

EVANGELICAL REVIEW OF THEOLOGY

VOLUME 18

Volume 18 • Number 1 • January 1994

Evangelical Review of Theology

*Articles and book reviews original and selected from
publications worldwide for an international
readership for the purpose of discerning the
obedience of faith*

EDITOR: BRUCE J. NICHOLLS



Published by
PATERNOSTER PERIODICALS

truth claims are being made, that they are capable of being tested, and that as a matter of principle they ought to be tested. And if pluralism is resistant to having *its* truth claims tested, it can hardly expect to be taken seriously—save by those who for the culturally-conditioned moment share its prejudices. It will be a sad day when a claim to be telling the truth is met with the riposte that there is no truth to tell.

Let me recall an episode from another period of uncertainty about the future and viability of the gospel, when Christian confidence seemed low. At the height of the ‘New Theology’ controversy in Britain in 1907, Peter Taylor Forsyth remarked that this attempt at radical theological restatement was like ‘a bad photograph: overexposed and underdeveloped’. That summarizes my feeling about much liberal theological restatement in the face of the pluralist challenge. It has received too much attention in the media and in the Church, and it rests upon inadequate theological foundations.

In this article I have been exploring some more responsible and authentically Christian approaches to the challenge posed by the rise of pluralism. As will be clear. I have had time only to identify a few approaches, mapping out briefly what deserves to be discussed at far greater length. But my basic conviction is clear: pluralism is inherently self-destructive and owes its appeal more to the rhetoric of political correctness than to its intellectual credentials. As I have argued throughout, it seems that the credibility of a pluralist ideology rests entirely upon a willing suspension of one’s critical faculties. Pluralism has the temporary advantage that it corresponds to the spirit of our age and is thus appropriate to the committed liberal outlook of so much of American academia. But that is not a permanent feature of the world. That outlook, and the resulting cultural plausibility of a pluralist ideology, will be subject to historical erosion—and what will happen then?

I conclude with a wise comment by William Inge, formerly dean of St. Paul’s Cathedral, London: ‘He who marries the spirit of the age today will be a widower tomorrow.’ Tomorrow is not that far away, and responsible Christian theology, which I believe to be represented in the readership of this *Journal*, must speak today for that tomorrow.

Alister McGrath is lecturer in Christian doctrine and ethics at Oxford University in Oxford, England OX2 6PW. [p. 20](#)

The Logic of Hell: A Response to Annihilationism

Simon Chan

Printed with permission

The eternal destiny of those who reject the gospel, let alone those who have never heard it, is the most agonizing issue evangelicals face today in constructing a coherent Christian theology. While, traditionally, evangelicals have limited their understanding to the literal text of Scripture, this Chinese theologian adopts the logic of philosophy in order to clarify the issue as a groundwork for better exegesis. His wide-ranging discussion includes the

integrity of human freedom in relation to the integrity of the Creator-creature relationship, hell as the choice of the self against God or as God's retributive act and the relationship of acts in finite time to punishment in eternity. The author explores the nature of punishment as understood by universalists and by several well-known evangelicals who are re-examining the concept of annihilation. Finally, the author raises the issue of the all-encompassing sovereign grace of God, but does not develop his thinking on it. Surely it is here that evangelicals must give faithful and courageous leadership if the secular and religiously pluralistic people of our time are going to be drawn to the love of God in Christ.

Editor

INTRODUCTION

Historically, there are three theories about the future of the impenitent. The first and by far the oldest is the theory of eternal punishment (EP) or the doctrine of hell. The second is the theory of universal salvation (apokatastasis) or universalism which states that all will ultimately be **P. 21** saved, including the devil.¹ The third theory is called annihilationism. Unlike the previous two, this theory has no strong Christian tradition behind it.² In modern times, its association with various cult groups like Jehovah's Witnesses and Seventh-Day Adventism has tended to make it suspect in the eyes of conservative Christians. But it is interesting to note that in recent years it has gained a number of significant advocates among evangelicals, including Stephen Travis,³ P. E. Hughes,⁴ Clark Pinnock⁵ and John Stott.⁶ There are, of course, variations in the annihilationist position. One approach is to combine it with some form of purgatorial doctrine tending towards universalism and to see annihilation as a last resort after all efforts to win the free creature over have been exhausted.⁷ But all annihilationists are agreed that their position is to be preferred over the theory of eternal punishment because it makes better sense of God's goodness and justice.

The purpose of this paper is to respond to the main arguments of annihilationism and answer its main objections to eternal punishment. It will do this by showing

1. that annihilationism falls into the same error as universalism in not taking full cognizance of human freedom, albeit in a different way.
2. that it does not overcome the alleged difficulty attendant on the theory of eternal punishment.
3. that eternal punishment is the only logical position to hold which does justice to human freedom and the Christian doctrine of creation.

¹ For a brief historical survey of universalism see Richard J. Bauckham, 'Universalism: A Historical Survey,' *Evangelical Review of Theology* 15 (June 1991), 22–35.

² See *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, eds. F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingston (Oxford: OUP, 1983), s.v. 'conditional immortality'.

³ *I Believe in the Second Coming* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 196–99.

⁴ *The True Image: The Origin and Destiny of Man in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 402–7. The section was reprinted as 'Conditional Immortality' in *Evangel* (Summer 1992), 10–12.

⁵ 'The Destruction of the Finally Impenitent,' *Criswell Theological Review* 4:2 (1990), 243–59.

⁶ *Essentials: A Liberal/Evangelical Dialogue* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1988), 313–20.

⁷ This is the view of Brian Hebblethwaite in *The Christian Hope* (London: Marshalls, 1984), 215ff.

The adequacy of any theory, given our Christian assumptions, must be measured by its ability to maintain two things: (1) the integrity of man as a free creature and (2) the integrity of the Creator-creature relationship. We hope to show that only the doctrine of hell satisfies these two criteria.

We have adopted a more philosophical approach rather than, say, a biblical approach because on this particular issue we need, first and foremost, to think clearly—and philosophy is essentially clear thinking. It is important to work through the logical implications of our basic Christian assumption about the nature of God and his creature Man. This may actually provide the groundwork for better exegesis. Advocates of each theory have often accused their opponents of succumbing to psychological and cultural p. 22 conditioning. The fact of the matter is that we cannot avoid these formative factors. They influence us unconsciously and form our basic attitudes towards certain beliefs which in turn often colour our reading of Scripture. Why is it, for instance, that since the 19th century, one of the stock arguments against hell is that the saints could not enjoy heaven if they are aware of people suffering in hell, whereas earlier theologians like Tertullian, Cyprian, Augustine and Aquinas, to name a few, argued in exactly the opposite way, that the redeemed's contemplation of the torments of hell would actually enhance their blessedness?⁸ It is not our purpose at this point to decide on who are right (or more mentally sound!), but simply to note that each view flows logically from certain implicit feelings which are held to be true. To give another example, one could not help *feeling* (note well!) the special pleading of Stott for a reconsideration of annihilationism. He spoke 'with a heavy heart' on the subject of hell:

[E]motionally, I find the concept intolerable and do not understand how people can live with it without either cauterizing their feelings or cracking under the strain.⁹

But Stott would not allow his feelings to get in the way of his belief. Ultimately, the doctrine of annihilation, according to him, must be based on Scripture rather than feeling.¹⁰ Two questions come immediately to view. First, did it occur to Stott that his inability to empathize with those who believe in hell may be the result of modern psychological conditioning? Secondly, is it probable that such deep feelings would have absolutely no bearing on the way he understood the text of Scripture?

The theory of annihilation involves issues which have been extensively discussed by others in connection with universalism. We shall therefore have to begin with a brief discussion of the latter.

I. UNIVERSALISM AND THE PROBLEM OF FREE WILL

Most of the recent arguments for eternal punishment have been in response to universalism.¹¹ Perhaps the most telling argument against universalism is that, so far, it has not been able to provide a coherent explanation of human freedom.¹² Universalists

⁸ Bauckham, *Universalism*, 28.

⁹ *Essentials*, 313, 314.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 315.

¹¹ Ronald L. Hall, 'Hell, is this really necessary?' *Journal of the Philosophy of Religion* 25 (1989), 109–116; Jerry L. Walls, *Hell: The Logic of Damnation* (U. of Notre Dame Press, 1992).

¹² By 'freedom' we have in mind what in philosophy is called libertarian freedom. It means that the person's ability to choose with respect to a certain significant action is not determined by any antecedent condition

could maintain their position only by radically compromising the idea of freedom and in the end the integrity of man.

The issue is put most succinctly by Hall:

If the choice is truly free, [hell] must p. 23 be possible, even if never actual. God finally then will not *make* us accept. If some refuse, then God has no choice but to say to them, 'Not my will, but yours be done—return to the nonbeing from which I first called you'.¹³

Walls, too, has shown that both universalism and predestinationism involve a view of divine omnipotence which logically excludes any meaningful predication of human freedom. At most both views succeed in giving to man some kind of psychological freedom: a feeling of being free which is causally determined.¹⁴ We see this emasculated freedom also in a recent article by Kerry Walters in response to Hall's earlier essay. It is a strange way to define freedom in the way Walters does:

Even though I *must* ultimately accept salvation, it is perfectly within my prerogative to attitudinally will or rebel against such an inevitability.¹⁵

In other words, God could not tolerate people walking freely in hell; he would rather have them carded kicking into heaven. But the very idea of coercion of whatever kind (physical, psychological) is a contradiction of the idea of heaven. Heaven is where man is fully and freely the man God wants him to be. Universalism can be maintained only by vitiating the integrity of human freedom.

Universalists like Hick, however, understand the problem that freedom poses. He therefore attempts to develop a universalism that would give full play to that freedom vis-a-vis God's eternal love. Hick's basic premise is the Augustinian dictum 'You have created us for yourself'; that is to say, God created man with a predisposition towards himself.¹⁶ As the 'divine therapist', God has unlimited resources and time to deal with his 'patient'.¹⁷ So it seems that the cards are stacked in favour of the sinner's salvation. God is eternally patient and will continue to woo until man eventually freely yields his will to him. Hick recognizes that it is logically possible for man to continue to resist, but the probability that he will not 'amounts ... to a practical certainty'.¹⁸ Two things must be said about Hick's argument. First, Hick does not really solve the problem of freedom even with his p. 24 Augustinian conception of human nature once it is admitted that, notwithstanding his

or cause. It is only with such freedom that there can be true moral responsibility. For a defence of this concept of freedom see Alvin C. Plantinga, *God, Freedom and Evil* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 29–34.

¹³ Op. cit., 116.

¹⁴ As in Anthony Flew, 'Divine Omnipotence and Human Freedom' in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, eds. A. Flew and A. MacIntyre (London: SCM, 1955), 150–53. Noted by Walls, 'Can God Save Anyone He Will?' *Scottish Journal of Theology*, vol. 38, 167. It must be noted that Flew is no universalist. His point is to show that God does not exist. The argument runs as follows: Since it is possible for God to create free creatures who are causally determined to do only good, and since it would make a better world than the present one, there is no God who made the present world.

For a recent predestinarian understanding of freedom, see John Feinberg's contribution in *Predestination and Free Will*, eds. David Basinger and Randall Basinger (Downers Grove).

¹⁵ 'Hell, this isn't necessary after all,' *Journal for the Philosophy of Religion* 29 (June 1991), 180.

¹⁶ *Death and Eternal Life* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1976), 251.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 253–4.

¹⁸ John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (London: Macmillan, 1966), 381. Noted by Jerry Walls, 'Can God Save Anyone He Will?' *Scottish Journal of Theology* 32:2 (1985), 160.

predisposition, man is still capable of resisting God's will. Hick asks whether or not God is 'seeking actively to bring all men truly to himself'.¹⁹ Free will defenders could still agree with him that God does, but what God makes *possible* is logically different from what he makes *certain*. In the end Hick is forced to make the quantum leap from what *could* or we hope *would* happen to what *must* happen.²⁰ Secondly, Hick's confidence that the sinner could be changed by increasing two factors, love (L) and time (T), does not sufficiently take into account another kind of problem. One of the most basic principles of moral theology concerning the nature of sin is that it grows and increasingly hardens the heart with time. The longer one persists in sin the more difficult it will be not to sin. If a sinner keeps rejecting, the chances of his accepting will correspondingly get smaller through time.²¹ The possibility of conversion would eventually become so small as to be negligible. Human freedom (F) when rightly exercised (R) leads to greater freedom (F+), but freedom exercised in the wrong direction (W) leads to bondage (non-F) or a self-destructive freedom. The range of *actual* choices becomes more and more limited through time until the soul chooses only one thing: himself. His condition has become, in Luther's words, *incurvatus in se*. Thus,

F(R) + (L + T) [rarr] F+

F(W) + (L + T) [rarr] non-F²²

Hick's argument would hold if we assume an actual increase of God's love towards the unredeemed, like increasing the dosage of a medicine until it works. But Christian theology tells us that God has given all he could have given for the sinner. He could not have given more. Even where 'grace did much more abound' in the presence of abounding sin, there must come a point where the 'optimal grace' is given.²³

The only factor which could be increased, then, is time. But, again, if our moral theology is right, time does not work for the sinner. If he makes the first choice against God the next choice will be, all things being equal, more difficult. The likelihood p. 25 of his choosing against God will be greater.²⁴ There will come a time when the choice for God will be so improbable as to become practically impossible. That time is when the creature

¹⁹ *Death*, 257.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 259.

²¹ Cf. Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling and The Sickness unto Death*, trans. Walter Lowrie (New York: Doubleday, 1954), 236–62.

²² F is a created, natural and as yet unactualized freedom whereas F+ and non-F are qualified freedoms moving in opposite directions. It is the contention of moral theology that the freedom of the redeemed and the freedom of the damned do not have the same logical status. F+ is still in principle open to the knowledge of evil; it *could* (but would not) choose evil. But non-F is incapable of understanding the good.

²³ The idea of optimal grace suggested by Jerry Walls is helpful in overcoming the severe problem posed by a strong view of divine sovereignty: the belief that God possesses 'middle knowledge', that is, God knows what free creatures *would do* in a given circumstance. What they would do may not be actualized, in which case it is a counterfactual of freedom. The idea of middle knowledge raises serious questions about divine goodness: Why would God create such creatures who would eventually be damned if he had knowledge of what they would freely choose? Hick, of course, denies middle knowledge, and therefore could posit 'eternal wooing'. Walls, *Hell: The Logic of Damnation*, 37–40, 85–93.

²⁴ We say 'all things being equal' because it is possible that God may actually increase grace to overcome the resistance. But then, it is also possible that that grace will be further resisted, thus leading to greater hardness. This point of moral theology is not to suggest that the slippery down slide is inevitable, but that given the way things are in the moral universe, this is the way it *would* work.

freely rejects 'optimal grace'. Universalists, of course, would deny such a possibility. As one universalist put it recently,

Perhaps one should be content to speak of the indefinite (and so, nondefinite!) persistence or endurance of a flee 'no' to God, but not of its finality or eternity. As long as human freedom tries to refuse God, it fails to reach the finality for which it is created, for this finality comes not from human freedom in itself, but from and in God.²⁵

It is true that hell is not part of God's purpose of creation. God never intended man to be in hell. But that is quite different from saying that he could not be there. For to say that man could not have *decisively* chosen hell implies that God must have created him in such a way that he *must* ultimately believe. The freedom 'from and in God' is precisely the freedom to say 'no'. We are back to a compromised freedom. But if we recognize the full force of freedom, it means that ultimately hell is man's creation.

The view of Hick and Sachs seems to presuppose freedom (F) as a constant while the positive factors influencing F such as love and time increase. But F is not a constant. The very nature of moral choice is such that one is either becoming more free or less free. One is moving either towards F+ or non-F. And if this be the nature of freedom, then there is not a single factor left which induces belief in the inevitability of universal salvation.

If we are to give full play to the concept of divine justice and human freedom—which is what Christian theology would seem to require—then the question of purgatory will have to become an important factor in the whole debate. It is a reasonable construct on *prima facie* evidences. The present world is obviously an unequal world. Not every one has an opportunity to hear the gospel. Even when the gospel is heard, not everyone has the same degree of exposure to it. It is also obvious that death overtakes people at different stages of life and (we may reasonably surmise) in different spiritual conditions. To suppose that their final destiny would be decisively fixed at death would seem, at least logically, to be an injustice, unless one assumes that every person just before death is given their 'optimal grace'. But if God does it just before death, then why not after death? Most evangelicals, however, would balk at the very idea of a 'second chance'. It is anathema to both the annihilationist and advocate of EP not only on the p. 26 ground that it contradicts the alleged teaching of the Bible that the final destiny of man is decisively settled at death,²⁶ but also that it will take away all motivation for evangelizing the world.²⁷ Our belief is that the finality of death has been given much more weight than it deserves. The real issue is the nature of freedom. If man is morally free, then no number of second chances will lead him to salvation if he refuses it. By the same token, the possibility of his continual resistance after death does not make the doctrine of the second chance a serious threat to the present preaching of the gospel. In point of fact, our missionary task will still be as urgent considering that the sooner a person hears the gospel the more likely he is to receive it. The longer he waits the more difficult it gets. The possibility or nonpossibility of second chances is not really the decisive issue.

II. THE PROBLEMS OF ANNIHILATIONISM

²⁵ John R. Sachs, S. J., 'Current Eschatology: Universal Salvation and the Problem of Hell,' *Theological Studies* 52 (1991), 252.

²⁶ Harold O. J. Brown, 'Will the Lost Suffer Forever?' *Criswell Theological Review* 4 (Spring 1990), 277; Stott, *Essentials*, 314.

²⁷ Brown, *ibid.*

If the basic problem of universalism is the failure to take seriously the concept of freedom, the same could be said of annihilationism. Yet, advocates of the latter who reject universalism on the ground that it fails to take full cognizance of human freedom fail to see that their own position suffers from the same logical flaw. This will become obvious when we examine some of the arguments used by annihilationists for their rejection of the idea of hell.

A. Annihilation and Future Bliss

One common argument used against EP runs as follows: How could the saints be happy in heaven if they know full well that there are sinners in hell? But annihilationism does not overcome the psychological difficulty which is supposed to be present in a doctrine of hell. In order to make the saints truly happy, annihilationists must be prepared to defend the idea that the annihilation of unredeemed souls must be accompanied by the annihilation of certain memories in the saints; otherwise mere elimination of their being would be of no help if the saints in heaven could still remember them.

B. Annihilation and Divine Sovereignty

A second argument is from divine sovereignty. How could God be all in all if throughout all eternity there will always exist a blight in his creation? Would it not spoil the perfection that we have come to expect of the new creation? But does the existence of hell impugn divine sovereignty? No, because God could have eliminated it. But the moment he freely chose to create this world of free agents, he had already actualized a world in which evil could be present. Such a world is compatible with the Christian doctrine of divine omnipotence.²⁸ We [p. 27](#) may say that God took a risk; we do not know why. Thus creation is always regarded by Christians as a 'free act' of God.

But the real problem for annihilationism is whether it could make any meaningful predication of divine goodness. Annihilation means the unmaking of free, created agents. It means the taking away of that freedom which defines the structure of the moral relationship between God and man. It brings into question the integrity of creation. It is more likely that God will continue to maintain the created in their freedom and responsibility (even if it is a freedom purely for self) since he has already shown us how he has chosen to relate to his creation when he created man as a free agent. In short, it is reasonable to assume that God plays fair with his creation. He keeps to the ground rules. At least universalism expresses a hope which is *hypothetically* realizable (though perhaps not *actually* realizable). Universalism *could* be true without impugning the integrity of creation, whereas annihilationism could not be true without bringing into question the moral integrity of the Creator-creature relationship.

Annihilation is necessary only if we conceive of creation as existing under some kind of divine necessity, either under the principle of diffusiveness (PD) or the principle of plentitude (PP). The principle of diffusiveness states that goodness has a way of sharing, multiplying itself. If God is perfectly good, then a contingent universe *must* be the result. The principle of plentitude states that perfect goodness necessarily expresses itself in as

²⁸ Plantinga has convincingly shown that the 'free will defence' makes it possible to believe in *both* the existence of evil and the omnipotence of God. For the actualizing of such a world in which creatures are free precludes the actualization of other possible worlds in which creatures could do no wrong. Thus the fact that another seemingly better world could have existed does not mean that God is not able to create it. [*God, Freedom, and Evil*, 29–44.]

many ways as are possible, and produces as many kinds of good as it can.²⁹ If our doctrine of creation is predicated on PP or PD, then a situation which reduces one or the other will, of necessity, have to be eliminated. If so the presence of hell would be a threat to divine goodness. The furtherance of PD or PP (as in universalism) or the elimination of factors reducing PD or PP (as in annihilationism) would become necessary. But orthodoxy has maintained that creation is a free act. God is not under any necessity to create because he is a self-sufficient trinity. So, even if creation, as a result of sin, suffers from a reduction of diffusiveness and plentitude, it does not make God any less perfectly good. In short, the Christian doctrine of creation as a free act makes it philosophically tenable to maintain both perfect divine goodness and the existence of hell. It is because creation is a free act that we can agree with Morris that 'the full cost of creating free persons may be far beyond our power to imagine'.³⁰

C. Annihilation and Divine Punishment

The third objection of annihilationism to EP is, simply put, this: How p. 28 could sin committed by finite beings within finite time be punished forever? But the problem for annihilationism is that it bases its objection on a concept of eternal punishment which is largely rejected by most of its modern defenders themselves. They would be just as much against the idea of God tormenting sinners against their will. Thus Hall distinguishes between (active) 'punishing' and (self-imposed) 'punishment',³¹ while Packer prefers 'retribution' rather than 'punishment'.³² In both cases, what is highlighted in the punishment is not so much what God does against the sinner as what the sinner does to himself. As C. S. Lewis so rightly puts it, 'the doors of hell are locked on the *inside*'.³³

That hell is essentially the choice of self against God and, therefore, a radical evil because against the highest good, is an idea that we need to explore further because it is only on such an idea that the doctrine of EP can be effectively defended. The first thing to be said about it is that it is not a sort of *theologia ex eventu*, but is probably derived from the depth of Christian consciousness reflecting upon the totality of revelation. We have, first, the testimony of Scripture about those whom God 'gave ... over' to 'the sinful desires of their hearts' ([Rom. 1:24](#)), 'to shameful lusts' (v. [26](#)) and 'to a depraved mind' (v. [28](#)). In effect, God is saying, 'If you want your way, you can have it.' Such is the nature of sin of which hell is its logical extension. Sin, according to Barth, is 'a brute fact', 'man's impossible possibility'.³⁴ His description of the 'man of sin' makes for very sombre reading: He changes 'truth into untruth' and falsities what God has actually done for him in Christ.³⁵

²⁹ See Thomas V. Morris, 'The Metaphysical Doctrine of Creation,' *The Asbury Theological Journal* 46:1 (Spring 1991), 95–112.

³⁰ *ibid.*, 104.

³¹ *Op. cit.*, 116.

³² J. I. Packer, 'The Problem of Eternal Punishment,' *Evangel* (Summer 1992), 16.

³³ Noted by Packer, 19.

³⁴ *Church Dogmatics*, IV.3.1, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1961), 463.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 464–7. Barth, however, sees the threat of final condemnation as real but hopes for final deliverance (478).

We encounter the same understanding in the *Theologia Germanica* an early 14th Century work:

If anyone there [in heaven] took upon him to call anything his own, he would straightway be thrust out into hell, and would become an evil spirit. But in hell every one will have self-will, therefore there is all manner of misery and wretchedness ... But if there were one in hell who should get quit of his self-will and call nothing his own, he would come out of hell into heaven.³⁶

Literary artists like John Milton, Soren Kierkegaard and C. S. Lewis³⁷ have shown us that it is just such a hell which is compellingly serious because it alone makes best sense of a moral universe. Freedom, as Lewis puts it through his great teacher George MacDonald, is 'the gift whereby ye most resemble your Maker and are yourselves parts of p. 29 eternal reality'.³⁸ It is such a freedom bent completely toward self which leads Satan in *Paradise Lost* to declare:

Here we may reign secure, and in my choice
To reign is worth ambition though in Hell:
Better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heav'n.³⁹

The frightful reality of self-will is vividly portrayed in Kierkegaard in his analysis of despair which he calls 'the sickness unto death'.

That self which he despairingly wills to be is a self which he is not (for to will to be that self which one truly is, is indeed the opposite of despair); what he really wills is to tear his self away from the Power which constituted it. But not withstanding all his despair, this he is unable to do ... that Power is stronger, and it compells [sic] him to be the self he does not will to be. But for all that he wills to be rid of himself ... in order to be the self he himself has chanced to choose.⁴⁰

Kierkegaard further notes that the sin of self-will is such that it is 'within itself a consistency', that is, a substitute for the 'Power' that constituted it; 'and in this consistency of evil within itself it possesses a certain power' such that the self-willed 'demoniac' would even beg not to be 'tempted' by the good offered it.⁴¹ Such is the damned soul in hell, according to Lewis, using words reminiscent of Kierkegaard:

The damned soul is nearly nothing: it is shrunk, shut up in itself. Good beats upon the damned incessantly as sound waves beat on the ears of the deaf, but they cannot receive it. Their fists are clenched, their teeth are clenched, their eyes are shut. First they will not,

³⁶ *Theologia Germanica*, trans. Susanna Winkworth (London: Stuart and Watkins, 1966), 124–5.

³⁷ John Milton, *Paradise Lost and Paradise Regained*, ed. Christopher Ricks (New York: Signet Books, 1968); Soren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*; C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (London: Fount, 1977).

³⁸ *Great Divorce*, 115.

³⁹ *Paradise Lost*, Bk. I, 11. 261–3. Even Jean Sarte comes nearer the truth about hell in his concept of freedom. His idealization of existence which excludes others ('Hell is other people') is what the Christian would call hell. See his *Being and Becoming*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Citadel Press, 1965), 409–532.

⁴⁰ *Sickness unto Death*, 153.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 238, 239.

in the end they cannot, open their hands for gifts, or their mouths for food, or their eyes to see.⁴²

But can such a view of hell be appropriately described as punishment? This is a pivotal question which we must now take up. Pinnock, for example, accuses EP advocates of ‘softening’ the metaphor of punishment when it is conceived in this way.⁴³ Herein lies the crucial difference between annihilationism and EP. Is punishment essentially a divine act against the sinner or is it a condition brought upon the sinner by his persistent self-will? Annihilationists would insist that their view is more in keeping with Scripture. p. 30 What they actually mean is that their own ‘literalistic’ interpretation of the punishment metaphor is more true to the fact. This is an assumption we must challenge. In the first place, what they regard as the ‘more natural’ understanding of the tenn (and so, more ‘literal’) is no less metaphorical, especially when the subject is a supra-sensible reality. It is, perhaps, only more conventional. But being more conventional is not necessarily to have the correct interpretation. It could well be that the less conventional (i.e., less ‘literal’) is actually nearer the truth. Perhaps an example at this point would help. Marcia Falk in her study of the Song of Songs⁴⁴ brings out an interesting phenomenon among many of its commentators. They were simply baffled by the ‘bizarre’ and ‘grotesque’ metaphors for beauty found in the Song. Did the ancients have a completely different sense of beauty when the neck of the beloved was compared to ‘the tower of David built for an armoury’ (4:4) and her nose to ‘the tower of Lebanon which looketh toward Damascus’ (7:5, 6)? But the problem lies not with the ancients’ sense of beauty (or lack of it!) but with the modems’ own lack of understanding the function of those metaphors for beauty. They have simply assumed what they regard to be the ‘more usual’ way of understanding. Falk, getting her cue from the Arabic *wasf*, is able to show that by knowing the part of the picture which is being compared with reality, the metaphors make extremely good sense. What Falk has demonstrated is that understanding metaphors is a much more complex undertaking and not simply a matter of assuming the ‘more natural’ meaning.

All this is to say that the annihilationist’s more literalistic reading of the metaphor for punishment is not necessarily nearer the real nature of things. He may well have been, to use a Lewisian expression, ‘victim of a metaphor’. Neither, of course, does it mean that our understanding is the more correct. But in this respect, I am more inclined to trust the poetic sensitivity of a Lewis or a Milton than the straitjacketed theologian. For it is the former who have painted for us a picture of punishment which gives a better fit.

Pinnock and Stott may well argue that if people choose to go to hell, they could not properly be said to be punished. Can a prisoner be said to be punished if he enjoys being in prison? But this confuses the psychological state which accompanies punishment with the objectivity of the penalty itself. To be shut out of the totally real is an objective punishment, even when the shutting out is freely chosen. Reality will judge that person as

⁴² *The Great Divorce*, 113–4. It should be noted that the concept of radical evil does not preclude different kinds of evil. Walls has made a helpful distinction between the ‘weak evil men’ and the ‘strong evil men’ (op. cit., 125ff.). The former are consumed by their first order desires (e.g., lust) and make their second order desires (e.g., fame) serve the first. The Tragedian in *The Great Divorce* is an example of this kind. The ‘strong evil men,’ on the other hand, made their first order desires serve their second order desires. The Bishop-Ghost who is compelled by ‘free inquiry’ rather than truth, is perhaps an example of this type (ibid., 35–44).

⁴³ *Op. cit.*, 245.

⁴⁴ *Love Lyrics from the Bible: A Translation and Literary Study of the Song of Songs* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1982), 80–87.

existing in a pathetic state even if he may not think so. Also, such a person cannot be said to be psychologically indifferent. To hark back to Kierkegaard, the sinner's despair over his sin 'is an attempt to maintain oneself by sinking still deeper'; and he sinks deeper 'by casting from him the good'.⁴⁵ He 'enjoys' darkness only in the sense [p. 31](#) that he hates light more. Perhaps another picture, this time from Lewis' Narnian Chronicles, could help. In *The Last Battle* (ch. [13](#)), there is the scene of the dwarfs who sat huddled together, refusing all forms of help because they could not see beyond themselves: 'The Dwarfs are for the Dwarfs.' But these were the final words of Aslan:

They have chosen cunning instead of belief. Their prison is only in their own minds, yet they are in that prison; and so afraid of being taken in that they cannot be taken out.

One could not have thought of a more 'appropriate' condition in which the word punishment fits: They were in an objectively pathetic state, yet not such that we feel sorry for them as we would toward an underdog. Of such condition we could not have said any more or less than what is spoken by the mysterious voice in the Apocalypse: 'Yes, Lord God Almighty, true and just are your judgments' ([Rev. 16:7](#))—and felt that they are just the right words.

The annihilationists' argument would be valid if we grant their concept of punishment. Sins committed in finite time cannot be punished eternally if by punishment we mean God's direct punitive action against sinners. It would have been more just of God to let the sinners simply slip into non-being at the point of death. Let us call this the 'weak' annihilationist view. Advocates of this view (e.g., Hughes and Travis) see human beings as naturally mortal beings and immortality as a superadded gift to those who believe. But there is a 'strong' annihilationist view advocated by Stott which sees annihilation as involving some form of direct action from God. This view is no doubt necessitated by some such biblical considerations as the intermediate state and the resurrection of the wicked. The wicked must be raised to be punished for a period of time commensurate with their sins before being finally annihilated. This 'strong' view, however, raises more problems about divine justice than it solves. One must ask: What is the point of the intermediate state and the resurrection of the wicked? Why must they be subject to a period of torment when the intended end is their extinction? It seems unnecessarily cruel to raise them up only to destroy them again.

But the 'weak' view is not without its own difficulty. If our concept of self-imposed punishment is correct, then even such annihilationism will still be unjust because the sinner has no choice but to be annihilated. What if he refuses to? The annihilationist may well counter: 'But why would anyone not want to be annihilated given the misery of his condition?' But would he? The very act of despairing, as Kierkegaard notes, is to shut out 'every assault of the good' and to shut himself in deeper despair.⁴⁶ He may just not want to be destroyed, preferring his own self-enclosed freedom:

Free, and to none accountable, preferring
Hard liberty before the easy yoke
Of servile Pomp.⁴⁷ [p. 32](#)

⁴⁵ *The Sickness unto Death*, 241.

⁴⁶ *Op. cit.*, 240.

⁴⁷ *Paradise Lost*, Bk. II, 11. 256–8.

He may even derive a certain perverse satisfaction in existing in continual defiance, or in the vain hope of heaven's ultimate defeat—

... him to unthrone we then
May hope, when everlasting Fate shall yield
To fickle Chance, and Chaos judge the strife.⁴⁸

But let us say that the sinner is willing to be annihilated. Even this entails difficulty for the annihilationist. For that would imply that there must still be a chink in his armour which still lets in some light for him to agree with his Maker that annihilation is in his best interest, or God must have succeeded in making him so. In either case, annihilation would be unjust. But if it is the latter, the question arises: If God succeeded in making him willing to be annihilated, why didn't God make him willing to be saved? Universalism would have been the preferred option.

III. SOVEREIGN GRACE

I grant that the annihilationist's picture of the future world is the neater one, swept clean of all the unsightly, filthy spots. But the cleaning process is carried out at the expense of changing the ground rules of creation. God will certainly be sovereign, but what sterile sovereignty! On the other hand, the world in which there is a hell is admittedly messy. But then what is ultimately revealed is the triumph of another kind of sovereignty: the sovereignty of grace.

Hell is man's creation, yet in a more ultimate sense it is with God's permission and by his grace. The damned—or those who damned themselves—are able to exercise their puny wills against God only because he maintains them in freedom by grace. It is in this sense that Donald Bloesch describes hell as 'the last refuge for the sinner'.⁴⁹ It is also in this light that we can now understand why the ancient theologians consider the contemplation of hell as serving to promote the blessedness of the saints in heaven. (There is no evidence to suggest that such a thought is the product of a perverse mind or a vindictive will.) For one cannot think of hell without thinking of the all-encompassing grace of God.

Dr Simon Chan teaches Theology at Trinity Theological College, Singapore. [p. 33](#)

The Logic of Hell: A Brief Rejoinder

John Start

I have a warm personal regard for my younger friend and brother, Simon Chan. I am thankful for his Christian integrity and his commitment to Christian scholarship, and I have

⁴⁸ Ibid., Bk. II, 11. 231–3.

⁴⁹ *Essentials of Evangelical Theology*, II (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1978), 227.