

## **Wicked Good: Saint Anselm on the Place of Hell in the Beauty of Creation**

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*In an article entitled “The Beauty of Hell: Anselm on God's Eternal Design,” Frank Burch Brown argues that the reality of hell puts the core of the Christian faith at great risk. The article focuses on an investigation of Saint Anselm's Cur deus homo. Brown's thesis is that, while there is beauty in the details of Anselm's presentation, nonetheless it fails because the argument for the beauty of hell in the eternal design, which carries with it the unending suffering of the damned, cannot stand in the face of basic Christian elements such as hope and forgiveness and reconciliation. I argue that Anselm's view of hell can only be understood in the context of his understanding of heaven, and from that perspective, hell as a place of eternal punishment does have a necessary beauty and existence. I begin with Anselm's understanding of hell in the context of his understanding of heaven. Then I examine Brown's claim that Anselm's position yields an untenable interpretation. Finally, I offer three reasons why Brown's preferred interpretation of hell needs to be reexamined.*

Heaven knows, any attempt to wed beauty and hell is a bit of a stretch. Well, to be honest, more than a bit. Nonetheless, there is no doubt that in the thought of Anselm two truths obtain: first, that hell has a distinct place in the universe as created by God; second, that hell is necessary so long as those who have been granted intellect and freewill ultimately and definitively choose not to follow the commandments of God, who, in other words, rebel against the goodness and loving kindness of God. Hell is a necessary part of God's eternal design. When all things are made new at the end of time, the rebellious angels and humans have to be “somewhere” that is not heaven, and thus it was necessary for the good order of the universe that a place be set aside for them. Literary accounts of hell, the underworld, Hades, abound from the classical narratives of Homer and Virgil in the voyages of Odysseus and Aeneas to the medieval masterpiece of Dante's *Inferno* to Milton's grand vision of Pandemonium in *Paradise Lost* to Jean Paul Sartre's *No Exit*. But none of these describe hell as beautiful or as an aspect of the beauty of creation. Rather the image is at least one of hopeless desolation, barrenness, and complete deprivation of all that is good, if not a world of fire and brimstone or the frozen lake that precludes all movement of limb or will. All that remains that might have any semblance to beauty, it seems, is the basic metaphysical good of existence.

In an article entitled “The Beauty of Hell: Anselm on God's Eternal Design,” Frank Burch Brown argues that while “hell has [never] been completely extinguished as an evocative image or doctrine or literary topos,”<sup>1</sup> nonetheless recent efforts to retrieve the notion of hell into the theological mainstream “cannot be [made] wholesale without (ironically) putting at risk the

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<sup>1</sup> Frank Burch Brown, “The Beauty of Hell: Anselm on God's Eternal Design,” *The Journal of Religion* 73.3 (1993) 329-56, here 329.

core of Christian faith.”<sup>2</sup> The article goes on to investigate Anselm's *Cur deus homo* with a view to showing in large part Anselm's “largely implicit conception of the necessary beauty of hell.”<sup>3</sup> Brown’s thesis is that, while there is beauty in the details of Anselm's presentation, nonetheless “the argument they serve finally fails at the very points at which Christian orthodoxy has typically failed when it has contemplated the nether side of God's eternal design.”<sup>4</sup> In other words, Anselm’s argument for the beauty of hell in the eternal design, which carries with it the unpitiable and unending suffering of the damned, cannot stand in the face of basic Christian elements such as hope and forgiveness and reconciliation.

I will argue in this paper that Anselm’s view of hell can only be understood in the context of his understanding of heaven, and from that perspective, *pace* Brown, hell as a place of eternal punishment does have a necessary beauty. The paper will be divided into three parts. First, I will present Anselm’s understanding of hell in the context of his understanding of heaven. Second, I will lay out the two proposed interpretations of hell that Brown presents in his article and his claim that Anselm holds the first, and, ultimately for Brown, untenable interpretation. Finally, I will offer an initial and modest reply to Brown’s understanding of Anselm and offer three reasons why Brown’s preferred second interpretation of hell might need to be reexamined.

## **Part One: Hell in the Context of Heaven**

Elsewhere I have argued that for Anselm heaven was the model of right order.<sup>5</sup> There are three kinds of order in heaven: first, heaven is a moral order in that sin and punishment are precluded from being there; second, heaven is a salvific order in that heaven is the reward granted to those who persevere in the faith; third, heaven is a mystical order in that it is inhabited by a perfect number of beings.

Because of incorruptibility and immortality in heaven, those who are saved and rest there will experience a happiness which, as St. Paul noted, is what “eye has not seen, and ear has not heard, and what has not entered the human heart, what God has prepared for those who love

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<sup>2</sup> Brown, “Beauty of Hell,” 331.

<sup>3</sup> Brown, “Beauty of Hell,” 332.

<sup>4</sup> Brown, “Beauty of Hell,” 332.

<sup>5</sup> “Saint Anselm and the Four Last Things,” *The American Benedictine Review* 61.2 I (June 2010) 183-203. That right order is a significant aspect of Anselm’s thought is a commonplace and is evident throughout his writings. Anselm scholars regularly assert his desire to find and acknowledge the order in the Creator and in creation. See, for example, Gregory Sadler, “A Perfectly Simple God and Our Complicated Lives,” The 2008 Saint Anselm Lecture given at Saint Anselm College on April 22, 2008 and published in *The Saint Anselm Journal* 6.1 (Fall 2008) at <http://www.anselm.edu/library/SAJ>; Katherin A Rogers, “Anselm on Eudaemonism and the Hierarchical Structure of Moral Choice,” *Religious Studies* 2005, Vol 41(3) 249-68; Eileen C. Sweeney, “Anselm's *Proslogion*: The Desire for the Word,” *The Saint Anselm Journal* 1.1 (Fall 2003) at <http://www.anselm.edu/library/SAJ>. Anselm used several terms for heaven: *caelum* (heaven), *civis caelesti* (heavenly city), *regnum dei* (kingdom of God), *regnum angelorum* (kingdom of the angels), and *regnum caelorum* (kingdom of heaven). The term *paradiso* was primarily used by Anselm to designate the Garden of Eden; in only three instances did he use it to refer to heaven proper. While Anselm occasionally used phrases that refer to a vision (*visio*) of God or of the Son or of the angels or of peace, the idea of heaven as a beatific vision of the knowledge of God, such as it is in Saint Albert the Great and other later medieval thinkers, was not an aspect of Anselm’s thinking.

him” (I Cor 2.9). In *De Concordia* Anselm wrote of the irresistibility of this heavenly homeland: “For since people would see those converts to Christ instantly passing into incorruptibility, there would be no one who could even will to withdraw from the overwhelming happiness to be seen.”<sup>6</sup> Whatever real good one desires will be found there in heaven. In *De humanis moribus* Anselm set out the four-fold conditions to which human nature is susceptible: to be miserable [*miser*], the condition of those who live in the world; to be most miserable [*miserrimus*], the condition of those who are permanently fixed in the fires of hell; to be happy [*beatus*], the condition of those who enjoyed the earthly paradise before the fall, viz., Adam and Eve; to be most happy [*beatissimus*], the condition of those who reside with the saints in heaven.<sup>7</sup> Since the sin of Adam and Eve, the *beatus* condition no longer obtains and the *miser* condition is limited to this life. Thus at the end of time, all rational beings will exist either in a state of *beatissimus* or *miserrimus*. Those who order their lives according to the will of God will enjoy the condition of *beatissimus*.

Earlier in this same work, Anselm set out the fourteen opposed pairs of beatitude and misery. The first set of seven belongs properly to the body: beauty and ugliness; agility and slowness; strength and weakness; freedom and servitude; sanity and insanity; calmness and anxiety; long-lived and short-lived. The second set of seven belongs properly to the soul: wise and foolish; friendly and unfriendly; agreeable and disagreeable; honorable and shameful; powerful and impotent; peaceful of mind and fearful; joyful and sad.<sup>8</sup> Those in heaven will enjoy the fullness of all fourteen beatitudes and will be most blessed, while those in the underworld will be cursed with the fourteen miseries and will be most miserable.

Anselm offered no tour through hell *à la* Homer or Virgil or Dante. Except for one instance, he did not describe what awaits those who deserve eternal death. With the exception of two occasions in which Anselm spoke of hell as the place where all souls went prior to Christ's redemption act, all other references to hell simply referred to the place of eternal damnation. Anselm uses three terms to refer to hell: the most frequent term is *infernus*, but in a few instances he uses the Scriptural term *Gehenna*<sup>9</sup> and the pagan term *Tartara*.<sup>10</sup> While the three terms are scattered throughout his writings, it is in *Meditation II: A Lament for Virginité Unhappily Lost* that one finds his most concentrated references to hell and in which, incidentally, all three terms are used. He meditated on hell, “the land of darkness and the shadows of death,” in order to exhort himself to return to the Lord. Here, and only here in Anselm's works, do we have some brief graphic description of hell: sulphurous flames; flames of hell; eddying darkness, swirling with terrible sounds; worms living in fire; devils that burn with us, raging with fire. The

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<sup>6</sup> Anselm, *De Concordia* 3.9, in *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works*, ed. Brian Davies and G. R. Evans (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) 464.

<sup>7</sup> *De humanis moribus* 125, in *Memorials of Saint Anselm*, ed. R. W. Southern and F. S. Schmitt (London: Oxford University Press, 1969) 86.

<sup>8</sup> *De humanis moribus* 48-71 (Southern and Schmitt, 57-63).

<sup>9</sup> E.g., *Oratio* 13; *Epistola* 403 (quoting Mt 5.22); *Deploratio virginitatis male amissae*. The Latin texts of Anselm's works are from *Intelex Past Masters*, an online resource of *S. Anselmi Opera Omnia* (Schmitt edition).

<sup>10</sup> E.g., *Oratio* 4 (*bis*); *Deploratio virginitatis male amissae* (*bis*).

meditation ends with a plea to the Lord to hear his prayer for mercy and forgiveness as he takes full credit for his sins:

Lord, you do not lie; would it be truly not “to desire the death of a sinner” to bury into hell [*Gehenna*] a sinner who cries out to you? Is to thrust down a sinner into hell [*infernus*] to “desire not the death of a sinner”?<sup>11</sup>

Hell is what it is, in Anselm's thought, and as that which is the absolute rejection of divine grace and beatitude, was not deemed worthy of any more than what one might call almost casual mention. It is the epitome of the disorder and chaos caused by disobedience toward and rejection of the reign of God and his Christ. As such it is the opposite of heaven, wherein right order reigns. Heaven being the only logical goal of every rational being, hell's beauty, then, lies in providing a place for those who choose total disorder and irrationality. In the eternal design of God, whom truth and beauty surround, hell has its proper place. Lacking the rebellious sin of angels and humans, hell need not have existed. But given sin, hell takes its place, however unfortunate that is, within the beauty and order of creation. Right order requires that rational creatures who have utterly and completely rejected God cannot abide where there is perfect moral, salvific, and mystical order.

Thus hell is, by inference, disordered in all three modes. It is moral disorder because there can abide in those who inhabit it grave sinfulness and moral turpitude along with a desire to have nothing to do with the grace that could set them free from the slavery of sin. They will to be separate from the will of God and the order of life and love. Further, hell is salvific disorder in that the promises of God for the eternal happiness of his rational creatures have been rejected and thus cannot be realized or experienced by those in hell. They choose to be outside the order of salvation which was open to them and generously offered to them in the saving action of Christ. Finally, hell is mystical disorder, because there can be no perfection there. There cannot even be perfect suffering, for the suffering in hell had no goal or purpose beyond itself; it is conceived of as a timeless and utter separation from all that is perfect and perfecting of angelic or human nature.

But, as mentioned above, hell, like sin, cannot lie outside the purview of God's power and justice and mercy, for God's omnipotence and omniscience cannot allow that to be. Thus it is part of the created order, however internally disordered it be, and thus has a beauty in that it is fitting and right and true for those who fully and completely in both intellect and will abandon (dare one say “hate”) the God who had created them for the joys of heaven.

## **Part Two: Brown's Two Interpretations of Hell**

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<sup>11</sup> *Deploratio virginitatis male amissae* (Ward, 228).

Having shown that hell must be understood in the context of heaven, and thus its beauty must be understood as part of the order of the creation in God's eternal design, we can turn in this second part of the paper to Brown's two interpretations of hell. The first is the traditional view of hell as a place in which there is eternal suffering and absolute damnation for those who completely reject God. This is the interpretation he understood Anselm to hold with 'wonderful rigor.' But Brown sees a great flaw in this first interpretation. He writes:

Anselm presses traditional views into an aesthetic-moral dimension and, in doing so, inadvertently reveals the tragic cosmic pattern that is subtly woven into the classical image of damnation. Rarely has a theologian made it so plain and plausible that a perfectly good, wise, and powerful God in love with beauty would be unwilling to see the intended design of the universe marred forever by sinful ugliness. . . . And because Anselm must admit that every creature that will there be consumed forever was nonetheless loved (if not elected) by God, the resulting picture of God's eternal design is unavoidably tragic. It portrays a vast region of perpetual loss such that God's purpose must (paradoxically) be defeated with respect to the many who will be damned, in order to be fulfilled with respect to the few who will be saved.<sup>12</sup>

This first interpretation, then, is "a symbol of what Christian faith must recognize as a genuine if virtually unthinkable possibility against which it persistently hopes and teaches, though without absolute certainty." For it to be true, one must conclude that "Christian faith in God and in the efficacy of love and justice was fundamentally vacuous."<sup>13</sup> In short, it would seem that in the end, despite his understanding of God's justice and mercy, Anselm got it wrong, and hellishly so. For there to be a hell required that God's power to save be limited and this, for Brown, cannot stand.

How are we to escape from this miserable conclusion? Here Brown offers his second interpretation, which saves Christians and Christian faith from this fate, and is what Brown calls a candidate for Christian teaching and contemplation. He bases it on an Anselmian point that "because of the nature of God and the world, the elements God regards as vital to the good and beautiful community of creation could never come to nothing or suffer perpetual destruction even as an outcome of creaturely freedom."<sup>14</sup> Brown then claims that hell had to be understood on this reading as "the chaos, death, and destruction potentially permitted and then perpetually overcome by God's creative love and justice in the process of turning evil into good (without denying it has been evil)."<sup>15</sup> Thus hell offers a strictly temporary suffering; it is a kind of extreme purgatory. Its being eternal is thus understood as being a "perpetual possibility" insofar as God continues to create souls. But once the temporal order ceases, hell will cease to exist because the love and justice of God cannot abide the existence of such a place; it would mar the beauty of the

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<sup>12</sup> Brown, "Beauty of Hell," 348.

<sup>13</sup> Brown, "Beauty of Hell," 352.

<sup>14</sup> Brown, "Beauty of Hell," 353.

<sup>15</sup> Brown, "Beauty of Hell," 354.

new creation: “The One who sat on the throne said to me, ‘See I make all things new’” (Rev 21.5).

Even though Brown concedes the beauty of hell in its proportion and symmetry in the order of creation, insofar as there needs to be such a state for intractable and unrepentant sinners, nonetheless the processes of hell, however described in theological, scriptural, or literary language, are not at all beautiful; they are quite ugly and horrific. Hell’s beauty has clear parameters which cannot endure beyond the end of time. For while the infernal processes are required for God’s beauty and justice to prevail, neither God’s beauty nor justice will necessarily require that the outcome of unrepentant sin “be either eternal or annihilating misery,” even though Brown admits, in agreement with Barth and Rahner, that such an outcome is optional. Thus hell in this second interpretation is a necessary possibility, because of the enormity of sin’s destructive power and its unresponsiveness to the gratuitous offer of grace and forgiveness, but only for a set period of time.<sup>16</sup>

The first interpretation, then, must be rejected in favor of the second. Brown contends that Anselm's understanding of God's saving plan and power, especially as laid out in *Cur deus homo*, ineluctably leads to this conclusion even though Anselm, because of the medieval culture of his time, was not open to drawing that conclusion himself.

### **Part Three: An Initial, Modest Reply to Brown**

There are three issues that I would like to raise in regard to Brown’s argument that admittedly need further development.

First, a few of my students have sometimes built a last wall of defense around their writing assignments on the bulwark of “I know what I wrote, but what I meant to say was . . . .” I have a suspicion that Brown’s argument may have a similar basis: “I know what Anselm wrote, but what he meant to say was . . . .” With this I would have some problems, not the least of which is that Anselm was not afraid of breaking new ground within the tradition and “pushing the envelope,” as it were. *Proslogion* immediately comes to mind as a text that he wrote with serious purpose and that he defended with modest insistence, despite the negative responses from such figures as Lanfranc. So it seems to me that what Anselm wrote about hell he meant, and to argue that his conclusion is deficient because he was enculturated by medieval thinking and unable to go beyond it seems at first glance questionable and suspect. I could just as easily argue that, if Anselm had come to the conclusion that Brown’s second interpretation was the only logical one, then Anselm would have found a way to put it forward. His arguments, however, led him to a different conclusion, Brown’s first interpretation, and there Anselm took his stand with the tradition.

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<sup>16</sup> Brown, “Beauty of Hell,” 351.

Second, I am not ready to concede that, having experienced hell, a sinner would necessarily undergo conversion, and thus the need for hell would be removed with the end of time. I have heard it argued that at the end of time there would be no need for hell, for one could not imagine a worse fate for someone who hated God than to have to spend all eternity in God's presence. But that is not Anselm's position, nor is it Brown's. I would argue that Anselm holds that God ultimately respects the will of the rational creature to such an extent that God would allow the fulfillment of that will even if it led the rational creature to willing an eternal existence in the chaos and despair of hell. For God to act otherwise, to force, as it were, sinners to leave hell and shut it down, would indeed bring about Brown's second interpretation in that "nothing about God's honor and justice would necessarily require that the outcome of unrepented sin be either eternal or annihilating misery."<sup>17</sup> God, who does not will that any should perish but that all should come to repentance, will not force a rational creature to repent.<sup>18</sup> To suggest such an act on God's part suggests some rather worrisome issues regarding the relationship between the divine will and the will of the rational creature.

Third, I am troubled by Brown's consistent depiction of hell as death, annihilation, destruction in his first interpretation as if the processes of hell at the end of time extinguished the existence of those who are there. If that were the case, well, what joy for the unrepentant sinner! Hell is not after all eternal punishment; it is mere nonexistence and nothingness. But that is not Anselm's view, nor that found in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* which teaches that hell is for those who willfully turn away from God and persist in that turning away.<sup>19</sup> There they undergo a torment that is indeed self-inflicted, for they find themselves bereft of their ultimate end and fulfillment, union with God. The *Catechism* further states: "the chief punishment of hell is eternal separation from God, in whom alone man can possess the life and happiness for which he was created and for which he longs."<sup>20</sup>

Brown's second interpretation of hell, it seems to me, comes uncomfortably close to that of a group whom Cardinal (now Saint) Newman condemned as "advocates of expedience." Newman says of them: "They consider all punishment to be remedial, a means to an end, deny that the woe threatened against sinners is of eternal duration, and explain away the doctrine of the Atonement."<sup>21</sup> The error these thinkers commit is that they overlook the fact that "the Christian God is represented in Scripture not only as a God of love, but also as a 'consuming fire.'" They have rejected the testimony of conscience "which assuredly forebodes ill to the sinner."

#### **Part Four: Conclusion**

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<sup>17</sup> Brown, "Beauty of Hell," 351.

<sup>18</sup> II Peter 3:9.

<sup>19</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1037.

<sup>20</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1035.

<sup>21</sup> John Henry Newman, "Tolerance of Religious Error," Sermon 23 in *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, Vol. II (London: Longmans, Green, and Co.: 1908), 287.

Brown's examination of *Cur deus homo* with a view to understanding the beauty of hell offers a studied review of the Anselmian position and an intriguing conclusion that presents two interpretations of hell in the hope that by re-imagining hell something can be contributed to contemporary Christian reflection, something that differs significantly from the received tradition of scholars like Anselm. For though, on Brown's reading, Anselm "envisions . . . endless perdition as fitting into an eternal design," such a vision "could not derive any radiance or beauty from perpetual damnation, but only from the mysterious working out of what ultimately takes the shape of salvation."<sup>22</sup>

But the question remains: by his re-imagining of hell in his second interpretation, does Brown compromise too much of the tradition and the wisdom of such figures as Anselm (and Newman) and thus mar in some way the beauty of God's eternal design which Anselm was so keen to respect and safeguard?

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<sup>22</sup> Brown, "Beauty of Hell," 356.