

Accepting Universalist Passages at Face Value

Introduction

I am going to argue that it is possible to endorse both the traditional view of hell and universalism. I will further argue that the way I suggest this can be done is plausibly true.

1. Traditionalism

Jerry Walls characterizes the “traditional popular view” as “the view that hell is God’s eternal punishment which falls irreversibly on all who die in a state of sin,” and the “traditional orthodox view” as hell being “God’s eternal punishment of all who obstinately refuse his grace to the end of life.”¹ While there might be variations on what is believed to be the best way to get to (or stay in) hell, and the nature of the punishment involved, I’ll call *traditionalism* the view that holds, minimally, that some people will make decisions during the course of their life that eventuate in their being separated from God for an eternal duration. Perhaps more concisely, Jonathn Kvanvig says “the view of hell held by traditional Christianity” entails what he calls “Anti-Universalism,” according to which “not all people will be saved.”²

2. Universalism

There are many different versions of universalism, each with their own subtleties. In his wide-ranging survey of universalist positions, Ruchard Bauckham concludes that “only the belief that all men will be saved is common to all universalists.”³ This is true to Keith DeRose’s definition. He writes, “As I’ll use it, ‘universalism’ refers to the position that eventually all human beings will be saved and will enjoy everlasting life with Christ.”⁴ That, then, is what I’ll call *universalism*—the view that holds, minimally, that all humans will be saved.

Universalist’s find the strongest Biblical support for their position in passages that universally quantify over humans as personal objects of salvation. The three home-run passages are:

Romans 5:18-19

Consequently, just as one trespass resulted in condemnation for all people, so also one righteous act resulted in justification and life for all people. For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by one man's obedience many will be made righteous.

Romans 11:32

For God has bound everyone over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all.

1 Corinthians 15:22

For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive.

The “all” in these passages, universalists urge, should be taken literally and at face value—it means *all*—it does not mean “some,” or even “all of a select group.” Universalists make a big deal out of “that wonderful word”—as DeRose calls it—‘all.’ He writes:

¹ Jerry Walls, *Hell: The Logic of Damnation* (Notre Dame, 1992), p. 12-14.

² Jonathan Kvanvig, *The Problem of Hell* (Oxford, 1993), p. 24.

³ Richard Bauckham, “Universalism: A Historical Survey,” *Themelios* 4 (1978), p.49

⁴ Keith DeRose, “Universalism and the Bible” <<http://pantheon.yale.edu/%7Ekd47/univ.htm#2.>>

“All”, when it's used properly, always means all without exception. Quite simply, “all” means all. ... There is *some* sense in which “all” doesn't always mean all: On some occasions of use, “all”, or “all the F's” means all (or all the F's) within a limited domain. But, *relative to that domain*, “all” really does mean all (without exception): My sentence “All the beer is warm” turns out to be false if there is some cold beer that I failed to notice in the room.

But when the domain is limited, there has to be some fairly clear clue as to what the limited domain is. When “all” is used in the New Testament, as in “For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God,” and similar passages, the “all”, I take it, refers to all people. It could possibly refer to some restricted class of people, but that suggestion is to be rejected, b/c (a) there is no such restricted class that clearly presents itself (all the people in this room?), (b) it's incumbent on a speaker to make clear what the class is if he means for it to be specially restricted and no specially restricted class clearly presents itself given current conversational intents and purposes, and (c) the NT doesn't specify any such specially restricted class. So, “All have sinned” means that all people have sinned, as almost all would agree. But similarly for the “all”s of the universalist passages.⁵

Accepting universalist passages at face value is to accept that “all” refers to *all* humans.⁶ Restricting the “all” in some way to a certain class or select group of humans, I am assuming, is not to accept the passages at face value.

It will be my contention that, so characterized, traditionalism and universalism are logically compatible; it is possible that both are true.

I. The Argument and Plan of Attack

1. The Universalist Argument

- (1) Traditionalism and the proposition ‘All humans will be saved’ cannot both be true
- (2) The proposition ‘All humans will be saved’ is true
- (3) Therefore, traditionalism is false

2. The Plan of Attack

The strategy I wish to explore should be a familiar one—it is the strategy Alvin Plantinga adopts in the Free Will Defense, which aims to refute the logical problem of evil. The logical problem of evil purports to show that the following pair of propositions are inconsistent, and hence cannot both be true:

- (1) God is omniscient, omnipotent, and wholly good
- (2) Evil exists

Plantinga writes:

The problem, then, is to show that (1) and (2) are consistent. This could be done...by finding a proposition *r* that is consistent with (1) such that (1) and (*r*) together entail (2). One proposition that might do the trick is

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ The broader context of these passages unambiguously refers to humans.

(3) God creates a world containing evil and has a good reason for doing so

If (3) is consistent with (1), then it follows that (1) and (2)...are consistent. One can attempt to do this in at least two ways. On the one hand, we could...conceive of a possible state of affairs such that, if it obtained, an omnipotent, omniscient, and wholly good God would have a good reason for permitting evil. On the other, someone might try to specify what God's reason is for permitting evil and try to show, if it is not obvious, that it is a good reason.⁷

Plantinga calls the former strategy a *defense* and the latter strategy a theodicy. I am searching for a proposition that will make the following pair of propositions consistent:

- (1) Traditionalism is true
- (2) The proposition 'All humans will be saved' is true

The proposition need not actually be true, but only possibly true. In other words, I'm exploring what there could be by way of a Traditionalist Defense.

II. The Traditionalist Defense

What proposition do I propose could render (1) and (2) logically consistent? Here's a candidate:

- (3) All human persons that end up eternally separated from God cease to be human

The idea is fairly simply. Persons that are human are not human essentially; for any human person, it is possible that that person lose their humanity. So the idea is that no *human* person ever ends up in hell—though there could be many persons in hell who were *formerly* human. Recall that traditionalism holds that some people will make decisions during the course of their life that eventuate in their being separated from God for an eternal duration. If something like (3) is true, then traditionalism is logically consistent with the universalist's claim that all *humans* will be saved. All humans *are* saved—those human persons that aren't saved cease to be human.

If a proposition like (3) is possibly true, we have all we need in order for (1) and (2) to be logically compatible. But is (3) plausible? Although I myself am not sure whether (3) is true, I do think it is plausible. Here is a way of 'fleshing out' (3) that makes it seem, at least to me, more than possibly true.

III. A Probable Solution: Hell and the *Imago Dei*

As Charles Sherlock observes, "the Bible's unique testimony is that to be human means to be made 'in the image of God'.⁸ So the *imago Dei* is essential to being human. Whatever the *imago Dei* is, we could say that it is at least that faculty or capacity which makes it possible for humans to be rightly-related to God. Each person's *imago Dei* is their God-connection. Crucial in this respect is

⁷ Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Eerdmans, 1974), p. 26.

⁸ Charles Sherlock, *The Doctrine of Humanity* (IVP, 1996), p. 16.

the capacity to make morally significant choices.⁹

Suppose further that, through these morally significant choices, one can, as Augustine says, “deface and tarnish”¹⁰ the *imago Dei*; or as Calvin says, the *imago Dei* can be obscured, effaced, or even obliterated.¹¹ Doing thus inhibits one’s connection to God. The more damaged one’s *imago Dei* becomes, the less suitable one is for a relationship with God. Just as “a mirror reflects the image of a person only when it is properly positioned in relation to that person,”¹² so we reflect God’s image when we are properly related to Him. Furthermore, because the *imago Dei* is essential to being human, the more damaged it becomes, the less human one becomes.¹³ Calvin says when the *imago Dei* has been obliterated, “we do not deserve to be regarded or accepted as people¹⁴...[and instead become] like brute beasts.”¹⁵

To complete the thought, those who end up in hell are those who have lost or irreparably damaged their *imago Dei*, thereby ceasing to be human. Worse, they have forever lost their God-connection, rendering impossible a relationship with Him. They have become like those for whom hell was originally created—non-human persons who chose not to be rightly related to God. (Hell, after all, was not created for humans. According to Jesus in Matt 25:41, hell was created for Satan and his minions.)

1. Some Biblical Reflections

A. Image and Separation from God

Hell is traditionally understood as eternal separation from God. This is based on 2 Thess 1:9. How can a person in a place “away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power” continue to bear or reflect God’s glorious image? Could persons in hell still rightly be called the “image and glory of God,” as Paul calls humans (1 Cor 11:7)?

B. Image and Idolatry

In either its ancient or contemporary expression, idolatry is, I think, the real heart of sin. But what is idolatry but the improper imaging of God (e.g., Exod 20:4-5; Deut 5:8-9)? As Richard Lints put it, “Idolatry—creating a God in one’s own or another’s image—is the conceptual undoing of the original act of being created in the image of God.”¹⁶ When a person obstinately rejects God, that person refuses to image God and chooses to image something else. Hell is, in this sense, God’s granting people to be idolaters forever. But that option comes with the price of losing one’s humanity. As N. T. Wright says, “It is dangerously possible to start reflecting gods other than the true God in whose image we were made. But the other gods are not life-giving. To worship them is to court death: the eventual utter destruction of all that it means to be truly human.”¹⁷ This

⁹ A morally significant choice is one such that it is made without any sufficient causally determining factors and is either wrong or right. With Augustine, I think morally significant choice presupposes morally significant freedom.

¹⁰ Augustine, *On the Trinity*, xiv.16

¹¹ Quoted extensively in Philip Hughes, *The True Image: The Origin and Destiny of Man in Christ* (Eerdmans, 1989), pp. 66-67.

¹² Jack Cottrell, *The Faith Once for All* (College Press, 2003), p. 151.

¹³ I originally came across this intriguing idea in N. T. Wright’s small book, *Following Jesus*, ch. 10. I am told that Wright develops the thought further in *After You Believe: Why Christian Character Matters* (Harper One, 2010).

¹⁴ Hughes, *The True Image*, p. 65ff.

¹⁵ Ibid. p. 66. I should note that Calvin did not think the *imago Dei* could ever be *totally* lost. See Idem.

¹⁶ Richard Lints, “Imaging and Idolatry: The Sociality of Personhood in the Canon,” in Lints, Horton, and Talbot (eds.), *Personal Identity in Theological Perspective* (Eerdmans, 2006), p. 217.

¹⁷ N. T. Wright, *Following Jesus* (Eerdmans, 2009), p. 94.

makes sense of why in the Bible “idolatry called for the strictest punishment, elicited the most disdainful polemic, prompted the most extreme measures of avoidance and was regarded as the chief identifying characteristic of those who were the very antithesis of the people of God.”¹⁸

C. Image and Ownership

Recall what Jesus said to the Pharisees who asked whether it was lawful to pay taxes to Caesar. In a profound object lesson, Jesus asks “Whose image does this coin bear?... Render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s, and unto God the things that are God’s.” We humans, as image bearers of God, properly owe Him *our lives*. Those in hell are no longer rightfully God’s—they have sold themselves to another master, be it self, sin, or Satan.¹⁹ Such are those that “God *gave them over* to a depraved mind,” as Paul says (Rom 1:24-32). As such, how could they continue to bear God’s image?

D. Image and Perfection

Consider Jesus, the perfect human. Jesus is, Scripture tells us, both ‘the image of the invisible God’ (Col. 1:15) and the image of perfect humanity (Heb. 2:14-18). Indeed, it was by “being made perfect” in his humanity that Jesus “became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him” (Heb 5:8-9). Jesus, as our representative before God, is a perfect image *for us*, fully restoring our own *imago Dei* and securing for us a right-relationship with God. This is part of what it means to be “a new creation in Christ” (2 Cor 5:17). Paul urges us not to sin “since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator” (Col 3:9-10; cf Eph 4:24). As Lints puts it, “Christ, in a virtual act of re-creation, restores the ‘inner nature’ (*eso hemon*), but now...the second creation is enacted by one who is the very image/likeness of God. This is a re-creation in the image of the Image.”²⁰ Those not so rightly-related will not similarly reflect that image.

E. Image and Annihilationist Passages

One additional benefit to this view is that it also gives a very natural way if understanding “annihilationist” passages. In support of their view, many annihilationists appeal to passages that say of the wicked that they will “wither away,” “be no more” “perish” (E.g., Ps 37:2, 9-10, 20, 38; 68:2; Mal 4:1-2), or passages that describe the punishment for the wicked as *destruction* (1 Cor 3:17; Phil 1:28; 3:19; 2 Thess 1:9; 2 Pet 2:1, 3; 3:7; Heb 10:39). When a human person loses the *imago Dei*, this *just is* what happens to that human *qua* human. Moreover, if the restoration of a human’s *imago Dei* can be God’s re-creation of that human, would not the loss of the *imago Dei* correspond well with the “second death” referred to in Rev 2:11; 20:14; 21:8? (the first death being brought by the initial tarnishing of the *imago Dei*, the second by the total loss of the *imago Dei*).²¹

¹⁸ Brian S. Rosner, “The Concept of Idolatry,” *Themelios* 24.3 (May 1999), p. 22.

¹⁹ This fits well with the scriptural motif of humans being held in bondage to sin (Ps 107:14; Rom 6:6-7) or Satan (Luke 13:16; John 8:31-47; Matt 4:8-9; Eph 2:2; 2 Tim 2:26; 1 John 5:19).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 220-221.

²¹ The view developed effectively retains the core idea of traditionalism, universalism, and annihilationism. If it is possible for a person to lose one’s humanity, then the conjunction of all three of the following propositions is possibly true: “Some persons are lost forever”; “All humans are saved”; “Some humans are annihilated.” The explanatory scope and power this view has is really astonishing.

2. Some Philosophical Reflections

A. On Being Humane

Above I suggested that part of what it means to bear the image of God is to be able to make morally significant choices. When we make bad choices (i.e., sin), we mar or damage our *imago Dei* and become less human. When people perpetrate unspeakable evils, we say they've committed crimes against humanity, or have acted inhumanely. This is one way of making sense of this deep intuition.

B. Why are we Perturbed by Hell?

Could this also be why we're (typically) not as disturbed by the thought that *purely* wicked and perverse creatures like Satan and his minions spend eternity in hell? We're disturbed by the prospect of *humans* spending eternity in hell. Maybe this is because we're apt empathize with our fellow image-bearers as creatures of tremendous moral significance and intrinsic value. Bertrand Russell is no exception. He writes, "there is one very serious defect to my mind in Christ's moral character, and that is that he believed in hell. I do not myself feel that any person who is really profoundly humane can believe in everlasting punishment."²² But what if some humans—through their own choices—bring themselves down to those inhumane, devilish levels? If this were true, would we still feel the same as Russell about those who end up in hell? Maybe hell is a place where humans by nature cannot be. To summarize, Philip Hughes captures succinctly the ideas above:

Nothing is more basic than the recognition that being constituted in the image of God is of the essence of and absolutely central to the humanness of man. It is the key that unlocks the meaning of his authentic humanity. Apart from this reality he cannot exist truly as man, since for man to deny God and the divine image stamped upon his being and to assert his own independent self-sufficiency is to deny his own constitution and thus to dehumanize himself.²³

IV. A 'Damning' Objection?

1. The Objection

Suppose a fire breaks out in the library. All of the books are damaged to some degree, though many are restorable. Many more, however, are not. Indeed, the ones unsalvageable are no longer books at all, but just charred remains.

The distraught librarian peeks in after the fire is put out and is horrified at the amount of charred remains. The librarian asks the fireman

(L) How many books are saved?

And the fireman replies, "All of them. No charred remain you see here is a book." I suspect that the librarian would not be very satisfied with the fireman's logic. The fact is that many books were lost. Not all books were saved. What's true is that *only* books are saved. But that seems rather trivial.

²² Bertrand Russell, in "Why I am not a Christian"

²³ Philip Hughes, *The True Image*, p. 4.

2. 'Saving' the Traditionalist Defense

The firefighter's response to the librarian seems cheeky because we think the librarian really means:

(L) How many of things *which were books at some time* are saved?

And this makes the firefighter's response seem absurd. But *is* (L') what the librarian means? Presumably she is not asking the firefighter about the salvation of those things which used to be books a week ago that a disgruntled student destroyed. So what she *really* means is

(L') How many of things which were books at some time are *saved from the fire*?

Now, suppose all of the 'books' that were reduced to charred remains in the fire happened to be just those 'books' that were already destroyed by disgruntled students before the fire broke out (maybe the students wanted to get rid of the evidence). In that case, even in response to (L') what the firefighter says is true: all the books are saved.

Applying this to the issue at hand, when the universalist says "all humans will be saved," I take him to mean "all humans will be saved *from hell*" (otherwise, what is the universalist proposing humans are saved from?). So if the universalist tries to cause trouble for the Traditionalist Defense and ask

(U) How many persons who were humans at some time are saved from hell?

The answer could still truthfully be "all of them," supposing that it is *possible* for some human persons to cease to be human before they enter hell. Indeed, hell could be a place reserved just for such persons. So it could also be true that just those persons not saved from hell were not human beforehand. Thus, (2) remains possibly true even if the universalist asks us (U).

Conclusion

I have suggested a possible solution for making traditionalism and universalism logically compatible. I went further and suggested that the proposed solution is plausible. Even if you're not convinced of that last claim, *this* is at least true: even if we accept universalist passages at face value, they do not entail what universalists think they do—namely, that traditionalism is false.