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ST Field Exam #2

### Question 1

1. Define the terms "hell" and "eternal punishment" as you are using them and explain how they are mainly related in traditions of Christian thought.

#### a. Definition of "Hell"

In this field exam, I define "hell" as "*a place of suffering and separation from God after death.*" This definition is consistent with biblical depictions of hell, as well as traditional theological and literary descriptions.

First, I use the phrase "*place of suffering*" because this is how hell is depicted in the New Testament. For example, Jesus says that it is better to cut off both of one's arms than to be condemned to hell, where the fire and the worm never die. See Mark 9:34-39. In that text, "hell" refers to Gehenna, or the Valley of Hinnom, which is a location outside the gates of Jerusalem in which dead bodies and refuse (and allegedly child sacrifices in the past) decomposed and were burned. See Isa 66:24. Other examples of hell as a place of suffering is the lake of fire into which the devil, beast, false prophet, and anyone who is not found in the book of life is thrown and "tormented" forever. See Rev 14:11, 20:10, 15.

Second, I use the phrase "*separation from God after death*" because this is also how hell is depicted in the New Testament. The best example of this is the parable of Dives and Lazarus, in which Dives -- after he dies -- is sent to a place that is separated by a chasm from both the land of the living as well as the bosom of Abraham. See Luke 16:26.

This definition of hell is also consistent with the traditional theological and literary descriptions of hell, such as Augustine's description in Book 21 of *De Civitate Dei* and Dante's *Inferno*. I recognize, however, that not all theologians or philosophers may agree

with this definition. For example, some (such as John Paul II) may argue that hell is more of a state of existence rather than a "place." Others (such as C.S. Lewis) may argue that certain people might actually choose not to leave hell and therefore it is not a place of "suffering."

Nevertheless, I use the traditional definition of hell as a helpful starting point against which alternative views can be compared.

#### b. Definition of "Eternal Punishment"

In this field exam, I define "eternal punishment" as "*unending conscious mental and/or physical torment.*" Again, this definition is consistent with biblical depictions of hell, as well as traditional theological and literary descriptions.

First, I use the word "*unending*" because it is consistent with New Testament depictions of hell. For example, in the parable of the sheep and goats, Jesus condemns all those who have not welcomed him in this life to "eternal" punishment (that is, *kolasis aionion*). See Matt 25:46. Similarly, those who worship the beast will be tormented "forever and ever." See Rev 14:11, 20:10.

Second, I use the phrase "*conscious mental and/or physical torment*" because this is also consistent with the biblical text. In terms of conscious mental torment, we are told that some individuals who are raised from the dust (that is, resurrected) will suffer "shame" and "contempt." See Dan 12:2. In terms of conscious physical torment, we have already seen this in many of the passages discussed above. See, e.g., Mark 9:43-49, Luke 16:26.

The foregoing definition of mental and physical torment is consistent with the two kinds of penalties -- *poena damni* and *poena sensus* -- that are traditionally associated with eternal punishment. It is also consistent with the passages from Augustine and Dante that were described above. Again, I recognize that some theologians or philosophers may disagree with my definition. Some (for example, Origen) may reject the notion of

"unending" punishment. I have also remained silent on the underlying rationale for punishment in the above definition (for example, punishment as retribution vs. education vs. deterrence), since there is widespread disagreement about this issue (as we will see later).

Again, I use the traditional definition of hell as a helpful starting point against which alternative views can be compared.

### c. Relationship Between "Hell" and "Eternal Punishment"

#### i. The Traditional View

In general, the two concepts of "hell" and "eternal punishment" have been closely linked in Christian thought. This is evidenced by (I) the biblical witness, (II) Augustine's description of hell in *De Civitate Dei*, and (III) the condemnation of Origenism by the fifth ecumenical council (Constantinople II) in 553 C.E.

#### (I) The Biblical Witness

First, as we have seen above, there is considerable overlap between "hell" and "eternal punishment" in the various biblical texts discussing these subjects. For example, in the parable of Dives and Lazarus, Dives is sent to hell after he dies, where he is subjected to both mental and physical torment. See Luke 16:26. Similarly, hell is repeatedly described in Revelation as a place of eternal punishment and torment. See Rev 14:11, 20:10, 15.

#### (II) Augustine and *De Civitate Dei*

A second reason for the close connection between "hell" and "eternal punishment" is the influential description of hell by Augustine in Book 21 of *De Civitate Dei*. In that book, Augustine spends a great deal of time talking about topics like how it is physically possible for bodies as well as spiritual beings to be burned eternally in hell (citing, interestingly, the example of a salamander).

Augustine also raises and then rejects a panoply of objections to eternal punishment in hell. For example, Augustine argues that it is perfectly just for a person to be punished eternally for a finite act. This is because a single act of adultery or murder -- that may only take minutes to consummate -- can be punished by lengthy imprisonment, and the penalty can also be increased based on the dignity of the victim. Thus, in the case of God, whose dignity is infinite, eternal punishment is just.

### (III) Council of Constantinople II

Third, the concepts of "hell" and "eternal punishment" have been closely linked as a result of the fifth ecumenical council (Constantinople II) in 553 C.E. This council, which followed the Council of Chalcedon, was called by the Emperor Justinian in order to root out the Nestorian heresy and win over the monophysites. Specifically, the council condemned the Three Chapters (that is, writings by Theodore of Mopsuesta, Theodoret, and Ibes of Edessa), which seemed to state that Jesus Christ was a separate person than the divine *logos*.

Although the primary focus of the council involved christological issues, the council also is said to have passed fifteen anathemas against the teachings of Origen. These anathemas included a condemnation against any teaching that denied eternal punishment. See Anathemas I, XIV, XV.

In recent years, scholars have raised questions as to whether the fifteen anathemas were actually passed by the council -- or if only nine anathemas were passed at a regional synod in 543 C.E. as the result of a controversy over factions of Palestinian monks called *isochristoi* and *protoktistoi*. Regardless of the debate over the authenticity of the fifteen anathemas, the practical result of Constantinople II was to inexorably intertwine the concepts of "hell" and "eternal punishment" in Christian thought. In fact, it would be nearly a thousand years later before a sustained theological dialogue of alternative views on this issue could emerge.

#### ii. Challenges to the Traditional View

As noted above, there have been a number of strands of Christian thought in which the connection between hell and eternal punishment has been severed. One example is the teaching of *apokatastasis*, or universal restoration, by Origen of Alexandria in the third century C.E. Another is the contemporary evangelical belief in annihilationism or conditional immortality. These and other issues will be explored in greater depth in the following questions of this field exam.

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## Question 2

2. In The Acts of the Apostles the account is given of Peter proclaiming a "universal restoration [*apokatastasis*] that God announced long ago through his holy prophets" (Acts 3:21). Trace the highlights of the history of this concept in Christian thought and the issues, as you see them, that it poses for church teaching today.

### a. Historical Highlights

In Christian thought, *apokatastasis* is the concept that, at the end of time, all things will be restored to their original state. That is, all rational beings (which presumably include not only human beings, but the fallen angels) will someday be restored to their original pre-lapsarian relationship with God.

Because all beings will eventually be restored to God, it is logically impossible for eternal punishment to exist within a framework of *apokatastasis*. This is not to say that there cannot be some kind of punishment after death in hell. In fact, individuals can be punished in hell for a very long time. However, in the end, that punishment will come to an end.

It follows that, within the framework of *apokatastasis*, punishment has a rehabilitative or corrective function. That is, the goal of punishment is to purify an individual of his or her earthly sins. See, e.g., 1 Cor. 3:13. By contrast, punishment is purely retributive within a framework of eternal punishment, since there is no hope or possibility of rehabilitation or correction.

In this essay, I would like to discuss four main highlights of the history of *apokatastasis* in Christian thought: (i) the biblical witness; (ii) the theology of Origen of Alexandria; (iii) the theology of Gregory of Nyssa; and (iv) contemporary theology.

### i. The Biblical Witness

There are a number of biblical passages that point to the idea of a universal restoration. As pointed out above, Peter proclaims a "universal restoration" in Acts 3:21 at which time Jesus Christ will return from heaven. In addition to this passage from Acts, there are also a number of other New Testament passages, mostly from the writings of Paul, that point to the idea of *apokatastasis*.

For example, Paul says that Jesus Christ's act of righteousness will lead to justification for "all." See Rom 5:18. Similarly, he notes that we are "all" alive in Jesus Christ, see 1 Cor 15:22, and that eventually God will be "all in all," see 1 Cor 15:28. In his letter to the Philippians, Paul says that "every" knee shall bow to Jesus Christ, whether above, on, or under the earth. See Phil 2:10-11. Other examples of the concept of universal restoration in the New Testament include God's desire that "all" be saved, see 1 Tim 2:4, the reconciliation of "all" creation to God, see Col 1:20, and the desire of Jesus Christ to draw us "all" to himself, see John 12:32.

### ii. Origen of Alexandria

Origen of Alexandria (d. 251 C.E.) was a prolific biblical exegete, systematic theologian, mystic, and one of the most brilliant minds in the early church. The concept of *apokatastasis* is most closely associated with his name, although in recent years patristic scholars such as Frederick Norris have questioned the degree to which Origen might have actually espoused this teaching (due primarily to the many lost writings and unreliable translations of Origen's works). It should be noted that scholars have also noted strands of *apokatastasis* in the works of other patristic authors. For example, Clement of Alexandria alludes to universal restoration in the *Stromata* when he talks about the corrective (that is, educational and healing) nature of punishment.

According to Origen, the end will be like the beginning. That is, based on his reading of Acts 3:21, as well as 1 Cor 15:22-28, Origen argues that God will be "all in all" (*pasin en panton*) at the end of time. That is, there will be an eschatological subjugation in which all

rational creatures, including Satan himself, will be placed under the feet of God and Jesus Christ. As such, all souls will be reunited to God.

Like Clement of Alexandria, Origen also viewed the purpose of punishment as being corrective (that is, educational and healing) as opposed to retributive. He based this reading on 1 Cor 3:13, in which Paul notes that all human works will eventually be tested by fire. For Origen, punishment is a process of purification and not simply retribution.

Origen's views on *apokatastasis* were primarily set forth in his tractates *De Principiis* and *Contra Celsum*, as well as his commentaries on John and Romans. Interestingly, in Book 1.6 of *De Principiis*, Origen acknowledges that the issue of universal restoration cannot be asserted with any degree of certainty, although he also notes that such eschatological matters are not subject to the rule of faith.

It should be noted that some of Origen's views reflected his philosophical background in Neoplatonism and were quite unorthodox from a Christian point of view. For example, Origen wrote about the preexistence of souls, the falling away of such souls from the pure contemplation of God and being enslaved in human bodies, and the possibility of multiple cycles of restoration and falling away before a final reunion with God could occur.

As noted above, Origen's writings were anathematized by the Emperor Justinian and the fifth ecumenical council (Constantinople II) in 553 C.E. While it is not clear whether the council actually passed the fifteen anathemas relating to Origenism (or even the nine anathemas attributed to the regional synod of 543 C.E.), the practical effect was to silence most discussions of *apokatastasis* until the sixteenth century.

### iii. Gregory of Nyssa

Gregory of Nyssa (d. 394 C.E.) was the other major patristic theologian who taught the doctrine of *apokatastasis*. Like the other Cappadocian Fathers, Gregory was influenced

by Origen's theology, although he went much further than Gregory of Nazianzus or Basil of Caesarea in writing about universal restoration.

Gregory's primary work on *apokatastasis* was his *Dialogus de Anima et Resurrectione*, a dialogue between him and his sister Macrina on her deathbed. Like Origen, Gregory looked to biblical texts such as 1 Cor 3:13 and 1 Cor 15:28 to support the concept of universal restoration. However, Gregory also relied upon a philosophical argument that was based on the nature of evil. That is, if evil is defined as the *absence* of the good, and if God will be "all in all" at the end of time, see 1 Cor 15:28, then evil cannot possibly continue to exist, since God -- that is, pure goodness -- will be in everything. As such, neither hell nor punishment can exist eternally.

Gregory did not accept all of Origen's teachings, however. For example, he did not accept Origen's protology (that is, the preexistence of souls or the falling away of souls from contemplation into human bodies). Neither did Gregory accept Origen's cyclical view of eschatology and its cycles of restoration and falling away. Perhaps it is for this reason that Gregory's writings on *apokatastasis* were never formally condemned by the Church as being heretical.

#### iv. Contemporary Theologians

As noted above, theological discussion about *apokatastasis* largely disappeared for a thousand years as a result of Augustine's writings in *De Civitate Dei* and the anathematizing of Origenism by the Council of Constantinople II. There were a few individuals who wrote about *apokatastasis* during this period (for example, Maximus the Confessor in the seventh century, John Scotus Eriugena in the ninth century, and medieval sects like the Amaurians, Cathars, and Brothers and Sisters of the Holy Spirit), but for the most part the Christian theological tradition (for example, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin) simply affirmed the teachings on hell and eternal punishment.

Starting in the sixteenth century, however, theological discussions about *apokatastasis* once again began to resurface. This was largely due to a number of factors such as a

renewal of interest in patristic writings, changing views on the nature of God and punishment as a result of the Enlightenment, and an increasing willingness by individuals to challenge ecclesial authority.

Examples of some of these challenges in the sixteenth century included the Socinians, who focused largely on the annihilation of souls after death. In the seventeenth century, George Rust, an Anglican bishop in Ireland, wrote a pamphlet on Origen and challenged the notion of eternal punishment. Anne Conway, a friend of Rust's, also wrote about this topic and reiterated some of the philosophical themes expressed by Gregory of Nyssa.

In the eighteenth century, the Universalist movement was founded by individuals such as John Murray and Hosea Ballou. Other theologians and philosophers followed suit, such as Friedrich Schleiermacher, Søren Kierkegaard, and F.D. Maurice in the nineteenth century. The twentieth century has seen a resurgence in writing about *apokatastasis*. Although few theologians have explicitly embraced this doctrine, many have written about the *hope* or *possibility* of the restoration of all things. Such theologians include Karl Barth, Hans Urs von Balthasar, and Karl Rahner. Some theologians who have been more embracing of *apokatastasis* include Hans Küng, Jürgen Moltmann, and John Hick.

#### b. Issues for Church Teaching Today

In my view, *apokatastasis* raises a number of significant issues for church teaching today. First, *apokatastasis* allows us to have a fuller discussion about the nature of God. Many Christian communities today simply ignore the issues of hell and eternal punishment after death because they believe such issues are inconsistent with their view of a loving God. It would seem that the doctrine of *apokatastasis* could encourage a fuller conversation about traditional issues such as hell, punishment, and the justice of God, while still allowing for the hope of forgiveness or repentance after death.

Second, *apokatastasis* raises issues about the nature and purpose of divine punishment. Is divine punishment retributive? Or is it corrective? If divine punishment is retributive,

then the traditional doctrine of eternal punishment might make sense, although it is still unclear whether such punishment is fundamentally unjust in terms of being disproportionate to the "crime." However, if divine punishment is corrective, then a theology of universal restoration makes more sense. *Apokatastasis* also raises questions about the deterrence function of punishment. That is, would a more widespread adoption of *apokatastasis* lead to antinomianism or ethical relativism? Would it undermine church authority and teachings?

Third, *apokatastasis* raises issues about free will. If we take free will seriously, then would a theology of universal restoration override human free will (since all individuals are saved in the end)? Or does God merely persuade individuals -- albeit with a very strong rationale -- so that everyone still has the choice to accept God? Also, *apokatastasis* raises the question whether human free will and repentance is limited to this life or whether they can survive death.

Fourth, *apokatastasis* raises issues about missiology. Why do we need to bring Jesus Christ to other lands and cultures that do not know the Good News if all will eventually be saved? On the other hand, it seems that a doctrine of universal restoration might also allow for more authentic ecumenical and interfaith dialogue, since it does not start from the premise that all non-Christians will be condemned to eternal punishment.

Fifth, *apokatastasis* is relevant to LGBT people, many of whom are told repeatedly that they will be going to hell from a young age and thus reject Christianity completely. A doctrine of universal restoration may be a way of ministering to such people and overcoming a "stumbling block" to Christian faith. Similarly, such a doctrine may help in terms of pastoral discussions with people who are grieving over the death of loved ones and uncertain about their loved ones' ultimate fate with God.

Finally, *apokatastasis* allows us to have a fuller conversation about the overall shape of salvation history, from original sin to atonement to the last judgment. That is, will God's victory truly be complete in the end? Will good triumph over evil? Will all people be

universally redeemed by Christ's death, thus reversing the universal condemnation of all people by Adam's fall? See Rom 5:18, 1 Cor 15:22, Col 1:20. Which vision of last things -- eternal punishment or universal restoration -- is most conducive to the Christian virtues of faith, hope, and love?

### Question 3

3. The final form of the so-called Apostles' Creed that gradually developed out of the Old Roman baptismal symbol in the western church confesses faith in Jesus Christ as having "descended into hell" (*descendit ad inferna*). Explain the disputed significance of this confession and how it is treated in the twentieth-century theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar. Give your assessment of his treatment.

#### a. Descent Into Hell

The confession in the Apostles' Creed that Jesus Christ descended into hell after his burial (*descendit ad inferna*) has been the subject of much controversy. The precise origin of this statement is unclear, and the statement does not appear in other "universal" creeds such as the Nicene Creed. There is no express discussion in any of the four gospels as to what happened to Jesus Christ between the time of his burial and his resurrection. The main scriptural support for this statement is 1 Peter 3:19, which states that Jesus Christ visited and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison. However, that statement merely alludes to the descent and does not talk about it explicitly.

Despite the controversial nature of this confession, this event of Jesus Christ descending to the land of the dead (that is, Sheol, or Hades), breaking open its gates, and setting free the biblical ancestors such as Adam and Abraham -- commonly called the *anastasis* or the "harrowing of hell" -- has been celebrated in Christian iconography and art for centuries.

According to the traditional theology of the harrowing of hell, Jesus Christ descended into Sheol (or Hades) on Holy Saturday and set free the righteous pagans who had come before him. This act reflected Jesus Christ's victory over death on the cross and was a prelude to the resurrection that would occur on Easter Sunday. It should be noted that Jesus Christ is *not* seen as visiting the hell of the eternally damned. As such, those

individuals who had been condemned to eternal punishment still remained imprisoned in hell.

b. Hans Urs von Balthasar and the *Descensus*

The *descensus* is an important part of the theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar (d. 1988), who was one of the great Roman Catholic theologians of the twentieth century. Originally ordained as a Jesuit priest, von Balthasar left the order in order to found a religious community of both lay and ordained men and women. He was a prolific scholar and writer and, following the Second Vatican Council, he was associated with certain theologically "conservative" voices such as Joseph Ratzinger (now Benedict XVI). Von Balthasar died three days before he was to have been created a cardinal by Pope John Paul II.

i. Hopeful Universalism

Before discussing the specifics of von Balthasar's theology of the *descensus*, it is important to understand his views on hell and eternal punishment. In his book *Dare We Hope That All Men Be Saved?*, von Balthasar sets out his theology of hopeful universalism. Specifically, von Balthasar believes that it is the duty of all Christians to hope for the salvation of all people -- even though we ourselves are under judgment -- because it is God's will that all people be saved. See 1 Tim 2:4.

According to von Balthasar, he cannot rule out the possibility that all people will be saved by God. Indeed, although the Catholic Church has identified numerous saints who are in heaven with God, the Church has never stated definitively that any particular person is in hell. This is not to deny the possibility of hell for each of us, however. On the contrary, the very real possibility of hell is a constant reminder of our existential situation. That is, it reminds us of the vital importance of the decisions that we make every day in our lives.

Von Balthasar takes a middle path by rejecting both the certainty of double predestination (that is, God affirmatively chooses to damn certain individuals) as well as the certainty of universalism (that is, God will save all people). Quoting Josef Pieper, von Balthasar tells us that the Christian must avoid either the hopelessness of despair on the one hand (that is, certain damnation) and the hopelessness of presumption (that is, certain salvation) on the other. We occupy a position between God's justice and mercy.

Nevertheless, we can -- and must! -- hope for the possibility that hell is in fact empty. In the words of St. Edith Stein, we must hope that the overwhelmingly powerful nature of God's grace can outwit even the most hardened soul and bring us all to salvation.

## ii. The *Descensus*

Von Balthasar's theology of hopeful universalism has an additional twist. As noted above, Jesus Christ's descent into hell on Holy Saturday (the "*descensus*") plays an important part in von Balthasar's theology. Although he only alludes to this doctrine in a footnote to *Dare We Hope*, von Balthasar writes more extensively about the *descensus* in *Mysterium Paschale* (his book on the Easter Triduum), as well as in his sixteen-volume trilogy of *The Glory of the Lord (Theological Aesthetics)*, *Theo-Drama*, and *Theo-Logic*.

In the section of *Mysterium Paschale* about Holy Saturday, von Balthasar argues that the salvific work of Jesus Christ does not end on the cross on Good Friday. Rather, this work continues with Jesus Christ's descent into hell on Holy Saturday. Instead of seeing the *descensus* as a triumphant victory over Hades, von Balthasar views the *descensus* as Jesus Christ's solidarity with humanity into the furthest depths of isolation, despair, and hopelessness. Indeed, Jesus Christ's saving work is not complete until he reaches the very depths of hell and experiences total abandonment by God the Father and actually becomes sin himself (see 2 Cor 5:21).

As an aside, it should be noted that von Balthasar draws upon some very unusual sources in constructing his theology of the *descensus*. In particular, he was profoundly influenced by the mystical experiences of his collaborator Adrienne von Speyer, who was

a physician and co-founder of their new religious community. For many years, von Speyer would enter into a trance during the Easter Triduum and experience a descent of her own.

The implications of von Balthasar's theology of *descensus* are profound. Specifically, there is no place in all of human existence -- not even hell -- that is beyond the saving power of Jesus Christ. Although Jesus Christ's descent is a passive movement, it does in fact represent a decisive victory over evil. Thus von Balthasar's theology of the *descensus* gives us an even greater basis for hoping that "all men [sic] be saved."

### c. Assessment

I personally find von Balthasar's theology of the *descensus* to be extremely appealing. The *descensus* is located precisely at the center of the chiastic structure from one of my favorite passages from scripture -- the christological hymn of Phil 2:10-11 -- which traces the self-emptying "downwards" movement as well as the exalted "upwards" movement of the Christ event.

Von Balthasar's theology of the *descensus* also emphasizes that there is no part of creation that is not touched by Jesus Christ: (I) he descended from *heaven*; (II) he was made incarnate on *earth*; (III) he died, was buried, and descended into the lowest part of *hell*; (IV) he was resurrected from the dead and returned to *earth*; and (V) he finally ascended back to *heaven*. In other words, Jesus Christ's saving act does not simply stop at the cross. Rather, it extends to all parts of human experience, including the depths of hell.

I also find von Balthasar's theology of the *descensus* appealing from a liturgical perspective. For me, the *descensus* is a helpful way of thinking about the liturgical stillness of Holy Saturday, which lies between the sorrow of Good Friday and the joy of Easter Sunday.

Finally, I find von Balthasar's theology of the *descensus* to be helpful from a pastoral perspective. It gives hope to people who may experience hopelessness about their eschatological situation before God, including LGBT people who are repeatedly condemned for their sexuality. It also speaks to people who suffer from depression or experience other similar forms of despair. Indeed, the current Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, has written about this aspect of the *descensus*. Put simply, Jesus Christ is in solidarity with us, even in the depths of despair, and his *descensus* gives us hope that he has fundamentally changed the nature of hell.

Recently, von Balthasar's theology of the *descensus* has been criticized by Alyssa Pitstick, a Roman Catholic lay theologian. In her book *Light in Darkness*, Pitstick argues that von Balthasar's theology is not consistent with the traditional Roman Catholic teaching about the *descensus*. Pitstick's claims are somewhat surprising, particularly in light of von Balthasar's association with Joseph Ratzinger and his reputation as a "conservative" Roman Catholic theologian.

Although I can understand Pitstick's argument -- which is actually very well articulated -- I do not see how von Balthasar's view of the *descensus* takes anything away from the traditional theology of Holy Saturday. If anything, it increases the power and majesty of Jesus Christ's saving work by extending it into the realm of hell. In the end, I believe that von Balthasar's creative reading of the *descensus* is a theology that can give a lot of people -- especially those on the margins of the Church -- hope about the Good News of Jesus Christ.

#### Question 4

4. Matthew 3:12 and Luke 3:17 refer to the chaff being burned "with unquenchable fire." Explain how "unquenchable fire" is appropriated today in certain self-styled evangelical teachings regarding "eternal punishment" and denied or revised in others that espouse instead so-called "annihilationism." Evaluate the significance of this controversy.

##### a. Evangelical Teachings on Eternal Punishment

In Matt 3:12 and Luke 3:17, John the Baptist describes Jesus Christ as the one who will metaphorically gather the wheat from the floor and burn the chaff "with unquenchable fire." Indeed, evangelical Christians have traditionally envisioned hell as a place of everlasting punishment where the damned are tortured for all eternity by an unquenchable fire.

In recent years, however, a number of evangelical theologians have shifted away from this traditional view of hell. Instead, they have embraced a theology of annihilationism or conditional immortality. Under such a theology, the damned are not subjected to eternal conscious suffering. Instead, God either affirmatively puts them out of existence at the Last Judgment (annihilationism) or simply refuses to resurrect them at that time (conditional immortality). In either case, the ultimate result is eternal in consequence -- that is, these individuals cease to exist forever -- but, mercifully, they are not subjected to eternal suffering.

##### i. Traditional View

As noted above, the traditional evangelical view of hell is one of fire and eternal punishment. This view is supported by a number of passages in the Bible. Some of these images are derived from the description of Gehenna as a place where the fire and the worm never dies. See Isa 66:24; Mark 9:43-49. Other images are derived from the parable of Dives and Lazarus, where Dives is sent to a place of intense suffering from

extreme heat and thirst. See Luke 16:26. Still others are derived from the image of the lake of fire in the Book of Revelation. See Rev 14:11, 20:10, 15. This traditional view of hell and eternal punishment is strongly defended by evangelical theologians such as Robert Peterson, for whom scripture is the sole authority and source of revelation.

## ii. Annihilationism and Conditional Immortality

In recent decades, a number of prominent evangelical theologians -- including John Stott, Clark Pinnock, and Edward Fudge -- have rejected the traditional evangelical view of hell (that is, eternal conscious suffering) in favor of a theology of annihilationism or conditional immortality. According to these individuals, such a theology is actually more faithful to the biblical text. For example, annihilationists rely upon Matt 10:28 as a key text, which warns that God can destroy both body and soul in hell. Conditionalists, on the other hand, rely upon 1 Tim 6:16, which states that only God is immortal (which in turn means that those who are damned will automatically cease to exist if God refuses to grant them eternal life). Both annihilationists and conditionalists claim that the vast majority of texts about what happens to the damned after death involve destruction -- for example, they use words such as "perishing" (see John 3:16), "second death" (see Rev 20:15) or "destruction" (see Matt 10:28) -- and *not* eternal punishment.

With respect to the few passages that do talk about eternal punishment, both annihilationists as well as conditionalists argue that the Greek words "*aion*" or "*aionion*" should be translated as "a long period of time" or a "relating to a particular age" and *not* "eternal" or "eternity." (Although this argument has some merit, it does raise difficulties in passages such as Matt 25:46 and Rev 14:11, 20:10, which do strongly suggest "eternity" translation in light of the parallel syntax with "eternal life" or the use of the phrase "ages of ages").

In addition to the foregoing arguments about the biblical text, evangelicals who subscribe to annihilationism or conditional immortality also argue that their reading is more consistent with a loving God and also has pastoral benefits in terms of ministering to people in times of grief.

### iii. Other Evangelical Views

Interestingly, the alternative evangelical views on hell and eternal punishment are not limited to annihilationsim or conditional immortality. In fact, there have been a number of additional views about this topic in recent years.

For example, Thomas Talbott is a prominent evangelical theologian who, in his book *The Inescapable Love of God*, makes a philosophical argument against eternal punishment that is based upon a fusion of the Arminian and Augustinian views of God's sovereignty.

Specifically, Talbott argues that eternal punishment cannot be logically consistent with the following three premises: (I) God wants all people to be saved (the Arminian view, see 1 Tim 2:4); (II) God can accomplish anything that God wills (the Augustinian view, see Eph 1:10); and (III) there are people who are not saved and thus are punished eternally.

That is, if God in fact wants everyone to be saved *and* if God can accomplish anything that God wills, then we must reject the idea of eternal punishment. (Of course, one might critique Talbott's argument by pointing out that his three premises do not adequately take into account the importance of giving people the free will to either accept or reject God.) As such, Talbott considers himself to be an evangelical universalist.

Still other evangelicals use the trajectory of the entire biblical narrative to argue for universalism. For example, Jan Bonda, a reformed pastor in the Netherlands, wrote the book *The One Purpose of God* in which he reads Romans closely and concludes that the sole purpose of God is to effect to the salvation of all people (that is, the fullness of the gentiles and all of Israel in Romans 11). According to Bonda, the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the prodigal son all point to God's constant desire for reconciliation and a corrective view of punishment.

Similarly, Gregory Macdonald -- a pseudonym for an evangelical scholar who chooses to remain anonymous for the time being -- has written a book called *The Evangelical Universalist*. Macdonald bases his argument on the shape of salvation history as described in Col 1:20, in which all of creation is ultimately reconciled with God. For Macdonald, there is a clear parallel between Israel's exile and return on the one hand and humanity's fall and redemption on the other. For Macdonald, scriptural passages such as Rom 5:18 (contrasting the effects of Adam's trespass with Jesus Christ's righteousness), 1 Cor 15:22 (noting that "all" die in Adam whereas "all" live in Jesus Christ) affirm this perspective.

#### b. Significance of the Controversy

The controversy over the nature of hell and eternal punishment in the evangelical theological community is significant in a number of ways. First, this controversy demonstrates that there is theological depth and nuance within that community. It is simply not true that the evangelical community has only one view of hell and eternal punishment. In fact, a recent study by ACUTE, the Evangelical Alliance Commission on Unity and Truth Among Evangelicals, affirmed both annihilationism and conditional immortality as valid alternative ways of thinking about hell and eternal punishment. Furthermore, as we have seen above, there are even some evangelicals who believe in a universalist reading of scripture.

Second, this controversy demonstrates that there is not a single "right" way to read scripture. Biblical exegesis is not just a matter of reading the words on the page and understanding the intent of the author. Rather, there are often conflicting texts that need to be interpreted, and different readers from different backgrounds may arrive at different conclusions. Furthermore, this controversy demonstrates that evangelical theologians are not averse to using reason (that is, logic and philosophy) as a source for theology (see, for example, Thomas Talbot's writings as well as other evangelical philosophers such as Richard Swinburne).

Third, this controversy may result in pastoral benefits for the evangelical community. Although the difference between eternal punishment on the one hand and annihilationism or conditional immortality on the other hand may not seem significant to most people, the latter approach seems to be more consistent with the loving nature of God. This may be particularly helpful in times of grief when the fate of one's deceased loved one is doubtful or cannot be known.

Fourth, this controversy may result in missiological benefits for the evangelical community. It is often argued that abolishing the concept of eternal punishment will lead to an evisceration of mission (since there is no longer the fear of hell and eternal punishment). However, I believe that a focus on annihilationism and conditional immortality might actually help with respect to reaching out to people who have been hurt by evangelical teachings about hell and eternal punishment in the past, such as LGBT people and others who are on the margins of church communities. The evangelical debate over hell and eternal punishment may be an effective way to reach out to such individuals and start the process of healing, while simultaneously preserving traditional conceptions about the justice of God.