

---

# Unconditional Divine Mercy and Hell. John Paul II on some Key Ideas about Damnation

*La misericordia divina incondicional e infierno.*

*Algunas ideas claves sobre la condenación en Juan Pablo II*

RECIBIDO: 18 DE NOVIEMBRE DE 2020 / ACEPTADO: 26 DE FEBRERO DE 2021

---

César Andrade ALVES

Faculdade Jesuíta de Filosofia e Teologia  
Belo Horizonte. Brazil  
ID ORCID 0000-0002-1724-8286  
cesar.alves@faculdadejesuita.edu.br

**Abstract:** Throughout history, theological reflection on hell expanded considerably. Between the 19th and 20th centuries, Christian eschatology in general, and theology of hell in particular, underwent a major renewal. At the end of the 20th century John Paul II issued a document in which he examined the appropriate way to connect divine mercy and hell in the light of the very core of Christian revelation. Although it has been largely ignored, John Paul II's document is relevant to any current presentation of Christian eschatology that aims to deepen the renewal of this discipline. A new synthesis of the theology of hell is presented at the end of the text.

**Keywords:** Eschatology, Renewal, Self-exclusion.

**Resumen:** A lo largo de la historia, la reflexión sobre el infierno se ha ampliado considerablemente. Entre los siglos XIX y XX la escatología cristiana en general, y la teología del infierno en particular, experimentaron una gran renovación. A finales del siglo XX, Juan Pablo II publicó un documento en el cual examinaba la manera apropiada de conjugar misericordia divina e infierno a la luz del núcleo central de la revelación cristiana. Aunque ha sido en gran medida ignorado, el documento de Juan Pablo es esencial para cualquier presentación actual de la escatología cristiana que pretende profundizar en la renovación de esta disciplina. Al final del texto se presenta una nueva síntesis de la teología del infierno.

**Palabras clave:** Escatología, Renovación, Auto-exclusión.

Christian eschatology has undergone a major renewal since the end of the 19th century. This process of revitalization reached a climax in the 20th century and continues to this day. The scope of this movement brought eschatology more accurately into line with Christian revelation. As a subtheme of Christian eschatology, the theology of hell was also reformulated so that it corresponded more faithfully to divine revelation and stressed a greater awareness of God's unconditional mercy. Indeed, unconditional divine love is a non-negotiable element of Christian revelation, just as hell is the ultimate refusal of this love.

In recent decades, however, reflections on hell have been dominated by studies (in the field of the philosophy of religion) which have devoted little attention to the renewal of Christian eschatology<sup>1</sup>. The relevant contribution of the theological literature on hell produced between the 1950s and the 1990s was overlooked by those philosophical studies, even though that contribution proceeded to the ordinary magisterium under John Paul II in 1999 in the document *Hell as the definitive rejection of God*<sup>2</sup>, which was also disregarded by the authors of these studies.

Also, the renewal of the theology of hell has so far had little penetration in preaching, catechesis, and on significant occasions, in theological works<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> See especially WALLS, J. L., *Hell. The Logic of Damnation*, Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992; KVANVIG, J., *The Problem of Hell*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1993; TALBOTT, Th., «The Doctrine of Everlasting Punishment», *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers* 7 (1990) 19-42. The first title above, for example, is the ninth volume of the series *Library of Religious Philosophy*. The words «theology» and «eschatology» are absent from this book, whose author works at the Department of Philosophy, Houston Baptist University, and is a member of the Society of Christian Philosophers.

<sup>2</sup> In this article we use the official English version available in the Vatican website: JOHN PAUL II, *General Audience, Hell as the definitive rejection of God. Wednesday 28 July 1999*, Vatican, 1999, [http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/audiences/1999/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_aud\\_28071999.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/audiences/1999/documents/hf_jp-ii_aud_28071999.html) (accessed January 25, 2021). The original Italian text too is available in the Vatican website together with the English version. The Italian text appears published in print as: JOHN PAUL II, *L'inferno come rifiuto definitivo di Dio. Udienza generale, Mercoledì 28 luglio 1999*, in *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II 22/2 1999*, Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2002, 80-82.

<sup>3</sup> Examples of recent theological works on which the renewal of the theology of hell has had little effect are: FARLEY, L. R., *Unquenchable Fire. The Traditional Christian Teaching about Hell*, Chesterton, IN: Ancient Faith Publishing, 2017; HART, D. B., *That All Shall Be Saved. Heaven, Hell & Universal Salvation*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019. Also, even a recent book that tries to shift the accent away from divine punishments and towards divine love and creaturely freedom is unacquainted with such renewal. This is the case of Reimer's work *Hell and the Mercy of God*. It does not cite any author or work that engaged in the revitalization of the theology of hell (even John Paul II's *Hell as the definitive rejection of God* is absent), and it is lacking in key ideas such as: (1) the symbolic biblical language regarding hell; (2) hell as self-exclusion; and (3) the

Harvey Egan noted in 2014 that «there has been relatively little contemporary theological reflection»<sup>4</sup> about hell. The decrease of theological reflection has brought the renewal of the theology of hell almost to a halt. As a consequence, some lines of thought concerning this issue remain impervious to the key concepts or ideas that were brought by that revitalization.

These circumstances are a challenge for theology in working out a tenable position on damnation. In this respect, this article has four aims: (1) to provide an overview of the lines of thought that are unreceptive to the renewal of the theology of hell; (2) to summarize the key ideas about hell that have arisen in theological literature but have been ignored by the works in the field of philosophy of religion that have prevailed in recent decades; (3) to highlight the progression that theological contributions have undergone when they were elevated to the ordinary magisterium by John Paul II; and (4) to highlight some aspects that are necessary to interpret John Paul II's text and to derive from it a theology of hell.

## 1. METHODOLOGICAL OBSERVATIONS

Two methodological observations have to be considered in view of the predominance of philosophical studies on the subject of hell. Firstly, this article is developed within the framework of Theological Method and more specifically Catholic Theological Method. The issues are approached from a theological standpoint that encompass the magisterium's authority. This article is not undertaken in the manner provided by the philosophy of religion. However, this work acknowledges the substantial contribution made by these studies.

Secondly, this article considers the talents of relevant non-English-speaking authors who worked on the issue of hell. A multilingual approach is open about the meaningful reflections provided by these authors. It leads to authors and concepts that, far from being useless, are important to a solid theological reflection on hell<sup>5</sup>. Monolingual approaches, in contrast, fail to do justice to

---

narcissistic love of the wicked person. See REIMERS, A., *Hell and the Mercy of God*, Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2017.

<sup>4</sup> EGAN, H., «Hell. The Mystery of Eternal Love and Eternal Obduracy», *Theological Studies* 75 (2014) 66.

<sup>5</sup> As an example of a fruitful multilingual approach see EGAN, H., «Hell. The Mystery of Eternal Love and Eternal Obduracy», 52-73.

these studies. Monolingual pieces of research are easier to conduct and are more frequent among English-speaking authors. Many authors who wrote on hell from a philosophical standpoint were confined to that sphere. It is a handicap because it is likely to generate biased studies. The great *Oxford Handbook of Eschatology*, for instance, assigns only a handful of lines to the renewal of eschatology. It makes passing reference to scarcely any non-English-speaking authors<sup>6</sup>. It does not cite any reference to their works through endnotes, or review the major contributions they made. And, conversely, it gives a longer endnoted discussion to less relevant texts produced within the English-speaking world<sup>7</sup>.

## 2. LINES OF THOUGHT LITTLE INFLUENCED BY THE RENEWAL

The weak influence which the revitalization of the theology of hell has on several spheres of ecclesial life can be discerned in the six lines of thought described below.

### 2.1. *An angry God of limited love*

In some ecclesial domains, hell is hitherto presented in a similar way to the expositions before the renewal of Christian eschatology. Hell is often conceived as a place to which an angry God casts certain beings, where they are to be given eternal punishment for the evil acts they committed. This punishment, inflicted by God, would comprise endless torment and total unhappiness from which there is no escape. «It has been the predominant conception in the Christian church throughout much of its history»<sup>8</sup>. In such a conception, God's unconditional and gratuitous mercy, as revealed in the event of Jesus Christ, is not at issue.

This is a gap demonstrated in the seminal work that Bishop Julian of Toledo wrote in the year 688<sup>9</sup>. In the history of theology, this book is the first synthesis of Christian eschatology. It exercised a profound influence in

<sup>6</sup> See WALLS, J. L. (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2010, 9.

<sup>7</sup> See WALLS, J. L., *The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology*, 10-11.

<sup>8</sup> ADAMS, M. M., «Hell and the God of Justice», *Religious Studies* 11 (1975) 433.

<sup>9</sup> See JULIAN OF TOLEDO, *Prognosticum futuri saeculi. Foreknowledge of the world to come (Ancient Christian Writers 63)*, New York, NY: Newman, 2010, 369-464.

this field for more than 1,200 years. Julian of Toledo wrote: «we believe that Christ the Lord will give the kingdom to the saints and perennial torture [*perenne supplicium*] to the reprobates»<sup>10</sup>. Julian conceived God's mercy in a conditional or partial way and applied this understanding to the righteous in heaven when they see the damned in hell: «The sight of the punishment of the impious does not obscure the light of such beatitude in the just ones, because it is by then impossible to have compassion for the damned [*compassio miseriae non erit*]»<sup>11</sup>. Also, Julian uses a literal hermeneutics with regard to future eschatological events, such as the final judgment, in which Christ grants beatitude to the saints and torture to the wicked. For instance, during that judgement even the courtroom and its chairs are literally understood<sup>12</sup>.

The renewal of the theology of hell, on the contrary, draws special attention to the symbolic biblical language regarding hell, along with hell as a self-exclusion (versus an exclusion that could be imposed by an angry God). Also, it highlights God's gratuitousness or unconditional divine mercy.

Equipped with such literal hermeneutics and characterized by that deficiency in considering God's unconditional mercy, Julian's work influenced both the structure and content of Christian eschatology for over 12 centuries<sup>13</sup>. In this period «it is instructive to note that there is no such prominent alternative to [this] traditional view that rejects [...] the thesis that identifies the purpose of hell in terms of punishment»<sup>14</sup>. In the first half of the 20th century, the *De Novissimis* treatises were still preserving the structure and the main concepts of Julian's work. Unconditional divine mercy was replaced by the partial mercy of an avenging God who could also be literally choleric and who could actually cast certain beings into hell, where they would receive eternal punishment for their evil deeds. However, under modern reasoning based on consistent research, «it is as great an exaggeration of human capabi-

<sup>10</sup> JULIAN OF TOLEDO, *Prognosticum futuri saeculi* III/44: *Ancient Christian Writers* 63, 455.

<sup>11</sup> JULIAN OF TOLEDO, *Prognosticum futuri saeculi* II/32: *Ancient Christian Writers* 63, 420.

<sup>12</sup> See JULIAN OF TOLEDO, *Prognosticum futuri saeculi* III/11: *Ancient Christian Writers* 63, 435.

<sup>13</sup> See WICKI, N., «Das *Prognosticon futuri saeculi* Julians von Toledo als Quellenwerk der Sentenzen des Petrus Lombardus», *Divus Thomas* (Freiburg) 31 (1953) 349-360; POZO, C., «La doctrina escatológica del *Prognosticon futuri saeculi* de san Julián de Toledo», *Estudios Eclesiásticos* 45 (1970) 173-201; STANCATI, T., «Alle origini dell'Escatologia cristiana sistematica. Il *Prognosticon futuri saeculi* di san Giuliano di Toledo (sec. VII)», *Angelicum* 73 (1996) 400-433.

<sup>14</sup> KVANVIG, J., «Hell», in WALLS J. L. (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2010, 417.

lities to suppose that a man's actions in this world could make him deserve eternal damnation as to think that they could merit eternal bliss»<sup>15</sup>.

## 2.2. *Universalism one*

The second line of thought into which the renewal of the theology of hell has barely penetrated is a variant of the first. Such a variant replaces eternal punishment by a temporary one. There would be hell and fire for some people after death but this hell fire should be as transitory as a period of successful medical treatment. Even if some people ended up in hell, they would have a second chance to achieve eternal salvation and they would universally grasp this last window of opportunity. After a certain period of divine punishment there would be no human being who would not finally convert. Such an idea did not come directly from Jesus Christ, but became possible for Christians throughout the history of the Church. «Jesus [himself...] was intended to awaken the spiritual imagination of his disciples and to leave room for reinterpretation as they matured in the faith; it was not intended to provide final answers to their theological questions»<sup>16</sup>.

On the one hand, this second line of thought can be based on the idea of a partial divine mercy. God could also be literally choleric to the point of providing such a provisional experience with hellfire. In this case, «hell [would] be fundamentally a place of punishment»<sup>17</sup>.

On the other hand, this same line of thought can also be developed on the basis of a conception of a God who is totally loving, without anger. If such is the case, the belief is that in the end «everyone will be in heaven on grounds that a loving God could not allow anyone to suffer [eternally] the disaster of hell»<sup>18</sup>. Universalism of this type thinks that «if there are finally wasted lives and finally unredeemed sufferings, either God is not perfect in love or he is not sovereign in rule over his creation»<sup>19</sup>. In such a conception a critical role is played by an idea of divine mercy with a narcissistic stamp that eternally excludes from God's love the acceptance of rejection and failure. Authors of this line of thought suppose that such a theory responds to a dilemma that they

<sup>15</sup> ADAMS, M. M., «Hell and the God of Justice», 447.

<sup>16</sup> TALBOTT, Th., «The Doctrine of Everlasting Punishment», 20.

<sup>17</sup> KVANVIG, J., *The Problem of Hell*, 136.

<sup>18</sup> KVANVIG, J., «Hell», 416.

<sup>19</sup> HICK, J., *Evil and the God of Love*, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, 340.

project onto God: whether the infinite divine love, thus conceived, could abide the eternal existence of someone in hell. These authors presuppose God's love according to such a narcissistic perspective and then ask: does God no longer love the damned for whom his Son died? Or, if those complete rebels are burning in hell, what effect does such a situation have on God?<sup>20</sup> Assuming that sort of divine love, Universalism believes that God's failure to prevent voluntary separation from him is inconsistent with his love for all people<sup>21</sup>.

An author whose work has influenced the conception of Universalism is Hans Urs Von Balthasar. This influence springs from his idea of the «duty to hope for the salvation of all» derived from Saint Paul's passage: «[love] hopes all things» (1 Cor 13,7). He affirms that the hope in the universality of redemption is distinct from rejecting the possibility of eternal damnation and from teaching the redemption of all (*apocatastasis*)<sup>22</sup>. Von Balthasar fails in two aspects. Firstly, his literal interpretation of 1 Cor 13:7 may lead to the hope for any world of fantasy («all things»). Secondly, Christian hope is not independent of the teaching that rejects *apocatastasis*; this hope, on the contrary, is fed by it.

Besides, universalists believe that within human freedom, «once all ignorance and deception and bondage to desire is removed, so that a person is truly “free” to choose»<sup>23</sup>, there will no longer be any reason for choosing eternal agony for oneself and that anyone can reject God forever. A fully informed choice to live apart from God «is utterly and almost inconceivably irrational»<sup>24</sup>. In this sense, Universalism naively believes that deliberately caused evil is engendered by a deficiency in logic and reason. In fact, authors of this line of thought ignore that deliberately caused evil is a freely chosen state of «father of lies» (Jn 8:44), and miss that the lie is, in itself, incoherent. Deliberately caused evil of the most severe nature, which constitutes hell, involves a complete and free moral adhesion to lies and incoherence and does not change by means of logic and reason. These shortcomings lead universalists to consider a choice to remain freely and forever in such a bad «place» as hell,

<sup>20</sup> See VON BALTHASAR, H. U., *Kleiner Diskurs über die Hölle*, Ostfildern: Schwabenverlag, 1987, 75.

<sup>21</sup> See TALBOTT, Th., «The Doctrine of Everlasting Punishment», 40.

<sup>22</sup> See VON BALTHASAR, H. U., *Kleiner Diskurs über die Hölle*, 15.100. See also HEALY, N., *The Eschatology of Hans Urs Von Balthasar: Being as Communion*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2005, 205.

<sup>23</sup> TALBOTT, Th., «The Doctrine of Everlasting Punishment», 37.

<sup>24</sup> TALBOTT, Th., «Universalism», in WALLS J. L. (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2010, 455.



to be mindless and unreasonable (and therefore untenable). Nevertheless, «today Universalism – the theological affirmation that all humanity will eventually be reconciled to God – has ceased to be merely the opinion of an eccentric minority and has acquired more mainstream legitimacy»<sup>25</sup>.

The renewal of the theology of hell, by contrast, draws special attention to the rejection of *apocatastasis* professed by Christian faith. This revitalization highlights hell as a self-exclusion, along with the gravity of narcissistic love, for which one's own self comes first and any sort of everlasting suffering is preferable to the loss of the self. Also, this renewal emphasizes God's gratuitousness or unconditional divine mercy that accepts rejection and failure.

### 2.3. *Universalism two*

The third line of thought on which the renewal of eschatology has had little influence is a politically correct view. Hell is treated as a possibility discarded *a priori* in the name of universal tolerance of people and their attitudes. It is a line of thought demonstrated in oral, unwritten terms. It imagines a lenient God who, leaving aside any intolerance, would finally consent to everything. In such a conception, divine mercy would be indulgent and incompatible with the existence of hell. Here too everyone would be saved. In this third line of thought, however, the paramount relevance of the event of Jesus Christ is weakened.

The renewal of the theology of hell maintains that such a lenient conception of divine mercy, devoid of any intolerance of human attitudes, is incompatible with what was manifested by Jesus of Nazareth.

### 2.4. *Annihilationism one*

The fourth line of thought into which the renewal of the theology of hell has had little penetration is the conception of passive annihilation, which functions as a kind of ontological euthanasia. In this case, «elimination might be a better word than annihilation»<sup>26</sup>. According to this fourth line of

<sup>25</sup> DE LA NOVAL, R., «Divine Drama or Divine Disclosure? Hell, Universalism, and a Parting of the Ways», *Modern Theology* 36 (2020) 201. See a recent critical book on Universalism: MCCLYMOND, M., *The Devil's Redemption. A New History and Interpretation of Christian Universalism*, 2 v., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018.

<sup>26</sup> PINNOCK, C., «Annihilationism», in WALLS J. L. (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2010, 464.



thought, «once the gift of life is withdrawn by God, the lost will cease to exist as persons»<sup>27</sup>.

This plays with the idea that God could cast the wicked into hell. «But because God does not relish unending torture, I don't think that his mercy would let us hurt ourselves so badly»<sup>28</sup>. Since God is love – to be presupposed also as narcissistic love that excludes rejection and failure – the solution proposed by this fourth line of thought is that the elimination of the evil person is an extreme, loving method for the release of the person from everlasting hellish torment. With such narcissistic divine love in mind, and presupposing that God casts the wicked into hell, this line of thought asks: «[does] torturing people without end is the sort of thing that the Abba God and Father of Jesus would do? Would the God who tells us to love our enemies actually be planning to wreak vengeance on his own enemies for all eternity?»<sup>29</sup>. The divine attitude would then be a kind of ontological euthanasia that the being would suffer passively. This elimination should be preferable to the perennial torture caused by an extrinsic will. «Annihilationism [...] views the cessation of existence as somehow preferable to unending conscious existence in hell»<sup>30</sup>. Such an insight can be found in Catherine of Siena, who wrote: «O Lord, shall I be content if any of those who are created in your image and likeness, as I am, should perish [...]? Should your truth and justice permit, I would wish hell to be completely destroyed [...]»<sup>31</sup>.

The renewal of the theology of hell, in contrast, draws special attention to God's gratuitousness or unconditional divine mercy that accepts rejection and failure.

## 2.5. *Annihilationism two*

The fifth line of thought on which the renewal of the theology of hell has had little effect is the libertarian concept that advocates the right of a person to make absolute decisions about his own being to the point where he can choose to quit existing. This fifth line of thought sustains annihilation as a

<sup>27</sup> PINNOCK, C., «Annihilationism», 464.

<sup>28</sup> PINNOCK, C., «Annihilationism», 470.

<sup>29</sup> PINNOCK, C., «Annihilationism», 470.

<sup>30</sup> KVANVIG, J., «Hell», 417.

<sup>31</sup> CATHERINE OF SIENA, *La vita di santa Caterina da Siena compilata dal B. Raimondo da Capua*, Roma: Tipografia di Monte Citorio, 1866, 10.

kind of ontological euthanasia as well. Here, however, annihilation would be active, that is, it would be freely chosen by the creature and actively carried out by the incorrigible sinner. Such self-destruction could be preferable to eternal torments.

One way to express this annihilation is that of an eternal death conceived as «back to nothingness» or «falling into nothingness». «Whoever refuses to accept God's love [...] can only experience the death [...] of his whole being: falling into nothingness. [...] God cannot annihilate the creature, created out of love. The creature destroys himself by plunging into nothingness»<sup>32</sup>. This type of Annihilationism wonders about the hypothesis that it is God who would have to cast the irreparable sinner into hell, and then dismisses such an idea as inadmissible. «That God should make someone immortal in order to be able to condemn him, that he should free him from his natural fall into nothingness and keep him in his being just to make him suffer – to me, at least, it is inconceivable»<sup>33</sup>. The proposed solution, then, is that the evil person would actively and deliberately take the decision to no longer exist.

Another way of expressing active annihilation involves two phases: hell and annihilation. The key idea in both phases is the individual's self-determination. The person himself would choose hell and then annihilation. In the first phase there would be self-determination for hell. «Hell is an afterlife journey toward annihilation. It may even be true that some never get to the end of the road toward annihilation; it may be that some eternally exist in hell»<sup>34</sup>, never choosing the ultimate separation from God, which is annihilation. The second and final phase would be the option for annihilation. This would happen when the individual, already in hell, would freely opt out of being. «That person should be free to choose nonexistence»<sup>35</sup>.

Contrarily, the renewal of the theology of hell emphasizes narcissistic love as incompatible with self-annihilation. Also, this revitalization stresses the idea of hell as a self-exclusion.

This fifth line of thought fails in two aspects. Firstly, free created beings do not enjoy absolute control over their existence. They cannot ontologically

<sup>32</sup> RUIZ DE GOPEGUI, J., «Inferno: revelação ou fruto do imaginário coletivo?», *Perspectiva Teológica* 33 (2001) 380.

<sup>33</sup> TORRES QUEIRUGA, A., *¿Qué queremos decir cuando decimos «Infierno»?», Santander: Sal Terrae, 1995, 74.*

<sup>34</sup> KVANVIG, J., *The Problem of Hell*, 152.

<sup>35</sup> KVANVIG, J., *The Problem of Hell*, 142.

decide their nonexistence, just as they cannot decide to come to existence<sup>36</sup>. Secondly, this theory ignores the fact that a most evil being is focused on its selfishness. Choosing nonexistence and going through self-annihilation would mean rupture to it. But the most necessary thing to its heart is itself; its self comes first. For that reason, even if active ontological euthanasia were possible, this evil being would never choose to have lost its self. So how could it choose to relinquish that which is the focus of its entire interest? To that free evil being, any kind of perennial suffering is to be preferred to the loss of self.

## 2.6. *A matter of no importance*

The last line of thought on which the renewal of the theology of hell has had little influence has a secular character and is not uncommon. The theme of hell is sidelined as an unnecessary or uncomfortable subject. «Alternative outlooks not requiring the doctrine [of hell] find ready acceptance among a population whose conception of God leaves little room for the language of fire and brimstone»<sup>37</sup>. There is a cultural unavailability of hell. It is an issue «not available in the culture at large, something that has either atrophied or entirely disappeared [...], in the sense that hell is unavailable for civic discourse, and that the public has not noticed this disappearance»<sup>38</sup>. Ernst Troeltsch's formulation is a classic in this regard:

For the moral feeling the idea of wages and punishments becomes more and more unbearable. The hereafter can be nothing other than the gradual emergence of the consequences of a higher life and an ever deeper penetration into the divine spiritual realm. A modern theologian says: the bureau of eschatology is mostly closed nowadays. It is closed because the ideas that founded it have lost their root<sup>39</sup>.

<sup>36</sup> See O'CALLAGHAN, P., *Christ Our Hope. An Introduction to Eschatology*, Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2011, 209-210.

<sup>37</sup> KVANVIG, J., *The Problem of Hell*, 13.

<sup>38</sup> MARTY, M., «Hell Disappeared. No One Noticed. A Civic Argument», *The Harvard Theological Review* 78 (1985) 393.

<sup>39</sup> «Immer unerträglich wird für das sittliche Gefühl der Lohn- und Strafgedanke. Das Jenseits kann nichts anderes sein als das allmähliche Hervortreten der Folgen, die das höhere Leben zeitigt, und ein immer tieferes Hineinwachsen ins göttliche Geisterreich. Ein moderner Theologe sagt: Das eschatologische Bureau sei heutzutage zumeist geschlossen. Es ist geschlossen, weil die Gedanken, die es begründeten, die Wurzel verloren haben»; TROELTSCH, E., *Glaubenslehre. Nach Heidelberger Vorlesungen aus den Jahren 1911 und 1912*, München: Duncker & Humblot, 1925, 36.

The renewal of the theology of hell, by contrast, draws special attention to God's gratuitousness as a non-negotiable element of Christian revelation, just as hell is the ultimate refusal of this love. This process of revitalization insists that the state of hell begins to be chosen during earthly life. The infernal city begins to be built in this life through free decisions against God's gratuitousness, which can metaphorically be expressed as distance. Before death, such effective distancing from God is provisional and can be concealed by deceptive appearances. After death this actual estrangement from God becomes fully visible and may be definitively chosen. Death is the occasion when a human misery of this kind meets, with no chance of concealment, God's gratuitousness. The wicked person keeps the free, previous decisions. For such a person, one's own self comes first and any sort of everlasting suffering is preferable to the loss of the self. But God's gratuitousness is then a reality that cannot be avoided and that has to be dealt with as a definitive gruesome burn. This is an issue of great importance.

This section has provided an overview of the lines of thought that are un-receptive to the renewal of the theology of hell. It is not uncommon that they manifest themselves in the life of the Church. In order to effectively bring about such revitalization to preaching, catechesis, popular devotion, and theological reflections, it is relevant to summarize the key ideas and concepts about hell that have arisen in theological literature. They have been ignored by the works in the field of philosophy of religion that have prevailed in recent decades.

### 3. THE RENEWAL OF ESCHATOLOGY

Christian eschatology has undergone a major renewal from the end of the 19th century; a renewal which has extended throughout the 20th century. In such a revitalization, key elements – which, though fundamental, had been long forgotten for centuries as if they had lost their ancient and original importance – of the *depositum fidei* were retrieved. These elements built a conception of hell other than those previously mentioned. The renewal of biblical, patristic, liturgical, and ecumenical studies continuing throughout the 19th and 20th centuries made possible a more vivid contact with the fundamental revelation brought by Christ and witnessed by the apostles. It was a remarkable process that has impacted theology in general and Christian eschatology in particular<sup>40</sup>. The renewal of Christian eschatology was started in the

<sup>40</sup> See LATOURELLE, R., *Theology. Science of Salvation*, Staten Island, NY: St. Paul, 1969, 251-270.

context of theological reflections and then reached the level of the ordinary magisterium<sup>41</sup>.

The first significant step towards the revitalization of eschatology was taken by the work of the German Protestant theologian and exegete Johannes Weiss<sup>42</sup>. In the Protestant field, other authors followed, such as Albert Schweitzer, Karl Barth, Charles H. Dodd, Oscar Cullmann, Joachim Jeremias, Wolfhart Pannenberg, and Jürgen Moltmann<sup>43</sup>. The renewal also touched the Catholic sphere, in which the pioneers were Jean Daniélou, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Yves Congar, Hans Urs von Balthasar, and Karl Rahner<sup>44</sup>. In 1965 the revitalization of Christian eschatology marked key documents of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council: the constitutions *Lumen Gentium* and *Gaudium et Spes*.

The renewal of Christian eschatology in the 19th and 20th centuries also meant a revitalization of the idea of damnation. «The theology of hell, after disposing of the erroneous representations of a fierce and avenging God who takes delight in taking poor human beings by surprise and damning them, rightly insists on the mystery of the man who turns towards himself and becomes fixed in his refusal of God»<sup>45</sup>. Hell is then conceived, more than as a

<sup>41</sup> The following titles are a selection of those indicated as relevant to the renewal of eschatology by: SCHWARZ, H., *Eschatology*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000, 107-172; NITROLA, A., *Trattato di Escatologia. 1. Spunti per un pensare escatologico*, Cinisello Balsamo: San Paolo, 2001, 34-90; ANCONA, G., *Escatologia Cristiana*, Brescia: Queriniana, 2003, 226-257; ALVIAR, J. J., *Escatología*, Pamplona: Eunsa, 2007, 37-42; O'CALLAGHAN, P., *Christ Our Hope. An Introduction to Eschatology*, 46-53.

<sup>42</sup> See WEISS, J., *Die Predigt Jesu vom Reiche Gottes*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck-Ruprecht, 1892, 5-67.

<sup>43</sup> See SCHWEITZER, A., *Von Reimarus zu Wrede. Eine Geschichte der Leben-Jesu-Forschung*, Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1906, 221-238; BARTH, K., *Der Römerbrief. Zweite Fassung 1922*, Zürich: TVZ, 2010, 45-713; DODD, C. H., *The Parables of the Kingdom*, London: Nisbet, 1935, 5-214; CULLMANN, O., *Christus und die Zeit. Die urchristliche Zeit- und Geschichtsauffassung*, Zürich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1946, 33-215; JEREMIAS, J., *Die Gleichnisse Jesu*, Zürich: Zwingli, 1947, 9-152; PANNENBERG, W., «Dogmatische Thesen zur Lehre von der Offenbarung», in PANNENBERG, W. (ed.), *Offenbarung als Geschichte*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck-Ruprecht, 1961, 91-114; MOLTSMANN, J., *Theologie der Hoffnung*, München: Kaiser, 1964, 11-334.

<sup>44</sup> See DANIÉLOU, J., «Christologie et eschatologie», in GRILLMEIER, A. and BACHT, H. (eds.), *Das Konzil von Chalkedon. Band 3, Chalkedon heute*, Würzburg: Echter, 1954, 269-286; TEILHARD DE CHARDIN, P., *Le Phénomène humain*, Paris: Seuil, 1955, 282-323; CONGAR, Y., «Le purgatoire», in AUZELLE, R. (ed.), *Le mystère de la mort et sa célébration. Vanves, 27-29 avril 1949*, Paris: Cerf, 1956, 279-336; VON BALTHASAR, H. U., «Eschatologie», in FEINER, J. et al. (ed.), *Fragen der Theologie heute*, Einsiedeln: Benziger, 1957, 403-421; RAHNER, K., «Theologische Prinzipien der Hermeneutik eschatologischer Aussagen», in RAHNER, K., *Schriften zur Theologie. Band IV*, Einsiedeln: Benziger, 1960, 401-428.

<sup>45</sup> LATOURELLE, R., *Theology. Science of Salvation*, 269.

place, but also as a vital situation of disunion with God<sup>46</sup>. Hell came to be better understood as the eternalized condition of an individual freedom which closes itself to unconditional divine love. The renewal of the theology of hell underlines the human capacity to turn egotistically to his own self and to entrench oneself narcissistically in a definitive rejection of God.

René Latourelle points out<sup>47</sup> the first consistent theological book that deals with the revitalization of the theology of hell: the collective work *L'enfer*<sup>48</sup> (*Hell*). This work, published in 1950, is a milestone in which the subject of hell is examined by different authors in several fields: Sacred Scripture, Patristic theology, later theologies, literature, art, and contemporary mentality. The guiding principle of these reflections is to examine the theme of hell in the overall context of Christian revelation<sup>49</sup>. This concern effectively brings to light the dimension of the kingdom of God as manifested in Jesus of Nazareth. This brings consequences for reflections on the matter. Firstly, in a negative way, the retrieval of the kingdom of God effectively manifested in Christ's life, death, and resurrection, provides a contrast to the classical understanding of hell «as a special world, an outer nature created for the torment of God's enemies»<sup>50</sup>. This classical understanding in fact composes «a theology unconcerned by the spirit of mercy, which is the very spirit of Christianity»<sup>51</sup>. The milestone work *L'enfer* repeatedly refers to the incompatibility between, on the one hand, the unconditional divine mercy of the New Covenant revealed in the event of Jesus Christ, and on the other hand, a divine action that could create hell and could cast the incorrigibly wicked into it. The creation of evil and hell cannot be attributed to the God who is fully revealed in Jesus Christ:

If it opposes God's majesty and goodness to be the creator of evil, it opposes him even more to be the creator of the absolute evil that is hell.

<sup>46</sup> See ALVIAR, J. J., *Escatología*, 45.

<sup>47</sup> See LATOURELLE, R., *Theology. Science of Salvation*, 269. See also the indication of Bardy's work in RATZINGER, J., «Hölle», in HÖFER, J. and RAHNER, K. (eds.), *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche. Band 5*, Freiburg: Herder, 1960, 449.

<sup>48</sup> See BARDY, G. et al., *L'enfer*, Paris: Éditions de la Revue des Jeunes (Collection Foi Vivante), 1950, 7-348.

<sup>49</sup> See BARDY, G. et al., *L'enfer*, 9.

<sup>50</sup> CARROUGES, M., «Images de l'enfer dans la littérature», in BARDY, G. et al., *L'enfer*, Paris: Éditions de la Revue des Jeunes (Collection Foi Vivante), 1950, 81.

<sup>51</sup> GUITTON, J., «L'enfer et la mentalité contemporaine», in BARDY, G. et al., *L'enfer*, Paris: Éditions de la Revue des Jeunes (Collection Foi Vivante), 1950, 326.

There is no world created by God for torture. The demonic universe is not a cosmos [...]. If we can picture it as a world, it is only as a global metaphor<sup>52</sup>.

Secondly, in a positive way, the renewal of the theology of hell is conducted in the light of God's unconditional love and of the possible separation that a free created being can establish from his loving creator. It is an approach «infinitely closer to the true spirit of Christianity»<sup>53</sup>. Unconditional divine mercy always permeates the horizon of these reflections on hell. The human response to this unconditional divine love has a grave responsibility to choose between its rejection or adherence to it. «Love always shrouds us: it is we who, through our attitude towards it, transform it into fire or light»<sup>54</sup>. A rejection of unconditional divine love can begin already in this life before death. «It is on the basis of man himself, as he lives down here on earth, that the infernal city begins to be built»<sup>55</sup>. Antipathy or contempt for God's unconditional love configures all sinful actions. «Every sin thus involves what theologians call "aversion to God", the first and fundamental element of sin»<sup>56</sup>.

The seriousness of sin is that it implies the refusal to love God in order to prefer beings; the created being becomes the supreme end to which the sinner turns himself. In this way the sinner distances himself from God. The individual's free choice (in thought, words, deeds or omissions) of the anti-kingdom of God establishes *ipso facto* some degree of effective detachment from God. «Such an outrage is only the effect of this amazing freedom granted by God to his creatures»<sup>57</sup>. The freedom of the individual can heighten this aversion to God and exacerbate it to a maximum level:

In fact, it is man who, by himself and through his own fault, brings about this separation [...]. But if, at any given moment, the sinner, whoever he may be, persists definitively in his fault, in his rejection of divine love, there is nothing more on the horizon than eternal separation: and what is this separation but hell?<sup>58</sup>

<sup>52</sup> CARROUGES, M., «Images de l'enfer dans la littérature», 81.

<sup>53</sup> CARROUGES, M., «Images de l'enfer dans la littérature», 86.

<sup>54</sup> GUITTON, J., «L'enfer et la mentalité contemporaine», 346.

<sup>55</sup> CARROUGES, M., «Images de l'enfer dans la littérature», 83.

<sup>56</sup> HÉRIS, Ch.-H., «Le dogme de l'enfer et la Théologie», in BARDY, G. et al., *L'enfer*, Paris: Éditions de la Revue des Jeunes (Collection Foi Vivante), 1950, 261.

<sup>57</sup> CARROUGES, M., «Images de l'enfer dans la littérature», 86.

<sup>58</sup> HÉRIS, Ch.-H., «Le dogme de l'enfer et la Théologie», 263.



The freedom granted by God to his creatures may in fact transform them into «lucid monsters [...], Luciferian human consciousnesses»<sup>59</sup>. As these human beings live down here on earth, they build an infernal city with tangible results. These are the atrocities not only of international wars, which may sound distant, but they are also atrocities committed by many normal people who enjoy a high degree of psychological freedom. These are «everyday people»; they are neither psychopaths nor mentally ill persons, nor victims of psychic trauma. Instead, they are psychologically healthy and lucid people who torture or kill, or exploit someone in order to benefit from their work. They do this diligently, through free choice, and have a good level of understanding about what they do. This kind of person is well confirmed in his narcissism. «It is always his self-interest and egoism that he has wanted to satisfy. He loved only himself, and this self-love went as far as contempt for God, because God in his desires and demands seemed to him to be opposed to his insatiable hunger for enjoyment»<sup>60</sup>. This real detachment, however, can be concealed in this period we live before death. A situation of effective separation from God may be hidden by a deceptive appearance, which may or may not be a religious one. The incessant practice of egoism, the never-ending pursuit of profit, fame, and power, and the oppression of one's brethren, are acts that may be hidden before death by means of honorable external appearances.

However, after death such dissimulation is no longer possible and the actual estrangement from God becomes fully visible. This is the other face of the creature's inflexibility in willing such detachment. This definitive element – a freely chosen one – is accompanied by the now apparent character of that separation. Damnation is such a freely chosen state. «The human conscience is no longer judged from the outside by a judge, even an omniscient one, nor is it punished by a torture chosen and created for it. Man forges his own hell for himself»<sup>61</sup>.

The freedom of the being who lucidly takes this definitive choice is respected by God, who created him lovingly with such a possibility. The possibility of rejection by the free created being is an irrevocable part of God's unconditional love. Running a risk is a quality of unconditional love. God's unconditional love is characterized by taking the risk of being partially or de-

<sup>59</sup> GUITTON, J., «L'enfer et la mentalité contemporaine», 338-339.

<sup>60</sup> HÉRIS, Ch.-H., «Le dogme de l'enfer et la Théologie», 285.

<sup>61</sup> CARROUGES, M., «Images de l'enfer dans la littérature», 86.

finitively rejected<sup>62</sup>. Those who choose damnation «manifest the sacredness and drama of this existence. Without the real possibility of eternal death, neither the freedom of man loving God nor the freedom of God sacrificing himself to save man would have their true meaning»<sup>63</sup>. The person who chooses such a state of ruin deprives himself forever of the unparalleled happiness to which he was called from the very first moment of his existence:

[This person,] eternally isolated in his selfishness, can henceforth only be the object of all kinds of vexations: whether they come from his rejection of God, or from his brothers and sisters in misery, to whose misfortune he has contributed by his scandals, or finally from creation itself which he has sacked with his lusts. A destiny for which he alone is responsible and which God has only sanctioned in his justice by respecting to the end the freedom of his creature<sup>64</sup>.

Among the Church Fathers, both Irenaeus of Lyon<sup>65</sup> and Augustine of Hippo<sup>66</sup> had maintained that the estrangement from God, and the resulting suffering of sinners, are not inflicted by God, but by the very person who distances himself. In 1965 the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council was indeed marked by the revitalization of Christian eschatology, but this movement did not reach the council's assertions on hell<sup>67</sup>. In the 1990s a number of theological works expressed reflections about hell that were akin to the precursor work *L'Enfer*<sup>68</sup>. These similarities were also found in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, published in 1997 under the authority of John Paul II<sup>69</sup>. In the

<sup>62</sup> «Taking the risk» is employed in analogical sense. About God «taking the risk of» see the section «Le Risque Divin» in GUITTON, J., «L'enfer et la mentalité contemporaine», 339-342.

<sup>63</sup> GUITTON, J., «L'enfer et la mentalité contemporaine», 342.

<sup>64</sup> HÉRIS, Ch.-H., «Le dogme de l'enfer et la Théologie», 305.

<sup>65</sup> See IRENAEUS OF LYON, *Contre les Hérésies* V:27,2: *Sources Chrétiennes* 153, 345, Paris: Cerf, 1969.

<sup>66</sup> See AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 5,10: PL 36, c. 87, in MIGNE, J.-P., *Patrologiae Cursus Completus. Series Latina*, Paris, 1841.

<sup>67</sup> Constitution *Lumen Gentium* treats of Eschatology in chapter 7, in which the word «hell» is absent. This theme is addressed in number 48, but without taking into consideration the renewal of the theology of hell. Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* treats of Eschatology in several numbers (14, 16, 17, 18, 21, 39 and 45), in which both the word and the theme «hell» are absent.

<sup>68</sup> See SACHS, J., «Current Eschatology. Universal Salvation and the Problem of Hell», *Theological Studies* 52 (1991) 235; LADARIA, L., «La teologia cristiana sull'inferno» (a conference held in 1993), in BRUNO, E. and ALBERIONE, E. (eds.), *Inferno*, Milano: San Fedele, 1996, 29-38; GRELOT, P., «Voir Dieu. Le Ciel, l'Enfer, le Purgatoire», *Esprit et Vie* 108, 11 (1998), 241-246; SEGUNDO, J. L., *El infierno. Un diálogo con Karl Rahner*, Montevideo-Buenos Aires: Trilce-Lohlé Lumen, 1998, 179.

<sup>69</sup> See CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH, Vatican, 1997, no. 1033.

*Catechism*, hell is shown as a situation in which the person, by his own choice, remains forever separated from God. The concept of hell is defined through two typical concepts that the theological renewal had elaborated in this field: «state» («*status*») and «self-exclusion» («*exclusionis sui ipsius*», «*auto-exclusionis*»): «This state of definitive self-exclusion from communion with God and the blessed is called “hell”»<sup>70</sup>.

#### 4. THE RENEWAL OF THE THEOLOGY OF HELL BY JOHN PAUL II

It was in 1999 that John Paul II raised the renewal of the theology of hell that was taking place in theological reflections to an unprecedented level. His audience *Hell as the definitive rejection of God* meant acceptance by the ordinary magisterium of a number of facets that until then were found mainly in theological texts<sup>71</sup>.

A few years earlier, in 1994, John Paul II had dealt in passing with the subject of hell in his book *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*. He presupposes the teachings of the magisterium about hell: on the one hand, the existence of hell and its eternal suffering, and on the other hand, the non-existence both of a hell with temporary pain and the predestination of someone to hell<sup>72</sup>. In that book he mentions that the ancient Church rejected the theory of *apocatastasis*. Also, he writes that the Church never made any pronouncement condemning a specific man to hellish torment; in this regard, John Paul II asserts that «the silence of the Church is, therefore, the only appropriate position for Christian faith»<sup>73</sup>. He concludes his passing reference to the issue of hell with a mere presentation of some unanswered questions:

Is not God who is Love also ultimate Justice? Can He tolerate terrible crimes; can they go unpunished? Is not final punishment in some

<sup>70</sup> CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH, no. 1033.

<sup>71</sup> We use the official English version available in the Vatican website: JOHN PAUL II, *General Audience, Hell as the definitive rejection of God. Wednesday 28 July 1999*, Vatican, 1999, [http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/audiences/1999/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_aud\\_28071999.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/audiences/1999/documents/hf_jp-ii_aud_28071999.html) (accessed January 25, 2021). The original Italian text appears published in print as: JOHN PAUL II, *L'inferno come rifiuto definitivo di Dio. Udienza generale, Mercoledì 28 luglio 1999*, in *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II 22/2 1999*, Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2002, 80-82.

<sup>72</sup> As for the existence of hell and its eternal suffering see the Symbol *Quicumque* (DH 76), the Fourth Lateran Council (DH 801), the constitution *Benedictus Deus* (DH 1002) and the constitution *Lumen Gentium*, no. 48 (DH 4168). With regard to the non-existence of a hell with temporary pain see the rejection of *apocatastasis* (DH 411). For the non-existence of the predestination to hell see the Second Council of Orange (DH 397) and the Council of Trent (DH 1567).

<sup>73</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, New York, NY: Alfred Knopf, 2005, 186.

way necessary in order to reestablish moral equilibrium in the complex history of humanity? Is not hell in a certain sense the ultimate safeguard of man's moral conscience?<sup>74</sup>

In 1999, three weeks before the July audience about hell, John Paul II made a passing statement about the self-exclusionary character of eternal damnation in a previous audience entitled *The merciful nature of God's judgement*. He stated: «Only those who will have rejected the salvation offered by God in his boundless mercy will be condemned, because they will have condemned themselves»<sup>75</sup>.

But now, in the audience *Hell as the definitive rejection of God*, John Paul II goes further and develops a consistent reflection about the issue. In this brief but important document he articulates, in a manner true to the ultimate nucleus of Christian revelation, unconditional divine mercy and the existence of hell. Aiming at a better understanding of John Paul II's text, his reflections on hell are divided here into four sub-themes. The text was part of a trilogy in which he developed issues in the field of Christian eschatology – heaven, hell and purgatory – over a period of three weeks.

#### 4.1. *Biblical symbols of hell*

John Paul II's document stresses that the words used by Sacred Scripture to refer to hell are characterized by relating major truths through the use of allegories. So far as it concerns hell, «to describe this reality Sacred Scripture uses a symbolical language»<sup>76</sup>. It is misleading to read such accounts literally as an anticipative history of the future.

The papal document details some of these symbolic terms. In the Old Testament they are: the *sheol* as a land of darkness (Ez 28:8; Ez 31:14; Jb 10:21f.; Jb 38:17; Ps 30:10; Ps 88:7.13), a pit from which one cannot rise up (Jb 7:9); or a place in which it is impossible to praise God (Is 38:18; Ps 6:6). As for the New Testament, these symbols are a place like a fiery furnace (Mt 13:42; Mt 25:30.41) or like *Gehenna* (Mk 9:43); and also as a place of eter-

<sup>74</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, 186.

<sup>75</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *General Audience The merciful nature of God's judgement. Wednesday 7 July 1999*, Vatican, 1999, [http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/audiences/1999/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_aud\\_07071999.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/audiences/1999/documents/hf_jp-ii_aud_07071999.html) (accessed January 25, 2021).

<sup>76</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Hell as the definitive rejection of God*, no. 2.

nal suffering with no possibility of return (Lk 16:19-31). Hell is also depicted as a pool of fire (Rv 20:13f.). A further symbolic element is the image of a judgement, where people appear to have handed down a legal sentence of conviction (Rv 20:13)<sup>77</sup>.

John Paul II refers to the necessary, correct interpretation of these images in order to achieve the great truths they symbolically assert. «The images of hell that Sacred Scripture presents to us must be correctly interpreted»<sup>78</sup>. Biblical allegorical language of hell should not be taken literally, given that «the improper use of biblical images [could...] create anxiety or despair»<sup>79</sup>.

#### 4.2. *God is only the source of good*

John Paul II opens his exposition with such words: «God is the infinitely good and merciful Father»<sup>80</sup>. In the overall context of Christian revelation God is only the author of blessings and unconditional mercy. There is no room in the Triune God for divine wrath. John Paul II writes that «God [...] in his merciful love [...] can only desire the salvation of the beings he created»<sup>81</sup>; indeed, God is only «source of all life and joy»<sup>82</sup>. As a consequence hell «is not a punishment imposed externally by God»<sup>83</sup>. Hell or «eternal damnation, therefore, is not attributed to God's initiative»<sup>84</sup>.

#### 4.3. *The utmost importance of free decision*

John Paul II notes that human freedom is called on «to conform our life to that of Jesus who lived his life with a “yes” to God»<sup>85</sup>. Ingression into the state of hell is closely bound up with an option contrary to that offered by unconditional divine mercy. «Man, called to respond to [God] freely, can unfortunately choose to reject his love and forgiveness once and for all, thus separating himself forever from joyful communion with him»<sup>86</sup>.

<sup>77</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Hell as the definitive rejection of God*, no. 2.

<sup>78</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Hell as the definitive rejection of God*, no. 3.

<sup>79</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Hell as the definitive rejection of God*, no. 4.

<sup>80</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Hell as the definitive rejection of God*, no. 1.

<sup>81</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Hell as the definitive rejection of God*, no. 3.

<sup>82</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Hell as the definitive rejection of God*, no. 3.

<sup>83</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Hell as the definitive rejection of God*, no. 1.

<sup>84</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Hell as the definitive rejection of God*, no. 3.

<sup>85</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Hell as the definitive rejection of God*, no. 4.

<sup>86</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Hell as the definitive rejection of God*, no. 1.

Damnation is attained through a definitive deliberation in this direction. «In a theological sense, hell is [...] the ultimate consequence of sin itself, which turns against the person who committed it. It is the state of those who definitively reject the Father's mercy, even at the last moment of their life»<sup>87</sup>. Hell therefore means a condition in which a created being freely places itself. «Rather than a place, hell indicates the state of those who freely and definitively separate themselves from God»<sup>88</sup>. In Christian revelation hell means the actual consummate frustration of a life that has freely disowned unconditional divine love: «In reality, it is the creature who closes himself to his love. Damnation consists precisely in definitive separation from God, freely chosen by the human person and confirmed with death that seals his choice forever. God's judgement ratifies this state»<sup>89</sup>.

#### 4.4. *There's already someone in hell*

John Paul II stresses the devil as a personal reality. «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»<sup>90</sup>. Such free beings are already in the state of hell. John Paul II asserts that the materialization of such a possibility should be for us a cautionary signal. «What happened to them is a warning to us: it is a continuous call to avoid the tragedy which leads to sin»<sup>91</sup>.

### 5. JOHN PAUL II'S TEXT AS A CATALYST FOR A SUBSTANTIAL THEOLOGY OF HELL

It is not easy to interpret a text of the Church magisterium to either extract its strengths or to overcome its limits. This is the case of the discourse *Hell as the definitive rejection of God*. On the one hand, we are granted access to the complete official text as it has been published, but we do not have the precursory stages of its composition with the eventual notes writ-

<sup>87</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Hell as the definitive rejection of God*, no. 1.

<sup>88</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Hell as the definitive rejection of God*, no. 3.

<sup>89</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Hell as the definitive rejection of God*, no. 3.

<sup>90</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Hell as the definitive rejection of God*, no. 4.

<sup>91</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Hell as the definitive rejection of God*, no. 4.

ten by the advisors who were consulted. Neither is it indicated to what extent theological literature and advisory opinions were consulted. On the other hand, the final text should be understood from its origin and purpose. This brief but significant document is not a global view of an ecumenical council, but the answer of a pope to a precise question about a pressing catechetical issue.

There was already a process of renewal of the theology of hell at that time. This article assumes that John Paul II intended to demonstrate both orthodoxy and inculturation in this regard. He meant loyalty to the very core of Christian revelation as far as orthodoxy was concerned. As for the elaboration of contemporary Catholic teaching, he expected to strengthen a more precise expression of the Christian doctrine of hell.

Despite its concision John Paul II's text encourages the development of a renewed theology of hell that expresses what Christian revelation really demonstrates on this subject. Some methodological (firstly) and conceptual (secondly) elements are critical to achieve this goal.

### 5.1. *A methodological consideration and some consequences*

Inclusion in a specific religious confession through a particular act of faith is methodologically mandatory. John Paul II was not ambivalent as far as belonging to a religion is concerned. The concept of Jesus as the fullness of revelation plays a crucial role in this particular act of faith. John Paul II worked from a perspective within a religious confession, according to which a New Covenant between God and mankind became explicit in Christ's life, death, and resurrection, where it was shown that God supplies only blessings and unconditional mercy. There is no room in the New Covenant for divine wrath. This viewpoint marked John Paul II's pontificate. He did not consider mercy to be a peripheral element of the Christian faith, «but rather proposed it as a core reality in the Gospel»<sup>92</sup>. According to John Paul II, the missionary urgency determines the duty to announce the event of Jesus Christ to which God's unconditional love is key. Therefore, he «enclosed his whole mission in the word mercy»<sup>93</sup>. He gave to this word «a pi-

<sup>92</sup> MARINI, V., «La Misericordia nel Magistero di san Giovanni Paolo II e papa Francesco», in BIANCHI, L. (ed.), *La misericordia lungo la Storia della Chiesa*, Milano: Biblioteca Francescana, 2019, 128.

<sup>93</sup> MARINI, V., «La Misericordia nel Magistero di san Giovanni Paolo II e papa Francesco», 127.



votal role in the Church's message, stressing how God is love and love is mercy»<sup>94</sup>.

With regard to damnation, John Paul II's document was thus in line with the renewal of the theology of hell. He left aside the concept of divine mercy that could be limited because it was dictated by the response of created beings, as if at times God would be merciful and at times he would be irascible, depending on how the free beings behaved with him. One occasion when God could act without any mercy, but with ruthless ferocity, would be in sending the wicked to hell. On the contrary, the papal text underlines an element found in the deepest core of divine revelation manifested in the event of Christ: the gratuitous and unconditional character of divine love. Divine love remains merciful regardless of the individual's response, and is therefore unconditional.

John Paul II had expressed insights in this sense about two decades earlier – in 1980 – in his encyclical *Dives in Misericordia*. He stressed that God's justice is only properly understood in the light of divine mercy. God's love and mercy are primary and fundamental to His justice. In God «love, so to speak, conditions justice and, in the final analysis, justice serves love. The primacy and superiority of love *vis-a-vis* justice – this is a mark of the whole of revelation – are revealed precisely through mercy»<sup>95</sup>. John Paul II asserts that «of this love one can say that it is completely gratuitous, not merited»<sup>96</sup> («*omni gratuitus nulliusque meriti fructu*»). He observes also that divine gratuitousness<sup>97</sup> is not leniency to evil: «in no passage of the Gospel message does forgiveness, or mercy as its source, mean indulgence towards evil, towards scandals, towards injury or insult»<sup>98</sup>.

That methodological insertion and its consequences – in line with the insights John Paul II had expressed in 1980 – are crucial to a renewed theology of hell.

<sup>94</sup> MARINI, V., «La Misericordia nel Magistero di san Giovanni Paolo II e papa Francesco», 121.

<sup>95</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Dives in Misericordia*, Vatican, 1980, [http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_30111980\\_dives-in-misericordia.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_30111980_dives-in-misericordia.html) (accessed January 25, 2021), no. 4.

<sup>96</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Dives in Misericordia*, no. 4, note 52.

<sup>97</sup> «Gratuitousness» is a particularly important term in Benedict XVI's encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, where it occurs 12 times (nos. 6; twice in 34; 36; 4 times in 38; 4 times in 39). In this encyclical «gratuitousness» is portrayed as the quality of the «absolutely gratuitous gift of God» (no. 34) and of «unconditional gift» (no. 37). See BENEDICT XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, Vatican, 2009, [http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_enc\\_20090629\\_caritas-in-veritate.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate.html) (accessed January 25, 2021).

<sup>98</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Dives in Misericordia*, no. 14.

## 5.2. *A range of ideas between selfless love and obduracy*

In order to develop a concise theology of hell based on John Paul II's *Hell as the definitive rejection of God*, some important concepts can be indicated in advance. In the series of nine elements below they appear arranged in sequence with their explicit meanings. Subsequently these nine ideas will be integrated and worked on in a synthetic exposition that springs from John Paul II's document.

**Selfless love.** Unconditional divine mercy or God's gratuitousness expresses itself as selfless love because it exhibits no concern for oneself but is devoted to others' interests. God's selfless love «is bestowed in a completely gratuitous manner, without any previous merit»<sup>99</sup>. Selfless love is a merciful action for the benefit of others; it is not an act of violence against oneself<sup>100</sup>.

**Self-denial.** A closely related idea is altruistic self-denial, which is the decision to give up personal interests for the benefit of others. It is a self-effacing love from someone who has no concern for themselves but for others. This is above all a characteristic of God's selfless love. Altruistic self-denial is also a distinctive action of unconditional divine mercy or God's gratuitousness; it is not an act of violence against oneself as well. Since human beings are created in the image of God, self-denial is also an imperative to us: «If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow me» (Mt 16:24; see Mk 8:34 and Lk 9:23).

**Loss of one's own life.** The third idea, also closely related to selfless love, is the concept of an altruistic loss of one's own life for the benefit of others. It is a distinctive action of unconditional divine mercy or God's gratuitousness as well; it is also not an act of violence against oneself. Through the loss of one's own life, unconditional divine mercy or gratuitousness is tantamount to Christ's love in the sense that «God demonstrates his own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us» (Rm 5:8). The altruistic loss of one's own life for the benefit of others is also essential to human beings, due to their creation in the image of God: «he who has lost his life for my sake will find it» (Mt 10:39; see Mt 16:25; Mk 8:35, and Lk 9:24).

<sup>99</sup> BENEDICT XVI, *Deus Caritas est*, Vatican, 2005, [http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_enc\\_20051225\\_deus-caritas-est.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est.html) (accessed January 25, 2021).

<sup>100</sup> The selfish or unselfish character of self-sacrifice (in the sense of selfless love, self-denial and loss of one's own life) is critically studied in DALFERTH, I. U., «Self-sacrifice. From the act of violence to the passion of love», *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 68 (2010) 77-94.

Acceptance of rejection. Another closely related idea to selfless love is the acceptance of rejection, suffering, and failure. It is also a distinctive action of unconditional mercy or gratuitousness. God's acceptance of rejection is expressed in terms of an offer to us of the possibility of saying «no». God never overrides free will. The divine acceptance of rejection, suffering, and failure establishes a sovereignty that is the reverse of absolutism, in which the ruler overrides people in order to assert his supreme power.

Subsequent ideas that are necessary to deal effectively with John Paul II's text are related to a movement which contrasts the unconditional divine mercy.

Taking advantage. A choice for evil implies a decision that «at least holds sufficient advantage to be gained»<sup>101</sup>. Taking advantage of others means the misuse of others for one's own benefit and implies a ruthless pursuit of personal gain. «Beware, and be on your guard against every form of greed; for not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions» (Lk 12:15).

Narcissism. Hell is the condition of «the terminally narcissistic damned»<sup>102</sup>. Narcissism lives wholly in one's self-interest and self-concern, and exhibits no concern for others. The only thing a narcissistic heart needs is itself. Anything contrary to one's self-interest is a blow and a setback, and so narcissism excludes rejection and failure.

Distance. It is an analogical term. It means estrangement or disconnection, a state of being apart from someone, a separation<sup>103</sup>. It refers to a relationship that is not close.

Self-exclusion. This idea means an exclusion that is not caused from the outside by a judge, but is self-forged<sup>104</sup>. It means an active estrangement akin to a self-inflicted condition<sup>105</sup>. The state of being apart from someone is caused by one's own intention to move away.

Obduracy. It stands for an unreasonable refusal to change a personal decision. Obduracy portrays how evil can be chosen decisively. It expresses a freely chosen state of «father of lies» (Jn 8:44) and the definitive option for incoherence. Obduracy is a complete and free moral adhesion to this in the face of God's selfless love<sup>106</sup>.

<sup>101</sup> WALLS, J. L., *Hell. The Logic of Damnation*, 138.

<sup>102</sup> EGAN, H., «Hell. The Mystery of Eternal Love and Eternal Obduracy», 71.

<sup>103</sup> See HÉRIS, Ch.-H., «Le dogme de l'enfer et la Théologie», 263.

<sup>104</sup> See CARROUGES, M., «Images de l'enfer dans la littérature», 86.

<sup>105</sup> See the expression «self-inflicted suffering» in WALLS, J. L., *Hell. The Logic of Damnation*, 145.

<sup>106</sup> See EGAN, H., «Hell. The Mystery of Eternal Love and Eternal Obduracy», 66.

These nine ideas will be now integrated into a concise exposition that springs from John Paul II's document.

### 5.3. *A theology of hell based on John Paul II*

Based on the previous considerations, we explore a theology of hell that derives from John Paul II's perspectives, which are indeed rooted in divine revelation.

Unconditional divine mercy or gratuitousness is the foundation of the whole cosmos. All that exists endures in existence due to its foundation on God's gratuitousness expressed as divine selfless love. Benedict XVI writes that «everything has its origin in God's love, everything is shaped by it, everything is directed towards it»<sup>107</sup>. The founder's selfless love is characterized by a self-denial that expresses itself through the loss of one's own life for the benefit of others. This kind of love characterizes the inner life of the Triune God.

Ultimately, it is the created beings endowed with freedom which make their own choices regarding such a foundation. Benedict XVI observes that «the human being is made for gift, which expresses and makes present his transcendent dimension»<sup>108</sup>. The history of salvation is marked from the beginning by the drama of the creature's freedom to accept or reject it. The reflection on hell acquires greater depth and precision, as damnation becomes more properly understood as an eternalized state of obduracy, a creatural freedom that closes itself to divine love. Joseph Ratzinger writes that the doctrine of hell does not primarily bring to us knowledge of hitherto unknown objects, or information of the hereafter, but tells us kerygmatically something that offers us a guidance for our existence before God without any ulterior motives calculating with a possibility of *apocatastasis*<sup>109</sup>. He argues that it brings us to master our lives «in the face of the real possibility of eternal failure and to understand revelation as a claim of ultimate seriousness»<sup>110</sup>.

John Paul II, moreover, highlights that the terms used by Holy Scripture to impart such guidance are metaphors which, through symbolic words, announce great truths<sup>111</sup>. Thus the seriousness of this doctrine requires stressing

<sup>107</sup> BENEDICT XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, no. 2.

<sup>108</sup> BENEDICT XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, no. 34.

<sup>109</sup> See RATZINGER, J., «Hölle», 448.

<sup>110</sup> RATZINGER, J., «Hölle», 448.

<sup>111</sup> See JOHN PAUL II, *Hell as the definitive rejection of God*, no. 2.

that the literal interpretation of such symbolical language is a misuse of biblical images.

The non-neutral foundation of the cosmos manifests itself in a world whose way of behaving generally moves forward in the opposite direction. Benedict XVI asserts that «gratuitousness is present in our lives in many different forms, which often go unrecognized because of a purely consumerist and utilitarian view of life»<sup>112</sup>. Not theoretically, but practically, all globalized ideologies conspire to make profits and take advantage of most opportunities. John Paul II underlines that «the present-day mentality, more perhaps than that of people in the past, seems opposed to a God of mercy, and in fact tends to exclude from life and to remove from the human heart the very idea of mercy. The word and the concept of “mercy” seem to cause uneasiness in man»<sup>113</sup>. In a world that moves forward in this direction people often despise God’s gratuitousness. «In consequence, we are quick to deduce that mercy belittles the receiver, that it offends the dignity of man»<sup>114</sup>. Saint Paul teaches that, in such a context, the distinctive orientation of the foundation of the universe is considered as «the foolish things [...], the weak things [...] the base things of the world and the despised, the things that are not» (1 Cor 1:27-28).

In his classic work *L'Ère du Vide (The Empty Era)*, Gilles Lipovetsky writes that, in the eyes of a large number of researchers, narcissism characterizes the present time<sup>115</sup>. In a narcissistic era such as this, the issue of unconditional divine mercy – or God’s gratuitousness – as opposed to narcissism is not a minor matter. Regarding the theology of hell, Ratzinger stresses that the damned pass into «the emptiness and self-closure of the merely own» («*die Leere und Selbstverschließung des bloß Eigenen*») <sup>116</sup>. The damned are solidly confirmed in their narcissism. They always aim, with lucidity, to satisfy their own interests and selfishness. For one such free being, the only thing its heart needs is itself. Since its own self comes first, it will never abandon that which is the center of its interest. To such an evil being, any sort of everlasting and self-inflicted suffering in hell is preferable to the loss of the self. In its own narcis-

<sup>112</sup> BENEDICT XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, no. 34.

<sup>113</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Dives in Misericordia*, no. 2.

<sup>114</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Dives in Misericordia*, no. 6.

<sup>115</sup> For an ample bibliography, see LIPOVETSKY, G., «Narcisse ou la stratégie du vide», in LIPOVETSKY, G., *L'Ère du Vide. Essais sur l'individualisme contemporain*, Paris: Gallimard, 1983, 55.

<sup>116</sup> RATZINGER, J., «Hölle», 449.

sism, human love is often abusive and totalitarian. Such inappropriate human love judges that overriding a person's freedom may be justified, and that not doing so would be a personal act of omission. In a narcissistic era, such as this, this kind of narcissistic love can be projected onto God in a theological reflection: God could not be perfect in love if there were free beings in hell, in a perpetual condition of suffering and no redemption.

Luis Ladaria emphasizes that unconditional divine love is not like that. He writes that «the problem of hell simply lies in the perspective of God's love, who can never override man. A love freely offered must also be freely accepted because if we did not have the ability to say "no", our freedom would not be real»<sup>117</sup>. The eternally obdurate suffer precisely because unconditional divine mercy is not narcissistic and accepts rejection and failure. Unconditional divine mercy is affected by that suffering, but since God does not love narcissistically he eternally accepts such rejection and failure. In the light of this, Egan maintains that «hell is the paradox that God, Christ (who died and rose even for the damned), the saints, and creation itself continue to love eternally even the condemned»<sup>118</sup>. Thus the existence of such wasted lives and unredeemed eternal suffering does not mean that God's love is not perfect or that he is not sovereign in ruling over his creation. God's sovereignty is not like absolutism, in which a narcissistic ruler overrides people in order to assert his supreme power.

The collective work *L'Enfer* emphasizes that damnation can analogically be referred to as a distance between the eternally obdurate and God, in the sense that there is a separation or estrangement between them<sup>119</sup>. But the existence of the damned is irrevocably laid on the divine foundation that is selfless love. In this respect, Egan asserts that «one aspect of hell will be the loving presence of the deified and christified new heaven and new earth to the eternally obdurate»<sup>120</sup>. Hell does not mean an absence of God. God can be observed in plain sight by the wicked. Pierre Grelot emphasizes such insight. He writes that in hell, «in the face of this love, there is the "falling out of love", the voluntary rejection of love that persists in spite of the "face to face"»<sup>121</sup>. God's gratuitousness that expresses itself as selfless love becomes a reality that

<sup>117</sup> LADARIA, L., «La teologia cristiana sull'inferno», 30.

<sup>118</sup> EGAN, H., «Hell. The Mystery of Eternal Love and Eternal Obduracy», 66.

<sup>119</sup> See HÉRIS, Ch.-H., «Le dogme de l'enfer et la Théologie», 263.

<sup>120</sup> EGAN, H., «Hell. The Mystery of Eternal Love and Eternal Obduracy», 70; see also 73.

<sup>121</sup> GRELOT, P., «Voir Dieu. Le Ciel, l'Enfer, le Purgatoire», 244.

cannot be avoided by the eternally obdurate and that reality has to be dealt with. Grelot writes that «this light, [they] now see it face to face as a gruesome burn. This face to face with God's love becomes an intolerable torment for the freedom that has refused to love»<sup>122</sup>.

For a human being, the state of hell begins to be chosen during earthly life. The infernal city begins to be built in this life before death through free choices and free decisions against selfless love. If fully accomplished, the never-ending pursuit of self-interest establishes the free created being voluntarily in a certain state in which, by his own will, he has broken forever with unconditional divine mercy. Before death, such effective distancing from God is still provisional and can be concealed by deceptively honorable appearances that can even consist of some sort of religious aspect. This effective but hidden estrangement may be the oppression of others, the contumacious practice of egoism, a constant pursuit of personal gain, or a permanent striving for fame, power, profit or pleasure.

Death is the occasion when a human misery of this kind meets, with no chance of concealment, the foundational selfless love that is characterized by self-denial and by the loss of one's own life for the benefit of others. Obduracy means that this effective contrast then becomes immutable and manifest. The wicked person keeps the free, previous, and informed decisions and will be in the state of hell only because he freely determines to be there. Damnation is a self-exclusion. Egan remarks that «God, Christ, the saints, and creation itself do not cast the lost from their presence»<sup>123</sup>. Ladaria too remarks that unconditional divine mercy «contemplates [our] ability to say "no", to self-exclude ourselves [...], out of communion with God, with others and with the transformed cosmos»<sup>124</sup>. He maintains that hell thus «is not extrinsic [...], a punishment which, in an extrinsic way, could also be another. Hell is the very consequence of self-exclusion, in which there is something intrinsic»<sup>125</sup>. The free creature forges hell for himself. Egan writes also that «this view shifts the theological discourse away from extrinsic, legalistic, and mythological terminology to intrinsic, personalistic, and more pastorally useful categories. It underscores hell as a dimension of the mystery of human freedom. No one is

<sup>122</sup> GRELOT, P., «Voir Dieu. Le Ciel, l'Enfer, le Purgatoire», 244. See also EGAN, H., «Hell. The Mystery of Eternal Love and Eternal Obduracy», 68.

<sup>123</sup> EGAN, H., «Hell. The Mystery of Eternal Love and Eternal Obduracy», 66.

<sup>124</sup> LADARIA, L., «La teologia cristiana sull'inferno», 36.

<sup>125</sup> LADARIA, L., «La teologia cristiana sull'inferno», 36-37.



“in hell” who does not want to be. Metaphorically speaking, the gates of hell are locked from the inside»<sup>126</sup>.

Ladaria asserts that hell «is the maximum contradiction that man can undergo; it is an existence that becomes contradictory in itself because man is made for God»<sup>127</sup>. In this respect, Juan Luis Segundo stresses such contradiction in other words. He writes that it is appropriate to define hell as «the absolute minus»<sup>128</sup> or the extreme «least» sector of free choices. At the end of his discourse, John Paul II maintains that some free created beings are already in such a state or situation. They are the demons; the extreme «least» sector of free choices is already a reality in them. Hell, therefore, is not «empty».

The renewal of the theology of hell pushes eternal salvation well beyond the rigid limits of those who have received the sacrament of baptism. Actual salvation is intimately tied to adherence to or rejection of the foundation of the cosmos. Belonging to the Church and receiving the sacrament of baptism alone are no guarantee of salvation. The passages of Mk 16:16 («He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved») and 1 Pet 3:21 («baptism now saves you») should not be misinterpreted. These are misunderstood if they are thought to express that in order to be saved, it is enough to receive baptism and belong to the Church, as if then one could stand by or, even worse, do whatever one put one's mind to even if it is evil. Such passages presuppose that baptism should correspond to practical attitudes of justice and holiness, without which belonging to the Church is in vain.

But so is there no point in belonging to the Church? Is baptism then superfluous? The answers to such questions remain negative. The Second Vatican Ecumenical Council stresses that belonging to *Ekklesia* and receiving the sacrament of baptism imply the increased responsibility of taking Jesus Christ as a practical guide for life:

He is not saved, however, who, though part of the body of the Church, does not persevere in charity. He remains indeed in the bosom of the Church, but, as it were, only in a «bodily» manner and not «in his heart». All the Church's children should remember that their exalted status is to be attributed not to their own merits but to the special grace of Christ. If they fail moreover to respond to that grace in thought, word

<sup>126</sup> EGAN, H., «Hell. The Mystery of Eternal Love and Eternal Obduracy», 73.

<sup>127</sup> LADARIA, L., «La teología cristiana sull'inferno», 35.

<sup>128</sup> SEGUNDO, J. L., *El infierno. Un diálogo con Karl Rahner*, 179.

and deed, not only shall they not be saved but they will be the more severely judged<sup>129</sup>.

Also, the collective work *L'Enfer* remarks that «those who are most apt to commit [mortal] sin are educated Christians who know the requirements of God's love and the duties that this love imposes on them, for when they sin, they can act with full knowledge of the facts»<sup>130</sup>. Instead of ensuring salvation, belonging to the Church and receiving baptism thus imply for the believer an even more serious existential charge of opting for divine justice and gratuitousness. In the same sense, Saint Luke teaches: «From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded» (Lk 12:48).

### CONCLUSION

This paper reviewed six lines of thought about hell that are marked by a lack of conformity with Christian revelation. One of those viewpoints, for instance, goes back at least to the seminal book *Prognosticum futuri saeculi*, written in 688 by Julian of Toledo. This work is characterized by a literal hermeneutics of Sacred Scripture and the inadequacy of setting forth God's unconditional mercy, some features that are still alive in a number of Christian circles today. Indeed, this book influenced the presentations of Christian eschatology for more than 1,200 years until the *De Novissimis* treatises in the first half of the 20th century. Other lines of thought that were examined are Universalism, Annihilationism, and the secular approach that considers hell as an unnecessary subject. These are also active at the present time.

This discussion focused on the broad enterprise of theological renewal in the field of eschatology that took place from the end of the 19th century and spread throughout the 20th century. The aim of this revitalization was to render eschatology more faithful to what Christian revelation actually shows in this regard. As a subordinate subject within eschatology, the theology of hell was also revitalized. With John Paul II the renewal of the theology of hell was raised to the level of the Church's ordinary magisterium. The theology of hell as presented by him in the document *Hell as the definitive rejection of God* thus relied on a previous path of consistent and solid reflections made by other authors.

<sup>129</sup> Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, no. 14 (DH 4137).

<sup>130</sup> HÉRIS, Ch.-H., «Le dogme de l'enfer et la Théologie», 265.

Based on these previous reflections, this article describes a synthetic theology of hell that derives from John Paul II's perspectives, and points out manifold aspects:

- symbolic biblical language versus a literal understanding of Holy Scripture;
- God's unconditional gratuitousness or mercy, rather than an angry God of limited love;
- foundational selfless love of the Triune God that is marked by gratuitousness and self-denial which are eternally expressed through the loss of one's own life for the benefit of others;
- gratuitous and selfless divine love that accepts rejection and failure versus a narcissistic conception of divine love that would exclude both;
- the ultimate gravity of narcissistic love, for which one's own self comes first and any sort of everlasting suffering is preferable to the loss of the self;
- the infernal city begins to be built in this world before death through free decisions against God's gratuitousness;
- instead of ensuring salvation, belonging to the Church and receiving baptism imply for the believer a greater existential charge of opting for divine justice and gratuitousness;
- the individual's self-exclusion versus an exclusion that could be imposed by an angry God;
- self-exclusion manifested by an ultimate adherence to lies and incoherence, and metaphorically expressed as distance;
- before death, such distancing from God is provisional and can be concealed by deceptively honorable appearances that can even consist of some sort of religious aspect, but after death it becomes fully visible;
- the intrinsic character of hellish suffering rather than an extrinsic punishment inflicted by a truculent God;
- selfless divine love as a reality that cannot be avoided by the eternally narcissistic obdurate and that has to be dealt with while being faced with God's gratuitousness (that accepts rejection and failure), which becomes an intolerable torment.

John Paul II's document is a catalyst for a substantial theology of hell marked by a more precise expression of what Christian revelation really demonstrates in this regard.

## Bibliography

- ADAMS, M. M., «Hell and the God of Justice», *Religious Studies* 11 (1975) 433-447.
- ALVIAR, J. J., *Escatología*, Pamplona: Eunsa, 2007.
- ANCONA, G., *Escatologia Cristiana*, Brescia: Queriniana, 2003.
- AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, in MIGNE, J.-P., *Patrologiae Cursus Completus. Series Latina* (PL 36), Paris, 1841, 67-1968.
- BARDY, G. et al., *L'enfer*, Paris: Éditions de la Revue des Jeunes (Collection Foi Vivante), 1950.
- BARTH, K., *Der Römerbrief. Zweite Fassung 1922*, Zürich: TVZ, 2010.
- BENEDICT XVI, *Deus Caritas est*, Vatican, 2005, [http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_enc\\_20051225\\_deus-caritas-est.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est.html) (accessed January 25, 2021).
- BENEDICT XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, Vatican, 2009, [http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_enc\\_20090629\\_caritas-in-veritate.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate.html) (accessed January 25, 2021).
- CARROUGES, M., «Images de l'enfer dans la littérature», in BARDY, G. et al., *L'enfer*, Paris: Éditions de la Revue des Jeunes (Collection Foi Vivante), 1950, 11-87.
- CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH, Vatican, 1997, [http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/\\_INDEX.HTM](http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_INDEX.HTM) (accessed January 25, 2021).
- CATHERINE OF SIENA, *La vita di santa Caterina da Siena compilata dal B. Raimondo da Capua*, Roma: Tipografia di Monte Citorio, 1866.
- CONGAR, Y., «Le purgatoire», in AUZELLE, R. (ed.), *Le mystère de la mort et sa célébration. Vanves, 27-29 avril 1949*, Paris: Cerf, 1956, 279-336.
- CULLMANN, O., *Christus und die Zeit. Die urchristliche Zeit- und Geschichtsauffassung*, Zürich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1946.
- DALFERTH, I. U., «Self-sacrifice. From the act of violence to the passion of love», *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 68 (2010) 77-94.
- DANIÉLOU, J., «Christologie et eschatologie», in GRILLMEIER, A. and BACHT, H. (eds.), *Das Konzil von Chalkedon. Band 3, Chalkedon heute*, Würzburg: Echter, 1954, 269-286.
- DE LA NOVAL, R., «Divine Drama or Divine Disclosure? Hell, Universalism, and a Parting of the Ways», *Modern Theology* 36 (2020) 201-210.
- DENZINGER, H. and HÜNERMANN, P. (eds.), *Enchiridion Symbolorum. A Compendium of Creeds, Definitions and Declarations of the Catholic Church*, 43rd ed., San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2012.

- DODD, C. H., *The Parables of the Kingdom*, London: Nisbet, 1935.
- EGAN, H., «Hell. The Mystery of Eternal Love and Eternal Obduracy», *Theological Studies* 75 (2014) 52-73.
- FARLEY, L. R., *Unquenchable Fire. The Traditional Christian Teaching about Hell*, Chesterton, IN: Ancient Faith Publishing, 2017.
- GRELOT, P., «Voir Dieu. Le Ciel, l'Enfer, le Purgatoire», *Esprit et Vie* 108, 11 (1998) 241-246.
- GUITTON, J., «L'enfer et la mentalité contemporaine», in BARDY, G. et al., *L'enfer*, Paris: Éditions de la Revue des Jeunes (Collection Foi Vivante), 1950, 319-348.
- HART, D. B., *That All Shall Be Saved. Heaven, Hell & Universal Salvation*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019.
- HEALY, N., *The Eschatology of Hans Urs Von Balthasar: Being as Communion*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- HÉRIS, Ch.-H., «Le dogme de l'enfer et la Théologie», in BARDY, G. et al., *L'enfer*, Paris: Éditions de la Revue des Jeunes (Collection Foi Vivante), 1950, 241-305.
- HICK, J., *Evil and the God of Love*, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.
- IRENAEUS OF LYON, *Contre les Hérésies. Livre V* (Sources Chrétiennes 153), Paris: Cerf, 1969.
- JEREMIAS, J., *Die Gleichnisse Jesu*, Zürich: Zwingli, 1947.
- JOHN PAUL II, *Dives in Misericordia*, Vatican, 1980, [http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_30111980\\_dives-in-misericordia.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_30111980_dives-in-misericordia.html) (accessed January 25, 2021).
- JOHN PAUL II, *General Audience The merciful nature of God's judgement. Wednesday 07 July 1999*, Vatican, 1999, [http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/audiences/1999/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_aud\\_07071999.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/audiences/1999/documents/hf_jp-ii_aud_07071999.html) (accessed January 25, 2021).
- JOHN PAUL II, *General Audience Hell as the definitive rejection of God. Wednesday 28 July 1999*, Vatican, 1999, [http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/audiences/1999/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_aud\\_28071999.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/audiences/1999/documents/hf_jp-ii_aud_28071999.html) (accessed January 25, 2021).
- JOHN PAUL II, *L'inferno come rifiuto definitivo di Dio. Udienza generale, Mercoledì 28 luglio 1999*, in *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II 22/2 1999*, Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2002, 80-82.
- JOHN PAUL II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, New York, NY: Alfred Knopf, 2005.

- JULIAN OF TOLEDO, *Prognosticum futuri saeculi. Foreknowledge of the world to come* (Ancient Christian Writers 63), New York, NY: Newman, 2010.
- KVANVIG, J., *The Problem of Hell*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1993.
- KVANVIG, J., «Hell», in WALLS J. L. (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2010, 413-426.
- LADARIA, L., «La teologia cristiana sull'Inferno», in BRUNO, E. and ALBERIONE, E. (eds.), *Inferno*, Milano: San Fedeale, 1996, 29-38.
- LATOURELLE, R., *Theology. Science of Salvation*, Staten Island, NY: St. Paul, 1969.
- LIPOVETSKY, G., «Narcisse ou la stratégie du vide», in LIPOVETSKY, G., *L'Ère du Vide. Essais sur l'individualisme contemporain*, Paris: Gallimard, 1983, 55-87.
- MARINI, V., «La Misericordia nel Magistero di san Giovanni Paolo II e papa Francesco», in BIANCHI, L. (ed.), *La misericordia lungo la Storia della Chiesa*, Milano: Biblioteca Francescana, 2019, 111-155.
- MARTY, M., «Hell Disappeared. No One Noticed. A Civic Argument», *The Harvard Theological Review* 78 (1985) 381-398.
- MCCLYMOND, M., *The Devil's Redemption. A New History and Interpretation of Christian Universalism*, 2 v., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018.
- MOLTMANN, J., *Theologie der Hoffnung*, München: Kaiser, 1964.
- NITROLA, A., *Trattato di Escatologia. 1. Spunti per un pensare escatologico*, Cinisello Balsamo: San Paolo, 2001.
- O'CALLAGHAN, P., *Christ Our Hope. An Introduction to Eschatology*, Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2011.
- PANNENBERG, W., «Dogmatische Thesen zur Lehre von der Offenbarung», in PANNENBERG, W. (ed.), *Offenbarung als Geschichte*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck-Ruprecht, 1961, 91-114.
- PINNOCK, C., «Annihilationism», in WALLS J. L. (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2010, 462-475.
- POZO, C., «La doctrina escatológica del *Prognosticon futuri saeculi* de san Julián de Toledo», *Estudios Eclesiásticos* 45 (1970) 173-201.
- RAHNER, K., «Theologische Prinzipien der Hermeneutik eschatologischer Aussagen», in RAHNER, K., *Schriften zur Theologie. Band IV*, Einsiedeln: Benziger, 1960, 401-428.
- RATZINGER, J., «Hölle», in HÖFER, J. and RAHNER, K. (eds.), *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche. Band 5*, Freiburg: Herder, 1960, 446-449.
- REIMERS, A., *Hell and the Mercy of God*, Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2017.

- RUIZ DE GOPEGUI, J., «Inferno: revelação ou fruto do imaginário coletivo?», *Perspectiva Teológica* 33 (2001) 363-390.
- SACHS, J., «Current Eschatology. Universal Salvation and the Problem of Hell», *Theological Studies* 52 (1991) 227-254.
- SCHWARZ, H., *Eschatology*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000.
- SCHWEITZER, A., *Von Reimarus zu Wrede. Eine Geschichte der Leben-Jesu-Forschung*, Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1906.
- SEGUNDO, J. L., *El infierno. Un diálogo con Karl Rahner*, Montevideo-Buenos Aires: Trilce-Lohlé Lumen, 1997.
- STANCATI, T., «Alle origini dell'Escatologia cristiana sistematica. Il *Prognosticon futuri saeculi* di san Giuliano di Toledo (sec. VII)», *Angelicum* 73 (1996) 400-433.
- TALBOTT, Th., «The Doctrine of Everlasting Punishment», *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers* 7 (1990) 19-42.
- TALBOTT, Th., «Universalism», in WALLS J. L. (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2010, 446-461.
- TEILHARD DE CHARDIN, P., *Le Phénomène humain*, Paris: Seuil, 1955.
- TORRES QUEIRUGA, A., *¿Qué queremos decir cuando decimos «Infierno»?», Santander: Sal Terrae, 1995.*
- TROELTSCH, E., *Glaubenslehre. Nach Heidelberger Vorlesungen aus den Jahren 1911 und 1912*, München: Duncker & Humblot, 1925.
- VON BALTHASAR, H. U., «Eschatologie», in FEINER, J. et al. (ed.), *Fragen der Theologie heute*, Einsiedeln: Benziger, 1957, 403-421.
- VON BALTHASAR, H. U., *Kleiner Diskurs über die Hölle*, Ostfildern: Schwabenverlag, 1987.
- WALLS, J. L., *Hell. The Logic of Damnation*, Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992.
- WALLS, J. L. (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2010.
- WEISS, J., *Die Predigt Jesu vom Reiche Gottes*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck-Ruprecht, 1892.
- WICKI, N., «Das *Prognosticon futuri saeculi* Julians von Toledo als Quellenwerk der Sentenzen des Petrus Lombardus», *Divus Thomas* (Freiburg) 31 (1953) 349-360.



---

## NOTAS

