The Devil’s Redemption

A NEW HISTORY
AND INTERPRETATION
OF CHRISTIAN
UNIVERSALISM

Michael J. McClymond
This book is dedicated to my teachers at Yale University Divinity School:

Sydney Ahlstrom, Brevard Childs, Hans Frei, Rowan Greer, Richard Hays, Lansing Hicks, Paul Holmer, Timothy Jackson, Robert K. Johnston, David Kelsey, Bonnie Kittel, George Lindbeck, Jaroslav Pelikan, and Lamin Sanneh;

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¹. An obituary for Professor Smith is online at http://www.scotsman.com/news/obituaries/obituary-dr-oliver-smith-lecturer-1-2963958.

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2. Interested readers can visit the MDZ download site at http://www.muenchener-digitalisierungszentrum.de/index.html?c=digitale_sammlungen&l=de.
Abbreviations


ca. circa, about

CCSL Corpus Christianorum: Series Latina. Turnhout: Brepols, 1953–.


cent. century

ch(s). chapter(s)


d. died

DR The Devil’s Redemption; cross-references by chapter and section number to the present work

ET English translation

FC Fathers of the Church

fl. flourished


GNO Gregorii Nysseni Opera; auxilio aliorum virorum doctorum edenda curavit Wernerus Jaeger. 19 vols. Leiden: Brill, 1952–.


KG Evagrius, Kephalaia gnōstika

LCL Loeb Classical Library

Abbreviations


par(s). paragraph(s)


PO Patrologia Orientalis. Edited by René Graffin et al. 53 vols. Turnhout: Brepols, 1904–.

SC Sources chrétiennes

sec(s). section(s)


The question of universal salvation seems to be on many minds these days. Rob Bell’s surprise bestseller, *Love Wins* (2011), led to a *Time* magazine cover story during Easter week, “What If There Is No Hell?” The book also led to controversy in the two-thousand-member Michigan congregation that Bell was leading, followed by his departure from that church and from pastoral ministry. More recently, Lukas Hnath’s play *The Christians* debuted in 2014 in Louisville, Kentucky, and in 2015 went on to productions in New York City and elsewhere.¹ A review of the Edinburgh production described the plotline in this way: “Hearing about a young Third World non-Christian dying to save his sister from a conflagration, Paul, pastor of a US fundamentalist mega-church, is shocked into realizing that he cannot believe that God condemns the hero to the hell-fires of eternal damnation. . . . He concludes—and preaches—that Hell is not a real place.” The church congregation then enters into controversy over the pastor’s change of mind and his sermon.²

When interviewed, playwright Hnath explained that he sought to treat Christian beliefs not flippantly but seriously: “There seems to be too little consideration of why Christians believe what they believe and what’s at stake in those beliefs. It just seemed to be an aspect of the subject that was missing. For me, the dilemma was how to write a play about Christianity that takes on the belief seriously.” He added: “It wasn’t going to be a play about believers versus non-believers but about a disagreement in doctrine—universalism, the belief


that Christ is not the only way into heaven. That sort of debate is at the heart of the play.”

It is telling that the play is called not The Baptists, The Catholics, or The Pentecostals, but simply The Christians. Though the drama is set in a US megachurch, it deals with a central Christian theme that biblical scholars sometimes have called the “two ways” motif. Central to Christianity, in all branches of the church and throughout church history, has been the idea that all human beings face an inescapable choice with respect to God, that more than one option is available, and that differing eternal outcomes result from differing choices regarding God. Hnath’s framing of the issue—“that Christ is not the only way to heaven”—might not sit well with many Christian universalists, who often insist not only that everyone finally is saved but equally that all are saved through Christ. Christian universalism is theoretically and practically quite different from the spongy inclusiveness of the multireligious or many-paths-to-God version of universalism. Hnath’s play does not purport—like Dante’s Divine Comedy or Milton’s Paradise Lost—to portray the afterlife. Yet it reinforces a sense that questions of ultimate destiny are of ultimate significance. These matters are important enough for today’s Christians—and perhaps even non-Christians—to care about and even to argue about.

A surprising sign of the times occurred during 2016, when forty-five traditional Catholic leaders and theologians from various nations addressed a list of dubia (questions calling for clarification) to Pope Francis, one of which was in response to the isolated statement contained in Francis’s apostolic exhortation Amoris Laetitia (2016): “No one can be condemned for ever, because that is not the logic of the Gospel!” Read without regard to the context of the document, this sentence sounds like an affirmation of universal salvation. While the global media have widely reported on the dubia pertaining to eucharistic reception on the part of unmarried sexual partners or same-sex couples, the issue regarding


4. Pope Francis, Amoris Laetitia, no. 297. See Chretien, “Full Text of 45 Theologians’ Appeal to Correct Amoris Laetitia’s Errors Revealed.” The thirteen-page response, Alvarado et. al., “The Apostolic Exhortation Amoris Laetitia: A Theological Critique,” quotes the pope’s statement (5–6) and then includes scriptural texts and Catholic dogmatic statements rejecting universalism. An accompanying letter of June 29, 2016, is addressed to Cardinal Angelo Sodano, Dean of the College of Cardinals, and signed by José Tomás Alvarado and the forty-four others. Two well-known Catholic authors—Oxford University professor emeritus John Finnis and Mount St. Mary professor emeritus Germain Grisez—jointly authored a thirty-seven-page letter to Pope Francis (November 21, 2016), noting that Francis’s words in Amoris Laetitia might be taken in support of a proposition they regard as false—namely, that “a Catholic need not believe that many human beings will end in hell” (Finnis and Grisez, “Misuse of Amoris Laetitia,” 26; cf. 25–34). Finnis and Grisez have asked Pope Francis to correct this possible misunderstanding of Amoris Laetitia.
Pope Francis’s possible adherence to or teaching of universalism has generally gone unnoticed. Even if those querying Francis have misinterpreted his statement in Amoris Laetitia, it is nonetheless remarkable to see Catholic leaders and teachers publicly asking the pope whether he is a universalist. It would be difficult to imagine such a thing happening at any point in church history prior to the last decade or so.

In presenting this book to the public, I suspect that at least some readers will regard the traditional position as indubitably and indisputably true, thus evoking the response: “Of course the universalist position is full of holes. Of course the universalist position cannot be reconciled with Scripture. Of course universalism goes against the historic tradition of the church. Of course there would be no reason for anyone to believe in God, or repent of sin, or struggle to obey God, or engage in evangelism, if universalism were in fact true.” I suspect that other readers will have an equally strong contrary reaction: “Of course the idea of non-universalism or of hell for anyone is inadmissible. Of course contemporary people have left behind the doctrine of hell as the barbarous relic of a cruel age. Of course the idea of eternal punishment is unethical and implies an unworthy conception of God. Of course there are differing ways of reading the Bible, and the universalist interpretation is the better one by far.”

In response to both sorts of readers, I would like to push against the unreflective attitude implied in the Of course! The longer I labored on this book, the more I sensed the profundity of the issues involved. Only a superficial consideration of the question leads one to the Of course!

This book is about Christian universalism yet is not an argument for universalism. In examining universalism in its varied forms, the argument here acknowledges that the overwhelming majority of Christian believers through the centuries have been particularists. They believed that certain persons—or a particular group of persons—will finally be saved and dwell forever with God, while others will finally be lost and irrevocably separated from God in hell. While universalism has undeniable curb appeal for the theological driver-by, the universalist house proves to be not a very livable place. The longer one looks at this house and examines the plumbing, wiring, and crawl space beneath, the less attractive it becomes. By stating in advance the overall conclusion to which my research has led me, I understand that some readers will view this book and its argument with suspicion. Readers should be aware that the prologue and the introduction summarize arguments that are based on the detailed analysis presented in the rest of this lengthy work. I would ask those who are unsympathetic to the conclusion to reserve their final judgment until they have considered the work as a whole. In this prologue I will say something about why the question of universalism is fraught with significance for

Individuals and groups that in past generations embraced the teaching of salvation-for-all ended up shifting their ground on any number of distinctive and defining beliefs. The Universalist Church was once ranked as the sixth largest in the United States, and was well known for its fervent advocacy of postmortem salvation for all persons. By the early 1900s, this nineteenth-century denomination had members who no longer were sure whether there was an afterlife. In the 1960s, what was left of the Universalist Church merged with the Unitarians—a sign of just how far their beliefs had changed. Theological reasoning, one might say, is like a chess game. The consequences of moving a given piece in a given way may not become immediately apparent. The “no hell” doctrine, which seems like a winner, may have and has had unforeseen repercussions, like the chess move that at first looks impressive but in retrospect proves to have been a fatal miscalculation.

Critics outside the church have a snappy comeback: “What’s wrong with giving up hell? Do you Christians have a stake in other people’s damnation?” The response is ad hominem. It casts doubt on the character of those holding a traditional view. Just below the surface is the suggestion that those who preach on hell take secret delight in visualizing other people suffering. Whether this psychological interpretation of belief in hell is plausible depends in part on one’s life experience. Those who have had negative experiences with judgmental and coldhearted church people will have little difficulty in believing that institutional Christianity exhibits a kind of cosmic schadenfreude.\footnote{Nicolas Berdyaev rejected the traditional Christian doctrine of hell in part because he viewed it as a reflection not of God’s will or divine justice but rather of human vindictiveness (\textit{DR} 8.5).} The turpitude of such schadenfreude should be clear enough. To delight in another’s hellish suffering, while invoking God’s sanction, appears to be a most heinous attitude—and the antithesis of the biblical gospel of God’s love in Christ.\footnote{The well-known British evangelical leader John Stott wrote, “I want to repudiate with all the vehemence of which I am capable the glibness, what almost appears to be the glee, the \textit{Schadenfreude}, with which some Evangelicals speak about hell. It [i.e., this attitude] is a horrible sickness of mind or spirit” (D. L. Edwards and J. Stott, \textit{Essentials}, 312).}

To be fair to the traditional Christian view, though, opponents of this view have not demonstrated that believers who speak of divine judgment or hell take any delight in doing so. It might or might not be so. By way of analogy, let us say that an employer put up a sign in her workshop, “Beware of Poison! Cyanide Kills!” to alert everyone that there are containers of poison nearby. It would hardly seem fair to accuse her, ipso facto, of taking sadistic delight in
frightening her employees. To label her as a “poisonist,” a gloomy and morbid person, a disturber of children and the emotionally unstable, would be unfair. She might well be acting responsibly by seeking to alert those who enter the workshop to the dangers involved so that they take heed and protect themselves.

Religious believers and nonbelievers alike acknowledge that sodium cyanide is deadly. The chemical substance threatens human life. Yet a sign that says, “Sin Kills! Beware of Hell!” would arouse controversy because there is no general agreement on the dangers of sin. Traditional Christian believers hold that human beings who reject God confront an objective danger of being separated from God in hell. In contrast, many nonbelievers not only reject this idea but also actually find it preposterous, if not emotionally damaging and socially dangerous. For the secularist, it is not only cyanide that is toxic but also religious faith itself and the belief in such doctrines as divine judgment and eternal hell. In reframing the question as suggested here, however, it becomes clear that the foundational issue is not whether some (or indeed any) Christians take pleasure in the thought of other people suffering in hell. The fundamental question is whether this belief is possible or plausible. To answer that question, one must address the possibility or plausibility of other Christian beliefs that may be more central or basic than that of hell. Moreover, the underlying question of doctrinal truth or falsity cannot be resolved merely by looking at people’s feelings about truth claims. The world we live in is not as we wish it to be. Nor can we remake the world by reimagining it. To think otherwise is to succumb to utopian imaginings and to inhabit a wishful world of our own choosing rather than the factual world of everyday experience.

Differing assumptions about God and humanity help to explain the disconnection between non-Christians and Christians in approaching the question of salvation. For many outside of the Christian church, the issue is how anyone could ever fall out with God to such a drastic degree as to end up in hell. In contrast, historical Christian teaching generally presumes that everyone has already fallen out with God. The Bible has sobering things to say about human beings as being “enemies” of God (Rom. 5:10) or “children of wrath” (Eph. 2:3) and continuing as such unless and until they receive God’s redeeming grace. So the question is not how people fall out but rather the reverse: How do people enter in so that they may commune with and enjoy God forever in heaven? The issue of sin is paramount and leads to a consideration of Jesus—the Messiah (or Christ), God-man, unique Savior, and answer to the dilemma posed by human sin. The issue of final salvation for all, or final salvation for some, does not stand alone but is intertwined with virtually everything that Christianity has to say about God’s love and justice, human nature, sin, freedom, Jesus’s life, Jesus’s death on the cross, Jesus’s resurrection, the Holy Spirit, the nature of
the church, and Jesus’s return. For the same reason, a Christian affirmation of
final, universal inclusion will affect everything else that one might say about
God, humanity, Christ, sin, grace, salvation, and the church. The interconnectedness of these doctrines will become apparent in the following chapters.
How much, theologically speaking, is at stake in the debate on universalism?
The answer is: everything.
Universal salvation (or universalism) seems to have first emerged as a distinct religious doctrine among Christian gnostic teachers in or around Alexandria, Egypt, during the early to mid-second century CE, several decades before the influential and well-known Christian author Origen (ca. 185–251). During the eighteen and a half centuries that have followed, Christian thinkers have frequently argued over universalism. The present survey of more than one hundred and fifty thinkers—past and present—traces the complexities of the arguments and counterarguments of leading pro-universalists and anti-universalists (or particularists). Many of the recent debates about universalism are a reprise or repristination of points made many centuries ago during ancient, medieval, or early modern discussions, but that are little known today. Readers may come to the conclusion—as I did—that a historical perspective may shed a new and clarifying light on the contemporary discussion of this issue. My overall conclusions regarding universalism are laid out in chapter 12, which builds on the detailed analysis and the concluding summaries that appear at the end of each of the preceding chapters. This introduction sets forth some major lines of argument in the work. The rationale and the documentation for the claims made in the introduction do not appear in the introduction, but within the subsequent chapters.

The present book is a complex answer to a straightforward question: Why do some Christians believe in universal salvation? At first blush, it seems that the Christian tradition through the centuries is consistent in teaching that there are two eternal outcomes for human beings, heaven and hell, and that some people in this life are heading toward the one destination and some toward the other. What is more, some of the scriptural texts that address this question—at least when interpreted literally—appear to speak of a twofold rather than unitary

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outcome (cf. Matt. 25:34, 41, 46; Rev. 20:10–15; 22:14–15).1 As I worked on the present book, the why question shifted into a where question, to wit: Where then did the idea of one final state—that is, heaven for everyone—come from? Soon the inquiry further ramified. Which arguments support universalism? What theological ideas undergird these arguments? Which arguments oppose universalism? How do biblical exegesis, church tradition, rational argumentation, and personal experience enter into these arguments?2

Throughout the course of my research, my concern has not been with so-called larger hope or Christian inclusivist arguments, which hold that the scope of salvation might be much larger than traditionally imagined. Universalism interested me more than inclusivism because it is a much stronger theological claim. It is a bit like the difference between saying “not many crows are white” and saying “no crows are white.” To prove a universal negative statement or universal affirmative statement is difficult. In Christian terms, the proposition that “everyone without exception will be saved” amounts to saying that “there are no intelligent creatures who, given a choice, will ultimately fail to believe, repent, and turn to God.” The universalist claim is clear and robust and so is well worth investigating.

Despite the chronological pattern of this book, there is an underlying theological argument that structures the sequence of topics, as should become apparent in the general conclusion. Just as the summary and conclusion at the end of each chapter connect the reasoning in each individual chapter, so the general conclusion builds on each of the preceding eleven chapters and seeks to tie together the loose threads from all the preceding lines of argument in the two volumes. Those who are interested in the historical exposition and analysis of particular thinkers should consult the individual sections of the work. Those who are interested in the argument as a whole might read the introduction, the summary and conclusion for each chapter, and the general conclusion in chapter 12. The appendices address topics that would divert from the flow of exposition and argument in the chapters and so have been placed at the end of the second volume.

0.1. Uncovering a Gnostic-Kabbalistic-Esoteric Tradition

The historiography of Christian universalism offered in this book is not wholly new. Two leading American historians of Christian universalism during the

1. Some exegetes find a unitary outcome of salvation for all in certain biblical texts (e.g., 1 Cor. 15:28; Phil. 2:9–11), and so an interpreter who accepts the authority of the whole Bible must consider all the relevant texts.

2. Because the later chapters in this book are extensively referenced, the footnotes in this preface are kept to a bare minimum, and readers looking for documentation are directed to consult the relevant chapters.

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nineteenth century, Hosea Ballou II and Richard Eddy, both claimed the second-century gnostic thinkers of Alexandria, Egypt, as their forbears. Eddy, who like Ballou was both a universalist himself and a historian of universalism, wrote: “As early as 130 A.D., we come upon the first notice of Universalism, after the days of the apostles, in the writings of the Basilideans, Carpocratians, and Valentinians, the more prominent sects of the Gnostics. The ultimate purification of the race was, according to their theories, by means of the discipline of the souls of the wicked through transmigration.” Ballou previously made the same claim: “Some of the Gnostics, perhaps some of the earliest, believed in the endless exclusion of a part of mankind from the abodes of celestial light. But among those who arose in Egypt there were many, particularly the Basilideans, the Carpocratians and the Valentinians, who are supposed to have held an eventual restoration, or rather transmigration, of all human souls to a heaven of purity and bliss.”

Christian universalists in recent decades have generally been unaware of (or else chose to ignore) Ballou’s and Eddy’s claims regarding ancient gnostic universalism as a precedent for modern Christian universalism. Yet this historical datum offers an important interpretive clue because it can be linked up with later data regarding Jewish kabbalistic universalism, Christian cabalistic universalism, and modern Western esoteric universalism (e.g., among Jakob Böhme’s followers) to form a coherent, overall picture of the history of universalist thought. Islamic Sufi universalism, though not in the main plotline of the narrative in this book, is a parallel case that corroborates the idea of a gnostic-kabbalistic-esoteric lineage for universalism. Just as the information on second-century gnostic universalism in this book is not entirely new, neither is the material on Jewish Kabbalah nor the material on Böhmism and Western esotericism. This book simply connects the dots in a new way.

As I began my research, I wondered what ideas might link together Christian universalists of the ancient, medieval, and early modern eras. As I pondered this question, I chanced on the Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism (2006), shelved in the stacks of the Yale Divinity School library. To my surprise, I found that the dictionary contained articles on almost every figure who had appeared in my handwritten list of Christian universalists: Clement of Alexandria, Origen, John Scotus Eriugena, Jane Lead, William Law, Friedrich Christoph Oetinger, Vladimir Solovyov, and others. The dictionary also led me to other universalists previously unknown to me: Martines de Pasqually, Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin, Valentin Tomberg, and others. Further investigation directed me into kabbalistic Judaism and esoteric Islam. The pattern that I had already detected

in studying Christian sources was mirrored in these two other monotheistic faiths. Overt universalism or near universalism was for many centuries primarily expressed within the esoteric strands of all three Abrahamic traditions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.\(^5\)

The longer I looked, the more evidence I uncovered to support the idea that universalist teaching is rooted in an ongoing gnostic-kabbalistic-esoteric tradition that stretches from the early second century to the Middle Ages, into the early modern period, and up to the present time. My search for the root of Christian universalism required some textual detective work and led ultimately toward two destinations: second-century Alexandria, Egypt, and late seventeenth-century Germany and England. One of my key findings is that there were purported Christian universalists prior to the time of Origen, including some of the gnostics of the second century CE. My claim may be counterintuitive, since much of the literature on the gnostics insists that they were elitists who taught a salvation for the few, not for the many, let alone for everyone. Yet the elitist image has begun to fade in recent literature. Authors on ancient gnosis or gnosticism (e.g., Pheme Perkins, Michael Williams, Elaine Pagels) have shown that some gnostics were either universalists or near universalists. Moreover, Irenaeus’s *Against Heresies*—and perhaps also the Nag Hammadi library—gives evidence that there were universalists before Origen.\(^6\) While Origen offered a new and creative synthesis in his epochal book, *Peri archōn* or *De principiis* (*On First Principles*), his cosmology of the premundane fall of souls, their embodiment, and their final return to God replicated a common pattern in gnostic and especially Valentinian cosmologies.

### 0.2. Linking Esoteric Universalism in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam

The argument in this book centers on Christianity, and yet the general thesis regarding the gnostic-esoteric roots of Christian universalism finds support

\(^5\) “Near universalism” is not a precisely defined term but refers to the idea that hell or eternal separation from God exists as a possibility only for a tiny (and perhaps vanishingly small) number of persons, such as those who believe and then fall away or those who reject multiple opportunities to receive God’s grace and forgiveness. The ancient gnostic text *The Apocryphon of John* (*DR 2.3*) and modern Mormon doctrines of salvation (*DR 2.9*) afford two instances of “near universalism.”

\(^6\) “Nag Hammadi” is a place name in Egypt, but it is generally used as shorthand for the Nag Hammadi library of texts, also referred to as the Chenoboskion Manuscripts or the Gnostic Gospels. In 1945 a local farmer discovered this collection of some fifty-two gnostic texts near the Upper Egyptian town of Nag Hammadi. These texts revolutionized the modern scholarly understanding of second- and third-century gnosis. For an English version of the texts, see Meyer, *Nag Hammadi Scriptures*. For discussion, see *DR 2.3*. 

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from a consideration of the two other Abrahamic traditions—namely, Judaism and Islam. In all three monotheistic traditions, one finds differences between a more scripturalist, exoteric, and antispeculative side and a symbolist-allegorical, esoteric, and speculative side. In Judaism, universalist tendencies find expression in the notion of a “Sabbath of all living things” (ha-shabbat kol ha-debarim le-hayatim) among kabbalistic authors, which Gershom Scholem sees as equivalent to the Christian apokatastasis (restoration). Assertive or unambiguous universalism appears in esoteric Judaism and is difficult to find in textualist or halakhic Judaism. The same pattern appears in Islam. While the text of the Qur’an did not seem to offer support for belief in universal salvation, the esoteric metaphysics of Ibn al-'Arabi—the preeminent philosopher of esoteric Islam—gave explicit endorsement. Likewise, the Sufi mystic Jalal al-Din Rumi presented a teaching on preexistent souls, their fall into the material world, and their final return to God that echoes Origenist teachings (DR appendix F).

In kabbalistic Judaism and esoteric Islam, the idea of universal salvation rests on an ontological foundation. The human spirit must return to God because of its character and its derivation from God. It is a “spark of the divine.” Just as the human spirit is destined for God, evil is destined for oblivion. Because of its ontological weakness, if not to say its unreality, evil has no metaphysical staying power. Comparing Christian universalism with Jewish and Islamic universalisms allows one to discern some common philosophical foundations for the teaching in all three faith traditions.

In comparing the Abrahamic faiths, one sometimes encounters telling details that suggest genealogical connections, even if it is not possible to spell out all the lines or directions of influence. To cite one curiosity, one finds in esoteric Jewish, Islamic, and Christian universalist sources a cycle of world ages that comes to an end after 50,000 years. The number 50,000 derives from the multiplication of 7 by 7,000 years, with another “jubilee” of 1,000 years added at the end. An early reference to this idea appears in the twelfth-century kabbalistic book, the Sefer ha-Temunah, which offers “the complex numerology of the cycles and their duration until the fifty-thousand-year jubilee.” The 7,000-year cycle and the 50,000-year super cycle are more fully described as follows:

7. “Exoteric” here has its usual meaning of “publicly known,” “readily comprehensible,” and/or “suitable to be imparted to the public” (Webster’s Third New International Dictionary, s.v.). I employ this word as an antonym to “esoteric,” as meaning “confined or limited to a small circle” or “understood by the specially initiated alone” (ibid., s.v.). The justification for using these terms lies in the argument below, especially as presented in the first two chapters. “Western esotericism” is today a recognized historical phenomenon and academic field of research (DR appendix A).

8. Manuel and Manuel, Utopian Thought in the Western World, 56.
During the seven thousand year [cycle], the chaos of the inferior bodies is constantly welling up over the first six thousand years. Once these [inferior bodies] are gone, and as all things withdraw into themselves, there is a period of rest during the seventh millennium; and in that space of time another six thousand years is conceived for a new generation. . . . After the inferior world is destroyed for the seventh time—that is, after seven, seven-thousand year cycles, the heavens will dissolve along with all its contents; and everything will return to chaos and the primordial mass. And this comes to pass once every forty-nine thousand years.⁹

During the thirteenth century, Ibn al-‘Arabi also makes reference to the 50,000-year idea. He seems rather certain that “the day of resurrection . . . lasts 50,000 years.”¹⁰

Skipping to the early eighteenth century, we find the influential German universalist author Johann Petersen interpreting the New Testament language of “forever and ever” (Greek aiōnes tōn aiōnon) in reference to the sevenfold 7,000-year age-cycle, with a culminating millennium, to give 50,000 years.¹¹ By the late eighteenth century, the 50,000-year period appears in the reflections of Elhanan Winchester, a transatlantic figure who was one of the most important Christian universalist authors in Britain and America. For the postmortem punishment of unbelievers, Winchester “was ready to suggest a matter of fifty thousand years as a possible limit.”¹²

As noted, the kabbalistic view was that 50,000 years represented the maximum length of time for the continuance of all creatures, after which the world would return to its original chaotic state. Thus the age-cycle theory mentioned in twelfth- and thirteenth-century Jewish and Islamic sources somehow found its way into eighteenth-century German and American universalist authors.

¹⁰. Chittick, Imaginal Worlds, 115. William Chittick here notes that Ibn al-‘Arabi appeals to a Qur’anic text: “The angels and the Spirit ascend unto Him in a Day the measure whereof is (as) fifty thousand years” (Qur’an 70:4, trans. Yusuf Ali). The 50,000-year tradition as it appears in the Qur’an thus seems to predate the medieval texts of the Jewish Kabbalah.
¹¹. In discussing “the great Sabbath” (von dem grossen Sabbath), Johann Petersen writes: “Also sind die sieben tausend Jahre wiederum ein Bild der grossen siebenmahl sieben tausend Jahre, welche in der Heil. Schrifte aiōnes tōn aiōnon genannt werden” (Thus the seven thousand years are again an image of the great seven-times-seven-thousand years, which in Holy Scripture is called “forever and ever”) (Petachia, 667; cf. 666–74). The 50,000-year time period is mentioned in Johann Petersen, Mysterion Apokatastaseos, 3:230: “Wohl abermahl einige Erlösung aus dem Pfuhl mag vorgeben biss endlich die siebenmahl siebentausend Jahre in den fünfzig tausenden Jahr sich endigen” (Indeed, once more, some of the redemption from the muck may [only] be affirmed when finally the sevenfold 7,000 years come to completion in the 50,000th year). The same passage also mentions the devil’s redemption: “sondern auch der Teufel” (but also the devil [will be redeemed]). Cf. Johann Petersen, Mysterion Apokatastaseos, 1:84.
This and other textual links between esoteric Judaism, Christianity, and Islam reveal a common stock of ideas marshaled in support of the doctrine of universal salvation.

0.3. Two Christian Strands: Origenism and Böhmism

Those acquainted with early Christian history will be aware that Origen’s views—regarding the nature of the soul, its fall, its embodiment, its return to God, and the final state of salvation for all (the apokatastasis)—became intensely controversial. Scholars commonly speak of a First and a Second Origenist Controversy (ca. 393 to ca. 410, and the 530s to 550s CE, respectively). The rejection of Origenist ideas at the Fifth Ecumenical Council in 553 did not mark the end of Origen’s influence, yet in both the East and the West most church thinkers were reluctant to associate themselves with Origen. Only in the later twentieth century has there been a growing openness among Christian scholars to reconsider Origen, and especially his eschatology, more seriously (see DR appendix D).

The modern origins of Christian universalism lie in the remarkable though lesser-known figure Jakob Böhme. If Christian universalism prior to around 1700 consisted in a series of footnotes to Origen, then from 1700 to about 1900—and perhaps even more recently—it consisted in a series of footnotes to Böhme. The so-called Mystical Cobbler of Görlitz exerted a major influence on figures as diverse as the English mystic Jane Lead (or Leade), Anglican spiritual author William Law, the poet William Blake, the German philosophers Georg W. F. Hegel and Friedrich Schelling, the Russian thinkers Vladimir Solovyov and Nicolas Berdyaev, the psychologist Carl Gustav Jung, and the German-American theologian Paul Tillich. Cyril O’Regan has suggested that Böhme represents the “alpha point” for a reintroduction of ancient gnosis in the modern era.

Almost all of Böhme’s followers were universalists of one sort or another. While Böhme himself was not a universalist, the English Böhmists, under Jane Lead, enthusiastically embraced salvation for all and believed that God had commissioned them to proclaim universal salvation. Lead’s reasoning represented a further evolution of Böhmist theology, as supported by Lead’s visionary experiences that had revealed to her the truth of universalism. The English Böhmists, who met as the Philadelphian Society in London just before and after 1700, seem to have been the first-ever Christian universalist society. Among Origenists, universalism had been the private opinion of individual thinkers for many centuries. Yet the Philadelphian movement was innovative—a religious society that viewed the doctrine of universal salvation as a new gospel that had been entrusted to it and that it was obligated to announce to everyone.
From London circa 1700, the evangel of salvation for all traveled first to Germany through translations of Jane Lead’s works into German. Johann and Johanna Petersen published literally millions of words in a series of books during the first two decades of the eighteenth century. It is estimated that perhaps a quarter to a third of all German Pietists in southern Germany embraced universalism as a result of the German Philadelphian movement as influenced by the Petersens. Among German-speaking colonists in America, and especially in Pennsylvania, universalism proliferated. Georg Klein-Nicolai, a friend of Johann Petersen, was the author of the first universalist book published in the American colonies, *The Everlasting Gospel* (1753), which appeared under the pseudonym Paul Siegvolck. While the standard narrative of Christian universalist origins in America commonly starts with the Calvinistic universalists (James Relly in England and John Murray in America), this account ignores the German pietistic universalists, who preceded the Calvinistic universalists by several decades. Had there been no convinced universalists already waiting in the American colonies, it is not clear that John Murray on arriving from England would ever have had an audience for his preaching. German-American universalists had built a chapel for a universalist preacher as an act of faith—before any universalist preachers were known to be available. When the Englishman John Murray happened to disembark near to them, in New Jersey, they invited him to become their pastor and preacher.

Böhnmism had a substantial presence in France and French-speaking regions through the Martinists, led by Martines de Pasqually and Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin. Pasqually is a mysterious figure, likely a Sephardic Jew, who sought to make French Freemasonry more religious and ritualistic. He claimed to have reintroduced the rituals that Adam had performed in paradise. The point of these rituals was to accomplish universal salvation for all, including Satan and the fallen angels. Pasqually spent his final years in Saint-Domingue (present-day Haiti), most likely offering there his own esoteric version of Freemasonry among French colonists and Haitians. Pasqually’s follower Saint-Martin translated Böhme’s writings into French. Though in his later years shifting away from ritual practice toward inward devotionalism, Saint-Martin maintained Pasqually’s universalism.

In Russia, Böhnmist influences on the Freemasons were even more pervasive than they had been in France. Even the Russian czar at one point was reading Böhme. Wherever Böhme’s influence extended, universalism followed. Böhme’s followers included William Law in England and Friedrich Schelling in Germany, who were both Christian universalists. In nineteenth-century Scotland, the theologian Thomas Erskine of Linlathan and the writer George MacDonald were influenced by Böhme, and both came to embrace universalism.
In Russia, Vladimir Solovyov, Nicolas Berdyaev, and Sergei Bulgakov were all avid students of Böhme, and they too were all universalists. Later chapters will present evidence for the claims presented here, but suffice it to say that through much of the modern era, Böhme’s writings and key concepts were a common denominator linking Christian universalists.

0.4. The Theme of Divine Self-Alienation and Self-Return

While ancient Origenism and modern Böhmism are by no means interchangeable, certain analogies exist between these two systems of thought. Both also have affinities with Jewish and Christian Kabbalah. Lezsak Kolakowski, the eminent Polish philosopher and historian of Marxist thought, describes in his essay “Can the Devil Be Saved?” a basic gnostic-kabbalistic-esoteric picture of God in this way:

God brought the Universe into being so that He might grow in its body. . . . He needs His alienated creatures to complete His perfection. The growth of the universe . . . involves God Himself in the historical process. Consequently God Himself becomes historical. At the culmination of cosmic evolution He is not what He was “in the beginning.” He creates the world and in reabsorbing it enriches Himself.

Kolakowski links this idea of the growing, evolving God to beliefs regarding a final reconciliation of all reality:

The implication of this belief is that cosmic history leaves no rubbish behind; everything is finally digested, everything incorporated, in the triumphal progress of the spirit. In the ultimate balance, all is justified, each element and event. Struggle and contradiction will appear as an individual contribution to the same work of salvation.\(^\text{13}\)

The notion of an eventual synthesis of cosmic values and energies has often reappeared. As the twentieth century’s most indefatigable scholar of Marxist thought, Kolakowski not only invokes ancient gnostic thinkers but also cites as parallel developments the medieval author John Scotus Eriugena and nineteenth-century German idealists like Hegel and Schelling. On this account, the Marxists’ utopian belief in a final triumph of the proletariat reflected an optimistic esotericism—a gnosis that was positive or world affirming rather than world negating.

\(^{13}\) Kolakowski, “Can the Devil Be Saved?,” 77–78.
A distinctive mark of both ancient and modern gnosis—as defined at an international conference in Messina, Italy, in 1966—lies in the conception of “a double movement of devolution and integration” of the divine. Before our present universe originated, a kind of cosmic catastrophe occurred within God, as the divine realm fell into disunion with itself and became scattered. In Lurianic Kabbalah, this event is known as “the breaking of the vessels.” As the pieces “fell” metaphysically, they became increasingly unlike their divine source, and the particles of light became trapped in material bodies. Salvation among the gnostics was a process whereby these particles of light were regathered and reassembled, and God once again came to completion through the restoration of all that was lost. Paul Tillich expressed such a view when he wrote, “The reunion with the eternal from which we come, from which we are separated, to which we shall return, is promised to everything that is.”

To illustrate the difference, then, between gnostic thought and biblical thought regarding God’s cosmic plan for salvation, we might employ the following diagram:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gnostic-Esoteric Paradigm</th>
<th>Biblical Paradigm</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unity</td>
<td>[Preexistence?]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diversity</td>
<td>Creation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fall</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[Re-]Unification</td>
<td>Redemption</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What one sees in juxtaposing gnostic and biblical thought is that the two narratives do not neatly map onto each other. The Bible itself says nothing regarding a primordial pleroma, or unity, of spiritual beings with God, such as we find in gnostic thought, Origenism, Kabbalah, and modern Western

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14. Scholars from various disciplines sought to define the word “gnosticism” in a fashion agreeable to researchers, and they settled on the following statement: “The Gnosticism of the Second Century sects involves a coherent set of characteristics that can be summarized in the idea of a divine spark in man, deriving from the divine realm; fallen into this world of fate, birth and death, and needing to be awakened by the divine counterpart of the self in order to be finally integrated. Compared with other conceptions of a ‘devolution’ of the divine, this idea is based ontologically on the conception of a downward movement of the divine whose periphery (often called Sophia or Ennoia) had to submit to the fate of entering into a crisis and producing—even if only indirectly—this world, upon which it cannot turn its back, since it is necessary for it to recover the pneuma [spirit] . . . expressed in a double movement of devolution and integration.” Messina Colloquium [1966], “Proposal for a Terminological and Conceptual Agreement,” xxvi–xxix.

15. The adjective “Lurianic” refers to the sixteenth-century historical figure Isaac (ben Solomon) Luria Ashkenazi, one of the most influential of all Jewish kabbalistic teachers. See DR 2.5–2.6.

esotericism. To preserve the three-stage narrative on the left side of the diagram, one must infer on the right side some primordial spiritual unity that antedated the creation of the material world as depicted in the book of Genesis. This is represented by the bracketed reference to “Preexistence.” It is no accident, then, that Origen’s *On First Principles* presupposes a preexistent state in which all human and angelic spirits existed in unity with God. The conceptual system of universal return requires it. Furthermore, we can see from the diagram that in gnostic thought the emergence of diversity is itself a “fall” away from a state of original, primordial spiritual unity. Hence the word “Diversity” on the left side corresponds to not one but two elements on the right side—namely, “Creation” plus “Fall.” These two distinct categories in biblical thought are collapsed into one in gnostic thought. Material, physical reality is itself a “fall” from primal unity in the direction of diversity and disparity. Gnostic redemption thus consists in the reattainment of unity. Salvation means reunification. As Origen wrote: “The end is always like the beginning.” What remained constant from ancient Origenism to modern Böhmism was this broad, triadic pattern of unity-diversity-unity, which reappeared in differing forms in Eriugena, Hegel, Schelling, Solovyov, Bulgakov, Tillich, and many other thinkers.

On gnostic-kabbalistic-esoteric premises, everyone is saved because humans are expressions or aspects of God, and it is inconceivable that God’s expressions or aspects will remain forever alienated from God’s own self. Everything separated from God must eventually come back to God. The metaphysical starting point is the presumption that the creature is not fully distinct or separate from the Creator. Origenism implicitly, and Kabbalah and Böhmism more overtly, conceived of the human spirit as originating and existing *ex Deo*—a spark of the divine taking its birth within God and possessing a divine destiny as well as a divine origin.

### 0.5. Contrasts between Esoteric and Exoteric Christian Theologies

Numerous traits distinguish esoteric from exoteric forms of Christianity. One might begin with esoteric Christianity’s dialectical view of God, which juxtaposes a radical doctrine of divine transcendence—that is, God as “nothing” (corresponding to the kabbalistic *En Sof*)—with an equally radical doctrine of divine immanence. This leads to what might be called the “no names” / “all names” paradox. In God’s transcendent aspect, no words can possibly describe God. Yet in God’s immanent aspect, all words describe God. Typically, this line

> 17. Origen, *On First Principles* i.6.2 (PA 216; Butterworth, 53).
of reasoning leads toward the conclusion that every creature is a theophany, or manifestation of God. Evil creatures are manifestations of God too, so that the archangel Michael and the fallen angel Satan might be viewed as “brothers” or as different aspects of the one God. The universalist conclusion derives from the notion that all these aspects of God or theophanies must be restored and reintegrated back into God. The origin of evil, in esoteric thought, does not lie in human choice, as intimated in the biblical narrative of Adam and Eve’s disobedience in the garden of Eden. Instead, evil is generally thought to originate within God or else within a spiritual or cosmic sphere that is not divine per se but is closely linked to God. Esoteric readings of Scripture tend toward symbolism and allegory rather than literal interpretation of the texts. This is one of the most common divergences between exoteric and esoteric Christian theologies.

Esotericists have generally reinterpreted the doctrine of the Trinity. Among ancient and medieval esotericists, Father, Son, and Spirit are often seen as forming an order or hierarchy of emanation rather than as being three coeternal persons. In modern esotericism, starting with Böhme, one finds a more dynamic, temporally oriented, and historically involved picture of God. The Trinity in Böhme, Schelling, and Hegel is a modalistic succession of divine manifestations. Esotericists often pay special attention to angels and the angelic realm, and they see a close link between humans and angels, sometimes regarding them as members of the same family of creatures or as interchangeable in form with one another. Regarding human nature, esotericists adhere overtly or covertly to some form of creation ex Deo, so that human beings in their inmost aspect are derived from the divine essence. As noted already, it is this aspect of esotericism that most obviously undergirds the idea of a final return to God and salvation for all. An optimistic view of human freedom and dignity (e.g., Pico della Mirandola’s Oration on the Dignity of Man) is common to esotericism. Regarding Jesus, the general tendency is away from an incarnational, substitutionary, or representative view—that is, Christ as the God-man who acts as man on behalf of all humanity, or as the divine Son who acts in the stead of the divine Father. Esotericism instead tends toward an exemplarist Christology, in which Jesus serves as a universal symbol for all human beings, if not to say all creatures as such.

The diminished Christology of esotericism is directly related to the view of God as manifesting himself in all creatures. A universal theophany is hard to reconcile with notions of a particular Savior, a particular people of God (by divine election), particular acts of God in history (by providence or miracle), and particular works of grace (by justification, infusion, regeneration, and so forth). Instead there is a tendency to conceive of God in unitarian fashion, as the divine Eros that draws all creatures heavenward to the extent that each one
is ready and willing to be drawn. For this reason, the idea of particular divine grace is diminished just as the specificity and humanity of Jesus are. Eriugena, for example, offered a docetist account of Jesus’s resurrection body as phenomenal rather than fleshly. For esotericists, the resurrection is a “spiritual” event, anticipated in the here and now of present-day human awareness. It is an event of consciousness rather than a postmortem occurrence involving a buried body or decayed flesh. The Christologies of Schleiermacher, Hegel, Schelling, and Tillich are sometimes slippery, so it is hard to give an unambiguous answer to the question of whether Jesus is God.

Regarding salvation, the esoteric tradition tends to exalt the divine attribute of love at the expense of justice or righteousness. Indeed, esotericists often affirm that justice is a form of love and deny that justice may be distinguished from love. Jesus’s death on the cross—if emphasized at all—is an expression of love and not a fulfillment of the divine attribute of justice. Because God has no attribute of justice or righteousness demanding fulfillment, there is a denial that God punishes sin. The Old Testament becomes problematic since it contains so much that seems to support a retributive view of divine punishment. The esotericist reading of the cross is closely related to esotericist views on universalism. Since God is not a punishing God, the idea of hell as retribution makes no sense and is replaced by an idea of hell as restoration, and indeed by hell as an anticipation of or stage toward salvation. All suffering that God inflicts is directed toward the aim of bringing final salvation to each and every creature. Christian esotericists through the centuries have invariably rejected the doctrine of particular divine election or predestination. There is good reason for this, for unless election is interpreted as universal (as in Karl Barth), the doctrine of election makes final salvation particular rather than universal.

The Protestant doctrine of justification by faith finds no favor in esotericism. Instead there is a stress on rebirth or regeneration (e.g., in Eckhart, Böhme, and the later William Law) rather than justification. What God gives us in salvation is not legal righteousness but an outpouring of the divine life into our souls, much as a tree trunk diffuses its sap into the branches. Finally, esotericists typically assign a low place to the visible, institutional church and its sacraments. What matters is not formal membership in the “outer church” but rather one’s inward awakening to divine truth and inclusion in the “inner church” of illumined persons. Because of the sharp body-soul dualism that is characteristic of esotericism, there is little emphasis on baptism, Eucharist, or other sacraments, which generally become adiaphora (i.e., indifferent matters) that neither add to nor subtract from the benefits of God’s grace in the soul.

Exoteric theology reverses each of the major points of esoteric theology. Rather than God as radically transcendent plus radically immanent, there is
instead an analogical view of language about God (e.g., Thomas Aquinas) that represents a middle way. God's self-revelation implies that certain words express God more aptly than other words. Even though human language as such does not exhaustively define God's mystery, human words can and do reflect who or what God is. Creation from nothing is foundational to the metaphysics of exoteric Christianity. God is God. Human beings are not God. The creatures’ final salvation is in no sense foreshadowed in human nature as such, as in esotericism. Being created by God does not entail being finally saved by God. Exoteric Christianity embraces the open mystery of divine election, and—despite disagreements on details—implies that God eternally chooses some but not all persons for salvation. Because of sin's pervasiveness in human life, all human beings are guilty before God and deserve punishment. Only divine intervention in the world through Jesus Christ and Jesus's representative birth, life, death, and resurrection provide sinful humans with a basis and a hope for salvation. The cross expresses not only God's love but also God's justice. Justification implies that human beings are saved through God's gift of grace and through Christ's own righteousness. Knowledge of divine mysteries or awareness of one's own true nature does not save anyone. Only Christ saves. Finally, exoteric Christianity places emphasis on the institutional church and its sacraments, viewing these as genuine channels of grace.

0.6. Theological Issues: Preexistence, Wisdom, Punishment, and Rationalism

From a universalist standpoint, the hypothesis of preexistent souls, their fall into bodies, and their return to God was conceptually cohesive and intellectually satisfying. It could explain how the different life situations of humans and angels were compatible with God's love and justice, while affirming an optimistic hope of a final return of all to God. Yet Origen's dilemma in On First Principles lay in his effort to hold on simultaneously to both the unity-diversity-unity paradigm and the creation-fall-redemption paradigm (see fig. 0.1, p. 10). Later Origenists never resolved the problem—nor could they. To remain strictly biblical meant abandoning (as in Gregory of Nyssa and Maximus the Confessor) the idea of preexistent souls as actual, intelligent, volitional agents. Yet without the affirmation of primordial unity, the presumed eschatological unity looked rather iffy. Without the metaphysical impetus of a return to beginnings, universal salvation would hang by the slender thread of correct human choices. How could anyone be sure that everyone would choose rightly? There was also the problem of the fallen angels. Scripture never recounted any instance of a demon saved by God.
The Origenists thus found themselves on the horns of a dilemma regarding whether to hold to a view that was simple and philosophically elegant or to hold to a view that was more obviously justifiable from Scripture and grounded in earlier Christian tradition.

With the rise of modern universalism, a new set of issues came into view. In contrast to Origenism, Böhmisim posited a more dynamic view of God. The ending of all things was not a return to the beginning. Instead, the ending was much more than the beginning. God became enriched and enlarged in and through the historical process. Böhme’s Ungrund—for him the matrix from which both the Trinity and the created world arose—was chaotic contingency and untrammelled freedom. Scholars have linked Böhme’s freedom-oriented metaphysics to German idealism, to Marxist economics, to existentialist philosophy, and to the modern discovery of the unconscious. In Freudian terms, Böhme’s Ungrund was God’s id: a dark, restless, semiconscious, subbasement of the divine.

Böhme took over from Kabbalah a concept of divine Wisdom (Sophia) that was destined to play a major role in modern esoteric thought and in the Russian Sophiology of Vladimir Solovyov and Sergei Bulgakov (DR 8.3–8.9). During the 1930s there was a fierce debate over the status of Sophia, which Bulgakov at one point had referred to as a “fourth hypostasis” alongside the Father, Son, and Spirit. Two of three different Russian Orthodox jurisdictions condemned Bulgakov’s views. Yet Bulgakov continued on as dean at St. Sergius Theological Institute in Paris. An opposition movement took shape, opposing the vagaries of Russian Sophiology and insisting on a stricter adherence to the consensus of early church writers. This neo-patristic perspective, as formulated by George Florovsky, Vladimir Lossky, and John Meyendorff, became central to twentieth-century Christian Orthodoxy. It was an antispeculative perspective, conceived in deliberate opposition to the speculative, sophiological, universalistic theologies of Solovyov and Bulgakov. Characterizing Solovyov’s thinking as essentially gnostic, Florovsky was more circumspect in his public statements about Bulgakov, his early mentor and later superior at the seminary in Paris. Yet Florovsky found indirect ways of making manifest his disapproval of both Solovyov and Bulgakov.

In the Universalist Church in nineteenth-century America, a fierce debate raged over postmortem punishment for sins. Many theological leaders of the Universalists were committed to an affirmation of radical divine grace. This meant that all persons, without exception, passed at death immediately to heaven. Rank-and-file members of the Universalist Church who had earlier been schooled in traditional Christian teachings did not find plausible this view of instantaneous heaven for all. During the debates of the 1830s and 1840s, opponents of the radical-grace teaching dubbed “ultra-universalism” pointed out that thieves, rapists, and murderers might on this assumption commit any
crimes they wished, hoping to escape human punishment, and yet, if caught and killed, rest assured of their place in heaven. On ultra-universalist premises, death itself became the savior inasmuch as the moment of death freed everyone from all consequences of their preceding, sinful actions. The opponents of ultra-universalism were horrified at what they took to be the antinomian implications of the view. They argued for a “moral nexus” between this life and the next. The choices humans made during their earthly life, they said, made a tangible difference in the life beyond. Their viewpoint, called “restorationism,” was akin to the Roman Catholic teaching on purgatory, except that it applied to everyone and not merely to the Catholic faithful. On this view, at death most people enter into a temporary state of suffering in which they are gradually purged of guilt and moral turpitude. For restorationists, everyone goes to heaven eventually but not immediately. The ultra-universalists accused the restorationists of a legalistic denial of divine grace. Forgiveness, they held, is free and universal. Christ’s death brought complete salvation for all persons without exception and without delay.

Like the earlier debates over Origenism, the purgationist dispute did not end in consensus. Those whose universalism was most strongly influenced by Anglo-American Calvinism inclined toward the ultra-universalist viewpoint. Yet by the late 1800s, the purificationist viewpoint was in the ascendency. Those influenced by Böhmism were more inclined toward some idea of postmortem punishment. By the early twentieth century, the old, internal debate increasingly became a moot point. Many members of the Universalist Church by the early twentieth century were no longer certain if there was an afterlife at all. Some were drawn into the secular humanist movement of the 1930s. By 1961, the Universalist Church merged with the Unitarians to form the Unitarian Universalist Association. Speaking generally, the Unitarians during the last century were less concerned with the world to come than they were with the world at hand and the quest for social justice, interreligious unity, and inclusive community. The Universalist Church in the United States turned gradually in the same direction, giving up the focus that had earlier defined the church and losing most of its members in the process.

In the twenty-first century, interest in the question of universal salvation seems now to be increasing most rapidly among those who, like the early

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18. The nineteenth-century American universalists who affirmed a condition of postmortem punishment prior to heaven were generally referred to as “restorationists” to distinguish them from the “ultra-universalists,” who denied this idea. Yet since “restorationist” can mean different things, I have generally used the term “purgationist” throughout this work to denote the various theories of postmortem punishment. I have reserved the term “purgatory” to refer strictly to Roman Catholic teachings.
American universalists, are rooted in evangelical and biblically oriented theology. Some Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christians of a more traditional bent also share this concern. Quite recently we find a turn toward “evangelical universalism” and a new form of universalism emerging among some independent Charismatics. On the question of ultra-universalism versus purgationism, many contemporary universalists remain indefinite. Those who incline toward universalism on Barthian premises seem implicitly to be ultra-universalists. Jürgen Moltmann, an “assertive” rather than a “hopeful” universalist, speaks of a coming reconciliation that will bring together history’s oppressors and victims. Moltmann writes of cleansing fire but does not explain how this fits into his eschatological picture. In many recent discussions, the question of punishment after death is left hanging in midair.

The theological analysis offered in the early chapters of this work and summed up in the final, systematic chapter indicates that Christian universalism is not like traditional Christian theology with salvation for all superadded. To explain the relationship of the doctrine of universal salvation to the other Christian doctrines, one might use the analogy of a chess game. As anyone knows who has ever played this game, every move of a piece on the board has implications for the status of many other pieces. Even the position of a lowly pawn could determine whether the more important pieces like the king and the queen are safe or in danger and whether a state of check or checkmate occurs. What is more, each move has implications that may become apparent only several moves ahead. Indeed, the mark of the chess grand master lies precisely in the ability to foresee many moves ahead the ultimate implications of each move of a chess piece, and so to choose moves that are advantageous over the long term and to reject moves that might be game ending. In a comparable way, the doctrine of universal salvation, though initially appealing to many people, may be a game-ending move that ends up undoing other doctrines such as the doctrine of the atonement and perhaps also the doctrine of Jesus’s divinity. The American Universalists of the nineteenth century first gave up the notion of Christ’s atonement and then ultimately set aside Jesus’s divinity and became Unitarians. Among British universalists, this process occurred even more rapidly than in the United States. From a historical standpoint, one might conclude that “evangelical universalism” is a mirage—the pen-and-paper construct of Christian intellectuals rather than a workable option for the church’s preaching, teaching, worshiping, praying, and evangelizing.

19. As I explain below (see DR 6.1), I use the lowercase form “universalist” throughout but employ the capitalized “Universalist(s)” for those in the United States who were members of the formally organized Universalist Church.
0.7. The Late Twentieth-Century Tilt toward Universalism

The best-known Christian universalists during the 1930s were the Russians—for example, Berdyaev and Bulgakov—who defended all-inclusive salvation at a time when this idea was still taboo in mainstream Catholic and Protestant circles. Early and mid-twentieth-century Protestant fundamentalists and Pentecostals were even further removed from universalism, not only tacitly accepting the doctrine of eternal hell but also actively proclaiming it in their pulpits. Only during the post–World War II period—and, in some respects, only since the 1970s—did Christian universalism become a more mainstream and more widely acknowledged point of view among pastors and priests, seminary professors, and Christian laypersons. The scathing, scandalized reaction of Swiss theologian Emil Brunner in his *Christian Doctrine of God* (1949) to Karl Barth’s affirmation of universal election in his *Church Dogmatics* II/2 (1942) was emblematic of mainstream Protestant sentiment. “Apokatastasis,” wrote Brunner, is “a doctrine which the Church as a whole has recognized as a heresy.”20 An examination of Christian literature in the 1950s and 1960s shows how widespread the opposition to universalism continued to be among Roman Catholics, the Orthodox, evangelicals, and most mainline Protestants. T. F. Torrance, the editor of Barth’s *Church Dogmatics* in English, distanced himself from universalist readings of Barth. In the Netherlands, G. C. Berkouwer wrote a carefully worded yet incisive critique of Barth’s universalism in *The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth* (1956).

By the 1970s and 1980s, Jürgen Moltmann and other academic theologians were increasingly open in espousing universalism. Then, by the century and millennium’s end, the dam burst. Starting with Thomas Talbott’s *The Inescapable Love of God* (1999), a flood of academic and popular books in defense of Christian universalism began to appear. And the trend has not reversed.

What, then, has happened to make universalism so much more acceptable among Christian pastors, teachers, and laypersons? Cultural factors may be part of the explanation. Karl Menninger’s *Whatever Became of Sin?* (1973) lamented the diminishing sense of personal responsibility for one’s own actions. When people did wrong, argued Menninger, they often blamed others rather than themselves. In such a context, the idea of a debt due or just desert for sins committed did not resonate. The traditional doctrine of hell became all but incomprehensible. This was equally true of traditional Protestant atonement theology, with its insistence that Jesus on the cross suffered the penalty due for human sins. In *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (2005), Christian Smith

offers an analysis of adolescents in the United States, whose dominant religion he refers to as “moralistic therapeutic deism.” The ground rules of this unofficial national faith are to be good to others, not to do stupid stuff, and to take care of oneself and others. Despite the adoption of Christian ethical principles such as unconditional love and concern for those in need, moralistic therapeutic deism is not by any stretch to be identified as Christianity. As a deistic credo, this view sidelines Jesus. The incarnation, atonement, resurrection, ascension, and second coming of Christ play little if any role in the faith life of most American teenagers. By starting from a deistic or unitarian account of God and borrowing the biblical principle that “God is love” (1 John 4:8), it is not difficult to draw the conclusion that that God will finally save everyone. Some today assume that God is ethically obligated to provide not only equality of opportunity but also equality of outcome as well. God’s “job” is get everyone to the heavenly “finish line”—otherwise it is not humanity but God who has failed.

0.8. Divine Drama in Bulgakov, Barth, Balthasar, Tillich, and Moltmann

From the early 1900s to the time of the Second World War, Russian thinkers such as Bulgakov and Berdyaev were the leading Christian universalists. As we will show below, there is continuity between the Russian Böhmists and esoteric tradition—and the thought of Solovyov—and the theologies of Berdyaev and Bulgakov. Yet a shift took place after World War II, and it was at this point that universalism became a more widely held and tenable view among Protestant and Catholic thinkers. The change was signaled in Barth’s argument for universal election (i.e., God’s choice of all human beings for final salvation) in Church Dogmatics II/2, which first appeared in German in 1942. In the first three volumes of the epochal Church Dogmatics (I/1, I/2, and II/1), Barth argued strongly for God’s aseity or independence from the created world. The Swiss theologian wanted to let God be God. God’s absolute freedom vis-à-vis creation and God’s transcendence of metaphysical categories were Barth’s constant emphases in opposition to earlier German liberal theologies. Yet Barth’s embrace of universal election marked a new beginning in his theology. God was now defined as essentially gracious rather than contingently so. In Bruce McCormack’s analysis, Barth’s statement that “Jesus Christ is the electing God” implies the metaphysically odd premise that Jesus’s human nature is just as eternal as his divine nature and that God constituted himself through a pretemporal decision to be God-man. While Barth had previously developed a reputation for being fiercely antimetaphysical in his approach to theology, he here engaged in his own sort of innovative ontologizing (DR 9.3–9.9).
Barth’s doctrine of universal election had a widespread influence in late twentieth-century theology. The election doctrine of Church Dogmatics II/2 made it harder to think about God in separation from creatures or a created world, for the implication of Barth’s universal election was that God defined or constituted himself in terms of the God-creature relationship. Hegel had famously quipped that “without the world God would not be God.” Whether deliberately or not, Barth’s election doctrine pointed in the same direction. The God-who-is of the early Barth became the God-who-is-for-us of the later Barth and of many other late twentieth-century theologians.

Hans Urs von Balthasar became personally acquainted with Barth, and he stated that Barth’s doctrine of universal election—combined with Balthasar’s own interpretation of early Christian authors such as Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, and Maximus, the influence of Henri de Lubac’s views on nature-as-grace, and the private revelations of Adrienne von Speyr—convinced him that there are grounds to hope that all human beings will receive God’s grace and will finally be saved (DR 10.4–10.9). As Balthasar was well aware, official Catholic teaching since the time of the early church had never sanctioned universalism, and so Balthasar remained cautious in his formulations. Yet when Balthasar published his book on “hopeful universalism” in the 1980s, he gave expression to ideas that had taken shape in his mind over thirty or more years. Another line of influence in Balthasar came from Russian thinkers including Berdyaev, Solovyov, and Bulgakov. The last of these three thinkers influenced Balthasar’s notion of the Urkenosis, according to which God the Father in begetting God the Son had to strip himself of being and empty himself of his own divinity. This internal movement in God created what Balthasar calls “infinite distance” within God, and it was in this “distance” that evil first originated (DR 10.7).

Tillich and Moltmann—together with Bulgakov—show a more overt relationship to earlier Christian esotericism. For Tillich, the link is primarily through Schelling (and so indirectly to Böhme), whereas Moltmann has oft-noted affinities to Hegel in his earlier writings and draws explicitly on Kabbalah in his later works. Especially in his earlier and formative writings, Bulgakov invokes a range of esoteric themes from Böhme, Schelling, and Solovyov.

The universalist theologians of the late twentieth century show a common commitment to what one might call divine or primal drama. In this account, the gospel is not only an earthly story but also a story transacted within God. In Barth’s case, there is the divine self-constitution through election (“Jesus Christ is the electing God”), in which God chooses himself to be the universally gracious God. In Barth’s doctrine of universal election, the gospel narrative of Jesus’s suffering is taken up and incorporated into the divine eternity, as a kind of “cross from above.” Barth’s notion of an eternal Godmanhood in Christ and
his unusual doctrine of evil as the nothingness (das Nichtige) springing into existence when God created the world are two quasi-esoteric themes in Barth.

Bulgakov’s divine drama is seen in his notion of divine kenosis as inherent to God. For Bulgakov, as in kabbalistic thought and in Schelling, God must delimit himself so that place and space may be established for creation to emerge. Balthasar follows Bulgakov’s lead in his own account of a primal kenosis in God (Urkenosis), and this achieves fuller expression in Balthasar’s doctrine of Holy Saturday, as interpreted through the mystical experiences of Adrienne von Speyr. Tillich—who, like Bulgakov, is indebted to Schelling—speaks of God’s eternal self-begetting and presents a modernized, existentialized version of the ancient drama of the fall and restoration of souls (DR 7.8). Moltmann is among the strongest of all these thinkers in affirming a God who is essentially dramatic. Both the Hegelian rendering of the cross as a self-constituting event for God and Moltmann’s later embrace of Lurianic Kabbalah add bright splashes of color to Moltmann’s divine drama. In Moltmann’s writings, there is a shift from a cross-centered idea of God’s suffering to one that is rooted in God’s creating of the world and that owes much to kabbalistic and kenotic themes (DR 9.10–9.11).

In each of these thinkers, the doctrine of universal salvation emerges as the corollary of one or more esoteric notions—for example, Barth’s eternal Godmanhood, nothingness doctrine, and universal election; Bulgakov’s idea of the human spirit as divine, his rejection of creation ex nihilo, his teaching on divine kenosis, and his Sophiology; Balthasar’s Urkenosis and his Holy Saturday theology; Tillich’s Böhmist and Schellingian doctrine of God and his motif of the fall and restoration of souls; and Moltmann’s ideas of inherent divine passibility, the cross as an event within God, and kabbalistic cosmology. In juxtaposing these five figures—Bulgakov, Barth, Balthasar, Tillich, and Moltmann—one might speak of an esotericization of the Christian doctrine of God during the mid- to late twentieth century.

0.9. Scripture, Reason, and Experience in Universalist Argumentation

The conclusion to this book deals with some of the methodological issues that underlie the debate over universal salvation. Generally speaking, universalism relies on nonliteral interpretations of Scripture and a substantial rejection of church tradition, which in its official doctrinal declarations (rather than in the sphere of private opinions) is consistently particularist on the question of final salvation. With the exception of some rare, outlier groups (e.g., the Universalist Church in the USA), one simply does not find assertions of universal salvation
in the creeds and confessions of the self-described Christian churches. Sometimes the approach to Scripture is subjective to the point of arbitrariness, as, for example, in the biblical arguments for universalism in John Murray’s writings (e.g., based on a symbolic reading of Aaron’s breastplate).

Another common line of argument for universalism derives from abstract or a priori theological reasoning. This way of thinking starts with God’s love for all human beings and then leaps to the conclusion of eternal salvation for all, while omitting the messy part in between—namely, the incarnation of God’s Son, Jesus’s life and teachings, Jesus’s call for faith, Jesus’s atoning death, Jesus’s bodily resurrection, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, and the need for evangelism. Perhaps this could be called the “abbreviated John 3:16”: “For God so loved the world that he gave eternal life to all.” On reflection, it is clear why many Christian universalist groups of the nineteenth century ended up as unitarians. The unitarian view is conceptually simpler since it requires no mediator nor the mediation of salvation. God exists, and human souls exist. The initial assumption—that God loves everyone—more or less entails the outcome that everyone is saved. Conversely, once one affirms a historically particular mediator of salvation (Jesus), a historically particular basis of salvation (Jesus’s death and resurrection), a linguistically and culturally particular message of salvation (the gospel), and a personally particular condition of salvation (faith in the gospel and repentance from sin), then the notion of a particularist outcome of salvation (some saved but not all saved) becomes much more plausible.

Another historically important base of support for universalism lies in paranormal experience. While evidence from ancient times may not allow us to draw conclusions, in more recent times many of the founding figures of modern universalism had visionary experiences on which they based their teaching. In the year 1600, Jakob Böhme had what he called his Zentralschau (vision into the center of reality). While not a universalist as such, Böhme laid the foundation for much of modern Christian universalism. Many of Böhme’s later works were attributed to automatic writing—that is, writing supposedly accomplished through spirit beings directing the human author. When the spirits moved Böhme to write, he said that it felt like a sudden summer shower coming over him. His hand could barely write quickly enough. George de Benneville’s four-day, out-of-body trance experience was the beginning of his itinerant preaching of universalism in the American colonies. De Benneville reported that spirit beings took him on a guided tour of the afterlife. After this otherworldly encounter, he devoted himself to propagating universalism. Along similar lines, Jane Lead in England came to believe in universalism not because of her theological arguments but because of what she purportedly saw. Spirit guides revealed to Lead the truth of universalism.
In Germany, Johann and Johanna Petersen housed a visionary woman, Rosamunde Juliane von Asseburg, in their home. Petersen later wrote a treatise to his fellow Lutheran ministers claiming that divine inspiration did not end with the completion of the New Testament and suggesting that von Asseburg was herself inspired. She played a major role—along with Jane Lead's writings—in turning the Petersens toward universalism. In France, the Martinists engaged in invoking spirit beings to appear to them, and claimed that visible marks (called “glyphs”) appeared as signs that the spirits were satisfied with their rituals, which were performed to accomplish universal salvation of all demons and humans. In Russia, Vladimir Solovyov was yet another universalist visionary. He traveled to the British Museum in London to study ancient gnosia and Kabbalah, and there—in the former reading room (where Karl Marx had written Das Kapital)—Solovyov had a vision of the heavenly Sophia, beckoning to him to travel to Egypt. Solovyov participated in séances in London and Cairo and received what he took to be his defining philosophy in messages purportedly from the spirit world. Like Böhme, Solovyov engaged in automatic writing. The style of handwriting in his notebooks shifted whenever he was dictating the words given to him by Sophia. Berdyaev, Bulgakov, and later Russian thinkers built their universalist theologies on Solovyov's foundation.

The early modern history of Christian universalism is thus permeated with the paranormal. Prior to around 1900, many of the foundational figures were in communication with what they took to be the spirit world. What one believes about their teachings on universal salvation is difficult to disengage from what one believes about their spiritualistic practices. The writings of Böhme, Lead, Petersen, de Benneville, Saint-Martin, and Solovyov all show that their teachings were based on what they took to be supernatural guidance from spirit beings (often referred to as angels). So it does not seem possible to appraise their teaching without considering such claims. Since the 1970s and 1980s, Betty Eadie and at least some of those writing about near-death experiences (NDEs) have continued this early spiritualist-universalist tradition by describing spirit beings whom they have met outside their physical bodies and who have taught them that everyone will be saved.

0.10. A Theological Irony: Universalism’s Eclipse of Grace

The great irony of Christian universalism lies in its eclipse of grace. The effort to extend grace to all has repeatedly ended up compromising or even eliminating the notion of grace. What seems to be “all grace” turns out on inspection to be “no grace.” We have already noted that esoteric theologies have trouble
accounting for a particular people of God, for particular divine actions in history, and for a particular Savior. The graciousness of grace has always been linked to particular divine actions viewed as contingent rather than necessary. Stated otherwise, the grace of God depends on God’s will and is not necessitated by God’s own nature or essence.

The doctrine of grace gets lost in different ways within the different forms of universalism. In the spark-of-the-divine teaching, salvation occurs according to nature, not according to grace. No distinct or particular work of God is required for salvation. Instead, the human spirit is said to have originated within God and so will finally return to God. There is, as it were, a cosmic recycling operation in which everything will go back to its appropriate place in and with God. So too, the ideas of eternal Godmanhood in Russian Sophiology and the analogous teaching in Barth create problems for a doctrine of grace. In this view, the union of humanity and divinity is not a contingent fact that came to be at a particular point in time (i.e., when the Virgin Mary conceived the child Jesus in her womb) but is instead an eternal, metaphysical truth. Just as there was never a time when Christ did not exist as divine, so also there was never a time when Christ did not exist as human. Such eternity suggests necessity.

If Godmanhood is eternal—like the eternal Sonship of Christ—then this is simply how or who God is. The grace of incarnation diminishes as Godmanhood becomes a natural or essential fact about God, much as the spark-of-the-divine view becomes a natural or essential fact about human nature. Both views undermine the Christian teaching on grace.

Purgationist universalism also does away with grace. Unlike the spark-of-the-divine and the eternal-Godmanhood teachings, purgationism does not start from the presumption of an implicit or covertly realized union of God with humanity. Instead there is a clear affirmation of distinction and even of separation between God and humanity that must somehow be overcome. Yet rather than affirming that Christ is the one who overcomes this separation, purgationism shifts this work from Christ to the human individual. Stated bluntly: people go to heaven when they are good enough for heaven. Bulgakov’s *The Bride of the Lamb* (1944) makes painfully clear this eclipse of grace in purgationism. He rejects the idea of “free forgiveness” and insists instead that all sinners will make full and complete “expiation” for their own sins. No one after death goes simply to heaven or to hell, says Bulgakov, but rather to some intermediate condition that represents a mixture of these two. Both heaven and hell exist in each of us, and so there is much inwardly that requires purification. Bulgakov’s insistence on full reparation for one’s own sins gives his theology a moralistic and impersonalistic ethos. One wonders what Bulgakov thinks Christ accomplished for sinners. It is unclear whether...
Jesus’s coming made a decisive difference inasmuch as everyone has to suffer until they expiate their own sins.

Universal election in Schleiermacher and Barth likewise leads to dilemmas regarding grace. It is not clear that God stands in a particular relationship to individual human beings. Instead one might say that God relates to each individual human being only insofar as each individual human being is part of humanity as a whole (in Barth) or part of the cosmos (in Schleiermacher). The fuller implication of Barth’s election doctrine is often missed. In Jesus Christ the Elect-Reprobate, all humanity is likewise elect and reprobate at the same time. The graciousness of election is tempered with the ungraciousness of reprobation. If Bulgakov made heaven somewhat hellish and hell somewhat heavenly, then Barth has done something similar in *Church Dogmatics* II/2 by making the elect in some sense reprobate and the reprobate in some sense elect. In both Bulgakov and Barth one finds a *coincidentia oppositorum* (coincidence of opposites).

By general consent among scholars, the concept of grace is not a part of Hegel’s speculative version of Christianity. Indeed, the very word “grace” does not appear as one of Hegel’s key conceptions. William Desmond goes so far as to refer to Hegel’s deity as a “counterfeit double” and to speak of “religiously gullible” followers of Hegel who do not realize that Hegel uses Christian and theological language with divergent meanings attached. For Desmond, Hegel’s *Geist* (Spirit) is not a deity of agape but of eros, which is to say that the Hegelian god acts not to fulfill others but for the sake of self-fulfillment (*DR* 7.6). Every step of the process that Hegel lays out—creation, fall, incarnation, Pentecost, eschaton—is a matter of advancing the self-development of *Geist*. In the end, finitude seems to be dissolved in a pool of Infinity. Schelling’s philosophical system is somewhat closer than Hegel’s to the doctrines of mainstream Christianity, yet his kenotic and relational onto-theology weakens the free and unmerited character of the divine gift of grace. Schelling obscures the idea of grace through his mistaken notion of God’s codependent coemergence alongside the world.

To return to William Desmond’s basic insight, we might say that an erotic rather than *agapeic* God poses an insoluble problem in giving an adequate account of divine grace. The God who needs to be fulfilled is not the God who freely gives grace. Christian theologians must decide: *Which God?* The historical and current debates on universalism will often lead us back to this question.
Final Salvation

Church Teachings and Newer Views

The creeping paralysis of universalism is rapidly gaining ground throughout Christendom. This dangerous doctrine minimizes the seriousness of sin, impugns the righteousness of God, emasculates the doctrine of the atonement and denies final judgement.

—J. Oswald Sanders¹

Hell is so real that it reaches right into the existence of the saints. Hope can take it on, only if one shares in the suffering of Hell's night by the side of the One who came to transform our night by his suffering.

—Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI)²

Of course, God will pardon me. It is his trade!

—Heinrich Heine (attributed last words)³

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³ Quoted in Monahan, *Heinrich Heine*, 44. In the original: “Bien sûr, il me pardonnera; c’est son métier.”
The reunion with the eternal from which we come, from which we are separated, to which we shall return, is promised to everything that is.

—Paul Tillich

In 1978 the British New Testament professor Richard Bauckham summarized the development of modern theological thinking on the question of final salvation:

The history of the doctrine of universal salvation (or *apokatastasis*) is a remarkable one. Until the nineteenth century almost all Christian theologians taught the reality of eternal torment in hell. Here and there, outside the theological mainstream, were some who believed that the wicked would be finally annihilated. . . . Even fewer were the advocates of universal salvation, though these few included some major theologians of the early church. Eternal punishment was firmly asserted in official creeds and confessions of the churches. It must have seemed as indispensable a part of universal Christian belief as the doctrines of the Trinity and the incarnation. Since 1800 this situation has entirely changed, and no traditional Christian doctrine has been so widely abandoned as that of eternal punishment. Its advocates among theologians today must be fewer than ever before. The alternative interpretation of hell as annihilation seems to have prevailed even among many of the more conservative theologians. Among the less conservative, universal salvation, either as hope or as dogma, is now so widely accepted that many theologians assume it virtually without argument.¹

Since those words were written, the trend toward universalism that he identified has continued unabated, and it even seems to be accelerating since the turn of the millennium.

Though Bauckham wrote about the change as happening since the nineteenth century, the change is for the most part a much more recent one. Until the middle of the twentieth century, universalist belief was generally confined to a minority of Christian theologians along with a few self-identified universalist groups. Concerning the official Catholic teaching, Cardinal Avery Dulles writes: “The doctrine of the eternity of hell has been firmly in place at least since the seventh century, and is not subject to debate in the Catholic Church. About

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the middle of the twentieth century, there seems to be a break in the tradition. Since then a number of influential theologians have favored the view that all human beings may or do eventually attain salvation.\textsuperscript{6}

This statement is largely true for Protestants as well. While there was plenty of Victorian doubt during the 1800s, and this centered on the doctrine of hell as well as other even more fundamental questions—for example, the existence of God—we do not find many Christian theologians or Christian leaders supporting universal salvation before the mid-1900s. The acceptance of universalism by substantial numbers of professing Christians is thus, from a historical standpoint, a very recent development. Up to the early and mid-nineteenth century, it was generally believed that the doctrine of an eternal hell had moral and social value as an incentive against evildoing. The almost unchallenged place held by the doctrine of hell among Western writers was due, according to D. P. Walker, to “the very strong scriptural authority for the doctrine,” and yet “a more fundamental reason . . . was the firm and almost universal belief in its value as a deterrent in this life.” “It was thought,” writes Walker, that “if the fear of eternal punishment were removed, most people would behave without any moral restraint whatever.” So strong was this conviction regarding the deterrent value of hell that atheists—who believed neither in God nor in hell—were commonly assumed to be thoroughly depraved and socially dangerous persons. “It was claimed that only criminals and debauchees could have motive for questioning the doctrine.”\textsuperscript{7}

The French Catholic Dom Sinsart wrote in 1748:

I do not hesitate to say that the system which limits the punishments of the afterlife has been conceived only by vicious and corrupt hearts. Indeed what motives would a good Christian have in distorting Scripture so as to divert it from the meaning it naturally presents? . . . A good conscience has no motive for inventing quibbles about a matter which does not concern it. It is, therefore, to crime, to stubborn crime, that this opinion owes its existence.\textsuperscript{8}

From the sixteenth century until the eighteenth and even into the early nineteenth century, there was widespread acceptance of the idea that only the wicked or reprobate mind would question the doctrine of an eternal hell. The result of this assumption, as Walker notes, was that “nearly all discussions of hell” were “veiled in a mist of secrecy and dishonesty.”\textsuperscript{9}

\textsuperscript{6} Dulles, “Population of Hell.” Citations are to the online version of this article.
\textsuperscript{7} Walker, \textit{Decline of Hell}, 4.
\textsuperscript{9} Walker, \textit{Decline of Hell}, 5. On the sometimes oblique and insincere discussion of forbidden opinions in the early modern period, see Strauss, \textit{Persecution and the Art of Writing}, and, more recently, Melzer, \textit{Philosophy between the Lines}.
This opening chapter surveys Christian teachings pertaining to final salvation in the major strands of the Christian tradition—Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox, evangelical, and Pentecostal—and follows this with a treatment of several related themes. Church discussions throughout the centuries have often touched on themes canvassed here: the possibility of a secret gospel of universalism, Christ’s descent to the dead, the Catholic doctrine of purgatory, Protestant and Catholic debates about hell and death, and the question of annihilationism or conditionalism. Chapter 2 presents documentation and discussion of an alternate tradition regarding the question of final salvation, with its own characteristic assumptions, conceptual cohesiveness, and internal issues, which might—for brevity’s sake—be designated with the adjectives “gnostic,” “kabbalistic,” or “esoteric.” Later chapters in the book will draw on ideas that are fleshed out in chapters 1 and 2.

1.1. Mainline Protestants: The Turn toward Universalism

Most ministers and laypersons in the older, established, or so-called mainline Protestant churches—Lutheran, Reformed, Episcopal, Congregationalist, Methodist—no longer argue much about eternal salvation and the possibility of eternal punishment. The general presumption is that everyone, sooner or later, will be saved. As early as the 1820s, the founding figure of liberal Protestantism, Friedrich Schleiermacher, challenged the traditional doctrine of hell. Schleiermacher favored a notion of human solidarity, according to which all humanity would together receive God’s grace. Not some, but all, were chosen for eternal blessedness. He reasoned that no one could truly be happy with God if just one soul were excluded from blessedness. Schleiermacher’s altered understanding of election was significant a century later. The twentieth century’s most influential theologian, Karl Barth, rejected most of Schleiermacher’s theology and yet embraced a notion of corporate election akin to that of Schleiermacher.

Particularist views of salvation nonetheless remained strong among Christian laypersons and even among theologians throughout the 1800s and into the early 1900s. In the leading Protestant nations of Germany, Britain, and America, there were few who followed Schleiermacher’s lead into universalism—with

10. Paul Dafydd Jones, in “Hopeful Universalism,” writes of the mainline Protestant response to the evangelical universalist Rob Bell’s book Love Wins: “Little more than a bored, smug shrug emanated from mainstream academics and mainline Protestants—so bored it hardly amounted to a shrug, so smug it implied that those still opposing universalism were no more than reactionary Neanderthals. . . . In certain circles, universalism is no longer the preserve of theological radicals. It’s gone mainstream.”


12. See Göckel, Barth and Schleiermacher.
the exception of those in the Universal Church, who made universal salvation their distinguishing trait as a denomination (DR 6).13 At the same time, a ferment was brewing in Britain during the nineteenth century regarding the traditional doctrine of hell.14 Doubts about the doctrine of hell began earlier, among seventeenth-century intellectuals, Socinians, Deists, and Enlightenment-era philosophes. Yet it was not until the nineteenth century that significant numbers of Christian leaders and laypersons began to express doubts about hell. In England during the 1850s, F. D. Maurice suggested that it might be possible to interpret the biblical word “eternal” (Greek αἰωνίος) as meaning something other than “forever and ever,” and hence “eternal punishment” as possibly referring to a period of limited duration. This issue had long been a neuralgic point in technical philosophical and theological discussions regarding the nature of time and eternity (DR appendix J). The popular uproar on this occasion was such, though, that Maurice lost his teaching job at King’s College in London.15 Meanwhile, during the late 1800s John Henry Newman—both as an Anglican and then later as a Catholic convert—upheld traditional views on eschatology.16

By the 1870s and 1880s in Great Britain, individual voices, like those of Samuel Cox and F. W. Farrar, went further in questioning the doctrine of hell and proposing some version of a “larger hope.” Some of these authors were inclusivists rather than universalists—that is, they believed that some people who did not explicitly believe in or follow Christ might be saved, but not that all people will be saved. In most cases the “larger hope” was not yet a universal hope.17 The Oxford Anglo-Catholic pundit E. B. Pusey defended traditional eschatology in response to Farrar.18 Near the century’s end, E. H. Plumptre suggested a purgatory-like state for departed souls.19 During the same period, Scottish author George MacDonald likewise argued that the consuming fire of

13. For the American and British developments, see Eddy, Universalism in America; Cassara, Universalism in America; Bressler, Universalist Movement in America, 1770–1880; Rowell, “Origins and History of Universalist Societies in Britain, 1750–1850.”
15. On the Maurice affair, see Maurice, “Concluding Essay—On Eternal Life and Eternal Death,” in Theological Essays, 442–78; Maurice, Word “Eternal” and the Punishment of the Wicked. Secondary sources include Mozley, Some Tendencies in British Theology; W. M. Davies, Introduction to F. D. Maurice’s Theology; Rowell, Hell and the Victorians; Cupitt, “Language of Eschatology.”
17. The phrase “larger hope” is derived from the title of the second of Samuel Cox’s two works, Salvator Mundi and The Larger Hope.
18. S. Cox, Salvator Mundi; S. Cox, Larger Hope; Farrar, Eternal Hope; Farrar, Mercy and Judgment. See the responses to Farrar in Pusey, What Is of Faith as to Everlasting Punishment?; Endean, What Is the Eternal Hope of Canon Farrar?
God’s love will eventually burn away sin and impurity and prepare every soul to enter heaven. His teaching assumed a postmortem, purgatorial state, and his influence extended to the contemporary universalist philosopher Thomas Talbott. Though indebted on a literary level to MacDonald, C. S. Lewis did not follow MacDonald into universalism. In the official teaching of the Church of England, a softening of eschatological views was evident in a 1922 report. Yet at that time there was no embrace of universalism as an acceptable theological opinion.

In Germany, where theological opinion tended to be more radical than in Britain and America, the tilt toward universalism did not progress markedly until the twentieth century. Scholarly studies in German appearing around 1900 traced the historical lineage of universalist views. Then in the early to mid-twentieth century there appeared popular books advocating universalism, written for pastors and the reading public. In the German-language Protestant literature, the key debates occurred during the 1950s and 1960s, at which time the tide seems to have turned decisively in the direction of universalism. Some European Protestants resisted. The Norwegian churches, with their strong Pietist and revivalist elements, were unfavorable toward universalism. In 1953–54, a debate took place among Norwegian Lutherans about the reality or unreality of hell, which in effect ended in a stalemate between two sets of church leaders and two sets of seminary faculty members.

Since World War II, much of the thinking among mainline Protestants on the question of universalism has been shaped by the theology of the Swiss thinker Karl Barth (DR 9.1–9.9). Beginning in 1942, Barth offered a new interpretation of divine election, according to which Jesus Christ himself was
both the Chosen or Elect One and the Rejected or Reprobate One. In Barth’s rendition, all human beings are connected with Christ and involved in a massive redemptive movement from God’s “no” of judgment to God’s “yes” of mercy. While Barth sometimes denied that he was a universalist, the logic of his arguments presses toward an all-inclusive picture of salvation.26 Even Hans Urs von Balthasar—who appreciated Barth’s theology in general and also hoped for salvation for all people—thought that Barth had denied or ignored the logic of his own arguments by not admitting that he was teaching an apokatastasis (universal restoration) for all people.27 During the 1960s and 1970s, a new view of Christian evangelism took hold among many mainline Protestants. According to this account, evangelism is not a call to a decision of faith so that one might believe and be saved, but instead is an announcement that all people are already saved so that people might know this and might live in the glad awareness of God’s love. Barth himself sometimes spoke on the topic of universalism in paradoxical ways, stating that “I teach it but then again I do not teach it.”28

In certain respects, the question of Barth’s own precise position on universalism became moot by midcentury, except among academic specialists. For even if Barth was only implicitly a universalist, many of those influenced by him have been explicitly so. Universalists who were at least partially inspired by Barth include John A. T. Robinson, Jacques Ellul, Jan Bonda, and Eberhard Jüngel.29 One of Barth’s leading critics during his lifetime was his early friend and contemporary Emil Brunner, who regarded Barth’s inclination toward universalism as a serious theological error. Brunner described the doctrine of divine election propounded in Barth’s Church Dogmatics as “a fundamental perversion of the Christian message of salvation.” He accused Barth of going much further than Origen and his followers, since “none of them ever dared to maintain that through Jesus Christ, all, believers and unbelievers, are saved from the wrath of God and participate in redemption through Jesus Christ.”

26. Karl Barth (CD II/2, 417) wrote that we have “to respect the freedom of divine grace,” and so “we cannot venture the statement that it must and finally will be coincident with the world of man as such (as in the doctrine of the so-called apokatastasis),” and again that “the Church will not . . . preach an apokatastasis,” but, he adds, “nor will it preach a powerless grace of Jesus Christ or a wickedness of man which is too powerful for it” (ibid., 477).

27. Balthasar’s general appreciation for Barth is apparent in Balthasar, Theology of Karl Barth. Balthasar’s strictures on Barth’s lack of consistency or forthrightness in acknowledging the implications of his own arguments appear in his Dare We Hope “That All Men Be Saved”? 44–45 and 94, where Balthasar agrees with W. Kreck that Barth’s “protestations that he does not mean apokatastasis panton [universal salvation] . . . remain . . . ultimately ‘rhetorical’” (94; cf. 44–45).

28. Crisp, “I Do Teach It, but I Also Do Not Teach It.”

This, in Brunner’s judgment, is “the most radical doctrine of universal reconciliation that has ever been constructed.”

Since Barth’s death, Jürgen Moltmann has been a leading European proponent of universalism (DR 9.10–9.11). Moltmann rejects the idea of a “double outcome” at God’s final judgment. He notes what he takes to be universalistic passages in the New Testament Gospels, in Paul’s Letters, and in the book of Revelation, sets these alongside dualistic passages, and draws the conclusion that “the decision for one or the other cannot be made on the ground of scripture.” For Moltmann, therefore, “not only all human beings . . . but the angels too—evidently the disobedient ones, since for the others it is unnecessary—will be reconciled through Christ.” This is the meaning of the New Testament teaching that “every knee” will finally bow to Christ (Phil. 2:10). Moltmann interprets the Gospel references to “hell-fire” as implying “a purifying fire—a corrective punishment.” Because divine grace is more powerful than human sin, there is a “qualitative difference” between God’s decision in favor of humanity and any human decisions against God, so that the former will finally prevail over the latter. Moltmann concluded that the last judgment is nothing to fear but is “the most wonderful thing that can be proclaimed” and “a source of endlessly consoling joy.”

1.2. Roman Catholics: Traditionalists versus “Hopeful Universalists”

In Roman Catholic circles, there was very little evidence of universalism in the period prior to Vatican II. The official doctrinal decisions and decrees collected in the Enchiridion Symbolorum assert many times that there is a final twofold destiny for all human beings, with the righteous or faithful going to be with God in heaven and the wicked or unbelieving going to a state of eternal suffering in hell. These official declarations extend from the second to the twentieth century.  

33. In Denzinger, Sources of Catholic Dogma, see the numbered sections: no. 2 (Christ will come “to judge the living and the dead”), no. 16 (“eternal punishment for sins”), no. 40 (“life everlasting” vs. “eternal fire”), no. 95 (reconciliation before death frees “from eternal ruin”), nos.
centuries. In the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1994), the issue seems clear-cut. Those who die in a state of grace go into heaven. Those who die without having been absolved of lesser (or venial) sins proceed to purgatory, where they suffer in purifying fires, leading eventually to their release into heaven. Those who die in a state of mortal sin go to hell, which is an eternal state of suffering. (Purgatory is a temporary state, where no one remains forever; for this reason, traditional Catholics and traditional Protestants both believe that there are finally only two destinations for everyone: heaven and hell.) The *Catechism* denies a claim made by some contemporary Eastern Orthodox thinkers—namely, that Christ’s descent into Hades, mentioned in the Apostles’ Creed, brings about the salvation of all humanity without exception (*DR* 1.6). Instead the *Catechism* teaches that, between the time of his death on Good Friday and his resurrection on Easter Sunday, Jesus descended into the underworld, or Hades, in order to bring out those righteous souls who had died believing in the true God, not to empty Hades altogether.

203–11 (against Origen and denying that “the punishment of the demons and of impious men is temporary”), no. 228a (“the punishment of eternal and inextinguishable fire, that they may burn without end”), no. 321 (“eternal rewards” vs. “eternal punishment”), no. 366 (false repentance leads to being “drawn into hell”), no. 457 (“if anyone without repentance dies in mortal sin, without a doubt he is tortured forever by the flames of eternal hell”), no. 493 (“those who die in mortal sin . . . descend immediately into hell . . . with different penalties and in different places”), no. 531 (“the souls of those who depart in actual mortal sin immediately after their death descend to hell where they are tortured by infernal punishments”), no. 570-1 (“eternal punishments of hell”), no. 570-s (“there is a purgatory”), no. 714 (“nonbelievers and schismatics “will depart ‘into everlasting fire which was prepared for the devil and his angels’ [Matt. 25:41]”), no. 983 (“there is a purgatory”).

34. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* maintains in substance the teaching found in the ancient, medieval, and sixteenth-century sources cited from Denzinger, *Sources of Catholic Dogma* (see n. 33). According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, “To die in mortal sin without repenting and accepting God's merciful love means remaining separated from him for ever by our own free choice. This state of definitive self-exclusion from communion with God and the blessed is called ‘hell’” (no. 1033). “The teaching of the Church affirms the existence of hell and its eternity. Immediately after death the souls of those who die in a state of mortal sin descend into hell, where they suffer the punishments of hell, ‘eternal fire.’ The chief punishment of hell is eternal separation from God, in whom alone man can possess the life and happiness for which he was created and for which he longs” (no. 1035). “God predestines no one to go to hell; for this, a willful turning away from God (a mortal sin) is necessary and persistence in it until the end” (no. 1037). The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* affirms the reality of purgatory (nos. 1030–32). It denies that Christ’s descent to Hades delivered all who had entered damnation or brought an end to hell: “Jesus did not descend into hell to deliver the damned, nor to destroy the hell of damnation, but to free the just who had gone before him” (no. 633).

35. In “Population of Hell,” Avery Cardinal Dulles writes:

The constant teaching of the Catholic Church supports the idea that there are two classes: the saved and the damned. Three general councils of the Church (Lyons I, 1245; Lyons II, 1274; and Florence, 1439) and Pope Benedict XII’s bull *Benedictus Deus* (1336) have taught that everyone who dies in a state of mortal sin goes immediately to suffer the eternal punishments of hell. This belief has perdured without question in the Catholic Church to this
Since Vatican II, there have been many signs of changing views among Roman Catholics. The French Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain wrote out a “reverie” that circulated among his friends but was not published until after his death in 1973. In this “conjectural essay,” he suggests that the damned—in response to the prayers of the saints—might pass out of a state of torment and enter a neutral realm, like limbo, where they experience neither the joys of heaven nor the pains of hell. Perhaps even Satan, with others who are lost, might have his will miraculously turned from hatred and toward the love of God. In proposing this, Maritain admits that he has no support from Scripture and that this idea contradicts the usual interpretation of the last judgment scene in the Gospel of Matthew (Matt. 25:31–46). Yet he thinks that his conjecture might help to show how Christ’s mercy extends to all spiritual creatures—including even those who are suffering in hell.\footnote{36}

Karl Rahner is another well-known figure indicative of a liberalizing of views regarding eschatology. He held that there is a possibility that no one goes to hell. In other words, we have no clear revelation that anyone—including Judas—is actually lost or damned forever.\footnote{37} This view required a reinterpretation of Jesus’s apparent teaching on God’s judgment and the final separation of the sheep from the goats, or the wheat from the chaff, which Rahner took to be an admonition rather than a prediction in the strict sense. Jesus’s hearers were not told that anyone would actually be in hell; they were simply warned lest they go to hell. While maintaining that hell is a real possibility, Rahner said that one also has to uphold “the truth of the omnipotence of the universal salvific will of God, the redemption of all by Christ, the duty of men to hope for salvation.”\footnote{38}

During the 1960s and early 1970s, Catholic theological debates on eschatology tended to focus on Christian inclusivism. This is a weaker view than universalism, which affirms not the salvation of all but that some non-Christians may be brought into relationship to Christ and saved by Christ without explicitly hearing or responding to the message of Christ. Rahner led the way with his conception of the “anonymous Christian.”\footnote{39}

\footnote{day, and is repeated almost verbatim in the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC §1022, 1033). Several local councils in the Middle Ages, without apparently intending to define the point, state in passing that some have actually died in a state of sin and been punished by eternal damnation. On the other hand, “the relative numbers of the elect and the damned are not treated in any Church documents, but have been a subject of discussion among theologians.”}

\footnote{36. Ibid.}

\footnote{37. Catholic New Testament scholar Rudolf Schnackenburg writes concerning Judas that it “is not certain that he is damned for all eternity” (“Prädestination,” 662).}


\footnote{39. On Karl Rahner’s inclusivism, see his “Anonymous and Explicit Faith,” in Theological Investigations (TI), 16:52–59.}

Michael J. McClymond, The Devil's Redemption, Volume 1
views of salvation have had a long history in Roman Catholic reflection prior to the twentieth century, yet not in such a way as to undermine traditional beliefs in heaven, hell, and—since the Middle Ages—purgatory. Inclusivism meant a “wider hope” or “larger hope” that extended at least some hope of salvation to those not in the visible Catholic Church—but not to every human being without exception.40

Universalism became a Catholic theological option only in the last generation. Yet even the “hopeful” rather than “dogmatic” version of universalism proved controversial. In the 1980s a debate erupted in Germany and elsewhere over Hans Urs von Balthasar’s book Dare We Hope “That All Men Be Saved”? (German, 1986; English, 1988), with its insistence that Christians ought to hope for the salvation of all persons. One of Balthasar’s critics charged that “the full truth about hell is not stated if one only speaks of its possibility . . . and not of its reality.”41 Others lambasted what they called the “salvation-optimism” of our age, with its “presumptuous trust in God’s mercifulness.”42 Nonetheless, Balthasar’s book has been widely influential in the Catholic world. His book includes a lengthy quotation from Edith Stein, now canonized as Saint Teresa Benedicta of the Cross. Since God’s all-merciful love descends on everyone, she argues, we may presume that this love brings transformation. To the same degree that people open themselves up to this love, they are redeemed. Divine omnipotence might circumvent or countermand all forms of human resistance to grace. On this basis, Saint Teresa Benedicta affirms the possibility of salvation for all—the position that Balthasar adopts.43

In his book Crossing the Threshold of Hope (1997), Pope John Paul II mentions Balthasar’s theory. After posing the question of whether a loving God...
can allow anyone to go into eternal torment, he replies, “And yet the words of Christ are unequivocal. In Matthew’s Gospel he speaks clearly of those who will go to eternal punishment (cf. Matt. 25:46).” To justify this assessment, he asks whether God, who is himself ultimate justice, could tolerate terrible crimes and allow them forever to go unpunished. The moral equilibrium of the universe would seem to require the existence of postmortem punishment.

Yet just a few years later, Pope John Paul II seems to have shifted his position. In a General Audience talk on July 28, 1999, the pope stated:

Christian faith teaches that in taking the risk of saying “yes” or “no,” which marks the (human) creature’s freedom, some have already said no. They are the spiritual creatures that rebelled against God’s love and are called demons (cf. Fourth Lateran Council). What happened to them is a warning to us: it is a continuous call to avoid the tragedy which leads to sin and to conform our life to that of Jesus who lived his life with a “yes” to God. Eternal damnation remains a possibility, but we are not granted, without special divine revelation, the knowledge of whether or which human beings are effectively involved in it. The thought of hell—and even less the improper use of biblical images—must not create anxiety or despair, but is a necessary and healthy reminder of freedom within the proclamation that the risen Jesus has conquered Satan, giving us the Spirit of God who makes us cry “Abba, Father!” (Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:6).

As Cardinal Dulles has noted, the final sentence in this quotation pertains to the hope that Christians have for their own salvation. Yet in the second-to-last sentence—on “whether or which human beings” might enter damnation—the word “whether” suggests at least tentatively the possibility that no one goes to hell and thus that salvation will be universal.45

Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI (Joseph Ratzinger) would seem to be less committed to inclusivist views of non-Christians and non-Christian religions than Pope John Paul II was. Under Ratzinger’s leadership, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith produced the document *Dominus Iesus* (2000), which was widely and rightly perceived as a slap in the face of liberal Catholics. It affirms that the Roman Catholic Church is the only true church—in the full sense of that term—and that those within the Roman Catholic Church have more complete access to the means of salvation than anyone else. If Pope John Paul II had in his later years a Balthasarian moment on the question of final salvation for all, then Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI seemingly did not.

44. John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, 185.
45. Dulles, “Population of Hell,” citing Pope John Paul II.
Cardinal Avery Dulles summarized the situation by stating that there has indeed been a shift in Catholic thinking on eschatology, “although the shift is not as dramatic as some imagine.” No longer does official Catholic teaching insist that participation in the visible Catholic Church and its sacraments is the sine qua non for receiving eternal salvation. There has also been a reaction against preaching and teaching that capitalizes on lurid depictions of the sufferings of the damned in hell. Yet an error on the other side has taken hold among many Catholics, according to Dulles. He points to a “thoughtless optimism” that ignores any possibility of divine judgment or hell and takes it virtually for granted that all people—or almost all—must be saved.46

1.3. Eastern Orthodoxy: Official Teachings and Private Opinions

Christian Orthodoxy, or Eastern Orthodoxy, has often been more tolerant of universalism than either Catholicism or Protestantism. For this reason, some contemporary authors have emphasized (and perhaps exaggerated) the degree to which Eastern Orthodox Christianity embraced a wider view of salvation. They have portrayed universalism as a kind of “minority report” fully embraced by Christian Orthodoxy and challenging the Latin West from the early church period onward. This perspective dominates the introduction and several of the essays in Robin Parry’s “All Shall Be Well” (2011). Because Christian Orthodoxy looks to ancient sources to define its faith, even in modern times, it is necessary to examine the early Christian authors to ascertain whether Orthodoxy allows or disallows universalism.

Without doubt, the early Alexandrian theologian Origen served as a major source for the dissemination of the doctrine of universal restoration or salvation (apokatastasis) from the third century onward (DR 3.1–3.8).47 What is more, the widely influential church father Gregory of Nyssa adopted a modified version of Origen’s universalism (DR 3.9).48 While Gregory left out Origen’s notion of

46. Dulles, “Population of Hell.”

47. On Origen’s universalism, the crucial primary work is Origen, On First Principles (Peri archôn). A critical Latin edition, including Greek fragments, and a full German translation is found in Origenes vier Bücher von den Prinzipien, edited by Görgemanns and Karpp, abbreviated below and in later chapters as “PA.” A few of the key secondary works are (in chronological order): Daniélou, Origen; Méhat, “Apocatastase”; Cornélio, “Les fondements cosmologiques”; Crouzel, Origen, 257–66; Crouzel, Les fins dernières selon Origène; Robinowitz, “Apokatastasis and Suntelia”; S. R. Harmon, “Apokatastasis and Exegesis”; Daley, Hope of the Early Church; McGuckin, Westminster Handbook to Origen; Greggs, Barth, Origen, and Universal Salvation; Ramelli, Christian Doctrine of Apokatastasis.

the preexistence of souls, he spoke as overtly and confidently as Origen did regarding the final salvation of all human beings. A few other early figures—including Diodore of Tarsus, Didymus the Blind, Theodore of Mopsuestia, and Isaac the Syrian (DR 4.9)—held to some version of *apokatastasis* akin to that of Gregory.49 Gregory of Nyssa’s brother, Basil of Caesarea, rejected the doctrine of *apokatastasis*; their friend, Gregory of Nazianzus, remained indefinite on the issue; while Maximus the Confessor—in the judgment of at least one expert—remained in a state of “honorable silence” on the matter.50

A full examination of the views of the early church authors, both before and after Origen, does not support the concept of a universalist “minority report.” In the second-century Greek writings—including the *Shepherd of Hermas*, the *Didache*, the letters traditionally attributed to Clement of Rome, the *Epistle of Barnabas*, and the writings of Irenaeus and Justin Martyr—there is not only a lack of attestation for universalist views; there is instead a clear affirmation of a final dual outcome of heaven and hell. Much of the literature connected with martyrdom expresses a fervent expectation that the martyrs will pass into eternal bliss with God, while those who persecuted them—unless they repent—will go into hell.51

Many of the Greek fathers not only affirmed the reality of hell but also asserted that this was the destiny of most human beings. Irenaeus, Basil, and Cyril of Jerusalem interpreted such passages as Matthew 22:14 (“for many are called, but few are chosen”) as meaning that the majority will be consigned to hell. Basil commented on how few will be saved. One must remember, he wrote, in the days of Christ, “how . . . high priests and scribes and elders devised the plot, and how few of the people were found really receiving the word.” Basil concluded that “it is not the multitude who are being saved, but the elect of God.”12

49. On Isaac the Syrian’s universalism, see Alfeyev, *Spiritual World of Isaac the Syrian*, 279–97. Isaac held that the biblical hell (gehenna) is a place or state of intense though temporary suffering in which the unrepentant are “scourged by the scourge of love” and so gradually purified of their sin (280). The final restoration will include sinful humans and fallen angels alike: “Demons will not remain in their demonic state, and sinners will not remain in their sins; rather, he [God] is going to bring them to a single state of perfection” (292). Isaac wrote that “not even the immense wickedness of the demons can overcome the measure of God’s goodness” (288; see “The Second Part” 39.13). Isaac himself cites Diodore of Tarsus’s *On Providence*.

50. Daley, “Apokatastasis and ‘Honorable Silence.’”

51. On patristic views, see Keith, “Patristic Views on Hell”; Carrouges et al., *L’enfer*.


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of Damascus, in his authoritative eighth-century work *On the Orthodox Faith*, affirmed a final twofold outcome for humans and angels.\(^53\) Taking issue with Origen’s theories, Theophilus of Alexandria preached stinging sermons that vividly depicted the final, irrevocable separation of the wicked from the righteous.\(^54\)

The influential sixth-century Syriac writer Jacob of Sarug (Serugh) responded to the pantheistically oriented universalism of Stephen bar Sudaili with a stern letter that emphasized the finality of God’s judgment and the reality and eternity of punishment: “Life everlasting, and hell everlasting: there is no end to life, and no termination to hell. To the day-light which is on the right hand there is no evening, and to the outer night-darkness on the left, there is no morning. The bridegroom enters and the door of the bride-chamber is closed, and is not opened unto those who knock.”\(^55\) This letter is noteworthy because it was written by a Syriac author, who used different terms and images than the Greek and Latin fathers and yet supported a comparable notion of a final, twofold destiny. The wide range of authors noted above—the Apostolic Fathers, Justin, Irenaeus, Basil, John Chrysostom, Cyril of Jerusalem, Theophilus of Alexandria, John of Damascus, and Syriac authors such as Jacob of Sarug—shows just how mistaken it is to suppose that Augustine invented the doctrine of everlasting punishment in the early fifth century.\(^56\) Without a doubt, some aspects of Augustine’s teaching were innovative (DR 4.3), but his eschatology in its broad outlines was traditional rather than innovative.

Assessments of universalism in Eastern Christianity depend on interpretations of the Fifth Ecumenical Council of 553 and the status of Justinian’s anathemas against Origen or Origenism in 543. These are complicated issues. In his recent publication on the council, Richard Price notes that Origen was condemned not only prior to the council but also by name in the official acts of the Fifth Ecumenical Council. Some of Origen’s twentieth-century defenders view this condemnation as pertaining to Origen’s christological views (i.e., the sanction that Origen’s ideas might have given for Arianism). Given the doctrinal

\(^{53}\) “We shall stand beside the awful judgment-seat of Christ: and the devil and his demons and the man that is his, that is the Antichrist and the impious and the sinful, will be given over to everlasting fire [paradothēsetai . . . eis to pyr aiōnion]. . . . But those who have done good will shine forth as the sun with the angels into life eternal [eis zōēn aiōnion], with our Lord Jesus Christ; ever seeing Him and being in His sight and deriving unceasing joy from Him” (John of Damascus, *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith* 4.27 [PG 94:1228; *NPNF* 2:9:101]).


\(^{55}\) Jacob of Sarug’s letter to Stephen bar Sudaili is reproduced in the original Syriac and in an English translation in Frothingham, *Stephen Bar Sudaili*, 11–27. The quotation is on p. 17.

\(^{56}\) On the relative rarity of universalism in the early church fathers, see *DR* appendix D.
context of the 530s and 540s, though, it seems more likely that Origen was condemned for his eschatological rather than his christological views.\(^7\) Just as significant as the Fifth Ecumenical Council itself is the later reception history of that council. For some fourteen hundred years—or until the mid-twentieth century—theologians and historians regarded the condemnations pronounced at the Fifth Ecumenical Council in Constantinople in 553 as aimed at Origen’s universalism.

Regarding Origen generally, what we find in Orthodoxy is deep ambivalence. The Western and Eastern thinkers from ancient times onward have been of two minds regarding Origen. In the margin of a manuscript of Origen’s commentaries that now resides in the Vatican, George Scholarios, Greek spokesman at the fifteenth-century Council of Florence, the onetime patriarch of Constantinople, and student of both Eastern and Western theology, wrote the following note:

The Western writers say, “Where Origen was good, no one is better; where he was bad, no one is worse.” Our Asian divines say on the one hand that “Origen is the whetstone of us all,” but on the other hand, that “he is the fount of foul doctrines.” Both are right: he splendidly defended Christianity, wonderfully expounded Scripture, and wrote a noble exhortation to martyrdom. But he was also the father of Arianism, and worst of all, said that hellfire would not last forever.\(^8\)

Note the complexity of Scholarios’s statement, which is a fairly typical expression of the pre-twentieth-century Orthodox thinking on Origen. The statement as a whole is neither pro-Origen nor anti-Origen as such, but both at the same time. Origen was the best and wisest of the early church authors and the “whetstone” that sharpened the thinking of the church’s writers. Yet Origen was a “fount of foul doctrines,” and in Scholarios’s view, Origen’s denial of eternal hell was even worse than his influence on the rise of the Arian heresy. Given that Arianism...

\(^7\) Some of Origen’s partisans (e.g., Henri Crouzel) have claimed that the church’s condemnations in 543 and 553 fell on Origen’s followers rather than Origen himself. Some have asserted further that the anti-Origenist canons were never formally approved by the bishops of the Fifth Ecumenical Council, so that they have no force for those who accept the binding authority of a general council of the church. Yet in his recent (2009) translation of documents from the Fifth Ecumenical Council, Richard Price argues that it is “tendentious” to claim that Origen escaped censure at the Fifth Ecumenical Council, inasmuch as he was “included among the heretics anathematized in . . . the canons formally approved at the end of the council” (Acts of the Council of Constantinople of 553, 2:271–72, 280). Moreover, Origen’s teachings were denounced or condemned on multiple occasions in Alexandria, Jerusalem, and Rome, as well as in Constantinople. See the anti-Origenist declarations in DR appendix C.

\(^8\) Vaticanus Gr. 1742, fol. 1r, translated and quoted in Chadwick, Early Christian Thought, 95 (emphasis added). My thanks are due to Jacob Van Sickle, who directed me to this quotation.
was usually regarded as the worst of all heresies among the Greek theologians, this is a remarkable statement.

When medieval and early modern Orthodox authors sought to defend and uphold Origen, they did so in a qualified fashion, without implying that they were in agreement with Origen's doctrine of universal salvation. Origen's twentieth- and twenty-first-century defenders, such as Henri Crouzel and Ilaria Ramelli, have given the impression that universalism is part and parcel of the Origenist package and that we need to accept it all. As the quotation from Scholarios shows, this was not the typical position of earlier Orthodox thinkers. Like these prior interpreters of Origen, Jean Daniélou approached Origen in a discriminating way. For Daniélou, Origen made great contributions to the church (e.g., in biblical exegesis and spirituality), yet this fact alone does not sanction all aspects of his teaching (e.g., eschatology).

Throughout the modern era and well into the twentieth century, Christian Orthodoxy in its official statements taught a final twofold destiny of heaven and hell. The Confession of Dositheus—incorporated into the Acts of the Synod of Constantinople in 1672—spoke of “repose or torment,” “bliss” or “sorrow,” and stated that “each one will receive the full measure of joy or condemnation due to him for the way in which he conducted himself.” In his summary of Orthodox teaching, Metropolitan Platon of Moscow (1737–1812) vividly depicted the final destiny of the lost:

The wicked that have despised the truth and the faith, and during the whole of their life-time have shown no repentance, will be eternally rejected of God, their most benevolent Creator, and deprived of every hope in His mercy. They shall ever be in a dreadful state, and shall be banished into the place of weeping and gnashing of teeth, in the abode of evil spirits, the place of eternal torments. . . . Then the word of Christ shall be fulfilled, “And these shall go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into life eternal” (Matt. xxv.46).

The Greek Orthodox theologian Chrestos Androutsos (1869–1935), professor of theology and ethics from 1895 to 1935 in Chalki and then in Athens, authored a Dogmatics (1907) that was considered in its day the most complete exposition of Orthodox theology. In this work, Androutsos writes that “the theory of Origen and of Gregory of Nyssa concerning the apokatastasis of all—and concerning the repentance of the demons and the ungodly—has been condemned by the church.” In support of this claim, he cites the seventh and eighth anathemas of

59. Gavin, Some Aspects of Contemporary Greek Orthodox Thought, 396. Cf. ibid., 394–422, for a thorough account of Greek Orthodox eschatology as taught in the early twentieth century.
60. Platon, Orthodox Doctrine, 162–63.
the Fifth Ecumenical Council. Androutsos’s writing is thus at odds with later claims that Origen’s *apokatastasis* was an accepted view in modern Christian Orthodoxy. Androutsos’s exposition includes many of the same themes that one finds in traditional Catholic and traditional Protestant teaching. Death marks the moment that decides one’s eternal destiny. From this point onward, no change in one’s spiritual state or condition is possible. He writes, “The result of the General Judgment is the eternal life of the righteous and the eternal punishment of the sinners—the former inheriting the Kingdom of God, and the latter being cast into hell fire.”

Iōannēs Papadopoulos, who taught in Boston and published a Greek-language summary of Orthodox theology in 1932, offered a teaching similar to that of Androutsos. After death, sinners go into a hell of unending suffering.

Given this brief survey of Orthodoxy, one might ask: If universalism was not an accepted view throughout the history of the Orthodox Church, why did Gregory of Nyssa escape censure in the decisions of the early church councils? It seems that Gregory’s view of *apokatastasis* was sufficiently unlike Origen’s to allow him some wiggle room. By giving up the speculative and disputed teaching on preexistent souls, Gregory did much to deflect criticism. Gregory of Nyssa was specially honored—along with his fellow Cappadocians Basil and Gregory of Nazianzus—for the major role he played in the development of the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity. Beyond that, there was respect for Gregory of Nyssa’s contribution to Orthodox spirituality and the consideration that Gregory was Basil’s brother. Androutsos took the view that Gregory’s teaching on the *apokatastasis* had been condemned, even though Gregory himself had escaped condemnation. This seems to have been a widely shared view in Orthodox teaching up to quite recently. In light of the sources cited above—and others that could be cited—it seems that belief in the *apokatastasis* was sometimes tolerated as a private opinion among the Orthodox, though it was not publicly taught as official doctrine within the Orthodox churches.

61. Androutsos, *Dogmatikē*, 445–46, with 446n2 (my translation). On eternal judgment, see the “synopsis” on eschatology (407–8) and the concluding discussion of “eternal life and eternal judgment” (445–48).


65. See DR 1.7 below for the Latin, Western appeal to Gregory of Nyssa over against the Greek theologians at the fifteenth-century Council of Ferrara-Florence, in defense of the medieval Roman doctrine of purgatory. The Greeks rejected the appeal to Gregory because they understood that he taught universalism and not a Western-style purgatory. At this council, the Greeks informed the Latins that their faith did not rest on the opinion of any church father taken singly. Gregory’s view on *apokatastasis*—in opposition to the other fathers—was not acceptable to them.
Like mainline Protestantism and Roman Catholicism, contemporary Christian Orthodoxy appears to have followed the general pattern in recent decades of shifting in the direction of universalism. Since the 1970s, a number of Orthodox bishops have begun more or less openly to support the doctrine of universalism. Among the prominent voices today are Bishop Kallistos Ware of Britain and Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeyev of Russia. Yet as the presentation here has shown, from a historical standpoint this is quite a new development.

1.4. Evangelicals, Pentecostals, and Charismatics: Newcomers to Universalism

Perhaps the most recent change has been the growing acceptance of universalism among conservative evangelical Protestants and Pentecostal-Charismatic Christians. A later chapter (DR 11) will discuss the liberalizing evangelicals in considerable detail, and so the discussion here will be curtailed. Beginning in the 1970s, evangelicals were engaged in internal debates over the question of Christian inclusivism. In this respect, the evangelicals were not far behind Roman Catholics, though the inclusivism debate among Catholics began about a decade earlier and crested earlier. There were differences in the two debates, since Catholics assumed that participation in the visible Catholic Church and in the church’s sacraments was the chief means of salvation, while evangelicals focused instead on the opportunity (or lack thereof) to hear the preaching of the gospel message. Catholics wrote of the “unchurched” and evangelicals of the “unevangelized.” Yet, allowing for such differences, there were parallels as both Catholics and evangelicals came to accept some notion of a wider or larger hope for those who did not have access to the visible Christian community, its preaching, or its sacraments.

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, the intra-evangelical debate shifted direction and focus as a number of well-respected British, Canadian, and US evangelical leaders indicated their tentative support for conditional immortality, or annihilationism—that is, the theory that the wicked will not be punished forever but will simply cease to exist (see DR 1.10). John Stott, in his day widely regarded as Britain’s leading evangelical, came out publicly in support of this view. The Canadian Baptist Clark Pinnock also publicly identified himself as

66. See Ware, Inner Kingdom, 193–215; Alfeyev, Spiritual World of Isaac the Syrian; Alfeyev, Christ the Conqueror of Hell.
67. See S. T. Davis, “Universalism, Hell and the Fate of the Ignorant”; Crockett and Sigountos, Through No Fault of Their Own; John Sanders, No Other Name; Erickson, How Shall They Be Saved?; Strange, Possibility of Salvation.
an annihilationist. The British evangelicals were generally more ready than their US counterparts to question traditional eschatological views. To be sure, the conditional immortality, or annihilationist, view had at least some traction among evangelical Protestants since the nineteenth century. Among Roman Catholics, by contrast, conditionalism was and is generally understood to be contrary to official church doctrine. This was one point where the evangelical discussions diverged from those of the Catholics. Yet one might suggest that conditionalism functioned among evangelicals analogously to Catholic belief in purgatory. The emotional pressure generated by believing in hell (John Stott thought that sincere Christians might “crack under the strain”) could be relieved by evangelical proposals regarding the annihilation of the wicked, even as traditional Catholics invoked purgatory as a humane alternative to eternal hell.

At a 1991 conference held in Britain, evangelical scholars reexamined the question of universalism. Their findings, as published in 1992, were more evenhanded toward universalism than one might have expected, given the thorough condemnation of the teaching among earlier generations of evangelical scholars. A widespread turn toward universalism among evangelical scholars and authors did not take shape until after the year 2000, with Thomas Talbott’s The Inescapable Love of God (1999) serving as a harbinger of things to come. Among Pentecostals and Charismatics, it is still rather early to talk about any large-scale or noticeable trend in the direction of universalism, though there are a few independent Charismatic teachers whose emphasis on grace has in recent years developed into an implicit or explicit universalism.

1.5. Should Everyone Be Told? Universalism as a Secret Gospel

Many ancient and early modern authors presumed that most people required the threat and fear of hell to prevent them from falling into sin. In his great


69. For the history of conditionalist, or annihilationist, views, see Froome, Conditionalist Faith.

70. The Lutheran-to-Catholic convert Richard John Neuhaus suggested in the journal First Things that “perhaps the fate of Judas is that of total annihilation.” Cardinal Dulles responded that this view is “contestable” and that “the constant teaching of the Magisterium has been that unrepentant sinners are sent to eternal punishment. Judas must be in hell unless he repented” (“Population of Hell”).

71. Stott commented, “Emotionally, I find the concept [of eternal conscious torment] intolerable and do not understand how people can live with it without either cauterising their feelings or cracking under the strain” (D. L. Edwards and J. Stott, Essentials, 314).

72. Cameron, Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell.
apologetic treatise, *Contra Celsum*, Origen states simply that hell is a place of punishment and then adds:

> But the remarks which might be made on this topic are neither to be made to all, nor to be uttered on the present occasion; for it is not unattended with danger to commit to writing the explanation of such subjects, seeing the multitude need no further instruction than that which relates to the punishment of sinners; while to ascend beyond this is not expedient, for the sake of those who are with difficulty restrained, even by fear of eternal punishment, from plunging into any degree of wickedness, and into the flood of evils which result from sin.\(^73\)

When set alongside other passages from Origen (DR 3.6–3.7), the passage suggests that he did not wish to publicize his universalistic views. This may have been not simply a self-interested decision on Origen’s part (i.e., an effort to avoid controversy) but a principled, pastoral position.\(^74\) While many modern universalists have remained quiet about their views for fear of reprisal, this sort of reticence might not have been so important in Origen’s day, when the church’s official doctrine on the afterlife had not been so fully elaborated. Like most non-universalists, Origen thought that the open proclamation of universal salvation would have morally disastrous consequences. Hell’s non-eternity was therefore to remain a secret, reserved for the spiritually mature. At points in his writings, Origen does not hesitate to state that God could and would use deception, in the same way that adults use deception with little children by putting on a stern face with them and seeming to be angry without really being angry at all.\(^75\) This is done to get the child to obey. Yet applying this idea to God raises questions about God’s ethical character.

It is clear, then, that Origen never proposed a “universalist gospel”—if by “gospel” one means “a message to be publicly proclaimed.” The irony in Origen is that universalism is good news but *good news to be kept quiet*. There is fantastic, wonderfully good news—that none of God’s punishments will last forever and that everyone will eventually make it to heaven—but few people should be allowed to learn this truth. Why? Because the knowledge of the unreality of hell will lead many people to presume on God’s mercy and to plunge deeper into wickedness, imagining that they can “sin now” and “pay later” for what they have done in another world-age, another embodiment, or in some purgatorial state of postmortem suffering. Whether it is ethical to keep good news quiet, or withhold gospel truth, is a debatable question.\(^76\)

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\(^73\) Origen, *Contra Celsum* 6.26 (PG 11:1332; ANF 4:585).
\(^74\) M. S. M. Scott, “Guarding the Mysteries of Salvation.”
\(^76\) One is reminded of 2 Kings 7, where some lepers leave the besieged and starving city of Samaria and find that the Syrian besiegers have fled and left behind an abundance of food, drink,
The Englishman Thomas Burnet (ca. 1635–1715) wrote a treatise regarding the afterlife under the title, *De Statu Mortuorum et Resurgentium* (*Of the State of the Dead and of Those That Are to Rise*). He never intended for his book to be published, but circulated a few copies among friends, with blank pages inserted on which others might add their comments. Following his discussion of the non-eternity of hell, Burnet exhorts his readers: “Whatever you decide, in your own mind, about these punishments being eternal or not, the received doctrine and words must be used for the people, and when preaching to the populace, which is inclined to vice and can be deterred from evil only by the fear of punishment.” He adds, “Therefore, if anyone translates these things, which are addressed to the learned, into the vulgar tongue, I shall consider it done with ill-will and evil intent.” With Burnet, as with Origen, we have a double doctrine: an esoteric teaching designed for those of advanced spiritual or intellectual character, and an exoteric teaching appropriate for the multitudes who cannot restrain their sinful impulses but need to be restrained by crude, fear-inspiring images of hellfire.

The Anglican minister John Tillotson, in a sermon preached in 1690, just months before he became archbishop of Canterbury, argued that although the New Testament plainly threatens eternal punishment, God would not be breaking his own word if he suspended the threatened punishment. Tillotson argued that, morally speaking, the failure to execute a threat of punishment is different from the failure to fulfill a promise of reward. The former implies no ethical defect, while the latter does. At the same time, Tillotson insisted that his hearers should still believe in the eternity of hell and not speak anything contrary to this viewpoint. Tillotson thus offered an odd blend of esoteric and exoteric teaching on the afterlife in the same sermon.

One wonders how Origen, Burnet, and Tillotson could be confident that some people need the fear of hell to be prompted to obey God, while others can be counted on to obey God from purer, nobler motives. Is there not a whiff of elitism here? And who is qualified to decide who learns the truth and

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78. John Tillotson, *A Sermon Preach'd before the Queen at White-Hall*, cited in Walker, *Decline of Hell*, 6. Tillotson's sermons were among the most widely read texts in colonial America. In the changing milieu in New England after 1700, “a new generation of tolerant Anglican authors were read. . . . None was more widely read and admired than Archbishop Tillotson. Almost every surviving student library inventory included his works” (McClymond and McDermott, *Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, 51).
who does not? If there is no hell or if hell is temporary, then the Christian preacher who knows this but refuses to say it speaks insincerely. But for these universalists, the preacher’s job was to scare people with the message of an eternal hell even while the preacher knew that no such possibility existed. This secret gospel of universalism thus becomes morally problematic. What if a congregant were to ask the priest or pastor about hell? Is the minister supposed to lie? And how could a Christian leader have the duty to lie about God?

A dramatically different point of view on universalism appeared in the writings of Jane Lead and Richard Roach. Lead was influenced by Böhme and other currents of modern esotericism. Her visions led her to embrace a doctrine of universal salvation that she did not find in Böhme. She considered universalism to be a special doctrine entrusted to her, to bring to the world at large. Lead claimed that the church of earlier times was not spiritually ready for this teaching and that her little fellowship of the Philadelphian Society in London would serve as the herald of a newly unveiled universalist gospel. Her Oxford-trained follower, Richard Roach, spoke of God’s “General Amnesty.” Essentially the idea was that God will decide in the end to surprise everyone. No one’s sins will count against them. All alienated human beings and fallen angels will find salvation. Lead and her disciple Roach—like Origen, Burnet, and Tillotson—distinguished between an exoteric teaching on the last things (i.e., heaven and hell) and an esoteric teaching (universal salvation). They suggested, though, that the exoteric teaching is characteristic of a preliminary and immature stage in church history, which will pass away and be succeeded by a coming glorious era typified by the open and full disclosure of divine truth, including the truth of universal salvation. Lead’s viewpoint resembles that of Joachim of Fiore and other adherents of a “Third Age” of the Holy Spirit that goes beyond the limitations of existing churches and the Old and New Testaments.79

The teachings of Lead and Roach raise the question: Is God free to set aside the punishments that both the Old and New Testaments stipulate for those who disobey and reject God? Most Protestant thinkers who addressed this question held that God is bound to fulfill whatever God has spoken. Martin Luther, in addressing the topic of damnation in 1522, stressed the supreme importance of God’s truthfulness. In a letter, he poses the question of whether those who died without faith can be saved, and he answers in the negative. He admits that God’s judgments may seem harsh or unfair to us and that this led Origen and others

79. On Joachim’s view of history, see de Lubac, La postérité spirituelle de Joachim de Fiore, and Gil, “Zeitkonstruktion als Kampf- und Protestmittel.”
to propose universal salvation. Yet Luther writes that “one must separate widely our way of thinking from God’s truth, and take care that we do not make God a liar, but rather allow that all men, angels and devils will be damned than that God should not be truthful in His words.”⁸⁰ The American theologian Jonathan Edwards offered an elaborate response to Tillotson’s views on God’s promises and threats, arguing that God is not intrinsically bound in any way to save or to damn anyone. Once God has spoken concerning this, however, then God is bound to follow through on what he has said. Some of God’s promises have no conditions attached to them, and other divine promises or threats specify that if condition X exists, then Y must follow. In such cases, a failure on God’s part to execute a promise or a threat would contradict God’s veracity. It would also undermine respect for God’s credibility.⁸¹

Most of the early modern attacks on the doctrine of hell are known today only “from posthumous and anonymous publications, manuscripts and hearsay.”⁸² The eighteenth-century New England minister Charles Chauncy was convinced of the doctrine of universal salvation as early as the 1750s, or about thirty years before he anonymously published his two universalist treatises, Salvation for All Men (1782) and The Mystery Hid from Ages and Generations (1784). During these years, Chauncy quietly made converts to his views by giving portions of his unpublished manuscript to selected disciples. One of Chauncy’s disciples, Jeremy Belknap, wrote in 1782 that “the doctrine of universal restitution has long been kept as a secret among learned men.” Those in the know spoke in code about the manuscript they had read, asking one another at ministers’ gatherings whether they had “tasted the pudding.”⁸³ So the phenomenon of a secret gospel continued into the modern period.

Church history provides numerous instances of pseudonymous or anonymous publications in favor of universalism: the works of George Rust (who anonymously defended Origen in 1661), Georg Klein-Nicolai (who defended universalism in 1753 under the pseudonym Paul Siegvolck), and Charles Chauncy (in the 1780s, as mentioned above). And most recently, Robin Parry, while working as an editor for a British evangelical press, published his universalist views in The Evangelical Universalist (2006) under the pseudonym Gregory MacDonald. Some five years later, Parry came out of the closet with the edited volume “All Shall Be Well” (2011), published with his real name alongside his pseudonym.

⁸⁰. Martin Luther, Sendbrief über die Frage, ob auch jemand, ohne Glauben verstorben, selig werden möge, 318–26, citing 322, quoted in Walker, Decline of Hell, 8.
⁸². Walker, Decline of Hell, 6.
⁸³. See Griffin, Old Brick, 126–27, 170.