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Introduction

Between Heresy and Dogma

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At the most simple level Christian universalism is the belief that God will (or, in the case of “hopeful universalism,” *might*) redeem all people through the saving work of Christ. Within the history of Christianity such a belief has been a minority sport, and those who have embraced it have been, with some notable exceptions, not very well known. Indeed, it would probably be true to say that for most of Christian history the majority of Christians have thought that such a belief was outside the bounds of orthodoxy. In the minds of the majority it was simply a *given* that Christianity taught that the unsaved were consigned to suffer the never-ending torments of hell. But there were always Christian voices that sang a different song—a song in which, one day, all God’s creatures would be redeemed.

The main goal of this volume is that of listening to and understanding these discordant voices. The book is intended as an *exploration* of their views rather than as a *defense* of them. Some of the authors of this book are universalists, but others are agnostic on the issue, and some of them think that universalism is just plain mistaken. So if you are looking for a book on “the case for universalism,” or, alternatively, one on “why universalists are wrong,” then you will be disappointed. If, however, your goal is to understand and to think afresh then our hope is that this volume will provide a unique and fascinating opening into the little-known worlds of Christian universalism.

This book, however, is not merely a descriptive exercise that outlines what various individual Christian thinkers have thought about universal salvation. Each of our authors was invited to offer some brief assessment of the strengths and/or weaknesses of their subject’s theology, and these brief evaluations are offered in order to further stimulate the theological engagement of readers with the issues.

Before launching into the studies themselves it is important, in light of the common perception of universalism as “dangerous” and “heretical,” to take some time to locate these explorations in relation to orthodox Christian faith. It is also useful to get some appreciation of the diversity of Christian universalisms before plunging into the depths of specific theologies. This introduction seeks to perform these two tasks.

Universalism between heresy and dogma

While attending the Baptist Association meeting in Philadelphia in 1779 Elhanan Winchester (see chapter 7), a twenty eight year old Baptist pastor and revivalist preacher, was invited to lead the First Baptist Church in the city. Winchester accepted. He quickly became a very popular preacher in Philadelphia and preached, in his words, “to many thousands of different people.”

What those who invited Winchester did not realize was that, though he had a reputation for hyper-Calvinism, for some while he had been pondering the theology of universal restoration. In 1778 he had skimmed a book by Paul Siegvolk called *The Everlasting Gospel*, which defended universalism. This book slowly began to unsettle his theological thinking. He found its arguments to be powerful and discussed them in private with friends when opportunity arose. These private theological explorations continued when he moved to Philadelphia, but there his conversation partners reported him to another minister—a man Winchester considered his best

friend. This “best friend” denounced him as a heretic and never spoke to him again, refusing all Winchester’s attempts at reconciliation.

He saw the storm coming! Ironically it was this anticipated resistance that compelled him in 1780 to focus intensely on the Bible and clarify for himself what he thought about universalism. He wrote, “I became so well persuaded of the truth of the Universal Restoration, that I was determined never to deny it, let it cost me ever so much, though all my numerous friends should forsake me, as I expected they would, and though I should be driven from men . . . and suffer the loss of all things, friends, wealth, fame, health, character, and even life itself.”¹

But while not *denying* the doctrine, he never proclaimed it in public and rarely in private. In 1781 some of his church members, learning of his views, asked him never to speak of them. He agreed never to preach them, nor to bring them up in conversation, but insisted that if he was asked about the subject he could not deny his beliefs. This compromise satisfied them. But, of course, the lid could not be kept on the box—word got out and people did come and ask him about his unusual theology. Some were persuaded, others resisted, and a “situation” developed.

Not long later, some of his opponents took advantage of his absence on a trip to visit George De Benneville (see later) in nearby Germantown to try to discredit him. The attempt backfired on them, however, when he returned before they expected him to. The opponents then demanded that the congregation get a new minister; but such issues were decided in Baptist churches by majority vote and the majority supported Winchester. So the opponents were compelled first of all to put pressure on church members to change their allegiance (threatening to excommunicate all who did not do so) and secondly to take the matter to law. They argued that the votes of Winchester’s supporters did not count because their “heterodox” views placed

¹ “Preface” to 1792 edition of Winchester, *The Universal Restoration*.

them outside of membership of the Baptist Society because the universalists denied the confession of faith.² The minority prevailed and in this way they were able to take control of the church property and expel Winchester and his followers.³

The reactions both of Winchester’s ministerial “best friend” and of his opponents within the Baptist church itself are not unusual. Universalism has often been labeled as heresy. It is considered by many to be unbiblical, unorthodox, unsavory, unhelpful, and unchristian—something to be avoided! Some universalists have attempted to strike back by arguing not only that their views are consistent with the Bible but also that universal restoration was the prevailing view of the church in its first five hundred years. The view that hell is an everlasting punishment is, they maintain, a theology that arose as pagan thinking infected the church!⁴ So the purer, more original Christianity is universalist, and those who affirm everlasting hell are the true heretics. The claim that *all will be saved* was believed by some universalists to be *the gospel itself*—the true heart of Christian faith.

I think that both of these approaches are unhelpful and that if we are to be true to the historic faith we need eschew both of these extremes and to relocate universalism somewhere between heresy and dogma.

Is universalism heretical?

One not infrequently hears the claim that universalism is heretical. More often than not those making such claims simply mean that the doctrine is, in their opinion, both *wrong* and *dangerous*. But sometimes they mean that an ecumenical church council formally condemned

² Presumably the Second London Confession of 1677.

³ On this incident see Stone, *Biography*, 46–57. Stone includes both Winchester’s account and also an account from the perspective of the non-universalist group.

⁴ The internet is awash with such claims (which can be traced back at least to the nineteenth century, if not earlier).

the doctrine as heretical. As the declarations of early ecumenical councils were taken as binding by both eastern and western churches, they set the standard for orthodoxy in all mainstream Christian churches—Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestant. If such a council formally condemned universalism, then it is, strictly speaking, *unorthodox*—not merely unorthodox in the sense of “unusual” but in the sense of “not conforming to Christian faith as understood by the church.” That might not worry some Christians, but it is a genuine concern to Christians who seek to remain within the bounds of orthodox Christian faith. Even Protestants, though they do not see the decisions of the councils as beyond question,⁵ will still seek to take them very seriously. So the issue *does* matter. Now I am not (by any stretch of the imagination!) a patristics scholar, but I will say a few words about how I currently see the issue.

The worry concerns the fifth ecumenical council—the second to be held in Constantinople—in 553. The council of one hundred and fifty-seven eastern bishops and eleven western bishops was primarily called together to try and form an official consensus position on christology—one that would continue to affirm the Chalcedonian definition, but do it in terms that would be more acceptable to those who were uncomfortable with it: affirm it as emphasizing the personal, divine unity of subject in the two natures of the incarnate Word. There is no doubt that the council condemned Origen by name in its eleventh anathema:

If anyone does not anathematize Arius, Eunomius, Macedonius, Apollinaris, Nestorius, Eutyches, and *Origen*,⁶ as well as their impious writings, as also all other heretics already condemned and anathematized by the Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church, and by the aforesaid four Holy Synods and [if anyone does not equally anathematize] all those who have held and hold or who in their impiety persist in holding to the end the same opinion as those heretics just mentioned: let him be anathema.

⁵ The fifth ecumenical council, for instance, declared Mary to be *Aeiparthenos* (Ever-Virgin) fixing her perpetual virginity in church dogma. Few Protestants feel any obligation to affirm *that* proposal because they (a) consider it *prima facie* unbiblical (or, at very least, going beyond Scripture’s claims), and (b) theologically unnecessary. My point is simply that most Protestants are *willing* to reject a decision by an ecumenical council.

⁶ Interestingly Origen is listed out of chronological order.

But no mention of *apokatsstasis* is connected with this condemnation, nor does it appear in any of the other thirteen anathemas. Indeed, when read in the context of the other anathemas, the concern with Origen is quite possibly christological (by this time Origen’s christology was thought to be problematic).⁷

Outside the main sessions of the council, however, it appears that some fifteen additional anathemas against Origen were quite possibly appended.⁸ We should also note that ten years earlier, in 543, a local council called by the emperor Justinian had produced nine anathemas against Origen. Both lists, which overlap considerably, concern a range of supposed teachings of Origen that by then were considered risky or misleading. The idea of *apokatastasis*—that at the end of history, all created intellects will be restored to their original condition of union with God—was one of these.

It is useful to look at the relevant anathemas. From the council’s fifteen anathemas, consider I, XIV and XV:

I. If anyone asserts the fabulous pre-existence of souls, and shall assert the monstrous restoration (*apokatastasis*) which follows from it: let him be anathema.

XIV. If anyone shall say that all reasonable beings will one day be united in one, when the hypostases as well as the numbers and the bodies shall have disappeared, and that the knowledge of the world to come will carry with it the ruin of the worlds, and the rejection of bodies as also the abolition of [all] names, and that there shall be finally an identity of the *gnōsis* and of the hypostasis; moreover, that in this pretended *apokatastasis*,

⁷ And it was indeed inadequate in the light of later clarifications. However, we need to be cautious here: Henri Crouzel warns against reading Origen “in the context of heresies other than the ones he had in mind: as he had not foreseen these, some of his expressions or speculations could, with a bit of a push, be made to look as if he embraced these heresies, especially when no trouble was taken to look in other parts of his work for the key to his assertions. The main one was Arianism. Origen, whose trinitarian vocabulary was not yet sufficiently precise, might seem opposed to the unity of nature defined at Nicaea, although he held its equivalent in a dynamic rather than ontological mode. Some expressions could draw his subordinationism, which is in terms of origin and ‘economy,’ towards the Arian subordinationism of inequality using texts which assert nothing more than a hierarchy of origin. Besides, he is constantly accused, for reasons of vocabulary . . . of making the Son and the Holy Spirit creatures of the Father. In this detractors take no account of his speculations on the eternal generation of the Word in the *Treatise on First Principles* itself and of the celebrated formula attested as being in Origen by Athanasius himself: ‘*ouk en hote ouk en*—there was not a moment when He (the Word) was not.’” Crouzel, *Origen*, 171–72.

⁸ Although there is some debate as to whether these really did originate with the council or were added later. See chapter 16 and <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf214.xii.viii.html>.

spirits only will continue to exist, as it was in the feigned pre-existence: let him be anathema.

XV. If anyone shall say that the life of the spirits shall be like to the life which was in the beginning while as yet the spirits had not come down or fallen, so that the end and the beginning shall be alike, and that the end shall be the true measure of the beginning: let him be anathema.

Of Justinian’s earlier nine anathemas (which are clearly not part of the output of an ecumenical council) the directly relevant ones are seven and nine:

VII. If anyone says or thinks that Christ the Lord in a future time will be crucified for demons as he was for men, let him be anathema.

IX. If anyone says or thinks that the punishment of demons and of impious men is only temporary, and will one day have an end, and that a restoration (*apokatastasis*) will take place of demons and of impious men, let him be anathema.

Before considering the implications of these anathemas for universalism we need to say a word about how accurately they represent Origen’s thought (see chapter 2). Origen’s ideas were always controversial, but to understand both sets of anathemas we need to understand that in the three hundred years between his death and the fifth ecumenical council his ideas had been picked up and developed in more radical directions than one finds in Origen’s own work.⁹ Indeed, arguably, Origen himself would have agreed with some of these anathemas.¹⁰ In part it was the

⁹ In the late third and early fourth centuries (until Nicea), Origen’s theology divided Christians into supporters (e.g., Gregory of Nyssa) and critics (e.g., Methodius). In the latter part of the fourth century, groups of ascetic monks in the Egyptian desert took Origen’s speculations further. Their thinking was represented by Didymus the Blind (313–398) and Evagrius of Pontus (346–399). In 400 Theophilus, bishop of Alexandria, convened a council and condemned as heretical a number of doctrines that the participants thought that they found in Origen’s work. The doctrines that they condemned were indeed taught by Evagrius and Didymus but not obviously by Origen himself. This Evagrian, neo-Origenist eschatology was revived in the sixth century by the likes of Philoxenus (440–523) and, in an even more radical pantheistic form, by Stephen Bar Sudaili (c.480–c.543). In the 530s a group of Palestinian monks of Evagrian persuasion became influential and so in 543, ten years before the fifth ecumenical council, the emperor Justinian I (Emperor from 527–565) convened a local Synod in Constantinople condemning Origen’s heresies in nine anathemas. See Daley, *The Hope of the Early Church*, 47–64, 89–91, 176–78, 188–90. While the council’s conclusions and anathemas (assuming that they actually come from the council) have a clear authority amongst orthodox Christians, the status of Justinian’s nine anathemas is somewhat ambiguous. Presumably they do not have the status of the pronouncement of an ecumenical council. Although the later council’s anathemas did vindicate *most* of what Justinian wrote they do qualify his apparent *blanket* condemnation of *apokatastasis* (see the main text).

¹⁰ For instance, while it is often said that Origen taught the salvation of Satan and demons (e.g., Augustine, *City of God*, 21.17), in fact, he explicitly denied it (see Norris, “Universal Salvation in Origen and Maximus,” 47–50). Part of the problem is that Origen’s work was sometimes ambiguous and, right from the start, was misunderstood by some readers. It also had the potential to be developed in questionable directions. On top of that some of his readers

theology of these *Origenists*—people such as Evagrius of Pontus (346–399), rather than that of Origen himself, that was condemned by Justinian and the council. But neither the council nor the later church made this distinction between Origen and *Origenism*—he was the seed from which the plant had grown, even if it had mutated as it developed—and thus he was condemned, in part, for the theological views of his heirs.¹¹

That aside, the critical question is: what did the council intend to condemn? Universalism *per se* or a specific *kind* of universalism? Let us consider the options:

1. *All forms of universalism?* It seems that many thought that this was so. The fact that a lot of medieval theologians were very cautious about any affirmations of universal salvation suggests that the general opinion was that the church had condemned universalism.
2. The proposal that one can assert that all will *definitely* be saved? Some insist that all that the council rejected was the notion that we can assert universal salvation with absolutely certainty. They argue that while one may *hope* all will be saved, certainty is not permitted.
3. A version of universalism that taught a universal return of pre-existent souls to an original state? This was arguably Origen’s view, but its exclusion does not rule out different versions of *apokatastasis*. This interpretation of the anathemas was defended by Sergius Bulgakov (see chapter 12).

In defense of view 3, let me make the following observations: First, it is clear that when *apokatastasis* is condemned in the fifteen canons it is *always* done so in association with other, problematic, ideas. Thus in anathemas I and XV the concern is with *apokatastasis* as linked with the idea of the pre-existence of souls and an eschatology which sees a simple return of souls to an original unity. In anathema XIV it is *apokatastasis* as associated with an immaterial, pantheistic eschatology. But this is not a condemnation of universalism *as such*. Rather, it is a

and translators felt at liberty to change his texts—even during his own lifetime. We must also remember that Origen lived prior to the flowering of orthodox theology and so some of his speculations did turn out to be dead ends but it would be anachronistic to suggest that he was teaching contrary to the established doctrine of his day. On the contrary, he was insistent that Christian theology must conform to “the rule of faith” and his theological speculations endeavoured to move within those constraints. See Norris, “Origen.”

¹¹ See also Norris, “Universal Salvation in Origen and Maximus.”

condemnation of universalism as linked into a wider, theologically problematic, system of thought. Even Justinian’s anathema IX—an anathema the status of which is ambiguous given that it was not a product of the ecumenical council—which looks like a blanket condemnation of all universalism might, in context,¹² be taken as a condemnation of *Origenist*-universalism.¹³ It seems that when the fifth ecumenical council turned Justinian’s earlier anathemas against Origen into fifteen approved anathemas *they* nuanced it in that way. If Justinian intended a blanket condemnation of universalism it is not at all obvious that this is what the council agreed to.

Second, in support of this interpretation we may note that Gregory of Nyssa (see chapter 3) was known to teach a version of universal salvation that denied the problematic notion of the pre-existence of souls. Neither Gregory nor his teachings are ever condemned. Gregory was highly revered as an orthodox theologian—named the “Father of the Fathers” by the seventh ecumenical council in 787—and remains so to this day. Paul Gavrilyuk writes, “This means, I suppose, that any Orthodox theologian has, shall we say, a canonical loophole to speak of the *apokatastasis a la Nyssa*, not *a la Origen*—an apologetic move that Bulgakov makes.”¹⁴

Third, when the fifth ecumenical council condemned Origen by name in canon XI, the context suggests that christology, and not *apokatastasis*, was the primary concern.

Finally, we might add that none of the central claims of orthodox Christianity, as embodied in the rule of faith or the ecumenical creeds, are incompatible with universalism.¹⁵

Universalism is, at very least, not unorthodox in the sense of being contrary to essential dogma,

¹² By “context” I refer to Justinian’s other anathemas, which, like the council’s fifteen anathemas, are concerned with the pre-existence of souls, the nature of the resurrection, deviant christology, etc. The question is whether Justinian’s anathema IX should be interpreted as a stand-alone condemnation or interpreted in the light of the other anathemas.

¹³ We might also add that universalists do not need to teach that Christ will die again for demons as per Justinian’s anathema VII. I have never come across a universalist who believed this.

¹⁴ Email to me dated 18 Oct 2006.

¹⁵ It is interesting that no creed makes any reference to the punishment of the damned. While “the life of the age to come” is a matter of creedal orthodoxy, the precise fate of the lost is not.

nor in the sense of entailing beliefs which are contrary to such dogma. Indeed some universalists have embraced universalism *precisely because* they feel that it enables them to better hold together important Christian beliefs which stand in awkward tension on more traditional notions of hell (e.g., divine love for creation and divine providence over creation).

So it seems to me plausible to suppose that theologically orthodox versions of universalism can exist.

However, one result of the ambiguity about whether the council had condemned all forms of universalism or simply Origenist *apokatastasis* was that from this point on Christians avoided anything that looked remotely Origenist. In the western church this impulse was reinforced by the enormous influence of Augustine’s theology, which was emphatic about the eternal conscious torment of the lost.

Some, such as Maximus the Confessor (580–662), seemed to fly close to the wind at times but always pulled away before getting too close to the “dangers” of *apokatastasis*. Those, like Julian of Norwich (1342–1416), who seemed to incline towards universalism did so very circumspectly (see chapter 4). The thinker who came closest to a version of universalism was Irish Christian neo-Platonist John Scotus Eriugena (815–877), but even here it is not totally clear that he went all the way. Thus it was that universalism more or less disappeared from the scene of orthodox Christianity until after the Protestant Reformation. The Reformers opened the door for individual believers to interpret the Bible for themselves and, amongst those that did, a few came to affirm some kind of universal salvation.

Is universalism the true Christian faith?

We do not know what ordinary Christian believers in the early church thought about issues such as universalism—probably all sorts of different things. Augustine, however, offers us a clue that universalism was popular amongst certain sections of Christians. He wrote:

In vain, then, that some, indeed very many, moan over the eternal punishment, and perpetual, uninterrupted torments of the lost, and say that they do not believe it shall be so; not, indeed, that they directly oppose themselves to Holy Scripture, but at the suggestion of their own feelings, they soften down everything that seems hard, and give them a milder turn to statements which they think are rather designed to terrify than to be received as literally true. For “Has God,” they say, “forgotten to be gracious? Has He in anger shut up his tender mercies?”¹⁶

Notice that the number of those who rejected an everlasting hell are said to be “very many.” Note also that this rejection is *not* understood to be a rejection of the Bible but rather of a particular interpretation of it (one Augustine thinks has been led astray by sentimentalism). Elsewhere he writes that he must “have a gentle disputation with certain tender hearts of our own religion, who think that God, who has justly doomed the condemned into hell fire, will after a certain space, which his goodness shall think fit for the merit of each man’s guilt, deliver them from that torment.”¹⁷

These “very many” tender hearted Christians were clearly universalists. So was J. W. Hanson correct in arguing that universalism was the prevailing doctrine of the early church?¹⁸ Is universalism in fact the more original, purer Christian doctrine, and are Augustine and his heirs the real heretics? No.

First of all, Christian doctrine is not decided by a vote of believers at a particular moment in time—if it were so there then Arianism would have some claim to be Christian dogma rather than heresy. Second, it is simply wrong to claim that universalism was the prevailing belief for

¹⁶ Augustine, *Enchiridion*, 112.

¹⁷ Augustine, *The City of God*, 21.17.

¹⁸ Hanson, *Universalism, the Prevailing Doctrine*.

the first five hundred years of the Christian church. Setting aside the Bible itself (the interpretation of which is part of the disagreement), we have plenty of evidence for Christian belief in eternal torment and in annihilation from the second century onwards.¹⁹ Aside from a couple of hints in an early belief in the possibility of salvation from hell,²⁰ the first *fairly* clear evidence of universalism comes from Clement of Alexandria (c.150–c.215).²¹ And even once universalism appeared on the Christian scene and was embraced by several prominent believers it was never the majority view of the leaders of the church. To claim that universalism is the purer, original Christianity from which later Christians, under the influence of paganism, deviated is absurd. And when one considers the history of the church as a whole, universalism has clearly been a minority view even in its “popular” phases. It has never had the status of a fundamental Christian teaching—not even for those who, like Origen and Gregory of Nyssa, believed it! Consequently to suggest that non-universalists are rejecting an important Christian dogma is just plain bonkers!²²

Universalism as theologoumena

Universalism, I suggest, occupies a middle ground between dogma and heresy. It is neither a teaching that all orthodox believers are expected to adhere to (in the way that the Trinity, or the union of deity and humanity in the one person of Christ are), nor one that they must avoid at all costs. Perhaps the most appropriate category to employ is that of *theologoumena*.

¹⁹ A read of Brian Daley’s survey of eschatology in the early church should be enough to settle this issue. See Daley, *The Hope of the Early Church*.

²⁰ *Sibylline Oracles* II.404–15; *Apocalypse of Peter* 15.1 (Rainer fragment).

²¹ See Harmon, *Every Knee Should Bow*, chapter 2.

²² This is not to say that a universalist is not at liberty to argue that non-universalists might hold beliefs about hell that appear to be inconsistent with fundamental Christian teachings about, for instance, God’s love, justice, or providence.

Theologoumena are pious opinions that are consistent with Christian dogmas. They are neither required nor forbidden. To see universalism in the category of *theologoumena* means that one cannot preach universalism as “*the* Christian view” or “the faith of the church,” but it also means that one *may* believe in it and one may also develop a universalist version of Christian theology.

It is not uncommon for theologians to suggest that if *apokatastasis* is a matter of *theologoumena* then, although one is permitted to *hope* that God will save everybody one must not go beyond this tentative faith to assert that God *certainly will* save all. Several of the authors in this book take the view that a *convinced* universalism²³ is not appropriate. My purpose here is not to evaluate the case for the view that “hopeful universalism” is theologically legitimate while “convinced universalism” is not. That is a theological discussion that needs to be undertaken in its own terms (and, for what it is worth, I confess to finding the theological case against “convinced universalism” to be unpersuasive). My focus here is on the more limited question of *whether the status of universalism as theologoumena entails that confident universalism is out of place*. If I may be permitted to speak for myself (and not on behalf of all the other authors in this book), I can see no reason at all to think that it does. There are plenty of matters that are *theologoumena* about which a believer may hold strong convictions. For instance, if universalism is *theologoumena* then so is its denial, yet it is rarely suggested that a firm conviction that some people will be lost forever is in some way unorthodox (though one may argue that it is theologically inappropriate²⁴). Indeed most Christians throughout history have had precisely such a conviction and have felt at perfect liberty to preach it. When I say that universalism, like

²³ I now prefer the terminology of “convinced universalism” to that I used previously of “dogmatic universalism” (see the introduction to Parry and Partridge, *Universal Salvation?*) simply because the word “dogma” has certain associations in discussions of orthodoxy that I do not intend to apply to universalism.

²⁴ As chapter 16 makes clear, Hans Urs von Balthasar did think that both a strong declaration of universalism *and of its denial* were presumptuous. In this he was consistent but even Balthasar, so far as I am aware, did not think that a strong declaration of the denial of universalism was *outside the bounds of orthodoxy*. If he had then the vast majority of Christians, past and present, were not simply mistaken but also unorthodox.

its denial, is *theologumena* I mean simply that it is an issue about which Christians can legitimately disagree within the boundaries of orthodox Christianity. So while I have no problem with some universalists affirming no more than a hopeful universalism I can see no good reason to suppose that Christian orthodoxy *per se demands* such hesitancy. It seems to me that the question of whether universalists may be “convinced universalists” or must restrict themselves to being merely “hopeful universalists” is itself a matter of *theologumena*. There is a case to be made both ways, but even though one view may be more theologically appropriate than the other—and which view that is an issue on which the authors of this book do not agree—neither view is outside the bounds of orthodoxy. Speaking for myself, I have no qualms about saying that I am a convinced universalist. I do believe that the proposition “God will save everyone through Christ” is a true proposition and consequently I think that those who disagree with it are mistaken. However, what I *do not* believe is that those who disagree with it (i.e. almost everybody) are unorthodox, unchristian, unkind, unspiritual, or . . . unclever. Similarly, while I have never preached or taught universalism in a church context, if I were to do so I would not claim, “This is the Christian teaching,” or “This is fundamental doctrine,” or “This is the faith of the church.” I would say, “This is an issue on which devout Christians disagree, but here is what I believe and this is why I believe it. You must judge for yourselves, before God.”

None of this is to suggest that the issue is a matter of indifference, nor that Christians should not debate about the issue—even vigorously. It is simply to relocate the discussion from being a debate between “the orthodox” and “the heretics,” and to see it as an in-house theological disagreement; indeed to see it as an issue that Christians, while they might disagree about it, should not divide over.

The variety of Christian universalisms

Elhanan Winchester and John Murray were contemporaries—both universalists and both living *relatively* close to each other in eighteenth-century America. So it is no surprise that they had some contact with each other; first through letters and then meeting face to face. At first Murray was thrilled by Winchester but he began to have his doubts. Their universalisms had different theological roots and consequently took different shapes. As time went on some tensions began to show. For instance, Murray, being a good disciple of James Rely (see chapter 6), believed that Christ had taken all the eschatological punishment of all humanity upon himself at Calvary. Consequently, nobody would go to hell.²⁵ Winchester, on the other hand, made much of the fate—albeit a *temporary* fate—of the lost in hell. He felt that the biblical warnings of eschatological judgment were “an insuperable bar to the opinions of those who deny a future state of retribution, which I think impossible for them to answer fairly.”²⁶ Was he thinking of John Murray?

They continued to work together but at something of a distance. Murray had some periodic input to Winchester’s congregation in Philadelphia while Winchester was away in London. Yet when Murray visited his mother in London during the time that Winchester was leading a church there, the evidence suggests that he did not go to see him.²⁷

This story neatly illustrates the fact that universalism is not a single system but can take different shapes, and it raises the issue of the diverse genealogies of universalism. Let me make some observations about this.

²⁵ John Murray never set out his view systematically in writing. But the patient reader can easily glean them from reading through his *Letters and Sketches of Sermons*.

²⁶ Winchester, *Universal Restoration*, Dialogue IV, Answer 10. Similarly, he later objects to “those who suppose that all the human race shall be admitted into the kingdom of heaven on the day of judgement” (UR.DIV.A13).

²⁷ Our evidence on Winchester’s side for this period is very thin but Murray left a detailed account of his visit to England and it makes no mention of Winchester (see Murray, *Life of John Murray*).

Winchester and Murray were two of the leaders of churches that were officially universalist and were part of the foundation for what soon became a universalist denomination. For the first time in Christian history we see the denominational institutionalization of universalism.²⁸ The universalist churches provided structures for passing on universalist theologies from generation to generation. However, prior to the eighteenth century—and still now in mainstream Christianity—universalism has had a more precarious existence. There have been no reliable channels to secure its passing on from one generation to another. Consequently, we observe two things about its perpetuation: its constant “spontaneous” reinvention, and its, sometimes complex, genealogical lines of descent.

Reinventing universalism

Throughout Christian history, but most especially since the seventeenth century, universalism keeps being “reinvented.” We can illustrate this from the eighteenth century again. Here I will introduce three different people who all appear to have come to universalist convictions without having been taught them by anyone else.

George De Benneville (1703–1793)

George De Benneville, the son of Huguenot refugees from France, was born and brought up in the royal court in London. After a period of mental anguish over his sinful state, he had a profound conversion experience—a revelation of God’s love and grace in Christ. This experience made him both an avid evangelist and a universalist.

His expansive views of divine grace set him at odds with the Huguenot community he had grown up in and as a result he was cast out. So, aged seventeen, he travelled to France and

²⁸ I ought to add that, from the start, denominational universalism was theologically heterodox, embracing not merely universalism but also unitarianism.

later to Germany and Holland to preach the gospel. He joined with like-minded believers setting up pietistic communities, was thrown into prison on several occasions, and once was only saved from execution by a *literally* last-minute reprieve from Louis XV.

At the age of thirty-seven (c.1740) De Benneville had a vivid and profound near-death visionary experience. He “became sickly of consumptive disorder” resulting from his deep anguish over the fate of the unsaved. The sickness brought him to death’s door and then to his life-changing universalist vision.²⁹ Here we have an example of a man that became a universalist on the basis of a couple of profound religious experiences that ran counter to his religious upbringing.

Charles Chauncey (1705–1787)

Charles Chauncy, the son of a prosperous Boston merchant, went to Harvard College—of which his great-grandfather had been the second president—at the age of twelve to study theology. In 1727 he was ordained and installed as co-pastor of Boston’s First Church, where he remained until he died in 1787. He obtained a reputation through his controversial writing. The topics he wrote on included (a) criticizing what he saw as the extravagancies of the “Great Awakening,” (b) defending congregational forms of church government, and (c) affirming certain “unorthodox” theological convictions (amongst them universalism and doubts concerning the doctrine of the Trinity). His universalism was first made public in a sermon in 1762 titled “All Nations Blessed in Christ” but it was not until 1784 that his book-length defense of universalism—*The Salvation of All Men*—was published. It is the most scholarly of all eighteenth-century defenses of universalism and remains worthy of serious reflection. The heart of Chauncey’s case is composed of arguments for what he sees as key biblical-theological

²⁹ De Benneville’s testimony, written in 1782, was translated from French into English by Elhanan Winchester and published in London in 1791 (against De Benneville’s wishes). Winchester considered De Benneville a man of “piety, humility, benevolence, and universal good character.”

principles that establish universalism (in the process, offering very detailed and scholarly—though sometimes idiosyncratic—exegetical studies of Rom 5:12–21; 8:19–23; and 1 Cor 15:24–28). The final section of his book considers standard objections and offers responses.

What led Chauncy to reject eternal conscious torment in favor of universalism? Clearly the influence of the Enlightenment freed him up to be prepared to challenge tradition; but he was no Bible-rejecting liberal. In fact, he took the normative role of Scripture as a given and his book was simply an attempt to expound what he saw as the *real* teaching of the Bible; teaching that he believed had been obscured by tradition. So which Bible teachers guided Chauncy to this view? According to his own testimony it seems that he was led to universalism simply through his own Bible studies on the issue.³⁰ The distinctive shape of his arguments makes this claim plausible. So in Chauncy’s case we have another spontaneous eruption of universalist thinking but one with a quite different foundation.

James Rely (1722–1778)

Finally, consider James Rely. As Rely is the subject of chapter 6 I shall be brief. Rely was one of George Whitfield’s converts and evangelistic preachers. It appears that he was troubled by theological difficulties with the popular evangelical accounts of penal substitutionary atonement. The standard objection to the idea that God punished Christ for our sins was that: (a) punishing an innocent person for the crimes of someone else and (b) failing to punish the guilty person, were quite simply *unjust*. Rely came up with a solution to this problem, and it involved a strong doctrine of union with Christ. Christ unites himself with humanity in such a way that he *really takes our sins upon himself* and is not “innocent” of them. And humanity is united to Christ in such a way that when he dies, *we really die “in him.”* This, to Rely’s mind, solved the problem

³⁰ He tells us, in the preface of *The Salvation of All Men*, that he was influenced in his thinking by the Rev. John Taylor of Norwich; but this was more at the level of a general approach to the interpretation of Scripture rather than in a direct influence on his universalism. Rev Taylor, Chauncy tells us, explicitly *denied* universalism.

of divine justice and the atonement. One implication of his system, however, was that *all humanity was already saved*—they simply did not yet realize it. So we find universalism spontaneously “reinvented” again. This time not on the basis of religious experiences (as with De Benneville), nor on the basis of rigorous exegetical biblical studies (as with Chauncy), but on the basis of basis of systematic theological reflections (albeit ones with biblical roots).

I would suggest that one of the reasons that universalism seems able to keep spontaneously reappearing, even when it is not taught, is that it is rooted in some fundamental Christian and biblical convictions. I am not claiming that Scripture or Christian theology require people to be universalists—far from it—but I would suggest that certain Christian beliefs and certain biblical texts *seem to point* in that direction and thus the potential for some form of universalism to burst forth is ever-present. Christian universalism is most fundamentally motivated not by mere sentimentalism nor by pagan philosophy (though both have had influence on some versions of universalism) but by currents within Christian Scripture, tradition, praxis, reason, and experience.³¹ Whether such currents are best followed to universalist conclusions is another matter, but that they sometimes have been and probably will continue to be seems clear.

Genealogies of universalism

Another feature of universalism is the creation of different “family lines” through the passing on of the teaching (whether through books, sermons, informal discussions, or formal church structures). We can illustrate this using a couple of the characters mentioned above.

The De Benneville “family tree”

³¹ To take Clement, Origen, and Gregory of Nyssa to illustrate the point: While Stoicism and neo-Platonism clearly influenced their theologies; the Bible played a decisive role in shaping their universalisms. On this claim see Harmon, *Every Knee Should Bow*.

At the age of thirty-eight De Benneville moved to America and lived in Germantown, near Philadelphia, where he worked as a physician. Alongside his medicine he continued on preaching tours in Pennsylvania and New Jersey until he died of a stroke in 1793.

De Benneville transmitted the heritage of German Pietist religious communities and the European Radical Reformation (of the Schwenkfelder tradition) to a wider American public. He also translated Paul Siegvolk’s book *The Everlasting Gospel* into English. This book, as I have already mentioned, fell into the hands of Elhanan Winchester and it played a key role in his conversion to universalism. Winchester’s subsequently made contact with De Benneville and they shared fellowship between 1781 and 1787. The shape of Winchester’s theology owed a lot to this pietistic version of universalism (chapter 7). Winchester himself then went on to publish on the topic and his books, in turn, converted William Vidler (1758–1816)—an English Particular Baptist minister—to the cause. Vidler then went on to be an influential universalist teacher in England continuing the “family line.”

The Relly “family tree”

As chapter 6 makes clear, James Relly’s most celebrated convert was John Murray (1741–1815). Murray had grown up as a boy in the heart of the evangelical Methodism, knowing both George Whitfield and John Wesley personally. He ended up worshipping at Whitfield’s tabernacle in London and, while there, converted to Rellyism, being persuaded by Relly’s biblical and theological arguments. Eventually Murray left England for America and, against his intentions, became a preacher of universalism. Over many years he worked tirelessly and against much opposition, to the detriment of his health, becoming the pastor of the first universalist church in

America (in Gloucester, Massachusetts).³² Murray never claimed to have rediscovered universalism but simply to have transmitted the teachings of his mentor. His gospel message was a faithful development of Rely's own thought. As it happens, while his ministry bore fruit for a while and he left his mark on American universalism, his distinctive Calvinist mode of universalism quickly faded and that short-lived informal “family tree” was extinguished.

And these are just two traditions within universalism. Another recurring tradition is that of the neo-Platonic Christianity of the Alexandrian school. Throughout Christian history, but especially since the seventeenth century, whenever neo-Platonism and/or Clement, Origen, or Gregory of Nyssa are “rediscovered” one finds them having some level of influence on small-scale “revivals” of Christian universalism. That neo-Platonic influence might be strong (as was the case with Cambridge Platonists Peter Sterry and Jeremiah White—see chapter 5) or weak (as was the case with various nineteenth-century universalists).

And the above simply illustrates the neater side of the lines of transmission for universalist theology. Often, the picture was much more complex, as is clear from, for instance, chapter 9. There Don Horrocks traces the different threads that influenced Thomas Erskine's universalism and, in turn, the way in which his thinking became one of several different interweaving influences on late nineteenth century universalism. The role of literature—both ancient and modern—and personal friendships and acquaintances played their part in both the perpetuation and the transformation of universalist theologies.

³² Murray's autobiography is a truly fascinating insight into eighteenth-century evangelicalism and his own universalist ministry.

The diversity of universalism

The different roots and family trees of universalism inevitably mean that Christian universalists, while having much in common, will often disagree on a whole range of issues. Consider the following:

Biblical interpretation

The interpretation of key biblical texts relating to the issues of hell and universalism have been handled differently by different universalists. Take the “hell” texts. How should they be handled?

1. *Try to show how they are compatible with universalism?* This is the classical approach of Christian universalists, although it has been done in various ways. For instance,

(a) The hell texts are argued to be consistent with a *temporary* fire from which all will eventually exit. This is the mainstream historic view. But even here some would see the fire as purgative suffering, while others would see it as more “educative” suffering that has no salvific power in itself, but instead exposes the reality of sin and leads people towards divine grace. The idea that suffering in hell was a mode of divine education, motivated by love, was especially prominent amongst nineteenth century universalists. Some would see retribution as *part* of the reason for the punishment, while others would deny retribution any role.

(b) The “hell” texts are *not* about a postmortem hell at all but about historical divine judgments on Jerusalem.³³

(c) The hell texts describe not the fate of individuals, but of the sinful nature within each individual.

2. *Hold them in tension with universalist texts?* This is a more modern strategy, and quite how that creative tension will work might vary. Consider the following:

(a) John A. T. Robinson (see chapter 15) believed that the Bible-reader is not called to harmonize the universalist passages with the eternal hell passages (they are not consistent). But nor are readers free to reject one teaching or the other. Both are essential to vital Christianity. The hell texts confront people with a real existentially possible fate in their moment of decision even if, in the end, none will experience that fate.

³³ As this view is not represented by the case studies in this book, see Ansell, “Hell: The Nemesis of Hope?”

(b) Several universalists use the tension as one reason for being “hopeful” rather than “confident” universalists. The hell texts stop of from asserting with certainty that all will *definitely* be saved. Universal salvation can therefore only be asserted as a possible, and hoped-for, outcome.

3. *Reject them as sub-Christian?* This is a much more recent strategy by some universalists who feel that certain biblical texts *really do* teach eternal conscious torment but that we are not bound to agree with them.

Exclusivism / inclusivism / pluralism

Christian universalists will agree that the salvation of all people is achieved through Jesus Christ, but they will not agree on *how* people might be saved through Jesus. Some will be *exclusivists* and will maintain that a person can only experience salvation through Jesus if they have explicit faith in him and thus belong to the church. (Obviously this scheme requires that many come to God through Christ *after death*.)

Others will be *inclusivists* and will allow that a person might be saved through Christ’s atoning work without explicit faith in him—indeed, they may not even have heard of him. So long as they respond with faith and humility to the true, even if very limited, revelation that they have received then God’s grace can reach them.

One of the subjects of this volume—John Hick (chapter 17)—is a *pluralist* and believes that “God” will “save” people through all religious traditions and that Christ is only one route of salvation (he is the “savior” of Christian believers). Hick’s universalist explorations began within the bounds of Christian theology and were originally justified in part on the basis of Christian theological criteria;³⁴ but his move towards pluralism took him beyond *Christian* universalism into something incompatible with orthodox Christian theology.

The atonement

³⁴ Though we should note that, even in his earliest work, Hick’s Christian theology was underpinned by a more fundamental Kantian philosophy that, in the end, eroded the Christian parts of his theology. See chapter 17 and Sinkinson, *The Universe of Faiths*.

Christian universalists will typically agree that Jesus died for all and that, on this foundation, all will be saved.³⁵ However, bearing in mind the different views of the atonement within Christianity in general, it should not surprise us that there is no agreed account of how it is that Christ’s atoning work saves.

Some universalists really say very little about how the cross-resurrection of Christ might relate to the issue of universalism. Some make much of the cross-resurrection as the basis for universalism but have no *clear* account of *how* it works or *why* it is necessary (although, to be fair, the Bible is not unambiguous on this matter either). Some have made a specific doctrine such as penal substitution central to their account of universalism while others have fiercely rejected penal substitutionary accounts of atonement.

Divine justice

Related to this is the issue of how we think of divine justice. Is it primarily retributive, punishing sin *because that is what sin deserves*? Or is it a saving and restorative justice punishing sin in order to redeem people from it? Or is it perhaps both?³⁶

Satan’s salvation

On the issue of the salvation of demonic powers we also see disagreement. Some universalists deny that Satan and his demons will be saved; others affirm that they shall be; others are agnostic. Still others do not believe that Satan and demons are individual persons that can be either lost or saved.

³⁵ Although, in the case of Origen’s universalism, the incarnation seems to play a more important role than the cross (see chapter 2). Precisely how the cross functioned in his universalist scheme is not clear, and the fact that so much of his work is no longer extant makes it impossible to be sure whether or not he ever explored the issue more fully.

³⁶ Note that, as an aside, it is perhaps worth pointing out that, while most universalists—both those who see justice as retributive and those who do not—have rejected the idea of hell as eternal, conscious torment, it is not essential for a universalist to do so. It is perfectly possible for a universalist who (a) took a retributive view justice and punishment, and (b) was persuaded by the arguments for the justice of eternal punishment, and of (c) a penal substitutionary account of the atonement, to argue as follows:

(1) sin deserves to be punished by eternal torment; and
(2) Christ bore that infinite penalty on the cross, so nobody else will ever suffer that fate.

The certainty of universalism

Some universalists—indeed the majority—believe that the salvation of all is a certain outcome, while others believe that it is a *possible* outcome but not one that can be affirmed with confidence. They maintain that we must always be careful to allow for the “impossible possibility” that some may, in the end, reject God (this view is especially helpfully presented in chapters 12 and 16).³⁷

Freedom

All universalists believe that humans have freewill, but they disagree on how this is compatible with God getting his saving will done in the end. Some simply do not address the issue and leave it as an unresolved tension for God to sort out. Others believe that human freedom is compatible with divine determinism and thus freedom is no obstacle for God getting his will done. Many others would believe that human freedom is not compatible with determinism (divine or otherwise) but that God still has ways to work with human freedom to bring about a situation in which all freely choose salvation. Exactly what those ways are will differ from one account to another. Still others would object that we elevate human freedom too high if we see it as something that God must bow the knee to *no matter what the cost*.

To this list one could also add different view on election, Scripture, sin, christology, Trinity, ecclesiology, the millennium, God’s relation to time, and so on, and so forth (and different approaches to how universalism interweaves with such theological loci). Universalists can exist anywhere on the conservative–liberal spectrum. Some are theological conservatives while others are more theologically liberal. And in terms of ecclesial affiliation, setting aside the

³⁷ The reasons for avoiding certainty typically include reasons such as the following: (a) the biblical texts do not speak with sufficient clarity to allow certainty; (b) we must not infringe on God’s sovereignty and we must therefore allow him space in our theology not to save all; (c) to protect human freedom we cannot have a theology that says that all will *inevitably* choose salvation.

obvious—though unorthodox—Unitarian Universalist congregations, we find Catholics, Orthodox, Anglicans, Baptists, Congregationalists, Independents, Reformed, Pietists, Presbyterians, Quakers, Pentecostals, etc., etc. Christian universalism never has been a monolithic system to be taken off the shelf and adopted. We will explore some of this diversity through a range of case studies.

Soundings

Returning now to the issue of the studies that follow: this book makes no claims to discuss all the key universalist thinkers but simply aims to provide sample explorations. In fact, there are quite a few notable “missing persons” from the list of subjects. Even if we do restrict ourselves to non-universalist churches, the following spring immediately to mind as those with universalist inclinations of *some* variety or other: Clement of Alexandria (c.150–c.215), Maximus the Confessor (580–662), John Scotus Eriugena (c.810–662), George Rust (d.1670), Ann Conway (d.1679), Jane Lead (1623–1704), James Fraser of Brea (1639–1699), Johann Wilhelm Petersen (1649–1727), William Law (1686–1761), Charles Chauncy (1705–1787), John Murray (1741–1815), Judith Sargent Murray (1761–1820), Johann Christoph Blumhardt (1805–1880), Christoph Friedrich Blumhardt (1842–1919), Andrew Jukes (1815–1901), Samuel Cox (1826–1893), Thomas Allin (nineteenth century), Hannah Whitall Smith (1832–1911), Herbert H. Farmer (1892–1981), Karl Rahner (1904–1984), Marilyn McCord Adams (1943–), and Thomas Talbott (1941–). And there are a growing number of thinkers exploring the possibilities of universalism with increasing theological sophistication.³⁸

³⁸ See, for instance, David Congdon, *The God Who Saves: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, forthcoming 2013) which will be, to the best of my knowledge, the first book-length systematic theological exploration of universalism ever published. It will represent a Reformed version of universalism.

But all that is to speak of what is *not* in this book. What we offer are seventeen case studies on universalist thinkers. Most were overt, convinced universalists, others were hopeful universalists, while a couple explicitly *denied* being universalists (P. T. Forsyth and Karl Barth). We have included the latter because, arguably, the logic of their theology led clearly in universalist directions and one might be justified in wondering whether their denial of universalism was a failure to follow the logic of their own theology to its conclusion (and chapters 11 and 13 in this book argue that this was indeed so for both these particular theologians). Even if that is not the case, their theology has much of value for more explicit universalists to engage with.

Whatever readers may feel about universalism everyone will find numerous points of agreement and disagreement with the thinkers that are discussed in the chapters that follow. It is my hope that, if nothing else, this book can play some small role in bringing into the light a diverse minority-tradition that deserves both more attention and more respect as an authentically Christian attempt at faith seeking understanding.

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