



Reviews



Robert Wild, *A Catholic Reading Guide to Universalism* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2015), pp. xx + 173, ISBN 978-1498223171. £15.00

The title of this book may appear oxymoronic, since Western Catholic theology has mostly supposed – often emphatically and graphically – the number of the damned to be considerable. To contest the claim that this is the only legitimate Catholic position, Fr Wild has made his own journey into the history of universalist literature and produced this short yet dense guide. Before considering its content and merits, two methodological points concerning purpose and scope are needed. Stressing that the texts are set forth as theological opinions rather than dogma, Wild distinguishes between *apokatastasis* and strong universalism. The former – often attributed to Origen and widely believed anathematised – asserts the *inevitability* of the eventual restoration of all things in Christ. The latter, exemplified in many texts throughout the book, also believes that all *will* ultimately be reconciled to God, but maintains the theoretical possibility that we are free to scupper the divine salvific plan. Secondly, the use of ‘Catholic’ requires elaboration, since on Wild’s admission the majority of writers presented are Protestant or Orthodox. The book, then, is Catholic in aiming to introduce a primarily Catholic readership to a body of literature largely unknown therein.

Indeed range is one of the chief merits here, since Wild presents texts detailing the arguments in favour of strong universalism from the apostolic age to the present, across the ecumenical spectrum, and in philosophy, history, and theology. Indeed, I am aware of no broader universalist text. Given the intention of introducing a non-scholarly readership to the case for universalism, I will present what I consider the most important aspects of this, before asking whether the book does what such a reader might expect of it in the staple Catholic areas of tradition, philosophy, Scripture, and *magisterium*.

The order is both historical and thematic, with six chapters considering universalist theology in particular times (including individual chapters on twentieth-century Catholicism, Orthodoxy, and Protestantism). The remaining six consider hermeneutical presuppositions, the descent of Christ into hell, freedom relative to the salvific will of God, a particular text (John Cronen and Eric Reitan's *God's Final Victory*), and related issues including annihilationism, mystical revelation, and near-death experiences.

These chapters are largely comprised of Wild's selection of the most significant texts for the particular period or theme, with a brief explanation of why the text is important. This can make for dense reading, with an often breathless panorama of sections from major texts across the history of theology, but this is arguably in accordance with Wild's intention, and he is clear from the outset that this is not original systematic theology. In my estimation the text is at its strongest when introducing readers to scholarship concerning patristic universalism. Wild summarises J. W. Hanson's *Universalism: The Prevailing Doctrine of the Christian Church During its First Five Hundred Years* (1899), still a staple text for historical treatments of universalism (though the assertion of predominance is largely considered to be exaggerated). Introducing Hanson's research to a wider audience is an especially important aspect of the text, particularly given the point that universalism was a common early theological opinion (as acknowledged by both Augustine and Jerome) and was absent from all of the patristic polemics against heresy. Together with more detailed considerations of Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and Gregory of Nyssa, and a challenge to the legitimacy of the Constantinopolitan anathemas, this section should provide sceptical readers with sufficient encouragement to read on.

Concerning later tradition, the book is lacking – though this can be excused by the paucity of medieval universalism. Given the intent of the work, however, it would have been valuable to address the centuries asserting mass damnation, not as arguments against universalism but as a period to which many readers have considerable loyalty (e.g. Thomas Aquinas and numerous post-Reformation theologians and saints). That said, the book does begin to implicitly address this by weaving throughout philosophical considerations of

issues like justice, freedom, and the nature and purpose of punishment. It is especially focused on countering the familiar objection to universal salvation made in the name of human freedom, arguing through a diversity of voices that genuine freedom chooses salvation rather than perdition. Moreover it may well be of great importance in introducing readers formed in concepts of retributive or penal justice to the idea that Christian justice is restorative. In a book of this breadth and intent there is a mere taste of philosophical issues, but enough to introduce the philosophical ground for strong universalism, with ample references for subsequent thinking.

Concerning Scripture, we would have benefitted from a distinct chapter considering biblical texts, but the basic issues are again amply introduced. For instance, the unscholarly reader might be surprised to read that Greek words commonly rendered as punishment, fire, brimstone, etc, are rich in nuances of purification rather than retribution, and that eternity is a questionable interpretation of the standard use of *aion* in Greek literature. I do, however, think that a more focused consideration of scriptural issues, specifically explicitly universalist texts in John and Paul (and the use of the notorious *apokatastasis* in Matthew and Acts!), would have made for a more reassuring guide for the reader convinced by centuries of damnationism.

Finally, concerning content, the Catholic *magisterium* is represented by texts from John Paul II propounding – *prima facie* – universal salvation, fertile ground for future Catholic treatments of universalism. Again, however, the reader might seek some consideration of issues relative to dogma, inasmuch as they might be a stumbling-block.

In general, however, Fr Wild has condensed an impressive range of literature for any reader unacquainted with the best of universalist thought, and I would argue that the most important issues are covered at least in passing, with extensive references for those who wish to delve deeper. Finally, of less emphasis in my review, the treatment of Orthodox and Evangelical literature makes the text an important contribution to ecumenism and to the value of historical methodology in theology, Catholic and otherwise.

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