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UNIVERSALISM AND HELL AS INNER TORMENT: A REFLECTION ON DAVID B. HART'S UNDERSTANDING

INTRODUCTION

In the twenty-first century, it seems to become increasingly difficult for people to accept the possibility of hell. One reason might be the contradiction to God's mercy if someone faces eternal damnation. That argument is not new but probably more acute again. God's mercy and hell are topics theologians have been pondering since the first centuries of the Christian faith. The teaching of eternal damnation emerged in the last two centuries before Christ (Ratzinger, 2012, p. 217). Two groups of arguments have materialized: first, the possibility of hell exists and cannot be repudiated, and second (a minority position), the denial of hell (for instance, Origen, Gregorius of Nyssa, Theodore of Mopsuestia, Evagrius Ponticus) because hell is incompatible with God's mercy. Both groups refer to the Bible to confirm their convictions.

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David Bentley Hart (*1965), an Eastern Orthodox scholar of religion and a philosopher, has recently contributed to the discussion (Hart, 2019) and advocates, one might think, that hell does not exist. That, however, is not accurate. Hart suggests that hell is the inner torment that one experiences while already being in heaven. Thus, hell does not exist for Hart as a separate location, but it is the inner experience of some people in heaven. His conviction is so strong that he advises his readers not to present new arguments for the possibility of hell. He warns them that it is not advisable².

The idea of hell as inner torment is not new. Isaac of Nineveh (c. 640 – c. 700) describes this interpretation of hell as an element of the antinomy of the kingdom of glory. He influenced David Bentley Hart, who refers to Isaac of Nineveh when discussing his concept of hell. Thus, Isaac’s idea is not isolated³. As fascinating as this interpretation might appear, the question remains whether the theory of hell as the inner torment of people in the kingdom of glory, that is, in heaven, is biblically sound.

In what follows, I offer a reflection on Hart’s concept of hell as the inner torment of people already in heaven. First, I will start by presenting David Bentley Hart’s suggestion of hell. Since this idea is not new, I focus on the root of Hart’s concept in Isaac of Nineveh’s teaching of hell next. That will deepen the understanding of Hart’s idea. Then, I will respond to the arguments for hell as inner torment. The discussion includes arguing for the possibility of hell in general. Afterwards, the reflection on salvation and hell from a relational point of view follows. I proceed with presenting the aporia into which this idea of hell leads. In conclusion, I discuss the significance of hell for the twenty-first century’s faithful and beyond.

1. DAVID BENTLEY HART’S HELL AS INNER TORMENT

David Bentley Hart challenges the ecclesial doctrine regarding the possibility of hell. In his book *That All Shall Be Saved* (2019), he anew debates the idea of universalism (apocatastasis), convinced that it is the only plausible and reasonable teaching if Christian faith should make sense: ‘I mean only that, if Christianity taken as a whole is indeed an entirely coherent and credible system of belief, then the universalist understanding of its message is the only one possible.’ (p. 3).

2 See Hart (2019, p. 4): ‘The most adventurous of all might attempt to come up with new arguments of their own (which is not advisable).’

3 There is another Orthodox theologian who bases his thoughts about hell on Isaac of Nineveh: the Russian Orthodox theologian Sergius Nikolaevich Bulgakov (1871–1944). He also reflects on the fundamental antinomy of the kingdom of glory and refers to Isaac (Bulgakov, 2002, pp. 462–464).

In Hart's universalist view, hell and salvation still have their places. The understanding, however, differs from the classical church teaching. For Hart, hell is the hatred in a human being that turns the neighbour's and God's love into torment. He emphasizes that it 'is entirely a state we impose upon ourselves' (Hart, 2019, p. 27). Salvation is the redeeming work of the all-merciful God. Hart explains: 'And the only Christian narrative of salvation that to me seems coherent is the one that the earliest church derived so directly from scripture: a relentless tale of rescue, conducted by a God who requires no tribute to win his forgiveness or love.' (Hart, 2019, p. 27).

Hart develops his thoughts based on two questions: first, is a human being, in true freedom, able to resist the love of God eternally (Hart, 2019, pp. 27–28)? Second, can God be a good God and creation a good creation if possibly only one soul falls into eternal damnation (Hart, 2019, p. 28)? Hart answers both questions with an unambiguous No (Hart, 2019, p. 28). If, thus, no one can resist God's love in true freedom, and God is only a good God if God saves all, then there is the possibility of eternal hell deserted. Therefore, Hart denies the possibility of eternal damnation.

Hart argues that God's mercy can never punish humans eternally because it would be unjust. He stresses that humans are limited, for they are creatures. Therefore, their sins are also limited. That leads Hart to ask how it could be justified to sentence humans eternally for limited sins. In that case, God would be unjust and merciless and not the good creator God. Hart, therefore, states: 'If God is the good creator of all, he must also be the savior of all, without fail, who brings to himself all he has made, including all rational wills, and only thus returns to himself in all that goes forth from him.' (Hart, 2019, pp. 90–91). The returning to God is the participation in God's kingdom. Hart argues that God's kingdom can only be God's kingdom if no one remains outside. That means everybody must participate in salvation, or creation appears worse than a nightmare. Hart reasons that if God, according to the Bible, describes creation as good, even as very good (see Gn 1:31), all creatures throughout history must see it (Hart, 2019, p. 91).

Furthermore, Hart refers to the three days of Christ's passion, death, and resurrection, where heaven and hell meet, because Christ has taken upon himself all alienation from God. He thereby opened the way back to God (Hart, 2019, p. 128). Hell, therefore, is something for Hart, according to John's gospel, that Christ has already conquered. He reveals hell in the human's heart and shakes it in his flesh. In this way, Christ draws all people to himself. 'Hell appears in the shadow of the cross as what has always already been conquered, as what Easter leaves in ruins, to which we may flee from the transfiguring light of God if we so wish, but where we can never finally come to rest—for, being only a shadow, it provides nothing to cling to (as Gregory of Nyssa so acutely observes).' (Hart, 2019, p. 129).

Here is a summary of Hart's thesis, which I put into a list of five items:

1. Anyone who recognizes the fullness of God's goodness cannot reject it.
2. God cannot refuse to accept the creature and put it into eternal torture because God would contradict godself in this. God would not be the fullness of goodness in this case.
3. God is the only one who is wholly free. Creatures only possess relative freedom because they are creatures, not God. Therefore, they might make wrong decisions. God would, then, be unjust to afflict eternal suffering on them.
4. God is omnipotent and knows everything beforehand. If God knows that one will decide against God and be eternally damned, how could God create such a being and still be pure love? That would be contradicting the love of God. God would be a demonic god, a monster.
The intention of the finite human will, being in full possession of one's faculties, can never equal profound evil. Likewise, according to Hart, a rational will that has ever experienced total freedom cannot voluntarily resist the love of God in all eternity. Complete freedom here means having the total rational consciousness of one's nature and the nature of the good (Hart, 2019, p. 40).
5. Everybody will be saved, but some may experience inner torment as the hatred in oneself while in heaven.

2. THE ROOT OF HART'S IDEA OF HELL

The idea of hell as the inner torment of people who are already saved by God and in heaven is not new. This concept endeavours to solve the paradox of eternal damnation and God's mercy. They seem to contradict each other *prima facie*. One solution suggests that the faithful must understand the kingdom of glory as including a fundamental antinomy. Hart borrows this idea from Isaac of Nineveh (c. 640 – c. 700), who has developed it.

Isaac of Nineveh, also known as Isaac the Syrian, talks about heaven and hell in the *Mystic Treatises 27* (also known as *Ascetic Homilies*). He argues that humans experience torment because of the whips of love. It is love, thus, that tortures people for love's sake. These humans know that they have turned against love. They experience knowledge and grief about their failings as a torment. Isaac explicitly states that those people are not empty of love for God the Creator, although they are in hell, for all have received love as genuine knowledge. Therefore, Isaac concludes that love works in two

ways—torture for those who have sinned and happiness for those who have held on to its demands. The tortured are in hell, and the delighted are in heaven. Both groups belong to the kingdom of glory because they have the genuine knowledge from which love stems as an offspring. That means all have received this love. Isaac of Nineveh, thus, suggests that hell is an inner experience of the sinner within the kingdom of glory. He calls this the antinomy of the kingdom. Here is what Isaac writes:

Also I say that even those who are scourged in Hell are tormented with the scourgings of love. Scourgings for love's sake, namely of those who perceive that they have sinned against love, are more hard and bitter than tortures through fear. The suffering which takes hold of the heart through the sinning against love is more acute than any other torture. It is evil for a man to think that the sinners in Hell are destitute of love for the Creator. For love is a child of true knowledge such as is professed to be given to all people. Love works with its force in a double way. It tortures those who have sinned, as happens also in the world between friends. And it gives delight to those who have kept its decrees. Thus it is also in Hell. I say that the hard tortures are grief for love. The inhabitants of heaven, however, make drunk their soul with the delight of love. (Isaac of Nineveh, 1923, p. 136).

Isaac of Nineveh offers an interesting suggestion on how to imagine hell. He imagines hell as an inner experience of human beings who fully know about the love of God. The ones who have lived according to God's will rejoice in God's love, and those who have refused to live according to God's love grieve about their sins. The grief is a torment for those humans. This view influenced Hart. He, too, understands hell as the inner torment of humans, as the hatred in humans turning the love of God and the neighbour into torture.

3. THE POSSIBILITY OF HELL

The interpretation of hell as inner torment understood as the grief of having sinned against the love of God, may fascinate on a logical level. This understanding, however, contradicts the majority of the biblical witness and the church tradition. Furthermore, it raises the question of whether the concept of hell as inner torment can appropriately display the infernal reality meant in Holy Scripture. In Matthew 25, when Jesus Christ talks about the outer darkness into which the goats have to exit, he hardly means an inner torment by that. Matthew 25:41 and 46 explicitly state that the accursed should depart from the Son of Man, and they will go

into eternal punishment. Those words do not indicate only an inner torment but a movement of the person⁴. Similarly, Revelation 20:11–15 tells the story of the Last Judgment and mentions the Book of Life and the lake of fire. In Revelation 20:15, the text is significant: ‘and anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire.’ One can hardly understand that as merely an inner torment of a person being in heaven. The term ‘anybody’, composed of ‘any’ and ‘body’, denotes the whole human being, not only an inner experience. One would not explain why a person is thrown into the fire if it is only an inner torment. The statement, thus, includes the whole human being, not only an inner experience. Therefore, the understanding of the hell of Isaac of Nineveh appears incompatible with the biblical witness.

What the concept of hell as inner torment describes, however, seems more in line with the Catholic teaching of purgatory according to the Council of Trent and the Second Vatican Council⁵. Joseph Ratzinger does not use the term ‘purgatory’ but describes what it means in the category of the encounter with Jesus Christ.

The encounter with him [Jesus Christ] is the decisive act of judgement. Before his gaze all falsehood melts away. This encounter with him, as it burns us, transforms and frees us, allowing us to become truly ourselves. All that we build during our lives can prove to be mere straw, pure bluster, and it collapses. Yet in the pain of this encounter, when the impurity and sickness of our lives become evident to us, there lies salvation. His gaze, the touch of his heart heals us through an undeniably painful transformation ‘as through fire’. But it is a blessed pain, in which the holy power of his love sears through us like a flame, enabling us to become totally ourselves and thus totally of God. In this way the inter-relation between justice and grace also becomes clear: the way we live our lives is not immaterial, but our defilement does not stain us for ever if we have at least continued to reach out towards Christ, towards truth and towards love. Indeed, it has already been burned away through Christ’s Passion. At the moment of judgement we ex-

4 Cf. Gnlika (1988, p. 377), who talks about an ‘exit into eternal punishment’. Similarly, Harrington (1991, p. 358) states the accursed ‘go to everlasting punishment’. Both internationally renowned theologians and exegetes, thus, use terms for the movement of the person, not only for inner torment.

5 The Ecumenical Council of Trent (1545–1563) in its *Decretum de Iustificatione* (January 13, 1547), Canons of Justification, c. 30 (DS 840) and *Decretum de Purgatorio* (December 3–4, 1563) (DS 983) confirms the existence of purgatory but does not explain it further. Similarly, the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) in its Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium* (November 21, 1964), §49, §51, teaches that purgatory exists but does not provide further details.

perience and we absorb the overwhelming power of his love over all the evil in the world and in ourselves. The pain of love becomes our salvation and our joy. It is clear that we cannot calculate the ‘duration’ of this transforming burning in terms of the chronological measurements of this world. The transforming ‘moment’ of this encounter eludes earthly time-reckoning—it is the heart’s time, it is the time of ‘passage’ to communion with God in the Body of Christ. (Benedict XVI, 2007, Section 47)⁶.

Ratzinger explains the experience of inner torment as the awareness of having sinned against the love of God. It means the inner experience of pain, which purifies humans and makes them ready to enter heaven. The image of the cleansing fire in purgatory expresses this inner torment as the desire for God out of love, but the person is not ready yet for the beatific vision. Those inwardly tormented persons are saved but still need purification, which they receive in the encounter with Christ⁷.

Isaac of Nineveh states that the people in hell are not destitute of love for God. This conviction is illogical because hell is the term to describe a place of pure hatred, irreconcilability, torment, and destruction. How can anybody love God there? Admittedly, Isaac of Nineveh suggests a fascinating concept, but it is—if at all—more in line with the teaching of purgatory than hell.

Joseph Ratzinger, who argues for the existence of hell, knows about the minority teaching of some Church Fathers who deny hell for reasons based on a system of logic. He acknowledges: ‘The mainline ecclesial tradition took a different path; it had to admit the expectation of the restoration of all followed from the system but not from the biblical witness.’ (Ratzinger, 2012, p. 218)⁸. Ratzinger, thus, understands that denying the possibility of hell stems from the system of logic but is incompatible with the biblical witness.

One main argument for the possibility of hell is the freedom that God bestows on human beings. They are free to choose between accepting or rejecting God’s love. Hart responds to this argument that only God is completely free. Humans merely have relative freedom because they are creatures and, as such, are limited. They might make wrong decisions—it is even quite likely because it is una-

6 Benedict refers at the end of this passage in a footnote to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, §1030–1032 (hereafter cited as *CCC*).

7 The Ecumenical Council of Florence (1438–1445) in its *Decretum pro Graecis* (July 6, 1439) mirrors this teaching: ‘It [the Council] has likewise defined, that, if those truly penitent have departed in the love of God, before they have made satisfaction by worthy fruits of penance for sins of commission and omission, the souls of these are cleansed after death by purgatorial punishment’ (DS, no. 693).

8 All Ratzinger quotations are my translation.

voidable for a created being—for they are not God. If God afflicts eternal torment on them, God would then be unjust.

That seems to be the logically correct answer, but it turns out to be one-sided because, by granting freedom, God offers the right also to humans wanting eternal damnation. God excludes no one from the gift of freedom, independent of how one uses this gift. Ratzinger explains: ‘The true Bodhisattva, Christ, goes to hell and suffers it empty; but he does not treat the humans as underage beings who, in the end, cannot accept responsibility for their fate. His heaven rests on freedom that also leaves the right to the damned wanting his damnation.’ (Ratzinger, 2012, p. 219). God, thus, does not take back human freedom but suffers the consequences when this freedom is abused and leads to rejecting God. God surpasses the independence of the sinful human being with God’s freedom of love, which descends even into the abyss of love (Ratzinger, 2012, p. 219). Jesus Christ, while nailed on the cross, reveals this definite and saving love of God in asking the Father to forgive the perpetrators (see Luke 23:34). In dying on the cross, Christ enters the darkness of death and fills it with God’s love. He offers God’s salvation to the captured even there. Christ holds the humans accountable but offers them a way out of their sins by offering them God’s forgiveness. That is an even greater mercy than humans can imagine, and pure logic can explain.

Furthermore, Hart argues that God created humans in the image of God. As such, they direct their will to God, to the definite goodness. Therefore, according to Hart (2019, pp. 173, 178), they are free to accept God’s love but not to reject it once and for all. An example contradicting Hart’s argumentation appears to be the fall of the angels (see 2 Pet 2:4). They are not in the image of God like the human beings but like them have received the freedom to choose. They have freely rejected God. Their decision is final, causing their damnation at the end of time by throwing them into the lake of fire (see Rev 20:10)⁹. Here, creatures decided against the goodness of God¹⁰.

Hart explains that someone will only reject the goodness of God because the person does not recognize the fullness of God’s goodness (Hart, 2019, p. 174). The creature here cannot make an informed, free decision. Therefore, Hart concludes that God cannot sentence the creature to eternal damnation, for God would contradict godself. God would not be perfect in this case. It, thus, makes no sense to justify hell with human freedom (Hart, 2019, pp. 171–179).

9 St John of Damascus (650–754) mirrors that teaching and emphasizes: ‘For after the fall there is no possibility of repentance for them, just as after death there is for men no repentance.’ *Expositio accurata fidei orthodoxae* II, 4; John of Damascus (1995, p. 21); PG 94, 877.

10 CCC, §§391–395, mirrors this doctrine.

Logically, this thought appears to be sound, but doubts remain. A creature is always limited and, therefore, can never recognize the fullness of God's goodness. Even in the moment of encounter with God in death, the human being has not the potential to perceive the depth of God's love (Engelbert, 1993, p. 709). God remains the greater one (*Deus semper maior*) because God is the transcendent (Przywara, 1964). Humans, however, can choose God's love even before they fully experience it. Paul insists in his discussion of the justification of the sinner on the overwhelming grace of God: 'For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life.' (Rom 4:10) In other words, God, out of love, came to the assistance of humans while they were God's enemies. Similarly, the author of the First Letter of John praises the love of God, redeeming human beings: 'God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.' (1 Jn 4:9–10) Some verses later, the author emphasizes the priority of God's love again: 'We love because he first loved us.' (1 Jn 4:19)

If someone rejects God's love, God's grace may seem insufficient, *prima facie*. That must be understood as a fallacy because God gave God's Son. God remained faithful to humans, although they murdered God's Son. There was nothing more God could have done. That indicates God will not hold back God's grace from anybody who requires it (cf. 1 Jn 4:9–10,19). Therefore, I would rather comprehend the repudiation of God as the mystery of evil that comes to the forefront. It is a mystery because who will reject someone who loves them, especially if it is God?

Furthermore, Ratzinger (2012) calls to mind the irrevocable, that is, the definite, in life. He stresses that not everything will, finally, 'transform to a moment in God's plans' (p. 219). Ratzinger, thus, advocates a double outcome. Because the irrevocable exists, there is 'also the irrevocable destruction—the Christian must live with this crisis' (p. 219). That becomes evident in Christ's cross at Golgotha. The evil was not unreal for God but a horrible reality. 'For God, being love, hatred is not nothing. God does not defeat evil in the dialectic of universal reason, which can translate all negations into affirmations; God does not defeat it in a speculative but in a real Good Friday.' (p. 219). That is, admittedly, beyond a system of logic.

There is another point that Hart raises against eternal damnation. He argues that God knows everything in advance. Therefore, God also knows whether someone will decide in favour of or against God in life. If God is aware that someone will not accept God's love and will choose a life without God and still creates this person, God contradicts godself. Then, God cannot be pure love. God reveals god-

self as a demonic god. In this case, according to Hart, God would be ‘a monstrous deity’ (Hart, 2019, p. 167).

Hart adds with that the argument of God’s foreknowledge to the discussion. It seems to destroy every other reason that opts for the possibility of hell and eternal damnation. The main point is how to understand the foreknowledge of God. God knows everything because God has created everything. It, however, appears too anthropomorphic a thought that God knows about any decision of humans beforehand. Because grasping something in advance presupposes time, which is part of creation. In God, however, there is no time, for God does not belong to the created order. God is beyond creation and time. Therefore, the term ‘foreknowledge’ seems inadequate here.

Romano Guardini (1885–1968) offers a helpful reflection on that issue. He brings God’s ‘foreknowledge’ into the context of God’s seeing. The mystery of God’s seeing includes God’s ‘foreknowledge’. The difference between human and divine seeing is that God sees the inward, meaning the heart (see 1 Sm 16:7), while humans see the outward. No one can deceive God, who recognizes the past, present, and future. God looks at creation full of love, that is, creatively, for love always is creative. Guardini explains: ‘The seeing gaze reflects what is in existence and affects what it sees. Seeing is an action. Seeing makes something happen to what one sees.’ (Guardini, 1981, p. 26)¹¹. Guardini applies this kind of seeing to God and explains: ‘God’s love is creative and redeeming. It is the one that has called the not-yet-existing world into being and has created the lost anew. God’s seeing is not of the kind that it finds something finished and glances at it, but it is itself creative love; it is itself the power establishing the thing in its being and lifting it out of the decline.’ (Guardini, 1981, p. 27). God’s seeing offers salvation and becomes a life-giving action.

Having that in mind, it is not surprising that Guardini encourages people to put everything under the gaze of God—really everything, the good and the bad (Guardini, 1981, p. 28). He emphasizes: ‘We can do nothing better than to push our way into God’s gaze.’ (Guardini, 1981, p. 28). This conviction reveals trust in God and understands God’s gaze as something desirable. In God’s eyes, humans find security and life because God sees the potential in every creature. What God ‘foresees’, according to Guardini, is nothing finished. Providence creatively takes place out of the newness included in God’s sovereignty and out of human free will, as little as it may be (Guardini, 1981, pp. 21–22). The place where it happens is not somewhere else but here and now. Why a human being, then, rejects God, although living under God’s gracious gaze, remains a question no one can seriously answer. It is the mystery of evil.

11 All Guardini quotations are my translation.

Ratzinger (2012) contributes another thought to the discussion. Hell receives, among other things, in the spirituality of the Carmel, with John of the Cross and Thérèse of Lisieux, a totally new meaning. 'It is for them less a threat they throw against others than a request to suffer in the darkness of faith the communion with Christ, especially as communion with the dark of his descent into the night.' (p. 220). Here, the horror of hell's reality is not abolished; on the contrary, it is so true that it extends into the own life. 'Hope does not come from the neutral logic of the system, from the trivialization of the human being, but from the abandonment of harmlessness and the passing of reality on Jesus Christ's side.' (p. 220). That is mercy lived out. Mercy, thus, takes nothing from the doctrine of hell but becomes 'the prayer of the suffering and hoping faith' (p. 220).

Joseph Ratzinger sees denying hell follows from the system of logic. He agrees with David Bentley Hart, who emphasizes the logical argument, but Ratzinger argues that this thinking is insufficient for biblical argumentation. Theological arguments must respect the biblical witness and have the Holy Scripture as the basis without losing the logic. On this ground, one can succeed in the reflection on hell and God's mercy. They do not contradict each other, but they do in Hart's argumentation.

4. SALVATION AND HELL FROM A RELATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

Hart rightly demands that the argumentation be logical. Christians, however, also relate to the Bible and the apostolic tradition. The relational perspective, thus, adds the biblical witness to the logic. This addition is essential when aiming at a conclusion within the apostolic tradition. Furthermore, the relational dimension emphasizes the relational aspect of salvation and hell. Both the logical and the relational facets belong together but can be distinguished. Hart, thus, is correct from a systemic point of view but misses the relational dimension of heaven and eternal damnation. Three points demand consideration:

(1) Jesus Christ became flesh (Jn 1:14) to save all creation. He offers his redemption to all. They participate in salvation through faith—for instance, John 20:31: 'But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.', and Romans 5:1–2: 'Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God.' Faith, thus, is essential to receive salvation.

(2) People who do not explicitly believe in Jesus Christ are not *eo ipso* excluded from salvation. They can implicitly show their faith through works. The

Letter of James 2:14–26 makes it clear that faith alone, that is, without deeds, is not enough (see Jas 2:24). James 2:18 points in this direction: ‘But someone will say, “You have faith and I have works.” Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith.’ James explains the significance of deeds for justification precisely with the example of Rahab, who was not a believer in Jahwe: ‘Likewise, was not Rahab the prostitute also justified by works when she welcomed the messengers and sent them out by another road?’ (Jas 2:25) People, thus, can, without knowing they adhere to God’s commands, accomplish works that are compatible with God’s demands (see Mt 25:31–46). From a Christian point of view, that is clear because God’s Spirit acts not merely in the faithful but also people of goodwill. Jesus confirms that in the nightly conversation with Nicodemus: ‘But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God’ (Jn 3:21). The criterion is to do the truth. A person who does the truth implicitly reveals accomplishing the works in God because Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is ‘the way, and the truth, and the life’ (Jn 14:6). Only through him can humans come to the Father (see Jn 14:6).

(3) Here, the relational aspect comes to the forefront more clearly. Christian faith means, as the baptismal rite reveals, that the believer enters into a personal relationship with the Triune God, that is, through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit with the Father. The relationship witnesses the individual acceptance of the salvation that Jesus Christ offers.

The talk of a personal relationship may raise the suspicion of whether the ecclesial dimension remains respected here. The answer is positive since the church is the mystical Body of Christ. Anyone who goes through Jesus Christ to the Father comes through the church, the mystical body of Christ, to the Father.

God offers salvation to all creation through Jesus Christ. To become effective on an individual level, one must accept it by entering into a relationship with the Triune God, implicitly or explicitly. The work that someone achieves gives witness. In his article about justification and cooperation, Joseph Ratzinger emphasizes the importance of accepting responsibility for deeds: ‘The renunciation of responsibility, of the ability to bear responsibility before God, could only seemingly be redemption. In reality, it degrades us and would, therefore, degrade God, too. What we are and what we do indeed count before him. He is worthy of calling us to cooperate with him despite the incommensurability.’ (Ratzinger, 2000, p. 433). The witness of evil deeds, thus, is of similar importance as the witness of good deeds. Rejecting responsibility has negative consequences because it refuses to cooperate with God. The Gospel of John brings the effect of evil deeds into the context of judgment. ‘And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved

darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed' (John 3:19–20). If someone does not come to the light, this person does not come to God because God is the light. Such a person is probably refusing cooperation with God. That at least comes close to rejecting the relationship with God and not accepting God's salvation.

5. THE APORIA OF HELL AS INNER TORMENT

The discussion has indicated some problematic aspects of Hart's idea of hell as inner torment. They lead to further problems and finally to the aporia of universalism.

The concept of hell as the inner torment of people who are already in heaven appears as the possibility to avoid hell, yet to bring some kind of it into the game. This concept, however, contradicts the notion of heaven, which is a 'place' of bliss. No one can experience inner torment there. If it were so, it would not be heaven.

The idea of hell as the inner torment presupposes that all human beings will be in heaven. Theology does not use only rational reasons, as there are, for instance, the desire for justice, punishment, and atonement, to reject the concept of apocatastasis (Scheffczyk, 1985, p. 39). It, moreover, employs deeper theological motivations—for example, the necessity to make decisions in life, the absolute contrast between good and evil, the definiteness of the human fate in death, God's justice and holiness which also God's love and mercy cannot put aside (Scheffczyk, 1985, p. 39). Leo Scheffczyk explains that God proves God's mercy in salvation and God's justice in allowing loss. 'It, thus, is the fullness of tension of the mysterious divine being that is behind the truth of the rejection.' (Scheffczyk, 1985, pp. 39–40)¹². To that, human beings correlate with the image of God. The freedom bestowed on humans empowers them to decide in favour of or against God. This ability becomes the inescapable responsibility of humans to choose between salvation and disaster. It belongs intrinsically to their lifetime and leads them to the radicality of decision (Scheffczyk, 1985, p. 40).

There is also the aspect of the practical-ethical reason. It must resist the permanent danger of amnesia of history, as Magnus Striet (2004, p. 185) stresses¹³. The practical-ethical reason draws attention to the seriousness of moral life, which is hard to demand without the absolute difference between heaven and hell (Scheff-

¹² All Scheffczyk quotations are my translation.

¹³ All Striet quotations are my translation.

fczyk, 1985, p. 40). Furthermore, if all human beings will go to heaven, the question arises as to why one should demand repentance and penance from people (Scheffczyk, 1985, p. 42).

Another problematic aspect appears if all humans will enter heaven. It concerns the biblical teaching of judgment, which includes grace and justice. If only grace determines the outcome, then the judgment is unnecessary because there is nothing to judge. The result is fixed right from the beginning (Scheffczyk, 1985, p. 42). Besides, one would consider such a judgment one-sided because it lacks justice. That would reduce the judgment to a farce, and one can question why it is necessary. That would contrast God's doing as is presented in the Bible. 'God binds godself to judgment because God wants to win the free human being for godself. Therefore, because God binds godself to the human being's freedom, there is the real possibility of eternal failure, a possibility which is held tightly by the doctrine of hell—a doctrine whose significance for salvation no one must obscure.' (Striet, 2004, p. 200).

Furthermore, one of the worst aspects of apocatastasis is its incompatibility with the understanding of the term 'God'. God would have to overlook the malice of the sinner and, by that, accept it. Consequently, God would have to deny godself. Thus, apocatastasis is an over-emphasising of God's kindness and immanence that does not allow for any part of God's creation to fall outside of God's grace (Scheffczyk, 1985, pp. 44–45). In other words, one is forced to accept the grace of God, which contradicts the biblical teaching about human freedom.

CONCLUSION: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF MERCY AND HELL

Hart and others argue that eternal damnation contradicts the mercy of God. To escape the incompatibility, they understand hell only as the inner torment of people who already are in heaven. If one remembers the atrocities worldwide like concentration camps, death camps, genocide, torture, and false imprisonment—to name only some—it is hard to imagine that a just God finally does not hold the perpetrators liable for their cruel deeds¹⁴. The topic, therefore, is also a question of final justice. The questions of eternal damnation and God's mercy, thus, are always significant—also today. If people recognize what evil they have done, that is, not responding to the love of God, and consequently regret, ask for forgiveness, repent,

14 That also raises the question of theodicy. It is not possible to cover this significant topic here. Striet (2004) offers a thoughtful discussion on it.

and accept God's mercy, then there is probably no need for hell¹⁵. Humans, however, live in the time after the Fall (see Gn 3) so that the questions of hell and God's mercy will be virulent as long as human beings live on earth.

The question arises regarding those who fail to recognize and accept their wrongdoings and evil deeds and, consequently, do not express regret and ask for forgiveness. Christians dare to hope that this case will eventually not happen. There is, however, the possibility that people will not accept their failures, even when they recognize them in the encounter with the love of God in the moment of their death. How could they enter heaven, that is, eternal bliss in communion with the Triune God and all saved humans, including maybe their victims? Persons not ready to recognize, accept, and regret their sins cannot love God and others from their heart and, therefore, cannot be part of what is particularly this: love, peace, and communion with each other and God. Those persons exclude themselves from heaven. In other words, there is the possibility of hell not being empty.

There is something more to that. It is the question regarding the victims. They call for justice and, in the biblical language, their blood cries out to God as in the story of Cain and Abel: 'And the LORD said [to Cain], "What have you done? Listen; your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground!"' (Gn 4:10) It is impossible that persons who have committed crimes—generally speaking, have failed in thoughts, words, and deeds—can join the communion of God and the saints without repenting from the heart. That question regarding the victims of history is burning when considering the atrocities, for instance, of World War II, the genocide, the present wars in the world, or the dictatorships. A simple 'Let's forget it!' is impossible here and is no option. It would harm the victims again.

The challenge, however, is on the side of the victims, too. They can enter heaven only if they forgive their perpetrators, for heaven is the 'place' where the inhabitants are forgiven and have forgiven all. How, however, can people forgive atrocities they have experienced? This question is hard to answer, and one must not take it lightly.

Eventually, it can help to remember that all humans have to expect the justice of God, 'since all have sinned' (Rom 3:23), but that they can also trust in God's mercy. There is, however, the possibility that people will fail to trust in God, given their (grave) sins, even when they experience the loving God in death. Because of the dynamic of good and evil, there is the reality of irrevocability (Ratzinger, 2012, p. 219), that is, the finality of both destruction and bliss. That God allows both bliss

¹⁵ I am aware it is not that simple. There is much more necessary for accepting God's forgiveness, but I focus here on the basics of the process.

and destruction is no reason for humans to hold it against God. It is the mystery of God's and humans' freedom (Scheffczyk, 1985, p. 46). Christians, of course, dare to hope that hell will be empty.

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UNIVERSALISM AND HELL AS INNER TORMENT: A REFLECTION ON DAVID B. HART'S UNDERSTANDING

SUMMARY

In recent years, the Russian Orthodox theologian David Bentley Hart (*1965) has renewed the thesis of universalism (final restoration, apocatastasis). His arguments are two-fold. First, a human being in true freedom cannot resist God's love eternally. Second, God is not a good God, and creation is not good if only one soul falls into eternal damnation. Therefore, God will receive all people into the kingdom of glory. Hell, then, according to Hart—in this, he follows Isaac of Nineveh (c. 640 – c. 700)—can only mean the inner torment that one experiences while already being in heaven. I will argue that it is not convincing that a human being in true freedom cannot resist God's love eternally. On the contrary, one must be free to decide in favour of or against something. Hart's second argument does not pay attention to God's justice and holiness. Furthermore, the argument makes God's goodness dependent on God's deeds for human beings. I conclude that universalism over-emphasizes God's mercy and disrespects God's justice, which leads to aporia. Mercy and hell, thus, still have significance and cannot be undervalued.

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