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ABSTRACT

The traditional view of hell as eternal conscious torment is challenged by proponents of universalism and conditional immortality. However, they need to explain why the church has been misled in adopting the traditional view. This paper draws from cognitive and evolutionary science of religion to provide an "error theory" of why eternal hell became the dominant view. Early Christianity grew rapidly despite persecution and marginalization. The fear of hell probably helped Christian communities to maintain cooperation by weeding out free riding even in times of crisis. Here the traditional view proved to be more effective than its competitors.

It is everlasting wrath. It would be dreadful to suffer this fierceness and wrath of Almighty God one moment; but you must suffer it to all eternity. There will be no end to this exquisite horrible misery. When you look forward, you shall see a long forever, a boundless duration, before you, which will swallow up your thoughts, and amaze your souls; and you will absolutely despair of ever having any deliverance's, and end, any mitigation, any rest at all; you will know certainly that you must wear out long ages, millions of millions of ages, in wrestling and conflicting with this almighty merciless vengeance; and then when you have so done, when many ages have actually been spent by you in this manner, you will know that all is but a point to what remains.

Jonathan Edwards, Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God

Punishments and threats are for this end, that fearing the penalty we may abstain from sinning.

Clement of Alexandria, *Paedagogus* (3.12).

Introduction

A heated debate on the nature of hell is going on in Anglo-American theology. Even in evangelical circles many are challenging the traditional view of hell as eternal conscious torment.[1] Universalism—the doctrine that eventually everyone will be saved—has gained popularity in recent years among evangelicals.[2] A view even more widely endorsed as an evangelical alternative to the traditional view is called conditional immortality.[3] Conditionalists argue that the Bible does not describe hell as a place of eternal suffering but as one where the wicked will be annihilated.[4] Eternal life is conditional upon saving faith in Jesus Christ, and no unbeliever will live forever. As usual in theological quarrels,

arguments from Scripture, tradition, and reason feature in the debate. For an outside observer, all sides seem able to present strong arguments appealing to one or several of these sources. For example, the biblical case for conditionalism has convinced a decent number of biblical scholars, including a few evangelical ones.[5] While the biblical support for universalism seems more modest, forceful philosophical and theological arguments support the claim that all shall be saved.[6]

Theological tradition, however, seems to support the traditional view. Tertullian, Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, and Wesley were all traditionalists, as were most of their contemporaries.[7] Eternal conscious torment is also affirmed in the Athanasian Creed as well as many other confessions of various historical and contemporary churches. However, universalists and conditionalists typically claim that their respective views were held by several early Christian theologians. The conditionalist website *Rethinking Hell* lists a few influential church fathers as proponents of conditionalism: Ignatius (d. 108/140), Irenaeus (c. 130–c. 202), Athanasius (c. 297–373), and the less influential Arnobius (c. 255–c. 330).[8] Similarly, the patristics scholar Ilaria Ramelli argues that the doctrine of apokatastasis–the universal restoration of all rational beings —was "abundantly received throughout the Patristic era," is found "in many Christian texts and Patristic authors," and is "rooted in the New Testament itself and, even back, in some Jewish universalistic expectations."[9]

If there is any historical validity to such claims, one might wonder why everlasting conscious torment became the dominant view of hell in practically all Christian churches despite all other theological disagreements. Conditionalists and universalists who hold a high view of theological tradition and believe that the Holy Spirit guides the church "into all truth" (John 16:13) seem to owe an explanation for why she has been misled in such a crucial issue. A proponent of everlasting hell, Jerry Walls, puts the challenge as follows:

> [A]dvocates of conditional immortality (and universalism) must demonstrate that their view is theologically, morally, and aesthetically superior to the traditional view of hell and gives us a more satisfying account of the biblical drama than the traditional view that most Christians down the ages have endorsed. Moreover, *they need to give us a convincing "error theory" to explain how and why the tradition went wrong in affirming the dominant view of hell.*[10]

By an "error theory" I take Walls to mean a story that explains the success of an idea by reference to what may be called "irrelevant influences."[11] Theological error theories are nothing new. Unitarians provide them to explain why the doctrine of Trinity became the hallmark of Christian orthodoxy, Protestants to counter the error of papacy, and Baptists to explain the historical prevalence of infant baptism. The usual strategy in such error theories is to point out the causes that have distorted the process of theological truth-seeking. While careful biblical exegesis, philosophical reasoning, and ecumenical debate are usually seen as reliable pathways to theological truth, exegetical and logical fallacies are the stuff of theological error theories. An error theory might also point to political, economic, psychological, and other such irrelevant factors. Of course, truth-seeking in the church as well as in the academia is always influenced by such causes to some extent. The relevant question is whether such factors can be shown to have taken precedence over the reliable methods of theological labor.

Recent work on the cognitive science of religion suggests that the success of theological ideas partly depends on how they satisfy our cognitive biases.[12] Cognitive biases help explain, for example, why people have a deeply anthropomorphic and "theologically incorrect" view of God.[13] Also, while there may be good biblical and philosophical arguments for theological determinism, even people from a Calvinist background often view their choices as free in the libertarian sense.[14] These examples have to do with *content biases*. Content biases help explain why people tend to adopt and transmit certain kinds of ideas more than others. *Context biases* (or *model-based learning biases*), however, help explain *whose* beliefs and behaviors we tend to adopt and in what circumstances.[15] The role played by context biases in the competition of theological ideas has so far received little attention. In attempting to explain why eternal conscious torment overshadowed other views of hell, we will need to take both types of biases into account.

This paper approaches the history of theology from a new perspective.[16] I draw from the cognitive and cultural evolutionary study of religion to provide an error theory of why the doctrine of eternal conscious torment became the dominant view of hell. According to the so-called Big Gods account, belief in moralizing, punitive deities fostered the rise of large societies around twelve thousand years ago.[17] The fear of divine punishment helped sustain large-scale cooperation by weeding out free riding. The Big Gods account converges with Rodney Stark's classical sociological work on early Christianity and with Meghan Henning's recent exegetical study on the function of hell narratives.[18] I will argue that the fear of eternal torment was an important factor that helped early Christian communities to sustain commitment and cooperation in the face of persecution. While universalism and conditionalism also include the notion of afterlife punishment, I will also suggest that the concept of everlasting torment enjoyed significant cognitive and cultural advantages over these views. For the sake of argument, I will assume that the scientific theories referred to below are on the right track.[19] I will also assume that conditionalists and universalists are correct in claiming that their views were common among early Christian theologians and thus their eventual marginalization demands an explanation.

The Cultural Evolution of Prosocial Religions

According to the Big Gods theory, belief in moralizing and punitive high gods (such as the God of Abrahamic religions) has laid the ground for civilization.[20] Once agriculture made possible large, settled populations, the challenge of large-scale cooperation was also introduced. Cooperation is behavior that by definition benefits others.[21] Thus, all else being equal, cooperation reduces the relative fitness of the cooperator. Well-known theories of kin selection and reciprocal altruism can explain how cooperation makes evolutionary sense within a group of people closely related or familiar with each other. For most of human prehistory, social interaction took place within families, clans, and tribes. In large societies, however, most people are strangers to one another. Anonymity provides opportunities for cheating and other forms of free riding. It is easy to get away with breaking agreements and norms upon which cooperation is built. In terms of fitness, free riding makes sense: enjoy the benefits of cooperation without yourself contributing. Once free riding increases, however, cooperation deteriorates.[22] Pulling together evidence from cognitive science, social psychology, anthropology, archaeology, and

evolutionary science, the Big Gods theory claims to solve the puzzle of large-scale cooperation. Ara Norenzayan summarizes the account in eight interrelated principles:

(1) *Watched people are nice people*
(2) *Religion is more in the situation than in the person*
(3) *Hell is stronger than heaven*
(4) *Trust people who trust God*
(5) *Religious actions speak louder than words*
(6) *Unworshipped Gods are impotent Gods*
(7) *Big Gods for Big Groups*
(8) *Religious groups cooperate in order to compete*[23]

Consider the first principle: *watched people are nice people*. Several studies on the so-called "eye effect" have shown that people behave better if they spot a pair of eyes watching them. For example, anti-littering posters that include eyes are more effective than posters with no eyes.[24] A visible pair of eyes is not necessary, however. The feeling of being watched or simply thinking of a watcher (after having been primed with the concept of God) can likewise foster cooperation.[25] Religious reminders such as a call to prayer from a minaret or a religious setting (a temple) versus a secular setting (a restaurant) also make one behave more prosocially.[26] The day of the week can also make a difference. A study on the "Sunday effect" found that religious Americans give more money to charity than other people—but only on Sundays.[27] Such results also suggest that religious morality is more a matter of context than of character. In other words, *religion is more in the situation than in the person* (principle two).

In weeding out antisocial behavior, the hope of heavenly rewards does not seem to have the same motivational impact as the fear of supernatural punishments. In a study where university students were given an easy opportunity to cheat in a math test, religious belief as such was found to be unrelated to cheating.[28] However, students who expressed belief in a "mean God" cheated much less than those who believed in a "nice God." Another experiment measured people's willingness to steal when no one was looking.[29] Christian participants were randomly assigned to read either a verse that described God as merciful (Jam. 3:17) or a verse that described a punitive God (Deut. 29:20). Those in the "Punishing God" condition ended up stealing less money than those in the "Forgiving God" condition. Widespread belief in hell is also often negatively correlated with national levels of crime, while belief in heaven is not.[30] Such results support the third principle: *hell is stronger than heaven*.[31]

Cooperation is based on mutual trust. If we cannot hold others accountable directly, it helps to know a third party is monitoring their behavior. Norenzayan provides historical examples of long-distance commerce. Merchants carrying valuable goods far away from home had many opportunities for cheating. The solution of Roman merchants in the first and second centuries BCE was to organize themselves into religious fraternities and to "invoke Mercury and Hercules to enforce oaths and bind them into contractual agreements."[32] This type of solution worked not just for merchants, but for whole societies. When people believed they were all being watched by "powerful, omniscient, interventionist, morally concerned gods," they were able to trust each other (principle four:

Trust people who trust God).[33] This claim is supported, for example, by experiments where individuals in religious communities (e.g. religious kibbutzim in Israel) tend to behave less selfishly compared with individuals in secular communities (e.g. secular kibbutzim).[34]

Believers make trustworthy cooperation partners, but how can you know others are sincere in their devotion? After all, it is usually easy to pretend you believe something you actually don't. The answer has to do with context biases. For example, human minds are biased in a way that leads us to adopt beliefs and behaviors favored by many people (conformity bias) as well as beliefs and behaviors of older and skilled individuals (prestige bias).[35] But we do not follow blindly. Practicing a religion takes time and resources, and we want to be sure that those we imitate are themselves practicing what they preach. That is why we pay close attention to *credibility-enhancing displays* (CREDs), that is, behavioral cues indicating that our cultural models are not deceiving us.[36] Observing them engaging in fervent prayer, intense rituals, or voluntary poverty makes us convinced (principle five: *religious actions speak louder than words*). Importantly, CREDs also make us interested and willing to commit ourselves. There must be something to this religion if this person is willing to sacrifice so much for worshipping this god. CREDs are testimonies of the trustworthiness of religious believers and of the truth of their religion at the same time. Thus, besides increasing in-group solidarity, CREDs also help spread religious belief and behavior. In a field experiment in Mauritius, researchers found that participation in or simply witnessing a painful religious ritual heightened identification with Mauritanian culture and increased anonymous donations to the local Hindu temple.[37] A religion without CREDs is reduced to a myth that no one takes seriously (principle six: *unworshipped Gods are impotent Gods*). Religious parents who merely talk the talk but do not walk the walk should not expect their children to adopt their beliefs.[38]

The more widespread cooperation you want, the more watchful God you need (principle seven: *Big Gods for Big groups*). Historical, anthropological, and archaeological data suggests that people in small hunter-gather tribes rarely believe in Big Gods. Their gods are finite, morally disinterested supernatural agents.[39] The emergence of Big Gods accompanied the rise of chiefdoms, states and empires, testifying to their vital role in implementing large-scale cooperation.[40] In the Common Era the earth has been conquered by the Abrahamic God. Also, recent work on the prosocial effects of karmic beliefs suggests that belief in karma has a similar function in Hinduism and Buddhism (and their offshoots Jainism and Sikhism) as belief in moralizing Big Gods has in monotheistic religions.[41] The reason prosocial religions succeed is that *religious groups cooperate in order to compete* (principle eight). Cultural evolution is driven by intergroup competition. More cooperative communities take over weaker groups via warfare, economic production, or demographic expansion. Today, of course, some of the most successful nations are highly secular. An important claim in this account is that modern governments have put Big Gods out of a job. Once the relevant governmental institutions are in place we no longer need to base our trust in others on their belief in a God.[42] Interestingly, though, many people in Western countries nevertheless feel that atheists cannot be trusted.[43] The belief that religion guards morality is deep-seated.

The Diverse Functions of Early Christian Hell Narratives

Can the Big Gods theory shed light on the development of the doctrine of hell? There are historical reasons to think so. Just as the emergence of large-scale cooperation demands an explanation so does the rapid growth of Christianity. Rodney Stark has famously suggested that the number of Christians grew by 40 percent per decade. He estimates 7,530 Christians in 100 CE, 217,795 in 200 CE, 6,299,832 in 300 CE, and 33,882,008 in 350 CE.[44] The growth is all the more amazing considering that the new religious sect was despised and viewed as harmful by most Greeks and Jews. However, Stark argues that belonging to the network of churches also provided several concrete benefits such as comfort and care during an epidemic.[45] The generous behavior displayed by Christians was a crucial part of the movement's appeal.

> It was not simply the promise of salvation that motivated Christians, but the fact that they were greatly rewarded here and now for belonging. Thus while membership was expensive, it was, in fact, a bargain. That is, because the church asked much of its members, it was thereby possessed of the resources to *give* much. For example, because Christians were expected to aid the less fortunate, many of them received such aid, and all could feel greater security against bad time. Because they were asked to nurse the sick and dying, many of them received such nursing. Because they were asked to love others, they in turn were loved. And if Christians were required to observe a far more restrictive moral code than that observed by pagans, Christians – especially women – enjoyed a far more secure family life.[46]

The level of commitment and cooperation among early Christians was clearly high. However, social security networks are vulnerable to exploitation, and Christians helped even those outside of their communities.[47] Stark argues that *stigma* and *sacrifice* helped early Christians to exclude potential free riders from their midst.[48] Stigmas are forms of social deviance that make members of a religious group different from their surroundings. For example, Christians had to avoid certain popular habits (e.g. enjoying cultic meals in the pagan temples) and engage in some others (e.g. evangelism). Sacrifices consist of material and human investments (time, money, resources, friends, etc.) and lost opportunities. In light of the Big Gods theory, stigmas and sacrifices are kinds of CREDs. They serve as badges of sincerity and thus helped Christians trust one another. According to Stark, stigmas and sacrifices not only kept potential free riders at bay. They also induced higher levels of commitment in the group. Thus churches were able to generate great material, social, and spiritual benefits for their members.

But certainly believers themselves must also have sometimes been tempted to compromise their faith. After all, in most times and places before 313 CE being a Christian was bad for one's reputation and livelihood.[49] Imprisonment and executions of church officials and even ordinary believers sometimes took place. It is well known that many lapsed under persecution. Some who had converted from Judaism to Christianity pretended they never had. Commenting on the situation behind the Epistle to the Hebrews, Paul Ellingworth writes that, "if (1) the majority of the readers had come from Judaism to faith in Christ, and (2) the readers lived in some center such as Rome, where Judaism (but not Christianity) was well established and officially tolerated, *there could well have been a constant temptation to de-emphasize, conceal, neglect,*

abandon, and thus in a crisis reject and deny the distinctively Christian dimension of their faith."[50] While such behaviors differ from intentional cheating or exploitation, they may still count as free riding. These believers would have continued to enjoy the benefits of belonging to the Christian movement while engaging in actions that undermine commitment and cooperation. However, while compromises took place, they didn't happen so often as to dismantle cooperation and extinguish the growing movement. The question is what kept so many Christians committed even at times when the costs of belonging overshadowed the benefits?

The Big Gods account suggests that the hope of heavenly reward may not have always been enough. According to Meghan Henning, the doctrine of hell provided a powerful tool for the moral education of early Christians.[51] Just as Greek and Roman schoolbooks included visual descriptions of Hades that were meant to move students to engage in civic virtues, early Christian authors described the horrors of hell in order to instill Christian morals. Some of the writings take the form of a guided tour to the underworld, with imagery far more vivid than anything found in the Bible. Consider the second-century *Apocalypse of Peter*. It describes women guilty of abortion sitting in a lake of discharge while their aborted infants shoot bolts of lightning into their mothers' eyes.[52] The bodies of those who once persecuted Christians are whipped by evil spirits meanwhile worms feast on their guts.[53] Often the punishments are designed to fit the crime. For example, blasphemers must gnaw their own lips while false witnesses gnaw their tongues as fire devours their mouths.[54] As in many other apocalypses, marking out of particular sins and errors serves to define the ethical and doctrinal boundaries of the community.[55] A common apocalyptic theme is the punishment of those who have neglected their neighbor. The *Apocalypse of Peter* also describes the sufferings of rich people who showed no pity for orphans and widows during their earthly life and "those who lend and take usury."[56] While there is a wide agreement that the *Apocalypse of Peter* was written to warn people of the consequences of sin, some scholars argue it was "meant to console its readers during a time of persecution and injustice."[57] The righteous will be rewarded and the wicked tortured. In fact, both purposes make sense in light of the present argument. Encouragements and warnings can both buttress the perseverance of the saints.

In some texts believers themselves are threatened with hellfire, as in the parable of the sheep and the goats (Matt. 25:31–46). According to Henning, in the period following the destruction of the temple (c. 70–100 CE) the Matthean community made up of Jewish and Greek believers faced pressures to redefine themselves with regard to other Jewish, Roman, and Christian groups.[58] This crisis, she suggests, is the reason why Jesus talks more about hell in Matthew than in the other Gospels. In order to avoid eternal fire, the church members are encouraged not to deny hospitality and love from their sick, hungry, naked, or imprisoned brothers and sisters. Whether or not this parable goes back to the historical Jesus is a secondary issue. The crucial point is that the author has Jesus remind believers of their responsibilities toward one another and of the fiery consequences of neglect. Similar threats are found from the book of Revelation, written for Christians facing oppression and the temptation to give in and pay homage to the image of Caesar.[59] Those who end up worshipping the beast and its image, it says, "will be tormented with burning sulfur in the presence of the holy

angels and of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment will rise for ever and ever. There will be no rest day or night … " (Rev. 14:10–11).

Not only persecution, but also widespread popularity may have presented a challenge for Christian cooperation and morality. In 313 CE Christianity was made legal, and by 380 CE it had reached the status of the official religion of the Roman Empire. Stark suggests that while in 300 CE Christians made up only ten and a half percent of the Roman population, by 350 CE more than half of the empire had become Christian.[60] Whether these numbers are exaggerated or not, the rapid growth would have called for serious control measures against laxity. Commenting on the fourth-century *Apocalypse of Paul*, Bart Ehrman writes:

> With a massive influx of converts there also came large numbers of less-than-devoted souls. And the blessings and punishments of eternity almost inevitably came to be modified as a result. By the end of the fourth century, when Christianity was well on the road to becoming the dominant religion of the empire, some Christian writers started to maintain that heaven was not the destination of all members of the church, or hell the fate reserved only for those outside of it. On the contrary, Christian sinners too could be subject to the eternal wrath of God. Especially to be wary were Christian leaders who did not practice what they preached.[61]

As the Big Gods theory indicates, few things are more threatening to cooperation than free riding leaders. The example of cultural models is vital for maintaining commitment and cooperation. Bishops, presbyters, and prophets were expected to live modestly. However, they were also entitled to receive support from church members (1. Cor. 9:3–9; 1. Tim. 5:17–18). Some leaders clearly took advantage of their position of authority. For instance, the *Didache* (dated to 50–70 CE) orders believers to give the "first fruits" of wine, oxen and sheep, money, and clothes to a prophet (13:1–7), but it also warns of false prophets who pay extended visits and ask for money (11:3–12). In the New Testament, false teachers seeking personal gain are threatened with severe punishments in the afterlife (e.g. 1. Tim. 6:5, 9; 2. Pet. 2; Jude 1). In the *Apocalypse of Paul*, their punishments are vividly described. The apostle is given a tour in hell and shown a priest who was "eating and drinking and whoring," a bishop who enjoyed his "great name" but "had not compassion for widows or orphans," and a deacon who "devoured the offerings and committed fornication."[62]

Christian leaders were expected to show their sincerity by engaging in CREDs. The apostle Paul, for example, reminds the Thessalonian believers of how he preached fearlessly despite being attacked earlier on, how he never used flattery, and how he did not seek money or praise but "worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone" while caring for the church members "as a nursing mother cares for her children" (1. Thess. 2:1–10). For the early Christians, Jesus and the apostles had set the standard of service and self-sacrifice. Sometimes following Jesus meant martyrdom. Displaying willingness to die for one's faith is something of a CRED on steroids.[63] Ignatius of Antioch's long journey to his own martyrdom provides a striking example. As Stark notes, the bishop's unwavering desire to give his life for his faith must have had a deep impact on the churches he met on his way to Rome.[64] Martyrs fostered deep commitment to the Christian cause among the ranks of believers and gave them a strong sense of identity.[65] While martyrs were venerated for their sacrifice, church leaders who had recoiled

when threatened with death or imprisonment were seen as having committed a serious sin. No wonder schisms such as the Donatist controversy took place.

The crucial role of CREDs indicates that prosocial behavior is rarely driven by fear only. The behavior of early Christians certainly wasn't. Here we must distinguish between that which fosters desirable behavior such as helping and serving and that which curbs antisocial behavior such as cheating. Hillary Lenfesty and Thomas Morgan argue that while the fear of punishment may inhibit undesirable behavior, it is unlikely to motivate acts of charity.[66] The neurological system of the human brain that responds to threats is different from the one that facilitates social interaction in safe environments. The neurological pathway promoting prosocial engagement is also phylogenetically newer and possessed by mammals only. According to Lenfesty and Morgan, it is not the fear of punishment, but the positive example of cultural models that drives self-sacrificial behavior. No wonder the author of the *Epistle to the Hebrews* encourages the readers to stay strong by reminding them of several "heroes of faith" (ch. 11). Likewise, the example of Jesus, Peter, Paul, and of many other saints must have given early Christians strength to carry on with stigmas and sacrifices. Nevertheless, at times when the temptation to fall back grew large, these authority figures were also employed by early Christian writers to instill the fear of hell into believers.

Rational Choices, Intuitive Dualism, and Emotional Selection

Such historical remarks converge nicely with Norenzayan's eight principles as follows:

(1) *Christians believed in a watchful, moralizing deity and engaged in large-scale prosocial behavior.*
(2) *Reminders of one's responsibilities towards fellow Christians and warnings of the punishment for free riding (and other immoral behavior) were important for maintaining cooperation and commitment.*
(3) *Promises of heavenly rewards were not enough; warnings of afterlife punishment in hell were also needed.*
(4) *Cooperation took place in the context of Christian in-groups that sought to exclude potential free riders.*
(5) *CREDs were treated as evidence of sincere belief, and were expected especially of church leaders.*
(6) *Christian belief was manifested in ritual and moral behavior (CREDs) that had a deep impact on believers as well as on outsiders (and thus CREDs helped spread Christian belief).*
(7) *The Christian God is a Big God (an all-powerful, all-seeing, moralizing deity). Early Christians constituted a big group as most of them remained anonymous to one another.*
(8) *Despite starting off as an obscure, marginal Jesus movement, Christianity destroyed the Roman gods and quickly became the dominant religious force in the Western world.*[67]

It seems, then, that the doctrine of hell played a crucial role in helping the Christian movement to grow and flourish. Now, we still need to explain why a particular concept of hell—eternal conscious torment—proved to be more successful than its competitors.

After all, universalism and annihilation also include the idea of an afterlife punishment. For example, according to Arnobius' conditionalism, "souls which know not God shall be consumed in long protracted torment with raging fire."[68] Origen (c.184–c. 253), the most well-known early universalist, envisioned a period of "correction and purification, even if bitter and painful, for those who have not wanted to obey the word of God."[69] Both Arnobius and Origen thus conceptualized afterlife punishment as a period of conscious torment of considerable length.[70]

I suggest that the biggest reason why everlasting hell eventually overtook these views is that it proved more effective in weeding out free riding. According to Stark's rational choice theory of religion, people carefully weigh the costs and benefits of their religion-related actions. Different afterlife prospects allow for different options for rational behavior. Not all punishments are equally scary. If you are contemplating a financial scam, it makes a difference whether the maximum sentence is two years or twenty years in prison. As Dominic Johnson points out, supernatural punishment is an effective deterrent not only because gods can detect free riding better than humans, but also because human punishments are not scary enough to defeat our natural selfishness.[71] The prospect of a limited period of torment followed either by salvation (universalism) or the cessation of existence (conditionalism) may not provide enough motivation to remain steadfast if the price of doing the right thing is very high. Everlasting hell, however, makes the price of free riding always too high. Given the possibility of eternal suffering, a compromise is obviously irrational and hence less tempting no matter what earthly goods are on offer. One does not even have to be fully convinced that hell exists. If there is any possibility that by committing this or that sin God might inflict you with never-ending torment, the only reasonable choice is to err on the side of caution.

This psychological explanation still leaves open the cultural mechanism by which everlasting hell became selected. There are several options here. Perhaps those Christian communities that believed in never-ending torment were more likely to stay committed through hard times—just like conservative churches have survived secularism better than liberal ones—and their doctrine survived with them. Alternatively, perhaps more and more bishops and theologians learned to value the fear of everlasting hell. After times of widespread persecution and popularity that exposed the lukewarmness of many believers' faith, there might have been a fresh appreciation for the pedagogical value of everlasting hell. In fact, it had not escaped even Origen. The doctrine of apokatastasis, he thought, was meant for those who were spiritually mature enough to do the good out of love instead of the fear of punishment.[72] He questioned whether the doctrine should be preached to the masses: "I do not know whether I should expose such mysteries before such a public […] it is dangerous."[73]

Let me suggest a few other possible reasons why everlasting hell had the upper hand. Belief in an immortal soul may have given the doctrine a cognitive advantage over the idea of annihilation. Conditionalists often argue that the concept of an immortal soul played a key role in making everlasting hell dominant.[74] According to some cognitive scientists, our tendency to divide persons into souls/minds and bodies is a cognitive default.[75] Belief in souls is not a product of a Western cultural milieu but is prevalent also among indigenous people groups.[76] The belief that the soul is distinct from the

body and brain is something that children develop naturally and it seems to persist into adulthood.[77]

Mind–body dualism also seems to make afterlife beliefs cognitively natural.[78] In a famous experiment, Jesse Bering and David Bjorklund put up a puppet theatre for children.[79] At the end of the play, the main character, Brown Mouse, was eaten by another character, Mr. Alligator. After the performance, the experimenters asked the children questions about Brown Mouse. Now that the mouse is no longer alive, they said, will he ever need to go to the bathroom? Do his ears still work? Does his brain still work? The majority of the 4–8 year old children said "no" to questions about Brown Mouse's biological functions. In another experiment with an otherwise identical setting, the experimenters inquired about Brown Mouse's postmortem psychological functions. Can he *see* this tree? Does he still *want* to go home? Does he *know* that he's not alive? The majority of the younger group (4–6 years old) tended to say "yes," as did a good (but lower) number of older children (6–12 years old). Many thought that Brown Mouse, although dead, could still think, feel, and even get hungry. Its psychological functions survived the death of its body. Essentially, Brown Mouse continued living. Now, even if belief that the mind/soul survives death were intuitive, this does not necessarily mean that belief in an immortal soul would be. After all, many people seem to find the idea of living forever hard to grasp. But what the research does suggest is that the concept of annihilation is *less* intuitive than the concept of postmortem continuance. Therefore, it is possible that the cognitive appeal of mind–body dualism helped in making everlasting hell successful.

Of course, universalists such as Origen believed in the immortality of the soul just as Augustine and other traditionalists did. A cognitive bias that might have favored the concept of eternal torment over both universal salvation and annihilation has to do with emotion. When it comes to stories that elicit negative emotions such as fear, anger, or disgust, humans are highly sensitive to small variations. Chip Heath and colleagues studied the success of various urban legends about cat food mislabeled as tuna, a rat in a soda bottle, a bellboy using other people's toothbrushes to treat some part of his body, and so on.[80] The more disgusting the variations of these stories people were told, the more they wanted to pass them on! The authors call this phenomenon *emotional selection*: stories that induce strong emotions are catchy, even if the emotions are negative (why do people enjoy watching horror movies, anyway?). It is feasible that emotional selection would have also helped the doctrine of everlasting conscious torment succeed over its competitors. For example, Origen's descriptions of the period of punishment for the wicked in his *On the First Principles* are a far cry from the vivid descriptions of hell in the book of Revelation, the *Apocalypse of Peter*, and the *Apocalypse of Paul.* The dreadful depictions of eternal conscious torment could have been remembered and spread through preaching and teaching more than any cool-headed theological speculations.

Concluding Remarks

The doctrine of hell probably played a role in the early church by weeding out free riding and limiting other undesirable behavior that might have been detrimental for the cooperation and growth of the church. Here the view of hell as eternal conscious

torment proved more effective than its competitors. This point provides a viable error theory for all who wish to argue that irrelevant influences were in play in the process by which the traditional view become the orthodox view of hell.

The doctrine also probably continued to function as a deterrent against free riding throughout Christian history. For example, in Dante's *Inferno,* traitors (those who have betrayed their own family members, their guests, or their country) are reserved a place in the ninth circle, closest to the Devil himself. In today's Western Christendom, however, hell has mostly faded into the background. From the viewpoint of the Big Gods theory, the erosion of belief in hell is the natural outcome of modernization. So is the popularity of less extreme views of afterlife punishment among Christians. Even contemporary traditionalists, while holding on to the view of hell as eternal, play down the aspects of "conscious" and "torment."

Notes

1. See e.g. Stanley N. Gundry and Preston Sprinkle, eds., *Four Views on Hell* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016).
2. For example, in the foreword to the second edition of Robin Parry's (writing under the pen name Gregory MacDonald) *The Evangelical Universalist*, Oliver Crisp notes that the idea that one could be both an evangelical and a universalist was deemed as an oxymoron at the time of the first edition in 2005. Crisp's comment clearly suggests this is no longer the case. See Gregory MacDonald, *The Evangelical Universalist*, 2nd ed. (Eugene: Wiph & Stock, 2012).
3. For instance, in a statement on the nature of hell, the theological commission of the Evangelical Alliance in UK calls conditional immortality "a significant minority evangelical view." See David Hilborn et al., *The Nature of Hell: A Report by the Evangelical Alliance Commission on Unity and Truth Among Evangelicals* (London: Evangelical Alliance, 2000). The Rethinking hell website lists many well-known evangelical leaders as either advocates of conditionalism or as traditionalists who support conditionalism as an evangelical option (see http://rethinkinghell.com/explore/).
4. See e.g. Christopher M. Date, Gregory G. Stump, and Joshua W. Anderson, eds., *Rethinking Hell: Readings in Evangelical Conditionalism* (Eugene: Cascade, 2014).
5. See a list of scholars from http://rethinkinghell.com/explore.
6. E.g. MacDonald, *The Evangelical Universalist*; David Bentley Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved: Heaven, Hell, and Universal Salvation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019).
7. See e.g. Edward W. Fudge and Robert A. Peterson, *Two Views of Hell: A Biblical & Theological Dialogue* (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 117–128.
8. Unsurprisingly, proponents of the traditional view typically argue that these fathers (with the exception of Arnobius) taught the eternal torment view.
9. Ilaria Ramelli, *The Christian Doctrine of Apokatastasis: A Critical Assessment from the New Testament to Eriugena* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 817.
10. Jerry L. Walls, "A Hell and Purgatory Response," in Gundry and Sprinkle, *Four Views on Hell*, 97. Italics mine.
11. Katia Vavova, "Irrelevant Influences," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 96:1 (2018), 134–152.
12. E.g. Helen de Cruz, "Cognitive Science of Religion and the Study of Theological Concepts," *Topoi* 33:2 (2014), 487–497.
13. Jonathan Jong, Christopher Kavanagh, and Aku Visala, "Born Idolaters: The Limits of the Philosophical Implications of the Cognitive Science of Religion," *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 57:2 (2015), 244–266; Jason D. Slone,

Theological Incorrectness: Why Religious People Believe What They Shouldn't (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

14. See Aku Visala, "How the Cognitive Sciences Might Contribute to the Theological Debate about Free Will," *Modern Theology* 37:2 (2021), 362–381; Slone, *Theological Incorrectness*, 93–97.

15. See Joseph Henrich, *The Secret of Our Success: How Culture Is Driving Human Evolution, Domesticating Our Species, and Making Us Smarter* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 38–53.

16. In putting forward my argument, I do not imagine that it rises to the level of a robust scientific hypothesis or that it comes close to an exhaustive explanation of how the traditional view of hell became dominant.

17. Ara Norenzayan, *Big Gods: How Religion Transformed Cooperation and Conflict* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012); Ara Norenzayan, Azim Shariff, Will Gervais, Ayana Willard, Rita McNamara, Edward Slingerland, and Joseph Henrich, "The Cultural Evolution of Prosocial Religions," *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 39:E1 (2016).

18. Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996); Meghan Henning, *Educating Early Christians Through the Rhetoric of Hell: "Weeping and Gnashing of Teeth" as Paideia in Matthew and the Early Church* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014).

19. Several aspects of the Big Gods account are debated. See the responses in the same issue of *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* to Norenzayan et al., "The Cultural Evolution." For an accessible summary of the recent debate initiated by Harvey Whitehouse and his team on whether Big Gods appeared before or after big societies, see this blog post by Connor Wood: https://www.patheos.com/blogs/scienceonreligion/2019/05/did-big-gods-come-before-or-after-big-societies/.

20. Norenzayan, *Big Gods*; Norenzayan et al., "The Cultural Evolution."

21. See Stuart A. West, Ashleigh S. Griffin and Andy Gardner, "Evolutionary Explanations for Cooperation: Review," *Current Biology* 17:16 (2007), R661–R672.

22. For an example, consider why conscientious objectors who refuse to fight in war have often been executed or imprisoned. An objector is essentially a free rider: he lets everyone else risk their lives while making sure his own life is safe. It has been generally assumed that many would refuse to fight if there were no harsh consequences of such disloyal behavior.

23. Norenzayan, *Big Gods*, xiii.

24. Max Ernest-Jones, Daniel Nettle, and Melissa Bateson, "Effects of Eye Images on Everyday Cooperative Behavior: A Field Experiment," *Evolution and Human Behavior* 32:3 (2011), 172–178.

25. Will M. Gervais and Ara Norenzayan, "Like a Camera In the Sky? Thinking about God Increases Public Self-Awareness and Socially Desirable Responding," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 48:1 (2012), 298–302.

26. Erik P. Duhaime, "Is the Call to Prayer a Call to Cooperate? A Field Experiment on the Impact of Religious Salience on Prosocial Behavior," *Judgment and Decision Making* 10:6 (2015), 593–596; Dimitris Xygalatas, "Effects of Religious Setting on Cooperative Behavior: A Case Study from Mauritius," *Religion, Brain & Behavior* 3:2 (2013), 91–102.

27. Deepak Malhotra, "(When) are Religious People Nicer? Religious Salience and the 'Sunday Effect' on Pro-Social Behavior," *HBS Working Paper* (2008), 09-066.

28. Azim Shariff and Ara Norenzayan, "Mean Gods Make Good People: Different Views of God Predict Cheating Behavior," *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 21:2 (2011), 85–96.

29. Amber DeBono, Azim Shariff, Sarah Poole and Mark Muraven, "Forgive Us Our Trespasses: Priming a Forgiving (But Not a Punishing) God Increases Unethical Behavior," *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 9:Suppl 1 (2017), S1–S10.

30. Azim F. Shariff and Mijke Rhemtulla, "Divergent Effects of Beliefs in Heaven and Hell on National Crime Rates," *PLoS ONE* 7:6 (2012), e39048.

31. Dominic Johnson (2016, 24–26) lists psychological evidence of what he calls the *negativity bias*. For instance, negative images elicit more attention and neural activity than positive images. We detect an angry face from a crowd of happy faces more quickly than a happy face from a crowd of angry faces. Because of a "loss aversion" bias, we are more afraid of losing an amount of money than excited of the prospect of winning that same amount. Such empirical evidence has led some psychologists to the conclusion that "bad is stronger than good" (Baumeister et al. 2001). It also leads Johnson to argue that people are more sensitive to punishments than to rewards.

32. Norenzayan, *Big Gods*, 56–57.

33. Ibid., 8.

34. Richard Sosis and Bradley J. Ruffle, "Religious Ritual and Cooperation: Testing for a Relationship on Israeli Religious and Secular Kibbutzim," *Current Anthropology* 44:5 (2003), 713–722.

35. Henrich, *The Secret of Our Success*, 38–53.

36. Joseph Henrich, "The Evolution of Costly Displays, Cooperation and Religion: Credibility Enhancing Displays and Their Implications for Cultural Evolution," *Evolution and Human Behavior* 30 (2009), 244–260.

37. Dimitris Xygalatas, "Effects of Religious Setting on Cooperative Behavior: A Case Study from Mauritius," *Religion, Brain & Behavior* 3:2 (2013), 91–102.

38. Jonathan A. Lanman and Michael D. Buhrmester, "Religious Actions Speak Louder Than Words: Exposure to Credibility-Enhancing Displays Predicts Theism," *Religion, Brain & Behavior* 7:1 (2017), 3–16.

39. Norenzayan et al., "The Cultural Evolution," 7.

40. What about the several finite gods of the Roman Empire? In fact, Norenzayan and colleagues seem to view them also as Big Gods: "[M]odern scholarship is increasingly rejecting this picture" of Roman gods as "amoral and fickle" as "the result of later Christian apologists' desire to distance the new Christian religion from 'paganism' […] Although Roman religion did not have sacred scriptures or an explicit moral code that was considered to be the word of the gods, the deities of imperial Rome were seen by the populace as the guardians of what was right and virtuous (Rives 2007, pp. 50–52, 105–131), and the gods were central enough to the public sphere that even the spatial layouts of Roman cities were created around temples dedicated to the major gods (Rives 2007, pp. 110–111)." Norenzayan et al., "The Cultural Evolution," 8–9.

41. Cindel J. M. White and Ara Norenzayan, "Belief in Karma: How Cultural Evolution, Cognition, and Motivations Shape Belief in Supernatural Justice," in *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* Vol. 60, ed. James M. Olson (Cambridge: Academic Press, 2019), 1–63.

42. Norenzayan, *Big Gods*, 170–192.

43. Will Gervais, Dimitris Xygalatas, Ryan McKay et al. "Global Evidence of Extreme Intuitive Moral Prejudice Against Atheists," *Nature Human Behavior* 1:0151 (2017).

44. Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 7.

45. Consider the bishop Dionysius of Alexandria's tribute to the nursing efforts of local Christians during a plague in 252 CE. According to Dionysius, believers showed "love and loyalty in not sparing themselves while helping one another, tending to the sick with no thought of danger and gladly departing this life with them after becoming infected with their disease." Eusebius, *The Church History: A New Translation and Commentary by Paul L. Maier* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 1999), 240.

46. Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 188.

47. For example, in a letter from 362 CE, Emperor Julian complains to pagan priest Arsacius that the Hellenistic religion has become unpopular in Galatia while Christianity prospers because of charity. The Christians "support not only their own poor but ours as well." W.C.F. Wright, ed., "The Letters of Emperor Julian: Letter 22.," in *The Works of the Emperor Julian* (Vol. 13) (Loeb Classical Library, 1913), https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Letters_of_Julian/Letter_22

48. Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 176–178.

49. See e.g. Larry Hurtado, *Destroyer of the Gods: Early Christian Distinctiveness in the Roman World* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2016).
50. Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 80. Italics mine.
51. Henning, *Educating Early Christians*.
52. Eric J. Beck, *Justice and Mercy in the Apocalypse of Peter: A New Translation and Analysis of the Purpose of the Text* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019), 69.
53. Beck, *Justice and Mercy in the Apocalypse of Peter*, 70.
54. Ibid.
55. Henning, *Educating Early Christians*, 226.
56. Beck, *Justice and Mercy*, 70.
57. Ibid., 15. Beck himself challenges both of these interpretations, arguing that "the primary purpose of the Apoc Pet is to encourage the righteous to show compassion to the wicked." Ibid., 18. Even if this was the original purpose of the work, it seems it was later used to warn believers of the consequences of sin. See footnote 67.
58. Henning, *Educating Early Christians*, 141.
59. Gregory K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 28–33.
60. Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 7.
61. Bart D. Ehrman, *Heaven and Hell: A History of the Afterlife* (London: Oneworld, 2019), 262.
62. Montague Rhodes James, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924), verses 34–36, http://wesley.nnu.edu/sermons-essays-books/noncanonical-literature/noncanonical-literature-apocryphal-nt-apocalypse/apocalypse-of-paul-summary/
63. Norenzayan et al., "The Cultural Evolution," 12.
64. Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 180–181.
65. See Daniel L. Eastman, "Early Christian Martyr Cults," in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Christian Martyrdom*, ed. Paul Middleton (New Yersey: Wiley-Blackwell, 2020).
66. Hillary L. Lenfesty and Thomas J. H. Morgan, "By Reverence, Not Fear: Prestige, Religion, and Autonomic Regulation in the Evolution of Cooperation," *Frontiers in Psychology* 10:2750 (2019).
67. Here I am alluding to the title of Larry Hurtado's book and to the subtitle of Rodney Stark's work.
68. Arnobius, *Against the Heathen*; quoted in LeRoy E. Froom, "Conditionalism in the Early Church," in *Rethinking Hell*, eds. Date, Stump and Anderson, 273.
69. Origen, *On the First Principles* 2. 3:1; quoted in Ramelli, *The Christian Doctrine*, 157.
70. Interestingly, the so-called Rainer fragment of the *Apocalypse of Peter* actually seems to include the idea of universal salvation. It suggests that "after a period of suffering in the afterlife, sinners too will finally attain beatitude, thanks to their post-mortem conversion and the intercession of the blessed (the "righteous") for them." Ramelli, *The Christian Doctrine*, 69. According to Ramelli, this explains why Origen also valued the text. However, she also points out that the later Ethiopic manuscript has sought to remove the suggestion of universal salvation. This supports the present argument.
71. Dominic Johnson, *God is Watching You: How the Fear of God Makes Us Human* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 166.
72. Ramelli, *The Christian Doctrine*, 206–207.
73. Origen, *Homilies on Luke*, 23; quoted in Ramelli, *The Christian Doctrine*, 207.
74. E.g. Glenn A. Peoples, "Introduction to Evangelical Conditionalism," in *Rethinking Hell*, eds. Date, Stump and Anderson, 10–27. Peoples argues that the concept of immortal soul is not found from the Bible but was imported to Christianity from Neoplatonism by Augustine.
75. Paul Bloom, *Descartes' Error: How the Science of Child Development Explains What Makes Us Human* (London: Arrow, 2004); Jesse M. Bering, "The Folk Psychology of Souls," *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 29 (2006), 453–498.

76. Maciej Chudek, Rita Anne McNamara, Susan Birch, Paul Bloom and Joseph Henrich, "Do Minds Switch Bodies? Dualist Interpretations across Ages and Societies," *Religion, Brain & Behavior* 8:4 (2018), 354–368.

77. Matthias Forstmann and Pascal Burgmer, "Adults Are Intuitive Mind-Body Dualists," *Journal of Experimental Psychoogy*: *General* 144:1, 222–235.

78. Jesse M. Bering, "Intuitive Conceptions of Dead Agents' Minds: The Natural Foundations of Afterlife Beliefs as Phenomenological Boundary," *Journal of Cognition and Culture* 2:4 (2002), 263–308.

79. Jesse M. Bering and David Bjorklund, "The Natural Emergence of Reasoning about the Afterlife as a Developmental Regularity," *Developmental Psychology* 40:2 (2004), 217–233.

80. Chip Heath, Chris Bell and Emily Sternberg, "Emotional Selection in Memes: The Case of Urban Legends," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 81:6 (2001), 1028–1041.

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