

## THOUGHTS ABOUT HELL? BALTHASAR, ORTHODOXY and ESCHATOLOGY

By Henry C. Anthony Karlson III

In modern times many Orthodox theologians, such as Sergius Bulgakov, Pavel Florensky, and David Bentley Hart, have questioned the way that eternal perdition, or hell, has been understood and taught. Each of them, in his own way, has sought to find a way to see Jesus' salvific work as being universal while taking into account His words about hell. Bulgakov, for example, proposes that the eternal fires of hell represent the pain and sorrow we feel when we contemplate the ways that we have failed God in our lives. Florensky considers that salvation entails the removal of what is evil within a person - his or her evil character - so that what is evil is cast aside and perishes.

Many contemporary Catholic theologians have similar problems with traditional teachings and explanations for hell. Perhaps the most famous of these is Hans Urs von Balthasar. He came to his conclusions through much theological and philosophical study and speculation. Among those influencing his creative theological opinion, as Jennifer Newsome Martin demonstrates in her book, *Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Critical Appropriation of Russian Religious*, were Vladimir Soloviev, Nikolai Berdyaev, and Sergius Bulgakov. Balthasar believed, similarly to Metropolitan Kallistos Ware, that we can hope that all will be saved. This does not mean everyone *will* be saved. While God is at work, seeking to save everyone, God does not force his salvation upon us. Some, if not many, might refuse God and end up among the damned.

While Balthasar's opinion could have previously been discerned by those carefully reading his many earlier books and essays, it was late in his theological career that his hope became clear, and therefore questioned by several theological opponents. Critics, implying that he was a heretic, claimed that he believed that all would be saved. Likewise, they suggested that holding to such universalism meant that Balthasar rejected human freedom. They believed that if all will be saved, then human free will would be overridden by God. Finally, his critics said that those holding such a belief would feel little to no reason to evangelize. If it could be said that all will be saved, then there would be no need for the church's missionary activity in the world.

Because Balthasar's critics have focused upon his hope, little analysis has been done concerning his notions of eternal perdition. Even though he hoped that all would be saved, he was not a universalist. He wrote a great deal on eternal perdition, but what he wrote was mostly overlooked. It was often easy to miss because he never wrote a major systematic work on perdition. His theological focus was on hope, not upon hell. Yet, as a Christian, he felt it necessary to affirm authentic Christian doctrine found in Scripture. The possibility of hell is found in Scripture, and so has to be taken into account. To grasp his view, one would have to read through a large number of texts, find all his discussions of hell, and then discern what they suggest when brought together.

This is what I did for my book, *The Eschatological Judgment of Christ: The Hope of Universal Salvation and the Fear of Eternal Perdition in the Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar*. In it I seek to correct several misunderstandings that people have of Balthasar's eschatological notions.

For Balthasar, hell is real. It has an important function in Christ's salvific work because it is the metaphorical location where all sin, and all who hold on to their sin, are to be placed. In His death Jesus descended to the edge of reality, to the depths of the abyss. He circumnavigated the whole of creation in order to reconstitute it with His grace. As a part of His accomplishments, Jesus took upon Himself the sin of the world so that He could carry it to its proper place in the order of creation. Sin is disposed of by Jesus in His descent into hell as if it were placed in a garbage dump at the edge of being.

Balthasar believed that, at the time of our death, we enter into a timeless state between temporal creation and eternity. It is the state where Jesus went in His death, which is why when we are there, we can and will meet with Jesus as our judge. In His judgment, Jesus denounces and condemns all that He finds in us tainted by sin. He then offers us His mercy. He is willing to take out sin away. We are given the opportunity to accept Jesus' judgment, reject our sin, and hand it over to Him. If we do so, He will take it upon Himself and take it away, saving us in the process. So long as we do not do so, we hold on to the sin, denying our own salvation.

Our judgment can seem to be painful as it is purifying us. Jesus comes with fiery judgment and mercy. Until we accept His mercy, all we have is His wrathful judgment of sin. If we never let go of sin, we will find ourselves in perpetual judgment, which is the state of perdition. This is why it can be said that, if we never let go of our sin, our destiny will be the same as that of sin. Nonetheless, the point of the judgment is not our condemnation; it is about our salvation. Balthasar is adamant that Jesus comes to us to offer the judgment of sin in order to give us freedom from its bondage. It is up to us. We can either accept the offer of mercy and say to Jesus, "Thy will be done," or we can deny it and hear Jesus say to us instead, "Thy will be done." So long as we are on this side of the eschaton, we do not know what the result of the judgment will be, either for ourselves or for others. This is why we cannot say whether or not all, or only some, will be saved.

While it might seem that Balthasar's view makes what we do in our earthly life irrelevant, that there will be another opportunity for salvation once we die, this is not exactly how he sees the result of the judgment. He suggests that how we interact with Jesus will be based upon how we interacted with Him during our lives. The judgment, and our reaction to it, are the presentation of what we have made of ourselves in life. Whether we know it or not, we are constantly acting and reacting to Jesus, saying yes or no to Him. A life lived out in Christian faith is a life more conscious of Jesus, of His judgment and grace. Christians, listening to the teachings of the faith and living them out, will be ready for the judgment. But we must not presume salvation. As Jesus showed in His parable of the last judgment, what He

reveals might surprise us. Many who thought they lived their lives in denial of Him might find out that they had accepted Him, and will find themselves among the blessed. Others, who thought they were following Him, might be shown how and why they are said to have really denied Him, ending up among the damned. All will be judged, and in that judgment, all that has been done will be revealed.

As we encounter Jesus in a state which is neither in time nor eternity, it takes qualities from each while being neither. So long as we are being judged, it will have a time-like sequence of its own. If and when we get out of the judgment and find ourselves among the saved, we will find ourselves entering into eternal life, with our judgment having taken no real time at all.

There is but one judgment. Once we exit that judgment, we will have no other judgment to face: our particular judgment is one with the last judgment. This means that for those rejecting mercy, the judgment will seem to go on forever. Purgatory and hell, likewise, are related, because they represent two aspects of the judgment. If we exit it, the judgment is purgatory, but if we do not, then it is hell. While Balthasar can be seen to be engaging Protestant questions about death, judgment, and eternity, his solution could also open up a dialogue with Orthodox critics of purgatory like St. Mark of Ephesus. Most Orthodox agree that there needs to be some sort of purification of sins before beatitude, but they do not think that there is a literal place called purgatory where that purification takes place. Balthasar agrees with the spirit behind the teaching of purgatory, but he is willing to reconsider how it is to be presented.

Balthasar, in his views about eternal perdition, agrees with his critics that the preservation of free will is key. He agrees with them that outright universalism would end up removing our freedom. Salvation, which makes us free from the bonds of sin, must therefore preserve and affirm our free will. But his critics are wrong about what his hope implies for Christian missions. Those missions must be founded upon hope. Without hope of success, why evangelize? Likewise, such hope can reassure would-be converts that God did not neglect their ancestors. God, in Jesus Christ, worked for the salvation of all, giving all a means of salvation. Balthasar gives us a reason to believe that God truly loves humanity and seeks for the salvation of all. This hope, however, must remain hope and not turned into a presumption that all will be saved. That is the message of Balthasar. God, in His love for humanity, truly gives humanity the freedom to reject Him; the drama of history can end in tragedy. God risks the tragedy out of His love for us. That love, as powerful and broad as it is, will seek every way possible to turn tragedy into victory, to bring victory out of defeat, and to save all humanity. That love is what Balthasar believed made the Christian faith credible.

*The Eschatological Judgment of Christ: The Hope of Universal Salvation and the Fear of Eternal Perdition in the Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar* can be ordered from [the publisher](#).

Henry Karlson is an independent Byzantine Catholic scholar who holds an MA in Theology from Xavier University in Cincinnati. He blogs at [A Little Bit of Nothing](#) on the Patheos website