
Outline and evaluate the doctrine of Annihilationism

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Outline

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1. Introduction

The final destiny of those who die in a state of unrighteousness before God has long occupied a firm place in Christian eschatology. The traditional view, based on passages such as Matthew 25:46 - “Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.”, is that they will suffer for all time in a state of conscious torment and pain.

As an example from church history, we note that in his work *Summa Contra Gentiles*, the Theologian Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) comments on this verse “...hereby is excluded the error of them who say that the punishment of the wicked will at some time come to an end.”¹

In more recent times, a relatively small but significant number of Evangelical theologians have turned to alternative views and it is one of these (annihilationism) that forms the subject matter of this essay.

2. Annihilationism and Conditional Immortality

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, 'Annihilate' derives from the Latin word *annihilare*, meaning 'to reduce to nothing'² In a Christian context, we may define annihilationism as the doctrine that after death, the unrighteous are not subjected to eternal conscious torment, but will simply cease to exist. The overwhelming view of those who hold this doctrine is that this extinction will take place at some unknown time after death, rather than on death itself. Furthermore, annihilationism should be distinguished from the secular humanist view of “no life after death”.

1. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 3:145.

2. *Merriam Webster Online Dictionary*, <http://www.merriam-webster.com>, 'Annihilate'.

Alongside annihilationism (but separate from it) is the view that the soul is not innately immortal (a view also found in Platonic thought). Instead immortality is a gift from God, bestowed conditionally on the righteous but not on the unrighteous. This view is known as *conditional immortality* or *conditionalism*. Essentially then, humans were created by God with souls that are *potentially* but not *naturally* immortal. In this context “immortality” is usually understood as the ability to survive death. As John Wenham puts it: “Immortality is a state gained by grace through faith when the believer receives eternal life...immortality being inherent in God alone.”³

3. Annihilationism in History

The Christian apologist Justin Martyr (100-165) in his apologetic work *Dialogue With Trypho*, rejected the Platonic view of the immortality of the soul and wrote regarding the judgement at death:

The souls of the pious remain in a better place, while those of the unjust and wicked are in a worse, waiting for the time of judgement. Thus some which have appeared worthy of God never die; but others are punished so long as God wills them to exist and to be punished.⁴

However, the first explicit defence of annihilationism is found in the writings of Arnobius of Sicca (died c.330):

But what man does not see that that which is immortal, which is simple, cannot be subject to any pain; that that, on the contrary, cannot be immortal which does suffer pain?...For they are cast in, and being annihilated, pass away vainly in everlasting destruction....For that which is seen by the eyes is only a separation of soul from body, not the last end-annihilation: this, I say, is man's real death...⁵

3. Wenham, *Facing Hell: An Autobiography*, p230.
4. Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew*, Chapter 5.
5. Arnobius, *Against the Pagans*, Book 2, Paragraph 14.

The traditional view of eternal punishment was held throughout the Reformation period and beyond, but the founding of several Adventist groups and their offshoots from the mid 19th century onwards (for example the Jehovah's Witnesses who deny eternal punishment) and others who questioned the traditional view of hell, meant that once more that annihilationism gained attention in some academic circles.

More recently, a number of Evangelical theologians have questioned the traditional view, with perhaps the best known being John Stott (1921-), who argued “the ultimate annihilation of the wicked should at least be accepted as a legitimate, biblically founded alternative to their eternal conscious torment.”⁶

In 1999, a group of scholars from the Evangelical Alliance met to discuss this and other issues regarding the nature of hell. They concluded that annihilationism was a valid, though minority viewpoint and of secondary importance:

Although Hell is a profoundly serious matter, we view arguments about its specific duration and detailed mechanics to be neither essential in respect of Christian doctrine, nor finally definitive of what it means to be an evangelical Christian⁷

4. Arguments for Annihilationism

Some of the arguments for the doctrine are taken directly from scripture. For example, using Jesus' own words: “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.” (Matthew 10:28, NIV). This and other biblical verses (e.g. Matthew 7:13, 2 Thessalonians 1:7-9) point to what John Stott has called a 'Vocabulary of Destruction' in scripture. Stott comments that “it would seem strange... if people who are said to suffer destruction are in fact not destroyed.”⁸

6. Edwards and Stott, *Evangelical Essentials: A Liberal-Evangelical Dialogue*, p319-20.

7. EA, *The Nature of Hell*, p86.

8. Edwards and Stott, p316.

The interpretation of this and other verses which mention destruction of perishing (e.g. John 3:16) is therefore one that is literal, rather than in any way denoting unending punishment.

Another area of debate is the meaning of the term “eternal” (Greek: *aionios*) in passages such as Matthew 25:46, which we have already seen. Rather than denoting exclusively a quantitative aspect as is traditionally understood, it is argued that it may also denote a qualitative reference to the age to come.⁹ A key concept here is *irreversibility* – annihilationists argue that in the age to come both life and death in this future age will be everlasting in the sense that they are irreversible, rather than everlasting.

In *Evangelical Essentials*, Stott sets out another form of argument, this time based on the problem of reconciling God's love with the requirement for justice. Essentially he points out the difficulty of reconciling a lifetime of eternal punishment in proportion to the offence of human sin against God, especially when set against his supreme love as manifested in Christ. In response, the traditional view points out that seriousness of sin in the eyes of God, merits such punishment. Aquinas, for example, pointed out that the consequences of sin against God, as an infinite being, merit infinite punishment.

A final argument sometimes advocated relates to the final triumph of God over evil, when God will be “all in all” (1 Corinthians 15:28). This, it is contended is difficult to reconcile with as the position that, as Stott argues, “..an unspecified number of people still continue in rebellion against him and his judgement.”¹⁰ It is a matter of debate as to whether Hell does in fact serve to glorify God's justice and those in it are still under God's control, despite their rebellion.

9. Morgan, *Hell Under Fire*, p202 quoting Edward Fudge in *The Fire That Consumes*.

10. Edwards and Stott, p319.

5. Arguments against Annihilationism

A number of passages in scripture are often cited in support of the traditional view such as Matthew 25:46 (and also verse 41, which implies that Hell is of the same duration as Heaven), which we have already seen. Firstly, Revelation 20:10, in mentioning the final judgement, states that the devil, false prophet and beast “...will be tormented day and night for ever and ever.” Verse 15 seems to indicate that the fate of the wicked will parallel this.

Secondly, we note the expression “weeping and gnashing of teeth” is found in a number of places where Jesus is talking of those outside the kingdom of God and in darkness (e.g. Matthew 8:12) or fire (Matthew 13:42,50). Robert Peterson argues that the implication of these verses should be of conscious persons undergoing real suffering, rather than any idea of suffering prior to destruction.¹¹

Returning to 2 Thessalonians 1:9, we note the phrase “They will be punished with everlasting destruction...” The annihilationist view is simply that 'everlasting destruction' is arguably incompatible with an eternal, conscious existence. However, it is also argued that 'destruction' can have other meanings, for example it can refer to a continuing absence from the presence of God.

Norman Geisler argues for the traditional view from the standpoint of the image of God in Man. Essentially his argument is by annihilating his own creatures who bear his image, “God acts against God”. As he puts it: “It is to attack himself in effigy by destroying his image bearers.”¹²

Finally, opponents of the doctrine point out that it is necessary to consider the supremacy of God in matters of justice. This justice is glorified as those in rebellion against God receive their due punishment. Arguably sin against God requires infinite punishment, because God is an infinite being.

11. Peterson, *Hell On Trial*, p164.

12. Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*, p24.

6. Conclusion

The doctrine of annihilationism, while still held by a numerical minority of Evangelicals, appears to be gaining in acceptance and academic investigation at this time. Despite the traditional view of hell being held by the majority of theologians throughout history, including such notables as Augustine, Aquinas and Luther, the doctrine has been accepted by some as a valid viewpoint, wholly consistent with scripture.

John Wenham argues that “...endless torment is a hideous and unscriptural doctrine which has been a terrible burden on the mind of the church for many centuries and a terrible blot on her presentation of the Gospel.”¹³

Within Evangelicalism, the decision by the Evangelical Alliance to accept annihilationism as a valid, albeit minority view and an issue not of primary importance is highly significant. It remains to be seen what future direction the argument will take, but it is likely to remain active in the near future.

Even though there is disagreement about the final destiny of the unrighteous, both traditionalists and conditionalists would not in any way wish to diminish the importance of evangelism, given the seriousness of the matter under discussion. This is perhaps the moral imperative in the whole debate.

John Wenham draws out the issue of *irreversibility* again to highlight the matter:

And let it be quite clear that these realities are awful indeed. Jesus and his disciples taught again and again in terrible terms that there is an irreversible judgement and punishment of the unrepentant. Warnings and loving invitations intermingle to encourage us to flee the wrath to come.¹⁴

13. Wenham, *Facing Hell: An Autobiography*.

14. Wenham, *The Goodness of God*, p41.

7. Bibliography

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