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RETHINKING OF THE HELL: THE SECOND CHANCE THEORIES IN THE MODERN ENGLISH AND AMERICAN PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

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Problem of hell is a philosophical problem related to theological doctrine of eternal punishment. It is a variation of the problem of Evil. With a few exceptions, the traditional concept of hell has prevailed in Christian thought since the time of early Christianity and until the XIX century. In general, this doctrine of afterlife teaches that after death the souls of sinners fall into hell, where they punished by eternal fire.

The article presents some objections to the traditional model of hell and considers a number of alternative theories. The particular attention has been paid to The Second Chance Theory and its varieties (escapism). Author of the article shows that such escapists as A. Buckareff, A. Plug and others understood the hell as an autonomous place or state, which God creates for those who do not want to communicate with him. Accordingly, the inhabitants of hell may at any time change their status and join the community of the saved. The author analyzes how this theory related to the concept of metaphysical libertarian free will, which admitted by the supporters of free will theodicy (R. Swinburne, E. Stump).

The author concludes that current religious and philosophical reflection developing in the discourse of humanist culture tend to rational criticism, which rejects the traditional model of hell for reasons of moral, psychological, logical and philosophical nature. This creates a need for new theories, designed to amend or reinterpret the traditional concept of hell.

Keywords: hell, the problem of Evil, Christianity, salvation.

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ПЕРЕОСМЫСЛЕНИЕ АДА: ТЕОРИИ ВТОРОГО ШАНСА В СОВРЕМЕННОЙ АНГЛОАМЕРИКАНСКОЙ ФИЛОСОФИИ РЕЛИГИИ

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Проблема ада является философской проблемой, которая связана с теологической доктриной вечного наказания и представляет собой вариацию проблемы зла. За некоторыми исключениями, традиционная концепция ада преобладала в христианской мысли со времен раннего христианства и вплоть до XIX века. В целом, согласно этой доктрине после смерти души нераскаявшихся грешников попадают в ад, где они подвергаются наказанию вечным огнем. В статье приводятся возражения против традиционной модели ада и рассматриваются альтернативные теории. Особое внимание уделяется теории второго шанса и ее разновидностям (эскапизм). Показано, что согласно взглядам эскапистов (А. Бухарев, А. Плаг и др.) ад понимается как автономное место/состояние, которое Бог создает для тех, кто не желает общения с ним. Соответственно существо, находящееся в аду, может в любое время изменить свое состояние и присоединиться к сообществу спасенных. Автор анализирует, как данная теория соотносится с концепцией метафизической либертарианской свободы воли, которая признается сторонниками теодицеи свободной воли (Р. Суинберн, Э. Стамп).

Автор приходит к выводу, что современные религиозно-философские рефлексии, развивающиеся в дискурсе гуманистической культуры, склонны к рациональному критицизму, который отбрасывает традиционную модель ада по причинам морального, психологического и логико-философского характера. Это порождает необходимость поиска новых теорий, призванных изменить или реинтерпретировать традиционную концепцию ада.

Ключевые слова: ад, проблема зла, христианство, спасение.

Introduction. The problem of hell is a philosophical problem related to the theological doctrine of eternal punishment and is a variation of the problem of evil. For centuries, the image of hell has filled millions of believers with fear. The traditional concept of hell is based on the following basic assumptions: (H1) The Anti-

Universalism Thesis: Some persons are consigned to hell; (H2) The Existence Thesis: hell is a place where people exist, if they are consigned there; (H3) The No Escape Thesis: There is no possibility of leaving hell; and (H4) The Retribution Thesis: The justification for hell is retributive in nature [5, p. 25].

The above described model has certain problematic aspects. The following statements have been accepted: (a) God exists, and He is as absolutely good, omnipotent and omniscient; (b) at least some of His rational creations are consigned to go to hell and stay there forever. The problem is that (b) seems inconsistent with the fundamental attributes of the divine essence encompassed in (a).

The **purpose** of the article is to analyze the second chance theories of hell in contemporary anglo-american philosophy of religion.

I will dwell on two of the most significant objections to the traditional model. First, the «juridical objection» to the traditional model of hell lies in the fact that there is an obvious discrepancy between the finite, limited evil that is committed by individuals, and infinite punishment. Indeed, although an external observer cannot determine with absolute accuracy the amount of evil caused by this or that person, and, therefore, cannot correlate it with the same evidently determined punishment, it is clear that the amount of offence committed during a single lifetime is disproportionate to further punishment that lasts forever.

Let us consider the juridical argument for the doctrine of eternal punishment, best expressed by Anselm of Canterbury (*Cur Deus homo* 1.7, 1.11). Because human beings have offended the infinite majesty of God by committing sin, or have demonstrated in this way the rebellion of limited will against the will of infinite Being, sin cannot be considered a limited action that deserves limited punishment. Accordingly, the punishment for any sin must be eternal. This explanation derives from the practice of feudal law. From this perspective, an appropriate punishment is primarily determined by not only the severity of the offense, but by status of the person injured. The obvious drawback of this theory, in my view, is that God as omnipotent Being cannot be *harmed* by anyone.

Second is the so-called «moral objection». In the most general form it can be presented as follows: the traditional doctrine of hell is inconsistent with the basic notions of love, justice and mercy that are expected from human beings and especially from an omniperfect God [1, p. 433–447; 5, p. 27–28]. It should be stressed that the problem of hell is not a complication exclusively within the Christian philosophical or theological system; it is also the marker by which external observers – atheists, agnostics or representatives of other religions – assess the ethical value of Christianity. For example, Antony Flew noted (*God and Philosophy*, 1966) that when Christians «really believe that God created people with the full intention of torturing some of them in hell forever, they might as well give up the effort to defend Christianity» (Cited according to: [10, p. 150]). David Lewis, considering the traditional doctrine of hell, also questions the concept of God's goodness. When considering the problem of hell, many researchers focus on evil that God cannot prevent; but there is also evil that is caused by God himself. Infernal punishment, says Lewis, is infinite in time and is more powerful than any earthly suffering. So God, in condemning people for such a huge torment, acts infinitely worse than the worst of tyrants did [7, p. 232]. Thus, as we can see, the doctrine of hell puts the morality of both Christianity and Christians under question.

The problem of hell is presented with a number of closely connected items – logical, philosophical, ethical and theological – and becomes acute in the process of careful examination of the doctrine of eternal punishment. A fundamental question that arises within the outlined discourse is how to «solve» the problem of hell. One response to the problem of hell is *annihilationism*. According to annihilationism, God just destroys the wicked souls, or allows them to die as a result of sin. In contrast to annihilationism, *universalism* affirms that all mankind will, sooner or later, be reconciled with God. J. Kvanvig points out that there are two branches of universalism – *contingent* universalism and *necessary* universalism [5, p. 74]. The latter affirms that not only is universal salvation possible, it will undoubtedly take place in reality, and furthermore the assumption that anyone could end up in hell is impossible. Most Christian theologians who share universalistic views hold to contingent universalism – although there is a risk that some people will end up in hell, as a matter of fact nobody will.

Contingent universalism is connected with another hypothesis that will be the main subject of my research. The matter concerns the *Second Chance Theories*¹ (posthumous conversion theories),

¹ The term was introduced by J. Kvanvig (1993) for any view denying that it is impossible for the damned to escape hell.

or «SCTs». According to SCTs, the verdict passed down to the sinful is not final, since there is still a chance for them to turn to God or perform other necessary acts *post mortem*. In line with advocates of the SCTs, human free will persists after death. God gives residents of hell a never-ending afterlife so that they can continue to choose whether to accept or refuse God's love. Most SCTs belong to the so-called issuant conceptions of hell that are prevalent today in Anglo-American philosophical theology and philosophy of religion. Many (but not all) of the issuantists adopt the following propositions. **The Less-than-Human Thesis:** One natural consequence of a person's rejection of God is the loss of the goods with which God endows people. The loss of these goods means the ultimate loss of humanity for the formerly human denizens of hell. **The Fixed Character Thesis:** The formation of an evil character explains how people can chose to remain in hell. **The Irrationality Thesis:** Because of libertarian human freedom, God must allow people to make irrational choices even if those irrational choices entail that they end up in hell. **The Extra Chance Theses:** In order to counteract the possible disadvantages of religious luck, God provides people with one or more postmortem opportunities to be saved [2, p. 124]. The absolute majority of issuantists accepts the Metaphysical Libertarian Human Freedom view and rejects the Retribution Thesis. The main reason for staying in hell is not external divine force, but the desires of a free being. Hell is seen as an autonomous (as far as it is possible within theism) place / state, which God in His love creates for those who do not want to communicate with Him. The theory of hell based only on the concept of God's justice cannot offer a comprehensive solution. An adequate conception of hell must flow from the same divine character from which heaven flows [5, p. 136].

As R. Baker indicates, there are several varieties of SCT: theses, including the possibility of escape or release from hell itself, some form of purgatory, or a restorative justice in which a person is purified through a personal encounter with God on judgment day [2, p. 132–133]. The main point of difference is as follows. One or an infinite number of postmortem chances are offered. Not all adherents of SCTs claim that the number of, or opportunities for, second chances are unlimited. Some believe that after death a person will be given a second chance, but only once. There are categories of people who during their earthly life had no real opportunity to choose between two alternatives – to accept God or reject Him. This refers primarily to those who died in infancy or early childhood until the age of reason (*aetas discretionis*), as well as insane persons. To answer the question of how such individuals can be saved, Heinrich Klee (1800–1840) suggested the Illumination Theory – at the moment of death the infant who have died without baptism is given a sudden illumination which enables him or her to desire the baptism and as a result to be saved (or not to be saved, if the proposal is rejected) [16].

There is another aspect of the issue. As we know, many people (e.g., those who lived before Christ, those who have never heard of Christian teaching, and so on) could not know about the gospel message. Since God is considered completely fair, He could not allow these people to be lost forever just because they had bad religious luck. Therefore, God gives them a postmortem opportunity to make a final decision. Stephen Davis, Jerry L. Walls and some others contemporary philosophers of religion develop this proposal. The advocates of the postmortem evangelization view think God's love cannot be limited by the time of our earthly life. If knowledge of Jesus did not occur before death, it must occur after death. This conclusion is based on some New Testament texts (John 3:18, 1 Pet. 3:18 – 4:6) and doctrine of Christ's descent into hell. Many proponents of postmortem evangelization (Donald Bloesch, Stephen Davis) think that this possibility of escaping hell will be provided, not for all people, but only for the unevangelized – those who have never heard the gospel in its fullness. According to Steven Davis: «Some who hear the gospel hear it in such a way that they are psychologically unable to respond positively. Perhaps they heard the gospel for the first and only time from a fool or a bigot or a scoundrel. Or perhaps they were caused to be prejudiced against Christianity by skeptical parents or teachers. Whatever the reason, I believe it would be unjust of God to condemn those who did indeed hear the good news but were unable to respond positively» (Steven Davis, «Universalism, Hell, and the Fate of the Ignorant», cited according to [12]).

On the contrary, A. Buckareff and A. Plug adhere to the thesis that God gives everyone an endless number of postmortem chances. In their opinion, God being patient and loving parent never ceases to desire to have His estranged child return and be forgiven. Therefore, He provides an infinite number of possibilities for repentance and salvation [4, p. 44].

Next I will mainly consider the theory of escapism suggested by Buckareff and Plug, as it is, in my opinion, the most significant among the SCTs. As the authors of this theory write: «The escapist view of hell can be captured in the following two theses: (E1) Hell exists and might be populated for eternity; and (E2) If there are any denizens of hell, then they, at any time, have the ability to accept God's grace and leave hell and enter heaven» [4, p. 46]. Buckareff and Plug throw out the suggestion that the residents of hell are wantons. They believe, a person must have both freedom and moral responsibility in hell with the possibility of the person coming to a point of repentance and being released from hell.

One of the main points of discussion between the supporters of the traditional model of hell, advocates of The Fixed Character Thesis and adherents of SCTs is the question of whether it is possible to change one's choice after death. According to the traditional model, conversion (*metanoia*) is possible only in this life. The choice made during one's earthly life completely and irreversibly determines one's eternal destiny. There are various explanations of why repentance (that is, one changing one's decision) is impossible in hell. Many think that the inability to change one's choice after death results from factors external to the person. For example, some believe that God limits or destroys a person's ability to make free choices (Theophylact of Ohrid, Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew, 22). The other view is that the freedom of the will of a resident of hell is damaged by some actions the subject performed. In other words, after death the will of the unrepentant sinner becomes fully determined by improper actions she performed during her lifetime. This position is typical for many issuantists who accept **The Fixed Character Thesis**. I will present some arguments these scholars use and consider how their arguments relate to the basic thesis of issuantism, namely the doctrine of libertarian freedom.

One who constantly resists good desires, says R. Swinburne, gradually transforms into a person in whom these desires no longer occur. She becomes prisoner of her depraved passion and no longer has the ability to choose to resist it [15, p. 181]. Some other philosophers of religion endorse such views, e.g. C. Lewis and E. Stump [6, p. 128–130; 13, p. 196]. Let's call these views the «character setting view» (CSV). It should be emphasized that many thinkers accepting CSV, combine it with **The Less-than-Human Thesis**. Swinburne believes residents of hell – that is, those who constantly resists good desires and have become totally depraved – can no longer be regarded as human beings. They turned themselves into something less than human [14, p. 48–49].

So what actually happens to the free will of the damned, according to these thinkers? It seems to me that in Lewis's system the fixed choice for evil the damned constantly make is constituted by the changes that occur with them on the ontological level. Lewis's world-view was influenced significantly by the neo-Platonism of Plotinus. This philosophical system regards God as a pure Being, the true source of life and goodness. Only God is perfect and only the existence of God is a complete and perfect good. The Cosmos has a hierarchical composition. Creatures standing in close proximity to God are more spiritual and real, and vice versa. At the very last step of the ontological scale there is primal matter. Lewis in line with this thinking, supposing those rational beings that stubbornly refused to follow God and moved further away from Him were becoming less good and less real. Their physical and mental structure is destroyed so much, that «a damned soul is nearly nothing» (Lewis, *Great Divorce*, 1946, cited according to [2, p. 63–64]). Although the damned souls may wish to get out of hell, this will never happen, because their wills are too weak and evil. Swinburne highlights key points somewhat differently. He agrees with Lewis that a person is capable of losing her soul, that is, of destroying the very essence of human nature. However, he is more focused on the issue of the disappearances of the intelligence and free will of the damned: «The man who has blinded himself to the goodness of things is no longer an agent, one who chooses what to do in the light of beliefs about its worth. ... The man has 'lost his soul'» [15, p. 177].

Thus, under this approach, people have libertarian freedom in order to be morally responsible. If the person makes bad choices for a long time, he forms a vicious character. For a person who has formed a vicious character, it becomes increasingly difficult to make good choices. Ultimately, he can reach a point where a choice for good will become virtually impossible. Such people make up the population of hell.

The CSV involves some problematic aspects. The question arises, what happens after death to those people who die before their characters are totally fixed? To my mind the issue of free will in character tracing theory is the most open to criticism. Swinburne, like several other supporters of CSV, holds that man is free in the sense that metaphysical libertarian freedom presupposes. But this

theory leads to the assumption that libertarian freedom is not a necessary feature of a human being. In fact, according to Swinburne, a person can use libertarian freedom only until his character is fully fixed. After this process is complete, the person no longer has libertarian freedom. The inhabitants of hell have lost their ability to make free choices, turning themselves into a kind of unreasonable animal, but the inhabitants of heaven also do not possess free will in the libertarian sense. Swinburne writes that although the inhabitants of heaven retain their free will their choice will lie only among a range of equally good actions. «Having no desires for the bad, they *inevitably* (italics mine. – V. K.) pursue only what they (correctly) believe to be good» [15, p. 190]. There is a strong temptation to conclude from the above that libertarian freedom is no more than an intermediate step to a kind of qualitatively «better» dimension of freedom, since this is a kind of freedom the inhabitants of heaven actually have. Consequently, this calls the value of libertarian freedom in question.

Swinburne himself does not make such a conclusion. On the contrary, the concept of libertarian freedom is at the centre of Swinburne's theodicy of hell. But if free will is such a great benefit, for the realization of which God allows to exist so many manifestations of evil, then why does this freedom appear to be so weak that it destroys as a result some (maybe numerous) acts of wrong choice? From this it may follow that God has transmitted some hidden defect to human nature. Proponents of CSV probably believe that the true realization of freedom necessarily implies that if a person trespasses upon this ability for a long time (i.e., makes a conscious choice in favor of evil), he destroys himself and his freedom. This state of affairs, they think, is logically necessary; even an omnipotent God cannot build the world differently, just as He cannot create a triangle with four corners. However, it seems to me it is not a self-evident conclusion. C. P. Ragland offers one of the possible solutions to this dilemma [11, p. 217].

One more objection to the CSV is that in the models of hell which include this thesis, there is a disproportion between the suffering that the damned experience and their misdeeds. Swinburne recognizes that the residents of hell feel some suffering – in particular, suffering that results from a lack of psychic integration [15, p. 182]. For the damned, whose character developed into totally corrupt one, this suffering will never end. However, the difficulty lies in the fact that the damned, since their character became completely fixed, are already deprived of the ability to choose anything. Their free will having been eliminated, they are no longer free or morally responsible for their actions. They were morally responsible before their character had finally been fixed as evil. During the time they were free and morally responsible, they committed some finite number of evil deeds. Because sins must be considered a limited action, which presupposes limited suffering, God, being just, cannot allow the damned to suffer forever. The argument that they continue in sin is not applicable here, since if the totally corrupted continue to sin in hell, they are responsible for this no more than animals or insane people.

Another discussion point can be set out with the help of such an analogy. Swinburne mentions Nazi butchers as an example of totally corrupted [15, p. 178]. Suppose however, that some are able to repent of their numerous crimes after death. The CSV presupposes a certain point of no return – in the continuum of human existence there is a moment after which we cannot put events in another scenario. Let us assume that Goebbels's character was not irrevocably approved in evil. He did not lose completely the human qualities such as reason and free will, so he could repent and was saved from hell. But his associate Mengele has passed the line that separates the fully fixed evil character from the not fully fixed. He destroyed his reason and ability to make free choices and so will remain forever in hell.

In our example, the degree of viciousness of Goebbels and Mengele was similar, although not absolutely equal. Goebbels was very close to the point of no return, but did not reach it, whereas Mengele, on the other hand, crossed the line. But God, being kind and loving, wants to give Mengele a chance for salvation also. How can He offer this chance to Mengele? It seems that in line with the general issuant thesis, God has to shift the point of no return. This means that creating human nature, God had to make it more «firm» in order to human character could be fixed in evil after more acts of bad choice than it happens now. In this case, Mengele (possibly) will escape hell also. However, in this case Alois Brunner, who (possibly) has established himself in evil little more than Mengele, will not be saved.

Thus CSV, in my opinion, is contrary to the freedom of will in the libertarian sense. True freedom requires that deep ego stand above one's nature, i.e., above empirical character. So, one may acquire some specific streaks, but also he may reject them again, without being identical with those traits.

Although the SCT theory seems to solve the problem of hell, it is contrary to some of the basic principles of Christian doctrine, therefore, it is unlikely to be adopted in Christianity as a real alternative to the traditional concept, at least until these principles are considered as invariable points of faith.

First of all I am talking about the question of an eschatological finality. Kvanvig writes: «This view of hell is not connected to Christianity in any significant way. In particular, it fails to be compatible with the eschatological dimensions of Christianity. Traditional Christian faith expects a final consummation of all things. This picture of hell is more akin to views that posit a cyclical or cylindrical order of events with no final consummation. A final consummation requires some account of what could or would happen to those who ultimately reject God. Because this account ignores this eschatological dimension of Christianity, it cannot be judged to be an acceptable solution to the problem of hell» [5, p. 73].

Thus, if the residents of hell can have a second chance and decide to choose God, then why don't the residents of heaven? That is, if it is possible for the residents of hell to leave, then it likewise seems possible for the residents of heaven to leave and thereby reject God. The theory ought to respond to this objection. If the escapist holds that the residents of heaven are free to leave, then his/her view faces other problems².

Conclusion. Within contemporary Christian philosophy of religion there are powerful trends toward rethinking traditional teachings on the matter of hell, postmortem punishment and destiny of the human soul. Modern philosophical theories developed in the context of humanistic culture tend to reject the traditional model of hell for moral, psychological, logical, and philosophical reasons. This creates a need to find new theories of hell.

According to issuantists, the traditional model of hell is incongruous with the idea of justice and it is contrary to ethical considerations. It also contradicts the nature of God as loving and merciful. The SCT avoids the most problematic issues of the traditional concept of hell. However, it does not meet the eschatological doctrine of Christianity and most likely will not get approval at an official level.

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² See, for example [8, 197–206; 9, 398–419]. All these papers discuss the «problem of heavenly freedom», as Timpe and Pawl call it. Notably, Timpe and Pawl endorse the character setting/tracing strategy that is incompatible with the SCT.