# When the Gates of Hell Fall Down: towards a modern theology of the justice of God[1]

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### I

The teaching that the wicked will go to hell has about it a certain logic and justice. We may not think that a loving God would wish to consign anyone to eternal torment, but that the final destination of the evil should be different from that of the good is not, on the face of the matter, unjust. A case for the extinction of the utterly evil was argued by Ulrich Simon in his *Theology of Auschwitz*. May it not be the case that some become so corrupted by the evil of their ways that there is nothing left for them but annihilation? 'Extirpation is congruous with the feverish activists in annihilation. Damnation is the silent seal on their wickedness. Unforgiven and unforgivable they go to the doom which their own fantasies and crimes have already sought on earth.'[2] Could justice demand anything less?

Why then has the doctrine of hell fallen into such disrepute? The main cause is that we have lost the concept of the justice of God. A number of reasons for the loss can be listed. First, there is the form the doctrine often took in the tradition. At least from the time of Augustine there has been a tendency to teach that the justice of God consisted in the fact that he could, had he wished, have consigned the whole of the human race to hell, but that he graciously (gratuitously?) saved a few brands from the burning. It is not wholly an accident that folk belief has often held that an unbaptised child will go to hell. Similarly, the lovingly elaborated images of the torment of the damned, and the gloating of the saved, have not always commended their doctrine to the morally sensitive conscience as quite worthy of the God of love. The form the church's teaching has taken has had much to do with the modern revulsion against the whole notion of hell.

But the extent of the change is far greater than can be accounted for in that way alone. It was not much over a century ago, a short period in historical terms, that a professor could be dismissed from an Anglican institution for denying the doctrine of eternal torment. Why has the
488

change since then been so great and so radical? The chief answer is that there has been a sea-change in the spirit of the age. At its heart is the increasing anthropocentrism of our culture, as a result of which a number of developments have taken place, so that either the problem of justice has come to be seen differently or the concept of the justice of God has been virtually lost. Let me rehearse some of the changes that have taken place.

The first is in the area of theodicy. As Kenneth Surin has pointed out in his recent study of theodicy, discussions of the justice of God have become decisively different since the Enlightenment.[3] We are no longer the problem: God is. It has come to be believed that God, not ourselves, is to blame for the way things are. It is hardly appropriate for the one held by many to be the cause of the problem to send the guilty to hell; so that the guilt of God, not of man, has come into the centre. The outcome is a new concept of theodicy, inconceivable before the Enlightenment, which attempts to reconcile God's omnipotence and love. The centre of attention shifts from God's ordering of the destiny of the world to his past and present responsibility for how things are. The doctrine of hell becomes overshadowed by an apparently prior question, and the discussion of the justice of God by the discussion of his guilt at the bar of history.

A second change is a more general cultural one, and concerns the very basis of justice. Some of the dimensions of the change have been noted in the recent writings of Alasdair MacIntyre.[4] MacIntyre's thesis—or part of it—is that there is crisis of such dimensions in modern ethical discourse that we do not even have the equipment to discover where our moral disagreements lie. Conflict—over such matters as abortion and nuclear armaments—runs so deep that exponents of opposing views do not have the conceptual equipment in which to bring their differences to light.[5] Because there is no common concept of justice, or even a shared way of disputing about it, fundamental moral disagreement is inevitable and incurable.

MacIntyre attributes the disarray in part to the loss of a concept of the justice of God. By this he means some concept of a universal justice—a justice written into the fabric of reality—which undergirds our everyday moral thought and action. The loss is illustrated by his treatment of Greek concepts of justice. In Greek thinking, there was always presupposed a cosmic order underlying the moral order, providing so to speak ontological underpinning for it. To take an obvious example, Plato's doctrine of Forms was a way of showing how morality was to be grounded in the way things really and eternally are. An action was good in so far as it participated in the eternal form of the good; and justice consisted in ordering social institutions as nearly as possible in accord with the form of justice, eternal in the heavens.

489

Something comparable to the Greek conception of the cosmic justice of the universe prevailed in Western culture until fairly recent times. The doctrine of hell was one way of speaking of it, for it presupposed the belief that a divine judge would see to it that the good were rewarded and the evil punished. In such a broad conception of things morality and justice are rooted in the deep structures of reality. In that respect, even the Enlightenment was a quest for divine justice, to discover by reason the order of things. Enlightenment thought was a quest for the universal rationality in things, their lawfulness.

Since the Enlightenment, however, the main line of philosophical development has destroyed the possibility of any such grounding for a concept of justice. The world has seemed progressively emptier of value, so that all has been loaded on to human subjectivity. And so, added to the change brought about in the area of theodicy there is an even more fundamental loss. Not only has the concept of the justice of God been altered in the attempt to defend him against responsibility for evil . More important, by progressively sundering the worlds of science and culture, modern philosophy has helped to create a world apparently empty of values. The meaningless world of Sartre is one in which there can be no morality apart from arbitrary decision one way or another. There is no justice of God, because the only justice there is arises from more or less baseless human decision.

These two problems, then, of theodicy and of the loss of meaning, will both be held in view as we move from a discussion of the general problem of modernity to the way it has affected Christian thought and practice.

## II

As one of the constituent parts of a culture, Christianity is inevitably bound up with developments within it, and so is necessarily affected by the sea-change that has taken place in recent centuries. The matter is made worse through guilt for much of the Christian past. Because we are so aware of past abuses of the doctrine of hell, and of the fact that there is a 'problem of evil', there has come about a change, for better and worse, in the way in which we see the question. Because we are only too aware of the involvement of ecclesiastical institutions in what we now consider unjust regimes and practices, we share with our surrounding culture a suspicion of the form the theology of justice has taken. It has, we suspect, taken far too 'other-worldly' a shape, so that the things of this world have taken too much of a back seat, and the church has been too ready to compromise with injustice.

Yet there is a price to be paid for our own modernity. However right

490

it is to take up neglected aspects of gospel teaching, there is in the modern context the danger that, for reasons of the kind that MacIntyre has outlined, we shall so lose our rooting in our own tradition that we too shall be unable to find ways of articulating and settling basic differences. It can be argued that the loss of a common theological grounding for our understanding of justice lies at the root of recent disagreements between, to take an obvious example, the Pope and certain exponents of the theology of liberation. Another danger, in some ways worse, is that we shall fail to transcend the banalities of modern political debate. As MacIntyre points out, the modern debate about justice scarcely if ever transcends the terms of modern liberalism (in which is included, of course, marxist thought, itself in this sense the product of post-Enlightenment liberalism): 'the contemporary debates within modern political systems are almost exclusively between conservative liberals, liberal liberals, and radical liberals.'[6]

In other words, the danger is that we shall simply replace an excessively other-worldly gospel with its equal and opposite this-worldliness. Because, along with modern culture, we have lost a concept of the justice of God, we too will lack a secure basis on which to offer to the world a concept of justice which is Christian and seen to be Christian. The result is that, rightly or wrongly, we shall share in the modern disorientation from reality and will appear indistinguishable from the political sects of our day. However it is elsewhere in the world, European political theology appears to be dangerously close to reduction to a form of secular moralizing.[7]

There can be no doubt that the Christian gospel has important implications for social and political relationships. But the way these are expressed sometimes gives the impression of a choice of one secular option over against another. There appears to be, to use a traditional way of speaking, the absence of a major premiss, or rather of its due elaboration. Most agree that there is a justice of God which requires a corresponding human justice. But unless that theological justice can be given due shape, our human justices will be little or no more than the reflection of contemporary political fashions, or than arbitrary choices between different approaches to economics. But can it be done without simply speaking another language from that of the world of competing liberalisms? How may we engage with the problems of modernity without merely parroting their language?

### III

An interesting feature of the thought of the British Congregationalist theologian P.T. Forsyth (1848—1921), who allied a fairly traditional

491

cross-centred theology with political views that we would now call progressive, was that he took up the modern concern with theodicy but transmuted it to a higher theological key. Beginning with theodicy, he moved to a conception of the justice of God in the broader sense that is being treated in this paper. Writing during the crisis of Christian civilisation in the First World War, he accepted that the God whom Christians worship had some charges to answer. Like Barth, and about the same time, he realised that the crisis symbolised by the War called for some kind of theological analysis. Who was the God in whose Christian civilisation such a horror had been let loose? The question that reared its head was not simply that of theodicy, of the defence of God against the charge of responsibility for evil, but one couched in historical terms. Where is the Lord of history when civilization is falling in ruins about our heads?

Forsyth's approach to the question was, in *The Justification of God* [8], theological without being other-worldly. That is to say, the answer was neither referred to an eschatological world remote from this one, nor treated in a largely immanent fashion, sociological or economic. The centre of the stage was taken by a God proclaimed to have taken responsibility for the way things are.

There are two main poles to Forsyth's discussion, the present and the past. In the present, the focus is provided by the historical catastrophe, which we can see to be not so very different from some of those facing us today. Forsyth's strategy here is to refuse to take the way of enlightened theodicy. God does not require defence against the charge of being the cause of evil, because in one sense of the word he is its cause. Forsyth takes the bull by the horns: the war is the judgement of God on a corrupt civilisation, just as today we might say that ecological disaster is the judgement of God on technocracy and greed. The world is a moral order, and therefore breaches of its fabric bring their own reward. 'The idea of a judgment is bound up with a moral order of a very real, immanent, and urgent, not to say eternal kind' (p.186).

The second focus is provided by the atoning death of Christ on the cross. This is at once 'God's justification of man' and 'His justification of himself in man' (p.174). The doctrine of the atonement, whether in its Anselmian or later Calvinist form, has sometimes appeared to be a kind of device whereby God can find a way of forgiving the unforgiveable. Forsyth sees it rather as something which brings about new forms of relationship. The cross is at once 'the solution and the destruction of the world's moral anomalies' not because it harmonizes (abstract) justice and mercy, but because as 'the creative focus of a moral world' it is 'the rightful and the real ruler of the course of history.' (p.106). It is God's way of so relating himself to human history that new relationships are made possible and, indeed, real.

492

Thus the atonement is not treated pietistically or in institutional terms: the cross effects not merely—not chiefly, indeed—individual salvation, but is an affair between God and the whole human race. One feature of Forsyth's work which shows that he does not treat the atonement merely moralistically is his concept of the broader justice of God as involving a righteousness pervading the whole universe. 'Our deeper views of creation ... do not allow us to think of the universe as an external and mechanical product.... The existence of the universe is too closely bound up with the being of God for that. Its life is the immanence of the Transcendent.' (p.73). Behind the rhetoric of such passages can be seen a-clear concern for the justice of God whose loss in recent culture MacIntyre is bewailing. Forsyth holds both that the cross is the centre of God's renewal of human moral relationships and that such renewal is linked with a justice lying at the very heart of the creation.

In his movement towards a conception of the justice of God which is both relational and concerns the whole of the created order, Forsyth's thought is consistent with some of the discoveries of recent biblical scholarship. The righteousness or justice of God in the Bible, it is increasingly noticed, is not limited to 'salvation' in the narrow sense, but with God's loyalty to his whole creation. The righteousness of God according to which he justifies the godless is his means of restoring the whole creation to its destined end. Romans 8, with its celebration of the destiny of the whole creation, thus belongs logically after the discussion of sin and forgiveness in the preceding chapters of that letter. We are not therefore presented with a choice between the individual, social and universal dimensions of redemption. The justice of God is that whereby he restores, and leads to its destiny, the whole of the created order. But it is the justice of God, transcendent and transcending any human systems of justice.

The justice of God is, then, in the first instance not economic or political or individual but cosmic and relational. It takes shape where the eternal God so relates himself to the world that broken relationships—between human beings, but also between man and nature—are restored. Forsyth sees rightly that the shape of the divine justice can be seen only on the cross, for it is there that the Son sent from the Father takes upon himself the weight of that which causes the disorder in the creation, human sin. The justice of God is first of all the creator entering creation's disorderedness to call it back to its true destiny. That is what might be called the 'vertical' dimension, the 'joyful exchange' in which the creator comes into our place. But there is also a corresponding horizontal dimension of the justice of God, which is the realisation of that justice ever and again through the recreating Spirit.

For Forsyth, the horizontal dimension flows from the vertical. In another book he makes the point interestingly. 'The core of the cross is

493

not merely the *revelation* of God as holy, but the *effectuation* of His holiness... If such an one died for all, in that act all died. It therefore commits Society to a development to that holy end. The object of historic Society is now, since that act *at the creative centre of history,* the evolution of holiness, and its actual establishment as the controlling principle of human relations.'[9]

Some of Forsyth's expressions have an odd ring today. But it is that' and particularly the concept of holiness, which makes his work distinctive and interesting, particularly in the West, where political theology is always in danger of succumbing to political fashion. Complaints are sometimes heard that bishops do not talk about redemption any more, only politics or economics. While such complaints are often from those who dislike the form the political talk takes, they will remain justified unless Christian talk of justice is firmly based in a concept of the redemptive justice of God. That is the strength of Forsyth's contribution to the discussion. What he has to offer is a conception of the justice of God which is not other-worldly in the bad old sense, but gives a basis for justice in the way God takes place among us in Christ. Justice is not, and should not be seen to be, merely or largely political and economic but is that transformation of relationships which the cross makes possible.


## IV


The justice of God is the action by means of which God re-establishes the direction of the creation. A full treatment of the matter would require a qualification of the claim, for we should have to realise that there is a justice in creation, too. The very creation is a kind of justice, an establishing of that which is other than God for community with him. Barth spoke of creation as justification,[10] and we can compare similar remark of von Balthasar's that 'In addition to other meanings related to man's justification and derived from its primary sense, *justitia Dei* above all means the rightness (*Richtigkeit, justesse*) of everything pertaining to God...'[11] The justice of God is to be seen in everything that God does. But in order to limit the discussion, and to pursue the starting point provided by Forsyth, we shall concentrate here on justice as re-creation.

Human relationships form the beginning of the matter, because it is from human sin that the fallenness of things takes its impetus: injustice is primarily a function of human disorder, whatever other questions of theodicy we must also face. It follows that, just as the vertical dimension is needed if the horizontal is to find an adequate context, so the social question must be embraced by the ecclesiological. That is to say we cannot speak of social justice unless we have first some concrete theology
494

of a society focussed on redemption. Can the church possibly sit for the picture of the just society? That is the question which must now concern us.

To begin with a confession of faith. The church is the model of a just society because alone of all societies it stands perpetually under judgement. The reason why a discussion of human justice must begin with the church is that, because of the pervasiveness of sin and its invasion of all the creation, there can be no justice without judgement. It is therefore not for any inherent virtue in the church, or because she is more fitted than any other institution to organise the world, that our concept of justice must centre on the church. The reason is that 'judgement begins with the household of God.' The church is the community which recognizes its own inadequacy and injustice, and therefore realises that it is only through forgiveness and grace that there can be the re-establishment of relationships on the basis of which the creation can return to its promised destiny.

This matter of sin, judgement and forgiveness should not be understood individualistically, as has too often happened in the history of the church. We are concerned with creation of community, for sin can be defined as that which breaks the community between God and the creation; justice as that which restores and completes it. More positively, it should be said that the church is the community called to embody the just relationships established by God in the atonement. It follows that the church's impact on society is best made by means of the impact of its form of life on the life of the wider world. The church will contribute more to a just world not by lecturing it or by interfering as a church in its politics so much as by the articulation and embodiment of an actual form of just relationships: the justice of God that comes from judgement and forgiveness. When John Howard Yoder says that 'Worship is the communal cultivation of an alternative construction of society and of history'[12], he makes the point precisely. It is the church's worship, where her renewed relationship to God is celebrated and realised, that is the heart of the matter. Ethics and politics flow from that. The primary form of the church's political involvement in the world is therefore as a form of embodied holiness. Justice is first of all the shape a form of life takes under the justifying justice of God.

There are therefore two main focuses for the church's social reality: the word and the sacraments. Both are concerned, among other things, with realising the renewal of the creation accomplished on the cross and by the resurrection. The word is the re-presentation in human words of proclamation of Christ who is God's judgement and forgiveness; the sacraments the realisation of his renewing action in the community's relations with each other and with the creation. Particularly interesting as an illustration is Paul's discussion of the eucharist in I Corinthians.

495

Two features belong inextricably together: the due celebration of the sacrament and the life of the just community. The sacrament is made 'invalid' by the fact that 'one is hungry and another is drunk' (I Cor. 11.21).

The argument of this paper is not designed to suggest that only inner churchly relationships are of concern to the church, but rather that unless justice takes shape here, we are wasting our time trying to organise everybody else, as has sadly been the case in so much of the church's history. What is the point of all this for an answer to the problem with which the paper began, the loss in our culture of any concept of the justice of God? It is that the concept will be renewed when and as it is embodied in a form of life. The now famous and pessimistic conclusion of MacIntyre's *After Virtue* was that the new dark age is already upon us, and that we need a new Benedict to fashion a community to maintain some form of light through the darkness.[13] If the gospel is true, however, we are free from such nearly total pessimism, and may hope that the Holy Spirit will enable new forms of divine justice to be embodied in the community that calls itself the people of God.

1    Some of the material for this paper will appear in my forthcoming book, *The Actuality of Atonement,* Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1989.
2    Ulrich Simon, *A Theology of Auschwitz*. London, SPCK, 1978 (1ᵉ 1967) p. 74.
3    Kenneth Surin, *Theology and the Problem of Evil*. London: Blackwell, 1986.
4    Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*. London: Duckworth, 1981; *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* London: Duckworth, 1988.
5    *After Virtue,* ch. 2.
6    *Whose Justice?,* p. 392.
7    See here H.M. Kuitert, *Everything is Politics but Politics is not Everything*. London: SCM Press, 1986.
8    P.T. Forsyth, *The Justification of God*. London: Duckworth, 1916.
9    P.T. Forsyth, *The Church, the Gospel and Society*. London: Independent Press, 1962, p. 20.
10   Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics,* Vol. 3/1. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1958 pp. 366ff.
11   Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord,* Vol. 1. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1982, p. 472.
12   John Howard Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom. Social Ethics as Gospel*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984, p. 43.
13   *After Virtue,* p. 245.