A Response to Michael McClymond's Theological Critique of Universalism*

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I. Introduction

Michael McClymond's majestic two-volume work *The Devil's Redemption: A New History and Interpretation of Christian Universalism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018) is a landmark work in the study of Christian universalism, one of the most significant analyses and critiques of that tradition ever published. It is stunning in both the breadth and depth of its research. As such, no academic attempt to engage universal salvation in a Christian context can afford to ignore it. While I find the theological critique inadequate to the task of undermining Christian universalism *per se* (as I shall argue below), there is a lot in McClymond's book, including his critiques of various specific universalist theologies, with which I concur.

The central thesis at its heart of the book is very simple: Universalism does not arise from biblical or Christian theological instincts, but is an alien import that first emerged and flourished in heretical gnostic sects and was subsequently planted into Christianity by Origen. The modern revival of universalism from the late seventeenth century onwards similarly drank deeply from the wells of esotericism, especially from the poisoned well of Jakob Böhme, whose heterodox theology lies somewhere behind many, perhaps most, modern versions of universalism (*DR*, 22). Thus, despite the Christian language with which universal salvation dresses itself in an attempt to appear at home in the church, its origins and underlying theological structure are, according to McClymond, antithetical to orthodox Christianity. He hopes that once we see the dubious origins of the universalist idea, in both its ancient and modern versions, we will be enabled to see why it is so problematic.[1]

* My thanks to Professor Thomas Talbott and Alex Smith for critical feedback on a first draft of this essay.

[1] Thomas Talbott thinks that McClymond is in danger of falling foul of the genetic fallacy, the fallacy of dismissing a view on the basis of its questionable origins. Some of McClymond's arguments do teeter on the edge of this fallacy, but within the overall context of the book the attempt to expose the allegedly dubious origins of universalism function as part of a cumulative case, standing alongside other arguments that seek to engage the theological case directly. So I do not think McClymond guilty of the genetic fallacy even though there were times when I was reading the book that I felt he was on the brink.

In this debate, argues McClymond, universalism is a Trojan horse—*everything* is at stake (*DR*, xxiv). What he means is that because Christian theology is a complex inter-connected web of doctrines, one cannot simply swap out hell for universal salvation without it have reverberations and repercussions throughout the rest of the web. He believes that all sorts of doctrines are put at risk.

My intention here is not to respond to the historical claims above. Elsewhere I have offered an extended critique of his thesis that Böhme is the father of modern universalism,[2] and I will leave it to patristics scholars to respond to the Gnosticism thesis. Ilaria Ramelli will no doubt lead that charge on that matter. My goal here is to consider McClymond's theological objections to universal salvation and offer a brief initial response, which I hope will contribute constructively to the conversation.

Before I begin, allow me to make a brief initial comment to explain my approach here. Over two thousand years, Christian universalism has existed in many very different versions. For the sake of simplicity and clarity I am going to work with a minimalist version. What this means is that if McClymond has a criticism of universalism that applies to *some versions* of universal salvation but not to others then it is not a criticism of universal salvation *per se* and I will consider it inadequate to the task of undermining universalism in general.

II. Is universalism a slippery slope into heresy?

The Argument

McClymond argues that well-meaning Christian universalists are unaware of the long-term consequences of belief in a universal restoration (*DR*, 1003–4). History, he says, shows that the move to accept universal salvation is the first step on a slope away from orthodoxy. He uses the analogy of a game of chess in which every move has implications for all the other pieces on the board, implications that may not be immediately apparent. A move that may look attractive at first might turn out to be catastrophic in the longer term. "In a comparable way, the doctrine of universal salvation, though initially appealing, seems to be a game-ending move that ends up

[2] Robin A. Parry, with Ilaria L. E. Ramelli, *A Larger Hope? Universal Salvation from the Reformation to the Nineteenth Century* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2019), appendix.

undoing other doctrines such as the doctrine of the atonement and perhaps also the doctrine of Jesus's divinity" (*DR*, 17 & 1004).[3]

The historical argument he uses to show this is the history of the Universalist denomination in America, a group that started as an evangelical universalist group and quickly moved to abandon the Trinity, penal substitution, then later the divinity of Jesus, the authority of Scripture, the centrality of Christ, and even (for some) belief in an afterlife, until today much has been lost from its original Christian form. This he takes to be a sobering warning to the church today.

Response

The historical argument McClymond offers is, I would argue, based on a misunderstanding of the journey of the Universalist denomination. His assumption is that their trust that God will save all people was directly connected to their rejection of atonement, Trinity, Christ's divinity, etc., and that once they tipped over the first domino in the chain the rest (inevitably?) followed in due course. They did not realize this at the start, but we can now see that once that first move was made, the game was over.

The actual story seems to me to be much more complicated than that.[4] The connection between their embracing of salvation for all and some of these other moves was indirect. The link was not primarily the belief in universal restoration itself but the *attitude of mind* that was willing to contemplate it being true.

Let me explain that. In the late eighteenth-century Western church, universalism was widely believed to be heretical. As far as most people were concerned, tradition and Scripture (as traditionally understood) ruled it out. For a person to even *consider* it, let alone embrace it, required a certain willingness to reject long-held traditions. And the American universalists in question were true American Protestants, proud of their rejection of tradition and of their God-given right

[3] Thomas Talbott comments: "This makes no more sense to me than the following: 'In a comparable way, the Augustinian idea of an eternal torture chamber, precisely because it is so appalling, seems to be a game-ending move that ends up undoing other doctrines such as the doctrine of the atonement and perhaps also the doctrine of Jesus' divinity.' I know many people who started out with a firm belief in an eternal hell and then ended up throwing out the whole ball of wax" (personal correspondence).

[4] On the history of the Universalist denomination, see especially Russell E. Miller, *The Larger Hope: The First Century of the Universalist Church in America, 1770–1870* (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 1979). See also Parry, *A Larger Hope?* Ch. 9.

to interpret the Bible for themselves. That attitude is what made universalism a possibility for them, and it is *also* what made unitarianism and deviant Christology and exemplarist atonement theologies possibilities. All of these were argued for at first on the basis that they were the true teaching of the Bible, long obscured by church tradition. Remember too that significant sections of American Protestantism at this time were also deeply influenced by the rationalism of the Enlightenment. That same spirit of the age shaped the early Universalist denomination. Right from the start Hosea Ballou's (1771–1852) theology was deeply impacted by deist rationalism. *That*, not belief in universal salvation, is what led him to reject the Trinity as unintelligible nonsense. This denominational celebration of rationality was further enhanced in the mid-nineteenth century by the impact of German higher biblical criticism and by Darwinism. These led to an undermining of the earlier faith in the Bible and in turn opened up hitherto unimaginable theological options for the denomination. (Besides, one can trace similar drift to unitarianism, unorthodox Christologies, and exemplarist atonement theologies among numerous Presbyterians and Congregationalists in the eighteenth century. Are we to conclude from this that the strict Calvinism of the Westminster Confession of Faith is a game-ending move that was not fully appreciated at the time?) My point is that *none* of this gradual transformation within the Universalist denomination was a direct implication of universal salvation. The chess analogy is entirely inappropriate unless one can show precisely *how* that doctrine leads to the abandonment of doctrines x, y, and z. But I have been unable to find any persuasive arguments in McClymond's book that show how the doctrine of salvation for all has implications that lead to the abandonment of any of the other doctrines he thinks are at risk. We'll test that instinct a little further in what follows.

III. Is universalism esoteric mysticism in disguise?

The Argument

Next we shall briefly consider McClymond's belief that the shape of Christian universalist theology reflects a pattern he sees both in Gnosticism and later kinds of esotericism, including Catharism, Jewish Kabbalah (and its Christian Cabbalah offspring), Swedenborgism, Freemasonry, and

Böhmism.[5] Indeed, he claims that "esotericism appears to have a hand-in-glove connection with universalism" (*DR*, 220). What he has in mind is an esoteric *unity-diversity-unity* metanarrative that he identifies across the diversity of esotericisms:

(a) UNITY: humans are created as some kind of divine creature containing a "divine spark," existing in complete unity with the Divine and all other rational souls.

(b) DIVERSITY: there was a fall away from the primal unity into a state of ignorance, diversity, and materiality.

(c) UNITY: creation will eventually return to its primal state of spiritual oneness, shedding its division, diversity, and materiality.[6]

According to this model, creatures come out of God and so naturally desire to return to God, being drawn back to their source: "it is this aspect of esotericism that most obviously undergirds the idea of a final return to God and salvation for all" (*DR*, 12). Stronger still, McClymond believes that the esoteric pattern of unity-diversity-unity is what underpins *all* universalisms. Indeed, he writes of this pattern, "the conceptual system of universalism *requires* it" (DR, 11, italics his).[7]

Response

There is a lot to be said here, but allow me to be brief and to the point. Christians do not need to look hard to find patterns analogous to the esoteric one in Scripture and in orthodox theologies. The Christian triad here is *creation-fall-redemption*. This metanarrative has important differences

[5] In reality the boundaries between some of these groups were porous, with considerable mixing of ideas.

[6] McClymond offers a helpful classification of various esoteric models for conceptualizing the final unity (*DR*, 221–28). (1) The ascent of fallen souls (with rebirth or illumination as the turning point); (2) the return to primal *plēroma* (spiritual fullness); (3) A return to the primal Adamic condition of androgyny, transcending gender differences and allowing completeness of the self; (4) Reunion of selves with the female divine principle of *Sophia* (Wisdom) or *Shekhinah* (divine glory), perhaps symbolized as a sacred marriage; (5) the return of humanity to Adam Qadmon, the Primal Man—the androgynous archetype of human beings as divine man; (6) the return from exile; (7) the motif of each effect returning to its cause (ultimately God); (8) the return to the original, spiritual, non-material condition (materiality being seen as a consequence of separation from the original unity)—all souls will eventually become a single mind in perfect union with God; (9) God's own life is dispersed and expressed throughout creation be will be drawn back into a final living unity in the end. McClymond thinks that all nine models share the idea of creation being a division that takes place *within God* and that the eschaton is about God's reconciliation *with God* restoring primal unity (DR, 227). Perhaps, though it is not at all clear to me that these models *must* be construed in that way; one could easily imagine the imagery and terminology of the models being deployed otherwise.

[7] As a matter of fact, Christian universalism does *not* require the metanarrative in a unity-diversity-unity form. One does find Christian versions of that model among Origenians and Origenists, but perhaps the majority of Christian universalisms since the Reformation do not appeal to it.

from and similarities to the esoteric *unity-diversity-unity* triad. As a consequence, *some* overlap between the two in both terminology and conceptuality is not in and of itself problematic. Let me illustrate.

McClymond worries about the high anthropologies in esotericism—humanity created as a divine-man with an inner "divine spark" that is naturally drawn to God, etc. While there are indeed problems for orthodox Christians in esoteric anthropologies, the devil is in the detail. We must not throw the baby out with the bathwater. After all, biblical anthropologies are also shockingly high. Humans are made as the *divine image/icon* in the sanctuary of creation (akin to the idol of a god in a temple) (Gen 1), and though dust they be, they are given life by *God's own breath* and granted access to eternal life (Gen 2). Related to this is the idea that God created human beings "a little lower than the gods" (Ps 8:5) with the *telos* (created end/goal) of union with him. We will even reign with Christ (2 Tim 2:13) and will judge the angels (1 Cor 6:3). Human beings are created to be filled with the divine Spirit and the represent and mediate the presence and rule of God in creation. None of this is a pagan idea latterly inserted into Christianity. That humans have a natural, inbuilt desire for God is not simply esoteric, as McClymond seems to suggest at various points. Rather, it is a corollary of the doctrine of creation (we were made *by* God and *for* God and thus yearn for God at a deep level of our being) and is mainstream orthodoxy. Hear Augustine: "You have made us for yourself and our hearts are restless, until they find rest in You" (*Confessions* I.1). If that does not speak of a natural desire for union with God then I don't know what does.

Similarly, the overarching pattern of creation-fall-redemption, in which redemption is understood as a restoration of what was lost (new creation, creation restored, a return from exile), is not some alien idea smuggled into Christianity, but is deeply imbedded in biblical texts. Yes, gnostics and such like did think about a return to beginnings, but Christianity has its own analogue of such ideas.[8]

In the same way, seeing the eschaton in terms of final *unity* and *plēroma* (fullness) in Christ is not simply pagan esotericism but also something one finds in Scripture (Eph 1:10; 3:19; 4:13). And even the very robust patristic theologies of *thēosis*/deification—of final completion/elevation of humanity through union with God—are intelligible in terms of biblical and creedal Christian

[8] Though, in both Scripture and in the Origenist tradition, this return was not a simple reversion to the beginning; the end is more perfect than the beginning.

theology. As I said, the devil is in the detail, and the problems arise in *how one construes* such unity, fullness, and *thēosis*. Some universalists did indeed tip over into esotericism (Stephen bar Sudhaile, Anne Conway, Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin), but most did not. (At least, if one wants to claim that they did then the burden of proof is on the accuser.)

Because McClymond is convinced that universalism requires the esoteric paradigm of unity-fall-unity he considers belief in the pre-existence of souls to be "a key idea in the ancient and modern development of universalism" (*DR*, 87), for it fits into the initial "unity" in the unity-diversity-unity triad. Now pre-existence is certainly an idea found among some universalists (e.g., George Rust and Anne Conway in the seventeenth century),[9] but it is *not* essential to universal salvation and hardly constitutes a "key idea." Gregory of Nyssa is a clear patristic example of a universalist who rejected the idea (*On the Making of Man* 28.3) and few Christian universalists of modern and contemporary times have entertained it.

Perhaps aware of this potential push-back, McClymond suggests that Gregory's universalism was not really consistent because by denying the pre-existence of souls he removed a key foundation on which his universalist eschatology should have been built if it was to be coherent (*DR*, ?).[10] But this is incorrect. *Apokatastasis* (final restoration) in no way requires belief in the pre-existence of souls. All that pre-existence adds is an innate desire for unification with God, and a doctrine of human creation in the image of God can supply that (see above).

One sometimes feels that McClymond, in his understandable zeal to distance himself from aspects of esotericism, ends up seeing monsters under the bed when it is not clear any are present. Allow me to illustrate what I mean. Consider the divine-spark-in-humanity idea mentioned above. McClymond argues that Sadhu Sundar Singh's (1889–1929) shift to Christian universalism came under the influence of the teaching of esotericist Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772). Now I agree with McClymond that Singh's admiration of Swedenborg and his claim to commune with the spirit of the dead Swedenborg are not encouraging signs for orthodox Christians! But I am not aware of any Swedenborgian underpinnings for his assertions about the redemption of all people. McClymond begs to differ. He quotes an extensive passage from *Meditations on Various Aspects of*

[9] Origen is much debated on this score. McClymond is insistent that Origen believed in the preexistence of souls; Ilaria Ramelli has argued at length that he absolutely did not.

[10] Confession: I recall reading this argument in the book, but I do not recall *where* and have not been able to locate it. If memory is playing tricks I withdraw the point.

the Spiritual Life (1926) that he describes as "a classic rendition of the gnostic-esoteric conception of the divine 'spark' in humanity" (*DR*, 218). However, there is nothing in the quotation that is inconsistent with mainstream Christian theology. Singh does indeed speak of "a divine spark" within human nature, but this idea does not come from Swedenborg (who as far as I am aware did not use such language). Given Singh's Sikh background before his conversion to Christianity, it is more likely a concept drawn from Sikhism (a plausible link McClymond himself makes; *DR*, 220). But this notion is easily converted into image-of-God theology—indeed Singh himself makes that very connection within the quotation, so why not consider it a perfectly intelligible example of contextualization or drawing on ideas from non-Christian philosophies to elucidate Christian ideas. Christians have always done this, from biblical times onwards. All that the quotation says is that no matter how sinful a person becomes they can never completely eradicate the divine spark within, which to me sounds like the claim that the image of God can be marred but not completely eradicated. And this becomes the basis for hope, because there always remains something within each person that God's Spirit can work on, something that is restless until it finds rest in God. Yet McClymond considers the theology here "a full-blown gnostic idea of human selves coming forth from God's nature and then returning to it." Indeed, it "glosses over the Creator-creature distinction" (*DR*, 219). Really? Singh is explicit in the quotation itself that this divine spark is not pre-existent and eternal, but is "created" by God alongside the soul in all people. So is this really problematic? Is it gnostic? McClymond concludes that given this account "it seems clear that Singh was influenced by Swedenborg" (*DR*, 220) but where is the evidence that Swedenborg's musings lie behind Singh's universalism? I see none. Swedenborg was not even a universalist, believing in hell and that one's fate was fixed at death, and in the passage in question Singh builds his hope on the ordinary Christian claims that God created human beings for fellowship with himself and that the divine image within humans yearns for God and cannot be eradicated by sin. Without further evidence, I remain to be convinced that any of this is sinister.

IV. Does universalism introduce division within the indivisible God?

A central part of McClymond's belief that universalism infects the whole web of Christian theology is his concern with *theo*logy proper. Yet a considerable chunk of McClymond's discussion

on the problems generated for the doctrine of God by universalism seems, in my opinion, to lose sight of the target and to get sidetracked from the issue in question.

McClymond writes that most versions of universalism focus on a divine drama that must be played out before all creatures can be saved. His concern is especially with those theologies that see a drama *within God*. What he has in mind is the Böhmist "dialectic of divine self-differentiation and divine self-reconciliation" (*DR*, 1008). Here salvation is a form of divine self-therapy, with the drama of creation as a working out of a dualism of light and dark within the divine nature itself. This idea did influence Hegel and through Hegel did have a big impact on German theology and thence global theology. (McClymond's book traces this idea very helpfully.) It also influenced some versions of universalism, but certainly not all. McClymond himself acknowledges this, though only for marginal figures such as James Relly and John Murray in the eighteenth century (*DR*, 1015). He believes that "the mainstream of Christian universalism . . . affirmed that all will be saved in connection with some sort of primal, divine, or intra-trinitarian drama" (*DR*, 1015–16).

Let's consider that final quotation more carefully. Some universalists did indeed affirm a *primal* divine drama (e.g., Origen and his account of the fall of the *logoi*) and some did affirm an *intra-divine* drama of one kind or another (e.g., Moltmann) and one may certainly wish to critique both of these. Be my guest. (As an aside, I am sympathetic with McClymond's critique of drama-within-God theologies. In the first place, they seek to say more about God that we can know on the basis of revelation. Second, they risk—and sometimes more than risk—bringing conflict into the inner life of the undivided God.) But what exactly is the third option—the "divine drama"? Placed alongside the other two, all that I can think it is that it refers to the drama of God's creating the world and then through Christ reconciling the world to himself and bringing it to glory. In which case, absolutely! This is a drama of God *within creation*, not *within God*, and all Christian universalists believe in *that* kind of divine drama: the reconciling work of Christ in incarnation, ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension. This is not a problematic, however. It is simply bog-standard Christianity. So whether divine drama is problematic depends on what one means by it, and as I have argued in my own work, universalism needs nothing more than a run-of-the-mill

drama of God's engagement with the world in creation, fall, and redemption.[11] Until I see a good argument as to why that is not the case I remain unpersuaded that universalism goes hand in hand with conflict-within-God theology.

Yet McClymond seems to intimate that most post-Reformation universalists have taken the drama-*within*-*God* approach. A few have; but most have not. Indeed, many of the Christians McClymond labels as "Böhmist universalists"—those one might consider most likely to embrace divine self-reconciliation theologies after their teacher—did not develop such intra-divine dramas in their theology. The reason for this is important and worth taking note of. It was because most of them made some critical adjustments to Böhme's theology, removing his dualistic vision of God. Böhme had insisted that both good and evil originate in God, the one source of everything. But many of his follows modified his vision of God so that God was now understood as pure light, goodness, and love, with no darkness or evil at all. It was precisely this move (towards orthodoxy, I might add) that enabled them to reconcile some of Böhme's other ideas with universal salvation and that removed the need for the intra-divine drama we are talking about. Böhme was himself a believer in eternal hell precisely because it emerged from his dualistic vision of God. So rather than universalism introducing a Böhmist division within God it actually inspired its removal. Salvation is *not* about God's self-therapy.[12]

McClymond, however, insists that:

> the message of ancient, medieval, modern, and contemporary universalism is quite different [from that of traditional Christian theology]. In the inverted theology of universalism, it is within heaven or God's realm that one finds risk, uncertainty, contingency, and perhaps even evil (or the potential for evil). The placid realm of the eternal Trinity becomes turbulent. As if to compensate for the stormy skies above, the earthly realm now becomes

[11] See especially the pattern of my argument in my chapter in Preston Sprinkle (ed.), *Four Views on Hell* (2nd ed. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016).

[12] McClymond writes, "From the analysis offered in the earlier chapters, it should not be surprising that the shift towards a conflictual or Böhmist conception of God should also involve a shift in the direction of universalism" (*DR*, 1022). I completely disagree. As I have argued elsewhere (Parry, *A Wider Hope?*, appendix), the move from Böhme to universalism came about when his followers *rejected* precisely the conflictual view of God he speaks of. The evidence shows, I believe, that belief in universalism did not arise from *within* the Böhmist system, but was introduced from the outside the system, which was then modified accordingly. Böhme himself believed in an everlasting hell and it was *this* view, not universalism, that was the natural correlate with his conflictual view of God.

> strangely serene. Earthly life is no longer a place of risk and contingency, because the final outcome of the still-unfolding heavenly conflict is declared in advance . . . . (*DR*, 1017)

In supposed contrast to universalist teaching, orthodoxy teaches that "God is not at risk of perishing, ceasing to exist, or becoming divided against himself. Evil does not threaten God" (*DR*, 1017).

McClymond's description here seems to me to pick out an issue with a few universalists and to tar all universalists with it. Looking at historical universalists, I think the majority would be astonished at this accusation. Indeed, it is a recurring motif in universalist arguments—ancient, medieval, modern, and contemporary—that God is undivided, pure goodness, at no risk from evil.

But here lies an irony: there are few universalists, past or present, that I hear talking about risk, either in God or creation. That is the kind of talk I usually hear from (certain) traditionalists, especially those with Arminian leanings. God takes a risk in creating creatures with free will, a risk that many will spiral away from their created destiny and be forever lost. God risks a certain degree of failure in his purposes for creation. Indeed, he may risk total failure. I am not 100 percent clear on the matter from the book, but I get the impression from McClymond's discussions on freewill that this is his own view. Our earthly realm, thinks McClymond, is one of risk and loss because of our sinful wills. But we should note that God cannot be insulated against such a risk, for it is *God's purposes* for creation that McClymond is seemingly putting in jeopardy here, making the future of creation depend on us rather than on God.

Here's a second irony: contrary to what McClymond's arguments lead me to expect, it is not universalists I hear speaking of internal division within God; rather, it is certain traditionalists. The intra-divine drama of divine self-reconciliation that I was made most familiar with as a young Christian was via the doctrine of penal substitution. As it is often taught, God faces an internal conflict: he loves and wants to forgive (some of/all of: delete as appropriate) his sinful creatures but his justice demands that he punish them. What to do? Christ takes that punishment on himself so that the inner-conflict in God can be resolved. God can now both be just and forgiving. Now this may be a slight caricature, but the theology is often presented in such a way, so perhaps it is *here* that the critique of divine-conflictualism needs to be directed.

And even penal substitution aside, one of the standard universalist arguments is that traditionalism risks dividing the undivided God by setting his love and his justice in conflict. Some of God's acts, such as casting the damned into hell, are presented as just but not loving. Universalism is proposed precisely as a way to avoid dividing God's inner life and actions up in this way. All God's acts are acts of undivided holy and just love. Conflict is precisely the thing universalists typically *refuse* to introduce into the divine life.

In sum, I can see no obvious connections between drama-within-God theologies and universal salvation. Neither implies the other. (Indeed as already mentioned, Böhme himself believed in eternal hell, not universal salvation, and Hegel never addressed the issue of the scope of salvation.) As far as I am concerned, this whole discussion, while interesting and important, has no direct bearing on whether the claim that God will save all people is theologically problematic.

Likewise, McClymond discusses at some length the problems of kenotic Christology, but I am not sure why. There are some universalists who have embraced kenotic Christology, but the connection is entirely contingent. Most universalists, historically speaking, have not defended it. So how is this supposed to be relevant to the general question of universalism? Indeed, most defenders of kenotic Christology are not universalists, so I remain unclear why this view is even brought up in relation to alleged weaknesses of final restoration.

The remaining concern about the doctrine of God concerns divine aseity and freedom. Now here there is more substance to the worry. The central concern is that God does not need creation in order to be God, that his decision to create the cosmos was contingent, not necessary, and that the decision to save creatures is similarly free. It is not necessitated either by something outside of God or by God's own nature. McClymond worries that arguments that move from claims about divine love to assertions of universal salvation treat saving everyone as something God *had* to do, and this threatens God's freedom. As a free choice, redemption must be contingent. Universalism makes salvation necessary. "Baldly stated, it is the idea that God will save everyone because God needs to save everyone, and that God needs to save everyone because God needs everyone. Every creatures matters, and I matter. God needs me to be God. Without me God cannot be God" (DR, 1003). As this complaint appears in another guise in his eclipse-of-grace critique, I will address it there in the section below.

V. Does universal salvation lead to an eclipse of grace?

Round One

According to McClymond, the belief that God will redeem all people leads to an "eclipse of grace": "[T]he effort to extend grace to all has ended up compromising the notion of grace. What seemed to be all-grace turned out on inspection to be no-grace" (*DR*, 1024).

At face value that is a very surprising claim. There is nothing initially obvious in the assertion that all will be saved (through Christ) that is incompatible with grace. Think: if salvation for one person can be a grace-gift, and nobody in this discussion denies that, then what would make it less of a grace-gift if God gave it to more people? Or all people? Is it less gracious to give an underserved present to all the children in a classroom than to give it to two of them? (Or must we think that God is *obligated* to damn some people forever to preserve salvation's gracious character?) Grace is the normal language used to describe salvation by Christian universalists. We love to speak of the grace that abounds more in its effects than sin: whatever damage sin inflicts, grace counters and undoes. As the effects of sin are universal, so too is the restoration work of grace (Rom 5:20). So at first glance the problem is not obvious.

Round Two

The Argument

However, perhaps first glances deceive. Let's look more closely to clarify the thinking here, for this is the most interesting of all McClymond's objections to universal salvation. We'll start with a specific issue already raised in connection with esotericism: the teaching about a "divine spark" in all people (*DR*, 23–25). McClymond writes: "The graciousness of grace has always been linked to particular divine actions viewed as contingent rather than necessary. Stated otherwise, the grace of God depends on God's will and is not necessitated by God's own nature or essence" (*DR*, 24). In esoteric "spark-of-the-divine teaching, salvation occurs according to nature, not according to grace" (*DR*, 24). (By nature, because "it is the nature of the spark eventually to return to God";

DR, 152.)[13] He writes, "From the standpoint of Christian orthodoxy, one of the key objections to this view is that it makes final salvation dependent not on human faith or faithfulness, or repentance or obedience, but on nature itself. If the innermost core of the human self is eternally and essentially linked to God, then it is not clear how or why a Savior would be necessary" (*DR*, 228).[14] The concern is a little clearer now. If we are saved because we have a divine spark in our natures, where is grace in that story?[15] We will return later to offer a response to McClymond's reflections here. First we need to dig a little deeper still.

Greater clarity in McClymond's thought comes when we make explicit what I call the "grammar of grace." McClymond believes that biblically speaking the essential components for understanding grace are:

1. It is a gift
2. It is undeserved, not owed as a duty
3. It is freely given (not necessitated)
4. It has a relational character (implying a human relation to God)

Grace for *all*, he says, undercuts grace construed in this way. How so? Let's see how the case develops.

McClymond thinks that the reasons universalists give for why God may care for them and thence act to save them take the grace out of grace. He considers universalist rationales for confidence in our salvation as falling into one of the following types:

1. *"I am saved because I am divine."* McClymond refers to those who might say "in my inmost self I am part and parcel of God, and God cannot be fully or finally divided against himself."

[13] McClymond says that if it is the nature of the spark to return to God then it is unclear why faith and obedience should be required (*DR*, 152). This seems a very odd claim, for obedience and trust in God are part of what it *means* to return to God. Given that, of course they would be required!

[14] As an aside, how does it follow from the belief that humans have an innate natural desire for God that there is not a problem with sin that we cannot resolve ourselves? That we do not need a Savior? That returning to God does not require faith and obedience? I cannot see how it does.

[15] Though, as an aside, one is also tempted to ask where is the grace in McClymond's story in which final salvation is dependent on "human faith or faithfulness, or repentance or obedience"? To a Protestant, that might sound at face value like salvation through our own good works. Being saved because of the kinds of creatures God made us is at least not about our own *self-salvation*. But I do jest somewhat. In Scripture, these obedient responses to God are themselves works of grace in us—a "gifted response."

2. *"I am saved because I am human."* This refers to those who think that because God-in-Christ has joined himself to humanity and that humanity dies and is raised in him then we can be sure that we will be saved.
3. *"I am saved because I suffer."* This speaks of "purgatorial universalism," which stresses God's use of sufferings to teach and purify of from sin. Because I am purged in the lake of fire by my own sufferings I will be saved.[16]
4. *"I am saved because God so wills it."* McClymond has something more specific in mind that it at first appears. He is thinking of so-called ultra-universalists (a short-lived though briefly popular view within denominational universalism, albeit with some modern analogues). Here we have instant salvation at death with no suffering afterwards.

All of these views allegedly undermine grace.

Response

Before I respond to this objection, let me make a concession: I do think that some of McClymond's critique has real bite for certain breeds of universalism. In particular, purgatorial universalism (3 above) needs to be *very carefully* spelled out, for it does run the risk of making Christ unnecessary for salvation. The focus can be on our own journey towards holiness through our own sufferings and learning. What role is left for Jesus?[17] And any theology that makes Jesus unnecessary for our redemption had abandoned the Christian tradition.

That done, there are some things to say here. First, and most important, just because God may have a *reason* to value me and to rescue me—e.g., that he loves me as a creature he made for himself—it does not follow that I thereby *deserve* to be rescued because of what I have done; or that I have *earned* my salvation.[18] I have sinned willingly; I do not earn salvation; it is given freely

[16] Here I was surprised to discover that this is apparently my own view (*DR*, 1029). I have sought in my publications to be clear that the sufferings of hell have no direct salvific effect—we are not saved though our sufferings. Their role is indirectly salvific in that they are educative and can lead us to see our condition and our need for Christ. I guess it depends what one means by "purgatorial"—that terms may hide some important distinctions.

[17] Those with purgatorial universalist instincts usually do try to develop their theologies to allow Christ the central role, but they are walking a tightrope and need to be ever vigilant.

[18] Though as Thomas Talbott pointed out to me, the word "deserve" in this context can function in different ways. I do not "deserve" to be saved *in the sense* that I have acted in such a way that it is my due. Quite the contrary! However, I may "deserve" to be saved because of the kind of creature that God has made me. He writes: "Consider the case of a newborn baby. Such a baby surely does deserve to be cared for by its parents, even though it has done nothing in the way of good works to have *earned* such parental care. A married couple may indeed be free not to have children. But

as a loving grace-gift, *but it is motivated*. God's acting in Christ to save humanity is not arbitrary. He does it because he loves us. "For God so loved the world that he sent his one and only Son . . ." (John 3:16). Why does he love us? Because he made us as objects of his love. God's love for creation is integral to the very act of creation itself. So the mere fact that someone might say, "I am confident that God will save me because he created me in his image and he loves me" (which is a Christian version of 1) in no way is equivalent to saying "God will save me because I deserve it on the basis of my works."

Second, if "I am saved because I am human" means I will be saved because God-in-Christ has united himself to humanity in his incarnation and in his death and resurrection transforms our human condition then I fail to see how this eclipses grace in any way. There is no claim of work-based desert hidden away in here; there is simply confidence in God's saving work in Christ. Grace is on full display in the giving of the Son.

McClymond still worries that on this account "[e]xamined from the human side, grace does not seem to be something 'received'" (*DR*, 1028), though he immediately goes on to admit that Gregory of Nyssa and other universalists taught that baptism, faith, and obedience play a key role in an individual's participation in Christ. Precisely! And historically speaking that has been the typical universalist approach: all humanity are saved in Christ, but we participate in that salvation experientially when we are united to Christ in the Spirit by obedient faith. All McClymond has to say in response to this is that "it is not clear how individual choice or action offsets the strong focus on Christ's corporate humanity and its all-inclusive character" (*DR*, 1028). But I cannot see how this is any more problematic than how the command "be reconciled to God" (2 Cor 5:20) offsets the claim that "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself" (2 Cor 5:19). Holding together the now of God's completed work in Christ with the as-yet-incomplete response of creation to it is a tension integral to Christian theology.

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if they choose to have a child (or just behave in a way likely to result in one), they thereby acquire an obligation to care for the child because the child deserves to be cared for (even if the best way to do so is to put the child up for adoption). Similarly, God may have been free not to create anyone at all. But he could not create someone without acquiring the freely accepted responsibility of a Creator to promote the created person's best interest over the long run. . . . I have a slight problem with the word 'duty' in the present context, because duties and obligations are possible only in a context where a failure to meet them is also possible. So in the case of God I prefer the idea of a freely accepted responsibility, where it is logically impossible that God might fail to meet one of these."

With regard to "I am saved because God so wills it," McClymond's discussion becomes confusing by sliding into considerations of ultra-universalism (a view that is indeed problematic, in my view) and passing over a more obvious candidate for the descriptor: Calvinist species of universalism. There have been universalists who have maintained confidence in their salvation because of God's sovereignty—they will be saved *because God has chosen that they will be*. God created all people for himself, he determines to bring all creatures to the *telos* for which he created them, and so he sent Christ to redeem them. As everything that happens is under God's control then there is no question about whether God's purposes of salvation will be achieved. Again, I fail to see how this undermines grace in salvation. Salvation is a gift, freely given, unearned, and with a relational character. All of McClymond's four components of grace are affirmed.

Finally, returning to the "divine spark" above, a word on "I am saved because I am divine." This phrase is subject to a range of meanings, some of which are heterodox and others of which fall within the ambit of orthodoxy. But I do not wish to get sidetracked into that discussion. Sticking to the point: McClymond offers the following analogy to explain why this view undermines grace. "One might picture the divine self as like a helium balloon trapped in one's chest. As soon as one dies, the balloon is released and ascends heavenward, back to its natural resting place in God. Missing from such an account of universal salvation is any notion of God's gift, as freely chosen by God, as unmerited, or as something received from God and implying some relation to God. Each of the four key elements in the biblical theology of grace . . . is missing. A strict interpretation of the 'divine spark' theology would make Jesus Christ unnecessary" (*DR*, 1026–27). The problem here is that he has not set up this analogy in a *Christian* form. In a Christian version, sin interrupts this neat picture. It turns the balloon to lead such that even though it contains helium, it cannot ascend . . . without divine help. In Christ, God transforms our humanity such that we can ascend to God again. How does this violate *any* of the four elements, let alone *all* of them? Far from making Jesus Christ unnecessary, it makes him absolutely essential.

Round 3

The Argument

However, while I think that most of McClymond's eclipse-of-grace argument does not work, there is at its core of a real issue, and I wish to turn to that now. It concerns component 3, that grace is

freely given, not necessitated. God does not *have* to show grace. If he did, it would not be grace. If the universalist says that God *has* to be gracious to all then grace is negated. Of all the arguments in McClymond's book, this is the one that comes closest to hitting home. Some reflections are in order.

Response

To start, let's say that we agree with McClymond that divine grace is contingent, not an expression of God's essence, but of his will. Fine—there is a logic to this theology. But that does not destroy universalism, for universal salvation is fully compatible with such a view. Let's say that God could choose not to be gracious to all people. It does not follow that God cannot also choose to be gracious to all. That would be *God's* call. And so a universalist could argue, and some have argued, that while God does not *have* to graciously save all people in order to be true to himself, God has as a matter of fact freely chosen to do so and his choice to save all humanity is revealed in the death and resurrection of Christ for all. How would this universalist view eclipse grace, even if grace is understood in the more voluntarist sense McClymond prefers?

However, I think it would be true to say that most universalists, myself included, are of the view that God's being love in God's essence means that it is unintelligible to think that God will abandon anyone to sin forever. To do so would be for God to fall short of being God, which is impossible. So is grace ungraced here? That is a good question and I am grateful to McClymond for pressing it.

Some musings. First, divine grace towards humans is God's giving humans what they do not deserve on the basis of their deeds, what they have not and cannot earn. As such, the gifts of grace are unmerited and cannot be claimed by their recipients as a right. So God does not *have* to show us grace *in the sense* that he is under some obligation to us to do so. If he owed us then the gift is merited and hence not of grace (Rom 4:4). This, however, is completely compatible with the claim that God will act with grace because of who God is *in God's very essence*. When God shows grace this is because God is love and God's love is essentially gracious when directed creationward. When he acts with grace towards sinners God is being God. (Not that we can know this *a priori*—we only know that God is love because of divine self-revelation.) On this view, for God to forever withhold grace from a sinner in need God would be acting in a way contrary to the

way God has revealed himself to be.[19] As Thomas Talbott notes: "According to 2 Timothy 2:13, 'If we are faithless, he remains faithful—*for he cannot deny himself.*" Does this not seem to imply that God *cannot* act in a faithless way?—that he *cannot*, for example, break a promise? If so, then it seems to be a necessary truth that God always keeps his promises. McClymond's view seems to imply, therefore, that God does not keep his promises freely."[20]

How would the view that I have developed here eclipse grace? It does not make the gifts of grace granted on the basis of our righteous behavior, nor would it mean that we do not need them or are not utterly dependent on them. Nor does it make God beholden to anyone or anything or any principle outside of Godself. Nobody and nothing outside of God is *making* God be gracious. God is being gracious because God wills to be gracious and God's will is here an expression of who God is as the God of love. As the Prayer of Humble access from the *Book of Common Prayer* (1662) puts it: "We do not presume to come to this thy Table, O merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in thy manifold and great mercies. We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy Table. But thou art the same Lord, *whose property is always to have mercy.*" Or, as some more recent versions put it, "for it is your nature always to have mercy."

Round 4

The Argument

Yet, I do not think that this will satisfy McClymond. He will worry that divine grace is by definition a *free choice* on God's part and if God's nature as love means that God will *certainly* act with grace when grace is needed then God cannot forever withhold grace and thus the choice is not free and consequently not grace.[21] Here we risk getting stuck in the very murky waters that

[19] McClymond disagrees and appeals to God's revelation to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy" (Exod 33:19). Paul goes further and, reflecting on Moses adds, "he hardens whom he wants to harden" (Rom 9:18). God hardens some people and has mercy on others—this is the thrust of Romans 9. But McClymond has neglected to note how this distinction of hardening for some and mercy for others is a temporary activity within a wider economy of mercy on all. Paul sums up his overall argument in 11:30–32, "Just as you [believing gentiles] who were at one time disobedient to God have now received mercy as a result of their [unbelieving Israel's] disobedience, so they too have now become disobedient in order that they too may now receive mercy as a result of God's mercy to you. For God has bound everyone over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all."

[20] Personal correspondence 13th October 2018.

[21] As an aside, one might object here that McClymond's point is based on *a priori* philosophical reasoning about the nature of freedom, with McClymond taking a libertarian stance on the issue and reasoning theologically from there.

gather around the understanding of the nature of freedom—which is hard enough to get clarity on when speaking of humans, let alone God!

Response

Some of the anxiety here is based on linguistic confusion. McClymond might object that universalists, by grounding grace in the divine essence, are saying that God *has* to show grace, in which case it is not grace. But this "has to" is rather misleading. As already mentioned, God does not have to be gracious because he is being compelled to be by any outside being or principle or standard. Nobody and nothing is making God do anything that God does not want and choose to do. God is gracious because God chooses to be. All God's acts are simultaneously free and motivated by who God is. God acts freely and at the same time in accord with his nature. *God's freedom is his complete freedom to be God, unhindered by anyone and anything*. By contrast, "an arbitrary freedom, one which is not *responsive* to the solicitations of goodness and beauty, is both unintelligent and ultimately *unfree*; for it fails to connect the act with its motive and therefore fails to show how the action is an expression of the agent's desire. Such indeterminate spontaneity is more like a spasm than an act of volition."[22]

So is there no contingency? Must God create the world in order to be God? The tradition has said that God's essence does not make creation inevitable. In other words, God does *not* need to create in order to be God; God is fully Godself without creation. This is divine aseity. Thus, the creation of the world is indeed contingent. Though this contingency is a requirement of divine *aseity*, not divine *freedom*. God's freedom is God's unconstrained liberty *to be God*. All God's acts are free, but that does not require that they are all contingent. What does this mean for grace? God's decision to create is free,[23] and a universal grace-gift of be-ing to the world. God's decision to create is still completely in accord with the divine essence as love. Creation did not *have* to be, but if creation is to be it cannot but be the creation of the God who is love. This means that the eschatological destiny of creation will be one in accord with divine love. It is as unintelligible to suggest that God might choose otherwise—e.g., to choose a world in which the final destiny of

[22] Michael Hanby, *No God, No Science? Theology, Cosmology, Biology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2016), 311.
[23] Though not free in the sense of voluntarist arbitrariness.

creatures is one of unmitigated horror—as to suggest that God might choose to cease existing.[24] This is not a limitation on God but simply an expression of God's divine perfection.

So while divine aseity does demand that creation is not inevitable given the divine nature, if God does freely choose to create—and God has—then God will also freely choose to manifest his being as love in creation. In a world lost in sin this will mean salvation and grace for that world.[25] And this universal grace threatens neither divine aseity nor the freedom and graciousness of grace.

VI. Does belief in universal salvation lack a proper theological foundation?

Introduction to the Argument (and round 1)

McClymond thinks that universalism has an epistemic problem because he believes that it cannot build a plausible case upon Scripture or tradition, so it is forced to fall back on *a priori* rational arguments or on religious experiences. Hence, we find many "speculators" in the universalist tradition, who build their theology on tidy, rational systems of thought. But this is to presume far more than we can claim to know about God and God's purposes. We are reliant on what God has revealed and so theology should have an epistemic humility and an *anti*-speculative frame of mind.

The spirit and ethos of universalism, according to McClymond, is a "metaphysical rebellion" against the very structures of reality. At this point his rhetoric does lead him in slightly surprising directions. He continues: "Here there is a rejection of the givenness and the conditions of human life, the fact of sin, and the way of salvation offered by God. Why should God become incarnate? Why should atonement for sins be necessary? *Why?* The 'metaphysical rebel' rejects the universe as it is in favor of the universe as he or she prefers it" (*DR*, 1035). This rebellious mindset is apparently prevalent among universalists. Now obviously this accusation of metaphysical rebellion is predicated on the truth of eternal hell, which is the very matter in dispute. Of course

[24] To speak of God's ability to choose to commit suicide is to talk literal non-sense. In the classical tradition, to which I subscribe, God's essence and his existence are one and the same so it is *unintelligible* to speak of God ceasing to exist.
[25] For the arguments here, see Thomas Talbott, *The Inescapable Love of God* (2nd ed. Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014); John Kronen and Eric Reitan, *God's Final Victory: A Comparative Philosophical Case for Universalism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

if one thinks eternal hell is a sober truth about reality—and McClymond does—then anyone who thinks otherwise is creating a fantasy world rather than dealing with the grim truth about the real world. So there is some begging of the question in this accusation. And even setting that aside, the argument is developed in a very odd way, because even if universalism is downright wrong, universalists have no qualms about acknowledging the givenness of human life, its limiting conditions, its warping by sin, and the need for incarnation and atonement. All these things usually matter enormously for universalists. It feels to me that beneath the rhetoric there is little substance to this complaint. But let's set that aside and consider the more sober complaints.

Abstract Rationality

The Argument

McClymond objects to arguments that move from claims about God's love to claims about universal salvation. Or from claims that God will achieve all his purposes to claims that all people will be saved. His concern is that the divine attributes (love, power, etc.) are abstracted from their scriptural context and then deployed to yield universalism. But, he says, we must understand divine love, power, mercy, etc., *in the light of the biblical narrative*. Scripture tells us what the shape of God's love is and we cannot know its contours in advance of such revelation. Abstractors are happy with "For God so loved the world" but are

> willing to skip over the middle part of the verse—"that he gave" (the Father's gift of his Son) "his only Son" (the internal differentiation in the trinitarian God, as Father and Son), "that whosoever believes in him" (the necessity of faith, linking individual humans to God) "should not perish" (the threat of destruction apart from God's salvation) "but have eternal life" (eternity in fellowship with God as gift). . . . In contrast to this, the abstractly rational mind will start from divine love and then proceed without further ado to the salvation of all persons, considering everything pertaining to the mediation of Jesus Christ as messy and cumbersome—if not unnecessary. . . . It is rather easy to see why universalists should often be unitarians and why unitarians should in general be universalists. As soon as one introduces a historical savior, things become complicated. (*DR*, 1037–38)

Again:

> Another common line of argument for universalism derives from abstract or a priori theological reasoning. This way of thinking starts with God's love for all human beings and then leaps to the conclusion of eternal salvation for all, while omitting the messy part in between—namely, the incarnation of God's Son, Jesus's life and teachings, Jesus's call for faith, Jesus's atoning death, Jesus's bodily resurrection, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, and the need for evangelism. (*DR*, 22)

Again:

> "God is love, therefore . . . ." The universalist fills in the blank with the idea that "all will be saved": "God is love, therefore all will be saved." But the human mind is endlessly inventive. I might think to myself, "God is love, therefore I will get the new job that I applied for." It is no more silly or arbitrary to begin with the premise that "God is love" and then infer consequences for myself during the next twenty-four hours than to infer consequences for the entire universe for the next twenty-four million years." (*DR*, 1065)[26]

Response

Let's consider the final argument above before getting to the heart of the issue. McClymond is saying that the following two arguments are as "silly" and "arbitrary" as each other:

1. If God is love and God is able to save me from eternal torment and unite me to himself then God will do so.
2. If God is love and God is able to get me the new job that I applied for then God will do so.

[26] As an aside, as I do not discuss it in the main text, let us note that McClymond thinks that abstract reasoning leads to the question of "fiat forgiveness"—why couldn't God simply forgive us?—which he believes leads to the idea that the cross is unnecessary (*DR*, 1038–39). This objection, of course, presupposes that the *only* function of the cross is as a mechanism for secure forgiveness. If God could just forgive us there was no point in Jesus dying. Even if forgiveness is one of the purposes of the cross, I find this argument to presuppose a strikingly reductionist account of atonement.

I beg to differ. According to the Christian theology, God created human beings for eternal union with himself, not for eternal hell. In love for his creatures, God sent his Son to redeem them from sin. I have very good biblical warrant for thinking that God in his love desires to bring humans to their created *telos*. I have no such warrant for thinking that God desires to give me the job I applied for. I know that the former is what is ultimately best for me—it is what God created me *for*. I do not know that getting the job is what is good for me in the long-term. To suggest that the two arguments are equivalent strains credulity.

A few more preliminaries. First, while appreciating that McClymond's focus here is epistemic, let us be crystal clear—lest his readers get confused—that Christian universalists consider Jesus to be at the heart of their universalism. As a rule they would not dream of skipping over any of the so-called "messy" items mentioned by McClymond. I am sure that it is not his intention to suggest that they would, but he could be misread in that way by the incautious reader. So it is worth making clear that even if universalists do employ some arguments for universal salvation that do not directly refer to Christ—and they often do—it would be obviously fallacious to infer from this that they think Christ expendable. After all, such arguments are arguments for global *salvation*, and the obvious question then to ask is how God will bring this salvation about. Christ is the answer to that question.

Second, it is also worth noting that such *a priori* arguments are often accompanied by other arguments drawn from Scripture and so forth. They may not be intended to function alone, but to be part of a cumulative case. As such, they play a role akin to many arguments employed in favor of, say, divine atemporality, divine simplicity, divine aseity, divine omnipotence, and so on, concepts McClymond takes very seriously, as do I.

Third, the alleged connection of ideas between universalism and unitarianism is unhelpful. Historically, Christian universalists were trinitarian. Unitarianism arose within Protestantism in general in response to some Enlightenment concerns, unconnected with universalism, and some universalists, under the influence of Enlightenment thinkers and believing they were following the teaching of the Bible, adopted it. But the association was historically contingent and does not reflect the mainstream of Christian universalism.

So let's consider the central epistemic concern: that divine attributes, love in particular, are abstracted from their biblical context by the speculative theologians. McClymond's point is that

while abstracted (and sentimentalized?) love might entail universal salvation, divine love of the shape as revealed in the Bible does not. I have argued in *The Evangelical Universalist* and at more length in a talk entitled "The Gospel-shaped Love of God" that when one does spell out divine love in the way it is set forth in biblical revelation it *still* points very clearly to universalist conclusions.[27] I do not intend to repeat my arguments here, but what I try to show is that when God's love is understood in terms of scriptural teaching on the love between the persons of the Trinity, the act of creation, God's love for Israel, God's love as shown in Jesus' ministry, and in the crucifixion, the resurrection, and the eschaton—alongside the clear biblical teaching on God's love for all, as well as an appreciation how love relates to all the divine attributes and to the wrath of God—then it becomes clear that this gospel-shaped love is strongly suggestive of universal salvation.

So I would maintain that the move from divine love to universalism works just fine, even—indeed, especially—when one fills out the notion of love in robust biblical terms. Consequently, I have no qualms at all with the stripped down versions that one often finds in universalist writings. Dismissing them as sentimentalized, as many traditionalists do, is an inadequate response. I do not consider them to be misleading but rather to be adequate compressions of biblical teachings and the implications thereof.

Religious Experience

Historically, at least in the modern period, religious experiences—visions and the like—played an important role in bolstering and motivating universalist beliefs. McClymond helpfully sketches the relativized place of experience in theological reflection: "Since the mainstream of the Christian church has always insisted that visionary experiences must be tested for their congruity with church teaching, a visionary experience does not stand on its own as an independent basis for faith, nor can it contradict whatever is already known clearly from biblical teaching or from the authoritative teaching of the church" (*DR*, 1046). I completely agree. In this regard, it is worth saying that some universalists invest too much store in their experiences. However, this is not necessarily or even normally the case. It may be worth pointing out the way in which eighteenth-century universalists,

[27] See my talk "The Gospel-Shaped Love of God – Session 7 (FGC 2016)" on YouTube.

say, were often so very keen to submit their experiences and ideas to the judgment of Scripture. Thus, for instance, Johann Petersen (1649–1726) and his wife Johanna (1644–1724) happily modified parts of Jane Lead's (1624–1704) eschatological system in light of the teaching of the Bible, even though she received through a vision. While visions certainly had a place, Scripture was the overriding authority for them. Or consider the repeated insistence in the writings of Elhanan Winchester (1751–97) that universalism could only be accepted if it was fully in accord with inspired Scripture. Everything must be tested against the authoritative teaching of the Bible. And Winchester invested a lot of time in arguing the case from the Bible.[28]

The General Epistemic Complaint

With regard to the more general epistemic complaint, I would answer it as follows. The case for universal restoration draws not simply on reason and experience, but also on Scripture and tradition.[29] The theological defense stands on four legs, not two.

I have argued at length elsewhere that a plausible biblical case for universalism can be made (which McClymond kindly describes as "the most ambitious attempt at a complete, canonical

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[28] See Robin A. Parry, "The Baptist Universalist: Elhanan Winchester (1751–97)" on Academia.edu: https://www.academia.edu/8643336/_The_Baptist_Universalist_Elhanan_Winchester_1751_97_.

[29] Now McClymond has carefully considered many universalist biblical arguments and is unpersuaded. That is fair enough. Scripture can be interpreted in the way he reads it, so I am not for one moment suggesting that interpretations such as his have no legs. And I agree with him that historically speaking the biblical arguments used have been a mixed bag, ranging from the sublime to the ridiculous. However, I remain convinced that the biblical case is strong. As I have argued this at length elsewhere I do not intend to repeat myself here.

There is one correction I ought to make to McClymond's critique of universalist hermeneutics. One universalist strategy, past and present, is to argue that *prima facie* the Bible seems to teach both eternal hell and universal salvation, so one needs a hermeneutic to handle this. In the twentieth century, some universalists have argued that these strands are genuinely contradictory and that one must choose one or the other (e.g., John Hick, Jürgen Moltmann, Marilyn Adams). McClymond, however, projects this use back onto all universalists who observe this tension: "The dual-strand interpretation requires that one believe that the Bible is at odds with itself in its teaching on eschatology and perhaps that the apostle Paul was himself of two minds on the question" (*DR*, 1049). This claim is wrong. Historically speaking, universalists had no intention at all of claiming that the Bible is at odds with itself. The strategy is intended to show that one needs to move beyond a superficial proof-texting approach to the Bible and to discern how all the text can be interpreted in a way that coheres. The aim is to problematize the easy traditionalist assumption that the Bible obviously teaches eternal hell, not universalism. Instead, space is opened up by this argument for a discussion of previously unimagined possibilities. Universal restoration is offered as the framework that allows both sides of the tension to be taken seriously and held together. (McClymond makes the same mistake when observing Andrew Jukes' use of this tension, which is not [*pace* McClymond] intended to suggest that the Bible is contradictory.)

reading of the Bible";[30] *DR*, 1054). I have no intention of repeating that case here, but I stand by what I have written.[31]

The case from tradition is not simply a matter of exploring the ideas of historic universalists such as Gregory of Nyssa, though it is certainly that, nor of showing how universal salvation is consistent with everything in the creeds, though it is that too, but it is also a matter of arguing that universalism offers the potential for holding traditional orthodox theology together as a more coherent whole than the doctrine of hell permits. This was the strategy of Thomas Allin in the nineteenth century: aiming to show that traditional hell is the alien virus in the body of Christianity, threatening the internal organs, and that universal salvation was the cure.[32] I think that there is a case to be made here—that we affirm universalism precisely because it helps us to be more *coherently* orthodox. And when reason and experience enter into the picture, it is not as stand-alone players. They set to work with biblical and traditional theological concepts, all four sources inter-relating in complex, dialogical ways.

In answer to McClymond's core question—*why* should one believe in universal salvation?—I think that the answer is put best by McClymond himself when defending authentic Christian hope against mere wishful thinking: "Christian hope is founded on what God has already done in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and it looks to the completion and fulfillment of that work that has already begun" (DR, 1064). Absolutely! I could not agree more! And *that* is the theological ground for belief in universal salvation.

What has God done in Jesus Christ? He created all people through the Son, destining them for himself; when sin sent humans spinning away from their divinely given destiny, he came in Christ, representing all humanity before God, living the human life that we could not. He died our death on behalf of all and was raised for our justification, entering heaven itself as our advocate, the Second Adam. This salvation of humanity in Christ will reach its completion in the eschaton, when all things will be headed up in Christ and God will be all, in all. Let me ask: How is

[30] I should add that he tries to show that my attempt is exegetically unsuccessful (*DR*, 596–67). However, his critique is, in my opinion, unsuccessful, and I stand by my original arguments. This essay is already too long and I have no intention of prolonging the agony by getting into the exegesis of countless biblical texts.
[31] Gregory MacDonald, *The Evangelical Universalist*.
[32] Thomas Allin, *Christ Triumphant: Universalism Asserted as the Hope of the Gospel on the Authority of Reason, the Fathers, and Holy Scripture*. 1885. Edited and with an introductory essay and notes by Robin A. Parry. (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2015).

traditional hell the fulfillment of *that* story, the story of what God has done in Christ? It is not. Which threads of that tale does it complete? None. The story of God's redemption of humanity in Christ's humanity ends in humanity's salvation. When the rubber hits the road, the epistemic heart of the case for Christian universalism is *the gospel itself*.

VII. Does traditionalism handle evil better than universalism?

McClymond rightly perceives that one stream feeding into the river of universalism is the desire to help people come to terms with the problem of evil in this world: "The historical pattern thus shows that Christian universalism often emerged in conflicted and chaotic periods of history. It hardly seems an accident that a hope for universal salvation often burned brightest in the darkest hour" (*DR*, 1056). However, he alleges that traditionalism is better able to handle evil than universalist alternatives. I found this part of his discussion somewhat tangled. For instance, he contrasts Origen, whom he classifies as holding "the pedagogical view," according to which evil and suffering are intended to teach us something, with Augustine, whom he classifies as holding "the voluntarist view," which locates evil in the rebellious will of the creature.[33] But why the contrast? McClymond is well aware that Origen was absolutely insistent that evil originated in the rebellious will of the creature long before Augustine did. It was one of his core convictions and a major disagreement he had with the gnostics. But once evil and suffering arose, God used them to teach people. For Origen these are simply different components of a single approach to evil, not two alternative approaches. Augustine is defended by McClymond for denying that evil is a substance, seeing it instead as a privation of the good. But in this too he was following Origen and his heirs. Indeed, that very metaphysic was fundamental in patristic universalism. One reason that hell could not be eternal, according to Origen, Gregory, et al., is that countless good creatures would be forever falling short of their *telos*—hell would *eternalize* evil (i.e., sinners falling short of their created nature) in creation such that God can never be all in *all*. He would only ever be all in *some*.

[33] He also considers "the dualist view" that roots good and evil in God. However, this view is exceptionally rare amongst universalists. And, as explained in the main text, that is not an accident, for it fits with eternal hell better than with universal salvation. He also considers "the illusionist view" which roots evil in appearances rather than reality. McClymond cites Barth as an example, but this is a highly contentious claim. No other examples are cited, so I will pass it by as at best a very marginal view.

The key reason traditionalism is supposed to deal better with evil than universalism, according to McClymond, is that it roots evil in the creaturely *will*. But that is the historic mainstream tradition within universalism too, the only *possible* exceptions being the Calvinist universalists, who while they too saw evil as originating in the will, they maintained that the will is determined by God.[34] So where is the advantage with traditionalism on this issue?

Perhaps I am too hasty in shutting the argument down so fast. McClymond explains that Origen is overly optimistic about the human ability to learn from experience, failing to appreciate the epistemically disordering effects of sin and the power of habituation in evil (*DR*, 1061–62). He is thus too optimistic about our ability to learn. Even if this is so, and I am not persuaded it is, that deficiency is easily rectified. Simply throw in a need for prevenient grace and the work of the Spirit to soften hard hearts and open them up to the possibility of change for the better and we're all good. Or does Christianity require us to hold to a belief that some people are so hardened in sin that even God's Spirit cannot reach them? That some are, in effect, beyond all hope of salvation? Such a view seems to me to overestimate sin and to underestimate God.

What is more surprising is that McClymond does not deal with his initial insight: that periods of human suffering inspire a hope for universal salvation. Why would that be? Why would people find it inspiring when the world seems dark? Precisely because the hope it offers is far brighter than the alternative. Sometimes we are able to cope with the evils of this world because we believe that in the end all shall be well. If we believed that all shall *never* be well then the sufferings of this life seem less endurable. In addition, we may well find the problem of theodicy unbearable: God created a world in which he knows that many creatures will be forever damned. How is that good? Yet McClymond offers no attempt to deal with this genuinely pressing issue.[35] So far as I can tell, universalism still has a big lead over eternal hell on the theodicy front.

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[34] But I say "possible exceptions" because, as with all Calvinists, they strongly deny that God is guilty of evil when he determines humans to sin, and the case for that defense is in my opinion plausible.

[35] Indeed, one of the interesting omissions from the book is any significant discussion of the many criticisms leveled against traditional hell. The criticisms are noted, but never responded to, save to argue that they arise from *a priori* reasoning and claim to know more about God than we can know. So the readers are left wondering how God can be love if eternal hell is real, how God can be an undivided unity if his love and justice pull in opposite directions, how the atonement for all works if many for whom Christ died are never saved, how suffering on the scale we see it can be compatible with the omnipotent, omnibenevolent God if things are only going to get worse on that score, for infinity, how Christ will ever be victorious if many of his purposes are forever thwarted. McClymond does briefly argue in favor of retributive justice, to render traditional hell more plausible (*DR*, 1040–41). But there is a long way to go from retributive justice to hell for retributive justice is also one of the key problems with hell (for how can an infinite

In conclusion, McClymond's book is a major achievement and a very well-researched guide to many of the major movements and players and themes in the history of universal salvation. However, at the level of theological critique it seems to me not to have delivered the fatal blow to universalist theology that it was hoping for. Indeed, I came away from it more convinced than ever that universalist theology can be authentically orthodox Christian theology.

punishment be a proportionate retribution for a finite sin?). McClymond does not even attempt to deal with these concerns, and I imagine that this is because his book was a critique of universalism not a defense of traditionalism. I appreciate that. But the problems are as much a thorn in the side of traditional hell as they ever were. Until they are satisfactorily dealt with universalism will always hold appeal.