

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The antinomy of gehenna: Pavel Florensky's contribution to debates on hell and universalism

Erica Ridderman\*

Duke University, Durham, NC, USA

\*Corresponding author. E-mail: [erica.ridderman@duke.edu](mailto:erica.ridderman@duke.edu)

## Abstract

In *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth* Pavel Florensky presents an account of hell, or 'Gehenna', that synthesises two seemingly irreconcilable claims: that God will save all people, and that some people will reject God forever. In insisting that both claims are true, and by recasting standard categories of final judgement, purgation and human identity, Florensky produces a novel contribution in contemporary debates about hell and universalism. I begin by surveying his account, then address two key interpretive questions raised by his critics, and conclude by situating his account within modern western conversations.

**Keywords:** eschatology; Pavel Florensky; hell; human agency; Last Judgement; universalism

Though never absent from the history of Christian reflection, the doctrine of hell is enjoying renewed interest, particularly in spirited debates about universal salvation, which, as many recent studies show, has been a small but persistent minority position throughout Christian history.<sup>1</sup> The issues involved are doctrinally, historically and

<sup>1</sup>By no means exhaustive, the following list might illustrate the current interest in universal salvation and its historical precedents. For collections of essays, see Robin A. Parry and Christopher H. Partridge (eds), *Universal Salvation? The Current Debate* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2004); Gregory MacDonald (ed.), *'All Shall Be Well': Explorations in Universalism and Christian Theology from Origen to Moltmann* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011). For single-volume historical surveys of universalism, see the work of Ilaria L. E. Ramelli, *The Christian Doctrine of Apokatastasis: A Critical Assessment from the New Testament to Eriugena* (Boston: Brill, 2013); and idem, *A Larger Hope? Universal Salvation from Christian Beginnings to Julian of Norwich* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2019). For a much-discussed example by a prominent theologian, see David Bentley Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved: Heaven, Hell, and Universal Salvation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019). For a reaction against the rising tide of universalism, see Michael J. McClymond, *The Devil's Redemption: A New History and Interpretation of Christian Universalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2018). For arguments in analytic philosophy, see Joel Buenting (ed.), *The Problem of Hell: A Philosophical Anthology* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010); John Kronen and Eric Reitan, *God's Final Victory: A Comparative Philosophical Case for Universalism* (New York: Continuum, 2011); Thomas Talbot, *The Inescapable Love of God* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014); and four volumes by Jerry Walls: *Hell: The Logic of Damnation* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), *Heaven: The Logic of Eternal Joy* (Oxford: OUP, 2002), *Purgatory: The Logic of Total Transformation* (Oxford: OUP, 2012), and his summary book *Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory: Rethinking the Things that Matter Most* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2015).

philosophically complex, touching on all manner of topics from the nature of judgement, love and forgiveness, to the development of doctrine and epistemological authority. Unsurprisingly, accounts of hell and/or universal salvation vary significantly across the centuries of Christian theological reflection. Despite this diversity, however, the modern landscape has often been dominated by two core commitments, summarised succinctly by one of the twentieth century's most prominent theologians on the question of hell, Hans Urs von Balthasar. In *Dare We Hope that All Men Be Saved*, Balthasar describes two series of scriptural statements that cannot be reconciled: those that speak of universal restoration and those that speak of eternal judgement.<sup>2</sup> For Balthasar, they reflect, respectively, God's universal will for salvation and human freedom to reject divine love. For some, God's will for universal salvation will ultimately be fulfilled against all opposing forces. For others, a stubborn human will can thwart God's invitation and spurn salvation forever. And for Balthasar, all Christians must cling to the first while acknowledging the real possibility of the second. In other words, we can hope, but never know, the outcome of the two competing claims.

I frame the problem of hell with this brief sketch of Balthasar in order to introduce another option, one which works in similar categories but casts the possibilities quite differently. Pavel Florensky (1882–1937), Russian Orthodox priest, theologian and polymath, offers a novel account of hell in his magnum opus, *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth*, published in 1914.<sup>3</sup> As far as I can tell, it is rarely, if ever, discussed in western theology and usually ignored in Orthodox thought, likely due to its icy reception among Florensky's peers.<sup>4</sup> Its absence from contemporary conversations is not indicative of its value, however. Florensky's account of 'Gehenna', as he calls it, might prove an intervention in contemporary debates by reconceptualising both the nature of final judgement and the autonomy of human persons. To prove so, this essay will proceed in three parts. First, I make a basic sketch of Florensky's argument, showing what he attempts and how he does it. Next, I turn to the areas most criticised in his account, namely, his anthropology and methodology, and offer an interpretation that might satisfy his critics, even as it complicates his self-described purpose. In the final section, I place Florensky's account in relation to predominant models, including those of Balthasar and David Bentley Hart in his recent book, *That All Shall Be Saved*, showing that Florensky's account deserves a place in the ongoing discussion about universal salvation.

### Florensky's account of gehenna

*The Pillar and Ground of the Truth* is a self-described 'essay in Orthodox theodicy', written in twelve letters addressed to an unspecified 'Friend'. The term 'theodicy', as used by Florensky, is not a rational justification of divine goodness in the face of

<sup>2</sup>Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Dare We Hope 'That All Men Be Saved?' With a Short Discourse on Hell* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988). In this paper, I will focus only on options that assert God's will for universal salvation. Though perhaps not the dominant position throughout Christian history, it is widely accepted today and reflected in official Catholic teaching to which Balthasar refers. See *Dare We Hope*, p. 38, n. 3, in which he cites *De oratione* on 1 Tim 2:4 ('Here we see that God's disposition to love aims at the salvation of all men without exception').

<sup>3</sup>Pavel Florensky, *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth: An Essay in Orthodox Theodicy in Twelve Letters*, trans. Boris Jakim (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

<sup>4</sup>See Avril Pyman, *Pavel Florensky: A Quiet Genius* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011), p. 37; or Robert Slensinski, *Pavel Florensky: A Metaphysics of Love* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984), pp. 162–3.

evil, but a justification of the human mind's claims to know the truth.<sup>5</sup> Writing in early twentieth-century Russia, Florensky and his contemporaries in what is now called the 'Russian religious renaissance' challenged the prevailing positivism and opposition to religious truth claims in the broader intellectual culture. His letters attempt to ground knowledge not in rationalism, but in religious experience of the triune God, which he calls 'a sole legitimate way to gain knowledge of the dogmas'.<sup>6</sup> Florensky not only recounts his own living religious experiences (he does so briefly in the introductory and concluding sections of each letter), but uses them to prepare the ground, so to speak, for readers to experience this 'Pillar and Ground of Truth' for themselves, particularly as they navigated the hostile intellectual climate. This strategy apparently worked for at least one close friend.<sup>7</sup> The book cites a dizzying variety of sources including Orthodox liturgies, quotations from ascetical writers, both eastern and western biblical commentators from Origen to Luther, religious traditions other than Christianity, plenty of Russian literature and stories from Florensky's own work as a priest. It would be difficult to point to a single grounding authority of his 'Gehenna' chapter but is perhaps more appropriate to recognise a cacophony of theological influences. For instance, even those with eschatological views most like his own (Gregory of Nyssa or St Isaac the Syrian come close), Florensky cites and then undercuts them, showing how his view is distinct from both. His position on hell is therefore not the 'typical' Orthodox position (if there is one), but instead ingeniously draws from and challenges this vast array of sources. The entire book is laid out in twelve letters: first are his opening letters, which cover epistemological matters like the hellishness of scepticism, the necessary asceticism of renouncing rationalism and the foundation of knowledge in ontological (not psychological) love. After these, he turns to specific doctrinal themes like the Holy Spirit, sin, creation, friendship and hell. Throughout the letters, Florensky weaves together and overlays previous ideas to arrive at new, often surprising theological insights. As we will soon see, this creative method adds both novelty and complexity to his account of hell in the 'Gehenna' letter.

As he does with each letter, Florensky begins this one with an anecdotal address to his unspecified 'Friend', this time acknowledging his hesitancy in writing on hell. Since Florensky claims earlier that all knowledge is grounded in religious experience, and since he has only an 'almost-intangible tissue of experience' of hell to work from, he worries that any account will be ripped 'to shreds'.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, he tremblingly recounts his own experience:

Once in a dream I experienced the second death in all its concreteness. I did not see any images. The experience was a purely interior one. Utter darkness, almost materially dense, surrounded me. Powers of some kind dragged me to the edge and I felt this to be the edge of God's being, that beyond it is absolute Nothing. I wanted to scream but could not. I knew that in one more moment I would be expelled into the outer darkness. The darkness began to flow into my whole

<sup>5</sup>As Slesinski notes, Florensky made this quite clear in a public lecture called 'Mind and dialectics', which he gave before defending his dissertation. See Slesinski, *Pavel Florensky*, pp. 43–5.

<sup>6</sup>Florensky, *Pillar and Ground*, p. 5.

<sup>7</sup>Florensky's friend, Nikolai Luzin, read an early version of Florensky's work while in the midst of deep despair, and it pulled him out of the atheistic scientism in which he was steeped: 'I felt as if I had leaned on a pillar', Luzin wrote. 'I owe my interest in life to you.' See Graham Kantor, *Naming Infinity: A True Story of Religious Mysticism and Mathematical Creativity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), p. 83.

<sup>8</sup>Florensky, *Pillar and Ground*, p. 151.

being. Half my consciousness of self was lost, and I know that this was absolute, metaphysical annihilation.<sup>9</sup>

In the midst of this darkness, he cried out ‘with a voice that was not my own’, and felt someone grab hold of him and throw him back ‘from mystical non-being’ into his room, where he finally felt God’s presence again. After the terrifying experience, Florensky says he now trembles ‘with [his] whole being’ at the thought of total separation from God. This, along with several second-hand accounts of others who experienced the second death, constitutes Florensky’s ‘tissue of experience’, upon which he builds the account of gehenna.

Florensky then moves from his own experience to its theoretical underpinnings, first describing two possible views on hell: the ‘thesis’ and the ‘antithesis’.<sup>10</sup> According to the thesis, God will inevitably save everyone, since divine love must forgive instead of ruin, save instead of destroy. Only then will the God of love ‘be all in all’ (1 Cor 15:28). In this God-centred view, ‘the impossibility of universal salvation is impossible’. But in the other direction, from human-to-God, we get ‘the diametrically opposite conclusion’. God may perfectly love, but humanity cannot say the same. Since God will not compel human beings to love in return, God allows that human freedom might defeat God’s loving advances in at least some cases. ‘In other words’, he writes, ‘the possibility of universal salvation is impossible.’

God cannot forgive an evil will, Florensky says, since this will ‘is a creative product of his freedom’. To forgive an evil will is to destroy the freedom used to create it, a freedom created by God as a means of love. To deny the validity of an evil will is therefore to deny the existence of the love that motivates human freedom in the first place, thereby undermining the ‘thesis’ one is trying to prove. One cannot have it both ways, for in order to maintain the divine love of the ‘thesis’, he says, one must also maintain the genuine human freedom of the ‘antithesis’.

As a result, the thesis and antithesis are at irreconcilable odds, much like Balthasar’s two options outlined above. Florensky agrees that one option precludes the other, but instead of settling on one option, he sees their coexistence as a truthful ‘antinomy’ that Christian faith must affirm. This theory of antinomy is a core concept throughout his letters, made most explicit in the letter ‘Contradiction’, in which he explains that human beings understand Divine Truth (big T) only through earthly human truths (little t), as expressed in antinomies. To human rationality, these antinomies seem like contradictions, but for the asceticism of Christian belief, ‘the thesis and antithesis together form the expression of truth’. ‘Truth [little t] is an antinomy,’ Florensky says, ‘and it cannot fail to be such.’<sup>11</sup>

When Florensky describes the thesis and antithesis of gehenna, then, he is not describing two irreconcilable options, but an antinomy that, in its very contradiction, is a human truth that reflects the Truth. Like all antinomies that Florensky describes,<sup>12</sup> the resolution of this antinomy lies not in rationality but in a heavenly, final ‘actual transformation of reality itself’, when human beings will finally see the resolution of

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., pp. 153–4.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 109.

<sup>12</sup>Florensky ends the ‘Contradiction’ letter with a list of scripturally referenced ‘Dogmatic Antinomies’ that include the tri-unity of God, the two natures of Christ, and predestination and free will, among others. Ibid., pp. 121–3.

antinomies in the experience of God.<sup>13</sup> In thinking about gehenna, one might expect Florensky to throw up his hands here, asserting his very limited personal experience and claiming that nothing more can be said at present. But Florensky pushes further. He wants to know how one might discuss the *possibilities* for a future, eschatological synthesis, and so he seeks the 'logical postulates' or 'conditions that are jointly unthinkable in the rational mind' that must happen for a synthesis to occur.<sup>14</sup> The resolution of the synthesis, like all antinomies, will only be eschatological, yet he probes its possibilities even now. It is within these speculations that Florensky gets most innovative.

Florensky's first step in a synthesis is to propose a key distinction between a person's will and character: 'A person created by God, that is, a person who is holy and absolutely valuable in his very core, has a free *creative will*, which is revealed as a system of acts, i.e., as an empirical character.'<sup>15</sup> These two aspects of a human being – a person's core and their act-composed character – become objects of the thesis and antithesis, respectively. He states that 'a creature of God is a person and must be saved', while '[a]n evil character is precisely what prevents a person from being saved'. How can this contradiction be overcome? By separating a person from the character. He describes a puzzling splitting of the 'I' that takes place in eschatological judgement:

[The] I splits apart ... Psychologically, this means that a person's evil will, manifested in the lusts and pride of the character, is separated from the person himself. This will thus acquires an independent non-substantial position in being and is absolutely nothing 'for another' (according to a metaphysical synthesis of the 'I' and 'He' of the fragmented person). In other words, the essentially holy 'in itself' of a person ... is separated from the person's 'for itself' ... insofar as the latter is evil.<sup>16</sup>

To understand what Florensky means by this splitting, one needs to see it in the context of his anthropology, expressed most clearly in the 'Doubt' letter. For Florensky, the rationalistic 'law of identity' (A = A) mistakenly claims that beings are isolated, self-contained units with no necessary relation to other beings.<sup>17</sup> Instead, Florensky sees identity as constituted precisely in relation to others. An A is never merely an A, but always also a not-A. This is the chief mark of the 'self-proving Subject', i.e. God, in whom all knowledge is grounded, and whose homoousian tri-personal essence epitomises the relational characteristic of being.<sup>18</sup> The same holds for human persons, who, according to Florensky, are united consubstantially with others (even into friendship 'dyads'), never as separate, merely individual entities.<sup>19</sup>

This interrelation is a core concept throughout the letters, as reflected by the book's opening image of two angelic beings joined atop a pillar, with the description: *Finis amoris, ut duo unum fiant* ('The limit of love: two are one').<sup>20</sup> With this picture in mind, Florensky posits a splitting of the self between the character 'for itself' and the

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 155.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 156.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., pp. 22–4.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., pp. 39–42.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., pp. 68–9.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 3.

person 'in itself'. The 'for itself' is the system of sinful acts built upon one's self-identity in isolation from others, and this is what 'burns ceaselessly'.<sup>21</sup> The 'in itself', the core substance of the person, is saved. The thesis and antithesis are synthesised.

Florensky spends the majority of the 'Gehenna' letter musing upon this splitting of the person in final judgement. One conceptual tool he uses to explain it is the well-known Orthodox distinction between 'image' and 'likeness' of God.<sup>22</sup> According to Robert Slesinski, who summarises Florensky nicely, this distinction 'resounds with the truth contained in the traditional, biblical and patristic distinction between the *imago Dei* (*obraz Bozhii*) and the *similitudo Dei* (*podobie Bozhie*)'. According to Slesinski, 'The former indicates the created human being in its ontological dimension of personhood, while the latter points to the human personality as the realization of the idea of a person, as the actuation of the *imago Dei*'.<sup>23</sup> The *imago*, as essential personhood, will be spared and saved by the God who loves and constitutes its being. But the *similitudo* of the sinful person, what Florensky calls 'the selfhood afflicted and damaged by sin' is absolutely 'cut off'.<sup>24</sup>

According to Florensky, people experience this process even now in the sacramental life of the church. A sacrament 'cuts off the sinful part of the soul' and shows it to be nothing but a 'self-enclosed evil'.<sup>25</sup> The same can be said of conversion, he thinks, in which the cumulation of a person's past acts, which often have lingering consequences into the present, are 'broken' and 'cast out of the soul'.<sup>26</sup> In conversion, divine grace annihilates the sinful character. Florensky himself experienced a similar preview of judgement when he once refused confession. He knew that a particular sin would continue to torment him, but he was unwilling to repent to the Friend, knowing that it would 'tear a chunk of my being out of myself'.<sup>27</sup> After much prayer, he opened the scriptures, read a particularly convicting passage, and was 'cut asunder' – and like the person split in the Last Judgement, he received a 'terrifying surgical operation' and immediately made confession. This tasting of the truth gave Florensky insight into the antinomic reality of gehenna.

Florensky draws his key scriptural support for this splitting from 1 Corinthians 3:10–15, in which Paul makes a distinction between a person and their works. Christ is the foundation of the image of God in every person, and each person builds atop it (v. 10). Each person's work will be 'revealed by fire' and tried (v. 13), so that those whose work abides will receive a reward, while those whose work burns will 'suffer loss'. That loss, however, does not consume the person (the 'he himself') who escapes 'as by fire' (vv. 14–15). For Florensky, the good buildings are made by those who follow the path of Christian asceticism and surrender their selfhoods to God in love. All other sinful building materials, all aspects of the *similitudo* that are not love, are consumed in the flames, while the person, the *imago*, is spared.

The results of judgement therefore differ quite significantly from person to person, depending on the development of one's *similitudo*:

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 157.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p. 161.

<sup>23</sup>Slesinski, *Pavel Florensky*, p. 161.

<sup>24</sup>Florensky, *Pillar and Ground*, p. 161.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., p. 162.

If it turns out that the innermost image of God has not been disclosed in the concrete likeness of God ... then the image of God will be taken away from his undeified selfhood. If his selfhood is transformed into the likeness of God, then the man will receive a 'reward', the inner bliss of seeing in himself the likeness of God, the creative joy of an artist contemplating his own creation.<sup>28</sup>

Depending on the building one has constructed during earthly life, one will lose parts of oneself to varying degrees. For Florensky, Christ's deification of human nature grounds the image of God in all human beings, but people have freedom to determine their own characters and build upon them accordingly. Though God wills the salvation of all *people*, sinful *characters*, the building blocks resulting from creaturely freedom, will burn eternally.

Florensky sums up his synthetic work like this: '[I]f you will ask me, "Will there in fact be eternal torments?" I would answer "Yes." But if you were also to ask me, "Will there be universal restoration in bliss?" I would again say "Yes."' <sup>29</sup> Florensky claims to hold together both thesis and antithesis, both the full enactment of God's salvific will and the eternal rejection of some persons – or, rather, parts of persons – in a single synthesis.

### Some interpretive questions

Florensky's account has not come without its critics. According to his biographer, Avril Pyman, the letter on gehenna 'disturbed the Academy' when submitted as part of his dissertation, and he 'was recommended not to submit it to the Synod for his candidate's degree'.<sup>30</sup> Among the twelve letters that composed the work, this one apparently raised the most eyebrows. Even Slesinski, who outlines Florensky's conceptual framework both skilfully and appreciatively, sees this letter as especially troubling. The criticisms centre on two issues, taken in turn: his eschatological anthropology and antinomic methodology.

### Eschatological anthropology

For Slesinski, Florensky's main hypothesis of a split human being is 'inadmissible'. 'Its principal defect', he claims, 'lies in its contention that the human person can be divided into two selves, his "real, personal self" and his only "apparent self," the evil self that is amputated and consigned to eternal torment.'<sup>31</sup> Florensky's contemporary Nicholas Lossky echoed the same concern a century earlier, and, like Slesinski, viewed Florensky's account as positing two persons from one, thereby impermissibly creating two separate conscious/experiencing selves.<sup>32</sup> Florensky's description of the antinomic split is shocking on the surface, but when one probes deeper into the structure of his letters, this 'two-selves' reading is far less certain. There are three key passages to analyse.

First, take the following in which Florensky describes the difference between the saved 'image' (or 'he himself') and the perishing 'work':

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., p. 168.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., p. 186.

<sup>30</sup>Pyman, *Pavel Florensky: A Quiet Genius*, p. 79.

<sup>31</sup>Slesinski, *Pavel Florensky*, p. 162.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., p. 163.

[I]n becoming separated from 'he himself,' man's 'work,' his self-consciousness, will become a pure illusion, eternally burning, eternally perishing. It will be a foul dream without a dreaming subject pierced by God's burning gaze, a nightmare seen by nobody. This 'work' exists only subjectively, as a naked 'for itself.' The element of 'in itself' is decisively absent in it ... 'Selfhood' without 'self' is an excruciating mirage that arises in the emptiness of non-being. It is a 'weeping and gnashing of teeth,' which is not heard by anyone, as though it were an unceasing hallucination of Nothing, not existing for anyone. It is an eternally burning and eternally perishing unreality.<sup>33</sup>

Florensky is characteristically obscure here. On one hand, he describes the 'work' as a human being's 'self-consciousness' that will eternally burn in gehenna. It exists 'only subjectively' and not in relation to other beings. Both statements make it seem like the perishing 'work' of a person is itself a subject, a conscious/experiencing self that burns in the fires of judgement. But on the other hand, Florensky also describes this 'work' as a 'dream without a dreaming subject' and a 'mirage' that only exists in 'non-being'. It is a 'hallucination of Nothing' and an 'unreality'. This description of the split human being, though not clear-cut, questions the accuracy of Slesinski's and Lossky's two-selves interpretations. The 'work' is 'not existing', just like the nothingness of sin itself, echoing Florensky's explicit commitment to a privative account of evil in his 'Sin' letter.<sup>34</sup> No longer yoked to the *imago Dei*, the work burns figuratively in 'unreality', since nothing truly exists outside of God. The splitting here is like separating a kernel from its husk, a self from its accretions – not two, separate selves, but a single self that is severed from its evils.<sup>35</sup>

There are other passages, however, that might support a two-selves reading, at least on the surface. Take, for instance, the following lines that describe the fate of sinful selfhood when gazing on Christ's face in judgement: 'This moment of terrible seeing of the Holy Face of Christ, Who burns selfhood the way fire burns chaff, is engraved forever as a fixed idea in selfhood.'<sup>36</sup> An 'idea' that is 'engraved forever' seems to require an existing subject. Florensky says in the lines that follow, 'In the next age the sowing wind of sins will reap a tempest of passions, and one who is caught up in the vortex of sin will not stop being whirled about by it and will be unable to escape from it.'<sup>37</sup> The 'one' that Florensky names as forever caught up in sin sounds much like an individual self.

But it is precisely here that we must remember Florensky's denial of the law of identity, which forms the core of his letters. No A exists as simply an A, but always in relation to a not-A. There can be no 'I' without 'Thou', no self without another. And this is exactly what the isolating fires of gehenna do not allow. Any selfhood that burns in gehenna is a merely a fiction of a self, an accretion slashed away and discarded to its own, self-consumed nothingness. This enables Florensky to say, after an extended, almost poetic description of the selfhood's eternal torment, that 'neither the selfhood nor its torment exists, and the former subject of their torment – "he himself" – has long forgotten that he once had an eye that offended him, an eye that he plucked

<sup>33</sup>Florensky, *Pillar and Ground*, p. 171.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., pp. 124–50.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., pp. 160–1.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., p. 175.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., p. 176.



out and cast away from himself.<sup>38</sup> The person, as 'he himself', always exists in relation to other selves. *He* is not a self without *them*. What is cast away, then, is merely the eye that kept him from loving others.

Florensky also notes that people experience a splitting in their earthly lives, before the final judgement. In this earthly case, the 'cutting off' or 'uprooting' is voluntary, 'like the amputation of a gangrenous member' to preserve the health of the whole person.<sup>39</sup> The casting away of selfhood, in order to enter more fully into love with others, does not create two selves; rather, it makes one self more truly a *self*, ridding it of rationalistic self-identity. If Florensky envisions these earthly experiences as an accurate foreshadowing, there cannot be two selves in the eschatological judgement.

Perhaps a story drawn from early in the letter says it best: Florensky recalls a 'Syrian slave' who found himself involved in a conversation with Protestant missionaries. When they debated God's justice and mercy, the slave gave the golden answer: "I think," he said, "that God in His justice will punish and destroy *sin*, while in His mercy, He will forgive the *sinner*."<sup>40</sup> The person, as true self, is preserved. The selfhood, as a shadowy, non-real privation of sin, is cast away. Sin and its effects are not thereby diminished but are seen as they really are: human manifestations of the nothingness of evil, of a movement away from God and towards the outer darkness of separation from the one who truly is. Thus God forgives sin precisely by removing it.<sup>41</sup>

### *Antinomic methodology*

Yet this raises the question: if Florensky does not assert two separate selves, then what happens to the antinomy? If the slashed-away selfhood that burns eternally in gehenna is not integrally part of the person, then in what sense does Florensky retain the antithesis that some people will reject God for eternity? This criticism, that Florensky collapses the very antinomy he wishes to preserve, was levelled against him in the early twentieth century by F. I. Udelov and is cited by Slesinski. To them, Florensky's view ultimately reduces to pure thesis that all will be saved, which Udelov (rightly or wrongly) calls 'Origenism'.<sup>42</sup> If only works are condemned while all people are saved, then the antithesis melts away. Admittedly, Florensky's account pushes the antinomy to its breaking point, but as I will show in this section, his universalism is not a straightforward affirmation of the thesis at the expense of the antithesis, but a *recasting* of the latter that retains its scriptural and historical thrust. Thesis and (reinterpreted) antithesis are held together in antinomic, though no longer illogical, tension.

Florensky explicitly defends against Udelov's worry near the end of the letter when he situates his account in a wider historical context of reflection on hell, symbolised by two 'columns' that represent the thesis and antithesis.<sup>43</sup> His theory, he thinks, is the 'architrave' that bridges the two columns. In the intellectual development of the first column, the antithesis (that some will not be saved) gradually developed from an assertion of 'the absolute character of evil' in which 'all will perish', to the realisation that

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., p. 180.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., p. 174.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., p. 161.

<sup>41</sup>This too, Florensky thinks, is figured in the sacraments: 'No sacrament makes sin not-sin: God does not justify untruth' (*Pillar and Ground*, p. 161). Rather, God transforms creatures by severing them from their sins.

<sup>42</sup>See Slesinski, *Pavel Florensky*, p. 163.

<sup>43</sup>Florensky, *Pillar and Ground*, pp. 184–5.

gehennic torment is due to God's love. In the development of the second column, the thesis (that all will be saved) moves between two major categories: what Florensky terms 'vulgar Origenism' and 'true Origenism'. Vulgar Origenism boldly asserts that hell is not real at all, and that God will simply forgive all sinners in the final judgement. In true Origenism, however, hell is real but purifying. According to Gregory of Nyssa, a true Origenist for Florensky, the purifying fires of gehenna are 'only a necessary surgery, reforming the soul', so that the person in hell is like a 'rope drawn through a narrow aperture' and cleansed of its vices.

Paul Gavrilyuk's article on Florensky's and Bulgakov's accounts of divine judgement (the only one of its sort in English) places Florensky in this Nyssan strain, saying that he also casts 'the torments of hell as purgative and therapeutic'.<sup>44</sup> But Florensky is at pains to show that the flames of gehenna are precisely *not* purgative or therapeutic; instead, they ceaselessly burn sinful selfhoods without remediation. Gehenna itself is not a place of purification but of unending fire. This does not, however, mean that the antithesis is altogether lost, since something (even if not some persons) will indeed burn eternally. In coming to this conclusion, Florensky does not collapse the categories, as his critics surmise, but recasts them in such a way that gains logical stability.

To see how, first take Florensky's discussion of purification and fire. Earlier in the letter, Florensky tries to distinguish his views from the 'Catholic doctrine of purgatory', in which the punitive fire slowly refines a person.<sup>45</sup> In this view, the person saved has 'rethought his life and changed for the better' due to the 'disciplinary punishment of purgatory'. But in Florensky's account, the 'whole man' is not saved as in doctrines of purgatory, only the 'he himself'. Drawing again on 1 Corinthians 3, Florensky states that although the 'work' of a person will be destroyed in fire, the 'he himself' will be spared 'despite' the fire. 'Despite' is his key word here. The flames of gehenna do not reform the person, but instead ceaselessly burn only the cut-off, sinful parts. This subtle difference allows Florensky to maintain that something will indeed be cast away forever, as reflected in the scriptural imagery he cites.<sup>46</sup> Again, the burning in gehenna is not purgative or therapeutic, and the antithesis column does not totally collapse into the thesis, even as the fires of gehenna are reoriented around sin itself rather than people.

Florensky fleshes out this difference in an extended discussion of the fire metaphor, which he says 'passes like a scarlet thread throughout the entire New Testament'.<sup>47</sup> Florensky distinguishes between three types of fire. The first (call it A, he says) is the fire 'into which "every tree which bringeth not forth good fruit" is cast'. It is the painful fire that consumes bad building materials in Paul's letter to the Corinthians. The second type of fire (B) is not consuming, but baptismal and purifying. It is a cleansing fire that Christ will wield, as John the Baptist predicts: 'he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit, and with fire'. The third fire (C) is the fire that burns chaff and fruitless branches, as recounted in the Gospels. According to Florensky, fire A and fire C are the same

<sup>44</sup>Paul Gavrilyuk, 'Divine Judgment in Pavel Florensky and Sergius Bulgakov', *International Journal of Orthodox Theology* 9/3 (2018), p. 17.

<sup>45</sup>Slesinski critiques Florensky for misconstruing the nature of Catholic purgatory in *Pavel Florensky*, p. 163. Accepting this critique, we can think of the 'Catholic' adjective as merely a stand-in for a particular view of purification that Florensky rejects. See Florensky's discussion in *Pillar and Ground*, p. 170.

<sup>46</sup>On this point, he cites Matt 5:29–30, 22:11–13, 24:48–51, 25:11–13, 31–46; Mark 9:43–9; and John 15:4–6.

<sup>47</sup>Florensky, *Pillar and Ground*, p. 181.

type, both defined by ‘burning that consumes what has already been cast away’. Fire B, however, is different than these. It does not torment, but purifies and ‘separates what is God’s from what is absolutely outside God’, splitting the person from their ‘unnatural, un-Godly accretions’. Florensky therefore equates fire B with the moment of final judgement in which Christ splits the selfhood from self. He sums this up nicely: ‘The Spirit of Christ, coming to sinful creatures, will be that fire of trial which will purify everything, save everything, and fill everything with itself. But that which is the instant of purification (fire B) for “he himself” will be the fire of torment (fires A and C) for sinful selfhood.’<sup>48</sup> Though stemming from the same source in God, Florensky differentiates how these fires are manifest in either purification or eternal judgement. The first type of fire (A and C) refers to the fires of gehenna that eternally judge sinful selfhoods, while the second type (B) refers to the moment of final judgement that purifies people (i.e. true selves). Sinful selfhoods, not actual selves, are eternally rejected in gehenna; people themselves are purified, cut away from their sinful delusions. Gavriilyuk’s reading of Florensky therefore misses this difference by claiming that gehenna is ‘purgative and therapeutic’. For Florensky, only the splitting of judgement itself is purgative. There is no Nyssan purgation process, but a single moment of divine purification. If one followed Nyssa, then the anthesis (eternal rejection) would one day collapse, but for Florensky, there is indeed an eternal rejection, as sinful selfhoods burn in gehenna’s hateful, self-consuming fires.

Why does this difference between a Nyssan universalism and Florensky’s unique version matter, given that all people are saved in the end? Of course, it is possible to overstate the implications, but there are factors worth considering, not least of which is Florensky’s adherence to gehenna as a place of eternal rejection and judgement, which might better reflect both certain scriptural passages concerning judgement and dominant traditions of interpreting them, as well as his own and others’ experiences of immediate loss in judgement and conversion. Perhaps too optimistically, it might even serve as a sort of bridge between a Nyssan universalism and accounts of eternal hell based on God’s wrath and judgement. For Florensky hell is indeed an eternal place of judgement, but what Florensky does quite beautifully is to reimagine what wrath and judgement in hell might possibly mean in light of God’s love. Something will indeed burn ceaselessly, but that something, when we peer closer, is actually the nothingness of evil that exists apart from God. Eventually, when Christ comes to judge, rectify and right the world, evil will be split away in a painful purification. Florensky’s recasting of hell might find an analogue in certain Christian versions of interpreting imprecatory psalms in light of Christ’s command and example of loving one’s enemies: in these, Christians pray that God might do away with evil, casting it into the Pit, dashing it against the rocks and any number of vengeful images. These images are not rightly applied to people themselves, all of whom are created in and for God’s love, but to the evil that resides within us and in the world. Florensky makes a similar move by claiming that scriptural images of eternal judgement must be reimaged, not dismissed altogether.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>48</sup>Ibid.

<sup>49</sup>People have debated at length whether the term αἰώνιος means ‘eternal’ in the sense of ‘everlasting’ or of ‘for an age’. How one answers this question has significant implications. Here, I simply note Florensky’s brilliance: one might take Jesus’ use of αἰώνιος as ‘eternal’ in an everlasting sense (the majority position in Christian history) and be a universalist. The two are not mutually exclusive.

In light of the interpretive issues covered, where does this leave Florensky's account? Instead of maintaining the original thesis (that all people will be saved) and antithesis (that all people will not), he recasts the antithesis so that all *persons* are saved, but all *parts* of the person are not. 'Will there in fact be eternal torments?' He answers yes. 'Will there be universal restoration in bliss?' Here too, he answers yes. His answer is antinomic, but not illogical. Florensky maintains that all will be spared because of God's abounding love for creatures, but he also maintains that there is real, eternal loss that results from judgement. There are parts of people that need to be slashed away, those 'parts' that turn out to be nothing but the nothingness of evil. These will be cut asunder, constantly consumed in the nothingness of separation from God. In this recasting, he might succumb to the critique that the gehennic antinomy should never be explained. Indeed, his account of gehenna shows where his commitment to the religious truth of antinomy, of contradiction, hits its limit and gives way to a more logically concrete account. To me, it does so quite helpfully, even if it introduces an inconsistency between his anti-rationalist commitments and his probing of the logically and doctrinally coherent possibilities. Florensky himself admits that contradictions are only a feature of earthly, human truth-seeking, not the ultimate truth of the 'Tri-Radiant Light' in which 'the contradiction of the present age is overcome by love and glory'.<sup>50</sup> Antinomies will one day fade away into illumination in God. It might be fitting, then, that his answer refuses to diminish the thesis of divine love, even if it means amending its antithesis.

### Florensky in the modern landscape

With this sketch of Florensky's account of hell in mind, it is now possible to map a comparison with more prominent accounts of hell. Recall that for Balthasar, there are two commitments found in scripture that we must hold in tandem: God's will for the salvation of all people, and the ability of human beings to freely reject God's offer forever. Because we are 'under judgement' (his oft-repeated phrase), we can never be sure of our own or others' salvation.<sup>51</sup> For Balthasar, the problem with many accounts of hell is precisely their certainty, either of hell's population or of universal salvation.<sup>52</sup> Florensky's thesis and antithesis fit closely with Balthasar's two options. They both reflect sometimes-competing divine and human wills and the human ability to reject God's desires. But where Florensky seeks a possible synthesis of options, Balthasar remains resolute that they cannot be combined: 'It is not for man, who is under judgement, to construct syntheses here, and above all none of such a kind as to subsume one series of statements under the other.'<sup>53</sup> Balthasar worries that some accounts introduce distinctions in God's will, so that all people are not included in God's salvific will (even if all 'types' are, for instance). He also worries that one statement might subsume the other in the opposite direction, insisting that God's will for universal salvation renders human freedom void. Quite simply for Balthasar, a synthesis is not possible.

In the 'Gehenna' letter, of course, Florensky attempts just a synthesis. Based upon his own experiences of the 'second death', in which he was plunged to the abyss of despair and brought back through love of friends, he has glimpsed both mercy and judgement,

<sup>50</sup>Florensky, *Pillar and Ground*, p. 117.

<sup>51</sup>Balthasar, *Dare we Hope*, p. 13.

<sup>52</sup>Citing Josef Pieper, he calls this 'double *praesumptio*'. See Balthasar, *Dare we Hope*, pp. 27–8.

<sup>53</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 23.

redemption and utter isolation. And though he recognises that his account of gehenna is speculative, he nevertheless inquires about the possibilities inherent in this antinomy. What he comes to, as I have discussed at length, is a splitting of the human being between 'person' and 'works', 'in himself' and 'for himself', *imago* and *similitudo*, so that all persons are saved, and all sinful works are eternally rejected. Had he read Florensky, Balthasar would disapprove insofar as Florensky was certain of the synthesis. But Balthasar is not unwelcoming of speculations, as long as they are grounds for hope rather than certainty. At the end of his *Short Discourse on Hell*, Balthasar presents several accounts of universal restoration, including those of Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, and Maximus the Confessor.<sup>54</sup> Balthasar would likely have placed Florensky's view within this set of responses – wrong in their certainty, but right as far as hope goes.

Apart from the certainty issue, a key question, it seems to me, is whether Florensky's synthesis can account for the reality of human freedom as well as he initially hopes when setting out the terms of thesis and antithesis. Once one accepts that God desires to save all people, then the reality of eternal hell can only be explained by a distortion of human will, not God's. This is Balthasar's assumption, his basis for highlighting the importance of human freedom to reject God's offer of salvation. Notably, this 'free will defense of hell' is the foremost option discussed in analytic philosophy circles, exemplified by an extensive debate between Thomas Talbott and Jerry Walls.<sup>55</sup> Florensky too insists on the need to maintain human freedom in light of God's universal salvific will and as a necessary condition for reciprocal love. But does his account of eschatological judgement negate such freedom by positing a split between the holy person and their evil works? In other words, if a person uses their freedom to produce evil works, then does splitting and consuming these works ultimately abolish the importance of freedom?

Florensky is somewhat opaque, but he does provide key pieces of an answer. When he first introduces the split between person and works, recall his statement that a person, 'who is holy and absolutely valuable in his very core, has a free *creative will*, which is revealed as a system of acts, i.e., as an empirical character'.<sup>56</sup> According to this statement, the will is located in the person, while the works are manifestations. The person, spared from the fires of gehenna, maintains its free, creative will, but the sinful accretions that result in earthly life are cut off and cast away. We might wonder, however, if a *sinful* will can be spared. For how can Florensky claim that a person is 'holy' at their core when their manifested acts are evil? Again, we must return to Florensky's anthropology. A self, a person, always exists in relation to other persons (an 'I' requires a 'Thou'). Without these relations, we cannot speak of a 'person' at all. What is cut away from a person is their selfhood, that self-asserting 'I' that remains in stubborn isolation. This bears on the freedom question in two significant ways. First, it allows us to imagine that the true person, torn away from their delusions of self-sufficiency, might only possess their *true will* in relation to others once freed from sin. When the sinful aspects are cut away in the final judgement, the will itself is freed. This means that there was always a holy, undefiled part of the will in human beings despite its sinful

<sup>54</sup>Ibid., pp. 236–54.

<sup>55</sup>They have each published at length on the topic, often in conversation with each other. For a representative example, see Talbott's 'Case for Christian Universalism' in the first three chapters of Parry and Partridge (eds), *Universal Salvation?*, followed by Walls' response in the same volume, 'A Philosophical Critique of Talbott's Universalism'.

<sup>56</sup>Florensky, *Pillar and Ground*, p. 156.

defects – parallel, perhaps, to the goodness inherent in beings who are created by a good God. What is cut off and cast away are the evil accretions built up as a husk around the will.

Second, the interrelation of creatures might also challenge the notion of an autonomous, self-determining free will in the first place. If a human being is constituted in relation to others, their wills must be related as well. What one wants and chooses is surely related to the wants and choices of others, who bear upon each other not only causally, but according to Florensky, ontologically. In his letter on ‘Friendship’, Florensky pushes in this direction. He says that, ‘Between lovers the membrane of the selfhood is torn. And, in a friend, one sees oneself as it were, one’s most intimate essence, one’s other I.’ In fact, he says, the other is ‘actually not different from one’s own I.’<sup>57</sup> The two ‘I’s are inextricably bound, knit together, he might say, so that one’s power of self-assertion is always tied up with others. Because of this, Florensky can say that ‘[e]veryone is responsible for everyone else and everyone suffers for everyone else’.<sup>58</sup> And this has serious consequences for any notion of human will in accounts of hell, including those of Florensky, Balthasar and others. If a human will is bound up with others who desire its salvation, their loving influence would surely have its effect. If loving another is a ‘going out’ of oneself and ‘into another person’ through the ‘power of God’s love’,<sup>59</sup> as Florensky claims, then the recipient could not be left unchanged forever. Florensky does not outright claim this in regard to gehenna, but it flows easily from his logic.

Amended in these ways, one might wonder if human freedom is even an appropriate category in eschatological debates. David Bentley Hart raises this question poignantly in his comprehensive new book on universal salvation. Among other issues, Hart tackles this anthropological question, asking whether it is possible for rational human beings to reject God forever. He answers a resounding ‘no’, given that human freedom is fully realised only in a clear-sighted understanding of the Good in which all illusion and ignorance is cleared away.<sup>60</sup> Until this happens (which inevitably it will by God’s will and initiative, he argues), a human person is not truly free, and no decision against God can therefore be a result of human freedom. Human beings are, after all, fundamentally oriented to the Good as both their source and *telos*, and so their freedom is realised only in union with God. And since God desires this union and freedom from sin, God can work within human creatures to clear away sin and ignorance, not as an external cause that crushes human autonomy, but as ‘the very power of agency’ itself that leads persons into true freedom.<sup>61</sup>

If Hart is right on this score, then human freedom cannot be the eschatological stumbling block that many modern accounts of hell assume, as does Balthasar, whose ‘uncertainty’ Hart critiques heavily. And if so, Florensky’s desire to hold in tension an antinomy – between God’s salvific will and human ability to reject it – is baseless. But even Hart acknowledges that human freedom consists *not only* in its final, eschatological fulfilment, but also in its ‘deliberative liberty’.<sup>62</sup> Citing Maximus the Confessor, Hart makes a distinction between the ‘natural will’, which is always oriented

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., p. 310.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., p. 312.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid., p. 67.

<sup>60</sup>Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved*, pp. 40–1, 172–9.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., p. 185.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid., pp. 178–9, 185–6.

towards its end in God, and the 'gnomic will', which has the capacity to choose between 'differing finite options'. This gap explains why there is 'considerable room in which to stray from the ideal path', so that even if all creatures are oriented to the Good, sin is real and operative, even if ultimately temporary. Though Hart does not dwell on this 'gnomic will' or deliberative capacity, it is an essential caveat that explains why theologians like Balthasar or Florensky worry about human freedom in the first place. Those who see human freedom as an impediment to universal salvation simply grant the deliberative capacity greater ability to deny God's urgings than Hart does. The question is not whether freedom is realised only in God (which of course it is), but *how* God is willing to engage with the deliberative capacity to bring about the salvation of all people. Hart sees no issue here, claiming that the One who holds all things in existence can arrange circumstances to prompt God's desired results in creaturely 'gnomic wills'.<sup>63</sup> But for others writing on hell, God's willingness to do so is less certain. When Florensky first introduces the antinomy of gehenna, he asserts that human deliberative capacities are ultimately about love, so that an infringement upon them would be an infringement upon people's ability to love. The logic here is that love requires a person to willingly and deliberately embrace it. This should at least give Hart pause, first by asking why God grants deliberative capacity in the first place given its proclivity to sin, and then by surmising how this relates to ultimate, eschatological freedom.

But there is an irony in Hart's account. Perhaps against his own desire to transform the category of 'freedom' into something entirely eschatological, Hart actually protects the importance of human deliberative capacities in his purgative account of hell. In Gregory of Nyssa's version of hell, which Hart adopts, human persons are purged from their sins, delusions and ignorance in the painful fires of judgement – a temporary but necessary stage in reaching true freedom. Though all humanity will be saved, he claims, each person must be saved in their own particularity, so that 'union with Christ must unfold within human freedom'.<sup>64</sup> In order to maintain human deliberative capacities, he seems to assume, God works through a gradual process of purifying one's desires. This Nyssan strain shows up in other universalist thinkers, such as George MacDonald, who, as I read him, sees the fires of purification as a process of winnowing away one's sinful defences until one surrenders to divine love.<sup>65</sup> For MacDonald and others, a human being must willingly accept divine love, not have it imposed or coerced. That means, according to MacDonald, the most recalcitrant sinners will experience the burning of separation from God for as long as it takes, until God finally breaks through their crust of resistance. Despite downplaying the eschatological consequences of human deliberative capacities, Hart makes them central.

What does this imply for Florensky, who posits not a Nyssan hell of purification, but a purifying split of the person at final judgement? The likes of MacDonald might worry that Florensky denies any actual *participation* of the person in the cleansing of their will, so that human freedom is never operative and the person is passively cut off

<sup>63</sup>Ibid., p. 185.

<sup>64</sup>Ibid., p. 143.

<sup>65</sup>See George MacDonald, 'The Consuming Fire', in *Unspoken Sermons: Series One* (Eureka, CA: Sunrise Books, 1989), pp. 27–49. It is also worth noting that Balthasar mentions MacDonald in *Dare We Hope*, though he mistakenly assumes that his views match those of C. S. Lewis, who draws upon him and even casts him as a character in *The Great Divorce*. Where Lewis thinks that human freedom can overcome God's will for salvation (so that 'the doors of hell are locked on the inside'), MacDonald clearly denies it. Hart also references MacDonald, but given that many of Hart's arguments are prefigured in MacDonald's sermons, his references could be much more extensive.

from sin with no engagement of their own. To me, this is the most forceful challenge to Florensky's position. But he is not without recourse, even though he does not name what I now propose. It may be that when the sinful aspects are cut away from a person, the person is left with little besides a bare, naked will, not yet developed into the likeness of God that it refused to become in earthly life. The person will still need to freely participate, learning how to use their will without the impediments of sin and evil, to grow further and further into the knowledge and love of God – an *epektasis* that all persons experience, despite their various starting points. The possibilities of a free reception of love are not then diminished, but enhanced, by the cleansing of judgement. Because of a person's misuse of deliberative capacities, they will indeed suffer a painful loss, but they will also receive a new start, one that insists upon their own participation even as it forgives and cleanses its prior misuses.

Assuming that the end result is the same in Hart's and Florensky's accounts, one might ask if the means make a difference. That is, should purification be located in hell or at final judgement, and why might this matter? As briefly mentioned above when addressing criticisms that Florensky collapses antithesis into thesis, it strikes me that Florensky's uniqueness might be beneficial for several reasons. Recall that Florensky's account of gehenna is set within his larger project of holding together antinomies that defy rationality yet witness to divine love at the centre of all truth and being. He wants, like Balthasar, to see and take seriously the scriptural witness to eternal judgement, even as he recasts it to apply to sin and evil, not people. This leads Florensky to acknowledge not only the difficulty of conflicting scriptural texts, but also to attend to the witness of Christian reflection that reads these texts as affirming eternal, not temporary, judgement. Though he ends in a universalist place, this may provide Florensky a greater space for constructive engagement with these countering traditions – which, to be quite honest, is a hopeful prospect in the midst of Hart's sometimes divisive and dismissive rhetoric. Florensky's account might also protect against certain dangers of talking about processes of purification. There is a danger, often present though not inevitable, that discussions of purification end up glorifying suffering in ways that justify and perpetuate human practices of oppression.<sup>66</sup> It is a danger of claiming that suffering is an instrumentally good thing. Florensky's account mitigates against this view by claiming that God will purify people in a single, merciful act of splitting the person from sin and evil. The emphasis here is on the nothingness of sin and evil, not its redemptive usage. A Nyssan-type view might account for these worries, but the differences are well worth pondering.

Florensky's account of gehenna is an important voice that belongs in present-day conversations about hell, judgement and salvation. By resituating human agency within a matrix of personal relations, Florensky opens conceptual possibilities that dominant western models, which focus only on individual, autonomous 'free will', deny. And he does this without losing the integrity of both God's salvific will and human attempts to thwart it. In his attempted synthesis, Florensky maintains the expansive love of God

<sup>66</sup>This is not an inevitability, of course, and Florensky even notes that Gregory of Nyssa calls the torments of purification an 'accidental consequence of purification ... like pain during an operation, like the unpleasant taste of medicine', in Florensky, *Pillar and Ground*, p. 185. Nevertheless, it is a real danger with which any theological account should wrestle. One can think of, among others, Delores Williams' famous critique of dominant 'surrogacy' models of the atonement, and the oppressive consequences these doctrinal formulations can have. See Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013).



*and* the terrifying reality of judgement and loss. He asserts the strength and importance of human deliberative capacities, yet he recognises the will's deep connection to others. He agrees, with Balthasar, that we are all under judgement, and yet he claims that divine love and overwhelming mercy will ultimately win the day. I do not argue that his picture is perfect, nor that mine is the only way to interpret it, but I do believe his vision of gehenna is worth engaging, wrestling with and considering in today's conversations on the doctrine of hell and universal salvation.

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