that takes part of the Christian proposition and diverts it toward this world.” Twenty-first-century Christian universalism may be interpreted as a form of this religion of humanity, minimizing humanity’s ineradicable spiritual divisions and annexing the biblical God to a secular affirmation of total human solidarity. The *liberté, égalité, fraternité* of the Jacobins here finds an eschatological construal. Universalism is a world built on theory. It tells us how the world *should be*, how the world *must be*, and so how it *actually is*. Universalism is not merely an affirmation of the age-old teaching that Christ died for all on the cross. It imagines a world where every heart receives the glad news gladly. Universalism admits that the first-century Jesus was crucified, but it insists that the twenty-first-century Jesus will be crowned by the crowd. Universalism is the Gospel narrative frozen at the moment of the triumphal entry, when everyone stands in solidarity applauding Jesus.

A little more than a century ago, a largely forgotten group of prerevolutionary Russian thinkers pursued a project known as “God-Building” (*bogostroitel'stvo*). These writers were socialists who—unlike Lenin—viewed religion not as an intractable foe but as a potential ally in the quest for human solidarity. Anatoly Lunacharsky claimed that “the true Social Democrat is the most deeply religious of all human beings.” Yet an obstacle prevented the marriage of religion with socialism, namely, the particularity and parochialism of the Christian God. “God-Building” was necessary because the Russian Orthodox God was simply too narrow. One character in Maxim Gorky’s novel *Mother* (1906) gave voice to the “God-Builders” as follows: “We have got to change our God. . . . It is necessary . . . to invent a new faith; it is necessary to create a God for all.” This last phrase—“to create a God for all”—might almost serve as a general slogan for twenty-first-century Christian universalism. As I hope to show, the recent arguments favoring universalism have not only distanced themselves from traditional accounts of the afterlife, but have also—to a surprising degree—moved away from a traditional Christian doctrine of God.

My claim that contemporary Christian universalism is affiliated with a religion of humanity finds support in several pieces of evidence: the universalists’ lack of interest in heaven itself, their erasure of eschatological tension, their excessive rational confidence, and their reconstruction of the doctrine of God in this-worldly terms.

Most universalist authors today are concerned to proclaim that everyone gets into heaven but not actually to describe heaven. Heaven means enjoyment, and everyone must have a share. Hart asserts: “There is no way in which persons can be saved *as persons* except in and with all other persons.” The horizontal dimension of everyone-all-together eclipses the vertical dimension of saints-in-union-with-God. Jürgen Moltmann’s universalism in *The Coming of God* underscores the final reconciliation between perpetrators and victims. Recall, by way of contrast, how Aquinas lovingly lingered over the saints’ vision of God, how his great mind expatiated in the thought of the creatures’ everlasting enjoyment of God’s fathomless goodness. For universalists, the central focus is not the enjoyment of God but the fact of final human solidarity. The universalists’ heaven seems to me like a concert to which everyone gets a free ticket, though no one is quite sure who will be playing the music.

Perhaps universalists so seldom speak of the heavenly enjoyment of God because the topic raises uncomfortable questions about the earthly process of preparation for heaven. Through pain, difficulty, disappointment, and loss, believers in God are gradually—in the words of C. S. Lewis—“learning to want God for His own sake.” For “human beings can’t make one another really happy for long. . . . There is but one good; that is God.” Lewis’s “The Weight of Glory” treats the joys of heaven as the culmination of many little choices made in the here-and-now. Those who learn to enjoy God on earth receive the reward of an immeasurably greater enjoyment of God in heaven. Universalist theology, in contrast to Lewis and the tradition he embodied, lacks a - spirituality of self-denial or an ethic of readiness to explain why our temporal choices matter eternally and how we need to prepare ourselves to enter God’s holy presence. The spiritual shallowness of universalism is thus as apparent as its theological deficiency. The eschaton reduced to universal human happiness falls short of the God-centered biblical and catholic heaven.

The kingdom of God, as biblical scholars say, is already but not yet. Yet in important respects the universalist kingdom is realized here and now. Regarding the universalist-ish author Rob Bell, the late Edward T. Oakes observed that his “central thesis [is that] Heaven and hell are *already* present on earth, and Christians are specifically called to spread the reality of God’s heaven to the hellish realities of earth.” Bell’s endeavor in *Love Wins* was not only to universalize but to immanentize heaven.

Today's universalist theology immanentizes Christian knowing by

diminishing the eschatological tension between the now and the not yet. The Apostle Paul wrote that we know in part and see through a glass darkly. Hart labors under no such limitations: He fully knows the eschaton, transparently perceives it, and declares with assurance what will certainly happen. Hart thus affirms a total luminosity of human eschatological understanding, banishing all shadows of doubt regarding God's future ways and works. This trait marks Hart not as Catholic or Orthodox but as an Enlightenment thinker. Apophatic reserve evaporates.

How differently the Church's acknowledged mystics approached the theme of heaven and hell. According to Denys Turner and Bernard McGinn, Julian of Norwich has been often, but wrongly, read as a universalist. Interpreted in the context of her other statements, Julian's famous phrase that "all shall be well" did not mean that "all shall be saved," but instead it was her affirmation of the ultimate rightness of God's ways. It was a statement made in faith, shot through with epistemic and eschatological tension, since she did not presume to be able to state exactly how it is that finally "all shall be well."

To observe the link between universalism and rationalism, one only needs to consider the developments of the last two or three centuries. The theological devolution of modern universalism into Unitarianism was not an accident. Once human reasoning had deconstructed the divine mysteries of election and eschaton, it applied its tender mercies to the Trinity and Incarnation as well. Unitarian-universalist rationalism spread like a virus, infecting the sinus, the lungs, the circulatory system, and then the whole body of Christian theology. No election, no hell, no atonement, no divine Son, no divine Spirit, and no Trinity—all that remained was moral uplift and human solidarity, or, as one wit put it, the Fatherhood of God, the Brotherhood of Man, and the Neighborhood of Boston. As one saying went, the universalists thought God was too good to damn them, while the unitarians thought they were too good to be damned. Here was an early version of the religion of humanity: deity and humanity reconstructed on a model of total divine-human and human-human solidarity, minus the mystery of the Incarnation.

Lest readers imagine that Unitarian-universalist theology is a historical footnote, they might pause to consider Richard Rohr's *[The Universal Christ](#)* (2019). Author of some forty-five books and mentor to Oprah and Bono, Rohr sets out in his latest work to distinguish a purportedly more

universal and spiritual “Christ” from the narrow, particularistic, and human “Jesus.” At the event that Rohr calls “Resurrection,” the “Christ” at last broke free from “Jesus”: The body of Jesus exploded into light particles that diffused throughout the cosmos. Rohr’s Easter evangel is not that “he is risen” but that “he is vanished.” In place of a message centering on the human and historical Jesus, Rohr propounds a “first incarnation” that occurred at the Big Bang. He writes that “Christ is a name for . . . every ‘thing’ in the universe,” and that “God loves things by becoming them.” For half a year this book has remained the #1 best-selling work on Christology at Amazon. Unitarian-universalism exists far outside the denomination that bears its name.

Contemporary universalist “God-building” seeks to update the Christian doctrine of God and to replace it with a “God for all.” To effect this transition, a number of contemporary theologians have propounded a new form of divine-human solidarity by attributing to God the division, conflict, and drama that are characteristic of creaturely existence. They imagine a primal drama, a crisis in the inner life of God, played out most often in the Father-Son relation. All sin, evil, death, hell, and separation are absorbed into God’s own being and thereby banished forever. A final solidarity then unites all creatures with one another and their Creator. This new, universalist God feels our pain in a way that the old, particularist God could not. The new divine-human solidarity is a solidarity-in-suffering. Yet more remarkably, for certain theologians it is a solidarity-in-weakness. God does not merely empathize with weakness but experiences it. Moltmann wrote: “If Christ is weak and humble on earth, then God is weak and humble in heaven.”

In 1974 Karl Rahner lamented what was already becoming evident:

There is a modern tendency . . . to develop a theology of the death of God that . . . seems to me to be gnostic. One can find this in Hans Urs von Balthasar and in Adrienne von Speyr. . . . It also appears in an independent form in Moltmann. To put it crudely, it does not help me to escape from my mess and mix-up and despair if God is in the same predicament.

Partistic and medieval tradition—for the most part followed by the Protestant reformers as well—taught that suffering and death were properly ascribed to God the Son because of, and only because of, the human nature that the Son freely assumed. This incarnational teaching requires a distinction of the divine and human natures in Christ. Yet, in what Paul Molnar calls

“historicized Christology,” an eternalizing of Christ’s humanity and temporalizing of Christ’s divinity effaces this distinction.

In *The Crucified God*, Moltmann asserted that “only if all disaster, forsakenness by God, absolute death, the infinite curse of damnation and sinking into nothingness is in God himself, is community with this God [the source of] eternal salvation.” Hans Urs von Balthasar argued that Jesus in his descent to hell underwent the “second death” that the Book of Revelation reserves for those finally rejected by God. Balthasar’s *Mysterium Paschale* states that “it is really God [in Christ] who takes upon himself what is, at all events, opposed to God and eternally rejected by God.” In this view, in order to reconcile the world to himself, God first must reconcile himself to himself. As Bruce Marshall has noted, in such views “the unity of God is in the final analysis a temporal event” and “[a] reconciliation of the divine Persons across the abyss of evil, death, and nothingness.” Conceived in Hegelian terms, God as Trinity appears as the climax of a drama of alienation and reconciliation, and properly exists only at the final stage. This dramatic understanding of God manifested itself over some eighteen centuries, not in mainstream Christian teaching, but among gnostic, kabbalistic, and Western esoteric authors (the Cathars, the Christian Cabalists, the Philadelphians in Germany and England, the Martinists in France, the Freemasons and Böhmissists in Russia, and so on). Esoteric Jewish and Islamic thinkers provided arguments for universalism resembling those employed by Christian esotericists.

Contemporary Christian theology poses not only the question, “Are all persons finally saved?” but the even more foundational question, “Who is God?” Contemporary universalist theologians do not simply replace traditional eschatology with salvation for all, while retaining the rest of the tradition. To revise eschatology, one must revise the other Christian doctrines too.

Universalists are less concerned with all men’s being united to God than with all men’s being united to each other. God is joined to man on human terms. Heaven is where people go to meet one another rather than to meet their Maker. We observe this above all in the universalists’ idea of a God who is imperiled by sin and evil and must struggle against it in his own being. Heaven is an outcome of God’s own internal struggle, making God—in the contemporary jargon—“relatable” to human beings, who have to deal with their own daily struggles.

My patristics teacher, Rowan Greer, reserved Augustine’s *City of God* to the end of his semester overview of early Christian theology—the professor’s final

thoughts, on final things, on the final day. Hearing his stark words depicting Augustine's irrevocable chasm between the saints in heaven and the damned in hell, one knew where his theological sympathies lay. His voice and body shuddered when he mentioned the eternal duality of heaven and hell, as if to say, "It *can't* be." From long hours of reading universalist authors, I have come to believe that universalist theologizing might be an intellectual expression of just that sort of shudder—more instinct than argument, more revulsion than ratiocination. When David Bentley Hart and Robin Parry tell how they became convinced universalists, moral repugnance and aesthetic distaste bubble below the surface. Hell is horrible and ugly, and so they don't believe in it.

One of the most shocking passages in all of Christian literature has to be

the section of *City of God* where Augustine speaks of the resurrected human flesh that suffers the fires of hell but is not consumed by them—an infernal rendition of Moses's bush that burns without burning up. The horror of this passage has often deflected readers from other, more important themes in *City of God*. It is easy to miss that Augustine's afterlife is of a piece with the earthly life. Human disharmony and duality did not arrive on the planet because a capricious God showed up at the end of the world and arbitrarily decided to cleave a harmonious earthly community in two. Duality began the moment that Cain raised his hand to murder his brother Abel. And so it has been ever since. In *City of God*, Augustine recounts the conflicts between the descendants of Cain and those of Seth, between Israel and the Gentiles, and between the Church and its persecutors—summed up in a single, overriding contrast between "the city of man" and "the city of God."

If someone were to ask me why I embrace a particularistic view of salvation and a dualistic eschatology rather than a religion of solidarity, my answer must be not only "Because this is what the Bible teaches" and "Because church teaching confirms it," but also "Because I have eyes to see." I don't need to hypothesize a world in which human pride and stubbornness cause people to turn away from God's gracious offer of mercy in Jesus Christ. This is the world I live in. This is what I see happening every day. This is what I read in the news. It is also what I am told by the Church: Jesus was crucified. Perfect love appeared in history—and observe what man did in response. In contrast to the particularist, the universalist must hypothesize a state of affairs in which, as Rob Bell says, "everybody will turn to God and find themselves in the joy . . . of God's presence." This imagining not just of a heaven, but of men and a world that no one has ever seen, leads me to a definite conclusion. Universalism is hopefulness run amok, the opiate of the theologians.

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