DAMNED NONSENSE

An Argument for Universalism

consisting of a critique of all of the alternatives to it

by

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Contents

With regards to the title of this dissertation, I am aware that, in one of his 'Broadcast Talks' published in 1942, C.S. Lewis reclaimed the phrase 'damned nonsense' to mean 'nonsense that… will (apart from God's grace) lead those who believe it to eternal death'. It, thus, gives me great pleasure to *re*-reclaim it to mean 'nonsense that is talked about damnation and hell'.

Introduction

My main aim in this paper is to show that universalism (the doctrine that all people will eventually be saved through the work of Christ) is an acceptable view for orthodox Christians – including evangelicals – to hold. Having done this, I will explore why, if it *is* an acceptable view, it is often regarded as a heresy[1] or, at least, dismissed as being fatally-flawed on biblical grounds. In asking this second question, I am following the evangelical universalist philosopher Thomas Talbott who suggests that 'something other than biblical exegesis lies behind the fierce opposition to universalism that we find in the tradition'.[2]

While I am a 'convinced universalist'[3] myself, I will not attempt to *prove* universalism as such. I will simply argue that all of the alternatives to it are, *at the very least*, as flawed as universalism itself is alleged to be, if not considerably more so.[4] This does, of course, constitute a case *for* universalism, if not a complete one. In order to support my claim, I will highlight the weaknesses of these other positions which are summarised in the diagram below:

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[1] Of course, technically, universalism *is* a heresy in that it was anathematised at the Fifth Ecumenical Council of Constantinople in 553 C.E. (having already been anathematised by the emperor Justinian in 543 C.E.). See Ludlow in Parry & Partridge 2003, 193-95. However, evangelical theology is not traditionally determined by Church councils and even the Roman Catholic Church (for which the pronouncements of such councils *are* authoritative) tolerates the 'soft' form of the doctrine. That is, it is permissible to *hope* and pray for the salvation of all; the heresy is to assert that this *must* happen. See Ludlow in Parry & Partridge 2003, 211. Evangelicals tend to regard even this 'hopeful universalism' as heretical – in practice, if not always in theory. Furthermore, the same pronouncement equally condemns the doctrine of annihilationism which, as we will see in chapter 2, is a view held by many evangelicals today. It states: 'If anyone says or thinks that the punishment of demons or impious men is only temporary and will one day have an end... let him be anathema'. Quoted in McGinley 1996, 3 n.7. Thus, whatever the reasons that evangelicals reject (all forms of) universalism, it is certainly not because of this ancient anathema.

[2] Talbott in Parry & Partridge 2003, 250.

[3] This is originally William Barclay's phrase and is quoted by Talbott (who describes himself in the same way) in Parry & Partridge 2003, 6. For the story of how I was converted from the traditional to the universalist position, see appendix C.

[4] Thus, I will not address every conceivable objection to universalism in detail - however, I hope that, in the course of my discussion of the terrain in general, I respond adequately to most of the major ones.

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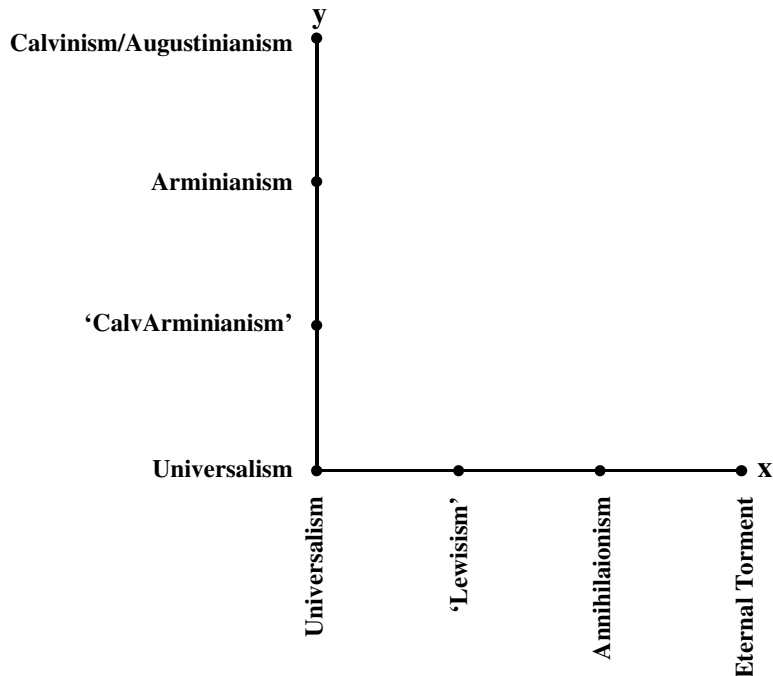
To explain this: there are two types of position that could be described as alternatives to universalism. Those on the y-axis of the diagram answer the question 'Who will be saved?' Those on the x-axis answer the *subsequent* question 'What happens to those who are *not* saved?' The answers to these two questions given by the different 'isms' are as follows:

WHO WILL BE SAVED?	
Calvinism	Only those whom God chooses
Arminianism	Only those who choose God
'CalvArminianism'	Don't know!
Universalism	Everybody

WHAT HAPPENS TO THOSE WHO ARE NOT SAVED?	
Eternal Torment	God subjects them to eternal torment
Annihilationism	God annihilates them
'Lewisism'	Nothing other than what they choose
Universalism	Everybody is saved!

Thus, the first two chapters will examine the y and x axes respectively. The third will attempt to identify Talbott's 'something other than biblical exegesis' which may be the true cause of the historic and contemporary rejection of universalism.

Chapter 1. The y-axis: The Scope of Salvation

The Calvinist[5] doctrine of 'double predestination' (which states that God predestines some to salvation and some to damnation) is rejected as morally dubious (and unscriptural) by a large number (if not the majority) of Christians today. However, it needs to be stressed that there was a pure and biblically sound motive behind its development.

Predestination is the logical conclusion[6] of the Augustinian assertion that salvation is not dependent on the human will but is 'entirely a gift of God'.[7] We are saved by grace *alone* and, while this salvation is effected *through faith*, even that faith is itself the gift of God.[8] Thus, the only way to explain the fact that not all people have faith is to say that God has not given it to them.[9] Hence, God chooses some for faith and salvation and others for unbelief and damnation.

The idea of God choosing and rejecting people on an apparently arbitrary basis is highly problematic for many. However, Augustine's logic of grace *requires* this very arbitrariness for, as McGrath says 'if [grace] is offered on the basis of any [external]

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[5] As Nigel Wright says, 'Calvinism is itself a variation on the teaching of Augustine'. Wright 1996, 31. Hence, some, such as Talbott, talk instead of Augustinianism. Furthermore, Wright points out that what we now think of as Calvinism (i.e. the five points) was developed by others after Calvin's death. Also, there are various forms of Calvinism. However, the core ideas are common to all these forms, so the use of this term seems appropriate here.

[6] McGrath 2001, 465.

[7] Wright 1996, 31.

[8] This was certainly the Reformation view (see McGrath 1988, 54) and I have always followed Augustine, Chrysostom and Caird (amongst others – see Bruce 1984, 289 and Muddiman 2001, 110-11) in seeing Ephesians 2:8 as saying precisely this. Perhaps this is because I grew up with the NIV which translates it as 'it is by grace you have been saved, through faith - and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God.' Like Caird, I understood the 'this' to refer to the faith and read it as 'and *even* this is not from yourselves'. The strength of this interpretation, according to Muddiman, is that 'it avoids the apparent platitude that salvation is the gift of God – a point that hardly needs making – and corrects a possible misunderstanding of "faith" as the meritorious virtue of faithfulness' - which is basically my point. However, Muddiman also suggests that the 'parallel formulations [of verses 8 and 9] "not from you" and "not from works" [make it clear] that it is salvation that is not from works' and, thus, 'the whole idea of salvation by grace through faith' to which the 'this' refers. He cites Lincoln as just one of many who agree with him on this point. The translators of the NRSV are obviously of the same opinion in that they translate it as 'this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.' The Greek is, in fact, ambiguous. As Bruce says, 'If the Greek pronoun [τουτο] were feminine agreeing in gender with "faith" [πιστεως] then the reference to faith would be plain… But the pronoun is neuter, and does not *necessarily* refer to faith. Even so… "the difference of gender is not fatal to such a view" (J.A. Robinson)'. Bruce's conclusion, like Lincoln's, is that the 'this' refers to 'salvation as a whole, *not excluding the faith by which it is received*'. Bruce 1984, 290. My emphasis. Thus, all this debate is, in one sense, irrelevant: either faith is the gift of God or the whole process of salvation by grace through faith is the gift of God. Eitherway, faith is from God not us and this *must* be so otherwise verse 9 is contradicted and we *can* boast – on which point see the later discussion on page 8.

consideration, it is no longer a gift – it is a reward for a specific action or attitude'.[10] Thus, while the doctrine of (double) predestination is anything but gracious in that it depicts God as being capricious, it was, rather ironically, a result of defending the gospel of grace against the Pelagian heresy. This may explain why many Christians still accept it today in spite of its obvious difficulties: they regard the alternative – Arminianism – as being a greater departure from the biblical gospel and the Reformation doctrine of justification by faith (for reasons which we will discuss shortly).

Arminianism came into existence[11] as a reaction to both the 'double decree' and the related doctrine of limited atonement or particular redemption.[12] Calvinist theology concluded that if Christ had died to save all then, clearly, all would be saved.[13] So again, the fact that not all come to faith in this life[14] was presented as evidence that Christ could not have died for all. For Arminians, both doctrines are clearly unbiblical. The double decree denies that God *desires* the salvation of all - which is stated explicitly in 1 Timothy 2:4 and 2 Peter 3:9.[15] Similarly, limited atonement is hard to square with scriptural passages such as 1 John 2:2.[16]

Of course, Calvinist theologians do attempt to deal with these passages rather than simply ignoring them but Arminians such as Nigel Wright find their explanations inadequate. Having listed many of the same scriptures about the universal scope of

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[9] Wright 1996, 32.

[10] McGrath 2001, 466.

[11] Wright 1996, 32.

[12] McGrath 2001, 466.

[13] So, the contemporary Calvinist Daniel Strange says in his response to Talbott 'Talbott is indeed correct that *if* Christ died for everyone *then* everyone will be saved'. Emphasis original. Strange in Parry & Partridge 2003, 160. Similarly, Packer says 'To say that Christ died for everyone logically leads to universalism'. Quoted in Sanders 1994, 86 n.2. This is worth bearing in mind during the discussion on pages 11-14.

[14] See Wright 1996, 31. From a Calvinist perspective, faith may be a work of God not the human will but people are still justified by faith. Thus, without faith, there is no possibility of salvation: the presence of faith in a person's life is the *evidence* that they are one of the elect. And because faith is a work of God not the human will, the idea of a 'post-mortem opportunity' (see the discussion on page 25) is less relevant to Calvinists. Of course, one could argue that *God* 'works salvation' in people after death, but this is not a typical Calvinist position.

[15] Which say, respectively: 'God… desires everyone to be saved' and 'The Lord… is patient… not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance'. In the OT, one could point to Ezekiel 18:23 'Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, says the Lord God, and not rather that they should turn from their ways and live?' and v.32 'I have no pleasure in the death of anyone… Turn, then, and live'.

[16] 'He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world'.

Christ's atonement quoted above, Wright asks 'How much clearer could it be?' He goes on:

> When exegetes avoid the plain force of these texts by arguing that they refer to 'all kinds of people' rather than 'all people' they simply indicate that their theological system has taken over from the Bible. This in turn indicates that there is something wrong with their system.[17]

Talbott would fully agree with Wright on this point. However, he would suggest that the same charge applies equally to those Arminians who, rather ironically, employ *exactly* the same argument in their handling of the various apparently universalist texts such as Romans 5:18, Romans 11:32 and 1 Corinthians 15:22.[18]

Tom Wright[19] suggests that, in all these cases, 'all' does not mean all people but rather either 'both Jews and Gentiles'[20] or 'all those who belong to Christ'.[21] Of course, he would defend himself against the accusation of ignoring the plain reading of Scripture by appealing to the *context* of these universalist 'proof-texts' and the message of the Bible as a whole.[22] However, Calvinist theologians would, no doubt, defend themselves in the same way and it seems to me that the only reason why their exegesis – or indeed, *eisegesis* - is challenged and (Tom) Wright's is not is because of the near-total dominance of Arminianism in the contemporary Church and academy.[23]

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[17] Wright 1996, 34.

[18] Which say, respectively: 'just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all'; 'God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all' and 'as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ'.

[19] As opposed to Nigel!

[20] '"[A]ll" in [Romans 5] simply cannot mean "all individual human beings without exception"... the correct gloss to put on "all men" in vv.12, 18 is not 'all men individually' but "Jews and Gentiles alike".... [Similarly] the context [of Romans 11:32] demands the gloss "Jews and Gentiles alike" beside both occurrences of "all men".' N.T. Wright 1979, 56.

[21] '[T]he "all" of v.22 clearly has the same general sense as in Romans 5, as can be seen from v.23: those who will share Christ's resurrection are those who are Christ's.' N.T. Wright 1979, 56.

[22] Indeed, this is precisely what he does. See Wright 1979, 55-57. His argument is basically the same as that of Marshall, Moo and Moule and Talbott refutes it with ease. Wright suggests that only 'believers' receive justification and life and seems to think that (particularly) Romans 14:11-12 makes a universalist understanding of 'all' impossible. Yet the fact that all will be judged does *not* entail that all will be condemned – especially when the same letter says that all will be justified. Similarly, as Talbott says, 'From the premise that only those who accept Christ and place their faith in him will be 'justified unto life', it simply does not follow that some people will never place their faith and will therefore never be 'justified unto life'. He goes on 'if all will be saved in the end, then it already follows that all of the relevant conditions of salvation will be met as well'. Talbott in Parry & Partridge 2003, 29-30 n.11; 20. See also 25-26.

[23] See, for example, Holmes 2002, 88. Holmes suggests that Arminianism has 'prevailed' (over Calvinism) and that it 'is now so pervasive as to be axiomatic'.

This dominance may provide the first clue to what other than 'pure' biblical exegesis motivates opposition to universalism.

Arminianism as a 'Plausibility Structure'

The sociologist Peter Berger coined the phrase 'plausibility structure' to refer to the set of almost unconscious assumptions 'accepted within a given society, which determine which beliefs are plausible to its members and which are not'.[24] As Newbigin says, it is extremely difficult for people to question the assumptions of the 'reigning plausibility structure' of their society.[25] I suggest that Arminianism is one of the assumptions of the plausibility structure of contemporary evangelicalism. This would explain why its weaknesses - which are so clear to Calvinists and others who inhabit a *different* plausibility structure – are simply invisible to the Arminian majority.[26]

Having asserted - rightly, in my opinion – that God wants all to be saved and that Christ died to save all, Arminianism says that while Christ has made salvation *possible* for all, only those who respond appropriately – i.e. with faith – are *actually* saved.[27] To theologians as diverse as McGrath, Borg and Holloway (and, indeed, the present author) it is clear that to say this is to say that we are saved by something that *we do* and, thus, by works not grace.[28]

Arminianism states that 'we are justified *because we believe*'.[29] This is *not* the Reformation doctrine of justification by faith. As McGrath says:

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[24] Newbigin 1989, 8. See also 53.
[25] Newbigin 1989, 10. See also 18.
[26] Sanders confirms my point when he admits that he stands 'with those who have adopted... the *control belief* [my emphasis] that an act of faith is necessary for salvation'. He also acknowledges that this belief is not convincing for everyone - yet, in doing so, he shows that, unlike others, he is not completely controlled - or blinded - by his control belief. Sanders 1994, 108.
[27] So, while 1 Timothy 2:10 says 'God... is the Saviour of all people, especially of those who believe', the Arminian reads this as 'God is *potentially* the Saviour of all people, *but only actually* the Saviour of those who believe'. Having written this sentence, I was flabbergasted to see Pinnock *literally* insert the words 'potentially' and 'actually' into this verse – albeit in square brackets. If this does not count as eisegesis, I don't know what does. See Pinnock 1992, 158.
[28] Other theologians who take this position are Moltmann (see later discussion on page 13) and Schleiermacher who 'repudiated the Arminian idea of conditional election based on human faith on the grounds that it would make salvation a matter of works rather than grace'. Sanders 1994, 91.
[29] McGrath 1988, 53.

> The Reformation doctrine affirms the activity of God and the
> passivity of humanity in justification. Faith is not something human
> we do, but something divine that is wrought within us.[30]

Arminianism's (right) rejection of (double) predestination forced it to account for the observable fact that not all have faith by also rejecting the concept of faith as pure gift and replacing it with the concept of faith as an act of the human will. It is for this reason that people such as Smail call Arminianism 'semi-Pelagian'.[31]

Holloway goes further and refers to the 'built-in Pelagian bias' of the Western tradition which 'accounts for the incoherence and internal confusion of much [of its] theology'.[32] Borg is similarly aware of this internal confusion. He says that mainstream Christianity (which, as we have seen, is predominantly Arminian):

> uses the language of God's grace… but its own internal logic turns
> being Christian into a life of requirements and rewards, thereby
> compromising the notion of grace. Indeed, it nullifies grace, for
> grace that has conditions attached is no longer grace.[33]

This echoes Paul in Romans 11:6: 'if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace would no longer be grace'. Arminians may protest that merely believing/ responding to the gospel is not a work but surely this is desperate semanticism? It seems *indisputable* to me, as it does to Borg,[34] that if our salvation depends ultimately on anything that we have to *do*, then we are saved by works – or by *a* work at least.[35]

Thus, while I agree with the Arminians that Calvinism is 'unbiblical' in that it effectively ignores those passages of Scripture that clearly affirm the universality of both God's salvific will and Christ's atonement, I also agree with the Calvinists that

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[30] McGrath 1988, 54. While he appears to disavow Arminianism in the strongest possible terms here, his argument against universalism *later in the same book* seems to me to be pure Arminianism of the very sort that he supposedly condemns. See appendix B.
[31] Smail 1998, 171.
[32] Holloway 1992, 11.
[33] Borg 2003, 11.
[34] 'When [it] is understood [as "You must believe x, y and z in order to be saved"] faith becomes a work'. Borg 2003, 39.
[35] See Holloway 1992, 3-4.

Arminianism is unsatisfactory in that it does the same to those parts of Scripture that affirm the 'passivity of humanity' in salvation. Talbott agrees and suggests that:

> Because many Christians now find [the Calvinist doctrine of predestination] morally repugnant and contrary to their own understanding of love, they sometimes fail to appreciate… the extent to which the Bible itself affirms God's sovereignty in both election and salvation.[36]

He cites Romans 9:16[37] as a prime example of this but one could also point to John 6:44a (and 65) and John 15:16a.[38]

Thus, Arminian theology seems to make nonsense of Paul's statements about the impossibility of boasting in Ephesians 2:8-9 and Romans 3:7. If it is our *choice* that either 'qualifies'(!) us for salvation or condemns us to damnation, as Arminianism suggests, then the correct answer to the question 'Why is John Doe saved?' is *not* 'because Jesus died for his sins'. According to Arminianism, Jesus died for *everybody's* sins. What has made the difference, in the final analysis, is John Doe's own decision. Thus, even if it is still meaningful to call Jesus his saviour[39] – since he could not have been saved without Christ's atoning work – at the very least, John Doe is his own 'co-saviour' and could *legitimately* pray like the Pharisee in Luke 18:11: 'God, I thank you that, unlike other people, I chose to respond to you'.[40]

Arminians deny all this,[41] of course. However, the fact that their denial does not involve dealing adequately with these, for me, fatal objections suggests that this is

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[36] Parry & Partridge 2003, 249. There is some irony in the idea that non-universalist evangelicals might base their doctrine on 'their own understanding of love'. This is precisely the sort of accusation that such people often make against universalists. See, for example, Blum 1979, 61.

[37] 'So it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God who shows mercy'.

[38] 'No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father/unless it is granted by the Father' and 'You did not choose me but I chose you'.

[39] A further point: even if it is meaningful to call Jesus *his* saviour, is it meaningful to call Jesus the saviour of those who are not saved? Of those who end up in hell? And, if it is not, is it meaningful to call Jesus the saviour of the world? Should John 4:42 actually read 'Truly, this man is *potentially* the saviour of the world (but only *actually* the saviour of those who believe)'? See the earlier discussion of 1 Timothy 2:4 on page 4.

[40] Talbott says something very similar: '[If it is true that] we ultimately determine our own destiny in heaven or hell... then the redeemed are… in a position to boast, it seems, along the following lines: "At the very least, some of my own free choices – my decision to accept Christ, for example – were a lot better than those of the lost"'. Talbott in Parry & Partridge 2003, 260.

[41] Nigel Wright suggests that the fact that the 'Remonstrants' five theses (1610) acknowledged that 'Human beings are impotent to believe apart from the Holy Spirit' 'distinguishes Arminius clearly from Pelagius'. Wright 1996, 32. Perhaps it is in recognition of this fact that Smail calls Arminianism *semi*-Pelagian? Wright, meanwhile, has surely overstated his case by talking of a *clear* distinction.

denial in the clinical sense of an unwillingness to face unpleasant facts. To say 'Yes, you have to do something to be saved but you are not saved by anything you do' is simply nonsensical. This irrationality belies, I suggest, the 'incoherence and internal confusion' of Arminianism of which Holloway spoke.[42]

'CalvArminianism'

The universalist Charles Slagle satirises this incoherence by coining the phrase 'CalvArminianism' which he says 'takes on the more attractive (and less despair inducing) features of each system and tries to blend them together'.[43] According to this 'muddled mixture':

> We are saved only by God's grace. Yet in the end our ultimate
> salvation probably depends, to some significant degree, on the
> success of our own effort (but to what degree is uncertain)![44]

I said earlier that Arminianism is dominant in the Church today. However, it may be more accurate to say that Slagle's CalvArminianism is the prevailing view since the former has, I believe, evolved into the latter.[45]

Where Calvinism asserts that 'it is impossible for those who are truly among the elect to lose their salvation'[46] (since their *final* salvation has been predestined and, thus, guaranteed) the original Arminians taught that 'it is possible to fall from grace and be lost'.[47] A person who once chose to accept Christ can later choose to reject him. If that person then dies before turning back to Christ, they are not saved. So, just as an act of the human will is required to save someone initially, so human free will can negate that salvation at any point in the future. Here, Arminian doctrine seems to make nonsense of Romans 8:39 which says that nothing can 'separate us from the love of God'. If the Arminians are correct, human free will – which surely counts as a

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Indeed, since it suggests that whether or not a person chooses/believes/responds is the 'bottom line', it seems more than reasonable to me, as it does to Talbott, to call Arminianism 'outright' Pelagianism. See Talbott in Parry & Partridge 2003, 4.

[42] Although Holloway wasn't talking specifically about Arminianism, he was in that he was talking about Christianity in general which, as we have seen, is now predominantly Arminian.

[43] Slagle 1998, 11.

[44] Slagle 1998, 11.

[45] To continue the evolutionary metaphor, one could say that CalvArminianism is to Arminianism what neo-Darwinism is to Darwinism.

[46] Wright 1996, 33.

'thing' in creation – does indeed have that power. Thus, any kind of assurance of salvation is undermined.

Luther and the rest of the Reformers believed that one could (and should) enjoy assurance of salvation since salvation is entirely a work of God.[48] Classical Arminianism thought the loss of such assurance a price worth paying in order to be free from the unacceptable implications of double predestination and limited atonement. Modern Arminians, on the other hand, have tried to have their cake and eat it. They seek to offer the 'eternal security' of Calvinism to *all people* (not just the elect) in accordance with the main tenet of Arminianism – that salvation is genuinely available to all.

As Slagle says, while 'this understanding of the gospel is the kindest' it is also the 'most inherently self-contradictory'.[49] Holloway is surely correct when he states 'we can't have it both ways… we are either saved by God's mercy or we procure our salvation or damnation by our own efforts [i.e. by believing]'.[50] If the former, then once a person is saved, they are saved forever, as Calvinism declares. If the latter, then it must be possible for that person to lose their salvation – unless, of course, anyone who has believed in Christ at some point in their life is saved *even if they subsequently renounce him*. Few, if any, would be prepared to argue this case.[51]

The Universalist Alternative

Clearly, then, CalvArminianism's attempt to combine the positive (and biblical) parts of the other two systems is unsuccessful. For Slagle, Talbott and other universalists

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[47] Wright 1996, 33. Rather significantly, it is only people who are 'who are trying to be justified by law' that have 'fallen away from grace' according to Scripture – Paul in Galatians 5:4. Falling from grace is, thus, a *result* of self-effort, not something that self-effort prevents.

[48] McGrath 2001, 462.

[49] Slagle 1998, 11.

[50] Holloway 1992, 12-13.

[51] Certainly, I have never encountered such a position, either in person or in a publication. Citing James 2:19, most Arminians are clear that saving faith must translate into some form of action. So, while not wishing to promote salvation by works (even if they are, according to my argument!) Arminians agree that there must be some sort of proof that a person is 'truly saved' (on which See Holloway 1992, 10-11). At the same time, there are various scriptures that suggest that one can lose or renounce one's salvation - e.g. Hebrews 6:4-6, Romans 11:22, 1 Corinthians 15:2, Colossians 1:22-23, 2 Timothy 2:12b. Quite understandably, however, many – and, possibly, most - Arminians are reluctant to take these warnings at face value. Thus, they become CalvArminians and, according to Slagle, make the incoherent suggestion 'that once we're (truly) saved we can never be lost – or, at least, it's probably next to impossible to be lost!' Slagle 1998, 11.

including myself, however, universalism succeeds where CalvArminianism fails. For the philosopher Talbott, universalism is *entailed* if the key principles of the two systems are both accepted:

> If you simply take the Augustinian idea of God's sovereignty in the matter of salvation – that is, the idea that the Hound of Heaven cannot be defeated forever – and put it together with the Arminian idea that God at least wills or desires the salvation of all, then you get universalism, plain and simple.[52]

Talbott is following in some very distinguished – and respectable - footsteps here. Barth[53] acknowledged that if one affirms both the sovereignty of God (understood in Augustinian/Calvinist terms) and the universal scope of Christ's atonement, then 'theological consistency' *seems to* require a universalist conclusion.[54] I stress 'seems to' because, in fact, Barth always refused to draw this conclusion. However, I believe that his name can still legitimately be invoked to support Talbott's argument.

Barth may have disavowed *dogmatic* universalism (the view that all people *must* be saved)[55] but he was equally convinced that it was permissible – even mandatory – to *hope* for the salvation of all.[56] Fackre believes that this 'kind of hope cannot be included as a variety of universalism'[57] but I am not sure that this is true. In terms of our graph, Barth's position is closer to universalism than it is to anything else. It is certainly not Calvinism for, in that system, the damnation of some is already assured. And, while Arminianism allows for the possibility that everyone *now alive* will come to faith and so be saved, that possibility cannot be extended to everyone who has ever lived without positing some kind of post-mortem opportunity for salvation. Some Arminians are willing to do precisely that, as we shall see in the next chapter, but the majority are not and maintain that salvation is determined in this life. Thus, both of the (coherent) alternatives to universalism (on the y-axis) exclude the possibility of

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[52] Talbott in Parry & Partridge 2003, 7.

[53] Who was 'a towering figure in modern theology – widely revered by evangelicals'. Hilborn & Horrocks in Parry & Partridge 2003, 231.

[54] Barth 1961a, 477.

[55] This is the 'hard' form of the doctrine, as opposed to soft/ hopeful universalism. See the earlier discussion in note 1 on page 1.

[56] 'If we are certainly forbidden to count on this as though we had a claim to it, as though it were not supremely the work of God to which man can have no possible claim, *we are surely commanded the more definitely* to hope and pray for it'. My emphasis. Barth 1961a, 478.

[57] Fackre in Parry & Partridge 2003, xvii. See note (61)on Crisp on next page.

the salvation of all and, since Barth is *genuinely* open to this possibility, it seems reasonable to classify him as a universalist.

Of course, he is equally genuinely open to the possibility of some being eternally lost[58] but this is not because of an Arminian emphasis on human free will. Barth was forthright in his condemnation of Arminianism. With his roots in the Reformed tradition, Barth is more concerned about the freedom of *God* and is, therefore, as unwilling to say that 'any man must be saved' as he is to say 'all men must be saved'.[59] God is not bound by *anything* - including logic - so even if logic *demands* that He save all, He is not obliged to do so.[60]

While this ultimate 'commitment to… divine sovereignty' was the insurmountable obstacle that prevented Barth from ever actually embracing universalism, the fact remains that 'the logic of [his] theology' pointed unmistakably in that direction.[61] The same is true of one of the other contenders for the title of 'greatest theologian of the

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[58] As are many who call themselves universalists – including myself. See the later discussion on pages 27 & 30.

[59] Bettis 1967, 429. Rather ironically, this may apply to the Roman Catholic Church's rejection of universalism as well. The RCC has traditionally been uncomfortable with the idea of *anybody* saying that they know that they are saved or that they will go to Heaven when they die so it is hardly surprising that she should object to the idea that we can know that *everybody* will be saved. In this sense, her rejection of dogmatic universalism is simply an extension of her understanding of the nature of salvation (and assurance of it) in general. I am aware, of course, that the differences between Catholic and Protestant theology have been exaggerated in the past - just as the convergence between them may have been in the present – but further exploration of these finer points is neither possible nor necessary since, in broad terms, what I have said about the Catholic attitude to assurance in general remains true.

[60] I am not sure that logic can be dispensed with so easily. Discussing the logic of universalism, Sanders says 'To attempt to escape from the logic of the argument by claiming God is not bound by human logic... is to break the rules of the theological game. Theology is a human enterprise and must be played within the rules of human understanding. If [it is permissible to say that God is not bound by logic], then any theological proposition is permissible, and none is refutable. Theologians could construct any sort of arguments they liked, regardless of their contradictions... Their assertions would cease to have any real meaning.' Sanders is not a universalist – indeed, the above quote appears in the course of a passionate argument *against* universalism. However, like Strange and Packer (see note 13 on page 4) he accepts the logic of the universalist case. Where they 'escape from the logic of the argument' by denying that Christ died for all, he does so by rejecting the Augustinian understanding of God's sovereignty. See Sanders 1994, 111-12.

[61] To the extent that his position was 'awkward…violating the canons of Aristotelian logic'. Fackre in Parry & Partridge 2003, xvii. Parry & Partridge mention that Oliver Crisp 'argues that if Barth was consistent he would have embraced dogmatic universalism'. Parry & Partridge 2003, 243 n.66. And, in the paper he gave at the conference at King's mentioned in the bibliography, Crisp said that, as far as he is concerned, only dogmatic universalists are 'real' universalists and that those who simply hope for it are not actually saying anything. See the later discussion on page 27.

twentieth century',[62] Jürgen Moltmann. However, what Barth would only entertain as a hope – albeit a well-founded rather than a vain one – Moltmann is happy to assert as a fact.

For Moltmann 'the realistic consequence of the theology of the cross *can only be the restoration of all things*'.[63] His argument is similar to Barth's:[64] Christ 'suffered the true and total hell of God-forsakenness'[65] for all people[66] on the cross. Therefore, all people are already included in the new creation which began with the resurrection.[67] Since Christ died for all when all were sinners, 'all will be made righteous without *any* merit on their part'.[68] This includes the merit of responding/believing/accepting. To suggest that a human decision is required to make the work of Christ effective – or worse, that it can make it of no effect – is 'to make God dispensable'.[69] For Moltmann, the Arminian emphasis on free will:

> fits the modern age, in which human beings believe that they are
> the measure of all things, and the centre of the world and that
> therefore everything depends on their decision... If , even where
> eternity is at stake, everyone were to forge their own happiness and
> dig their own graves, human beings would be their own God.[70]

As Ludlow says, it is unusual for a theologian to be as confident about universalism as Moltmann is. Certainty in this regard is, she suggests, normally the preserve of 'analytic philosophers of religion' such as Talbott and Hick.[71] Moltmann may be a theologian rather than a philosopher but, like both of them, he 'discusses universalism in the context of theodicy':[72] it is in the ultimate restoration of all things that he finds a

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[62] At a conference I attended at the Sheldonian in Oxford in 2002, Moltmann was introduced as 'the greatest living theologian'.
[63] Moltmann 1996, 251. My emphasis.
[64] Moltmann 1996, 249.
[65] Moltmann 1996, 251.
[66] Moltmann 1974, 194-95.
[67] Moltmann 1974, 176. This is very similar to Barth's belief that Christ's atonement is 'so pervasive in its effect that… all are implicated in the redemption it achieves'. This is Hilborn & Horrocks's paraphrase of Barth. They also quote him (from *Church Dogmatics* Volume 3): 'In this One [Christ], He [God] has taken upon Himself the sin and guilt of all, and therefore rescued them all by higher right from the judgement which they had rightly incurred, so that *He is really the true consolation of all.*' My emphasis. See Hilborn & Horrocks in Parry & Partridge 2003, 231.
[68] Moltmann 1974, 194-95. My emphasis.
[69] Moltmann 1996, 245.
[70] Moltmann 1996, 245.
[71] Ludlow says that Talbott and Hick's work 'is characterised by a clarity and desire for coherence which tends to result in their affirmations of universal salvation sounding very confident'. Ludlow in Parry & Partridge 2003, 211.
[72] Ludlow in Parry & Partridge 2003, 211.

solution to the 'problem of evil'. This brings us neatly back to Talbott who adapts the classical form of the 'problem of evil'[73] both to make his case for universalism and to illustrate the irrational nature of many of the arguments against it.

Talbott's Triad

He calls the Arminian idea that God desires the salvation of all proposition (1) and the Augustinian/Calvinist idea that God can and will achieve everything He desires proposition (2). His proposition (3) is that some people 'will be separated from God forever'.[74] Clearly, one cannot accept all three propositions. Thus, Arminians affirm (1) and (3) and so reject (2); Calvinists affirm (2) and (3) and so reject (1) and universalists affirm *both* (1) and (2) and so reject (3).

At this point, Talbott expresses bewilderment at the fact that Calvinists and Arminians are often united in regarding universalism as heretical – or at least, unbiblical/inadequate - while regarding each other's positions as merely mistaken.[75] How can universalism be heretical, he asks, if it is *entailed* by accepting two propositions, neither of which are heretical in themselves? Yes, universalists reject (3), which both Calvinists *and* Arminians consider the 'plain teaching of Scripture' but Calvinists reject (1) which is 'a clear and obvious teaching of Scripture, at least as clear and obvious as a doctrine of everlasting separation'[76] for Arminians, and Arminians reject (2) which is the same for Calvinists.

As Talbott himself says, a possible answer to this objection would be that the scriptural evidence for (3) is 'overwhelmingly greater than that for [(1) and (2)]'.[77] However, this is far from being the case, he suggests, since where: '(1) and (2) seem to rest upon systematic teachings in Paul, the texts cited on behalf of (3) are typically lifted from contexts of parable, hyperbole and great symbolism.'[78] For Talbott, (3) 'is the weakest of the three [propositions]'. Yet even if we simply say that there is

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[73] That is, the 'triad' of three propositions - 'God is good', 'God is omnipotent' and 'Evil exists' - one of which must be false by definition. The problem was originally expressed in this form by Epicurus and subsequently by Hume. See Vardy 1992, 11-13.
[74] Talbott in Parry & Partridge 2003, 7.
[75] Talbott in Parry & Partridge 2003, 6-7.
[76] Talbott in Parry & Partridge 2003, 250.
[77] Talbott in Parry & Partridge 2003, 11.
[78] Talbott in Parry & Partridge 2003, 12.

biblical (and distinguished scholarly) support for and against all three positions (and there is)[79] Talbott's next question is still valid:

> why should an assumption about everlasting separation be the only
> sacred assumption in a context where some are limiting God's love
> and others are limiting the scope of his ultimate victory?[80]

In his response to Talbott, the Arminian Jerry Walls suggests that 'the reason is that (3) is more of a matter of consensus among orthodox Christians than either (1) or (2) and is therefore arguably more certain for both sides'.[81] However, he then goes on to say that he personally 'is more certain of (1) than of (3)'.[82] Talbott suggests that, in spite of any claims to the contrary, Walls is, in fact, speaking for all Arminians here.[83] This seems reasonable given that (1) is definitive and foundational for Arminianism – that is, Arminianism exists precisely to defend this principle. Similarly, (2) is foundational for Calvinism. As Packer says:

> Calvinism is a whole world-view stemming from a clear vision of
> God as the world's maker and King... [It] is a unified philosophy of
> history which sees the whole diversity of processes and events that
> take place in God's world as no more, and no less, than the
> outworking of His great preordained plan for His creatures and His
> Church.[84]

Thus, it seems fair to say that Calvinists are, at the very least, *as* certain of (2) as they are of (3).

Here then is the source of Talbott's 'perplexity' which causes him to ask 'why should either Arminians or Augustinians be any less tolerant of universalism than they are of each other?'[85] This is, of course, a rhetorical question to which Talbott's answer is 'they should not be'. It is because they *are* that he draws his conclusion, referred to earlier, that 'something other than biblical exegesis' is responsible for their 'fierce opposition to universalism'.[86] We shall explore what that something is in chapter three but first, we turn to the x-axis and the fate of the damned.

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[79] Talbott in Parry & Partridge 2003, 8-9. See also Parry & Partridge 2003, xxiii.
[80] Talbott in Parry & Partridge 2003, 250.
[81] Walls in Parry & Partridge 2003, 108.
[82] Walls in Parry & Partridge 2003, 108.
[83] Talbott in Parry & Partridge 2003, 249.
[84] Quoted by Strange in Parry & Partridge 2003, 147-48.
[85] Talbott in Parry & Partridge 2003, 250.

Chapter 2. The x-axis: The Fate of the Damned

It will be obvious that, in the last chapter, far more space was devoted to the weaknesses of the Arminian position than to those of its historic rival. This seemed necessary precisely because Arminianism is, as I suggested and as Moltmann confirmed, part of the 'reigning plausibility structure' of the contemporary Church. The deficiencies of Calvinism are so obvious to the Arminian majority as to hardly need addressing. Conversely, to question the 'sacred assumptions' of Arminianism can be as difficult – and as welcome - as pointing out that the emperor is not, in fact, wearing any clothes.

In much the same way, it is equally obvious to many today that the traditional view of hell as eternal torment is 'plainly sadistic and therefore incompatible with a God who loves humanity'.[87] Even high profile and relatively conservative evangelicals have rejected it as a 'savage doctrine'.[88] According to Marshall, it is 'unstable and inherently unsatisfactory'.[89] More famously, Stott said 'I find the concept intolerable and do not understand how people can live with it without either cauterizing their feelings or cracking under the strain'.[90]

Both of these and several others[91] have, thus, abandoned the traditional view in favour of a doctrine of annihilation which they regard as being more biblical as well as more palatable. Yet it seems to me that annihilationism is just as problematic as the traditional view *and for the very same reasons* as those cited by all the above. The apparent inability of annihilationists to even acknowledge the (to me) glaring inconsistencies of their position leads me to conclude, once again, that either some sort of plausibility structure or 'clinical denial mechanism' is at work. Thus, I will focus more on annihilationism than eternal torment.[92] Furthermore, just as Talbott questions why Calvinists and Arminians accept each other more than they do

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[86] Talbott in Parry & Partridge 2003, 250.
[87] Pinnock & Brow 1994, 88.
[88] Michael Green's phrase, quoted in McGinley 1996, 28.
[89] Marshall in Parry & Partridge 2003, 61.
[90] Quoted in Pinnock & Brow 1994, 92. However see Cameron 166.
[91] Including Pinnock, Brow, Wenham and Sanders. See the later discussion on page 18 ff.
[92] Talbott suggests that, since universalism is entailed if one affirms God's sovereignty (understood in Augustinian terms) as well as the universality of God's salvific will, universalists could 'simply leave it to the Augustinians... to shore up that part of the case for them'. Talbott in Parry & Partridge 2003, 12.

universalists, so I will question why, for evangelicals, annihilationism is now an acceptable view but universalism is not.

Annihilationism: The New Orthodoxy

According to the British Evangelical Alliance, the traditional view is still the majority view for evangelicals.[93] Nonetheless, the Alliance recognises annihilationism as 'a significant minority evangelical view' the holding of which does not affect one's 'evangelical credentials'.[94] Meanwhile, it explicitly rejects universalism as being 'divergent from authentic evangelical faith'.[95] Is this rejection based on Scripture alone or something else, as Talbott suggests?

Universalists do not deny that there are passages of Scripture that at least *appear* to teach the final loss of some people. As we saw earlier, Calvinists interpret the passages that (for Arminians and universalists) *clearly* state that God wills the salvation of all in the light of their understanding of the message of the Bible as a whole. In precisely the same way, universalists understand the various passages about hell in the light of *their* 'bigger picture' which is equally informed by Scripture.

For Tom Wright this is 'Sachkritik, the criticism and rejection of one part of scripture on the basis of another', a practice of which he disapproves.[96] Yet, as Talbott points out, precisely the same charge can be levelled at non-universalists since the Bible also contains passages that at least *appear* to teach the eventual salvation of all people, a fact which most on even the other side of the debate accept.[97]

I have basically applied this principle to eternal torment and taken the arguments against that position as read/already having been made for me by the annihilationists.

[93] In a 1998 survey conducted by the E.A., '79.6% of responses (675 Churches) affirmed the statement 'Those who die without faith in Jesus face eternal punishment in hell'. Hilborn & Johnston 2000, 6.

[94] Hilborn & Johnston 2000, 135. See also 122.

[95] Hilborn & Johnston 2000, 32. Elsewhere, Hilborn (the E.A.'s theological adviser) writes: 'However conservative a person's background and theological formation has been, the historic evangelical norm is that once that person embraces universalism, he or she *de facto* forfeits any authentic claim to the description 'evangelical'. The same outlook also tends to hold that however orthodox someone may be in other areas, affirming universalism effectively cancels out their evangelical credit and leaves them short of the doctrinal standard required to belong to the evangelical constituency.' Hilborn & Horrocks in Parry & Partridge 2003, 238. Having said all this, Hilborn and Johnston 'acknowledge that a small number of theologians working in evangelical contexts would disagree [that universalism is necessarily incompatible with evangelicalism]' and give Talbott as an example. Hilborn & Johnston 2000, 32.

[96] N.T. Wright 1979, 5.

[97] Parry & Partridge write: 'It is agreed by all sides that certain biblical texts seem to teach the final destruction of the lost (whether that be understood in terms of eternal conscious torment or annihilation) whilst others appear to teach the salvation of all'. Parry & Partridge 2003, xxiii.

Thus, when Marshall says:

> The major weakness in the universalist view is that, in attempting
> to explain the few texts which it interprets to refer to the salvation
> of all people, it has to offer an unconvincing reinterpretation of
> texts about God's judgement and wrath.

Talbott simply 'holds up a mirror' and retorts:

> The major weakness in the *traditional* view is that, in attempting to
> explain the few texts that it interprets as teaching *everlasting
> separation*, it has to offer an unconvincing reinterpretation of texts
> about *Christ's victory and triumph*.[98]

In this context, 'the traditional view' includes annihilationism or any view that
teaches that some will be eternally lost. Thus, a good example of such 'unconvincing
reinterpretation' would be the way that annihilationists handle texts such as 1
Corinthians 15:28 and Ephesians 1:23 which talk (respectively) of God and Christ
being 'all in all'.[99]

Stott, Kings, Wenham, Travis and Hughes all accept that 'all' means 'all' here
(which, for the universalist, is an improvement on Tom Wright's exegesis of Romans
5 and 11 discussed earlier!) Indeed, it is precisely because they accept this that they
reject the traditional view of hell as eternal torment.[100] Stott questions 'how God can
in any meaningful sense be called "everything to everybody" while an unspecified
number of people... continue in rebellion against Him [eternally]'.[101] Similarly,
Hughes says:

> When Christ fills all in all and God is everything to everyone...
> how is it conceivable that there can be a section or realm of
> creation that does not belong to this fulness and by its very
> presence contradicts it?[102]

The question is rhetorical but Travis answers it by saying that the 'eternal
cosmological dualism' entailed by the traditional view 'is impossible to reconcile

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[98] Talbott in Parry & Partridge 2003, 268-69 n.26.
[99] Ephesians 1:11 talks of 'all things' being 'gathered up' in Christ. See also Colossians 1:20, Philippians 2:10-11 and John 12:32.
[100] Obviously, there are other reasons as well but for all of them, this is given as a - if not the - major one.
[101] Stott in Edwards & Stott 1988, 319.
[102] Quoted by Wenham in Cameron 1992, 190 n.33.

with' the scriptures under discussion.[103] Yet the way that he and all those listed above seek to reconcile 'the awful reality of hell and the universal reign of God'[104] is, for me, equally unsatisfactory.

Following Stott,[105] Kings suggests that, if condemnation to hell is seen as annihilation, then:

> all who remain *after* judgement… would indeed be summed up in Christ and there would be no person left in the recreated universe that would not joyfully acknowledge his everlasting reign.[106]

For many including the present author, this is hugely problematic, being reminiscent of Orwell's '1984', in which enemies of 'The Party' become 'unpersons' (i.e. they are killed and all record of their existence is erased) or even of Nazism, with annihilation being God's 'final solution' to the problem of sin – and worse, sinners. Indeed, 'annihilation' (in German, *vernichtung*) was the very word used by Hitler for the extermination of the Jews.[107, 108]

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[103] Quoted in Hilborn & Johnston 2000, 106-07.

[104] Stott in Edwards & Stott 1988, 319.

[105] Edwards & Stott 1988, 319.

[106] Kings 2002, 160.

[107] In his speech to the Reichstag of January 30th 1939, Hitler referred to 'die Vernichtung der jüdischen Rasse in Europa' (the annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe). Source: http://veritas3.holocaust-history.org/der-ewige-jude/hitler-19390130.shtml. According to Robert Shea and Robert Anton Wilson, this was the first time that Hitler had used that particular word which, according to a (fictional) survivor of Auschwitz in their novel, 'is the most terrible word in any language'. It certainly seems a terrible word to use of God. See Shea & Wilson 1976, 221-22, 269.

[108] A friend of mine suggested that, by drawing an analogy with Nazism here, I have breached 'Godwin's law'. She explained that the rules of 'netiquette' (internet etiquette) dictate that whoever mentions Hitler and/or the Nazis in an argument first, loses! Even though I have been a web-user since 1993, I had not heard of this convention. However, on looking it up, I discovered both that she had not understood it and that I had not breached it. In fact, Godwin's law is purely descriptive and simply states that 'As an online discussion grows longer, the probability of a comparison involving Nazis or Hitler approaches one.' The law *has* been extended by the internet community 'to imply that the invoking of the Nazis as a debating tactic (in any argument [in any forum, online or otherwise] not directly related to World War II or the Holocaust) automatically loses the argument', as my friend suggested. However, there is a further convention that 'whoever points out that Godwin's law applies to the [discussion] is also considered to have "lost" the battle, as it is considered poor form to invoke the law explicitly.' Thus, in fact, my friend clearly breached it. Meanwhile, the whole reason that Godwin developed his law in the first place was to ensure 'that when valid comparisons to Hitler or Nazis are made, such comparisons have the appropriate semantic impact.' *Wikipedia* – the internet encyclopaedia from which all the above quotes come – states that the law is necessary because 'the nature of [World War II and the Holocaust] is such that any comparison to any event *less serious than genocide or extinction* is invalid and in poor taste'. Given that the doctrine of annihilation involves the alleged destruction of possibly *billions* of people and the attempt to provide a philosophical justification for the same - sometimes on the basis that those being destroyed have ceased to be human – (see Lewis

Kings feels that 'eternal active punishment does not seem to match the Father's good will for His creation' and I agree - but is this not also true of his alternative? God is Creator and Saviour not Destroyer[109] and His final solution to sin was the Cross. However, even if it is possible to qualify these statements in such a way that they are compatible with the idea of God *irrevocably* destroying people created in His image and for whom Christ died, the Kings/Stott position does not, I believe, cohere with other key biblical statements about God's character.

To me, it borders on dishonesty to suggest that God's promise to be 'all in all' would be *genuinely* fulfilled by first eliminating all those who make a more literal fulfilment of that promise impossible. Can we really ascribe such duplicitous behaviour to the God of *truth*? In the final analysis then, Wright's interpretation of 'all' as merely 'all kinds of people' seems far preferable to Stott and co.'s 'all' as 'all that remain after God has annihilated everyone else'.

A further inconsistency in the annihilationist position is that many annihilationists are also Arminians[110] who reject universalism because of its perceived incompatibility with genuine free will. Yet, as Chan points out, for God to annihilate people would be just as much of a violation of their free will as it would be for Him to save them against their will.[111] Why, then, do Arminian annihilationists such as Marshall and Nigel Wright consider it reasonable for God to enforce his damnatory will on people but unreasonable for Him to enforce his salvific will on them? Surely if God *were* ever going to 'override' the free will that Arminians believe He values above all things[112] - and, as we shall see, this is *not* what universalists believe - He would do so in a way that benefits rather than harms people?[113] While the Arminian/annihilationist

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1977b, 113 and Wright 1994, 79-80) the comparison seems entirely valid to me. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Godwin's_law.

[109] Indeed, 'Destroyer' is the demonic 'angel of the Abyss' of Revelation 9:11. 'His name in Hebrew is Abaddon, and in the Greek he has the name Apollyon' both of which mean 'Destroyer'.

[110] See Reitan in Parry & Partridge 2003, 126.

[111] McGinley quotes Chan from the January 1994 *Evangelical Review of Theology* Vol. 18 No. 1, 27: 'Chan argues that if, as many conditionalists now believe, hell is chosen freely by its inhabitants then annihilation means "taking away that freedom which defines the structure of the moral relationship between God and man".' McGinley 1996, 29.

[112] Pinnock and Brow express the Arminian view explicitly and succinctly 'God values human freedom so much that he allows people to reject him finally'. Pinnock & Brow 1994, 88.

[113] As Talbott says, 'if God is love, as 1 John 4:8 and 4:16 declare, and it is therefore his very nature to love, then it is logically impossible that he should fail to love someone or should act in an unloving way towards anyone. It is as impossible for God to act contrary to someone's ultimate good, in other

plausibility structure enables many not to notice this inconsistency, some Arminians do see it and attempt to address it.

'Lewisism'

One of the first people to do this was C.S. Lewis – hence 'Lewisism' on my diagram. Like its equivalent on the y-axis (CalvArminianism), this position is 'kinder' than the alternatives but also more 'self-contradictory'.[114] Lewis famously claimed that 'the doors of hell are locked on the *inside*'.[115] He suggested that hell is not 'a sentence imposed' on unrepentant sinners but 'the mere fact of [them] being what they are'.[116] Thus, rather than sending people to hell, God simply 'leave[s] them alone'[117] - as they have, in effect, asked Him to do by their insistence on doing their own will not His.[118] All this serves to get God 'off the hook'[119] since 'people are in hell because they choose it'.[120]

Is this coherent, however? Talbott argues that it is not. He rejects as unintelligible the idea that anyone would freely choose eternal misery.[121] Walls – who is a 'Lewisian' – accepts that this is true but gets round it by suggesting that 'hell is indeed a place of misery *but not unbearable misery*'.[122] He goes on: 'The damned find a certain distorted sort of satisfaction in evil and they perversely prefer that satisfaction to the true happiness of heaven'.[123] Lewis says pretty much the same granting that 'there may be a truth in the saying "hell is hell, not from its own point of view, but from the heavenly point of view".'[124]

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words, as it is for him to believe a false proposition or to act unjustly'. Talbott in Parry & Partridge 2003, 32. For further discussion of this point see note 190 on page 30.

[114] See Slagle 1998, 11 and the earlier discussion on page 10.

[115] Lewis 1977b, 115.

[116] Lewis 1977b, 111.

[117] Lewis 1977b, 116.

[118] Lewis 1977b, 116, 111. Then, in *The Great Divorce*, Lewis says 'There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, "Thy will be done," and those to whom God says, in the end, "*Thy* will be done."' Lewis 1977a, 66-67.

[119] Or, as Reitan says 'On this picture, God's love and mercy are preserved intact... Thus, at least in terms of its compatibility with other central Christian teachings, this progressive understanding of [hell] is preferable to the classical one'. Reitan in Parry & Partridge 2003, 127.

[120] Pinnock & Brow 1994, 88. The point is then emphasised: ' None are sent there against their will'.

[121] Talbott 2001, 421.

[122] Walls in Parry & Partridge 2003, 119. My emphasis.

[123] Walls in Parry & Partridge 2003, 119.

[124] Lewis 1977b, 114.

According to Tom Wright - who advocates a similar position[125] to that of Lewis and Walls:

> [The most powerful objection to universalism] is the presence in the gospels – on the lips of Jesus himself – of sayings which leave no room whatever for the universalist's position [such as] the sheep and the goats [and] the separation of the rich man and Lazarus.[126]

Yet these and the other 'anti-universalist' passages seem just as problematic for the Lewisian view which, as Talbott says, takes 'the hell out of hell, at least as far as the damned are concerned'.[127] Certainly, in Matthew 7:22-23 and 25:41-46 there seems to be no question that the damned *know* that they are damned, *wish* that they were not and are told in no uncertain terms that this is their fate *whether they like it or not*! Universalists may struggle to deal with these passages[128] but surely they speak equally against the Lewisian position?[129] Lewis himself makes only a half-hearted attempt to address this fact. He says 'I do not think this [view] belies the severity of Our Lord's words'[130] but he does not actually engage with these words or explain how they would be adequately fulfilled in the kind of scenario he envisages.

Of course, since universalists, Calvinists and Arminians all appeal to the message of Scripture as a whole and to theological consistency rather than to mere proof-texts, we cannot completely write Lewisians off just for doing the same. Unfortunately,

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[125] Wright 1994, 79-81.

[126] Wright 1975, 202.

[127] Quoted by Walls in Parry & Partridge 2003, 120.

[128] Although, many – including Talbott – are satisfied that the whole canon of Scripture can (legitimately) be read in such a way that it is fully compatible with universalism. Discussing the parable of the sheep and the goats particularly, Talbott points out that 'anyone who finds Jesus' apocalyptic story difficult to square with Paul's universalism should likewise find it difficult to square with his grace' since the parable seems to suggest that 'salvation is essentially a matter of doing good works'. Talbott in Parry & Partridge 2003, 45.

[129] To be fair to Wright, there is a 20 year gap between his dismissal of universalism on biblical grounds and his articulation of the view of hell described above and, clearly, his thinking in this area has changed dramatically- as the following quote shows: 'most of the passages in the New Testament which have been thought by the Church to refer to people going into eternal punishment after they die [as will become clear, he is not talking here about eternal punishment as opposed to annihilation or even his own version of hell but hell *per se*] don't in fact refer to any such thing. The great majority of them have to do with the way God acts within the world and history'. He goes on: 'As a historian, I can say categorically that Jesus' language about the awful punishment in store for those who rejected his message must be read as predictions of the awful future that awaited the nation of Israel if she rejected the way of peace which he was proposing'. Wright 1994, 78-79. In spite of this, however, Wright's 1975 article is still referred to as a classic refutation of universalism (e.g. Kings 2002, 160 n.41). I suggest that either Wright's 1975 comments or his 1994 ones be 'struck from the record' in this debate.

[130] Lewis 1977b, 114.

however, their position does not appear to be theologically consistent either. Walls admits that:

> the idea that hell can be preferred to heaven obviously requires a profound illusion… It is the ability to deceive ourselves [eternally] that finally makes intelligible the choice of eternal hell.[131]

However, according to Lewis himself, the whole reason that hell *must* exist is precisely because both justice and mercy demand that no unrepentant sinner can continue in the 'ghastly illusion'[132] that 'his way of life is utterly successful, satisfactory, unassailable'[133] forever. 'Even if it never becomes good, [the creature] should know itself a failure'.[134] Thus, as Talbott points out, 'Lewis's own account of hell excludes, even as Walls's account does, the very thing that Lewis says justice requires'.[135]

I have already mentioned '1984'. It seems to me that to hold Lewis, Walls and Tom Wright's position requires the use of what Orwell termed 'doublethink'.[136] Perhaps even more astonishingly, some *annihilationists* who reject the Lewisian 'hell-less hell' for the reasons discussed above,[137] still attempt to argue that hell is not imposed on people by God. Pinnock and Brow claim that hell is simply 'the logical outcome of final rejection *of* God' rather than rejection *by* God.[138] Yet, in the very next breath, they state that 'to enter hell is to be rejected by God'.[139] I suggest that Pinnock and Brow need to decide which of these mutually-exclusive propositions they wish to retain: if God does indeed reject some people eternally, it *cannot* be said that He never rejects anybody – even if His rejection of them follows their rejection of Him. To do so is simply dishonest.

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[131] Walls in Parry & Partridge 2003, 120.
[132] Lewis 1997b, 110.
[133] Lewis 1997b, 109.
[134] Lewis 1997b, 110.
[135] Talbott 2001, 432. See also Reitan in Parry & Partridge 2003, 131.
[136] Which is defined as 'the power of holding two contradictory beliefs in one's mind simultaneously and accepting both of them'. Orwell 1984, 183.
[137] '[Does] the picture of hell in Lewis… do justice to the terrible imagery in Scripture?' Pinnock & Brow 1994, 90-91.
[138] 'God does not choose hell for people – they choose it [for themselves]'. Pinnock & Brow 1994, 88.
[139] Pinnock & Brow 1994, 94. Similarly, having said 'we know that God is not in the business of punishing people. Jesus died so that he would not have to do that' (88) they later contradict this by saying 'God is justified in destroying the wicked' (93).

Of course, universalists object to the very idea of God eternally rejecting anybody and find scriptural support for their position in statements such as 'the Lord will not reject forever'[140] and 'His mercies *never* come to an end'.[141] In sharp contrast to this, Marshall believes that there are 'limits to [God's] patience'[142] and, in a rather disturbing analogy, Lewis argues that as 'a master often knows, when boys and parents do not, that it is really useless to send a boy in for a certain examination again',[143] so God knows when it is time to 'wash His hands' of the perpetually impenitent.[144] There are at least two objections to this view.

Firstly, if God knows 'the end from the beginning' - as the majority of Christians still believe that He does[145] - one has to wonder why He would waste His time pursuing those whom He knows in advance will never respond. More importantly, in Luke 15:4, Jesus describes God as a shepherd who searches for a lost sheep *until He finds it*.[146] Yet, in spite of this, Marshall claims that 'there is no hint in the Gospels that he continues to seek out sinners in the next world until he is completely successful'.[147] For Talbott and other universalists, the Lucan statement is precisely such a hint – or, even, an explicit statement.[148] Why does it not seem so to Marshall?

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[140] Lamentations 3:31.

[141] Lamentations 3:22b. Barth quotes this at the climax of his argument for hopeful universalism in *Church Dogmatics*. See Barth 1961a, 478. The structure of the whole verse indicates that the persistence of God's mercies is a result of the fact that His 'steadfast love… never ceases' (22a). A variant of this phrase ('his steadfast love endures forever') appears twice in 1 Chronicles, four times in 2 Chronicles, once in Jeremiah and 34 times in the Psalms – including all 26 verses of Psalm 136. So, it seems fair to say that this is a key biblical statement about God. For universalists, it is incoherent to say that God steadfastly loves those in hell – on which point, see the later discussion on page 30 and, particularly, note 190.

[142] Marshall in Parry & Partridge 2003, 71.

[143] Lewis 1977b, 112.

[144] Pinnock and Brow say something similar, suggesting that 'there comes a point when God, who has done everything to bring sinners back into fellowship, gives up trying' and pronounces them 'a lost cause'. Pinnock & Brow 1994, 88. They then refer to God's 'decision to terminate life since nothing positive remains for it' (95). The use of the word 'terminate' and the attempt to justify termination on this basis seems hugely ironic to me given that evangelicals – and, particularly American evangelicals – tend to be firmly on the 'pro-life' side of the abortion debate. Are we to imagine God as the 'cosmic abortionist', disposing of all those souls which He deems 'non-viable'? Again, this seems to me to conflict with the idea of God as Creator and Saviour.

[145] Some, such as Sanders, question whether God does, in fact, know the future on the basis that no human decision would be truly free if He does. Sanders 1994, 111. Plantinga is one of the leading opponents of this view and defends the traditional one. See, for example, Zagzebski 2004 [online].

[146] See Talbott in Parry & Partridge 2003, 257.

[147] Marshall in Parry & Partridge 2003, 57.

[148] Talbott in Parry & Partridge 2003, 257.

Again, the answer is 'because of one of the assumptions of the reigning plausibility structure'. As Nigel Wright says, there is a 'controlling belief… that death seals a person's destiny'.[149] Wright is one of an increasing number of non-universalist evangelicals[150] who agree with Talbott that:

> there is no suggestion anywhere in Scripture that God's forgiveness
> has a built-in time limit or that the judgement associated with the
> parousia eliminates every possibility of repentance in the future.[151]

Ironically, Pinnock himself makes this point very well when arguing for 'A Wideness in God's Mercy'. He is adamant that 'God does not cease to be gracious to sinners just because they are no longer living' and that, even at the judgement, 'anyone wanting to love God who has not loved him before is certainly welcome to do so'.[152] Yet, as we have seen, both Pinnock and Wright manage to believe, *at the same time*, that there *is* a 'time limit', a point at which God's grace and mercy *do* run out.

The Evangelical Alliance has expressed concern that the likes of Pinnock and Wright 'might in time move further towards outright universalism'.[153] To me, there is little danger - or, rather, hope - of this for as long as their first commitment is to Arminianism. However, once again, theological consistency would seem to require that they *should* make this move. If they are unable or unwilling to do this, then their only viable alternative would seem to be to accept that it is *God* who *sends* people to hell and to live with the uncomfortable feelings that this creates for them – and rightly so, in my opinion!

The Universalist Alternative

Reitan gives an excellent summary of the logic that leads from here to universalism. If it is actually true that the 'doors of hell are locked on the inside – that is, [that] God never withdraws the offer of salvation',[154] then there are only two ways to avoid universalism. The first is to say that, rather than losing the offer of salvation, some

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[149] '... and that the condition in which a person dies is that in which they will for ever remain after death'. Wright 1996, 98.
[150] 'This group now includes, at least George Beasley-Murray, Charles Cranfield, Donald Bloesch, Clark Pinnock [and] Gabriel Fackre'. Hilborn & Horrocks in Parry & Partridge 2003, 229.
[151] Talbott in Parry & Partridge 2003, 255. See also 269 n.28.
[152] Pinnock 1992, 170-71.
[153] Hilborn & Horrocks in Parry & Partridge 2003, 239.
[154] Reitan in Parry & Partridge 2003, 136.

people 'lose the freedom to accept it'.[155] This is essentially Tom Wright's position – and Lewis's when he is not reverting to 'Hell as a sentence inflicted by a tribunal'.[156] Yet it is hard to see how it can be said that people who have lost their freedom have freely chosen hell.

The Lewisian response to this is that the loss of freedom is itself the result of a previous free choice or series of choices. Reitan's counter-argument is that since the loss of freedom was not the thing chosen, this is irrelevant.[157] A person may make free choices of which the *result* is 'bondage to desire' but no-one would consciously choose that bondage in itself. Thus, 'anyone who chooses... bondage to desire must do so based on some pre-existent… bondage to desire'.[158] If Reitan is correct, (and I believe that he is) then however many other previous free choices one suggests to account for *this* state, there must have been an *initial* bondage to desire that was *not* chosen. Since this sounds like a reasonable definition of 'the sinful nature', saying that God abandons such people to their fate is tantamount to denying that God graciously saves undeserving and helpless sinners[159] – which, presumably, no-one would wish to do. We arrive at exactly the same theological dead end if we pursue the only other path that leads away from universalism.

This involves arguing that while people never lose *either* the opportunity or the freedom to be saved, nonetheless, it is possible that some people will 'choose to reject God at every moment for the rest of eternity'.[160] Now, in fact, most universalists happily concede this point. As we saw from Ludlow earlier,[161] the majority of universalists are 'hopeful' like Barth rather than 'convinced' like Talbott – and, possibly, are so precisely because they admit this possibility. However, even Reitan, who believes that universal salvation is 'guaranteed',[162] does the same.[163] Yet, for him,

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[155] Reitan in Parry & Partridge 2003, 140.
[156] Lewis 1977b, 111.
[157] Reitan in Parry & Partridge 2003, 132.
[158] Reitan in Parry & Partridge 2003, 133.
[159] As Reitan says, 'Christian orthodoxy teaches that *all* of us are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves. Hence, divine intervention is essential for any of us to be saved'. Reitan in Parry & Partridge 2003, 132.
[160] Reitan in Parry & Partridge 2003, 136.
[161] Ludlow in Parry & Partridge 2003, 211. See earlier discussion on page 13.
[162] Reitan in Parry & Partridge 2003, 137-38.
[163] Reitan in Parry & Partridge 2003, 140.

the possibility is 'so remote'[164] that 'for all practical purposes, it is inevitable'[165] that all will eventually accept God – *of their own free will* - and so be saved.[166]

Hick similarly concedes the point and yet opts for a dogmatic rather than merely hopeful universalism:

> It seems morally (although… not logically) impossible that the infinite resourcefulness of infinite love working in unlimited time should be eternally frustrated, and the creature reject its own good, presented to it in an endless range of ways.[167]

Thus, universal salvation is a 'practical certainty' which we 'may confidently affirm' as part of the general Christian hope.[168]

The last possible remaining objection to all this is to say, as Sanders does, that universalists fail to take account of the fundamentally irrational nature of sin - the '*mystery* of iniquity'.[169] According to this argument, the universalist case is based on the false assumption that no-one with all the facts would choose to reject God – and, thus, their own ultimate happiness.[170] For Sanders, this is to ascribe too much rationality to fallen human beings. He believes that, because of sin, a person might perpetually reject God and His offer of salvation even though he 'has every reason not to do so'.[171]

Yet, if this is true, it is hard to see in what sense the lamb of God has taken away the sin of the world.[172] The very problem that Jesus came to solve is still with us and, worse, will remain unsolved forever.[173] So, as with the 'loss of freedom' argument, this last line of defence against universalism results in a Pelagian[174] denial of the very

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[164] Reitan in Parry & Partridge 2003, 140.

[165] Reitan in Parry & Partridge 2003, 139.

[166] Thus, he suggests that 'we should believe in universal salvation unless we have some kind of knock-down proof [against it]'. He goes on: 'It is hard to imagine what such a knock-down proof would look like - but scattered and conflicting scriptural passages surely don't constitute such a proof'. Reitan in Parry & Partridge 2003, 138.

[167] Hick 1966, 380.

[168] Hick 1966, 381.

[169] Sanders 1994, 113.

[170] Sanders sees the influence of Plato here: 'To know the truth is to do the truth'. Sanders 1994, 113.

[171] Reitan in Parry & Partridge 2003, 136.

[172] John 1:29.

[173] Sanders attempts to pre-empt this objection by saying that 'sin is not a problem to be solved but a mystery to be challenged by gracious love'. Sanders 1994, 113.

[174] However reasonable and gracious Lewis and his followers may sound when saying that 'no soul that seriously and constantly desires joy will ever miss it' (Lewis 1977a, 67) I believe that if one reads between the lines of what they are saying, one still hears the words of the Pharisee in Luke 18:11 (see

concept of salvation. We are no better off after Christ than we were before him. Sin can still have the last word.

In 1 Corinthians 15, however, Paul makes it clear that sin does *not* have the final word. Sin is the sting of death and death 'has been swallowed up in victory'. Thus, Paul taunts the defeated powers with the *rhetorical* question 'Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death is your sting?' As Talbott points out, if God's revealed will for the salvation of all is thwarted *in even one case* because of sin, then sin and death can truthfully answer 'here!' – but, as Talbott says, 'the question is not supposed to have an answer'.[175]

We have established, then, that all of the alternatives to universalism on both axes are at least as flawed as the universalist position is alleged to be. Thus, we turn to the question of why universalism is the one unacceptable option. What really lies behind its rejection?

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page 8): 'God, I thank you, O God, that unlike these other people who are now in hell, I seriously and constantly desired joy'. If desiring joy was something that we chose to do, then we can boast about it. If it was not, then is it just to allow people to suffer eternal consequences for not having done it? To me, not desiring joy sounds like a form of mental illness from which people need to be healed - and that by the very one who said: 'those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick' (Matthew 9:12).

[175] Talbott in Parry & Partridge 2003, 254.

Chapter 3. 'Original Ungrace' vs. Pure Grace

In the parable of the labourers in the vineyard,[176] those who had worked all day are *outraged* that they receive no more than those who had only worked for one hour. The landowner's response to this is 'are you envious because I am generous?' - and, clearly, they were. For Yancey, this is a typical human reaction to the 'scandalous mathematics of grace'.[177] As he says, grace '[goes] against every instinct of humanity' and we have 'an inbuilt resistance'[178] to it. Surely people should get both the rewards and the punishments that they *deserve*? Yet, as Yancey says, it is precisely the point of the parable - and of the gospel as a whole - that this is not so. God is kind to the wicked and the ungrateful[179] and 'in the realm of grace the word *deserve* does not even apply'.[180]

However, even though he understands all this and explains it very well, Yancey is still guilty of what Talbott calls the 'sin of exclusivism'. This is the 'perennial heresy'[181] whereby people 'insist that God has no right to extend his mercy to a given class of persons'.[182] Yancey agrees with Talbott that it is as a result of the congenital ungrace that afflicts us all that 'the Pharisees' objected to God 'open[ing] the gate to the Gentiles so late in the game'.[183] Yet, as an Arminian, he is willing to believe that God's mercy is limited to those who respond to Christ in the appointed way before the appointed time.[184]

Yancey and other Arminians would no doubt justify this as 'scriptural' but that is precisely the point: the Pharisees also thought that they were being faithful to God's revelation.[185] Yet, with hindsight, we can see that they were being faithful to their

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[176] Matthew 20:1-16.
[177] Yancey 1997, 62.
[178] Yancey 1997, 45.
[179] Luke 6:35b.
[180] Yancey 1997, 62.
[181] Talbott 1999, 123.
[182] Talbott 1999, 127. According to Talbott, God's answer to such people is 'I will have mercy upon whomever I damn well please'! This is Talbott's paraphrase of Exodus 33:19b which Paul quotes in Romans 9:15: 'I will have mercy on whom I have mercy and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion'.
[183] Yancey 1997, 61.
[184] See Yancey 1997, 55 and, indeed, the discussion on page 30.
[185] In spite of his condemnation of them above, Yancey elsewhere expresses admiration for the Pharisees' 'high standards' and their willingness 'to die rather than have their laws broken'. He even suggests that he would have been a Pharisee (as opposed to a Sadducee, an Essene or a Zealot) had he been a first century Jew and it seems to me that, by doing so, he is implying that evangelicals in general

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wrong understanding of God's word, not God's word itself. For Talbott and for me, the same is true of Arminians – and all other non-universalists. *It is 'original ungrace'[186] not biblical exegesis that lies behind even evangelical opposition to universalism.* When Yancey says that only those who fulfil a particular condition can benefit from it, he negates his previous statement that grace is – necessarily - undeserved and unconditional. That he cannot see this is simply more 'doublethink', confirming once again that Arminianism functions as a plausibility structure in the contemporary Church.

This is most obvious in Yancey's proposed definition of grace as meaning that 'there is nothing we can do to make God love us more' and 'nothing we can do to make God love us less'.[187] He stresses that our 'instinct' that we have to '*do something* in order to be accepted' by God is wrong.[188] Yet, at the same time, he says that 'all we must *do* [to 'get to heaven'] is cry "Help!"'.[189] Surely, then, there *is* something we can *do* to make God love us more? It is hard to see in what meaningful sense those who 'fail' to 'get to heaven' (and, thus, presumably, end up in hell, however that is defined or conceived) are accepted or loved by God.[190]

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are the 'spiritual descendants' of the Pharisees. This is *not* intended as a criticism. Yes, the Pharisees are depicted as 'the bad guys' in the Gospels but, as Yancey explains, 'the Gospels were written [after] Jerusalem had been destroyed and the other parties had virtually disappeared. Understandably, the gospel writers focused on the sole surviving threat to Christians, the Pharisees'. Yancey 1995, 61 .

[186] My phrase.

[187] Yancey 1997, 70.

[188] Yancey 1997, 71.

[189] Yancey 1997, 55.

[190] Walls believes that we can say that God still *loves* those in hell. (Walls in Parry & Partridge 2003, 122-23). Indeed, the whole theory of a 'tolerable hell' to which he subscribes (see the earlier discussion on pages 21-23) is an attempt to make the existence of hell compatible with the idea that God always loves all people. It is clear to him, as it is to universalists, that God would not annihilate – much less, subject to eternal torment – those whom he loves. For Walls, God continues to love those who reject Him but, because they must respond to Him freely or not at all, they may remain in hell forever in spite of this. While this seems reasonable at first, however, it conflicts with a scriptural understanding of what love is. Scripture is clear that true love involves action and not just mere sentiment. (See 1 John 3:17-18 for the most direct statement of this principle. See also James 2:15-16 and 1 Corinthians). There seems no reason to suppose that this is true of people but not of God. Thus, to say that God loves someone must mean that He acts in such a way as to promote their 'ultimate good' (which surely involves their eventual salvation and reconciliation to Himself) rather than that He merely desires it without doing anything about it. See Talbott in Parry & Partridge 2003, 32 and the earlier note (30) on page 21. To say that God continues to love those in hell indefinitely is, thus, to say that He continues to seek their salvation indefinitely – and, here, we are simply back to Hick's point on page 27: unless we believe that God is not capable of conceiving and executing strategies to persuade people to respond to Him which will eventually be successful and which do not violate their free will in their process, we *must* reach a universalist conclusion.

Calvinists such as Crockett agree with universalists that 'there is no meaningful way to say that God loves [those in hell]'[191] but, rather than embracing universalism, they conclude that God does *not* love those in hell. This position has the advantage of being logically consistent but, for both Arminians and universalists, it is theologically unacceptable. So, once again, universalism agrees with Calvinism's and Arminianism's critiques of each other and offers a synthesised alternative to both.

To sum up, then, let us return to our diagram:
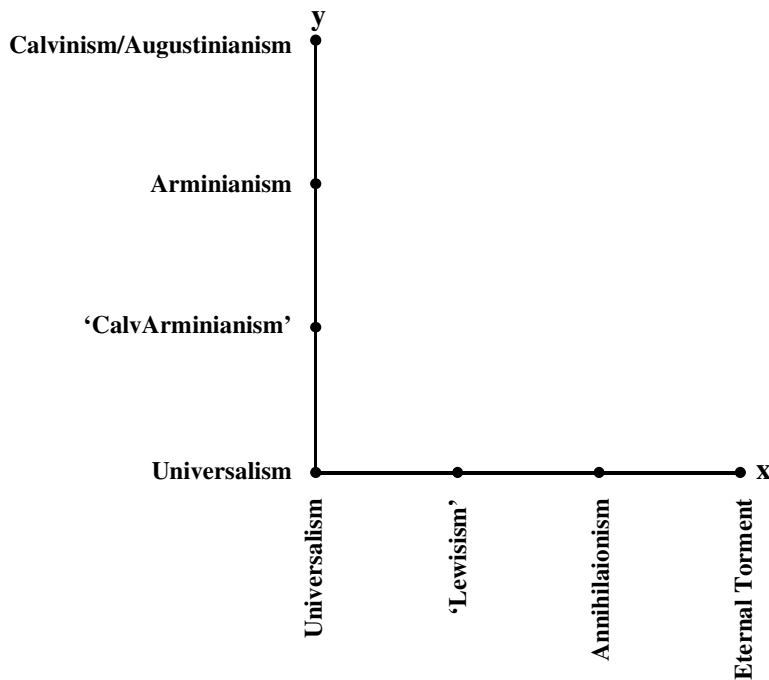
I submit that the 'origin' of the graph represents not just universalism but pure grace since, as I have argued, universalism is the only logical conclusion of a theology of pure grace. Thus, the positions that are furthest from the origin (Calvinism on the x-axis and Eternal Torment on the y-axis) are the least gracious as well as those most opposed to the universalist position. I suggest that it is precisely because they recognise this fact that many evangelicals have attempted to moderate their positions (on both the scope of salvation and the fate of the unsaved) and moved towards grace.

However, as long as they refuse to go the whole way (and embrace universalism), rather than becoming more gracious, their positions simply become less coherent. So,

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[191] Quoted by Strange in Parry & Partridge 2003, 162.

Arminianism dethrones the capricious false god of Calvinism but at the price of making salvation a work of the human will – and 'CalvArminianism', recognising this, tries to have it both ways. Similarly, it is clearly the 'lesser of two evils' to think of God snuffing people out of existence rather than tormenting them forever but should we be ascribing *any* evil behaviour to God? Recognising *this*, 'Lewisians' deny that God sends anyone to hell and suggest that people send themselves there but, in so doing, they conveniently ignore the very same scriptures that they previously used as proof that universalism cannot be true. This simply will not do.

Calvinism and eternal torment may be morally objectionable to many/most people but, in both cases, the problem is with the *first principle* rather than the subsequent logic of the position derived from it. So, it seems to me that the drift away from the traditional positions on both axes, can be explained in one of two ways. Either it is a regrettable drift from biblical orthodoxy to heresy, as some conservative evangelicals believe, with universalism the ultimate heretical destination of this movement; or, the trend is to be welcomed as a genuine 'move of the Spirit', away from 'theologies of ungrace' and towards a more consistent theology of grace.

Conclusion

Clearly, I believe it is the latter and hope that this trend will result in a universalist 'revival'[192] whereby universalism becomes, at the very least, an acceptable,

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[192] My use of the word *re*vival should not be taken to imply that I believe that universalism was the teaching of the apostles. Obviously, many significant figures in the early Church were universalists: most (in)famously, Origen (c.185-254) but also Gregory of Nyssa (c.335-395) and, arguably, Gregory of Nazanzius and Clement of Alexandria as well. See Ludlow in Parry & Partridge 2003, 191and Bauckham 1979, 49). Furthermore, Augustine wrote that 'There are very many [imo quam plurimi] who though not denying the Holy Scriptures, do not believe in endless torments' (source: http://www.tentmaker.org/books/asw/Appendix5.html but see also Ludlow in Parry & Partridge 2003, 194). Meanwhile, Talbott (and others) are convinced that Paul – and, possibly, even Jesus Himself - were universalists. See Talbott in Parry & Partridge 2003, 48, 257-59. My opinion on this – with regards to Paul, at any rate- is similar to that of Holloway and (E.P.) Sanders. Holloway believes that while Paul was the 'spiritual genius' who first understood the Gospel of pure grace, he was still 'more than residually, Paul the Pharisee' and was, thus, unable to 'fully accept' the explosive doctrine of justification of faith which he proclaimed – as the Church as a whole has been ever since according to both Holloway and myself (see Holloway 1992, 8 and Holloway 1997, 56). Similarly, Sanders accepts that Paul taught *both* 'destruction for those who rejected his message' and 'that God would save everyone' (unlike Tom Wright, he thinks that Paul *did* mean 'all people' when he said 'all' in Romans 5:18 and 1 Corinthians 15:22). He acknowledges that, logically, Paul *should* have 'subordinated one to the other' but suggests that he did not do so because he was 'a charismatic who saw visions... not a systematic theologian'. Sanders 1991, 148-49. Sanders does not criticise Paul for this and questions whether it is necessary for a religion's answers to be 'completely consistent with one another'. My response to this would be similar to *John* Sanders's point quoted in note 60 on page 12. The question of

respectable option for all Christians, including evangelicals. Of course, better still would be the universal acceptance of universalism in the Church for it seems to me, as it did to Robinson, that what is at stake in the universalist debate is nothing less than the doctrine of God itself.[193] As Slagle asks, 'What can we actually *know* about God?'[194] Does He love us unconditionally? Or do 'terms and conditions apply'?[195]

Slagle's concern is also evangelistic. This may sound ironic given that a frequent objection to universalism is 'Why preach the gospel if everyone is going to be saved anyway?'[196] However, to the universalist, such a question exposes a deeply deficient understanding of the Christian life in the one asking it. Is there really no benefit to being Christian other than escaping hell? Is knowing God not enough to get excited about and not worth shouting about from the roof-tops?

Slagle is a fervent evangelist and, 'returning the objection to sender', sees the doctrine of hell as the single biggest obstacle to effective evangelism – as do I. What sort of God are we proclaiming? Is 'God loves you *but*…'[197] good news? For Slagle and for me, that is 'no gospel at all'[198] and, in conclusion, I am convinced that only the gospel as proclaimed by universalists qualifies as 'good news of great joy for all the people'.[199]

Jesus' position is more complex since it is related to the issue of to what extent Jesus had God's knowledge and to what extent He knew no more than any other first century Jewish prophet. It is, therefore, beyond the scope of this paper.

[193] Robinson 1949a, 155.

[194] This quote comes from a personal email that Slagle sent me.

[195] My phrase, not Slagle's.

[196] Of course, as Hart says, one could ask Calvinists the same question. See Hart in Cameron 1992, 27. Tom Wright attempts to get round this by saying that this is only true of 'hyper-Calvinists' who believe 'that the elect will be saved *automatically*' as opposed to ordinary Calvinists who believe 'that God will save his people *through the preaching of the gospel*'. Wright 1975, 204. But from where does Wright get the idea that universalists believe that anyone will be saved 'automatically' or that the gospel does not need to be preached? It seems to me that he is here knocking down one of the very 'Aunt Sallies' that he objects to universalists erecting. See Wright 1975, 201. For further discussion of this point, see also Robinson 1949a, 152.

[197] As I understand it, it is generally agreed that the presence of a 'but' in a sentence effectively negates that which precedes it so that only what follows it is heard...

[198] The NIV's translation of Galatians 1:7a – as opposed to the NRSV's 'not that there is another gospel'. Regardless of which translation is more faithful to the Greek, the NIV version expresses my opinion perfectly, even if only coincidentally.

[199] Luke 2:10.

Appendix A: A Question for Tom Wright

When I was first converted to universalism (see appendix C), Charles Slagle informed me that Tom Wright was a universalist. His evidence for this claim was the following passage in *What Saint Paul Really Said*:

> There [in Romans 8], Paul outlines and celebrates the hope that one day the entire cosmos will have its own great exodus, its liberation from bondage to decay. The point is this: *the covenant between God and Israel was always designed to be God's means of saving the whole world. It was never supposed to be the means whereby God would have a private little group of people who would be saved while the rest of the world went to hell (whatever you might mean by that).* Thus, when God is faithful to the covenant in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and in the work of the Spirit, *it makes nonsense of the Pauline gospel to imagine that the be-all and end-all of this operation is so that God can have another, merely different, private little group of people who are saved while the world is consigned to the cosmic waste-paper basket.* It is not insignificant that the critical passages at this point, the middle of Romans 8 and the middle of 1 Corinthians 15, have themselves often been consigned to a kind of exegetical and theological limbo with Protestant exegesis in particular appearing quite unsure what to do with them…. If it is true that God intends to renew the whole cosmos through Christ and by the Spirit – *and if that isn't true then Paul is indeed talking nonsense in Romans 8 and 1 Corinthians 15*…. if the Church is commanded and authorized to announce that gospel, *it cannot rest content – for exegetical as well as theological reasons – with anything less than this complete vision.*[200]

It must be admitted that this does sound very much like universalism. Indeed, just as Wright says that Paul is talking nonsense if the whole world will not be saved, Slagle could surely be forgiven for saying that Wright is doing the same if he is not a universalist! Wright seems to suggest here that 'all' *does* mean 'all' in 1 Corinthians, contrary to his exegesis of that passage discussed in chapter one. He also uses the kind of 'emotive' language (e.g. 'cosmic waste-paper basket) which he criticises universalists for using in other places.[201] How can he possibly write such an impassioned argument *for* universalism and not be a universalist?

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[200] Wright 1997, 163-164. My emphasis.
[201] See Wright 1975, 201 where he suggests that 'when universalist writers speak of hell as a chamber of horrors… [or] a concentration camp' they are adding 'a good deal of unjustified emotive weight' to their case'.

This was Slagle's reaction when I informed him that Wright has explicitly disavowed the doctrine. He concluded that Wright must have *rejected* universalism *since* writing WSPRS. When I pointed out that Wright has *never* been a universalist and was not one when he wrote WSPRS, Slagle was literally *dumbstruck*.

As I said earlier, [202] Wright's thinking on the issue of hell and damnation has clearly changed in the last twenty years but, as far as I know, he is still not a universalist and nor has he responded to the (wrong) belief being circulated by Slagle et al that he is. Quite possibly, he has not hitherto been aware of it. Thus, like Slagle , I would be very interested to hear what stops him from pursuing his 'universalist' logic in WSPRS through to its conclusion.

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[202] See note 129 on page 22.

Appendix B: A Question for Alister McGrath

I said in note 30 on page 7 that while McGrath appears to disavow Arminianism in the strongest possible terms, his argument against universalism *later in the same book* seems to me to be pure Arminianism of the very sort that he supposedly condemns. He writes:

> The decision to accept or reject God remains our decision, a decision for which we and we alone are responsible. God gives us every assistance possible to make the decision he wants us to make, but he cannot make that decision for us. God enables us to accept his offer of forgiveness and renewal by removing or disarming every obstacle in its path – obstacles such as spiritual blindness, arrogance, confusion, a compromised freedom of the will, and so forth. But, in the end, God cannot and does not make that decision for us. To affirm human dignity is to affirm our ability to say "No!" to God – an affirmation the New Testament and the Christian tradition have no hesitation in making. *Universalism perverts the gospel of the love of God into an obscene scene of theological rape quite unworthy of the God whom we encounter in the face of Jesus Christ'.*[203]

It seems to me that, in spite of his attempts to be faithful to the Reformed understanding of the pure gift-nature of salvation and faith, he is still giving the *casting vote* to the human will.[204] He might be saying that salvation is 99.999% God's work with only 0.001% required from us but, for me (and for Charles Slagle with whom I have discussed this point on many occasions), if *anything* is *required* from us in order to be saved, if it is possible to be damned because of *our* failure to *do* something, then salvation *is*, ultimately, by works.[205]

Thus, I respectfully suggest that McGrath's position here is typically 'confused', as per Holloway[206] and Slagle.[207] Indeed, McGrath seems to be the ultimate 'CalvArminian' in that he fully appreciates the strengths and weaknesses of both positions and is attempting to synthesise them, yet, for some reason, he is unwilling to consider the *universalist* synthesis. Why is universalism the one unacceptable option for McGrath?

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[203] McGrath 1988, 106 (my emphasis).
[204] See page 8.
[205] See pages 6-10.
[206] See page 7.
[207] See page 9.

Whatever answer I have given to that question when discussing the Church as a whole, it is both impossible and inappropriate to answer it in the case of an individual person. However, I feel obliged to point out that there seems to me to be a disparity between McGrath's violent rejection of universalism as involving 'obscene theological rape' and his attitude towards those Reformers who affirmed the 'passivity of humanity'[208] in the process of salvation. He may not share this Reformed view, but, in accordance with Talbott's observation,[209] he seems to regard those who do as merely mistaken while he sees universalism as, if not heretical, theologically obscene. *I would be very interested to hear McGrath's explanation of why the one is worse than the other* – and, indeed, why the idea of God saving people 'against their will' is more obscene than the idea of Him subjecting people to eternal torment against their will or annihilating them, equally against their will.

Since I am highlighting an apparent inconsistency in the thought of someone for whom I have tremendous respect[210] and since, in accordance with my declared aim, I have not addressed every conceivable objection to universalism in detail, this seems like a good place to examine a possible inconsistency/incoherence in my own position.

In chapter three, I spoke of God 'conceiving and executing strategies to persuade people to respond to Him which will eventually be successful *and which do not violate their free will in their process'*. Clearly, in spite of my rejection of the *sovereignty* of free will (as per Arminianism), I am still concerned to show that universalism does not compromise genuine freedom. The same is true of most other universalists. For example, Robinson wrote that an:

> unswerving insistence on the inviolability of freedom must be
> maintained from beginning to end if all that follows is not to fall
> away into self-contradiction and futility.[211]

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[208] McGrath 1988, 54.
[209] See page 14.
[210] I am not sure if I would have got through theological college without McGrath's '*Introduction to Christian Theology*' and, having seen him speak at a debate at the Sheldonian in 2002, I consider him an absolutely outstanding orator.
[211] Robinson 1950, 109.

Even Slagle says that 'people will never be saved until they *are* saved'[212] – in other words, a free response of some sort *is* 'required' before someone can be saved. Does this contradict everything that I have said in my paper?

Clearly, I do not believe that it does. As Talbott points out, the issue is what *genuine* freedom involves. Quite possibly, he grants, universalism *is* incompatible with *libertarian* freedom - 'according to [which] conception, a person acts freely only when it remains in their power, at the time of acting, to refrain from the action'.[213] However, libertarian freedom is *not* genuine freedom – or, at least, the only kind of genuine freedom – for Talbott. Rather ingeniously, he uses C.S. Lewis's account of his conversion to make his point.

The Lewisian view of hell that I critiqued in chapter two is based on a libertarian understanding of freedom. However, when describing his *own* experience of conversion, Lewis wrote: 'I say, "I chose", yet *it did not really seem possible to do the opposite*'.[214] Indeed, Lewis famously described himself as 'the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England' and as 'a prodigal who is brought in kicking, struggling, resentful, and darting his eyes in every direction for a chance of escape'.[215]

Talbott suggests that such a description fits perfectly with the biblical statement that no-one can come to Christ unless they are drawn (or dragged) by the Father and that 'few first person accounts of conversion sound anything like libertarian free choices'.[216] Yet Lewis's choice was still *voluntary*. As he said himself:

> You might argue that I was not a free agent, but I am inclined to think that this came nearer to being a perfectly free act than most I have ever done. *Necessity may not be the opposite of freedom* [My emphasis!][217]

Lewis used the phrase 'checkmate' to describe his experience of being cornered by the 'Hound of Heaven'. This phrase is *utterly* incompatible with the libertarian view that - I suggest - doublethink allowed him to hold in spite of his experience. However,

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[212] Slagle 1998, 41.
[213] Talbott in Parry & Partridge 2003, 270 n.42.
[214] Quoted by Talbott in Parry & Partridge 2003, 260.
[215] Lewis 1998, 178. Quoted by Talbott in Parry & Partridge 2003, 260.
[216] Talbott in Parry & Partridge 2003, 260. This is certainly true of my story.
[217] Quoted by Talbott in Parry & Partridge 2003, 260.

it is fully compatible with the image that both Talbott and Hick use to show how universalism does not compromise genuine – albeit non-libertarian – freedom. Following William James, they use the analogy of a grandmaster playing chess with a novice:

> Even though the novice is free at every stage to make his own move, we can predict with complete practical certainty that the master will eventually win… whatever moves the novice makes, the master can so respond as sooner or later to bring the game to the conclusion that he himself desires.[218]

Thus, while we do not know how long it will take God to get each person – and, indeed, every person – to the point of free surrender, we can be confident that He *will* do this eventually – *and that is all that matters to the universalist.*

This, then, explains how Slagle and myself can reject the idea that one has to choose God in order to be saved and, at the same time, say that no-one is saved until they voluntarily choose God. In the Arminian paradigm, the human will, not God's, is sovereign. It has the power to thwart God's will eternally and, ultimately, is what saves or damns people. In the universalist paradigm, this is not so: God's salvific will *will* be done. In a sense, it will be done 'in spite of us' and yet, there will be only willing participants in this universal salvation.

Robinson invites us to imagine 'a love so strong that ultimately no one will be able to restrain himself from free and grateful surrender'[219] and both he and Talbott are convinced – as am I – that God can and will do 'for every other sinner… exactly what he did for Paul on the road to Damascus and exactly what he did for Lewis'[220] and, indeed, exactly what he did for me.

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[218] Hick 1966, 380. See also Talbott in Parry & Partridge 2003, 264.
[219] Robinson 1950, 111.
[220] Talbott in Parry & Partridge 2003, 265.

Appendix C: My 'Conversion' to Universalism

I have defined myself as a Christian for the last fifteen years (since 14th April 1990, to be precise). For most of that time, I held to the traditional view of hell as a place of 'eternal conscious torment for all Christ-rejecters' to quote the statement of belief of the denomination in which I was taught the faith (Elim Pentecostal).[221] However, on 20th April 2001, I experienced what I can only call a paradigm shift in my thinking.[222]

This was precipitated by visiting the website of Charles Slagle, a North American evangelist who describes himself as a 'prophetic psalmist' who I had seen minister at Kensington Temple (my Elim church) on a few occasions. I had been very impressed by Slagle, not just because of the 'spectacular', apparently supernatural aspect of his ministry but because he seemed to know the same God of unconditional love that I did – which was not something that I could say of every visiting minister or, indeed, every person in my church!

Imagine my surprise, then, when I heard that this great man of God, this prophet who clearly knew God, who heard from Him and, even spoke for Him, had 'gone off the rails'. Apparently, Slagle was now teaching that all people would be saved - a ludicrous heresy that was clearly unscriptural. How could this be? It was to answer that question that I logged on to **http://www.sigler.org/slagle/**. Within literally seconds of reading the material there, I was converted. Perhaps that is overstating the case slightly – but not much. From almost the first sentence, I was thinking both 'I hope this is true' and 'I think this *is* true'. What did I read that caused me to change my mind – or, at least, be willing to – so quickly?

In chapter two, I talked about Slagle's concept of 'CalvArminianism', the attempt to combine Calvinism and Arminianism by taking only the nice bits from each. That is precisely what I – and possibly my denomination as a whole - had done. Indeed, just the day before reading about the 'four views of salvation' (Calvinism, Arminianism, CalvArminianism and universalism) for the first time, I had said to a friend during a

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[221] See http://www.elim.org.uk/fundamentals.htm.
[222] Talbott uses the same phrase to describe his own 'conversion'. See Talbott in Parry & Partridge 2003, 6.

theological discussion that I was a Calvinist for myself but an Arminian for everyone else.

In other words, my own experience was that God seemed to have chosen *me*, made Himself known to me in a way that was, to all intents and purposes, *irresistible* (a good Calvinist word!) I could not see what I had done to invite this, let alone deserve it. I had been saved *entirely* by grace and so I knew that God loved me literally unconditionally. However, precisely because I knew that God did not love me because of anything that *I* had done, it was also obvious to me that He must love everybody else as much as - and in the same way that - He loved me. (And, of course, the theology of my church was Arminian, evidenced by the word 'Christ-rejecters' in the statement quoted above).

Convinced that no-one deserved to go to hell more than I did – and that most deserved it a lot less – and that God did not want anyone to go there, I was a fervent evangelist. As well as leading 'street outreach' teams at the church, I shared my faith with people whenever and wherever the opportunity presented itself: at work, on the bus and on the tube. I didn't mind making a fool of myself (and I'm sure I often did) because I was more than willing to suffer a little embarrassment – and even worse – if it could save even one person from an eternity of unbearable agony.

Yet most of those to whom I 'witnessed' did not respond in the way that I hoped they would and while, for all I know, some of them may have done so at a later date, according to my old beliefs, those who did not would spend eternity regretting it in hell. Slagle's article confronted me with the inherent contradiction in my position: if any of those people had had the experience of God that I had had, they would have believed in Him - just as I did not believe before I had those experiences. How, then, could God send them to hell? Of course, the capricious god of *Calvinism* could do that but a God of unconditional love…?

Slagle forced me to articulate what I had always believed but repressed for the sake of maintaining 'orthodoxy': a love that requires conditions to be met before it can be experienced is conditional. If God's love is truly unconditional, then it must be true that no conditions need to be met before a person can benefit from it – and this was precisely what Slagle proposed. He dared to suggest that God's love for each person

is so great that He will *never* give up on *anyone* and that He will continue to pursue *every* person until they *are* saved.

This was a tremendously exciting concept and, as I say, I certainly *hoped* that it was true even if I feared that it might not be.[223] Because, of course, as a good evangelical, I was still concerned about 'everything that the Bible says about hell'. However, on turning to my Bible, I discovered that the Bible doesn't say anywhere *near* as much about hell as I had thought it did and that many of the things it did say were not as clear as I had supposed either.[224] Furthermore, there were several passages of Scripture that could, conceivably, support this new understanding of the gospel and, perhaps most significantly, these were all passages that I had never been able to accommodate in my old system of thought. I have already discussed 1 Timothy 2:4 and Romans 8:38-39 and the difficulties these present to the non-universalist exegete.[225] Another example is Philippians 2:10-11.

Previously, I had understood this to mean that, on the day of judgement, everybody would bow before the risen Jesus and acknowledge Him as Lord. However, while there is *nothing* in the text to warrant this, I had assumed that the scene it described would involve two different groups of people: those – such as myself – who would willingly bow their knee to Him before being admitted to paradise, and those who would be forced to do so against their will, before being thrown into the lake of fire.

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[223] Trevor Hart (who is very definitely *not* a *dogmatic* universalist but whose theology may share 'genuinely similar theological concerns to that of some forms of universalism') observes that 'occasionally one is given the impression that some Christians will be disappointed if, in spite of everything, God does indeed choose to 'save' all in spite of their rejection of him; as if they themselves will somehow have been robbed or upstaged were this to happen'. Hart in Cameron 1992, 33-34. I have certainly experienced exactly this reaction when I have 'preached' universalism. Indeed, people – evangelical Christians who are supposed to believe in justification by grace through faith – have *actually* said to me 'But that wouldn't be *fair*. Why have I bothered living as a Christian and serving God if I'm going to be no better off than people who haven't'! Little wonder that I think that 'original ungrace' is the true motive behind the rejection of universalism. Having said that, Hart could be a legitimate exception to my rule. Since he clearly understands the concept of 'original ungrace' (his next comment after the one quoted above is 'Perhaps there is something of the elder brother in Jesus' story of the Prodigal Son in all of us'), it would be stretching credulity to say that that is, nonetheless, the *real* reason that he rejects universalism. So, I will admit that his rejection of *dogmatic* universalism is based on genuine exegetical (or theological or philosophical) concerns. However, since I – and, as we have seen, Reitan, Hick and Robinson – are, technically, only *hopeful* universalists ourselves (see page 27) I feel justified in regarding Hart as being on 'our side' of the debate in broad terms, just as I do Barth (see pages 11-12). Hart does seem to me to be a hopeful universalist – albeit one more cautious even than Barth. Of course, Hart might object to being tarred with even *this* brush but I can still only regard him as an ally not an enemy since, as we saw and as he says himself, we have 'genuinely similar theological concerns'.
[224] See Tom Wright's statement quoted in note 129 on page 22.
[225] See note 27 on page 6 and pages 9-10 respectively.

The fact that the plain reading of Scripture favoured universalism here – and in other places - while my (Calv)Arminian theology had required me to rewrite it, as I had with 1 Timothy 2:4, was a significant piece of evidence that served to confirm me in my growing conviction that universalism was true.

So, of the four sources of authority, Reason was clearly on the universalist side and now it seemed that Scripture was, at the very least, not completely opposed to it. That there had been universalists in the early Church was, perhaps, less striking to me as a Protestant than the fact that there were people who were otherwise orthodox but also universalists *now* – not least Slagle himself who, as I have said, I both admired and trusted. Indeed, as a Charismatic, I was prepared to consider that God might be 'speaking to me' through the very *experience* of responding to Slagle in the way that I did.

While there may be some validity in the conservative evangelical critique of Charismaticism/Pentecostalism that experience is the supreme authority rather than Scripture,[226] experience is still one of the sources of authority recognised by Christians – or by Anglican Christians at least. Furthermore, I believe that the principle 'you will know them by their fruits'[227] applies to *doctrines* as well as to people; as Jesus said: 'wisdom is vindicated by her deeds'.[228] Perhaps *the* most compelling evidence for me that universalism is true is the difference that believing it has made in my life. Of several examples that I could give, I will mention only the most significant.

I was sexually abused as a child and, for many years, I struggled to forgive my abuser. It is clear to me now that my non-universalist understanding of Christianity *prevented* me from forgiving him rather than *enabling* me to do so even though it told me that this was required of me – and, possibly, as a condition of my own forgiveness. The fact is that, in the past, I believed that God only forgives those who truly repent. It is clear to me now that it is as meaningless to say that God has forgiven those He sentences to hell (whether that is eternal torment or annihilation) as to say that He loves them.[229]

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[226] See, for example, MacArthur 1992, 23-46.
[227] Matthew 7:16.
[228] Matthew 11:19b.
[229] See the discussion in note 190 on page 30

Thus, I did not feel obliged to forgive my abuser more than I believed that God would. The best that I could say was that I was *willing* to forgive him *if he repented* (which he still has not done to date). Even if I *had* said that I had forgiven him 'unconditionally', would this really have been true if I still believed that God was going to send him to hell on the day of judgement if he persisted – and died - in his non-repentance? Would I not have been harbouring some sort of revenge fantasy in my heart in spite of any pious words I might have spoken? Indeed, some people even exhorted me to forgive on the basis that the Bible says 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord'![230]

When I became convinced of the truth of universalism, however, my feelings towards him changed dramatically. No doubt there were other factors involved as well but, when I realised that, if I was correct, God had *already* forgiven him and would not punish him or send him to hell *regardless of whether or not he repented*, I felt able to forgive him unconditionally too. This was nothing short of a miracle. It also made scriptural sense.

In Luke 6:35, Jesus tells us to love our enemies so that we may be like God who is 'kind to the ungrateful and the wicked'. God's mercy *precedes* our repentance, just as Christ died for us [all] when we were [all] sinners (Romans 5:8). Calvinism may ignore the (implied) alls but Arminianism does the same to the 'when we were sinners' and leads us to imagine that we *deserve* our salvation because we repented. It is significant to me that the next verse says that we have been justified by *his blood* - rather than by (our) faith. This seems to confirm that all of 'the ungodly' for whom He died are *already* justified by what He did, not by what they may or may not do in response to it in the future.[231]

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[230] Romans 12:19/Deuteronomy 32:35. Of course, one could argue that such people were saying nothing more or less than Paul himself: the first half of the verse does say 'Never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God'. However, as Tate argues (Tate 1997, 167-68) the next two verses makes it clear that the passage is about 'forgiveness, not judgement'. He explains: 'In the *Stories of the High Priests of Memphis*, a repentant person is depicted as going to the person he had wronged, bearing a dish containing burning coals on his head... With this in mind, the meaning of the metaphor [of heaping burning coals on your enemy's head, both in Paul and in Proverbs 25:23 which he is quoting] is that if a person acts in a forgiving way towards an enemy, the enemy will come to repent' – on which point see the rest of my discussion above.

[231] I should point out that not all universalists would agree with this statement. Some universalists that I have 'spoken to' (on the web) think in terms of God punishing 'the wicked' in hell for a finite period but eventually saving them. As will be obvious, this goes against the whole logic of my theology which could, thus, be described as 'hyper-universalism'.

Knowing that God forgave my abuser unconditionally and felt nothing but compassion for him, I did and felt the same - and told the man so. While, as I said earlier, he has not fully repented even now, his response to this was to express genuine remorse for the first time ever and, in conclusion, I simply cannot believe that this remarkable transformation in me and my situation was a 'lucky accident', that something so wonderful has happened in spite of – or, indeed, as a result of - me embracing a heresy. Thus, this episode provided final confirmation to me that the doctrine of universal salvation reveals the true heart of God to us and enables us to demonstrate it to others.

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[232] Paper delivered at a conference on Universalism held by the Research Institute in Systematic Theology of King's College, London which I attended on 21st May 2004.

[233] See note above.

[234] This paper was adapted from Dulles's Laurence J. McGinley Lecture delivered at Fordham University on November 20, 2002.

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