

Reconciliationism – a forgotten evangelical doctrine of hell

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Over the last 30 years there has been a growing debate in the evangelical world over the doctrine of hell. This debate has largely been between traditionalists, who hold that the torment of the damned continues unendingly, and annihilationists, who hold that the torment of the damned comes to an end with extinction.¹ A striking gap in this burgeoning literature has been reference to the similar and even more extensive debate in the latter half of the nineteenth century.² Amongst the leading figures of this earlier debate were annihilationists such as Edward White and Henry Constable and traditionalists such as William Shedd³ and Edward Pusey. However there was an alternative view proposed by evangelicals in that earlier debate which I believe is worthy of reconsideration as providing important insights for a resolution of the current impasse.

The distinctive of this alternative doctrine of hell is stated succinctly by Griffith Thomas as that 'which endeavours to harmonise the idea of everlasting punishment with the non-eternity of sin...'⁴ Its advocates saw it as a distinct fourth

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- 1 Evangelical annihilationists are thus to be distinguished from those theologians who hold that the extinction of the damned occurs at the death of the body. I am using annihilationism as synonymous with conditionalism or conditional immortality. For a discussion of the terms see K. S. Harmon, 'The Case Against Conditionalism' in N. M. de S. Cameron (ed.) *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1992), 196-99.
 - 2 The notable exceptions are Geoffrey Rowell's historical study *Hell and the Victorians: A Study of the Nineteenth-Century Theological Controversies Concerning Eternal Punishment and the Future Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), and David Powys in his book *'Hell': A Hard Look at a Hard Question. The Fate of the Unrighteous in New Testament Thought*. (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1998) and paper 'The Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Debates about Hell and Universalism' in N. M. de S. Cameron (ed.), *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1992), 93-138.
 - 3 Shedd has been widely quoted in the recent debate with the republication of his work on hell in 1990. W. G. T. Shedd, *The Doctrine of Endless Punishment* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1990 [1885]).
 - 4 W. H. Griffith Thomas, *The Principles of Theology: An Introduction to the Thirty-Nine Articles* (5th rev. ed., London: Church Book Room Press, 1956), 526.

doctrine of hell (alongside traditionalism, annihilationism and universalism).⁵ Although I believe that it is best thought of as a modified form of traditionalism, for the sake of clarity I will distinguish it by the neologism 'reconciliationism', which may be defined as that doctrine of the fate of the damned which holds that they remain unendingly conscious in hell, but that they cease to sin and are to some degree reconciled to God without thereby experiencing the blessings of the saints.⁶

The only works clearly advocating reconciliationism are from the period 1850-1915, with the exception of the contemporary evangelical theologian Henri Blocher, who doesn't refer to these nineteenth-century proponents. Elements of the position have been advocated by other writers, but they do not distinguish themselves from the classic traditionalism of the continuing sin of the damned. Thus this remains a rare position in the history of doctrine, although Blocher suggests 'It may be nearer to older orthodoxy' than the modern alternatives.⁷

This is also a largely forgotten doctrine. The few exceptions, in the main, focus solely on the leading Reconciliationist, Thomas Rawson Birks. Rowell gives the most extensive discussion;⁸ Michael Paternoster is briefer,⁹ and the ACUTE report for the Evangelical Alliance briefer still.¹⁰ None of these commentators presents Birks as part of a wider group of theologians advocating a distinct position. However, Griffith Thomas in a 'Special Note on Eschatology' in *The Principles of Theology*¹¹ lists Birks along with four other writers as advocates of a distinct view on hell. A recent unpublished lecture by Stephen Williams now adds a substantial and very valuable survey and exposition of these nineteenth-century writers.¹²

5 Of this view James Langton Clarke, a former Professor of Divinity at Durham University, wrote, 'nevertheless a *fourth* view seems possible, which has slowly grown up in my mind on the basis of the Eternal Saviour-Judgeship of Christ, and this view may be called by the name of *reconciliation*' (J. L. Clarke, *The Eternal Saviour-Judge* [London: John Murray, 1904], 85 [italics original]).

6 Blocher writes of his view being 'a kind of "reconciliation"'. (H. Blocher, 'Everlasting Punishment and the Problem of Evil' in N. M. de S. Cameron (ed.), *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1992), 310.) Blocher's definition of reconciliation is given earlier: "'Reconciliation" [in Colossians 1.20] does not imply *salvation*,... it means the restoration of order, of all within God's order, "pacification," as all are brought back into the divinely-ruled harmony' (303 [italics original]).

7 Blocher, *Everlasting*, 304.

8 Rowell, *Hell and the Victorians*, 123-29.

9 Michael Paternoster, *Thou Art There Also: God, Death and Hell* (London: SPCK, 1967), 102-103.

10 ACUTE, *The Nature of Hell: A report by the Evangelical Alliance Commission on Unity and Truth Among Evangelicals* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2000), 64-65.

11 Griffith Thomas, *The Principles of Theology*, 526. This reference was removed after the 5th edition of 1956.

12 S. N. Williams, 'The Question of Hell and Salvation: is there a Fourth View?' *Tyndale Lecture* (2005, unpublished). My own investigation has been independent of his, but I am glad to acknowledge his help over several years as my doctoral supervisor and in commenting on drafts of this article.

The leading advocate of reconciliationism was Thomas Rawson Birks. Birks was a prominent Evangelical, a founder member of the World's Evangelical Alliance, and an honorary secretary of the UK Evangelical Alliance. He became successor to F. D. Maurice as Professor of Moral Philosophy at Cambridge. Rowell writes of Birks,

Although he could not be described as an outstanding scholar, he was definitely to be ranked amongst the leaders of Evangelicalism, and the young Gerard Manley Hopkins could describe him in 1864 as 'almost the only learned Evangelical going'.¹³

Dr. Candlish, Rector of New College, Edinburgh and a contemporary of Birks, concurs, noting that he is from the Evangelical wing of the Church of England and 'is one of the ablest and best of that school'.¹⁴ According to Rowell, Birks' 'major statement of his position'¹⁵ was *The Victory of Divine Goodness*,¹⁶ although his most mature statement is found in *The Difficulties of Belief*.¹⁷ He is the writer most often quoted and referred to by theological friend and critic alike in the debate of his day.

The other published advocates of this position mentioned by Griffith Thomas were James Langton Clarke, Professor of Divinity at Durham University;¹⁸ Dr J. R. Illingworth, who is perhaps best known for his two chapters in *Lux Mundi*;¹⁹

13 Rowell, *Hell and the Victorians*, 124, quoting from C. C. Abbott (ed.), *Further Letters of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, 1956, 18 (6 June 1864).

14 R. S. Candlish, *Tendencies in Connection with the Doctrine of Future Punishment: Being Principal Candlish's Introductory Lecture at the Opening of the Session 1869-70, in the New College, Edinburgh* (London: James Nisbet, 1870), 1.

15 Rowell, *Hell and the Victorians*, 124.

16 T. R. Birks, *The Victory of Divine Goodness: including I. Letters to an inquirer on various doctrines of Scripture; II. Notes on Coleridge's Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit; III. Thoughts on the nature of the Atonement and of Eternal Judgement*. (London: Rivingtons, 1867). Birks then wrote a reply to two critical responses, entitled *The Victory of Divine Goodness: Reply to Strictures in Two Recent Works* (London: Rivingtons, 1869). This later work was then added to make a second edition of the former, also entitled *The Victory of Divine Goodness* (2nd ed., London: Rivingtons, 1870), and quotations will be from this later edition. Birks writes that he first came to this view through independent study in 1837 (see *Victory*, x, 254-55).

17 T. R. Birks, *The Difficulties of Belief in connexion with the Creation and the Fall* (2nd ed., London: Macmillan, 1876), especially 217-41. In this second edition Birks added 'the two Essays on the Atonement and Eternal Judgment, somewhat revised,... {from *The Victory of Divine Goodness*' (*Difficulties*, x.), as well as two new final chapters in which he develops his own view of hell at length.

18 Clarke, *Eternal Saviour-Judge*. The correct initial for Langton Clarke is 'J' (for James) and not 'R' as Thomas records it. He may have confused him with Robert Lowes Clarke, another theologian of the time who had written on eschatological topics.

19 J. R. Illingworth, *Reason and Revelation: An Essay in Christian Apology*. (London: Macmillan and Co., 1902, 1st ed., 1906, 2nd ed.)

Samuel Garratt, a clergyman and Honorary Canon of Norwich;²⁰ and James Orr, who taught at the United Free Church College in Glasgow from 1900 to 1913.²¹ Other writers of the period who are suggestive of reconciliationism, though without noting any link to Birks or claiming it as a distinct position, include Alfred Edersheim, who is noted by Clarke,²² and Sir Robert Anderson, one time Inspector of Scotland Yard.²³

I will begin by expounding Birks' doctrine of hell, since he gives the most detailed presentation of reconciliationism.²⁴ I will then expound the similar doctrine of the modern French theologian Henri Blocher, who offers the most satisfactory presentation of this position, and where he differs from the earlier writers is to be preferred. Finally I will note some of the main criticisms and strengths of reconciliationism.

An exposition of reconciliationism

1. Thomas Rawson Birks

Michael Paternoster offers a brief summary of Birks' position, and highlights its most distinctive element:

his originality showed itself in the speculation that the damned, in spite of their personal loss and shame, would come to accept the justice of their sentence and to worship their judge. He believed that saved and unsaved alike would, each in their way, contribute to the total victory of Christ... Birks, feeling that the total victory of divine goodness is incomplete while an opposition party exists anywhere in the universe, is constrained to say that the damned are not in rebellion, but accept God's sentence and by accepting turn it to his praise.²⁵

Birks' offers several numbered summaries of his position. By far the most ex-

20 Samuel Garratt, *World Without End* (London: William Hunt and Co., 1886) and *Veins of Silver or, Truths Hidden Beneath the Surface*. (London: Charles J. Thynne, 1904, 2nd ed.) Garratt notes the influence of Birks, whom he refers to as a 'well-known Theologian' (*Veins*, viii) and attributes the seed for some of his views to Birks' *Victory* (*Veins*, xiii).

21 Orr's comments are found in a single paragraph (James Orr, *Sin as a Problem of To-Day* [London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1910], 317-18).

22 A. Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (London: Longmans, 1883) Appendix IX., vol. ii., 795, quoted by Clarke, *Eternal Saviour-Judge*, 91-92.

23 Robert Anderson, *Human Destiny: After Death - What?* (London: Pickering and Inglis, 1913), especially 134-35 and 141-43.

24 I have given a fuller exposition of the positions of Birks, the other nineteenth century reconciliationists and Blocher in *Arguing with Annihilationism: a doctrinal assessment with special reference to recent evangelical debate* (Coventry Ph.D., 2000), 129-92. See also Williams, 'The Question of Hell and Salvation', especially 12-17 on Birks.

25 Paternoster, *Thou Art There Also*, 102-103.

tensive such summary is in *The Difficulties of Belief*,²⁶ but more succinct ones are given in *The Victory of Divine Goodness*²⁷ and in his response to Dr. Candlish's criticisms.²⁸ I will quote the second summary in *The Victory of Divine Goodness* and add in material from the others where it serves to clarify or amplify.

The main doctrines on the judgement to come asserted or implied in my work are these.

Firstly, that the moral contrast between the righteous and the wicked, in this life, leads to an eternal and solemn contrast of doom, of reward or of punishment, in the life to come.

Secondly, that everlasting punishment does not mean extinction or cessation of all being, but an abiding for ever under the penal and condemning sentence of the righteous and holy Judge. [‘This is the contrast of the doctrine of Annihilation or Absolute Destruction of being itself.’²⁹]

Thirdly, that this punishment will be complete, not incomplete; so as not merely to confine from without, but to subdue and crush the rebellious will under the mighty power of God, revealed in judgement; so that there will be, and can be, no eternal reign of Satan, and no power of active mutual torment on the part of men and angels, under this condemnation. [‘the punishment will not leave the wicked in the active commission of eternal blasphemy, defiant rebellion, and mutual torment, but will bring them, as the footstool of Christ, into a state of passive subjection and utter and complete humiliation under the mighty hand of God. This is the contrast to the mediaeval superstition, which assigns to Satan a rival empire to God’s own dominion for evermore.’³⁰]

Fourthly, that the perfections of God, who is at once just and gracious, lead to the conclusion that since righteousness, as well as grace, is displayed for ever towards the saved, so grace, mercy, and compassion, in some mysterious form, will be displayed, as well as righteous justice, towards even the worst and guiltiest of the creatures of God. [Omitted from his *Reply to Candlish*]

Fifthly, that the general nature of such mercy may, and probably will, consist in a contemplation, passively and under Divine compulsion, of the infinite goodness of the Lord, a contemplation rendered possible to lost souls only by the strict execution of the solemn threatenings of God. [‘be-

26 Birks, *Difficulties*, throughout the final two chapters, from 217.

27 Birks, *Victory*, 211-12 and 229-30 (originally published in Birks, *Reply to Strictures*, 15-16 and 33-34).

28 T. R. Birks, *The Atonement and the Judgement: A Reply to Dr. Candlish’s Inaugural Lecture; with a Brief Statement of Facts in Connection with the Evangelical Alliance* (London: Rivingtons, 1870), 23-24.

29 Birks, *Victory*, 211.

30 Birks, *Victory*, 211.

cause this judgement is so complete, it will involve the capacity for a passive contemplation of God's perfect goodness, so far as He may be pleased to unfold it; such as tends in its own nature to adoration, wonder, and praise... Its extent and degree I leave as a solemn mystery, which eternity alone may reveal.^{31]}

A good single sentence summary of Birks' position on the state of the damned is: 'They will glorify their Maker, even amidst the fires of penal judgment.'³²

The chief arguments that Birks uses to support his view can, according to Garratt, be summarised under two heads: the character of God and the victory of God.³³

1.1 The argument from the character of God

Turning first to the argument from the character of God, Birks argues that all of God's attributes, including his love and grace, will be directed toward the damned as well as the righteous. This is expounded briefly under 'Fourthly' above, and its importance for Birks is indicated in the following summary.

The main idea, in my view of the future, is that eternal punishment, however sure and however solemn, does not exclude every form and kind of goodness or mercy from being shown to those who are punished, but that the King of Heaven retains still the right and power to mingle such actings of Divine mercy and compassion with the fulfilment of his threatenings, in such measure as seems good in His sight. The secondary idea is that of one especial way in which such mercy may be shown.³⁴

This point is emphasised in Rowell's summary comments on Birks

Birks saw more clearly than most that the conflict between universalism and a rigorous understanding of eternal punishment was paralleled by the problem of the relation of God's justice and mercy. His attempted solution may have been paradoxical, but he did at least recognise that the problem existed, and at the same time pointed the way to an emphasis on a corporate as well as an individual salvation.³⁵

Rowell's observation about a corporate as well as an individual salvation is an important distinction for Birks in his understanding of the experience of the damned. Birks argues,

that all happiness is of two kinds, personal and federal, one resulting directly from blessings strictly our own, and the other from sympathy with the joys of others, or from the contemplation of external and objective truth.³⁶

31 Birks, *Atonement*, 23-24.

32 Birks, *Difficulties*, 235.

33 Garratt, *Veins of Silver*, 63.

34 Birks, *Atonement*, 39-40, point 8. See also Birks, *Victory*, 230.

35 Rowell, *Hell and the Victorians*, 129.

36 Birks, *Victory*, 43.

He then concludes that while the damned suffer subjectively and personally, there is also an objective and federal element in which they can share in the blessing of heaven by its passive contemplation.³⁷

1.2 *The argument from the victory of God*

Birks refers to the victory of God over evil in the title of two of his major books on the subject of hell, and offers a brief exposition under ‘Thirdly’ above. Birks argues from the notion of God’s forbearance that God’s current permission of evil is not his final response. For example,

There is... the widest contrast between the present time of Satan’s permitted activity and reign, and the future season of punishment, when all his power to tempt or accuse the brethren, or to reign over evil men, will have ceased for ever. It is not strange, but natural and certain, that sinners should have less freedom for active wickedness under the fiery anger of God than in the time of his forbearance and long-suffering. Nothing can be more monstrous than the notion that, under the holy eye and righteous hand of the Supreme Judge, they both can and will rebel more freely and fiercely than ever before. Such a prison, in which criminals should be allowed to cultivate their own wicked habits and practices to the uttermost, would be a foul reproach to any earthly government. How great, then, must be the evil of bringing this charge, without the least grain of Scriptural evidence, nay, in the teeth of its express statements, against the government of the Righteous and Eternal King!³⁸

In his understanding of hell as a place in which God’s victory results in the cessation of rebellion in hell Birks is typical of reconciliationists. Birks is though distinct in his argument that this victory is achieved by the cross. Birks discusses the atonement at length³⁹ and argues that without the death of Christ hell would have been that of classic traditionalism, which he terms the ‘first death’.

On this view we may see the force of the contrasted figures, by which the first and second death are portrayed. One is “the lake of fire,” solemn indeed and most awful, yet bounded in its range, shut in by firm land on every side. The other is “the deep,” the abyss, “the bottomless pit,” evil reigning, rioting, growing, deepening without limit and without end, in its fatal descent, farther and farther, from light, happiness and heaven. By the sentence of the law, fulfilled without atonement or redemption, mankind, once fallen, would be shut out from God’s presence, and sink and sink,

37 Candlish isolates this understanding of the psychology of the damned as Birks’ starting point. Candlish claims that Birks has combined the former, personal, aspect, which underlies traditionalism, with the latter, federal, aspect which underlies Birks’ ‘new’ view (Candlish, *Tendencies*, 3).

38 Birks, *Difficulties*, 220.

39 See especially Birks, *Difficulties*, Chapter 11 ‘On the Nature of the Atonement’, 175-92.

and sink for ever, in this abyss of hopeless and endless ruin. There would have been, through ages without end, the awful reality of a God-dishonouring, God-hating, God-blaspheming, self-tormenting, God-abandoned universe.⁴⁰

In other words, Birks argues that there is a group of Scriptural texts which support the traditional doctrine of hell, but they all apply to the first death. Thus Birks only holds his distinctive view about hell when the term is applied to the state of the damned in the second death.

Birks argues from a doctrine of a universal atonement⁴¹ that the damned do not face the punishment of the first death because Christ suffered its curse on the cross.

And the curse which He bore was death, the first death,... The curse and condemnation of the Law is done away with in the cross of Christ. The condemnation of the Gospel alone remains...⁴² And thus the effects of Christ's Atonement, common to all mankind, are these:... the abolition of the first death, the wages of sin, which is swallowed up in eternal victory; the resurrection of the body; and the transfer of men from the reign of death, and the curse of utter vanity, to a state in which God, the God of love and holiness, will be for ever glorified – though by some in the height of heavenly glory, and by others only in the depth of just retribution and eternal shame.⁴³

1.3 What sort of doctrine is this?

The most common charge from traditionalists against Birks' position, and reconciliationism in general, was that despite his formal distinction between the

40 Birks, *Difficulties*, 184. The section 182-84 is introduced with the question 'What, then, apart from the Atonement, is the state of mankind before God?' 182.

41 There is some uncertainty about how to term Birks' doctrine of the atonement. Birks describes his own position as 'moderately Calvinistic, or, to speak more correctly, temperately Augustinian, in my views on theology' (Birks, *Atonement*, 11) and repudiates the idea that he was an Arminian. However Candlish suggests that Birks was an Arminian, and Rowell judges that 'there would seem to have been some justice in Candlish's suggestion that [Birks] was an Arminian despite Birks' repudiation of the idea.' (Rowell, *Hell and the Victorians*, 124.) The difference of opinion occurs, I suspect, because Birks holds a different understanding of the impact of the atonement on what he calls the first death (the classic traditionalist hell) and the second death (the reconciliationist hell). Thus the atonement actually gained some blessings for all people, saving them from the first death, but only the possibility of salvation from the second death.

42 Birks elaborates succinctly on this distinction between the condemnation of the Law and Gospel in *Atonement*, 21: 'I do hold, indeed, that the sin of each, as a debt of guilt from the breach of perfect law, was cancelled on the cross... But I do not hold that the present guilt of any one, in the rejection of grace and disbelief of God's promise, is cancelled until he repents and believes.'

43 Birks, *Difficulties*, 185, 188.

state of the damned and the righteous it is actually a form of universalism. An example of this charge that is made by Dr. Candlish who concludes his discussion of Birks' position that 'his doctrine at bottom is really that of universal restoration.'⁴⁴ If this charge could be substantiated it would be a very strong argument against reconciliationism for evangelicals, because universalism is usually regarded as an unbiblical doctrine and therefore unacceptable for evangelicals. The ACUTE report states, 'we understand universalism to be divergent from authentic evangelical faith...'⁴⁵

A more recent verdict on Birks' position is in the ACUTE report, which is more cautious than Candlish, but still describes it as a form of universalism:

Birks advocated a qualified Restitutionism in which 'the lost' had the potential to develop in the afterlife to a point where they could eventually share some of the joy of God's re-made cosmos, if not its full blessings.... His scheme *did* maintain unbelievers in an eternal realm rather than annihilating them, and this eternal realm *was* divided off from heaven. It was, however, palliative (if not exactly remedial),...⁴⁶

However in his comprehensive survey of views on the future state Salmond gives Birks' *The Victory of Divine Goodness* as a reference for a position that is 'not a form of universalism'⁴⁷ and that Birks' position is best categorised as a modified traditionalism.⁴⁸ I think that this is correct.⁴⁹ Birks clearly retains the notions not only of a division of the damned from heaven, but also of their unending punishment (see under 'Firstly' and 'Secondly' above), which clearly distinguishes his position from universalism. Thus, although Birks can write of the damned being saved in some senses, he writes equally clearly of them not being saved, as the following quote illustrates.

Unbelievers are not saved from judgment, from the condemning sentence of their Judge, from righteous punishment, and the second death, from shame and everlasting contempt, from the fire that is not quenched... They will be saved from that first death, in which the creature is self-ru-

44 Candlish, *Tendencies*, 14. See also William Reid, *Everlasting Punishment and Modern Speculation* (Edinburgh: Oliphant, 1874), 314.

45 ACUTE, *The Nature of Hell*, 32. See also 131.

46 ACUTE, *The Nature of Hell*, 64 (italics original).

47 S. D. F. Salmond, *The Christian Doctrine of Immortality* (4th ed. Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1901), 665 (italics mine).

48 The ACUTE report contains a brief account of the controversy over Birks' views in the British Organisation of the World's Evangelical Alliance (ACUTE, *The Nature of Hell*, 64-65). The move to have Birks excluded from the Alliance's British Organisation was led by a solicitor called Robert Baxter who admitted Birks' claim to teach a form of traditionalism, only questioning his interpretation of Scripture. For a brief historical account see J. B. A. Kessler Jr., *A Study of the Evangelical Alliance in Great Britain* (Goes: Oosterbaan & Le Cointre, 1968), 67-69.

49 Williams concludes that Birks is best categorised as holding a distinct fourth view of hell (Williams, 'The Question of Hell and Salvation', 17).

ined, and God is not glorified at all, but for ever blasphemed. They will be saved from the curse of hopeless vanity, in which the great end of their creation remains wholly unfulfilled.⁵⁰

The decisive distinction here is that the damned are not saved from hell, the second death, and thus Birks does not hold to a form of universalism, but a modified form of traditionalism.

2. Henri Blocher

Henri Blocher⁵¹ presents his doctrine of hell as a modified form of traditionalism. However his position is similar to that of Birks and the earlier reconciliationists, and he is the only advocate of this distinctive position in the debate of the past thirty years.⁵² After a brief summary of Blocher's position, I will highlight the main differences between Blocher and Birks.

Blocher's major presentation of his thesis is his chapter 'Everlasting Punishment and the Problem of Evil'.⁵³ However the following quote is the nearest that Blocher comes to giving a summary of his understanding of hell.

[W]e can correct... inadequate ideas of eternal punishment. Scripture, for instance, never suggests the idea that it is a divine defeat, or that sin continues, that evil perpetuates itself in Gehenna. On the contrary, evil, vanquished and crushed by judgment shall no longer exist! Every tongue shall confess (Phil. 2:10f), all creatures shall be 'reconciled' (Col. 1:20): this must mean that *all* human beings, without any exception, in the blaze of that Day, shall see at last in truth. They will render to God the homage he re-

50 Birks, *Difficulties*, 238.

51 Henri Blocher is Professor of Systematic Theology at the Faculté Libre de Théologie Evangélique in Vaux-sur-Seine, France and Professor of Theology at Wheaton College, Illinois, USA.

52 There are a few theologians who advocate certain elements of reconciliationism, yet without presenting them as a significant modification of traditionalism. A rare example from the more recent debate is Paul Helm when he writes, 'We are informed that before Christ the Judge every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father (*Phil. 2:11*). And this language implies that the impenitent will recognise the essential justice of their plight. For they too recognise Christ's Lordship, and confess him, not with love and adoration as a Saviour, but as their Lord. So hell is a place of pain, but not of defiance or resistance. It is not a demonic colony which has gained unilateral independence from God. Because there is full recognition of God's justice, God's character is vindicated, and hence glorified, even by those who in this life have defied him and suffer for it' (Paul Helm, *The Last Things* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1989), 116-17).

53 Blocher, *Everlasting*. Much of Blocher's essay deals with the rejection of alternative positions, and his positive thesis is largely confined to pages 302-12. Blocher first wrote about his position in 'La doctrine du châtement éternel', in *Ichthus* 32 (April 1973), pp. 3-9. An account can also be found in 'The Scope of Redemption and Modern Theology' in *The Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 9/2 (Autumn 1991), 80-103.

quires: a sincere Amen assenting to judgment. The ungodly shall condemn their own ungodliness, in agreement with God; they will wish for nothing else than for punishment as they will *see* that punishment alone can right them with God; the consuming desire of their conscience shall be to satisfy the divine justice. It will be *good* for them to glorify God in and through their judgment; they will thus fulfil, in spite of a lost life, the essential calling of all creatures – to glorify the Lord – and they will know it. It might happen that this doctrine be more merciful, in the end, to them, than theories which have been framed to elude the clarity of biblical teaching.⁵⁴

The key argument for Blocher, as with Birks, relates to the victory of God, although his particular point is different:

And now we come to the weightiest *datum* of all. The theory of sin forever flourishing ignores the message of Christ's victory over sin and all evil. *Every* knee shall bow and *every* tongue confess... (Phil. 2:10f), those of the lost included. It cannot mean mere outward, hypocritical and forced agreement; what sense would there be in any outward show in the light of that Day, when all the secrets shall be exposed (Rom. 2:16), before the God who is Spirit? Sinners are forced, then, to confess the truth, but they are forced by truth itself, by its overwhelming evidence and spiritual authority; they can no longer refuse to see, they can no longer *think* otherwise. Through Christ, it has pleased God to reconcile, *apokatallaxai*, the whole universe, including all rebellious spirits (Col. 1:20). 'Reconciliation' does not imply *salvation*, here, as independent exegetes have recognized; it means the restoration of order, of all within God's order, 'pacification,' as all are brought back into the divinely-ruled harmony. Nothing could be farther removed from divine defeat and sin going on after judgment... The main fact about everlasting punishment, the fate of the reprobates, is this: *sin shall be no more*. Such is the thesis we propose.⁵⁵

Blocher makes the distinction between the state of the damned and salvation clear not only in his statement that "Reconciliation" does not imply *salvation*' but also when he writes:

If sinners ultimately glorify God, they do reach in a paradoxical way the *telos* of all creatures as such. And they *know* it, since they now see the truth of their lives; they see their evil works – which they now abhor – as included in God's plan, by his permissive will, and used for his purposes. May this imply another side in their remorse-consciousness? They are excluded from the fellowship of God; they cannot 'enjoy him forever'; here is the tragedy, and the meaning of 'outer darkness' (they have no share in the banquet-feast of salvation). Yet, their

54 Blocher, 'The Scope of Redemption', 103 (italics original). In *Everlasting* Blocher is more tentative about the damned glorifying God, which he discusses in a section entitled 'Daring Questions, to Conclude' and introduces with the question, 'Can we make a few more speculative steps?' 310.

55 Blocher, *Everlasting*, 303-304 (italics original).

thought is fixed in the knowledge that, through their very deprivation, they glorify God and agree with him.⁵⁶

Blocher spells out some of the other strengths of this modified traditionalism:

The model accommodates easily and *economically* other elements of the doctrine of everlasting punishment: not only the reference to the deeds done though the body (with the harvest metaphor), but also the diversity in degrees (few stripes, many stripes). There can be no proportion more exact to guilt than that of the suffering of seeing oneself in the light of truth. That God be glorified and sanctified by sinners punished, as Scripture intimates (Isa. 5:16; Ezek. 38:16) is readily perceived; that there is a satisfaction of the order of divine law, a vindication of God's honour and holiness, and a kind of 'reconciliation'.⁵⁷

The key feature of reconciliationism, that the damned cease to sin and are thus to some extent reconciled to God without thereby receiving the blessings of the righteous, is shared by both Blocher and Birks. However there are several differences between Blocher and Birks in their arguments for reconciliationism. The two most striking differences relate to the role of the atonement and of divine mercy. With regard to the atonement, Birks argues at length for the modification of the traditionalist hell on the basis of blessings gained by the atonement.⁵⁸ Blocher only mentions the effect of the atonement insofar as it is implied in his reference to Phil. 2:10f and Col. 1:20,⁵⁹ and argues rather from God's suppression of all rebellion through the infliction of retributive punishment.⁶⁰ With regard to the role of divine mercy, Birks writes, 'the last judgment is the work of God's mercy as well as of his judicial righteousness... It is mercy to the wicked to deny them the fatal power of adding sin to sin.'⁶¹ In contrast Blocher asks,

But what about God's love and mercy? God displays them on the other side, in them that inherit eternal life. Beyond that simple answer, champions of the traditional view have little to say... This need not be considered a weakness...⁶²

Thus Birks argues that the cessation of sin is in part an act of divine mercy while for Blocher the cessation of sin is solely an act of divine judgment. In both arguments I think that where they differ Blocher's position is to be preferred.

56 Blocher, *Everlasting*, 310 (italics original). See also 311-12. Earlier Blocher explicitly repudiates universalism, 290.

57 Blocher, *Everlasting*, 310 (italics original).

58 See especially Birks, *Difficulties*, 'Chapter XI: On the Nature of the Atonement', 175-92.

59 Blocher, *Everlasting*, 303.

60 See for example Blocher, *Everlasting*, 292, 297, 305.

61 Birks, *Difficulties*, 225-26, 226-27. See also 221-23, 236-39.

62 Blocher, *Everlasting*, 293.

3 An assessment of reconciliationism

A full review of reconciliationism is not possible here.⁶³ However I will briefly note some of the chief criticisms and indicate in outline some of the strengths of this view.

3.1 Criticisms of reconciliationism

In the nineteenth century debate there were three main published critical responses to Birks' position, of which the most able was by Dr. Robert Smith Candlish, Principal of New College, Edinburgh.⁶⁴ There has been very little interaction with Blocher's position.⁶⁵

The main reason that this position is rejected in the tradition is because the agreement of the damned in the justice of their punishment is thought to be equivalent to repentance, and repentance would result in full restoration. This is Paternoster's chief criticism of T. R. Birks. Paternoster concludes, 'Birks has, illogically, turned hell into purgatory and yet maintained its eternity.'⁶⁶ It is also Ellis' one criticism:

But as an Augustinian-Calvinist, Blocher should recognize that if their remorse is a 'godly sorrow' it is the product of the Holy Spirit in His work of redemption; if only a remorse that they were caught and judged, that remorse continues to be sin.⁶⁷

Blocher responds with two steps that I think are distinct, distinguishing firstly remorse in this life and in the life to come and secondly remorse and repentance.

But final remorse differs from remorse as it is experienced in life: final remorse will be remorse-in-agreement with God. In life... only *repentance* agrees with God; remorse remains a twisted and truncated apprehension of the truth of one's deeds. Will not, then, final truthful remorse amount

63 I have given a more extended assessment in 'Hell Without Sin – a Renewed View of a Disputed Doctrine', *Churchman* 119/3 (Autumn 2005), 243-61.

64 Candlish, *Tendencies*. The other published responses were James Grant, *Religious Tendencies of the Times; or, how to deal with the deadly errors and dangerous delusions of the day* (London, 1869) and Robert Baxter, *God's Purpose in Judgement: considered with especial reference to the assertion of mercy or annihilation for the lost* (London: S. W. Partridge & Co., 1869). Birks' *Reply to Strictures* was with reference to these two books.

65 The only references to Blocher's thesis I have found, other than brief references in book reviews, are three pages in J. Bonda, *The One Purpose of God: An Answer to the Doctrine of Eternal Punishment* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998 [1993]), 226-28, and less than a page in D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Leicester: Apollos, 1996), 534; E. E. Ellis, 'The New Testament Teaching on Hell', in K. E. Brower & M. W. Elliott eds., *The Reader Must Understand: Eschatology in Bible and Theology* (Leicester: Apollos, 1997), 216.) and J. W. Wenham, *Facing Hell: The Story of a Nobody, An Autobiography 1913-1996* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1998), 258.

66 Paternoster, *Thou Art There Also*, 103.

67 Ellis in Brower and Elliot, *Reader*, 216, n.79.

to repentance?... the deepest difference between remorse and repentance is this: repentance has a *future*, it enters the open future; remorse relates only to the *past*.⁶⁸

The main argument against the cessation of sin is also stated by Blocher: 'Psychological considerations on habit and hardening eclipse all other arguments.'⁶⁹ The assumption here is that without intervention the damned have no power to change their habitual sinfulness which they exhibited on earth. Therefore they will continue to sin because there has been nothing to change them or prevent them. In response I would note that the Last Judgement provides just such a moment of intervention to force people to face the truth about God and themselves.⁷⁰

3.2 Strengths of reconciliationism

Blocher believes that with his doctrine of hell 'It is possible, we suggest, to reach such a *renewed understanding of the old dogma* that will relieve some of the tension [of the problem of evil]...'⁷¹ Birks writes in his Preface that he is attempting,

to clear away false representations and causeless additions to the truth Divinely revealed, to show its harmony with other great truths no less plainly, and even more fully taught, and thus to strengthen the defences of the Christian faith;...⁷²

Garratt states that reconciliationism is essentially traditionalism stripped of human additions, and thus offers a response to the criticisms made of classic traditionalism.

The Eternal Punishment of unforgiven sinners is a Scripture doctrine, and it is best to defend it from the plausible objections which human additions to the teaching of God's Word have raised against it, by clearing them away.⁷³

I believe that these modifications to traditionalism serve to clear away several such 'human additions'.

The greatest strength of reconciliationism is that it alleviates the problem of dualism which is the chief annihilationist charge against classic traditionalism.⁷⁴

68 Blocher, *Everlasting*, 307 (italics original).

69 Blocher, *Everlasting*, 301.

70 See Blocher's discussion, *Everlasting*, 301-303, and the several positive arguments he gives for the cessation of sin.

71 Blocher, *Everlasting*, 284-85 (italics original).

72 Birks, *Everlasting*, xi.

73 Garratt, *Veins of Silver*, xiv.

74 For example, 'This is perhaps the most powerful and appealing theological argument against the orthodox doctrine: how can God be "all in all" (1 Corinthians 15:28) if there is an "outside" in the final world order?' (Sinclair Ferguson, *W. G. T. Shedd and the Doctrine of Eternal Punishment: The Evangelical Library Annual Lecture 1994*, [Lewes: F.C.M. Trust, 1994], 13).

Blocher calls this 'the weightiest *datum* of all. The theory of sin forever flourishing ignores the message of Christ's perfect victory over sin and all evil.'⁷⁵ In the hell of reconciliationism there is no eternity of sinning, but rather the damned are reconciled to the justice of their punishment. In its denial of continuing sin it offers a better response to the problem of dualism than classic traditionalism. In the notion of the reconciliation of the damned it offers a better response to the problem of dualism than annihilationism since the reconciliation of the damned is a good which their extinction would lose.⁷⁶ Thus Langton Clarke asks,

But how is [evil] to be expelled? There is the way of Annihilation – expulsion of sin by the destruction of the sinner. But... if this were the method of cure, who would be the victor – God or sin? Would not the victory remain with the evil which compelled God to uncreate His own creation?⁷⁷

Blocher writes about the 'waste' of annihilationism and contrasts his own position in which 'the existence of the lost shall not amount to a total waste, neither for the universe, nor for God, nor for themselves...'⁷⁸

Further, to the extent to which there is a mitigation of the severity of hell, reconciliationism serves as a response to the other major annihilationist criticism of classic traditionalism: its injustice.⁷⁹ Birks is clear that reconciliationism is such a mitigation. For example,

To glorify God, through shame and punishment, compared with the bliss of the redeemed and holy, must be an infinite and irreparable loss. But to glorify Him in any way, however solemn and mournful, when contrasted with the reign of that death which is God's enemy, and the curse of eternal vanity, darkness, and corruption, may be, even to the souls of the lost, a real, and perhaps even in some respects, an infinite gain.⁸⁰

75 Blocher, *Everlasting*, 303.

76 I have a fuller discussion of annihilationism in 'Arguing with Annihilationism – an assessment of the doctrinal arguments for Annihilationism', *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 24:1 (Spring, 2006), 65-90.

77 Clarke, *Eternal Saviour-Judge*, 109.

78 Blocher, *Everlasting*, 311.

79 For example, 'the issue that bothers evangelicals most about the doctrine of endless conscious punishment – that an eternal punishment for temporal sins seems cruel and unfair.' (W. V. Crockett, *Response to Clark H. Pinnoch*, in Crockett, *Four Views*, 171.) Crockett gives 'cruel and unfair' as a single issue, although the key charge is that it is unfair, which I take as equivalent to unjust here, rather than cruel, since a just punishment would not be a cruel one. I think that the problem of dualism is the more serious theological challenge to traditionalism, but Crockett's comment shows that the issue of justice is also widely perceived as a problem.

80 Birks, *Difficulties*, 236. Amongst reconciliationist writers there is a range of opinion about the degree of mitigation of the pains of hell. For example Clarke holds there is such a high degree of mitigation that it is hard to determine what distinguishes the experience of the damned from the righteous. See, for example, Clarke, *Eternal Saviour-Judge*, 345-46. However he also clearly states that his position is not a form of universalism, 87. See also, for example, the discussion in Garratt, *Veins of Silver*, 126.

Blocher is more tentative. On the one hand he notes that the mitigating views of some traditionalists, that the damned might prefer hell and could even enjoy 'black pleasure', are ruled out on his position.⁸¹ On the other hand it does seem to be a mitigation if,

their thought is fixed in the knowledge that, through their very deprivation, they glorify God and agree with him... If we may cautiously trust the larger hope that the existence of the lost shall not amount to a total waste, neither for the universe, *nor for God, nor for themselves*,...⁸²

In conclusion I believe that reconciliationism, particularly in the form developed by Blocher, offers a modified traditionalism with distinct advantages over both classic traditionalism and annihilationism in the current debate. In particular, reconciliationism offers an important response to some of the chief annihilationist criticisms of classic traditionalism.

In the nineteenth century Garratt was optimistic that reconciliationism would gain wide support:

[W]hile I do not expect that all will at once receive as truth what is here taught, I have the full conviction that not many years will elapse before Christian men will wonder that it could ever have been doubted.⁸³

Yet despite the advocacy of several notable theologians reconciliationism did not gain wide acceptance, and it might be argued that the theory was tested and found wanting. However I believe that there is still a job of advocacy to be done, particularly with the careful exposition and clarification of the position by Blocher which has left reconciliationism more securely grounded. My hope is that this study may serve to place this alternative into the contemporary debate about hell amongst evangelicals for serious and sustained consideration.

Abstract

Over the last 30 years there has been a growing debate within the evangelical world between traditionalists and annihilationists over the doctrine of hell. However there has been very little discussion of an alternative doctrine of hell proposed by evangelicals in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in which the damned remain in hell but cease to sin. It is a modified version of the traditional doctrine, but for the sake of clarity I refer to it by the title 'reconciliationism'. In this article I want to expound the position of its chief advocate, T. R. Birks, as well as the similar position of the contemporary French evangelical theologian, Henri Blocher, who offers the most satisfactory form of this doctrine.

81 Blocher, *Everlasting*, 296 (quoting C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (London: Collins Fount, 1977 [1940]), 114), 307.

82 Blocher, *Everlasting*, 310, 311 (italics mine).

83 Garratt, *Veins of Silver*, pp. xiv-xv. These words appeared in the Preface to his First Edition of *Veins of Silver*, written in 1872, and retained in the second edition of 1904.

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