BESPOKE THEOLOGY FOR THE BEREAVED?

ERIC STODDART

Dr Eric Stoddart is a lecturer in Practical Theology at St Mary's College, the School of Divinity of the University of St Andrews. He was, from the mid-1980s, an associate pastor in a Scottish Baptist church for ten years. He is currently writing a book on theological responses to a surveillance society (due in 2010) and undertakes research into theologies of digital technologies in general. His PhD (2001) was written as a theological reflection on the practice of the doctrine of hell.

ORDINARILY, A CHRISTIAN'S HOPE IN HEAVEN IS PROFOUNDLY COMFORTING BOTH IN TERMS OF A BELIEVER'S OWN INEVITABLE DEATH AND IN THE BEREAVEMENT OF LOSING A LOVED-ONE. There is, however, a dilemma that is rarely articulated: how to respond with integrity when your belief in heaven is significantly at odds with that of some of the chief mourners. A pastor may believe that not everyone will ultimately be admitted to heaven but such an outcome would horrify mourners who assume (or contend with sophisticated argument) that none, or certainly not, their loved-one will be excluded from heaven. Despite sincere attempts to avoid judgementalism by deferring to God's unique ability to discern a human heart, the tension does not evaporate. It is particularly acute when exclusion from heaven is associated with mental or physical post-mortem torments. This is one of the most sensitive points at which belief and experience intersect.

In this article I wish to explore ways in which Christians' theology is shaped by and shapes their grief and pastoral response, even when people's intended method of interpretation claims primary authority for the Bible. In other words, a bespoke theology is developed by and for those who are bereaved.

WIDER SHAPING FORCES

Christians' ways of articulating their confident and/or tentative hopes for life beyond death have been highly diverse. Two major images of heaven have dominated the Christian tradition. One is theocentric (eternal solitude with God alone); the other is anthropocentric (believers are reunited with friends and family).[1] Until the nineteenth century almost all Christian theologians taught the reality of eternal torment. But literalistic interpretations of exclusion (hell) and embrace (heaven) were weakened by the use of higher criticism and the development of more refined hermeneutical principles.

A growing appreciation of other religious cultures also shaped belief in Christianity's monopoly as a gatekeeper of heaven. Christianity is so entwined with European culture that it can be said to have validity for those inhabiting that culture whilst other religions are valid within *their* respective cultures.[2]

John Hick, for example, argues that the great religious traditions each constitute different human responses to what is ultimately real, so there are various routes to heaven.[3]

There are also those within a Christian theological tradition who have concluded that salvation is of all, not only some. For JAT Robinson the ultimate salvation of all people can only come about because of the saving work of Christ.[4] Robinson was convinced of the need to preserve 'the absolute identity of the divine love and the divine justice'.[5] His universalism was grounded in his doctrine of Christ, 'a love so strong that ultimately no one will be able to restrain himself from free and grateful surrender'.[6]

More recently, Jürgen Moltmann argued that in the Christ who dies and descends into hell 'we recognize the Judge of the final Judgment'.[7] Herein lies the confidence that 'nothing will be lost but that everything will be brought back again and gathered into the eternal kingdom of God'.[8]

Whilst these philosophical and theological perspectives have undoubtedly contributed to a climate in which universal salvation is legitimated (if not even perhaps demanded) this is not the whole picture. The slaughter of the First World War rendered exclusionary interpretations of heaven less respected.[9] The role of Christian pastors in society has moved far from that of a moral police force familiar to earlier generations where recourse to threats of hell might have a measure of saliency. The burgeoning of psychotherapeutic counselling not only highlighted the abusive potential of manipulation through religiously invoked fear but created an ethos of largely non-judgmental regard within which hell's dangers were viewed with increasing suspicion and approbation.[10] It is within this cultural context (that includes, but is not limited to theological and philosophical concerns) that some Christians' wrestle with the uncertainty they sense concerning the salvation of particular individuals.

THE FUNERAL OF THE (POSSIBLY) UN-SAVED.

The vicar of a parish, more frequently than his colleague in a gathered congregation, finds himself preparing to conduct the funeral of a person whom he suspects is unsaved.[11] A family may have no meaningful church connection and might draw on elements of inherited traditional or folk religion to sustain them in their bereavement whilst also calling on the pastoral services of their local Christian minister. In this case, the vicar may be quite clear in his mind that he will be conducting a funeral for a non-Christian and a family who has little awareness of orthodox Christian eschatology. Potentially more discomfiting are those occasions when the pastor offers care to members of his congregation but they and the deceased cannot be counted, in his eyes, *clearly* amongst those 'committed to the fellowship'.[12] It may be unusual for family

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members to ask where their loved-one has gone, but they are likely to make statements such as 'she's gone to a better place'. The dilemma for the vicar lies in his silence. To let these assertions go unchallenged is, from his frame of reference, to leave the bereaved with a false hope and thus to further endanger their eternal life.

One response is to remain silent and interpret such remarks as emotionally charged assertions that are of little long-term significance. This avoids direct confrontation, out of respect and compassion, at a time of acute loss, but is rather patronising. Many clergy prefer to defer to God's omniscience and deliberately avoid passing judgment on the deceased. This is a profoundly Christian response, but it does not wholly defuse the issue.

The funeral itself can generate even more conflict within the pastor. Where it is his tradition to use 'in sure and certain hope of the resurrection from the dead' as part of the committal rite, he may feel that he is directly up against a liturgical universalism with which he disagrees. The vicar will likely subvert this theology by adding 'for those who love the Lord', or 'for those who believe in Christ', which is a seamless liturgical revision that goes unnoticed by all but those who are sensitive to (and perhaps share) the vicar's lack of certainty regarding the eternal condition of this particular deceased person.[13]

The vicar is seeking to maintain integrity between what he would preach from his pulpit and what he will say in a funeral chapel. Few Western clergy will take the route of treating a funeral as an evangelistic opportunity, preferring instead to adopt a pastoral approach that eschews confrontation and uses ambivalence and ambiguity. Although some vicars may clothe themselves in universalism to avoid adding to the distress of grieving relatives, most seem to adopt circumlocutions to set aside any dark (exclusionary) aspects of their theology.

This is more than compassionate pastoral pragmatism but represents a revised hermeneutical method. When faced with the sad prospect of some (in general) being lost, vicars may want to be faithful in their preaching of John 3.17 and so choose to prioritise Scripture over emotional compunction. I contend that a different hermeneutic is used when a particular person (rather than 'the lost' in general) is on the vicar's mind. He elevates the existential encounter with death (grief) over the urgency to present a compelling gospel to those in imminent danger of exclusion from the age to come. Such reticence, though admirable, is an example of how cultural sensitivities around others' grief becomes incorporated into a hermeneutical process that often prefers to see itself as standing apart from what it otherwise views as 'compromise'.

These pastoral responses may also impact upon the vicar's theology of the life to come. The overused urgency of calling for an immediate decision for Christ relies on a theological perspective that elevates 'the decision', because the consequences of lostness (hell's torments or at least separation from God) are particularly acute and of such *unsurpassable* significance. Urgency is replaced with a less-frenetic theology of conversion that does not cohere around 'decisionism'. Now I do not suggest that every vicar or pastor who has been uncertain about another's eternal destiny has to overcome a preoccupation with 'the decision'. I do, however, propose that pastoral encounters with bereaved people soften and shift a vicar's theological focus in ways that are unnecessary if he is only ever dispatching the (apparently) faithful-deceased to glory.

Whereas the vicar may feel it incumbent upon him to subvert the incipient universalism of a traditional funeral rite a Christian who loses a 'non-Christian' loved-one in death may face an even more acute challenge – how to handle the prospect that this dear one might be heading for a lost eternity, perhaps even to torment.

GRIEVING FOR THE (POSSIBLY) UN-SAVED.

Many Christians will have lost a loved-one who does not clearly fit their understanding of 'a Christian'. Bereaved Christians are in a particularly invidious position when they cling to what, in any other context, they themselves would consider to be highly tenuous grounds for assurance of the salvation of their loved-one. What they apply as a sign of hope with respect to their deceased loved-one will not be entertained in their thinking about the anonymous lost. In other words, their theology may well be shaped unevenly. In this respect, emotional ties are incorporated into a hermeneutical method.

We can illustrate this by briefly considering various survival strategies a bereaved Christian may adopt to find comfort in the face of the thought that a loved-one might not be in heaven.

They might take refuge in their memories of 'a decision' made by the now-deceased many years previously. This could be a source of hope and reassurance. However, it could also be a memory that compounds the bereaved's anxiety, if the decision never went beyond what appeared to be a mere intellectual assent.

NOTES

1. C McDannell and B Lang, *Heaven: A History* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1988).
2. Ernst Troeltsch, 'The Place of Christianity among the World Religions', in John Hick and Brian Leslie Hebblethwaite (eds), *Christianity and Other Religions Selected Readings* (London: Fount, 1980), p. 26.
3. John Hick, 'The Non-Absoluteness of Christianity', in John Hick and Paul F. Knitter (eds), *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* (London: SCM Press, 1988), pp. 16–36.
4. See his influential contributions *Honest to God* (London: SCM, 1963); and, *In the End, God* (London: Fontana Books, 1968).
5. Robinson, *In the End*, p. 115.
6. Ibid., p. 122.
7. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God* (London: SCM, 1996), p. 250.
8. Ibid., p. 251. See also Moltmann, 'The Logic of Hell', in R Bauckham (ed.), *God Will Be All in All: The Eschatology of Jürgen Moltmann* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), pp. 43–7.
9. Alan Wilkinson, 'Changing English Attitudes to Death in the Two World Wars', in G Howarth and P Jupp (eds), *The Changing Face of Death: Historical Accounts of Death and Disposal* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997), pp. 149–64.
10. For a discussion of the historical aspects of the shift away from controlling or coercive models, see RJ Hunter, 'A Perspectival Pastoral Theology', in L Aden and JH Ellens (eds), *Turning Points in Pastoral Care: The Legacy of Anton Boisen and Seward Hiltner* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1990), pp. 53–79.
11. I use the masculine pronoun on the assumption that the clergy affected by this tension are more likely to be men than women. This does not imply that I believe all female clergy to be universalists nor that all male clergy face this pastoral dilemma. Similarly, I do not wish to convey the impression that this is an issue *only* for clergy in the parish systems of the established churches (of England and of Scotland).
12. Whilst I find these distinctions distasteful they are part of the routine pastoral discourse of many pastors across the denominations.

'Emotional ties to a coffin's occupant at the very least blur the edges of those theologies of heaven that are not universalist'

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13. In interviews I conducted across a range of denominations in 2006 this emerged as by far the most common approach taken by officiating clergy.

14. See, for example, A Fernando, *Crucial Questions About Hell* (Eastbourne: Kingsway, 1991), pp. 70–1.

15. I am particularly indebted to one of my anonymous interviewees for highlighting this approach.

16. This can be exacerbated when influential lay-leaders in a congregation, who do not have to conduct funerals of 'the lost', disregard any conflict between rhetorical and pastoral considerations.

They might cling to even more tenuous fragments – 'she was always respectful of my going to church,' or 'he was always willing to help people'. Such qualifications probably would not have passed muster as theologically 'sound' had the bereaved heard someone else use them in a different context and before their own loss. Furthermore, the grieving Christian may even now consider them *invalid* when applied to people in general.

It may be that the bereaved Christian believes that God has assured them during their private prayer-time that their loved-one will be safe beyond the grave. This can be acutely difficult for a pastor to handle because he is profoundly aware of how fragile we can be when grieving and the damage that can be done in removing psychological props prematurely.

Most commonly it seems that bereaved Christians will embrace God's perfect knowledge and conclude that the destiny of their loved-one is simply unknowable on this side of the grave. The deceased is 'left in God's hands' or 'surrendered' to him, in the confidence of Genesis 18.25: 'will not the Judge of all the earth do right?' A pastor might view this response as itself a God-given ability to handle the additional pain of loss that arises within a theological framework that admits the possibility that not all will enter heaven.

Whilst I am relieved that someone can leave their loved-one with God I find this distancing profoundly problematic. It portrays love as something from which to be set free so that one can mentally assent to a fearful outcome for another human being. Being told (even obliquely) that being horrified and deeply distressed is a sign of maturity and that further maturity is to 'hand the person over to God' who will cauterise your feelings now in anticipation of a heavenly emotion-bypass all contributes to silencing the bereaved.

No less invidious is the approach that interprets heaven as a place where the exclusion of a loved-one will not mar a Christian's eternal bliss.[14] Although this might be couched in terms of submission to God's glory and a joyful acceptance of his just judgements it raises serious questions about the way in which people on *this* side of the grave are valued by some Christians. To diminish another's humanity is to diminish one's own not least because we construct our personhood in calling out a response in others and responding to their call. Despite an often genuine and heartfelt compassion for 'the lost', an exclusionary view of heaven diminishes the humanity of the one *who holds* such a theology because they are (at least to some extent) living now in the presence of the future.

When the penny drops that her loved-one is likely to be in hell it is far too easy for someone's pastor to take refuge in providence and believe that this has arisen because God knows that the bereaved person has become sufficiently mature in the faith to handle it. From this angle, such additional pain of loss is a sign that the Christian is taking her faith more seriously than those for whom the question does not arise.[15] This seems particularly cruel because it further sequesters the doctrine from critical discussion in favour of placing the onus upon the believer to make a 'mature response'.

CONCLUSION

I wish to fully acknowledge the variety of philosophical, theological and cultural forces that shape theologies of the afterlife. The lurid imagery of Victorian preachers has been replaced by more muted tones as decorum and hermeneutics have changed. In their stepping-back from the urgency of decisionism and, more widely, in their reticence to challenge universalist views amongst grieving relatives, I suggest that some pastors have created for themselves a larger grey area at the boundary of 'the saved' and 'the lost'. There is, however, a dissonance between the rhetorical requirements of the evangelistic sermon and the pastoral concerns of a house-call to the bereaved. Publicly acknowledging the breadth of this grey area (if it were incorporated into evangelistic preaching) would be perceived as blunting the gospel or, in the eyes of some of his congregation, 'going liberal'.[16]

Emotional ties to a coffin's occupant at the very least blur the edges of those theologies of heaven that are not universalist. Emotional bonds are being incorporated into and prioritised in a hermeneutic that otherwise purports to privilege the Bible. That this often has to be done in secret, lest the bereaved person enters into open conflict with her congregation's 'official line' on the lost, is all the more tragic. Whilst some might wish to dismiss it as sentimentality that undermines biblical teaching on the possibility of loss in the life to come I would suggest that, despite its inconsistency, it represents a profound, perhaps unwitting, affirmation of their own and others' personhood as subjects, not simply objects, of communication. Significantly, the undermining arises *from within* the constituency; at those points when a theology of heaven is confronted with not the anonymous masses of 'the lost' but a particular loved-one who might just be 'lost'.