

The Problem of Eternal Life – Some Anti-Universalist Landmarks

Alexandru Lazăr¹

Abstract

The 20th century has been labelled by contemporary theologians as the century of universalism par excellence. Universalism has come to be regarded as one of the most important themes in theology today and raises important doctrinal issues to which the Orthodox Church is called to offer a timely and theologically well-articulated response since universalism is not a concept for a closed group of theologians but must be understood by each person. This text will provide an answer to two important eschatological points: the importance of the present life for establishing the place of a person in eternity and the view of the saints in heaven of sinners in hell. We believe that contemporary man needs a clear and comprehensive answer to this problem. Universalism is not a concept intended for a closed group of theologians, but it must be understood by each individual person. Christianity must always respond to everyone and, precisely because it takes all people seriously, fulfilling the words of the Apostle Peter, who asks us to, "always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have" (1 Peter 3:15).

Keywords: Eschatology, Apocatastasis, Universal Salvation, Christian Universalism, Eternal Life

INTRODUCTION

Christianity supports the existence of three stages of creation. The first is framed from the creation of the world to the coming of Christ, the second from Christ to the current finality of the world, being the stage that is lived in Christ, and the last is the one that will follow them. Father Stăniloae claims that there are only two stages for those who do not have faith or do not want to be with God: the one from creation to Christ and the final one, in which, unfortunately, one will still live without God. For those who lived after the incarnation of Christ, there are still three stages, the first being the one before baptism, which differs spiritually from the one after baptism (Stăniloae, 1997: 147).

The reason for Christ's incarnation is eternal existence. He became man to die for our sins and to give us eternal life. So, true life begins the moment we pass into eternity. All of God's iconomy is focused on eternal life. God brings everything into existence to enter eternal life. Without this entrance into eternity, earthly life would be meaningless, even if we lived it with Christ. But because it exists, communion with Christ is enfolded. Meaning is given by eternity with God, not just a certain time lived with God in this life, and this was fulfilled through Christ. Even other religions ascribe meaning to earthly life, affirming in their turn an eschatology: "It can be said that only the risen Christ gives us objective certainty about the future life, and that only communion with him, incarnate and risen as a man, secures us as persons for eternity, and thus assures us true, conscious, full, eternal happiness" (Stăniloae, 1997: 143). Christianity holds that the future life maintains us as persons, being an extension of earthly life, having a happy or unhappy existence, each according to its merits, good or bad, worthy of reward or not. As long as the meaning of life was Christ, eternity will be with Him. Otherwise, eternity will be far from Him in an eternally unhappy existence (Lazăr 2020: 172).

Additionally, what is astonishing in Christianity is that we enter this eschatological plane from the earthly world. For those who are believers, the future has already begun because of Christ's Resurrection. Because the Risen Christ maintains communion with Christians and His Church, earthly life is already arisen. The New Testament shows this reality on several occasions: I Corinthians 10:11: "And all these things happened to them as foreshadowings of the future, and were written for our guidance, to which the end of the ages has come", or Hebrews 9:26: "Otherwise he must have suffered many times since the foundation of the world; but now, at the end of the ages, He has appeared once for the remission of sin through his sacrifice." With Christ, the beginning of eternity has already begun. Eternity was inaugurated by his Resurrection, by his Person. "He who

¹ Babeş Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania. E-mail: Alexandru.05.lazar@gmail.com

hears my voice and believes in Him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come to judgment, but has passed from death to life" (John 5:24). This verse suggests that believers in Christ are partakers of His resurrection from the dead, being outside sin and the world.

According to Christianity, man has a transcendental destiny. This means that man will always put his hope in God so that in eternity he will be united with Him according to grace, being in a continuous dynamism towards a closer union. Therefore, man is infinite destiny (Pannenberg, 2012: 65).

Moreover, when the moment of passing into the eternal world arrives, the soul is gripped by fear because it is not sure where it is going. It knows about the future world at the abstract level, but not at the level of knowledge. Fear arises because you are never guaranteed such a vast preparation for meeting God. The soul would be able to do anything to earn its salvation. In the present world there are countless changes because, "The weather is the face of the changing being"(Saharov, 2013: 219), but there will be the greatest change, which will not undergo another set of change afterwards. This change brings before us, "The image of the divine being, unchanged in its perfection"(Saharov, 2013: 2019). Regarding eternity, Father Sophrony Sakharov sees in it as, "A single, unbounded act of the fullness of being"(Citirigă, 2011: 209). And when man enters eternity, he not only becomes immortal, but also a creature without beginning. Eternity is thus seen as another being, in which is included the whole of thoughts and spiritual experiences, pure, like man had before his fall. But a natural question arises, with those who have totally rejected the teaching of the Savior Christ and have lived a disordered life in sin without the desire and need for repentance, what will happen?

Also, the beginning of the new millennium has brought with it a series of major changes in Christian eschatology and beyond, facilitated by widespread access to information, with universalism becoming an issue in the debate in which the Orthodox Church is also invited to present a position that is as clear and convincing as possible for contemporary man.

The Role of Life on Earth in Preparing for Eternal Life

Christianity, especially the Orthodox Church, has the statement of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan symbol of what will follow the present life: "And again He will come in glory to judge the living and the dead, whose kingdom will have no end"; "I await the resurrection of the dead and the life of the age to come." It is about the second coming of the Savior Jesus Christ. The first time He came to redeem it, the second time He will come to perfect it. But the Lord's Second Coming is not a one-off event but will be part of a succession of linked moments: the resurrection of the dead, the Last Judgement, the transfiguration of the world, and finally, eternal life.

Furthermore, the Church, through her worship, anticipates or lives eternal life from now on. Everything is centered on the afterlife, where true existence will begin. We live from worship and from the revelation of Scripture. It is the Bible that gives us certain clues of the life to come. It is precisely eternal life that is made possible by the Resurrection of Christ, which is the basis of our own resurrection. Space and time transcend the rational regarding the afterlife, but it is not irrational either, but supra-rational. It is precisely because of lack of faith and hope that the mind does not want to conceive of a future reality, but to believe that there is nothing beyond is a delusion. Believing in a future life is not a myth. The Savior Himself spoke of this reality on several occasions. Life on earth is the expectation of the next life. Here, man prepares for what will be thereafter. God will give to each one according to his worthiness what he deserves, according to divine judgment and reason. Man is part of a world of communion. The Church itself is communion, and its members form communion. Homiakov shows the importance of communion as reality as follows:

"We know that when someone falls, he falls alone, but no one is saved alone. He who is saved is saved in the Church, as a member of it, and in unity with all its other members. If one believes, one is in the communion of faith; if one loves, one is in the communion of love; if one prays, one is in the communion of prayer"(Homiakov, 2014: 225).

Everything is important for the life which is to come. Depending on how we spend our life on earth, so we will spend our life in heaven: communion, love and happiness, or isolation, lack of love and sadness. The states

of happiness or unhappiness will only be complete after the Last Judgement. Communion, therefore, has major implications for life now and in the future. The fullness of deification takes place in the afterlife, but it nevertheless begins in earthly life, although the resurrection of the dead precedes the process of deification in its complexity (Lossky, 2010: 209).

St. Maximus the Confessor is the Church Father who links the beginning and the end of creation. Creation is open from the building to the eschaton. Saint Maximus the Confessor did not have this idea in the abstract, but based it on the Creator and Savior Logos, in Whom the end of all creation is virtually reflected. In this sense, Dumitru Popescu expresses:

"The Church does not live with nostalgia for the past, but with the hope of the eschatological future, which is virtually present in the life of the Church and of creation, through Christ, the incarnate Logos, the Pantocrator" (Popescu, 2005: 425).

The Flawed Vision of Christian Universalism Today

In John Hick's view, universalism starts from the idea of God's love: If God's love is universal in purpose, He cannot restrict this saving encounter with humanity. If God is the God of the whole world, we must assume that the whole religious life of mankind is part of an ongoing and universal relationship between Him and man. At the same time, the neo-Protestant theologian sees the idea of universal salvation as a direct consequence of the resolution of the relationship between the existence of evil and the love of God. The apparent contradiction between the two aspects can only be reconciled by supporting the finality of evil. Thus, John Hick declares that any viable Christian theodicy must affirm the universal salvation of all God's creatures, his theodicy being characterized by a continuous post-mortem spiritual preaching (Hick, 2010: 109).

As for the possibility of human perfection after death, Hick believes that the human being was not created perfect, but immature and susceptible to bad choices, but nevertheless destined to eventually attain Godlikeness. Since this process of perfection is slow and different for everyone and, in most cases, does not end with death, the spiritual development of man, including the sinner, can take place after death. This process of purification of the being has, in Hick's view, no negative connotation, which is why he rejects the notion of eternal punishment: "To assert that the sufferings caused by earthly evil deeds are eternal is to go beyond anything that can be justified by revelation or reason and to fall into a serious perversion of the Christian Gospel" (Parry 2012: 3)

Evangelical theologian Robin Parry is one of today's most influential theologians advocating universal salvation. In developing his arguments, Parry uses three analogous sequences of events:

Adam in the heavenly state - Israel in Canaan - the birth of the new Adam, Christ.

Adam's fall - Babylonian exile - Christ's death on the Cross.

The return from exile of the chosen people - the Resurrection of Christ - the restoration of all humanity.

In his enumeration of these biblical events, Robin Parry concludes that the return of the chosen people to bondage is a foreshadowing of the restoration of the Body of Christ at the

Resurrection, this event being the condition and argument for the restoration of all humanity in the eschaton (Parry, 2012: 12).

Broadly speaking, Robin Parry argues for an exclusivist view of Christian universalism, in which all people will be saved, but only through explicit adherence to and confession of faith in Christ. This idea presupposes the acceptance of the possibility of repentance after death and the change of the path of salvation beginning only in the afterlife, by divine grace all are saved.

In 1998, a suggestive film was made about the existential perception of heaven and hell by the simple man. This film, entitled *What Dreams May Come*, tells the love story of Chris Nielsen and his wife Annie. Chris dies and goes to heaven, and his wife, unable to bear the pain of parting, commits suicide, ending up in eternal torment. The film tells the story of Chris' journey from heaven to hell in search of his wife. The main message

is precisely the impossibility of rational and existential conception of eternal happiness in the absence of loved ones. Driven by love, Chris wants to be with his wife in hell rather than in heaven, since without her heaven is hell anyway. Likewise, the Protestant film *Come Sunday*, released in 2018 and based on real events in the life of Pentecostal pastor Carlton Pearson, succeeds in problematizing the classical teaching of universal salvation and launching some pro-universalism arguments that can hardly be overlooked, while revealing the growing reluctance of early 21st century Pentecostal church members towards such a theory, is considered outright heresy.

Author Hans Urs von Balthasar asks whether man can look at eternal love. If he were able to see it, then he would have to investigate himself because he would realize that he is at a great distance from this divine love. First, each person would have to transpose himself with his whole being into hell. A simple question arises: why? The author answers by saying that those in hell have in fact rejected God's love, and we are in some way obliged to share in the sufferings of others, because it is only because of God that some people get to inherit heaven. But the author believes that most of mankind would somehow deserve hell because they are unworthy of God. Another problem that arises is that hell is considered a place only for others, when in fact we too need to examine ourselves and become aware of our deeds that are not worthy of God, but of hell. Hell is a place that first provokes fear, but not a human fear, but a spiritual fear: separation from God for eternity. This could also be understood by reason of people's lack of faith. Another question arises: what is the feeling that those in heaven experience when they see those in hell suffering? Hans Urs von Balthasar, following the line of St. Gregory the Great, offers an answer: in heaven, mercy will no longer exist. Heavenly joy will not diminish, and the glory of the saved will not diminish when they see those in hell. So, those in heaven can see the damned (Balthasar, 1994: 39).

Answer to the Current Eschatological Problem

But until the Dreadful Judgment, man goes through a long process of contradictions and oppositions in history. The whole of history is moving towards Christ, the Center of the world, whether he wants to or not. History will end with the Second Coming of the Savior Christ. Until that time, the divine Logos has been the meaning, and now, all mankind will see Him as the Judge.

On the one hand, Christianity is messianic, and on the other, eschatological. The first stage is over, and the second will follow. It is the eschaton that shows the total resolution of the world. The fulfilment of Christianity lies precisely in the Second Coming of the Savior, who will divide, "Universal history into two fundamental periods, into two cosmic eons, each of which in turn may be subject to various subdivisions" (Berdiaev, 2009: 322).

The eternal time to come brings with it a new experience: that of the Infinite, where the light of the Holy Trinity will shine to the depths of being. Man was created from the beginning with a view to transfiguration, and in the eschaton this transfiguration will take place, so that man in his wholeness will develop, but not in a superficial sense of the word; there development involves the depths of being, because divine grace is within man, transfiguring him.

What can hinder man is precisely an avoidance of his desire to save the whole of creation. Being egocentric, man wishes to secure salvation for himself alone, but the true Christian desires the salvation of all creation. It is certain that the question of the salvation of all creation cannot be known by man, even if it existed. Nor can the realization of the coming of the Kingdom of God be known, since this question remains a mystery that is rationally insoluble. However, the desire for the whole cosmos to be saved is a manifestation of love. Even if the whole cosmos were not saved, "The idea of hell is not justified by God's judgment and punishment, nor by the idea of justice, but by human freedom" (Berdiaev, 2009: 340). The question arises: why does not God save everyone if He loves them? The answer is because God does not trample on man's free will which He gave him. Here, we see the corollary of creation: by the manifestation of freedom in every direction, whether good or bad, "But hell is the impossibility of loving God, because of a certain orientation of human freedom, as a result of man's estrangement from God and separation from Him, of an isolation within himself" (Berdiaev,

2009: 341), in which suffering is contained instantly and not in its prolongation. Nikolai Berdiaev defines hell as the tragedy of human freedom.

Finally, the Second Coming of the Savior causes the whole cosmos to continue its existence, but on a different plane. It is the eighth day, the one that will never end. The Christic Coming has in view both a cosmogonic and an anthropogonic process. Moreover, divine love spreads more over creation, so that freedom will also rise to another level. In Christ the Man, divine love will be answered by human love. In the Kingdom of God, there will not be a return to the primordial state, but a transition to a higher state, to a freedom and love hitherto unknown.

The Eschatological Sense of Time

The original time was different from that of the earthly world, and it will certainly be different from that of eternal life. In Mircea Eliade's conception, time is sacred:

"Sacred Time is, by its very nature, reversible, in the sense that, strictly speaking, it is a primordial mythical Time become present. Any religious celebration, any liturgical Time consists in the reactualization of a sacred event that took place in a mythical time [...] To participate religiously in a celebration means to leave the usual temporal duration to reintegrate oneself into the mythical Time reactualized by the celebration itself"(Eliade, 2000: 64). Once eternity begins, time is either annulled or transfigured along with all creation, so that we no longer perceive it as in mundane life. If there is to be time, then it must be understood as the moment in which a response between man and the call to God's eternal love is made concrete. In eternity, "Competition, limitations, problematizations will cease, heaven becomes the great fresco of life, man acquires the zeal to achieve complete agreement with the Creator, with general existence, with himself"(Lemeni, 2007:191) Yet there is a link: "The simultaneity of the two terms of the fundamental alternation thus signifies an intimate link between time and eternity" (Băncilă, 1998: 58).

From a theological-Christian perspective, time is linked to eternity. In other words, time is fulfilled by eternity (Nellas, 2013: 52). Time is created, but it is somehow linked to eternity before creation. Time advances creation and history towards God. It is time that makes it possible for man to interrelate with God. But from the moment when man's union with God is made definitive, at the moment after His Judgment, "Time becomes again eon in eternity"(Moltmann, 2015: 389). This aspect shows how much man is linked to the eternity of the Godhead. Time and history, then, are linked to the eschaton, although the eschaton transcends them.

Eschaton is also called "the eighth day", "the day of the Lord", "the day without night", "the day without succession", "the day without end". All these phrases indicate that renewal will take place, as well as the transfiguration of the cosmos. The Holy Fathers thought of the eighth day as the moment when everything is restored, but at the same time it is constantly moving ever closer to the Creator. So, time has significance as well as finality. It is not created in vain, but it reaches to finally penetrate all eternity. Man is a being that aims at the eschaton. If he aims at spirituality even in this world, then he is aiming at the eschaton. The eschaton opens the infinite link between man and God (Buchiu, 1997: 203).

The eighth day makes the whole of existence look different. Although it will have another form, every creature will have the risen Christic Body imprinted on a universal scale. The Eighth Day is beyond time, matter, and space. On this day, there will be "A time formed not by a succession of fleeting, perishable moments, but by the relationship of full love, which is continually being accomplished in a dynamic transfiguration 'from glory to glory' (2 Corinthians 3:18)", so that the whole of creation will be revealed in the reality of the Resurrection, in union with God, love being the one who judges, giving each person what he deserves. Saint Gregory of Nyssa speaks in his writings concerning this permanent ascent: "The nature of Good has the power to draw to itself those who look there - the soul rises ever higher, "stretched" by the desire for heavenly things [...] and its flight will carry it ever higher". The light of the Most Holy Trinity will also penetrate and illuminate all persons, making them like suns in the Kingdom of Heaven, with all mankind now clothed in "garments of glory"(Popa, 2014: 207)

In eternity, one can speak of that rest given by Christ both as Logos and as Savior, through the Holy Spirit, uniting them with Himself. This rest will deepen infinitely, being understood as the perfection of union in God.

An essential aspect is that in the eschaton Christ will reveal Himself both as Logos and as Son of the Father, but also as Savior, Judge and Pantocrator. In other words, he is "The eternal good existence itself" (Buchiu 1997: 204). This existence is again since all creation "Will shine like the great cosmic body of the Savior Christ." And again, "The risen body of the incarnate Creator will shine as the real center of the cosmic attraction which will draw all to itself", so that the cosmic body will be at the same time family, Eucharist, choir, Christ being the choirmaster who will lead the choir of saints. Here man will be oriented only towards what is right, so that he will have no wrong path to walk. From the "dust of the earth" he will come to be uncreated. From rejection and strife with others, he will come to welcome and dialogue with all.

Saint Maximus the Confessor believes that eschatology is already present in the world, but not in the sense and state in which it will increase with the coming of Christ. Eschatology can be likened to a ferment that is festering in history:

"Eschatology is not to be defined as the end of human existence, nor is it to be pushed to its limits in order to present the events that are related to the Parousia: the Resurrection of the Dead, the Judgment, Heaven and Hell. Eschatology refers to a new existential order, to an ultimate state of transfiguration, beyond historical time" (Anghelescu, 1995: 69).

CONCLUSION

This is precisely what the Kingdom of God consists of: the spiritualization of the virtues of the good ways of men. What He gave at creation will now be revealed in an apotheosis. Only the result of these fruits will also be shown in communion with others, as well as in the cosmos. In the historical plane, what is good has been achieved by man. What has happened on earth will be the framework for what will eternalize beyond. This is the purpose of each person: to gather as much good as possible during earthly life so that the joy of eternity will be commensurate. Passivity will not exist for those who have been faithful. In the same way Christ, by becoming incarnate, offered the possibility of communicating with Him. Therefore, passivity is cancelled.

Eternal life is destined for both the righteous and the unrighteous, but it will be different for both. The righteous will live in happiness, in communion and connection with God and with all their fellows, while the unrighteous will live in unhappiness, in individualism and in estrangement from God and their fellows. The state of both categories will be extensive. Then, eternal life will be lived by man in its complete structure: body and soul. There will be only one day - the eternal and endless day - on which the Sun of justice will shine. Happiness and unhappiness will not be the same for everyone but will have different degrees of intensity. From this point of view, the view of some that there is the possibility of repentance after death and a change in the path of salvation beginning only in the afterlife, by divine grace all being saved, is truly erroneous.

However, there will be continued growth in love and fellowship and individualism. This continual growth, called epectathesis, makes every end in fact a new beginning. As for hell and eternal torment, the damned will not be able to approach God because they live in hatred of Him. It is not the Creator who rejects them, but doomed humanity who rejects their Creator.

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