

<http://www.carm.org/mark-328-29-and-universalism>

Before I start, I want to emphasize in Matt's favor that he may very well address some or all of my critiques in other articles or posts elsewhere. Any critiques should be considered restricted to this article and its scope of presentation only.

[quote="Matt Slick"]The universalist states that there is no unforgiveable sin because all people who have ever lived will ultimately be reconciled to God; in other words, all sins from all people who have ever lived will be forgiven.[/quote]

Most universalists do go this distance, but those of us who do, do so only because we believe God revealed the final success of this in the scriptures. That includes me, but a revelation of final success isn't strictly necessary for universalism to still be basically true. A final stalemate would work just as well in principle. This is due to the principle distinctions between universalism (or "Kath" as I often abbreviate it for convenience) and either Arminianistic doctrines on one hand ("Arm" for convenient abbreviation) or Calvinistic doctrines ("Calv") on the other. (By these designations, I do not mean to exclude similar types of belief in Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox or other non-Western-Protestant Christian groups. I only mean to reference broad categories of soteriology represented, as it happens, by the Protestants Calvin and Arminius.)

Put shortly, if God intends and acts to save all people from sin (as Arm scholars broadly agree, despite other differences within that category), [u]and[/u] if God continually persists in acting to save all those He intends to save (as Calv scholars broadly agree, despite other differences within that category), then some kind of universalism

(distinct from Calv or Arm theology types) must be true. In theory, God could continue to act evangelically toward the repentance of sinners who, as it happens, shall never ever repent despite the omniscience of God.

Most universalists, though, find that it doesn't take vast amounts of faith to trust that the omniscient God will succeed someday in saving those He intends to save. We would bet on God, not on sinners, even if we didn't think the scriptures revealed God's eventual triumph in this matter. This is especially important to mention in regard to Calvinistic anti-universalist apologetics, such as what Matt Slick (hereafter MattS or Matt) is attempting in his article: Kathes agree with Calvs (whether Reformed Protestant Augustinians, or Roman Catholic Augustinians!) in trusting God to persist and to succeed in saving from sin all those whom God intends to save from sin. Our disagreement is about the scope of God's actions and intentions, including the quality of varying intentions, depending on the specific mode of Calv soteriology. Some Calvs teach that God never remotely even intended to love the non-elect, others go a little further in allowing some kind of love from God to the non-elect but not of course any kind of saving love whatever; others may go a bit further still and allow some kind of saving concern on God's part, but no action on God's part to save. However, Calvs who go this far tend to be denounced by less rampantly "liberal" Calvs, for trending into Arminianism!--or more pertinently, for encroaching on universalism.

This is an important point of tension between Calvs and Arms (and Kathes, on the Arm side this time); because if Calvs allowed that God ever acted in [u]any[/u] meaningful way to save all sinners, not only the elect, then their doctrine of persistence

in salvation would instantly add up to universalism. The same goes for Arns the other way around, of course, in regard to denying persistence but affirming the scope.

At any rate, it is now important to distinguish between two basic subcategories of universalist: ultra-universalists who believe in no post-mortem punishment at all, even with a goal toward repentance, and purgatorial universalists who acknowledge (in various ways among ourselves) post-mortem punishment with a goal toward repentance. Among ultra-u's, there are those who believe God will work salvation without any need for repentance, and those who believe God will (I don't know any other way to put it) work a repentance in all sinners without all (or perhaps any) sinners having to contribute any active repenting of sin themselves. This should be, but isn't always, distinguished from God healing us of natural proclivities to sin through the resurrection. Hardcore ultra-u's indeed typically expect all reconciliation to occur by the healing of our sin nature at resurrection, leaving over no inclination to sin at all--so why would anyone continue to sin?! Repentance by the person naturally follows after the fact of them being made truly righteous (not merely legally righteous as a convenient fiction). Other universalists (even among ultra-u's) aren't quite so optimistic about all sin being only the result of previously existent tendencies to sin. Be that as it may, again there are several similarities here between universalists, especially ultra-u's of various sorts, and Calvin theologians on how God's persistence to save may expect to succeed.

Aside from hard-core ultra-u's, however, universalists agree (with most Calvs, aside from

any who may effectively deny repentance to salvation in any way) that without repentance there can be no salvation from sin. So long as a person insists on persisting in doing what they themselves know to be wrong, there obviously cannot be forgiveness for that sin. For other sins yes, but not for that (or for those, if there is more than one such persistence).

Now, Calvin theologians are typically very well aware of this principle. It fits in quite well enough with their notions of the elect, the non-elect, and God's relation to both groups, especially through the activity of the Holy Spirit. Without the operation of the Holy Spirit in the life of the person leading them to repentance, there can be no repentance; and without repentance (in whatever way that may be truly and correctly understood) there can be no forgiveness and thus no salvation from sin. Indeed, without the operation of the Holy Spirit, a person cannot even have the ability to repent of sin, completely aside from when or how this ability is ever exercised.

Universalists across the board agree with Calvin (and with Arminius, for that matter--more so even in that case, as will be seen) that the Holy Spirit acts to convict all people concerning sin, concerning righteousness and concerning judgment. (Calvin, just like Luther and Arminius, also believe the 3rd Person does more than this, of course.) There may be a few Calvinists who deny this, but typically they don't, since aside from outright denying John 16:8-11 they would leave their theology with nothing even approaching a fair ground for condemnation. They might try to deny that God convicts the non-elect concerning righteousness (and maybe split the conviction of "the world" or {ho kosmos}, all creation, in some other way so

that the elect are not convicted of judgment and sin); but doing so will leave them no position for sensibly talking about blasphemy against the Holy Spirit--especially in the context of Mark 3:22-27, Matt 12:24-29, and Luke 11:15-20.

Jesus complains not that His Pharisaical opponents are making a mistake, or even that they are only blaspheming against Himself. His complaint is that they are willfully contradicting what they themselves believe and profess to be true, in order to oppose Him. This is no mere mistake of wrong belief; this is blatant cheating in order to hate Jesus without a cause. (John 15:22-25, where the Holy Spirit is also called the Spirit of Truth.) They are not judging fairly; they are acting directly against as much of the light as they can truly see (cf John 3:19-21, which has more than a little connection to the operation of the Spirit in prior context, including back at the prologue of John); they have no concern with, and are acting against, fair-togetherness: the compound word in Greek {dikaiosune} that we translate into English as "righteousness".

It should be clear enough that their blasphemy against (or in the face of, as GosMark implies) the Holy Spirit is also against the conviction of righteousness in their hearts by the light of the Holy Spirit. If they actually were blind, they would have no sin; the light that enlightens every man, is what and Who they are sinning against. They are willingly and impenitently cheating in order to avoid having to be fair to Jesus in their judgment of Him.

And the vast majority of Kathes would agree, with the vast majority (or even all?) Calvs, that unless they repent of that sin there can be no forgiveness for them, neither now nor in the age to come.

So much for agreements; at this point the disagreements between Calvs and Kath's more broadly speaking begin. And just as there can be differences among Calvs about whether one of the elect (like St. Paul or St. Peter) can sin against the Holy Spirit and yet be forgiven, universalists have disagreements among ourselves as to how best interpret this connotations of this passage in context of the rest of scripture. (Not even counting Arm theological disagreements on this passage, including among themselves!)

[quote="Matt Slick"]However, if there was a sin that will never be forgiven, the Universalism would be proven wrong.[/quote]

The vast majority of universalists, myself included--even all universalists in some ways--would strenuously agree however, that so long as a person persists in a sin that person cannot be forgiven of that sin, neither in this age nor in the age to come. And the vast majority of universalists, myself included, would believe that unless and until the sinner repents of his sin, he continues in his sin. (A few hardcore ultra-u's would disagree with that, believing that God only has to cure the inclination to sin for all sin to end. We have some on this board, and they are welcome to provide their own comments on this saying from Jesus.)

The key disagreement here is over what it means to never be forgiven; and since universalists (or most of us) can agree in principle that the sin against the Holy Spirit--which involves any insistence on persisting in what is recognized, thanks to the Holy Spirit, as sin--cannot (as such) be forgiven, then the disagreement actually moves to quite

another ground: the same basic ground of disagreement between Calvs and Kath's broadly. Namely, will God persist in saving all sinners from sin (Kath's) or will God persist in saving only some sinners from sin (Calvs)?

And strictly speaking, there is nothing in the Synoptic reports of Jesus' declaration of the unforgivable sin, which lands that question solidly in Calv favor vs. Kath.

There is certainly nothing here or in nearby context (including in Matt's more super-literal report of the Greek of GosMark) saying that God will give up persisting on saving such sinners from their sin, if He has chosen to act to save them from sin at all. If there was, it would be very hard to explain the case of St. Peter, who goes so far as to curse himself in blaspheming to save himself! God leads him, and other such sinners, to repentance; Calvs would say God elected to do so (and Kath's and Arms would agree, of course, though not meaning exactly the same notion by 'election'.)

Nor is there anything here or nearby context indicating that the supposedly hopeless condemnation of the sin against the Holy Spirit applies only to people whom God authoritatively decided never to even intend to act to save: the Calv non-elect. That notion might be read [u]into[/u] the text from somewhere else, but it isn't being read [u]out of[/u] the text. And I think here the Arms would have an advantage over Calv interpretations anyway. The sin against the light pretty much requires that the Holy Spirit is acting to enlighten the man, particularly in regard to fair-togetherness, which the man is himself resisting. That kind of enlightenment is extremely difficult to square with Calvinist notions of

election and non-election. If the Holy Spirit was not seriously trying to enlighten the man regarding righteousness, the man would still be blind and so would be without sin--much like rocks, plants or at best mere animals. The Holy Spirit must be trying to get the man to see. Now, it may be that if the man chooses instead to squint shut his eyes (and stop up his ears and harden his heart) against the light, God will then act to confirm him in that choice for some period of time. But on Calvin's principles of persistence, that time won't be forever; otherwise God would have never sent any of the good of the Spirit of Truth into his heart in the first place! Far from nailing shut a case against universalism, the sin against the Holy Spirit actually implies some kind of universalism, if the persistence of God is true, to save those in whom He acts to receive even enough light for them to responsibly and culpably reject it.

Arms, reading in a lack of persistence, have an inherently stronger case in relation to their theology. But they still have to read it in: there is nothing specifically saying that God will cease acting to bring such sinners to repentance; and nothing saying that such sinners will necessarily (for whatever reason) keep on sinning that way without end ever. The only things actually said are things which, in context, can be commonsensically agreed on by everyone in principle, whether Calvin or Arm or Kath: those who willfully sin against the very Spirit of Truth cannot be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come. This is nothing for a Kath to be worried about, unless the question is silently begged against repentance, and especially against the continuing conviction of the Holy Spirit. (Which would seem more than a little hazardous to insist against, all things considered!)



In short, this saying only works against universalism if a Calv (or Arm!) doctrine against universalism is read [u]into[/u] the saying first.

[quote="Matt Slick"]Verses 28 and 29 are in contrast to each other. Verse 28 says that all sins shall be forgiven. Verse 29 clarifies the statement and flatly says that there is a sin that "never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin."[/quote]

Actually, as Matt's own report of the Greek GosMark text clearly shows, the text doesn't read "never" {oudepote} (which might more easily be construed as shutting off further possibility, though even then not necessarily since the term can also be used conditionally or for hyperbolic emphasis), but simply "not" {ouk}. (The same is true for the other two Synoptic reports, by the way.)

A more accurate translation would be "he does not have forgiveness into the age but is guilty of a sin of an age." (The other two Synoptics make that wording somewhat stronger, though; for example "neither in this age nor in the age to come".)

[quote="Matt Slick"]This sin is [Blasphemy of the Holy Spirit](#) -- which is stating that Jesus did His miracles by the power of the devil.[/quote]

It's more than just that, however, by preceding context of the incident. Merely stating this would be an insult to Jesus, and that can be easily enough forgiven. The soldiers crucifying Jesus, and possibly the crowds around as well, were insulting Jesus far more immediately grievously, but Jesus had already forgiven them Himself and fully expected the Father to do so, too. Jesus' complaint

against His opponents in this scene goes much farther than statements they made. (To be fair, MattS may know this already, and just decided not to mention it for brevity's sake.)

[quote="Matt Slick"]Verse 29 has the contrasting preposition "but", Greek "de."[/quote]

Actually, verse 29 has the minor all-purpose conjunction {de}, which can mean "but", but can also mean "and", "now" (as a topical transition) or "yet". It also has the contrasting preposition "but", Greek {alla}, in its second clause. This is only an incidental technical point, however, even though {de} means "but" less often than "now" or "and"; it doesn't affect MattS's argument, since "but" (or "yet") does make the most contextual sense for {de} in this case.

[quote="Matt Slick"]The use of the word "but" is showing that there is a contrast, or an exception to the previous statement.[/quote]

Certainly true!--but, neither should we forget or discount the extreme scope of the affirmation in verse 28 (echoed, with somewhat different wording, in the other two Synoptics).

It ought to be worth noting, that between the three basic soteriologies, Kathars are the ones who intrinsically have more claim to keeping the extreme emphases of verse 28 in mind. Kathars limit the judgment of verse 29 to something that isn't hopeless, but Calvs and Arms limit the mercy of verse 28 to something that is hopeless. Who then is more likely to be found on the side of mercy rejoicing over judgment?

At any rate, it is the Kath who can say both that he who sins against the Holy Spirit does not have forgiveness, either now nor in the age to come, [u]and also[/u] that all the sins and the blasphemies, [u]however great those blasphemies might be[/u] ("as much as if they might insult"), shall be forgiven to the sons of men. I can easily say both, while keeping in mind that where sin exceeds grace hyperexceeds (for not as the sin is the grace), so long as I understand the unforgiven sin to be the sin that [u]so far[/u] has been unrepented of--and so long as I acknowledge God's gracious and persistent provision for repentance.

If I limit the grace, on the other hand, so as to maximize the sin, I would be found, one way or another, claiming that sin hyperexceeds the grace of God. Which would be very far from good news for anyone--even for the saved.

Put another way, I would rather say, "All sins, no matter how great, can and will be forgiven, including the one that continues persistently on, although that sin cannot be forgiven so long as it is persisted in," (thus implying that this sin shall not be never-endingly persisted at!) than to say (as MattS does), "All sins are forgivable, but blasphemy of the Holy Spirit is not"--which is a direct contradiction in two clauses, and requires mere repudiation of what is far more emphatically said positively. (Admittedly the first verse might be explained as hyperbole. By the same token, so might the other! My interpretation doesn't involve having to treat either verse as hyperbole, notably.)

[quote="Matt Slick"]So, how do the universalists answer this verse? They do it in two ways. First,

they say that the word "aiona", "age" can mean a period of time that ends.[/quote]

Not the way I answered MattS's use of this verse, of course. But maybe he'll address it in the second "way". [Hindsight note: in fact, he won't.]

But, speaking of this way: the typical fashion universalists would appeal to "into the age" in this case, would be that [u]processes or events[/u] described as occurring into or through an age are not [u]themselves[/u] necessarily never-ending, even if the age itself may or may not end. No universalist I am aware of (including the minor variant MattS mentions next) thinks the final Day of the Lord will ever end, for example; so they wouldn't bother appealing to the notion that an age might end in regard to [u]that[/u] age.

[quote="Matt Slick"]But it is big mistake to think that "aiona" always means a finite time.[/quote]

True enough, but few universalists go that route-- even the ones MattS was talking about at the beginning of his paragraph: the ones who appeal to the possibility of "age" meaning less than ever-ongoing duration. Matt has switched categories rather subtly here, as though he is answering Kath's who try to make it [u]always[/u] mean a finite time instead.

[quote="Matt Slick"]It is a conjecture on the Universalists part that the word "age", in [Mark 3:29](#), means a definite period of time that will end. But that isn't the case. As I said, Jesus is contrasting the second statement (unforgivable sin) with the first statement (forgivable sin).[/quote]

And he has completely jumped categories here!--or more accurately, he is circularly begging the question.

MattS is probably well aware that he cannot read a hopeless exclusivity out of "into the age" (maybe not even out of "a sin of an age"--although the grammar in Greek is rather flaky there, making it hard to translate). He admits that context will have to determine the meaning of the term. His contextual appeal, though, is to the contrast between all the greatest imaginable sins being forgiven and the sin against the Holy Spirit not being forgiven! If it turns out (as I argued above) that this contrast isn't as hopelessly ironclad as he needs it to be for this set of verses to count against universalism, where will he appeal for nearby context? He has already hinted how he will do this: the text must say that the sin will never be forgiven, period. Except the text doesn't say that either. But it might be implied from the context of the time cues involved!--except, he is well aware he needs some other context to nail [u]those[/u] references shut to hope. And so we're back to appealing to the contrast between can and will be forgiven and not forgiven (not "unforgivable", by the way.)

Thus as I said above: the non-universalist has to read the non-universalism belief directly [u]into[/u] these verses (or else briefly blink them unreflectively) in order for them to count against universalism. That [u]might[/u] be at least theologically consistent, depending on how it was done. But MattS isn't trying to do so here. (To his credit, he's trying to get it out of immediate and local context. He just isn't succeeding very well.)

[quote="Matt Slick"]Second, the Universalist will go to [Matt. 12:32](#)... They state that "the age to come" is the 1000 year reign of Christ which will end. Therefore, blasphemy of the Holy Spirit will be forgiven after the 1000 year reign [i.e. the "age to come" after "this age"]. They then state that [Mark 3:29](#) must be interpreted in light of [Matt. 12:32](#).[/quote]

There is in fact a minor variant of universalist who strongly endorses a millennial scheme similar to that of the pre-tribulationists, and who argue (not only in regard to these verses but in regard to many scriptural verses) that the final age is actually that of the millennial reign of Christ before the lake of fire judgment and/or the reign of Christ after the lake of fire judgment but before (per 1 Cor 15, which is the real cardinal point of their argument) Christ hands over the kingdom in subjugation to the Father. The concept here is that so long as there are rebels still in existence, then not everyone can be subjected to Christ in any way that God would care about--most importantly, they could not possibly be subject to the Son in the way that the Son will be subjecting Himself to the Father! The Son's subjection to the Father cannot be that of hypocritical subjection to mere force; the subjection of all to Him in the Father must be subjection of the same kind as the Son's subjection to the Father, or God could hardly be said to be all in all.

(Annihilationists can get around this in a way, if all rebels are eventually wiped out of existence so that only loyalists remain; but this doesn't fit very well with the close contextual notion that the final enemy to be destroyed is death itself--a notion that fits better with the idea of the

resurrection and continuing existence of the evil as well as the good.)

I think there's a lot to be said in favor of this view, even if one doesn't necessarily accept the future-history reckoning typically associated with it. But since this isn't the defense I presented above, I'll pass on.

Notably, MattS does not bother addressing the actual lynchpoint of these Kath's, which is to read GosMark in light of GosMatt's version [u]and then[/u] to read both in light of 1 Cor 15:20-28.

Instead of addressing the actual lynchpoint of these universalists, MattS attempts to illustrate why the logic of the universalist [u]must be wrong in any case[/u]. His problems begin with his first point, however, since Mark 3:29 does not in fact state, in the Greek, that the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven--not without reading that position into the verse, creating a question-begging appeal.

His problems multiply, however, by trying to interpret GosMatt 12:32 in light of GosMark 3:29 (when, strangely, he could have just stuck with prior contexts in GosMatt itself!) so as to claim universalists are flatly contradicting GosMark by reading GosMatt in such a way. Even setting aside the fact that Mark 3:29 does not actually read what he insists (against his own report of the Greek) that it does, he opens himself to a goose/gander saucebath of at least the same strength. His illustration could just as easily (and actually more accurately) be rephrased as followed:

1.) Mark 3:28 states that all sins and blasphemies, no matter how great, will be forgiven to the sons of men.

A.) This verse clearly states the impossibility of a flatly unforgivable sin.

2.) Mark 3:29 states that those who blaspheme in (the face of) the Holy Spirit (or BHS) do not have forgiveness into the age but sin a sin of an age. (And Matt 12:32 puts it more clearly, that they do not have forgiveness in this age or in the age to come.)

A.) If Mark 3:29 and Matt 12:32 are interpreted to mean that BHS flatly cannot and/or will not be forgiven, then that contradicts Mark 3:28 which states as clearly as possible that all the sins and the blasphemies, no matter how great they may be, will be forgiven.

B.) If Mark 3:29 and Matt 12:32 are interpreted in a way so that even the BHS can and will be forgiven, then that does not contradict Mark 3:28.

3.) Therefore, the only way to harmonize all three verses is to say that even blasphemy of the Holy Spirit is forgivable.

4.) If blasphemy of the Holy Spirit is forgivable, then MattS' attempt to marshal this saying as testimony against universalism fails.

MattS ends his article in a very peculiar way: by listing ten well known translations by reputable scholars and then comparing it with Knoch's Literal Concordant translation.

What is peculiar about this, is that instead of noticing how Knoch's Concordant version actually fits the Greek Interlinear translation more closely than he himself provided at the top of his article, Matt complains that the translator has only transliterated "eon" leaving its meaning up to contextual interpretation instead of reading an



interpretation [u]into[/u] the term!--although Matt doesn't put it quite that way.

Just as interestingly, MattS believes it is because the KC "wanted to influence the way the text sounds and is interpreted". That's doubtless true, but the ten translations above (Matt forgets to mention that the KC was also made a very reputable scholar with a high Bibliology in his day) are far more strongly influencing the way the text sounds and is interpreted.

As it happens, Matt did not anticipate, or address, the kind of analysis I gave of the verses above; although I do appreciate him bothering to mention a rather minor interpretative variant among Kath (so clearly he did do some study on the topic. Just not enough, as it happens.)

In conclusion: Matt Slick's argument, though doubtless well-intentioned, suffers most strongly from having to read his position into the text in order to make the text count against universalism-- a problem that becomes nearly bizarre toward the end, when he complains about a translation that doesn't try to do this any more (and maybe less!) than his own Greek Interlinear reference at the top of the page, in favor of ten translations which do overtly and demonstrably read in such meanings; and then tries to make it look like the KC is doing what his other translation examples are doing while claiming they are doing no such thing.

Just as problematic, Matt's argument against one strand of universalistic interpretation suffers hugely from being even more directly vulnerable to the same principle he tries to marshal against that interpretation (while not getting at the root of

what those universalists are going for in their attempt). Moreover (in this article anyway) he does not address special problems for Calvinists in trying to get a hopeless condemnation in regard to this particular saying of Jesus--the attempt to do so may actually count against Calv theology outright in favor of Kath or Arm (depending on whether the persistence to save is kept doctrinally)! Arm theological application to these verses would be somewhat more consistent, though still vulnerable to criticisms of the kinds of things Matt tries (which, as it happens, aren't specially Calv vs. Arm in theology.) It is arguably possible, however, that Kath theology is more consistent with both halves of this saying than even Arm theology, and certainly arguable that it is more consistent than Arm or Calv theology with various notions found elsewhere in scripture. (However, to be fair, the same might also be arguably true in one of the other directions depending on the scriptures being contextually referred to.)

In the end, the verses themselves, after close consideration, offer no definite testimony for or against either Calv, Arm or Kath soteriology groups (broadly speaking--although the verses may systematically nail off some subvariants within one or more of those branches of interpretation.)