

THE QUESTION OF HELL AND SALVATION

IS THERE A FOURTH VIEW?

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Summary

This article is a revised version of the 2005 Tyndale Lecture in Christian Doctrine. It sets forward a fourth view on the question of salvation and final judgement, supplementing the three familiar positions of eternal torment, annihilation and universalism. This is a view found in the work of five nineteenth- and early twentieth-century theologians: James Orr, J. R. Illingworth, Langton Clarke, T. R. Birks and Samuel Garratt. Griffith Thomas historically identified it as a fourth view, but it is argued in this article that there are significant differences between the proponents. Nevertheless, they share a conviction that the biblical data does not yield any one of the three traditional positions and that it is possible to envisage the reconciliation with God of those who are under eternal judgement, even if they do not enjoy eternal salvation. As this position is scarcely known in contemporary theology, the article describes rather than evaluates the positions in question.

1. The Spectre of a Fourth View

Debate over the boundaries of evangelicalism is at present very heated, especially in North America. Against such a background, presenting a somewhat novel viewpoint on the question of hell and salvation, in an evangelical context, may appear to constitute needless provocation. John Stott's tentative advocacy of a form of annihilationism, and his plea that it certainly be regarded as an evangelical option, provoked some clamant and adverse reaction.¹ Thomas Talbott's advocacy of

¹ David Edwards and John Stott, *Essentials: a Liberal–Evangelical Dialogue* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1988): 312-20.

universalism as an authentically evangelical and biblically grounded position is not so tentative.² Brian McLaren, of ‘emergent church’ fame, completed the trilogy that began with *A New Kind of Christian* by producing a volume largely concerned with the question of hell.³ If this article sets out a fourth position alongside (a) unending, consciously endured punishment, (b) annihilation and (c) universalism, are we not dangerously multiplying options already – some will protest – too numerous for evangelical health?

What follows is not in the service of theological novelty for its own sake. On this of all topics, such an enterprise would be thoroughly unworthy and distasteful. It is because of the intrinsic importance of the issues at stake that a fourth position is described here. The strand of theological thinking identified in what follows, located in the second half of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries, is largely unfamiliar. Accordingly, I confine myself to exposition. Obviously, I believe that the position or positions outlined deserve to be taken with theological seriousness. But constraints of space make even adequate description, let alone evaluation, impossible in the course of a single article. My hope is that what follows will stimulate those working in the areas of biblical studies and dogmatic theology – although exegetes, whose work is theologically front-line, must resign themselves to hearing far too little about the detailed exegetical foundations for the arguments that follow. Yet the thinkers under consideration were all anxious to be, first and foremost, biblical theologians.

Credit for discovering the following line of thought in the history of theology belongs to Dr Andy Saville.⁴ My own investigation is independent of his, but I am glad to acknowledge this impetus and contribution. He has both drawn attention to and followed up a ‘Special Note on Eschatology’, which concluded *The Principles of Theology* where Griffith Thomas referred to the three standard views on the question of our final destiny – universalism, annihilation and

² See Robin Parry & Chris Partridge, *Universal Salvation? The Current Debate* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2003).

³ Brian D. McLaren, *The Last Word And The Word After That* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005).

⁴ Andrew Saville, ‘Arguing With Annihilationism: A Doctrinal Assessment with Special Reference to Recent Evangelical Debate’ (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Coventry, 2000).

everlasting punishment.⁵ But there is, argued Thomas, a fourth view, one ‘which endeavours to harmonise the idea of everlasting punishment with the non-eternity of sin’. He mentions five tenants of this position: Langton Clarke, J. R. Illingworth, James Orr, Samuel Garratt and T. R. Birks.⁶

As far as it goes, such a description may sound more like a modified form of belief in everlasting punishment than like a fourth view. In our own day, Professor Henri Blocher has advocated what he regards as a modification of the traditional view precisely along these lines. Exegetically, he can not escape the conclusion that the condemned remain consciously condemned for ever. However, he believes that it is insuperably problematic to maintain that sin and sinning also enjoy unending existence. Reflecting on the confession of Christ’s lordship that Paul anticipates in Philippians 2:10-11, he argues that the perfection of Christ’s victory over sin and evil excludes the perpetual flourishing of sin and that the confession in question ‘cannot mean mere outward, hypocritical and forced agreement; what sense could there be in any outward show in the light of that Day, when all the secrets shall be exposed before ... God?’⁷ What follows from this? Henri Blocher suggested that the excluded are fixed in remorse but, supremely lucid, they see themselves as they are and acknowledge God’s justice, ‘their thought ... fixed in the knowledge that, through their very deprivation [of salvation], they glorify God and agree with him’.⁸ In this sense, they are reconciled to God in the perfection of their remorse – reconciled, but not saved.

We shall discover significantly *at least some* element of affinity between this and *at least some* aspects of *at least some* of those views formally described by Griffith Thomas as constituting a fourth position. The question of whether a given view is properly classified as distinctly fourth or a modification of one of the others is secondary, as far as I am concerned; I am more interested in describing the view under consideration. There are germane differences between the five thinkers mentioned by Griffith Thomas. In any case, familiar class-

⁵ W. H. Griffith Thomas, *The Principles of Theology: An Introduction to The Thirty-Nine Articles* (London: Longmans, Green & Co, 1930): 526.

⁶ Thomas mistakenly refers to R. L., instead of to J. L., Clarke.

⁷ ‘Everlasting Punishment and the Nature of Evil’ in *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell*, ed. Nigel M de S Cameron (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1992): 303.

⁸ ‘Everlasting Punishment’: 310.

ifications can obscure important distinctions. There is a universalism that appears to deny hell, and a universalism that maintains its reality, thought not its finality. ‘Annihilationism’ names both the position that maintains instant post-mortem annihilation, and that which places annihilation subsequent to consciously endured punishment. Nevertheless, while classification is not our primary concern, and a description of positions matters more than the headings under which they go, I hope to show that there is a conceptual fourth way of treating the question of hell and salvation, if we assume that universalism, annihilationism and everlasting torment describe three standard ways.

Of the five thinkers named by Griffith Thomas, only three really argue a case. They are Clarke, Birks and Garratt. But we turn first to James Orr and J. R. Illingworth.

2. James Orr

James Orr held chairs in Church History at the United Presbyterian College in Edinburgh, and Systematic Theology and Apologetics at the United Free Church College in Glasgow, at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. In his two major works, *The Christian View of God and the World* and *The Progress of Dogma*, he declared his adherence to the ‘traditional’ view of human destiny, rejecting both universalism and annihilationism. He did, however, strike a rather tentative note, especially in *The Christian View*.

I confess I marvel sometimes at the confidence with which people pronounce on that which must and shall be through the eternities and eternities – the ages and ages – of God’s unending life, during which also the soul of man is to exist; and this in respect of so appalling a subject as the future fate of the lost. There is room here for a wise agnosticism. I prefer to say that, so far as my light goes, I can see no end, and there to stop.⁹

No end, that is, to hell, as far as he can see; but he cannot see very far: hence, agnosticism. Orr is at this point touching on the fate of unbelievers, who constitute the vast global majority, in light of the ‘sweep of this grand [Christian] scheme of Incarnation and Redemption’ as he has described it. Of course, the question of the

⁹ *The Christian View of God and the World* (2nd edn; Vancouver: Regent Publications, 2002): 388-89. For the discussion in *The Progress of Dogma* (Vancouver: Regent Publications, 2000), see X.III.

scope of salvation outside the church is different from the question of the nature or duration of punishment. Nevertheless, the issues coalesce, as far as Orr is concerned, with respect to his conclusion: 'We feel instinctively that the last word has not been – cannot be – spoken by us here.'¹⁰

However, this was not quite Orr's last word on the subject. In a swift allusion to the issue in the course of *Sidelights on Doctrine*, Orr again appears to indicate his acceptance of the traditional view, but admits that he 'can profess to offer no satisfying solution' for some associated difficulties.¹¹ He said this in 1909; *The Christian View* and *The Progress of Dogma* had both been published some years before. Then, in 1910, he published the work to which Griffith Thomas alludes: *Sin as a Problem of Today*.¹² Right at the end of this volume, Orr took up from a fresh vantage-point the question of theodicy, which had been occupying him throughout, a question essentially concerned with sin, something that is 'in its very conception ... that which *ought not to be*'.¹³ Its divine permission 'is and remains a dark riddle' even after travelling three hundred pages of theological text. Sin is countered by redemption, but what is the scope of redemption? Issues arise here to which 'the elements of a solution are wanting; the calculus fails us for dealing with it'.¹⁴

Till that higher standpoint is reached where, as just indicated, the light of the Great White Throne beats on the unrolled scroll of God's providence, and the principles of His unerringly wise government are disclosed to the world that has been subject to it, glimpses to steady our thoughts, and guide our feet amidst the shadows, are the utmost that can be asked or hoped for.¹⁵

Orr is neither a universalist nor an annihilationist. But, surveying the panoramic scene of eschatological redemption, Orr has this to say:

Beyond lie *the eternal ages*, the secrets of which, known only to God, it is equally presumptuous and vain for man to attempt to penetrate. The veil, in Scripture, falls on what seems to be a duality, yet not to the

¹⁰ *The Christian View*: 390.

¹¹ *Sidelights on Doctrine* (London: Marshalls, 1909): 179.

¹² *Sin as a Problem of Today* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1910).

¹³ *Sin as a Problem of Today*: 1. I suspect that an instinct informs this formulation not unlike that of Henri Blocher in *Original Sin: Illuminating the Riddle* (Leicester: Apollos, 1997): 56-58.

¹⁴ *Sin as a Problem of Today*: 314.

¹⁵ *Sin as a Problem of Today*: 311-12.

exclusion of hints, even more, of a future final unification – a gathering up of all things in Christ as Head – when God is once more ‘all in all’. Such language would seem to imply at least, a cessation of active opposition to the will of God – an acknowledgement universally of His authority and rule, – a reconciliation, in some form, on the part even of those outside the blessedness of the Kingdom with the order of the universe.¹⁶

If this is what has warranted the label ‘fourth’ view, it nonetheless seems consistent, as far as it goes, with what Henri Blocher describes as a modification of the ‘traditional’ view on the two crucial and closely aligned points: firstly, a form of universal reconciliation is possible and, secondly, there is an end to sinning. We shall return summarily to Orr in conclusion, but we move on now to the second figure: J. R. Illingworth.

3. J. R. Illingworth

J. R. Illingworth, one-time Fellow of Jesus College, Oxford, was Rector of Longworth when he published *Reason and Revelation*, an elegant and lucid exposition of their harmony.¹⁷ Arriving at ‘The Problem of Evil’ in a final chapter, Illingworth considered the problem of God’s permission of sin and remarked that

... if we were sure that in the end sin was to be completely abolished ... such assurance would go far to remove any difficulty respecting its primary permission. But we are met by the objection that, so far from having any such assurance, Christians are committed to a belief in everlasting punishment; which implies final impenitence or the everlasting continuance of sinful wills. And this is indeed one of the strongest arguments urged against Christianity, the incompatibility between its view of God and its belief in hell.¹⁸

Illingworth proceeded to say both that all three views – everlasting punishment, conditionalism (or annihilationism) and universalism – have been maintained in the Christian church, and that certain biblical passages offer *prima facie* support for each of the views. He then volunteers that ‘even if we incline to the belief in everlasting punishment, on the ground of its long and wide prevalence in the

¹⁶ *Sin as a Problem of Today*: 314-15.

¹⁷ *Reason and Revelation: An Essay in Apology* (London: Macmillan, 1902).

¹⁸ *Reason and Revelation*: 228.

Church, we must distinguish between punishment and torment' (230). He proposes an analogy.

Take the case of a man who has been a culpable spendthrift, in his youth, and so reduced himself to penury for the remainder of his life. His poverty is his punishment, and as long as he resents it he is in misery: but no sooner does he recognize its justice, than he can bear it with cheerful acquiescence. Yet the punishment remains ... Now one can conceive a similar process in the future life; that men may there wake to recognize that, by their earthly conduct, they have brought themselves for ever to a lower state than might have been, and are to that extent everlastingly punished, while yet they accept their condition as divinely just, and are at peace.¹⁹

To the objection that this is tantamount to universalism, Illingworth rejoins that the position described retains the truth of everlasting punishment. What is denied is that such punishment entails impenitence. Further, he is not dogmatically espousing the position that he has presented. He believes 'that there is no clear revelation upon the subject' in the New Testament. But he obviously thinks that it makes theological sense. In his suggestion that those punished are at peace, he *may* be consistent with Orr, though it is hard to say, since Orr will not be drawn very far. However, he appears to go a step beyond Henri Blocher, at least in his language. Blocher speaks of being reconciled; Illingworth, of being at peace. (It is not clear that Illingworth intends his reference to 'cheerful acquiescence' in our destiny in this life to provide an analogical description of our emotional state in the next.) Are the concepts of 'reconciliation' and 'peace' mutually implicative? More analysis of them is required to answer that question than either Illingworth or Henri Blocher offers. While Blocher *might* say that emotional peace is not implied in reconciliation, which involves a state of timeless remorse, 'reconciliation' is surely implied in Illingworth's talk of 'peace'. A position that maintains everlasting punishment while interpreting reconciliation in terms of everlasting peace does begin to look like a fourth view.

When he came to write a preface to the book of another author, one that appealed to this very passage in his own work, Illingworth was noticeably reserved, professing sympathy with the broad intention, but not committing himself to agreement with any particular opinion expressed in the book. This is the book that, in all the literature that we

¹⁹ *Reason and Revelation*: 231.

are considering, most explicitly announces its position under the heading of a fourth view. It is *The Eternal Saviour–Judge*, published in 1904 by James Langton Clarke, late Fellow of the University of Durham; it is the longest – though not, I believe, the strongest – defence of the fourth view within the literature that we are considering. To it we now turn.

4. Langton Clarke

In outlining a fourth view, Langton Clarke appealed to two authors for a measure of support. One was Alfred Edersheim. ‘It has been most satisfactory to me,’ said Clarke, ‘to find that Dr Edersheim does not consider that the above three views – Endless Punishment, Annihilation, Universalism – are the only possible ones’.²⁰ He quotes Edersheim as follows:

It seems at least an exaggeration to put the alternatives thus: absolute eternity of punishment; annihilation; or else universal restoration. Something else is at least thinkable that may not lie between these hard and fast lines of demarcation. It is at least conceivable that there may be a *quartum quid* ... that there may be a purification or transformation (*sit venia verbis*) of all who are capable of such ... and in connection with this, we note that there is quite a series of Scripture statements, which teach alike the final reign of God, and the final putting of all things under Christ, and all this in connection with the blessed fact that Christ has ‘tasted death for every man’, that the world through Him might be saved, and that He was to ‘draw all men unto Himself’.²¹

Clarke does not always signal that he is omitting words from some of his quotations, but he does signal one omission and it is worth supplying the missing words. What Edersheim actually wrote was that ‘there may be a purification or transformation of all who are capable of such – or, if it is preferred an unfolding of the germ of grace, present before death, invisible though it may have been to other men ...’ so that ‘only that which is morally incapable of transformation ... shall be cast into the lake of fire’.²² Edersheim did not say at this point whether he considered the lake of fire to be indicative of unending torment or of annihilation.

²⁰ *The Eternal Saviour–Judge* (London: John Murray, 1904): 92-93.

²¹ *Saviour–Judge*: 92-93.

²² *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, vol. 2 (London: Longmans, Green & Co, 1884): 795.

The other figure to whom Clarke appeals is Illingworth. In distinguishing between 'Reconciliation', which is what he names his fourth view, and 'Restoration' (or universalism), Clarke had already both referred to and then quoted the passage from Illingworth that I have quoted above (*Saviour–Judge*: 89-90). Then he devoted a short appendix to Illingworth in order to show how, speaking of everlasting punishment, Illingworth 'makes some remarks on its possible compatibility with reconciliation to God, which amount to a fourth view and one which contains several important features of a doctrine of reconciliation' (345). What is Clarke's 'fourth view'?

Up until his statement of it, around a quarter of the way into the volume, Clarke has sought to revise widely held views on the concept of Christ as judge by 'the extension and adaptation of the argument of the Epistle to the Hebrews' (vii-viii). The substance of his argument is that, as the Old Testament priesthood was the type of the high priesthood of Christ, so the judges and the function of judgement in the Old Testament operate as the type of Christ's judgeship. Judges were, above all, saviours – indeed, judges *qua* saviours, their strictly judicial responsibility being a function of their appointment to a soteric role. As for kings, exemplified by Solomon, we find that judgement is their most important function, perpetually exercised in royal office. Solomon's kingdom, in particular, has always been recognised as a type of the kingdom of Christ. So consider Christ – priest for ever according to the order of Melchizedek. If he is also King for ever and Judge for ever, will he not exercise perpetual judgeship along the lines of the type, according to the hermeneutics of high priesthood? If so, is Christ's eschatological function as judge not bound to be a saving function as well?

Thus Clarke sets up his chapter on the fourth view by claiming that those who are judged are not thereby removed from the saving influence of Christ, their judge. The antithesis to the salvation that believers experience whereby they do not enter into judgement, is '*not the elimination of the saving element from the Eternal Judgeship of Christ, but the abiding of the punitive*' (86; cf. 283). Hell is the perpetuation of the punitive element in the eternal judgeship of Christ. The lost are subject to both the saving and the punitive offices of the Judge, or else mercy would be temporary and justice permanent. They suffer neither everlasting torment nor annihilation. Indeed, the lost are simultaneously the saved, but their salvation is not a restoration to what

they would have had or been had they believed. They are saved with a loss. This is what Clarke means by 'reconciliation'. As Esau could not retrieve the blessing sold for a mess of pottage, so the lost.

Clarke makes brief exegetical and theological comments on a large number of biblical passages. He insists that what he wants to defend is strictly the proposition that Christ continues to be Saviour as long as he is Judge, a situation which prevails until he hands over the kingdom to the Father. The objective of punishment during that period is amendment and penitence. It is not necessarily achieved for everyone. If some remain impenitent by the time that Christ hands over the kingdom to his Father, they will be annihilated. Those not annihilated are reconciled, but still do not attain the blessing that they forfeited by previous unbelief and disobedience. That is how divine wrath abides for ever on unbelievers.

Clarke's 'fourth view' may appear to combine elements of annihilationism with a modification of universalism, modified into a scheme of two-tier salvation – with or without loss. Is this apparent only? As far as annihilation goes, Clarke is usually critical, as are Orr, Birks and Garratt. (Illingworth is rather too brief to call.) Clarke alludes positively to its possibility only in connection with post-mortem impenitence up until Christ hands over the kingdom to the Father. Then is Clarke's basically a modified universalism? Clarke was well aware that his position might be so regarded. In announcing the term 'reconciliation' for the fourth view, he grants that '[a]t first sight it may seem that this is only another name for Restoration [i.e., universalism], but in reality it is quite different, and it appears to me that Reconciliation rather than Restoration is probably that which is worked out by the Eternal Judgment of the Eternal Judge' (85). 'Probably'? While insisting that he is not advocating universalism, Clarke adds: 'I will venture to say that there is in Scripture more of what I call set teaching of the best forms of this doctrine [i.e., universalism], than there is of endless sin and misery' (104). These 'best forms' are contrasted to a *Universalismus vulgarismus*, a universalism which is in biblical denial (82). Clarke admits that the theory of the eternal judgeship of Christ 'must make *in the direction of* Universalism ... My Universalism', he says, 'consists in the belief, or, at all events, the hope, that all God's punishments, whether in this life or in the life to come, are corrective in their intention and tendency, and, in the long run, *successfully* corrective' (172-73). Yet, his book is not designed to

argue dogmatically about outcomes, but ‘simply to show that the teaching of Scripture is that through all the ages of the Eternal Judgeship of Christ ... [that is, until he delivers the kingdom to the father] the *saving element remains along with the punitive element*’ (173). It is what he calls the ‘mechanism’, and not the extent, of reconciliation that Clarke wants to describe. And even ‘success’ brings reconciliation rather than restoration.

‘Reconciliation’ is adumbrated in a way that takes Clarke beyond Illingworth. ‘The reconciled are not only in a state in which acquiescence in their punishment results in peace and content, but are also restored to a condition of sonship, which is not only a joy to the reconciled, but also to the angels of God in heaven, and to the Heavenly Father Himself’ (346). Clarke can also say that ‘possibly and probably’ the reconciled will not enjoy ‘the full restoration to all they might have been had they not received the grace of God in vain’.²³ ‘Probably’ not? So *possibly* there is restoration, the categorical alternative to reconciliation that Clarke has been at such pains to distinguish. On post-mortem repentance, Clarke says:

I do not maintain nor even think it at all probable that an after-death repentance, however sincere, of one who, with full knowledge of Christ in this life rejects or neglects so great salvation, can fully restore him to that birthright of the first-born which he has sold for a mess of pottage.²⁴

Improbable, but possible. The language of probability may echo the thought of Bishop Butler, whose work is the target of positive allusion throughout, though he is not held up as a proto-proponent of the fourth view. Be that as it may, Clarke at least appears at times to countenance a hopeful universalism. Granted, he does not *expect* universal reconciliation, let alone universal salvation. He effectively advocates his fourth view as a strong and the best possibility, apparently leaving the door a little open to universalism. His might, therefore, be regarded as a fourth view; although it is also arguable that it is better described as a severely modified and non-dogmatic version of universalism.²⁵ At any rate, it is scarcely possible to merge it with Blocher’s avowed modified traditionalism into a uniform fourth view.

²³ *Saviour–Judge*: 330, but rather similar things are said elsewhere, e.g. 248, 268.

²⁴ *Saviour–Judge*: 257.

²⁵ Clarke can speak of his position as a kind of universalism but ‘modified by the view of possible reconciliation for all rather than full restoration’ (111). ‘Restorationism’ is Clarke’s characteristic way of speaking of ‘Universalism’.

We now move on to two other characters: Thomas Rawson Birks and Samuel Garratt. The terrain that we tread here is a little different.

5. T. R. Birks

T. R. Birks was an incumbent of Holy Trinity Church in Cambridge in the mid-1860s. At one stage, he was the secretary of the Evangelical Alliance and was the son-in-law of Edward Bickersteth, one of its founders. Gerard Manley Hopkins flattered all evangelicals by issuing the judgement that Birks was ‘almost the only learned evangelical going’.²⁶ That was three years before the publication of Birks’ *Victory of Divine Goodness (VDG)*, which caused such controversy that Birks resigned from the secretaryship of the Alliance – ‘resigned’, not ‘was expelled’, and from the secretaryship, not the organisation.

Hell was the subject of particularly heated controversy around that time. F. D. Maurice had been dismissed from his chair at King’s College, London, in 1853, on account of his views on eternal punishment. H. B. Wilson had been subjected to a lawsuit for remarks on the same question in the famous *Essays and Reviews*, published a few years later. Birks was to succeed Maurice as Knightbridge Professor of Moral Philosophy in Cambridge in 1872, and E. H. Plumptre was to remark of *VDG* that ‘in not a few passages it presents so close a verbal identity with the language of Mr Maurice’s *Theological Essays*, that, in a writer of inferior calibre, it would suggest the thought of a literary plagiarism’.²⁷ Maurice had been widely suspected of universalism. The Evangelical Alliance, on the other hand, had expanded its Confession of Faith, some years before Birks’ dismissal, to include a clause affirming eternal punishment.²⁸ Whatever truth there was in Plumptre’s statement, it was somewhat misleading: it was inapplicable to what was distinctive in Birks’ position, namely his advocacy of what we are

²⁶ See G. Rowell, *Hell and the Victorians: A Study of Nineteenth-Century Theological Controversies Concerning Eternal Punishment and the Future Life* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1974): 134.

²⁷ *The Spirits in Prison and Other Studies on the Life After Death* (London: Isbister, 1885): 229.

²⁸ Maurice refers to the Evangelical Alliance right from the first edition of his *Theological Essays* (Cambridge: Macmillan, 1853): 434.

describing as a fourth view, a view found neither in any edition of Maurice's celebrated essay nor in Plumptre's account of Birks.²⁹

VDG was a sequel to two other works, *Difficulties of Belief* (*DB*) and *The Ways of God*, published respectively in 1855 and 1863. A second edition of *DB*, published in 1876, contained supplementary essays on atonement and eternal judgement. These included revised versions of portions of *VDG*, because the latter work had given 'birth to strange misrepresentations, of which I do not seek to revive the memory'.³⁰ Rather than offer a comparison of the textual variations, I shall concentrate on Birks' mature position as set forth in *VDG* and the second edition of *DB*.³¹ But note that in the first edition of the latter work, he had concluded his discussion 'On the Nature of Evil' by saying that there are those who will be 'compelled, while enduring the righteous judgment of the Most High, to manifest, through eternal ages, the height and depth of his victorious goodness' and he had ended his discussion: 'On the Creation and Fall of Angels' by saying that 'the lost who see in Him the Destroyer who has effected their ruin, will own the awful righteousness of the Supremely Good and Holy, when this Deceiver of the universe is crushed under the victorious feet of the once crucified and now exalted Son of God.'³²

Three things about Birks' general approach to the question of eternal punishment bear comment. Firstly, he first broke public silence on his personal views when he published a letter written to an enquirer seven years previous to the publication of *VDG*, a letter which itself declared a position that he had privately maintained for well over twenty years before that.³³ Secondly, his insight was born of sustained spiritual pain and intellectual turmoil. Thirdly, the extent and evidence of Birks' orthodoxy on the authority of Scripture emerges in a

²⁹ Plumptre himself was in the thick of the debates: his *The Spirits in Prison* was dedicated to Maurice, and Farrar's series of sermons on eternal punishment – preached at the end of 1877 and generating yet another phase of controversy when they were published as *Eternal Hope* (London: Macmillan, 1878) – was dedicated to Plumptre.

³⁰ Birks, *The Difficulties Of Belief In Connexion With The Creation And The Fall, Redemption And Judgment* (London: Macmillan, 1876): x.

³¹ The supplementary essays in *DB* are actually tighter than those in *VDG* (London: Rivingtons, 1867).

³² *DB*: 35, 87. The page references are from the second edition, but this material was unchanged from the first.

³³ Cf. John Stott's private conviction on cognate questions over many decades prior to the publication of his debate with David Edwards: Timothy Dudley-Smith, *John Stott: A Global Ministry* (Leicester: IVP, 2001): 354.

substantial discussion of Coleridge's *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit*. This does not deal with the issue that we are considering, but it was included in *VDG* and reveals both Birks' ability to argue a case by close reading of a text and the consistent integrity of his position on Scripture.

Birks was biblically convinced that there is 'eternal separation, depending on the use or abuse of the probation in this mortal life' (*VDG* 44). In his essay 'On Eternal Judgment' in the second edition of *DB*, he indicates that he finds annihilation, whether instant or consequent on punishment, no more tenable than universalism. But he is troubled by the question of how the divine perfections, particularly those of goodness and love, can possibly be expressed in the unending punishment of the wicked. For the eschatological end of all things is victory, but, as he put it in *VDG*, to 'assume the perpetual contrivance of active malice and permitted blasphemies, is to ascribe to God a dominion shared for ever with the powers of evil. It makes hell the scene of Satan's triumphant malice ...' (47). Divine victory is thwarted by dualism, and perpetual sin spells dualism.

But if there is no perpetual sin, what is there? An acknowledgement on the part of the unsaved of the justice of God's judgement. However, if this is so, must this 'not also imply a compulsory but real perception of all the *other* attributes of the Almighty', such as wisdom and love? Birks thinks that it must. So he ventures the following statement:

Must not the contemplation of infinite wisdom and love, however solemn the punishment and the compulsion by which alone it is made possible for those who have despised the day of grace, be still, in its own nature, unutterably blessed? The personal loss and ruin may be complete and irreparable, the anguish intense, the shame and sorrow dreadful, the humiliation infinite and irreversible. Yet out of its depth there may arise such a passive but real view of the joys of a ransomed universe, and of the unveiled perfections of the Godhead, as to ... swallow up death in victory. (48)

The depth of the love of Christ will be revealed towards those in 'shame and everlasting contempt' (Daniel 12:2); the lost will know something of that love and '[w]ill they not be saved, in a strange, mysterious sense, when the depth of their unchangeable shame and sorrow finds beneath it a still lower depth of Divine compassion, and the creature, in its most forlorn estate, it shut in by the vision of surpassing and infinite love?' (191). There will be a depth of ruin and yet 'depths of compassion to the self-ruined, as, without reversing their

doom, may send a thrill of wondrous consolation through the abyss of what else be unmingled woe and despair' (64).

Birks uses the language of salvation here. From where does he get his notions? He explicitly acknowledged that he was adding to the biblical data an element found 'nowhere in the Bible, in set terms, explicitly revealed'. He is describing a 'secret purpose of God' which Scripture passes by 'in total silence' leaving it 'to be deduced by patient thought and moral inference alone' (45).³⁴ Gnosticism? At first blush, it can look like it and also look as though Birks was getting caught up in Victorian end-time fervour. The preface to *VDG* concluded with the words: 'If the Church is now approaching, or has almost reached, the time when "the mystery of God shall be finished", we may expect that new unfoldings of revealed truth, and of the deep treasures in the mind of Scripture, will be given to humble and waiting hearts in these last days' (xi). And in the later essay 'On Eternal Judgment' in that same volume, Birks avers that the 'message of judgment to come, though a doctrine, is also a prophecy, and gradual expansion is the common law of all prophetic truth. At the eventide of the Gospel there is to be added light. In the time of the end, "many shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall be increased"' (174). Birks has a deeply interesting passage, which we have no time to explore, on the conditions under which biblical silence should be broken.³⁵

To get a comprehensive grasp of what is going on here, we should need to visit Birks' earlier works – *The Four Prophetic Empires* (1844) or *Outline of Biblical Prophecy* (1854). Pending this, we merely note here how seriously Birks seeks to take Scripture. It is our business to concentrate on what is revealed, not to weaken biblical warnings. We must 'beware lest, in seeking to pierce the veil which shrouds the Divine glory, we should perish in breaking through to gaze, and lose the awakening power of those solemn messages which have come to us directly and plainly from the lips of the All-merciful and All-wise' (49).

³⁴ Our discovery that the 'infliction of just punishment is not the whole of God's purpose towards the unsaved' comes by way of 'meditation on its revealed truths below the surface, and ... indirect inference' (*VDG*: 63, 173).

³⁵ 'When the sense of God's universal goodness, derived from His own word, has been more widely diffused and has a firmer hold on the general conscience than the authority of His word himself, then the silence, which once deepened the power of His warnings, will abate their force' (*VDG* 175). Cf 45-46 and Samuel Garratt, *World Without End* (London: Hunt, 1886): 227-29.

In the Calvinist–Arminian controversy over particular atonement, Calvinists have characteristically insisted that universal atonement entails universal salvation. Birks, who defended himself against Candlish’s accusation that he was an Arminian, rejected the entailment; but he did think that belief in universal atonement, to which he subscribed, had logical implications for our doctrine of hell. The question: ‘How could a loving being create people whom He foreknew would experience everlasting misery?’ is compounded by another: ‘If Christ died for all, how can multitudes perish for ever?’ Birks theologically connects atonement with incarnation and resurrection. In assuming our nature by incarnation, the Son of God enters ‘into a close intimacy of union with every child of man’.³⁶ The resurrection of the just, as well as the unjust, is the result of Christ’s victorious resurrection. Therefore, some humans, joined with and loved by the incarnate, atoning and resurrected Christ, in a world where death is eventually abolished, may be excluded from *communion* with him, but not excluded from a *mercy* that is mingled with judgement in a resurrection to everlasting shame and contempt that is undergirded by love. ‘Every child of man is related to God under three successive forms of Divine goodness. The first is the simple bounty of the Creator. The second is the equity of the moral Governor of the world. The third is the mercy and compassion of the Saviour and Redeemer’ (*VDG*: 192).

Orr, Illingworth, Clarke and Birks all believe that sin will end. That suffices as a description of the fourth view, as far as Griffith Thomas formulated it, on the assumption that everlasting punishment is also affirmed. But if there is a fourth view, culled from the survey of Thomas’ authors, we obviously have to describe it more fully than in Griffith Thomas’ terms. When Henri Blocher writes of reconciliation and of lucidity, we might agree that he is doing what he says that he is, namely, setting forth a modification of the traditional view rather than offering a fourth. (He does not position himself in relation to any fourth view.) It is when we come to the language of ‘peace’ (Illingworth), ‘blessedness’ (Birks), or ‘salvation’ (Birks and Clarke) that we appear to alight upon a fourth view, unless we take any of these authors (Clarke is the strongest candidate) to be propounding a modification of universalism.

³⁶ *Ways of God*: 110; *DB*: 170. In *DB*, Birks largely repeats, but somewhat recasts, the discussion in the former volume.

If Clarke appealed to Illingworth, our last figure, Samuel Garratt, appealed explicitly to Birks. Accordingly we now turn to Garratt.

6. Samuel Garratt

Samuel Garratt wrote as ‘Honorary Canon of Norwich’ when he published his two works, *Veins of Silver (VS)* in 1872 and *World Without End (WWE)* in 1886. In at least one respect, he is the most satisfactory proponent of the fourth view. Clarke invests a great deal in the parallel between judges and judgement in the Old and New Testaments. He may or may not be justified in so doing, but we come to his comments on various New Testament texts at least wondering whether the issue has been largely wrapped up – or, at least, skewed – before we have arrived at his engagement with the basis of traditional beliefs. Birks approaches things somewhat unsystematically and episodically in separate essays, for he is not aiming at a full-length treatise, though it is true that chapters 13 and 14 of the second edition of *DB* do set out the relevant propositions succinctly.

In *VS*, Garratt, on the other hand, approaches the question of everlasting punishment methodically. The title is drawn from the surface of Scripture – ‘If you look for wisdom as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure’ (Prov. 2:4); but the subtitle of the work is *Truths Hidden Beneath The Surface*.³⁷ Garratt’s quarrel is with both generally careless readers and those Sadducee-types who will not dig below the surface to understand what the Old Testament teaches or implies about the resurrection (100-1). His approach allows him rather more space to limn the contours of biblical theology than Birks takes up. Garratt thinks that what is at stake in the debate is our honouring of God by the theological reconciliation of his attributes. However, it is neither to the logic of their reconciliation nor to their consistency with our moral sense that Garratt wants to look first, but rather to Scripture: ‘It is to Scripture I appeal’ (*VS* xiv). And he is a staunch inerrantist (4, 97).

In his preface to *WWE*, Garratt alludes to the reception *VS* received – one that rather concerned him. Then, in the preface to the second

³⁷ *Veins of Silver: Truths Hidden Beneath the Surface* (2nd edn; London: Thynne, 1904). See also *WWE*: 228. Birks uses this text in *DB*: 217.

edition of *VS*, published in 1904, Garratt announced his position clearly:

I believe in the everlasting punishment of sin, but I do not believe in punishment which makes men worse instead of better. I believe in everlasting punishment, but I do not believe in everlasting sin. I believe in God's righteous severity, but I do not believe in Satan's ultimate triumph over the works of God's hands. I believe that Christ must reign till every enemy is put under His feet and God is all in all (vii).

WWE is passionate and more polemical than *VS*, deliberately positioning itself in contrast to a figure like Jonathan Edwards, but it is fundamentally constructive. I shall follow the line of argument in *VS*, interlacing it with reference to *WWE*.

The difficulty that Garratt wanted to address was one that he found widely experienced, that is, 'to reconcile what Scripture tells us of God's character with what Scripture tells us of God's dealings with men after death' (*VS* 104). As he puts it in *WWE*: 'Better ten thousand worlds should perish than that a cloud should pass over the character of God,' and he is thus led into conflict with Jonathan Edwards and the celebrated passage in the sermon on 'Sinners in the hands of an angry God' which describes God's immeasurable hatred of and unending torment prepared for human creatures, ten thousands times more loathsome to him than the 'most hateful and venomous serpent' (186; 201-2).

Garratt begins by establishing that Scripture unquestionably teaches everlasting punishment, and by categorically rejecting annihilationism. A passage in *WWE* is indicative of Garratt's principled exegetical carefulness:

There are texts which prove distinctly a judgment to come and future punishment, but say nothing whatever as to its duration; there are other texts which prove that it is everlasting punishment which sin incurs, but do not prove that the sentence is irreversible hereafter any more than now; there are texts which imply that it is irreversible; and there are texts also which teach us what is the purpose designated by it (195).

Having established everlasting punishment, Garratt proceeds in *VS* to challenge three misapprehensions. The first is that the eschatological future is a scene of a-temporal changelessness. The second is that the result of future, eschatological punishment, is the increasing corruption and deterioration of the sinner. The third is one on which he speaks, as he puts it, 'with more hesitation, lest I should be myself misconceived'.

It is that God is bound by his own threatenings in the way that he is bound by his promises. In the case of Jonah, we learn that ‘threatening, however unconditional in its form, if it produces a result, may among men cease to be possible of execution’ (131). Probing the range of biblical data, Garratt concludes that the ‘fulfilment of all threatenings and some promises is conditional, that of some promises and no threatenings unconditional’. This means that at least ‘we must not place the threatening of everlasting punishment ... in the same category with the promise of everlasting blessedness’ in the sense that the fulfilments of promise and threat stand or fall together (134). Yet Garratt does not actually seem to depend on this argument for his eventual theological conclusion.

Turning to the question of the reversibility of punishment, Garratt expresses his belief that ‘the whole analogy of God’s dealings with men is opposed to any absolute reversal either of gifts or punishment’ (146). The parable of Dives and Lazarus is one illustration of this. But the parable is significant for other reasons. Dives is punished but not hated. In the exchange between him and Abraham ‘there is not ... on either side, an extinction of affection’ (150). ‘So far from there being the slightest intimation of any reversal of the sentence, or any alleviation of the suffering, no passage in Scripture is so much opposed to such a hope as this’ – and yet, Dives is morally chastened (152). So what is God’s purpose in punishing? This is the crucial issue, as far as Garratt is concerned. It is vitally connected to the question of the character of God.

The *fact* of everlasting punishment is clearer in Scripture than its *purpose*; still, ‘in the texts which most strongly assert everlasting punishment we can hear, if we listen for it, an underlying tone which reveals its purpose’ (*WWE* 228). If we go back to Genesis and the garden, we find that the sentence pronounced upon the sinner and the punishment of sin are not remitted. However, the curse of toil and child-bearing in pain are modified in the execution, so that work and children can bring blessing. That sets the scene for the rest of Scripture. The Psalmist’s words that ‘the Lord is good to all, and His tender mercies are over all His works’ capture the universality of mercy in all God’s judgements. They ‘require us to believe that in some way there is room for the exhibition of mercy to those suffering the everlasting punishment of their sins’ (*VS* 165). Garratt follows this through in relative detail in the seventh chapter of *WWE*; in *VS*, his analysis

proceeds to a survey of texts that culminate in what seems to him decisive: that passage in Philippians which has impressed Henri Blocher and which, Garratt thinks, ‘proves that those who have forfeited for ever the blessedness of heaven ... will yet eventually bow at the Name of Jesus, and confess him Lord’, in whose presence, we are told in Revelation, the damned are tormented but whose very presence at the scene is the guarantee of mercy (*VS* 177-78). ‘When Christ Himself is Judge, His holy punishment is calculated to benefit and not to injure, to elevate morally and not to degrade him who suffers it’ (*WWE* 235). So what is the issue of Garratt’s investigation? The lost will experience everlasting shame, but not everlasting sin. But shame is not always and not only a bad thing. It is better than shamelessness. Indeed, it is moral progress. The result? Praise in heaven, on earth, and in hell. But the distinctions are not abolished. So things stand on Garratt’s account of things and it looks like a fourth view.

7. Conclusion

Our five theologians all aspire to be biblical and cautious; they prize godliness and exhibit both ability of mind and pastoral concern.³⁸ I shall not rehearse here the difficulties that many experience both with everlasting torment and with universalism. Annihilation may be proposed in its own, independent exegetical and theological right, but presumably some are led to espouse it because they find that the difficulties attendant on both everlasting torment and universalism require some positive alternative. Some version of the fourth view may provide us with an alternative conceptual alternative. What needs proper investigation is whether it is arguable in its own independent exegetical and theological right.

James Orr argued that the progress of dogma was logical and not contingent. A systematic study of Christian doctrine optimally proceeds by treating of foundations; then the doctrine of God; then theological anthropology; then Christology; then objective atonement; then its subjective appropriation by faith; then eschatology. Is that not how doctrine (or ‘dogma’) has developed? The canon of Scripture and

³⁸ Regrettably, I can not record, e.g. Garratt’s important treatment of the ‘moral results’ of contrasting viewpoints in chapter 8 of *WWE*. I have also had to omit making a host of illuminating connections and contrasts between our authors.

the basic idea of God was set out in the earliest centuries; then followed the doctrine of the Trinity; then the Augustinian triumph over Pelagius; then the Chalcedonian Definition; then Anselm's grasp on the satisfaction of the cross; then the Reformers' discovery of justification by faith. What remains? Eschatology. That, announced Orr, is the task of our day. That was over a century ago.

His analysis is certainly open to question.³⁹ But his conviction that the construction or reconstruction of eschatology is a peculiarly important task and his conviction that, in its light, the whole pattern of Christian doctrine might be modified, without surrendering anything substantially gained along the way, is worth our consideration. The most important impetus to thinking afresh through the question of hell and salvation is simply to get it right, whether or not that conforms with one of the well-established positions. However, perhaps there is a *kairos* for this and the fact that the *kairos* comes in the midst of a greater and more disturbing ecclesiastical and theological diversity than we have ever experienced should add impetus as well as instilling caution. I believe that we shall not seize the day and grasp our responsibility aright unless we give a proper hearing to a fourth view. 'But what am I?/An infant crying in the night/An infant crying for the light' (Tennyson, *In Memoriam*, LIV).

³⁹ See my 'Foreword' to the cited edition (in footnote 9) of *The Progress of Dogma*.