

Ilaria L.E. Ramelli. *A Larger Hope?, Volume 1: Universal Salvation from Christian Beginnings to Julian of Norwich* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2019). 314pp. \$36.00 paperback.

Robin A. Parry, and Ilaria L.E. Ramelli. *A Larger Hope? Volume 2: Universal Salvation from the Reformation to the Nineteenth Century* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2019). 326pp. \$29.00 paperback.

These volumes by Ilaria Ramelli and Robin Parry are published in a context of growing debate about the orthodoxy of the doctrine of universal salvation in Christian circles. I think it is fair to say that the doctrine of conditional immortality, which also rejects an everlasting hell, is now within the bounds of orthodoxy. A number of prominent evangelicals have expressed their support for conditional immortality in recent years and produced plausible exegetical arguments for their position. Universal salvation however remains a step further for evangelicals, though one of the authors of the books under review, Robin Parry has argued the case in his *Evangelical Universalist* originally published in 2006, now in a 2012 revised edition.

Reviewing these volumes was stimulated by Robin Parry's visit to Sydney in July 2019, at the invitation of Alphacrucis Honorary Professor Tony Golsby Smith to speak at The Gospel Conversations annual conference, and events at Alphacrucis, Moore College and other places. Further information about Gospel Conversations may be found at <https://www.gospelconversations.com/> and Robin Parry followed eminent scholars such as Miroslav Volf, Edwin Judge, Iain Provan, John Walton and Rikk Watts as keynote speaker at the annual conference.

Aside from being a member of Gospel Conversations my interest in the topic comes from the importance of eschatology in the economic imagination. Christian accounts of the beginnings and end of our world express so much about our view of the present. If Christianity has influenced economic thinking as much as I believe it has (for instance my 2018 Routledge book about the role of theology in the formation of economics as a discipline in the 18th and 19th centuries *Political Economy as Natural Theology*, and the work of other scholars in the *Oxford Handbook of Christianity and Economics* 2014 I edited) then eschatology really matters for economics. Some social scientific confirmation of this comes from the work of Rachel McCleary whose 2007 paper "Salvation, Damnation and Economic Incentives" published in the *Journal of Contemporary Religion* suggested that beliefs about the afterlife are the religious belief which has the most powerful effect on economic behaviour. This of course would be no surprise to Adam Smith who wrote about the powerful effects of afterlife beliefs on economic behaviour.

Ilaria Ramelli opens the volume on the biblical and patristic discussions of universal salvation by pointing out that it is not just a shorter and less expensive version of her magisterial *The Christian Doctrine of Apokatastasis: A Critical Assessment from the New Testament to Eriugena* published by Brill in 2013. The Greek word *Apokatastasis* refers to the restoration of all things. In the book under review she deals with the biblical material and extends the argument of the earlier book

in a number of ways. Her argument about the biblical orthodoxy of universal salvation relies partly on an interpretation of the Greek word *aiōnios* as pertaining to the age, rather than as everlasting. Part of the argument is an account of how the traditional interpretation emerged as a mistranslation of the Greek into Latin which misled subsequent Latin readers of the texts. Ramelli deals first with Old Testament passages from Isaiah, Ezekiel and Lamentations which suggest a universal restoration. Gospel passages about eternal worms and fire are read in the light of her argument about the meaning of *aiōnios*, and take on rather different meanings. John's Gospel and the Epistles repeatedly affirm that salvation is for all in Christ. In both the traditional view and Ramelli's view there is no salvation outside of Christ – this is not in dispute. Acts 3:20-21, the only occurrence of the noun *apokatastasis* in the New Testament, is read by Ramelli as a clear announcement of universal restoration. Moving to the Epistles she notes that 1 Corinthians 15:28 was the favourite universalist text of both Origen and Gregory of Nyssa. Romans 4 and 5 are rich terrain for universalists, followed by Romans 8, climaxing in Paul's claims about the restoration of Israel in Romans 9 to 11. Also highlighted are Philippians 2:10-11, 1 Corinthians 3:14-15, 1 Tim 2:4-6, the book of Hebrews, and 1 Peter 3:19-21. She must of course deal with the book of Revelation. Here the lake of fire in 20:10-15 is the end of death, and Ramelli argues that nothing can be said about its duration. The biblical doctrine of punishment that emerges from her exegetical work is restorative rather than retributive. Ramelli concludes that there are many strong universalist passages in Scripture, and the passages that advocates of everlasting hell point to should be read differently.

Turning to the patristic discussions she makes the point that the doctrine of everlasting torment in hell, conditional immortality and universal salvation are all compatible with the Apostles Creed and the Nicene Creed. There is some doubt as to whether the doctrine was ever condemned at the church councils –opponents of universalism point to the Fifth Ecumenical Council (A.D. 553), and the fifteen anti-Origenist anathemas associated with it. However it is suggested by some church historians that the anathemas were never issued by the Council, and even if they were it is not clear that *apokatastasis* is the reason for the condemnation of Origen. One would expect that a doctrine as widely held by church fathers as Ramelli suggests would be much more consistently and clearly condemned by the Councils if it was regarded as outside the bounds of orthodox Christian doctrine. Nor can be *apokatastasis* dismissed as a Platonic intrusion into the tradition, for Origen and other Christian advocates of apokatastasis distinguish their view from the earlier pagan notion of recurring restorations and criticise it on scriptural grounds. Origen and others (including Augustine) make the metaphysical argument that evil has no substance and therefore cannot persist. It is only God and those in God who persist. Admittedly this metaphysical argument was taken in different directions by Origen and the later Augustine, and Ramelli champions Origen's development of it in a universalist direction as more coherent, suggesting that the Augustine fell into error in his later anti-Pelagian polemics. Another philosophical argument Origen deploys is that radically free will points to their always being the opportunity to embrace Christ, and that an everlasting hell is inconsistent with free will. Universal salvation thus offers a way of reconciling human free will and the strong emphasis on Divine

sovereignty that characterises the Augustinian tradition. The God who created us with free will is also the God wills that all be saved according to Ramelli.

Her treatment of Origen is the core of the book, but the doctrine of universalism is traced through the fourth century church fathers Eusebius, Marcellus, Athanasius, Hilary of Poitiers, Didymus the Blind, Basil of Caesarea, Gregory Nyssen, Gregory Nazianzen, Evagrius Ponticus. Theodore of Mopsuestia, then on to the later Latin fathers Jerome and Rufinus. The point is that universalism was not just the product of Origen, but preceded him and was regarded as orthodox by eminent authorities after him. Ramelli's reading of Augustine is perhaps the other core of the book, and her argument here and in the earlier Brill book that Augustine really should have been a universalist will no doubt surprise and annoy many. I am no Patristics scholar, but it was the part of the book I found least convincing.

The other volume under review, jointly authored by Ramelli and Robin Parry carries the story of universalism forward to the nineteenth century. Support is found for universalism in the radical reformation, pietism, sundry mystics, but on the whole the tradition is much less strong than in the patristic age. Then there is something of revival of universalism in nineteenth century America and in England, among both Anglicans and nonconformists. Concerns about the justice of consigning a segment of humanity to everlasting torment is now prominent, and many Victorians could no longer accept a God who did this. For evangelicals the issue was always consistency of alternative accounts of the end with Scripture, and few believed the universalist position to be Scriptural. Prominent universalists such as Thomas Erskine, George Macdonald and Frederick Denison Maurice either did not care to or could not make the case in a way that convinced influential biblical scholars and church authorities.

A bonus feature of the volumes is reproducing the exchanges between the authors and Michael McClymond author of the massive two volume history and critique of universalism *The Devil's Redemption: A New History and Interpretation of Christian Universalism*, published by Baker Books in 2018. Their reviews of each other's books together with some other relevant writings are reproduced. More is available at Robin Parry's website <https://reforminghell.com/dr-robin-parry/>.

One thing that would make the argument of the volumes stronger would be a detailed account of how the belief in everlasting hell arose and was sustained as the dominant view for so many centuries across many different contexts if it is actually heresy. And why universalism was suppressed. We get hints of it how belief in everlasting hell mistakenly arose especially in Ramelli's volume, but her interests and Robin Parry's are doctrinal, or at least doctrinal history. What is needed is a large-scale social history of everlasting hell and universalism. A theme of such as social history could be the social utility of everlasting hell, especially for rulers, both of the church and state.

Overall these volumes make strong arguments for Christian universalism—both philosophical and exegetical—and are to be highly recommended—perhaps especially for evangelicals

(including Pentecostals) who are sure universalism is wrong. Read, compare with scripture, and judge for yourself. It is an issue which really matters.

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