SAINT IRENAEUS AND CONFLICTING DOCTRINES OF DAMNATION

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Abstract: This essay considers the contradicting doctrines of salvation posited by two of the early Church Fathers of the Christian faith: Augustine arguing for eternal damnation and Irenaeus arguing for eternal salvation. It begins by identifying various explanations for hell and damnation before focusing on the reasons for Saint Irenaeus’ rejection of the doctrine of eternal damnation. The analysis includes a critical evaluation of the conflicting views presented by classical and contemporary scholars: the arguments for and against Saint Irenaeus’ rejection of the doctrine. The question of the afterlife is then further examined through scriptural evidence, before drawing on contemporary philosophy and theology to explore more recent developments in terms of understanding, knowledge and research into the adequacy of universal salvation.

Keywords: Saint Irenaeus, Saint Augustine, Afterlife, Catholicism, Eternal Damnation, Hell, Salvation.

Introduction

Richardson (1969) defines damnation as a sentence in hell, but notes that, since the nineteenth century, the previously accepted eternal nature of this punishment has been challenged. Nowadays, various Christian churches offer contradicting doctrines of damnation, despite all claiming to form their conceptualisations upon Biblical evidence. Specifically, the views of the Church of England, Roman Catholic Church and Evangelical Alliance exert significant influence over the lives of Christians in the UK. In the 1996 Church of England’s General Synod Report and the Roman Catholic Catechism, hell is described as a place where sinners are separated from God (Bill 2000; Catholic Church 1994). Moreover, the Catechism states that God predestines nobody to hell. Conversely, the Evangelical Alliance asserts that all of humanity is predestined to hell, but can escape through acceptance of Jesus. Furthermore, the Evangelical Alliance affirms that hell causes horrendous anguish, relative to the severity of the individual’s sins (Hilborn 2000). In other words, it is unclear exactly who is condemned to hell, for what reason people are sent to
hell, how long is spent in hell and – if hell exists – how it should be understood. The lack of consensus in the modern church justifies analysis into the fate of non-Christians.

**Saint Irenaeus and Saint Augustine**

The modern disparity within the church concerning the fate of non-Christians resembles the dissimilarity between interpretations of hell amongst the early church fathers. Specifically, there is disagreement between the applicability of the Augustinian Eternal Damnation and the Irenaean Universal Salvation. Saint Augustine (b.354 – d.430) affirmed that those who were justified by faith would be with God in heaven and all others would be damned to a state of eternal torment in hell (McGrath 2007). Saint Augustine argued that eternal punishment in hell is essential to resolve injustice within the human race, so that creation remains untarnished (Hick 1988).

There are two compelling criticisms for Saint Augustine’s defence of eternal damnation. Firstly, Hick (1988) argues that for God to eternally punish his creatures he would have to be immoral. Hick (1988) illustrates this through the analogy of a baby created through In Vitro Fertilisation (IVF). If a scientist created an embryo with a genetic composition which preordains that the baby will commit a crime, Hick argues that it would be immoral to later punish the person for committing the predicted crime. Even though the crime was executed in free will, it was morally wrong for the scientist to knowingly create a human that would commit crime. Likewise, this parallels the immorality of God’s action: if he were to create humans that he knows will sin – through his omniscience – to later punish them (Hick 1988).

Secondly, the Augustinian doctrine of eternal damnation is accused of limiting God (McGrath 2007). Throughout Christian scripture God is portrayed as limitless in his ability to love and overcome all evil (1 Corinthians 16:56-57) which aligns with the classical view of God (McGrath 2007). Nonetheless, for members of the human race, to suffer in eternal punishment implies that evil must exist in the world forever. If evil is eternal, then it seems irrational to suggest that God can be omnipotent and omnibenevolent, because these attributes presuppose the defeat of suffering (Moltmann 2007). Therefore, for eternal damnation to be a plausible prospect, it must be assumed that God is limited in either love or power.
The antithesis to Saint Augustine’s eternal damnation is supported by advocates of the work of Saint Irenaeus (b.130 – d.202). Saint Irenaeus adopted a more optimistic view of the afterlife. In contrast to the division of humanity between heaven and hell, Saint Irenaeus advocated a collective understanding of salvation (Osborn 2004). This all-encompassing approach is grounded in the belief that salvation is where everything is perfected in Christ, after it had been lost in Adam (McGrath 2011). Whereas Saint Augustine asserts that sinners deserve punishment, Saint Irenaeus appeals to Christ’s words on the cross, ‘Father forgive them, they know not what they do’ (Luke 23:34). This is evidence that Christ does not blame humans for their faults which are synonymous with fallible human nature.

The German philosopher Schleiermacher (b.1768 – d.1834) adopts universal salvation as an Irenaean response to eternal damnation. Nonetheless, it is not without its shortcomings (cited in Hall 2003). Schleiermacher proposes that all of humanity is saved because they eventually accept Christ which denotes eventual union with God (ibid.). Nonetheless, experience of the world demonstrates that many people die without ever accepting Christ. Hick (1988) responds to this observation by presenting the Catholic concept of purgatory as a means for humanity to unite with God after their earthly lives are finished. Gregory the Great (b.540 – d.604) established purgatory as a place where earthly sins are accounted for, so that the deceased can be reconciled with God (McGrath 2007). Nonetheless, the proposal of purgatory does not directly address the issue of unity with Christ, because the central purpose of purgatory is reconciliation of sins. Calvin (b.1509 – d.1564) argued that justification is based upon faith so paying for sin is not required because all is written off through faith in Christ’s resurrection (cited in McGrath 2007). Therefore, for the possibility of universal salvation with purgatory to be plausible the idea of purgatory requires alteration to concern the development of a relationship with God rather than the rectification of sins.

**Jesus on hell**

In order to discover a resolution to the discordance between Augustinian eternal damnation and Irenaean salvation it would appear appropriate to appeal to the testimonies of Jesus. Problematically, as Hick (1988) observes, the testimonies of the life of Jesus in the gospels
have been recruited for both sides of the debate. This disagreement concerning the message from Jesus regarding the fate of non-Christians is exemplified in the gospel of Matthew. For example, the gospel of Matthew documents Jesus’ instruction to the apostles that they should fear God because only God is capable of obliterating body and soul (Matthew 10:28). Such an annihilation of body and soul connotes the end of all possibility of life (Hick, 1988). Therefore, this testimony could be seen to support the Augustinian notion that non-believers are not redeemed after they are deceased. However, during the Beatitudes (eight blessings given at the Sermon on the Mount), earlier in Matthew’s gospel Jesus teaches his followers to love their enemies because God loves everyone equally (Matthew 5:45). God’s love for all of the world would invoke the aforementioned questions concerning the paradox in the idea of an omnibenevolent God punishing or destroying his creation. Therefore, the hypothesis of universal salvation could be seen to accord better with this verse. Nevertheless, if God saves all of humanity then it remains unexplained as to why Jesus warns the apostles of God’s ability to obliterate body and soul.

**Hell in Saint Paul’s letters to the Romans**

Considering the ambiguity within the gospels on the natures of the fate for unbelievers, the letters of Saint Paul to the Romans are assessed in order to resolve the Augustinian/Irenaeian debate. Paul never writes specifically about the destiny of non-believers, but Clark-Soles (2006) attests that Paul’s beliefs surrounding hell can be speculated from his letters to the Romans. Clark-Soles (2006) identifies three possibilities for the afterlife of non-Christians from Paul’s letters. Firstly, he refers to Paul’s description of the sovereignty of God to create and judge as he wills so, consequently, he may destroy his own creation (Romans 9:22). Nonetheless, this passage does not definitively confirm that God will destroy or punish non-Christians, because it could be seen to demonstrate God’s limitless jurisdiction, rather than suggesting that God wills to destroy his creatures.

Secondly, Clark-Soles (2006) proposes that Paul alludes to the Irenaen notion of universal salvation. When Paul discusses the fall of Adam and the resurrection of Christ he states that everyone is denounced for Adam’s sin, but through Christ’s death and resurrection all of creation is rescued from the punishment that they deserve (Romans 5:18). In this section Paul does not differentiate between Christians and non-Christians. Thus, it could be seen
that all of humanity are rescued from punishment through Christ, not only those who believe.

Clark-Soles (2006) proposes that the clearest message that can be ascertained from Paul’s letters to the Romans concerning the fate of the deceased is that Paul is unsure. This can be seen where Paul emphasises the unknowability and perplexity of God that we cannot understand (Romans 11:33-36). This explanation could be seen to account for the discordance between the previous two suggestions but is arguably unsatisfactory in terms of resolving the dispute.

**Origins of hell in the Old Testament**

An alternative depiction of hell in the scriptures is offered in the Old Testament. Unlike Matthew’s gospel and Paul’s letters to the Romans, the Old Testament presents a development of hell in anticipation of the beliefs in the Common Era (Lenchak 2013). The words ‘sheol’, ‘hades’ and ‘Gehenna’ are all translated as ‘hell’ in English forms of the original texts (Lenchaek 2013). Sheol (Hebrew Bible) and Hades (LXX) are accepted to denote the absence of God, but do not presuppose punishment in the Biblical context. However, Gehenna is defined as eternal punishment (Lenchaek 2013).

The historical context of the use of these words may be enlightening as to the development of modern understanding of hell. In the early Old Testament writing ‘sheol’ and ‘hades’ represent the resting place of the deceased regardless of their behaviour or beliefs during their mortal life (Lenchack 2013). In the second century BCE, ‘Gehenna’ was introduced in the book of Jeremiah as a place where child sacrifices were made, South of Jerusalem (Jeremiah 7:32). The introduction of ‘Gehenna’ into the book of Jeremiah may be enlightening in terms of the historicity of the Augustinian notion of eternal damnation. Jeremiah is believed to have been writing in the second century BCE. He was prophesising the Fall of Jerusalem and warning against idolatry (Collins 2004). The use of ‘Gehenna’ at a time of denunciation of idolatry is significant because warnings against idolatry and worship of false Gods are abundant throughout the Old Testament (Collins 2004). Therefore, perhaps with the Fall of Jerusalem immanent, Jeremiah introduces the possibility of eternal
suffering to emphasise the severity of God’s wrath. If this is correct then eternal damnation may originate as a cautionary device rather than foretell the fate of non-Christians.

The separation of the deceased into different realms is believed to have arisen in the first century CE according to Josephus’ writing. Josephus wrote that the good go to heaven and the bad go to Hades until the resurrection (Lenchak 2013). The context of Josephus’ writing was where Christians were emerging as independent from Judaism. Josephus was a Pharisee, but belief in heaven and resurrection was not shared amongst the Pharisees (Collins 2004). Thus, it is possible that Josephus was influenced by early Christian thought (Collins 2004). Notably, as Josephus refers to Hades which does not connote permanent suffering it is arguably more convincing to suggest that Josephus understood ‘hell’ as an intermediary state in preparation for resurrection. It then follows that it is possible that the Irenaean idea of a kind of purgatory in anticipation of universal salvation resembles eschatological beliefs of the early Christians.

The modern debate

Modern theologians continue to debate the nature of the afterlife for non-Christians. The strongest argument against the Augustinian doctrine of eternal damnation and in favour of universal salvation is that the New Testament depicts a forgiving God (Moltmann 2007). Therefore, it follows that a merciful God would not commit any of his creatures to eternal punishment. Moltmann (2007) expounds this argument by appealing to the New Testament where Christ is seen to be the judge of humanity. Moltmann (2007) suggests that the judging Christ will reflect the image of Christ portrayed in the Gospels. The picture of Christ in the gospels is an enemy of sin but, most importantly, not an enemy of sinners, as is seen through his indiscriminate love. Thus, God’s omnipotence allows him to overcome sin without abandoning hope in any of his creatures (Moltmann 2007).

Lewis (2002) admits that it is somewhat paradoxical to suggest that a loving God would punish his creatures, but attests that it is necessary for man to receive retribution. Lewis (2002) explains that where it is argued that God’s forgiveness implies that punishment is not required, it is a misinterpretation of the meaning of forgiveness. Lewis (2002) asserts that God does not condone sin, but can only forgive sin when the perpetrator shoulders their
guilt. This is because a condoning approach could make sin permissible, which does not equate to overcoming evil (2002). Therefore, the punishment of sinners is morally and rationally necessary. Nevertheless, Atkinson (1969) would dispute Lewis’s definition of forgiveness with respect to God. Atkinson (1969) argues that to propose that God’s forgiveness is ‘conditional’ upon the sinner is fundamentally flawed, because God’s love is ‘unconditional’. Atkinson (1969) attributes human temptation to reflect human action and emotion to God’s love as an outcome of creaturely imperfection.

Julian of Norwich (c.1342 – c.1416) provided a similar interpretation of divine forgiveness to Atkinson, which she expands into an argument for universal salvation (Maskulak 2011). Julian would have agreed with Lewis in so far as God intends creatures to have knowledge of their wrongdoing. Nonetheless, unlike Lewis, Julian argues that such wrongdoing should not be dwelled upon (Maskulak 2011). In support of this assertion, Julian differentiates between human and divine judgement. Human judgement can be hurtful and arduous, whereas God’s judgement does not assign blame, because God’s nature is peaceful and loving, so he is never angry (Maskulak 2011). Julian presents the analogy of a loving parent. If God is like a father then his child’s wrongdoing would not diminish his love for his child. As a parent would not consider invoking suffering upon a child, neither would God. Therefore, Julian proposes that Christ is an example of peace and love, which humanity should strive towards in order to be unified with God, because a creature with anger cannot be one with God (Maskulak 2011).

A further objection to the notion of universal salvation comes from Saint Augustine’s aforementioned argument that states that all people will not be saved. Saint Augustine proposes that the scriptures reveal that selected people from all groups will be saved (McGrath 2007). Nonetheless, Saint Augustine’s defence is arguably not sufficient to support the possibility of eternal damnation, in so far as the death of any human soul would challenge God’s omnipotence through His inability to turn all of his creatures in obedience towards Him (Hick 1988).

Lewis (2002) explains how the argument based upon God’s omnipotence does not dismantle the prospect of eternal damnation because Lewis attests that the special nature
of God’s creation of humanity meant that God chose to limit his own power for the sake of human freedom. Therefore, Lewis explains that God has not segregated his creatures through saving some and punishing others, rather the individual controls their own destiny. Lewis expresses that the gates of hell are locked from the inside. This does not mean that people want to be in hell but rather that they reject freedom based upon its association with God (Lewis 2002). Therefore, those who choose to be saved are redeemed through union with God which grants them eternal freedom.

Moltmann (2007) would disagree with Lewis’ suggestion that God allows any of his creatures to be punished even if it is through choice. He argues that scripture demonstrates that Jesus is not an opponent of non-Christians. Specifically, Moltmann refers to Paul who says that all people are trapped in disbelief so that God can show mercy to everyone without payment. Moltmann (2007) attests that salvation which depends on individual judgement is a Roman invention. Rather Moltmann emphasises that humanity is a community of believers. In this way Moltmann explains belief in relation to the divine is objective belief and humanity’s is subjective. The fate of humanity’s destiny is not in the hands of their changing beliefs but rather God’s unchanging belief in humanity as it is more reliable considering the fallibility of humanity. Like the father of a family would not base life-changing decisions upon the ideas of his young children, God does not create human destiny dependent upon their fallible actions (Moltmann, 2007). Therefore, the most rational way for God to judge humanity is through his belief in humanity, whereas human belief in God is inconsistent.

Conclusion
As shown in the preceding examples, the testimonies of Saint Matthew and Saint Paul can be adopted by both sides of the debate. It would also appear that the development of hell throughout the Old Testament suggests that the eternal nature of hell could have been used by the Old Testament writers as a warning against idolatry, rather than destiny for non-Christians. The interpretation of God’s forgiveness by modern theologians suggests that God’s unconditional love surpasses the need to earn salvation. Moreover, the universality of salvation is demonstrated through the explanation that all of humanity are believers because of God’s all-encompassing objective belief. Therefore, it seems reasonable to
suppose that hope of universal salvation is prospect for all of humanity. These findings are significant because they provide anticipation for a promising future in which differences and inequalities are overcome.

References


