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Hell and Hope for Salvation

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Abstract

This article supplements Ralph Martin's recent book, *Will Many Be Saved?* Our primary thesis is that those who hold double predestination or universalism cannot, if consistent, hope as Christians should for their own and others' salvation, and therefore can neither live their own lives with a view to reaching the heavenly kingdom nor promote others' salvation. We also contend that the same disabilities are likely to subvert those who hold certain views that approximate universalism. We go on to set out some positions regarding damnation and salvation that, we believe, all Christians ought to hold and hand on. God wills everyone to be saved, and those who are saved are saved by God's grace. Entirely through their own fault, more than a few people will end in hell. But no one still alive and able to repent need end in hell. While created persons cannot build God's kingdom, insofar as Christians do the Father's will in this world, they prepare materials, beginning with themselves and their interpersonal relationships, for that kingdom.

Keywords

hell, hope, universalism, kingdom of God, Ralph Martin

In a recent book, *Will Many Be Saved?* Ralph Martin devotes nearly a hundred pages to a detailed critique of relevant views of Karl Rahner and Hans Urs von Balthasar.[1] Each of them, Martin argues, "has been a major influence on the 'culture of universalism' that pervades the climate of the Church today."[2] We think Martin makes sound arguments against the views of Rahner and Balthasar, and that, if his work gets the hearing it deserves, it will help counteract the culture of universalism.

[1] *Will Many Be Saved? What Vatican II Actually Teaches and Its Implications for the New Evangelization* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2012).

[2] Martin, p. 128.

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In this article, we neither summarize Martin's arguments nor comment on them. Rather, we present some considerations bearing upon Christian hope—considerations that Martin does not mention and that we think will strengthen his case.

What do we mean by *Christian hope*?[3] In a sense irrelevant here, hoping is merely wishing—e.g., those planning a family reunion in a public park hope for good weather. In a relevant but general sense, hoping is the counting on each other of people who make mutual commitments for the sake of a common good that will be realized only if both parties keep their promises. For example, a couple who deliberately and sincerely make traditional wedding promises hope for a happy marriage. Christian hope is the absolute confidence with which God's children should count on the Father's grace and mercy as they strive to abide in his love and die in Christ, always looking forward to the resurrection of the dead and life everlasting in the kingdom.[4]

In earlier times, some Christians held: (1) *God creates some people intending them to die in grace and enter into his kingdom, and creates others intending them to die in sin and end in hell.* Holding (1) made it difficult to believe that God is merciful, and thus difficult to believe in God. Therefore, very few Christians now hold that God creates anyone intending him or her to die in sin and end in hell.

Rejecting (1), many Christian theologians and pastors have affirmed: (2) *God will see to it that every person he creates will enter into the heavenly kingdom.* They have often argued that God's infinite mercy and power preclude the loss of even the worst sinners and have generally thought that holding and preaching (2) would encourage people to persevere in or embrace Christian faith and hope. However, as an increasing proportion of non-Catholic Christian theologians and pastors have, during the past two centuries, held and preached (2), those who have done so have generally experienced increasing defections and decreasing conversions. And although during the past half century many Catholic theologians and pastors have strongly suggested that (2) may well be true—which led many Catholics to suppose either that (2) is true or that only a few extremely wicked people will be damned—the Catholic Church has at the same time

[3] Martin, pp. 173–77, provides a helpful analysis of what Balthasar means by *hope*.

[4] *Catechism of the Catholic Church,* 1821, "In every circumstance, each one of us should hope, with the grace of God, to persevere 'to the end'[93] and to obtain the joy of heaven, as God's eternal reward for the good works accomplished with the grace of Christ. In hope, the Church prays for 'all men to be saved.'[94]" Fn. 93: "Mt 10:22; cf. Council of Trent: DS 1541." Fn. 94: "1 Tim 2:4." The Church has always hoped and prayed that each person whose eternal destiny is not already settled be saved. From the Church's hope and prayer for every single human being, a fallacy of composition leads some today to imagine that the Church has always hoped and prayed that hell be an unrealized possibility—an empty class.

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experienced large losses of previously practicing members and few conversions of people who think that (2) is true.

Could it be the case that holding and preaching, or even strongly suggesting (2)—no less than doing the same with (1)—fosters secularism and impedes fruitful evangelization? We think it is the case and that we can explain why.

Sometimes people who do not want some possibility to be realized think that they can do nothing to prevent its being realized. Such people will be unable, if consistent, to choose to do or refrain from doing anything in the hope of preventing what they fear, whether for themselves or for others. And if (1) were true, then nothing one could choose to do or refrain from doing would prevent anyone's ending in hell. Thus, holding that (1) is true makes Christian hope impossible. Lacking hope, people despair with respect to those, whoever they may be, who, on this view, will inevitably die in sin and end in hell.

Therefore, Christians who held (1) could not, if consistent, choose to do or refrain from doing anything to prevent themselves or anyone else from ending in hell. When those who held (1) chose to repent, resist temptations, evangelize, or do other good works, they could not, if consistent, make such choices for the sake of their own or others' salvation. They therefore had in view other benefits—for example, self-esteem, others' welfare in this world, and/or assurance that they were not destined to end in hell.

Similarly, if people who desire some possibility to be realized think it will be realized no matter what they do, they will be unable, if consistent, to choose to do or refrain from doing anything with the hope of fulfilling their desire, whether for themselves or for anyone else. And if (2) were true, then nothing anyone could do would improve his or her own or anyone else's prospects for entering into the heavenly kingdom. Thus, holding that (2) is true makes Christian hope impossible. Lacking hope, people become presumptuous—that is, they expect that God will either pardon unrepentant sinners or prevent all sinners from dying unrepentant.

Therefore, Christians who hold (2) cannot, if consistent, choose to do or refrain from doing anything in order to promote their own or others' entrance into the heavenly kingdom. When Christians who hold (2) choose to repent, resist temptations, evangelize, or do other good works, they cannot, if consistent, make such choices for the sake of their own or others' salvation. They therefore have in view other benefits—for example, self-esteem, others' welfare in this world, and/or keeping the sure prospect of heavenly bliss lively in their own and others' hearts as an anodyne for the sufferings of this life, not least suffering when loved ones die.

We repeatedly inserted *if consistent* in the preceding paragraphs to take into account that not only do few if any Christians act consistently with all of the truths of their faith but that few if any who

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hold (1) or (2) always act in accord with those views. Of course, even people who deliberately take positions they realize are incompatible with Christian faith can continue holding propositions and engaging in practices that pertain to faith and its practice. They do so, however, insofar as those propositions and practices are elements of a worldview and lifestyle they find acceptable, and such people may be indifferent to rational consistency. Even those who hold no residue of their lost faith can go on behaving outwardly as if they still believed—because, for example, doing so remains psychologically gratifying or is expected by others. But not being chosen for the sake of what Christians hope for, such behavior is entirely consistent with their unbelief.

Some Christians who hold neither (1) nor (2) hold either (3) *Only Satan, his demons, and a few extremely wicked human beings will be damned,* or (4) *We cannot know whether any human being will be damned*.[5]

It is not impossible for people who hold (3) to be convinced that it would be unacceptably risky for themselves and those they care about to assume that none of them will be among the few extremely wicked human beings who will be damned. Similarly, it is not impossible for people who hold (4) to be convinced that it would be unacceptably risky for themselves and those they care about, to take it for granted that God will save everyone. And it is not impossible for people with such convictions who hold (3) or (4) to firmly reject the risky assumptions and proceed as if they believed that more than a few will be lost.

People who hold (3), however, are *likely* to suppose that neither they themselves nor anyone they care about is or ever will become one of the few extremely wicked people who will be damned. As a result, many who hold (3) consider the possibility of damnation for themselves or anyone they care about to be negligible for all practical purposes. At the same time, those who hold (3) are hardly likely to hope for the salvation of anyone they regard as extremely wicked. Nothing will be done to evangelize them and call them to repentance. Therefore, holding (3) is likely to have the same effects that holding

[5] It is worth noting that Pope John Paul II made a small but important change to the text of a catechesis on hell (Wednesday, 28 July 1999). The original text said: "Eternal damnation remains a real possibility, but we are not granted, without special divine revelation, the knowledge of whether or which [Italian: *se e quali*] human beings are effectively involved in it" (*L'Osservatore Romano,* 4; English, 4 Aug. 1999, p. 7; Italian, 29 July 1999, p. 4). However, the words "se e" appear neither in the text printed in *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II,* 22:2 (1999): p. 82, nor in the translations in the weekly English, French, Spanish, Portuguese, and German editions of *L'Osservatore Romano* on its 1999 CD-ROM. That little change makes it reasonable to conclude that John Paul II, on reflection, judged it wrong to deny that God has revealed that some human beings will end in hell.

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(1) would have had. Hope is replaced by presumption with respect to oneself and those one cares about, and by despair with respect to those one regards as extremely wicked. If consistent, one can make no choice to do or refrain from doing anything for the sake of one's own or anyone else's salvation.

Somewhat similarly, people who hold (4) are *likely* to think that they can safely assume in practice that (2) is true. Such people might reason: "If anyone were going to be damned, Jesus would have made that clear beyond all reasonable doubt. Since respected theologians tell us that he did not, it is reasonable to presume that God will see to it that everybody will be saved." Again, people who hold (4) might reason: "The Church prays that everyone will be saved, and nothing is impossible for God.[6] Then, too, the Church's prayers surely are always answered, if not at once, eventually. So, although many of us might deserve to be damned, we can take it for granted that ultimately God will save all of us." Therefore, holding (4) is likely to have the same effects on people that holding (2) would have had: if consistent, they can no longer hope and therefore cannot make any choice for the sake of their own or others' salvation.

If such people hope that all human beings will be saved, that is not the hope that excludes despair and presumption. Rather, it is the wishful expectation that (2) will turn out to be true, like the hope of people who expect good weather as they plan their family reunion in a public park and make no provision to move it indoors if thunderstorms drown their hope.

What, then, should Christians hold and hand on about salvation and damnation?

The New Testament clearly teaches two things: first, that God wills everyone to be saved and that Christ died for everyone; and second, that some, nevertheless, will be lost.[7] A classic formulation of that scriptural teaching was provided by a local council held in 853 at Quiercy, in northern France:

[6] *Catechism of the Catholic Church,* 1058: "The Church prays that no one should be lost: 'Lord, let me never be parted from you.' If it is true that no one can save himself, it is also true that God 'desires all men to be saved' (*1 Tim* 2:4), and that for him 'all things are possible' (*Mt* 19:26)."

[7] Many offer diverse arguments to support the view that the New Testament does not make it clear that any human being will be lost. We will argue below that the human authors of Mt 7:21–23, Mt 25:41–46, and Lk 13:23–24 asserted that Jesus warned that some human beings will be lost. While we realize that both the evangelists and Jesus expressed themselves in ways proper to the culture in which they lived, we hold that the evangelists' assertions and Jesus' warnings are true propositions. That the evangelists' assertions are true propositions is taught by Vatican Council II, *Dei Verbum* (Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation), 11, which explains that those assertions are asserted by the Holy Spirit, and 19, which affirms that the evangelists faithfully convey what Jesus, while living on earth, did and taught. That Jesus' warnings were true propositions follows from his being the Word of God.

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> Chap. 3. The omnipotent God wishes "all men" without exception "to be saved" [*1 Tim 2:4*], even if not all are saved. That some, however, are saved is the gift of the one who saves; that some, however, perish is the fault of those who perish.
>
> Chap. 4. Just as there is not, nor has been, nor will be any man whose nature has not been assumed by Christ Jesus our Lord, so also there is not, nor has been, nor will be any man for whom he has not suffered; even if not all are redeemed by the mystery of his Passion. That not all, however, are redeemed by the mystery of his Passion concerns neither the greatness nor the fullness of the price, but, rather, the part of those who are unfaithful and those who do not believe with that faith "which works through love" [*Gal 5:6*].[8]

Thus Christians should hold and hand on the truths that God, who is both all-powerful and infinitely merciful, wills every human being without exception to be saved, and that Christ died for every human being without exception. They also should hold and hand on the truth that some people nevertheless perish through their own fault. Due to culpable lack of faith or failure to live the faith, such people are not in the end redeemed.

Christian theologians and philosophers may find formulations like Quiercy's appealing. The saved do nothing without God, who has wrought for them all their works (see Is 26:12). And the damned alone are responsible for not being saved. But scholars may also find such formulations problematic. If the saved do nothing without God, how can they make any free choices, even the commitment of faith? And if we do make free choices and God somehow causes them, how can we freely choose to sin without that, too, being God's doing?

If the omniscient and omnipotent God's causality were similar to any causality we know of or can even imagine, God's causing would account for everything in such a way that nothing within creation could account for anything. However, God's causality transcends the created universe and is incomprehensible to us.[9] So, God's causing

[8] DS 623–24 in *Enchiridion symbolorum definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum,* 43rd ed., Latin-English; ed. Latin, Peter Hünermann; eds. English, Robert Fastiggi and Anne Englund Nash (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2012). The latter attribute (see p. 1395) the translation of these paragraphs to Roy J. Deferrari, *The Sources of Catholic Dogma,* 30th ed. (London and St. Louis: B. Herder, 1957), p. 127. Deferrari's translation, however, differs in many respects from what they provide. The two occurrences in it of *even if* translate *licet,* which Deferrari translated *although*, which is preferable, since Quiercy goes on at once to speak of those who perish and of those who are not redeemed. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church,* 605, treats the Council of Quiercy as an authoritative source by quoting an excerpt from DS 624: "There is not, never has been, and never will be a single human being for whom Christ did not suffer."

[9] See Kathryn Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology: Tyranny or Empowerment* (New York: Blackwell, 1988); David B. Burrell, C.S.C., *Freedom and Creation in Three Traditions* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame, 1993), pp. 75–139;

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completely accounts for the reality of a universe in which created causes of each sort account for their effects in their own ways. Among those causes are the choices by which human beings *freely* shape their own lives and relationships with God and with one another.[10]

Therefore, as St. Paul teaches, believers are saved by grace through faith; it is not their own doing, but a gift of God (see Eph 2:8). Yet faith is a self-commitment, a free choice believers could have refused to make. That refusal would have deserved condemnation (see Jn 3:18–21). The evil in freely refusing the gift of faith and in any other sin is a privation, the absence of something that should be there. Since privation is not a positive reality, it is not created by God. Rather, by the sinner's choosing alone, privation is introduced into otherwise good choices and actions, and makes them sinful.[11]

The New Testament also clearly teaches that more than Satan, his demons, and extremely wicked people, few in number, will be lost. For example, Jesus teaches that many who acted in his name will be shocked to find themselves condemned by their failure to have done the Father's will (see Mt 7:21–23). Jesus teaches that some who think they have fulfilled their responsibilities to him will be surprised to find themselves condemned for having failed to meet his pressing needs in the least of his brothers and sisters (see Mt 25:41–46). When asked whether those saved will be few, Jesus responds: "Strive to enter by the narrow door," and goes on at once to provide motivation: "for many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able" (Lk 13:24).[12] Without saying whether those saved will be few, Jesus thus makes it clear that more than a few will be lost.

Some claim that, while Jesus may well have said such things, he did not mean to provide information about what to expect when he returns but only to motivate people to repent, believe, and follow him. But Jesus would have been dishonest had he tried to motivate

Harm J. M. J. Goris, *Free Creatures of an Eternal God: Thomas Aquinas on God's Foreknowledge and Irresistible Will* (Leuven, Belgium: Peeters, 1996); Jacob Schmutz, "The Medieval Doctrine of Causality and the Theology of Pure Nature (13th to 17th Centuries)," in *Surnaturel: A Controversy at the Heart of Twentieth-Century Thought*, ed. Serge-Thomas Bonino, O.P. (Ave Maria, Fla.: Sapientia, 2009), pp. 203–50.

[10] For an argument that human choices can be truly free within a universe fully accounted for by God's creative causality, see W. Matthews Grant, "Can a Libertarian Hold that Our Free Acts Are Caused by God?" *Faith and Philosophy*, 27 (2010): pp. 22–44.

[11] See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae,* 1–2, q. 79, art. 2. A defense of this teaching of Thomas against some objections is offered by W. Matthews Grant, "Aquinas on How God Causes the Act of Sin without Causing the Sin Itself," *Thomist*, 73 (2009): pp. 455–96.

[12] Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J., *The Gospel according to Luke (X-XXIV),* Anchor Bible 28A (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1985), p. 1025, comments: "*many . . . will not be able.* So Jesus answers indirectly the question put to him. Many may crowd before the narrow door, but not all of them will succeed in passing through it."

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people by warnings that were not truthful information about their prospects if they failed to heed his warnings.

Indeed, for well over a millennium, those sayings conveyed that information to all Christians—East and West, and after the Reformation Roman Catholic and non-Catholic. While Christians regarded the articles of the ancient creeds as more central than their belief that more than a few will be lost, they always regarded that belief as an important teaching of Jesus, precisely because it continued motivating people as he plainly intended. Claiming that the whole body of Christians misunderstood what Jesus intended presupposes that the Holy Spirit failed to remind them of Jesus' teaching and complete it, as he promised his disciples that the Spirit would do (see Jn 14:26).[13]

Christians should believe that without God and without Jesus' humanity they can do nothing, but that with the Father's mercy, Jesus' sacrifice, and the power of the Holy Spirit they can do many things conducive to their own and others' salvation. Abuses of freedom of choice and culpable failures to use it rightly are not inevitable. Each person tempted to commit grave sins and to resist the grace to repent could, with God's grace, avoid bringing about his or her own damnation. Therefore, although Christians should hold and hand on the truth that more than a few people will end in hell, they should also believe that no one still alive and able to repent need end in hell. Realizing that in this world human persons can always give in to temptation but relying on the power of the Holy Spirit, every Christian and group of Christians should make every reasonable effort to promote their own and others' salvation.[14]

Although Jesus spoke often and clearly about hell, he spoke far more often and always enthusiastically about the reign or kingdom of God and eternal life.[15] That reign begins in the fallen world when God's will, disobeyed since Adam, is perfectly obeyed by

[13] Vatican Council II, *Lumen gentium* (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church), 12, teaches: "The entire body of the faithful, anointed as they are by the Holy One, cannot err in matters of belief. They manifest this special property by means of the whole people's supernatural discernment in matters of faith when 'from the Bishops down to the last of the lay faithful' they show universal agreement in matters of faith and morals." The internal quotation is from St. Augustine, *De Praedestinatione Sanctorum,* 14, 27, in *Patrologia Latina,* 44, 980.

[14] An essential part of what should be held and handed on is the Church's teaching about mortal sin and how to deal with it. In 1336, Benedict XII, *Benedictus Deus,* DS 1002, definitively taught that those who die in mortal sin go at once to hell; and in 1551 the Council of Trent, *Canons on the Sacrament of Penance,* canons 6 and 7, DS 1706–07, taught that mortal sins should be confessed and can be forgiven in the sacrament of penance.

[15] In recent years, many essentially sound scholarly works have clarified the meaning and centrality of the reign/kingdom of God in Jesus' teaching. See, e.g., Benedict T. Viviano, O.P., *The Kingdom of God in History* (Wilmington, Del.: Michael Glazier, 1988), pp. 13–80; John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus,* vol. 2, *Mentor,*

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Jesus. As he cures illnesses, drives out demons, forgives sins, and gathers his little flock, eliciting their obedience by word and example, God's kingdom slowly grows. Not of this world of sin and death, the completed kingdom will come about by a thoroughgoing divine transformation of the entire universe, foreshadowed by Jesus' raising of Lazarus and others, and initiated by his own resurrection and ascension. The transformed universe will be the Lord Jesus himself and all other things, "things in heaven and things on earth" (Eph 1:10; cf. Col 1:20), united in Christ.[16]

By taking up their own crosses and following Jesus, his disciples on earth can do the Father's will even as Jesus himself continues doing it in heaven. Disciples cannot build the kingdom of God, even if they love needy neighbors not just in words but in deeds and truth. But works of love can mitigate the sufferings of life in the shadow of death and soften the endless conflicts resulting from pervasive sin.

Provided disciples remain in Jesus and abide in his love, their good works—works like his own "and greater works" (Jn 14:12)—can also bear fruit for the kingdom. For in doing the works Jesus commanded them to do, his disciples prepare themselves and the world to be transformed into the new heavens and new earth when he comes again. When they die, their good works will not be lost (see 1 Cor 3:12–14) and will accompany them when they are raised (see Rev 14:13).[17] Indeed, more than the good works of the saints will be salvaged and perfected in the kingdom: "After we have promoted on earth, in the Spirit of the Lord and in accord with his command, the goods of human dignity, familial communion, and freedom—that is to say, all the good fruits of our nature and effort—then we shall find them once more, but cleansed of all dirt, lit up, and transformed, when Christ gives back to the Father an eternal and universal kingdom: 'a kingdom of truth and life, a kingdom of holiness and grace, a kingdom of justice, love, and peace.' On this earth the kingdom is

Message, and Miracles (New York: Doubleday, 1994), pp. 235–506; N. T. Wright, *How God Became King: The Forgotten Story of the Gospels* (New York: Harper-Collins, 2012).

[16] The resurrection of those saved, included in the universal transformation, will be like Jesus' resurrection, which initiated that re-creation. Like his glorious body, their bodies will be, not spirits, but realities with much better and incorruptible physicality, as N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: Harper Collins, 2008), pp. 154–56, explains in showing that 1 Cor 15:44 is mistakenly and misleadingly translated by "It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body."

[17] After stressing the realism of resurrection, Paul exhorts: "Be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain" (1 Cor 15:58). Some recent authors use this text to make the point that the Lord's work done by Christians will last into "God's future"; see, e.g., Wright, *Surprised by Hope,* pp. 192–205, and Randy Alcorn, *Heaven* (Carol Stream, Ill.: Tyndale House, 2004), pp. 133–39.

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present in mystery even now; with the Lord's coming, however, it will be consummated."[18]

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[18] Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et spes* (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World), 39 (translation our own); the internal quotation is from *Roman Missal,* "Preface of the Feast of Christ the King."

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