

## *Extra Ecclesiam nulla salus, sed extra mundum nulla damnatio*

### Reappropriating Christ's Descent into Hell for Theology of Religions

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**Abstract.** — *This article is a systematic theological discussion and evaluation of the contemporary use of Christ's descent into Hades in relation to the salvation of adherents of other religions. It does this by linking this article of the Apostles' Creed to its historical roots and to the evolution of the idea in the history of church and theology. We start with a discussion of the origin of the conviction that Christ descended into Hades and what its major interpretations were. Next, we give both a historical sketch of the relation between Christ's descent and the salvation of non-Christians and an evaluation of a contemporary proposal that Christ's descent plays a role in the salvation of adherents of other religions. Finally, we evaluate this locus theologicus in the light of the conviction that salvation is mediated socio-historically, and we close with an alternative proposal about the intermediate state.*

#### I. The Rediscovery of Christ's Descent into Hell?

The article in the Apostles' Creed that "Christ descended into hell" has had a chequered history. Most contemporary believers feel some unease when they recite this phrase of the *Apostolicum*. To slightly modify Bultmann's words, "It is impossible to make use of electric light and the wireless and to avail ourselves of modern medical and surgical discoveries, and at the same time to believe in [Christ's descent into hell]."<sup>1</sup>

1. Adapted from Rudolf Bultmann, "New Testament and Mythology," *Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate*, ed. Hans-Werner Bartsch (New York: Harper and Row, 1961) 5. The original quotation reads (in English): "It is impossible to make use of electric light and the wireless and to avail ourselves of modern medical and surgical discoveries, and at the same time to believe in the New Testament world of spirits and miracles." Bultmann's contribution was first published in 1941 in his monograph *Neues Testament und Mythologie: Das Problem der Entmythologisierung der neutestamentlichen Verkündigung* as a part of *Offenbarung und Heilsgeschehen*, Beiträge zur Evangelischen Theologie, 7 (Munich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1941).

One would guess that this article of the faith would have died a silent death, and now be buried and forgotten, or at most linger on in some sort of shady existence. But not so. As a matter of fact, the credo article “descensus Christi ad inferos” is enjoying a certain renaissance (or should we speak of a resurrection?) in scholarly literature.

This cannot be seen as a mere contingency. In contemporary theology, pride of place should go to Balthasar’s *Mysterium Paschale*,<sup>2</sup> a work published originally in German in 1970 and translated into English in 1990. Von Balthasar gave an innovative interpretation of the article. But he was not the only theologian to investigate Christ’s descent as a fecund *locus theologicus*. The last decade saw the publication of a number of academic monographs on the descent, from authors across the Christian spectrum: Catholic, Evangelical, Presbyterian, French Reformed and Russian Orthodox.<sup>3</sup>

There have equally been some extended scholarly disputations about the issue in the pages of the *International Journal of Systematic Theology* and of *Pro Ecclesia* the last five years.<sup>4</sup>

2. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale: The Mystery of Easter*. With an Introduction by Aidan Nichols, O.P., ed. David L. Schindler, trans. Aidan Nichols, O.P., Retrieval & Renewal: Ressourcement in Catholic Thought (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990).

3. Archbishop Hilarion Alfeyev, *Christ the Conqueror of Hell: The Descent into Hades from an Orthodox Perspective* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2009); Rémi Gounelle, *La descente du Christ aux enfers: Institutionnalisation d’une croyance*, Collection des Études Augustiniennes: Série Antiquité (Paris: Institut d’Études Augustiniennes, 2000); David Lauber, *Barth on the Descent into Hell: God, Atonement and the Christian Life*, Barth Studies (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004); Alan E. Lewis, *Between Cross and Resurrection: A Theology of Holy Saturday* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001); Alyssa Lyra Pitstick, *Light in Darkness: Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Catholic Doctrine of Christ’s Descent into Hell* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007).

4. Gavin D’Costa, “The Descent into Hell as a Solution for the Problem of the Fate of Unevangelized Non-Christians: Balthasar’s Hell, the Limbo of the Fathers and Purgatory,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 11, no. 2 (2009) 146-171; Paul J. Griffiths, “Is There a Doctrine of the Descent into Hell?,” *Pro Ecclesia* 17, no. 3 (2008) 257-268; Edward T. Oakes, “The Internal Logic of Holy Saturday in the Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 9, no. 2 (2007) 184-199; Edward T. Oakes, “Descensus and Development: A Response to Recent Rejoinders,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 13, no. 1 (2011) 3-24; Alyssa Pitstick, “Development of Doctrine, or Denial? Balthasar’s Holy Saturday and Newman’s Essay,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 11, no. 2 (2009) 129-145; Thomas Joseph White, O.P., “On the Universal Possibility of Salvation,” *Pro Ecclesia* 17, no. 3 (2008) 269-280; Jared Wicks, “Christ’s Saving Descent to the Dead: Early Witnesses from Ignatius of Antioch to Origen,” *Pro Ecclesia* 17, no. 3 (2008) 281-309. In Dutch, Herwi Rikhof’s valedictory lecture on Christ’s descent in theology and art was published: H. W. M. Rikhof, ‘... die nedergedaald is ter belle ...’: Een zoektocht in kunst en theologie (Tilburg: Tilburg University, 2011). The Dutch-language version of *Communio* featured an article in 2010 by Hans Tercic on Christ’s descent: H. Tercic,

However, upon closer inspection, we can question whether theological discussion on Christ's descent has ever been totally absent. In the middle of the twentieth century, Jean Daniélou interacted extensively with the issue in his *The Theology of Jewish Christianity*.<sup>5</sup> In the first part of the twentieth century, J. A. MacCulloch's *The Harrowing of Hell* was to be a reference work in the English language for many years.<sup>6</sup> It seems that the issue was widely discussed between 1850 and 1930. Louis Capéran discussed Christ's descent in his magisterial *Le problème du salut des infidèles*.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, he witnessed to the wide discussion of Christ's descent in the second half of the nineteenth century, something confirmed by the article of Friedrich Loofs in the *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* of 1911.<sup>8</sup>

We could go down the history of church and theology and discover that it has been a resurgent theme in theological, apologetic, liturgical and devotional literature in East and West from the very early church up till now.<sup>9</sup>

One of the most striking features of this renaissance, however, is that the article of the Creed is being used, or perhaps re-appropriated, in the theology of religions. This has been most apparent in the work of Gavin D'Costa<sup>10</sup> and of Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeyev.<sup>11</sup>

Our study of the issue, both in its historical development and its theological discussion, would suggest that Christ's descent has on several occasions appeared at the forefront of theological scholarship, and that its current re-appropriation in theology of religions was prepared in the

"Nederge daald ter helle': Verlossing door presentie, een theologische overweging," *Communio: Internationaal Katholiek Tijdschrift* (2010) no. 1, 29-45.

5. Jean Daniélou, *The Theology of Jewish Christianity*, trans. John A. Baker, *The Development of Christian Doctrine before the Council of Nicaea* (Chicago, IL: Henry Regnery, 1964).

6. J. A. MacCulloch, *The Harrowing of Hell: A Comparative Study of an Early Christian Doctrine* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1930).

7. Louis Capéran, *Le problème du salut des infidèles: Essai historique*, 2nd rev. ed. (Toulouse: Grand Séminaire, 1934); id., *Le problème du salut des infidèles: Essai théologique*, 2nd rev. ed. (Toulouse: Grand Séminaire, 1934). These two works will be referred to in what follows as *Le problème (essai historique)* and *Le problème (essai théologique)* respectively.

8. Friedrich Loofs, "Descent to Hades (Christ's)," *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, Vol. IV, ed. James Hastings (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1911) 654-663.

9. The harrowing of hell has also been popular in painting (including iconography) and drama (especially mystery plays), particularly in the Middle Ages. See, for example, Ralph V. Turner, "Descendit Ad Inferos: Medieval Views on Christ's Descent into Hell and the Salvation of the Ancient Just," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 27, no. 2 (1966) 173-194, p. 173.

10. D'Costa, "Descent into Hell."

11. Alfeyev, *Christ the Conqueror of Hell*.

nineteenth century while its seeds were planted in the theology and liturgy of the early church.

This article is a systematic-theological discussion and evaluation of the contemporary use of Christ's descent into Hades in relation to the salvation of adherents of other religions by linking it to its historical roots and evolution of the idea in the history of church and theology.

We start with a discussion of the origin of the conviction that Christ descended into Hades and what its major interpretations were. The following section gives both a historical sketch of the relation between Christ's descent and the salvation of non-Christians and an evaluation of a contemporary proposal that Christ's descent plays a role in the salvation of adherents of other religions. The final section evaluates this *locus theologicus* in the light of the conviction that salvation is mediated socio-historically, and closes with an alternative proposal about an intermediate state.

But first we must discuss where the idea of a descent of Christ into 'hell' comes from.

## II. *Descendit ad inferos*: Paradise Lost and Hell Regained?

### 1. *The Whence and the Whither of Christ's Descent*

Christ's descent into hell is one of the credal statements of the Apostles' Creed. The Latin *textus receptus* of the *Symbolum Apostolorum* mentions that Christ *descendit ad inferna*.<sup>12</sup> This final version of the creed is first attested in seventh-century Gaul. The most ancient versions of this creed do not have this statement.<sup>13</sup> There exist some variants on

12. The Latin *textus receptus* of the Apostles' Creed states: "Credo in Deum Patrem omnipotentem, Creatorem caeli et terrae, et in Iesum Christum, Filium Eius unicum, Dominum nostrum, qui conceptus est de Spiritu Sancto, natus ex Maria Virgine, passus sub Pontio Pilato, crucifixus, mortuus, et sepultus, descendit ad inferna, tertia die resurrexit a mortuis, ascendit ad caelos, sedet ad dexteram Patris omnipotentis, inde venturus est iudicare vivos et mortuos. Credo in Spiritum Sanctum, sanctam Ecclesiam catholicam, sanctorum communionem, remissionem peccatorum, carnis resurrectionem, et vitam aeternam." See Liuwe Westra, *The Apostles' Creed: Origin, History, and Some Early Commentaries*, Instrumenta Patristica et Mediaevalia: Research on the Inheritance of Early and Medieval Christianity (Turnhout: Brepols, 2002) 541. The Greek version of the *Apostolicum* is most probably a translation of the Latin; see Fika J. van Rensburg and Elma M. Cornelius, "Die aanvaarbaarheid en vertaling van κατελθόντα εἰς τὰ κατώτατα in die *Apostolicum Symbolum* in die lig van sy oorsprong, historiese en hedendaagse teologiese interpretasie," *In die Skriflig* 34, no. 3 (2000) 397-422, p. 400.

13. Earlier versions go back to a fourth-century Roman version, which itself is thought to depend on an older, and shorter, proto-Roman version from the early third

*ad inferna*, that speak of *ad infernum*, *in inferna*, *ad infernos*, or even *ad inferos*.<sup>14</sup>

Some scholars argue that the phrase *descendit ad inferna* should be excised from the Apostles' Creed. Sometimes, this is done on text-critical grounds, because the phrase is a late addition. Fika Rensburg and Elma Cornelius state that, "Measured by text-critical criteria [...] it is concluded that this phrase should be removed from the *Apostolycum* [sic] *Symbolum* as it was a late addition of which the motives are not above suspicion."<sup>15</sup> But most often, arguments against the phrase are built on dogmatic grounds. Wayne Grudem avers that there is no Scriptural basis for it.<sup>16</sup> Grudem argues his case by showing that the prime biblical text used in support of the phrase, 1 Peter 3:18ff., does not talk about a descent of Christ into hell.<sup>17</sup>

It is one thing to argue that the earliest versions of the *Apostolicum* did not have this phrase, but quite another to claim that therefore it has no place in the Creed.<sup>18</sup> Liuwe Westra has argued convincingly concerning the variations in the contents of the Creed, that "what we stamp an addition to the content of the Creed was not really seen as an addition in the period we are studying, but rather more as a specification of a truth that was already implicitly present in the Creed."<sup>19</sup> Westra discerns three different reactions to changes in the form of the Creed: "violent disapproval,"<sup>20</sup>

century. The use of these was most probably linked to the initiation of new believers (either to baptism or to the rites of *traditio* and *redditio symboli*). See Westra, *Apostles' Creed*, 68-72.

14. See Westra, *Apostles' Creed*, for an exhaustive treatment of variants in the Apostles' Creed.

15. Rensburg and Cornelius, "Die aanvaarbaarheid," 397.

16. Wayne Grudem, "He Did Not Descend into Hell: A Plea for Following Scripture Instead of the Apostles' Creed," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 34, no. 1 (1991) 103-113; id., *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester/Grand Rapids, MI: IVP/Zondervan, 1994) 583-594.

17. For other scholars, including francophone authors of previous centuries, who argue for a suppression of this article from the Creed, see Gounelle, *La descente*, 12-15.

18. This is accepted by Rensburg and Cornelius, who claim that "Die skynbaar eenparige polemielose aanvaarding van die frase vandat dit vir die eerste keer in belydenisskrifte te voorskyn tree, getuig dat die frase, histories beskou, aanvaarbaar is" (Rensburg and Cornelius, "Die aanvaarbaarheid," 419).

19. Westra, *Apostles' Creed*, 97. Elsewhere, Westra writes that, "[W]hat we call differences between two forms of the Creed were considered variations and nothing more. Even additions like *Creatorem caeli et terrae*, *Descendit in inferna*, *Sanctorum communionem*, and *Vitam aeternam* were probably not always regarded as changes in the text of the Creed, so that there was no difficulty in the fact that, for example, two variants, one of which contained these additions while the other lacked them, both could claim to be the one and only 'Apostles' Creed'" (Westra, *Apostles' Creed*, 85).

20. This approach is taken by Ambrose (c. 337-397).

defence as a necessary updating with a view to heresies,<sup>21</sup> and silence.<sup>22</sup> The latter, perhaps best explained as entailing that even the more conspicuous additions were not envisaged as real changes but more as glosses, is by far the most common reaction.”<sup>23</sup>

Some of the unease with the phrase is linked to the common translation of *infernā* as ‘hell’, the place of eternal damnation.<sup>24</sup> Some of the older references to Christ’s descent speak of his descent into *Hades*, the realm of the dead, which in Latin is sometimes mentioned as *inferos*, the ‘lower regions’.<sup>25</sup> Connell argues that, “The Latin words *inferos* and *infernā* are so similar that they may be easily confused.”<sup>26</sup> According to some interpreters, initially the phrase in the creed was only stating that Christ had entered the realm of the dead, i.e., that he was truly dead. But later developments in theology resulted in a change of interpretation that was reflected in a different wording: Christ descended into hell (*infernā*) to preach the good news and save (some of) the damned.<sup>27</sup> Although there is some merit in a developmental view of the Apostles’ Creed, this interpretation is not able to account for the multiple attestation of the phrase in the writings of the Fathers of the early church and its universal acceptance.

It is certainly true that there is no direct unambiguous biblical reference to Christ’s descent. Yet, if we look at the Scriptural witness that is put forward by the Church Fathers, a whole battery of proof texts is proffered.<sup>28</sup> The texts that are most often suggested as the Scriptural backing for Christ’s descent, come from the First Epistle of Peter: 1 Pet 3:18-21 in combination with 1 Pet 4:6.<sup>29</sup> Connell argues that, “Although the tradition

21. Representative of this strand is Rufinus (c. 340-410).

22. Augustine (354-430) is a prime example of this attitude.

23. Westra, *Apostles’ Creed*, 405.

24. This is the argument of Fika J. van Rensburg, “The Acceptability and Translation of *κατελθόντα εἰς τὰ κατώτατα* in the *Apostolicum Symbolum* in the Light of Its Origin, and Historical and Present-Day Theological Interpretation,” *Ekklesiastikos Phoros* 70/71 (1989) 44-58; and also of Rensburg and Cornelius, “Die aanvaarbaarheid.”

25. In a three-tier worldview, the realm of the dead is ‘below’, whereas heaven is ‘above’. For a more detailed analysis of Jewish cosmology with respect to death, see Wim Weren, *Uit stof en as: Bijbelse beelden van Gods relatie met de doden* (Tilburg: Tilburg University, 2011).

26. Martin F. Connell, “*Descensus Christi ad Inferos*: Christ’s Descent to the Dead,” *Theological Studies* 62, no. 2 (2001) 262-282, p. 264 n. 3.

27. Rensburg and Cornelius, “Die aanvaarbaarheid.”

28. For a discussion of the references in the apostolic writings, see Fergus J. King, “‘He Descended to the Dead’: Towards a Pastoral Strategy for Making Peace with the Living Dead,” *Soma: An International Journal of Theological Discourse and Counter-Discourse* 1 (2012) 2-19, pp. 5-7; MacCulloch, *Harrowing of Hell*, 45-66.

29. 1 Pet 3:18-21a: “For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits

came to find traces of the descent in many other passages of the Bible (especially in the Psalms and the canonical Gospels), the passage in First Peter is the only scriptural passage with an explicit warrant for the descent of Christ.<sup>30</sup> And although historical-critical exegesis of this passage leads most contemporary biblical scholars to doubt or even deny that this passage speaks about Christ's descent into the underworld,<sup>31</sup> it remains an unmistakable fact that almost all the early commentators took it for that.<sup>32</sup> What is most interesting, argues Connell, is that, "There is virtually no gap in the preaching and the literature about the descent after the First Letter of Peter. Even with so little scriptural testimony, Christ's descent is omnipresent in the Fathers of the next few centuries."<sup>33</sup> Apart from the texts in 1 Peter, the following texts are often discussed in the Fathers: Eph 4:7-10; Acts 2:22-24 (Western text); Rev 1:18; Mt 27:52-53; Mt 12:40; Col 2:15; Rev 20:10, 14; Phil 2:9-11; Rom 14:8-9; Rom 10:7; 1 Cor 15:54-57; Gal 3:13; 2 Cor 5:21; 1 Joh 2:1-3; Job 38:17; Ps 16:9-11; Ps 18:4-5; Ps 24:7; Ps 88; Ps 116:3; Hos 13:14; Zech 9:11.<sup>34</sup> The texts from the Old Testament are, of course, read typologically, and while most of the references from the New Testament would individually not be able to ground a descent in the underworld, given the acceptance of Christ's descent to the dead, it is not surprising that these passages are referred to.<sup>35</sup>

in prison, who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water. And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you." 1 Pet 4:6: "For this is the reason the gospel was proclaimed even to the dead, so that, though they had been judged in the flesh as everyone is judged, they might live in the spirit as God does." All biblical quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989).

30. Connell, "Descensus Christi," 263.

31. See Matthew Levering, *Jesus and the Demise of Death: Resurrection, Afterlife, and the Fate of the Christian* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012) 20 for a discussion and nuancing of this. For Schillebeeckx's arguments that the passage does indeed refer to Christ's descent into hell, see Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ: The Christian Experience in the Modern World* (London: SCM, 1980) 229-234.

32. It is interesting to note that Augustine in his letter to Bishop Evodius (Augustine, "Letters of St Augustine: Letter 164." <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1102164.htm> [accessed 22 June 2012]) denied that the passage in 1 Peter spoke about Christ's descent. At the same time, Augustine can say (in chapter 2 of that letter) that, "Who, then, but an unbeliever will deny that Christ was in hell?"

33. Connell, "Descensus Christi," 264. For a discussion of the earliest post-apostolic witnesses, see Wicks, "Christ's Saving Descent." Alfeyev, *Christ the Conqueror of Hell*.

34. For references, see Alfeyev, *Christ the Conqueror of Hell*, 17-20; Richard Bauckham, "Descent to the Underworld," *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992) 145-159, p. 156; Oakes, "Internal Logic of Holy Saturday," 188-189; id., "Descensus and Development," 8-9.

35. This raises several issues, such as the authority of historical-critical scholarship for dogmatics, as well as the relative authority of Scripture versus Tradition. Although



## 2. *The Major Interpretations of Christ's Descent*

It is clear that the confession of Christ's descent into Hades was a very common and uncontested *locus theologicus* in the first five centuries of Christianity.<sup>36</sup> Much less clear, however, is the meaning of this descent. Opinions of what Christ achieved in his descent differ, and significant differing interpretations co-existed spatially and temporally. Gounelle remarks that,

It is worth mentioning again that there is a great diversity of problems broached in the diverse texts that we analysed. At the time when Christ's descent into hell appeared in the regulative texts of the faith, no consensus whatsoever is made concerning the meaning and the modalities of this event in salvation history. Therefore, it is highly unlikely that we would find a unique explanation of our *theologoumenon* when it is introduced in the regulative texts of the faith.<sup>37</sup>

Categorizing the theological opinions of the first centuries of Christianity, we can state that the interpretations can be filed as Christological or salvation-historical, i.e., concerning *theologia* or *oikonomia*.<sup>38</sup> The descent of Christ into Hades has triggered extended theological disputations concerning the whereabouts of Christ's body, soul and divinity during the *triduum mortis*, including the Trinitarian implications of this event, i.e., Christ's relation to the Father and the Spirit. Although these dimensions of Christ's descent are important, our focus will primarily

these issues are very interesting and relevant to our discussion, space constraints prohibit further interaction at this point. One important conviction that needs to be maintained, is put well by David Lauber, who states that, "The construction of a doctrine of the descent into hell need not be explicitly grounded upon specific biblical texts; rather, it must rely upon a reading of Scripture as a whole" (Lauber, *Barth on the Descent*, 112). Herwi Rikhof also mentions this tension and speaks of a difference between 'Bible' and 'Scriptures', implying a tension between exegesis and systematic theology. See Rikhof, *Die nedergedaald is*, 7-9.

36. Alfeyev, *Christ the Conqueror of Hell*, 203-204.

37. "La diversité des problèmes abordés dans les divers textes que nous avons analysés mérite une nouvelle fois d'être signalée. Au moment où la descente du Christ aux enfers apparaît dans des textes régulateurs de la foi, aucun consensus n'est véritablement fait sur le sens et les modalités de cet événement de l'histoire du salut. Il est donc hautement improbable que nous trouvions une unique explication à l'introduction de notre théologoumène dans les textes régulateurs de la foi." Gounelle, *La descente*, 148 (my translation). Metropolitan Alfeyev takes issue with Gounelle speaking of a *theologoumenon*. In Alfeyev's understanding, a *theologoumenon* is a personal opinion of a theologian that is not (necessarily) representative of church doctrine. For him, the confession that Christ descended into Hades "belongs to the realm of general church doctrine" (Alfeyev, *Christ the Conqueror of Hell*, 208 for the quote and 205-210 for the wider discussion).

38. See Rikhof, *Die nedergedaald is*, 10-11.



be on the implied soteriology of the descent.<sup>39</sup> Nevertheless, it is important to see that the descent was discussed in the context of questions about the destination of Christ's soul. Gounelle remarks that this Christological interest is linked to soteriology, as it necessarily arose in the context of the explanation of Christ's salvific death.<sup>40</sup> Another interpretation which links the Christological and soteriological dimensions is that from very early on, the descent was seen as an event of salvation history without which the incarnation is not complete.<sup>41</sup> Christ's person and work are intimately linked. Gounelle mentions another interpretation of Christ's descent which we will not discuss further. In this understanding, his descent is the moment when salvation for all humanity is accomplished: Christ's descent is the moment when Christ acquires incorruptibility, i.e., the moment when the salvation brought to humanity through the incarnation is accomplished.<sup>42</sup>

Interpretations which we will discuss below are, (1) Christ's preaching in Hades to announce his salvation (i.e. proclaiming salvation); (2) Christ accomplishing liberation from Hades of the righteous dead who lived before his advent (i.e., procuring salvation); (3) Christ triumphing over death, Hades and the devil (i.e., proving salvation). It should be noted that these differing interpretations are not necessarily mutually exclusive.<sup>43</sup>

39. It should be clear, however, that *oikonomia* and *theologia* cannot be so neatly dissected. The opinion that there is a historical evolution, from soteriological concerns in the first three centuries towards Christological ones from the fourth century onwards, is no longer to be accepted. See Gounelle, *La descente*, 23-24; Rikhof, *Die nedergedaald is*, 10-11. For discussion on the Christological dimensions of Christ's descent, see Connell, "Descensus Christi," 268, 273-274.

40. Gounelle, *La descente*, 144-145.

41. *Ibid.*, 143-144. See also Bauckham, "Descent," 156, where he speaks of "the fundamental notion that Jesus Christ's soul had to descend to Hades in order for him to fully share the human lot in death."

42. Gounelle, *La descente*, 147.

43. *Ibid.*, 147-148. As the sources on Christ's descent abound, different overviews of the interpretations are possible. Karl Gschwind, however, offered a similar overview, claiming that already in the earliest church three different and partly complementary opinions concerning Christ's descent into hell were known, depending on the manner in which the activity of Christ in the underworld or the goal of his descent were understood: "1. Christus ist der Heilsverleiher und Auferwecker der vor-christlichen Gerechten. 2. Christus ist der Bringer der frohen Botschaft an die harrenden Auserwählten im Hades. 3. Christus ist der Sieger über den Tod und die Unterwelt. Von diesen drei Auffassungen ist die erste die weitaus am frühesten und sichersten bezeugte." Karl Gschwind, *Die Niederfahrt Christi in die Unterwelt: Ein Beitrag zur Exegese des Neuen Testaments und zur Geschichte des Taufsymbols*, Neutestamentliche Abhandlungen, 2, 3-5 (Münster: Aschendorff, 1911) 243. For similar overviews, see Bauckham, "Descent," 156; Wicks, "Christ's Saving Descent," 308-309. Archbishop Hilarion Alfeyev claims that the teaching of the Eastern Fathers of the fourth century on the descent can be

## a) Proclaiming Salvation: Christ Preaching in Hades

According to MacCulloch, “the announcement of the good news of salvation in Hades forms the earliest and most widely diffused conception of the purpose of the presence of Christ’s soul in Hades.”<sup>44</sup> Nearly all the early Fathers, starting from the beginning of the second century, make mention of it: Ignatius (died between 98 and 117), Justin (100-165), Irenaeus (c. 140-c. 202), Clement of Alexandria (c. 150-c. 215), Tertullian (c. 160-c. 225), Cyprian (died 258), Origen (c. 184-c. 254), ...<sup>45</sup> Although this interpretation of Christ’s descent can be directly linked to the interpretation of 1 Pet 3:19, these early Fathers do not cite this biblical passage.<sup>46</sup> It is interesting to see that some variations existed on this preaching. Some held that John the Baptist was also in Hades a forerunner of Christ.<sup>47</sup> Both the *Shepherd of Hermas*<sup>48</sup> and Clement of Alexandria claim that the apostles also preached in Hades. The *Shepherd of Hermas* also claims that the apostles baptized in Hades.<sup>49</sup>

There is also a great difference of opinion regarding those to whom Christ preached in Hades, the aim for doing so, and what effect it had. Some argue that it is merely an announcement of his victory, whilst others believe he preached the gospel in order for the hearers to be saved. This opinion can be divided into a preaching directed to all those present in Hades, or to the righteous only.<sup>50</sup> In the latter case, medieval

understood, “first, as a commonly accepted and indisputably integral part of the church’s kerygma; second, as an event of universal significance with all the dead included in salvation; third, as an event of limited significance, with only particular categories of the dead included in salvation; fourth, as the accomplishment of the Savior’s ‘economy’, the crowning feat he performed in order to save all people; fifth, as the victory of Christ over the devil, hell, and death; and sixth, as the prototype of the resurrection of the human soul – the mystical dimension of the teaching.” Alfeyev, *Christ the Conqueror of Hell*, 74. Jared Wicks summarizes the soteriological content of Christ’s descent as (1) Christ preaching a saving message in Hades, (2) Christ doing battle with and winning victory over the evil guardians of Hades, and (3) taking the righteous dead to heaven. Wicks, “Christ’s Saving Descent,” 308-309.

44. MacCulloch, *Harrowing of Hell*, 240.

45. *Ibid.*, 240-252. See also Alfeyev, *Christ the Conqueror of Hell*; Bauckham, “Descent;” Gounelle, *La descente*; Wicks, “Christ’s Saving Descent.”

46. MacCulloch, *Harrowing of Hell*, 64, 242.

47. *Ibid.*, 244, mentions Hippolytus (170-230), Origen, Gregory of Nazianus (c. 329-c. 389).

48. The *Shepherd of Hermas* is a popular Christian work dated around the middle of the second century. See, for example, Wicks, “Christ’s Saving Descent,” 283.

49. See Alfeyev, *Christ the Conqueror of Hell*, 24-25; MacCulloch, *Harrowing of Hell*, 246-248; Wicks, “Christ’s Saving Descent,” 283-284.

50. See below for discussion of these options.

theology placed these righteous in the Limbo of the Fathers, i.e., a separate abode in 'hell'. In that instance, Christ merely preached salvation in this *limbus patrum*, and not in the other abodes of hell, the *limbus puerorum* nor the *damnatorium*. Those in the *purgatorium* also hear Christ's proclamation, an event which gives them hope.<sup>51</sup>

b) Procuring Salvation: The Liberation of (Some of) the Habitants of Hades

A second major interpretation of Christ's descent into Hades is that his presence and/or preaching leads to the salvation of those who are detained in the underworld. Bauckham states that, "It was widely believed that Christ brought the OT saints out of Hades and led them up to paradise or heaven ..." <sup>52</sup> Wicks states that, "Souls detained in Sheol/Hades – at least some of them – came to salvation through Christ who came to them in their 'place' of detention after his death on the cross. This belief illustrates the universal outreach of Christ's saving work." <sup>53</sup> Even those who were members of the covenant, were believed to be detained in Hades, as this was the realm of the dead, where all the deceased 'lived' their shadowy 'existence'. Even the righteous were not considered to be in heaven, as the gates of heaven were not yet opened. This only happened through salvation brought by Christ in his death and resurrection. So even the faithful of the Old Testament were imprisoned in Hades.<sup>54</sup> Heaven, in this understanding, is thoroughly christological.

Some authors in the early church envisioned not only the Old Testament saints as the beneficiaries of Christ's preaching and salvation, but also the 'holy pagans', those gentiles who were not formally part of the covenant, who had lived righteous and virtuous lives and/or believed in God. One such author is Clement of Alexandria. Origen even considered

51. St. Thomas made the distinction between Christ's presence *per essentiam* and his presence *effectu*. He was present in the *limbus patrum* in the first sense, but in the other abodes only in the second sense, i.e., presence only through his influence. See Rikhof, *Die nedergedaald is*, 39. The idea of limbos is a medieval development. For more information about this development, see Christopher Beiting, "The Nature and Structure of Limbo in the Works of Albertus Magnus," *New Blackfriars* 85, no. 999 (2004) 492-509.

52. Bauckham, "Descent," 157.

53. Wicks, "Christ's Saving Descent," 282.

54. Daniélou, *The Theology of Jewish Christianity*, 233. For an explanation of the cosmology of the Old and New Testament concerning death, see Weren, *Uit stof en as*.

the conversion of sinners in Hades.<sup>55</sup> John Damascene (c. 676-749) also thought that “those who were not taught the true faith during their lifetime can come to believe when in hell. By their good works and ascetic life they prepared themselves for encountering Christ ...”<sup>56</sup> This opinion was considered heretical by some Latin authors, but was well attested by several authors in the fourth to sixth century, and these were authors of no little repute.<sup>57</sup> Gounelle lists authors from all around the Mediterranean basin, both Greek and Latin, to the extent that this opinion cannot be marginalised:

In the course of the fourth to sixth century, the idea that all the dead had the opportunity to be saved, or that all were saved, is widespread in the surroundings of the Mediterranean. It would be very precarious to try and limit this opinion to a group of persons or to a specific theological tendency.<sup>58</sup>

### c) Proving Salvation: Christ Defeating Death, Hell and the Devil

The last important strand of interpretation of Christ's descent concerns the defeating of death and hell. This is especially apparent in connection with the previous interpretation in its universalizing tendency. The earliest testimonies of Christ's descent mention this aspect. Wicks refers, amongst others, to the *Ascension of Isaiah*,<sup>59</sup> the *Odes of Solomon*<sup>60</sup> and Melito's *On Pascha*<sup>61</sup> as speaking of Christ engaging in battle with

55. Bauckham, “Descent,” 156.

56. Alfeyev, *Christ the Conqueror of Hell*, 215.

57. Gounelle, *La descente*, 72. According to Gounelle, the salvation of pagans in hell, began to be considered heretical in the West when Christians became too open towards pagan culture. Gounelle, *La descente*, 76-87.

58. “Au cours des IV<sup>e</sup>-VI<sup>e</sup> siècles, l'idée selon laquelle tous les morts ont eu la possibilité d'être sauvés, ou que tous l'ont été, est donc largement répandue dans l'ensemble du pourtour méditerranéen, et il serait tout à fait hasardeux de vouloir limiter une telle opinion à une groupe de personnes ou à une tendance théologique particulière.” Gounelle, *La descente*, 74 (my translation).

59. The reference is to a mid-second century Christian addition to this apocryphal work. See Alfeyev, *Christ the Conqueror of Hell*, 21-22; Bauckham, “Descent,” 157; Daniélou, *The Theology of Jewish Christianity*, 242-244; Wicks, “Christ's Saving Descent,” 287-288.

60. An early second century Syrian poetical document. The reference is to Ode 42. See Alfeyev, *Christ the Conqueror of Hell*, 39-42; Bauckham, “Descent,” 157; Daniélou, *The Theology of Jewish Christianity*, 247-248; Wicks, “Christ's Saving Descent,” 290-291.

61. This poetry was written in the middle of the second century by St. Melito of Sardis and was intended to be read on Good Friday. See Alfeyev, *Christ the Conqueror of Hell*, 35-36; Bauckham, “Descent,” 157; Wicks, “Christ's Saving Descent,” 291-293.

the lord of Hades, breaking down the gates of hell, and liberating the captive.<sup>62</sup> According to Alfeyev,

What is universally endorsed is the teaching that Christ mortified death and destroyed hell. This is, however, understood in different ways. The Eastern liturgical texts and many of the fathers speak of a total destruction of death and hell. Others are more specific, saying that death and hell continue to exist but only inasmuch as people's evil wills encourage its existence. In the Western tradition the view that Christ's death harmed hell but did not mortify it came into dominance.<sup>63</sup>

Although Alfeyev is perhaps overly optimistic about its universal endorsement, his statement is important in reminding us of this strong liturgical tenet still abiding in the Eastern church.

### III. Christ's Descent into Hell and Non-Christians

#### 1. *A Brief Historical Sketch*

The earliest church, starting at the turn of the first century, already discussed the descent in relation to the salvation of their Jewish ancestors who had lived before the advent of Christ. Gounelle remarks that in the early church, it is particularly the Syrian church, where Jewish Christianity was well represented, that distinguishes itself from the beginning of the second century as a place where the descent as salvific event is elaborated upon.<sup>64</sup> Not that Christ's descent was not discussed elsewhere, but our earliest witnesses of this belief are located in this area.<sup>65</sup>

62. For a discussion on the breaking of the gates of Hades, see MacCulloch, *Harrowing of Hell*, 216-226. For discussion of Christ's descent as victory over death and Hades more generally, see *ibid.*, 227-239. For this theme in Cyril of Alexandria (c. 366-444), see Daniel Keating, "Christ's Despoiling of Hades: According to Cyril of Alexandria," *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 55, no. 3 (2011) 253-269.

63. Alfeyev, *Christ the Conqueror of Hell*, 204-205.

64. Gounelle, *La descente*, 59. See also Werner Bieder, who remarks that the idea of Christ's descent probably appeared simultaneously in several places, yet nevertheless notes: "In Kleinasien und in Syrien ist die Descensusidee sehr früh ausgebildet worden." Werner Bieder, *Die Vorstellung von der Höllenfahrt Jesu Christi: Beitrag zur Entstehungsgeschichte der Vorstellung vom sog. Descensus ad inferos*, Abhandlungen zur Theologie des Alten und Neuen Testaments, 19 (Zürich: Zwingli, 1949) 198-199.

65. MacCulloch, *Harrowing of Hell*, 319, who writes, "Thus the earliest language used regarding the Descent is at once Jewish and Christian. If the belief arose in Jewish-Christian circles, we can understand why interest was excited in the fate of the Old Testament saints."

Similarly, when the Church defined itself within the philosophical and cultural context of Hellenism, starting with the Apologists in the second century, the issue was raised of the fate of the great Greek philosophers who had lived virtuous lives, and who had, in some instances, shown knowledge of doctrines that came very close to Jewish and Christian beliefs. Here also, Christ's descent into Hades was invoked as an issue that was relevant in that discussion.<sup>66</sup>

Nevertheless, the non-Christians that were considered as benefiting from Christ's descent – Jews and virtuous Greek philosophers – were those that lived before the Christian era.

It is interesting that in the twelfth and thirteenth century, a period when there was no major new face to face encounter with non-Christians, the discussion of Christ's descent into hell came to the forefront again. The issue that triggered the discussion was apparently the revival of interest in the literature and philosophy of the ancient Greeks and Romans. Ralph Turner avers that, "This atmosphere of sympathy of the pagans might be expected to arouse an interest in the question of their salvation, just as it had among the Alexandrians."<sup>67</sup>

In this period, theological opinion in the West about Christ's descent into hell took a more or less definitive form through the work of the scholastics. The first canon of the Council of Toledo IV (633) had already established that Christ descended into hell solely to redeem the Old Testament saints.<sup>68</sup> Aquinas agreed, but distinguished four regions in hell – *purgatorium*, *infernus patrum*, *infernus puerorum*, and *infernus damnatorum*. The Old Testament saints were liberated out of a separate abode of hell, the *infernus patrum*.<sup>69</sup>

We should note here that up till the end of the Middle Ages, common opinion held that Christianity had reached the ends of the earth, and that the whole world was reached with the Gospel. It is only from the thirteenth century onwards that non-biblical religions were 'discovered',

66. Relevant overviews can be found in Alfeyev, *Christ the Conqueror of Hell*; Capéran, *Le problème (essai historique)*; Gounelle, *La descente*.

67. Turner, "Medieval Views," 179. Among the theologians discussing Christ's descent, Peter Abelard should be noted first, but also Peter Lombard, Alain of Lille and, of course, Thomas Aquinas.

68. Heinrich Denzinger, Peter Hünermann, Helmut Hoping, Robert L. Fastiggi and Anne Englund Nash (eds.), *Compendium of Creeds, Definitions, and Declarations on Matters of Faith and Morals / Enchiridion Symbolorum, Definitionum et Declarationum de Rebus Fidei et Morum*, 43<sup>rd</sup> ed. (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2012) #485.

69. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, III q. 52. Alfeyev notes that Aquinas's view was "severely criticised by Protestant theologians during the Reformation, and indeed many of today's Catholic theologians are also very sceptical about the teaching" (Alfeyev, *Christ the Conqueror of Hell*, 98).

when missionaries entered Mongolia and China.<sup>70</sup> Yet even in India and Mongolia, there was an existing ancient Christian community prior to the arrival of Western missionaries.<sup>71</sup> Francis Sullivan notes that, "It seems clear that when St. Thomas spoke of people who had heard nothing about Christ, he was thinking of isolated individuals, rather than of whole nations."<sup>72</sup> Even the existence of Jews and Muslims was not considered as a contradiction of this view. Islam as well as Judaism were considered primarily as Christian deformations, rather than independent religions in contemporary understanding. D'Costa claims that, "Prior to the sixteenth century [Islam and Judaism] did not actually exist as 'religions' in the way we understand them today, for both Judaism and Islam were seen as deformations of the true religion, Christianity. [...] Most Christians viewed these 'religions' [...] as deviations of and from Christianity."<sup>73</sup>

It is, arguably, only with the 'discoveries' of the Americas and the vast number of peoples living there for centuries without any apparent exposure to the Gospel, that Christianity found itself facing the reality of non-Christians. The sixteenth century saw a world which had grown considerably beyond its previous geographical borders. Medieval theological opinion had suggested that God would send angels or messengers or grant interior revelation to those individuals who, outside a context of Christian nations and the proclamation of the Gospel, were sincerely searching for God. Yet in these new territories, no traces of Christianity were found, thus contradicting the prevailing theology.<sup>74</sup> As a result, in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, theologians began to discuss the salvation of these many peoples who have lived for centuries without any Christian witness. In this period, it is not Christ's descent into hell that is used as a theological resource to deal with this problem – that will happen in the nineteenth century only – but the development of the concept of implicit faith, an idea that had arisen in the theology of the schoolmen.<sup>75</sup>

70. Gavin D'Costa, *Christianity and World Religions: Disputed Questions in the Theology of Religions* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009) 69.

71. 'Thomas Christians' and Nestorians respectively.

72. Francis A. Sullivan, S.J., *Salvation Outside the Church? Tracing the History of the Catholic Response* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002; reprint, Paulist Press, 1992)

56. Also Capéran, *Le problème (essai théologique)*, 63.

73. D'Costa, *Christianity and World Religions*, 69.

74. Capéran, *Le problème (essai historique)*, 584. "Mais voici qu'à la fin du XV<sup>e</sup> siècle des faits inattendus démentent apparemment le principe de la sollicitude universelle de la Providence: dans ces Indes occidentales, qu'on vient de découvrir, nulle trace de prédication chrétienne."

75. It is not that Christ's descent into hell is not discussed in this period. On the contrary, it is commonly discussed by the major theologians of that era. However, the



There are nevertheless a couple of interesting exceptions. Claude Seyssel, archbishop of Turin, opines (in 1520) that some of the heathen will come to faith in Christ when they have done all within their means to search and find God. Surely God will call them as He did with Abraham, and He will lead them towards the truth. Other heathens, who are less zealous in their search for God, but who contented themselves, in the light of reason, to the works of religion towards God and justice towards their neighbours, will find themselves after death, in neither heaven nor hell, but in an intermediate abode. Although Seyssel remains agnostic of its place and specifics, he calls it limbo. There, their souls will live in a state of natural happiness.<sup>76</sup> This limbo of the 'good' heathen is a solution that will be taken up again by Roman Catholic theologians in the nineteenth century. On the side of the Reformers, Luther considers the possibility of *peri-mortem*<sup>77</sup> or *post-mortem* evangelization and salvation. He affirms that it is in God's power to give someone faith at the point of death or even after death, and through this faith salvation, but he states that it is impossible to prove that God actually does so.<sup>78</sup>

In the nineteenth century, Christianity found itself again in a new apologetic context with respect to unbelievers. This century saw the explorations of the African continent. Although the coasts of Africa were well known and colonized, now the interior lands were explored, leading to the discovery of vast territories containing untold numbers of tribes each with their own religion, living in total ignorance of Christ. However, another 'discovery' added to this new situation. This time not the extension of the geographical boundaries of the world, but the historical boundaries. This is the time that scientists discovered that the prehistory of humankind extends much farther back in time than previously

focus is either christological rather than soteriological, or it occurs in the disputations between Protestants and Roman Catholics. For an extensive polemical discussion of Christ's descent into hell, see James Ussher, *An Answer to a Challenge Made by a Jesuit in Ireland: Wherein the Judgment of Antiquity in the Points Questioned, is Truly Delivered, and the Novelty of the Now Romish Doctrine Plainly Discovered*, ed. Charles Richard Erlington, *The Whole Works of the Most Rev. James Ussher, d. d., Lord Archbishop of Armagh, and Primate of all Ireland* (Vol. III) (Dublin: Hodges and Smith [originally published in London by The Society of Stationers, 1625], 1848) 278-419.

76. Capéran, *Le problème (essai historique)*, 223. The reference is to *Claudii Seysselli, archiepiscopi Taurinensis, de Divina Providentia Tractatus*, Parisiis, 1520, tract. II art. 3 p. 73.

77. We call *peri-mortem* salvation that salvation which God grants an unbeliever at the point of death. It is to be distinguished from *post-mortem* salvation, because the latter occurs explicitly *after* death.

78. Luther does not discuss this opinion in the context of Christ's descent into hell. For reference to Luther's opinion, see Capéran, *Le problème (essai historique)*, 498.

thought.<sup>79</sup> This implied that the estimate of the number of people having lived before the advent of Christ was increasing exponentially. Capéran also mentions the progress in the study of ethnography, which, among others, showed that China had held many centuries of civilisation with its own religions completely isolated from Christianity.<sup>80</sup> In Protestant theology, many see a solution to this problem of the 'unevangelized' in Christ's preaching to the dead.<sup>81</sup> Capéran remarks that, "A large number of Protestant authors in the nineteenth century actually posited that all the pagans who die without the opportunity to choose for or against Jesus Christ, will eventually, in the afterlife, receive the means to get to know him and to attach themselves to him."<sup>82</sup> Quoting from one author at the end of the nineteenth century, Capéran counts forty authors from Germany, England, Switzerland and France, who hold this view, adding that it is gaining assent in these countries as well as in the United States.<sup>83</sup>

Roman Catholic theology developed along different tracks. On the one hand, apologetics demanded a solution that was quickly forthcoming, and here the previously mentioned solution by Claude Seyssel reappeared, stating that there was a limbo of the heathen. Although some of the heathen worshipped the Creator and believed in Providence, because they were not baptized nor without (venial) sin, they could not enter heaven. But confining them to hell seemed to be unfair as well. Some argued that these tribes of uncivilized people ('savages') were comparable to children who had not yet come to the age of reason.<sup>84</sup> In any case, in analogy to the *limbus puerorum* of the unbaptized children, a limbo for adults<sup>85</sup> was postulated.<sup>86</sup> On the other hand, theological convictions

79. Capéran, *Le problème (essai historique)*, 508.

80. *Ibid.*, II.

81. This is also the position taken in 1930 by MacCulloch, *Harrowing of Hell*, see especially 320-326.

82. "Au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle, un très grand nombre d'auteurs protestants ont posé en fait que tous les païens que meurent sans avoir eu l'occasion de se prononcer pour ou contre Jésus-Christ, ont enfin, outre-tombe, le moyen de le connaître et de s'attacher à lui". Capéran, *Le problème (essai historique)*, 498 (my translation). See also Loofs, "Descent to Hades (Christ's)," 658.

83. Capéran, *Le problème (essai historique)*, 495-496. Capéran refers to the work of M. E. Petavel-Olliff, *Le problème de l'immortalité*, vol. II (Paris, 1892) 366.

84. Capéran (*Le problème (essai historique)*, 484) cites Jaime Balmes, who wonders (rhetorically) whether "le plus grand nombre ne vivent pas dans un état de stupidité, dont nous aurions à peu près une image dans les divers degrés d'imbécillité qui affligent la nature humaine, même au sein de la civilisation." Jaime Balmes, *Mélanges religieux, philosophiques, politiques et littéraires*, trans. J. Bareille (Paris: Vivès, 1854) 364.

85. Perhaps this should be called a limbo for pagans, *limbus paganorum*.

86. See Capéran, *Le problème (essai historique)*, 478-489.

questioned this apologetic solution which seems to deny certain people the opportunity to participate effectively in grace, for it would imply that these people are not offered the proper means to come to faith.<sup>87</sup>

Finally, that is, from our historical vantage point, in the twentieth century it dawns upon the Christian masses that Christianity is not the religion of the majority of the world population. Moreover, in the second half of the twentieth century, it becomes clear that the evangelization of the world is not something that will be accomplished in the short term, if ever. There are literally multitudes of non-Christians in the world, many of whom will never be existentially confronted with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It is in this context, that Christ's descent into hell is re-appropriated again.

## 2. *The Contemporary Situation*

There are quite a few contemporary theologians who make use of Christ's descent in one way or another in their soteriological musings. What is striking is the universal appeal, both confessional and geographical. We find explicit references in authors such as Edward Schillebeeckx (Roman Catholic),<sup>88</sup> Gavin D'Costa (Roman Catholic),<sup>89</sup> Edward T. Oakes (Roman Catholic),<sup>90</sup> Hilarion Alfeyev (Russian Orthodox),<sup>91</sup> Fergus King (Anglican),<sup>92</sup> Carl E. Braaten (Lutheran),<sup>93</sup> David Lauber (Evangelical-Lutheran),<sup>94</sup> and Donald E. Bloesch (Evangelical).<sup>95</sup>

For a more in depth analysis of such current re-appropriation, we will look in more detail at how one contemporary author, Gavin D'Costa, deals with Christ's descent vis-à-vis theology of religions. D'Costa's proposal is theologically rich and as a leading scholar in theology of religions, his proposal has not gone unnoticed.

87. Capéran calls those who deny such participations Jansenists and Ultra-Thomists. Capéran, *Le problème (essai historique)*, 491.

88. Schillebeeckx, *Christ*.

89. D'Costa, *Christianity and World Religions*; id., "Descent into Hell."

90. Oakes, "Internal Logic of Holy Saturday;" id., "Descensus and Development."

91. Alfeyev, *Christ the Conqueror of Hell*.

92. King, "He Descended to the Dead'."

93. Carl E. Braaten, "The Person of Jesus Christ," *Christian Dogmatics*, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1984).

94. Lauber, *Barth on the Descent*.

95. Donald G. Bloesch, *The Last Things: Resurrection, Judgment, Glory* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2004).

## a) Christ Is Necessary for Salvation – Causally and Ontologically

First, and fundamentally, D'Costa is clear that there cannot be any salvation without Christ. Everyone's salvation is causally linked to Christ, for he is the "prime mediator."<sup>96</sup> Salvation is God's gift, wrought by Christ, and applied by the Spirit. Christ is the saviour, there is no way to salvation apart from him.

However, the grace operative in people, even non-Christians, relates them ontologically to Christ. D'Costa explains Rahner's understanding of how non-Christians are related to God:

Rahner, for example, classically argued that the inner *telos* of every genuinely good and charitable act is oriented toward and presupposes God, regardless of whether the person is a theist [...]. In this way, good works dependent on grace became the minimal requirement for salvation in the absence of evangelization. [...] Ontologically, they have become 'related' to the reality of God through grace.<sup>97</sup>

Although D'Costa also critiques Rahner for his insufficient attention given to the epistemological implications of the axiom *fides ex auditu*, he nevertheless retains this ontological relation on the basis of a person's life. This ontological relationship with God/Christ is made concrete, according to D'Costa, "through conscience, through noble and good elements within a person's religion, through the activity of grace and the Holy Spirit in both these modes."<sup>98</sup>

We note that D'Costa makes it clear that these 'good works' are made possible by grace through the work of the Holy Spirit. In this way, he avoids the error of Pelagianism. Christians and non-Christians alike are saved, not because of their meritorious works, but because of Christ and the grace of God operative in them through the Holy Spirit. But "good works may be a sign of human responding to grace."<sup>99</sup>

Whereas for Rahner, it seems that this causal and ontological link with God/Christ is sufficient for the salvation of the non-Christian, it

96. Gavin D'Costa, "Revelation and World Religions," *Divine Revelation*, ed. Paul Avis (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1997) 131; id., *Christianity and World Religions*, 20. D'Costa uses 'prime' mediator, rather than 'sole' or 'only' mediator, not because he thinks there are other mediators apart from Christ, but because he believes that others can participate in this mediating activity of Christ. See, for example, his argument for Mary as co-redemptrix in Gavin D'Costa, *Sexing the Trinity: Gender, Culture and the Divine* (London: SCM, 2000) 32-39, 196-203.

97. D'Costa, *Christianity and World Religions*, 163-164.

98. *Ibid.*, 177.

99. Gavin D'Costa, "Revelation and Revelations: Discerning God in Other Religions: Beyond a Static Valuation," *Modern Theology* 10, no. 2 (1994) 165-183, p. 174.

is not so for D'Costa. Salvation, according to D'Costa, "entails a specific knowledge and full participation in the life of the triune God."<sup>100</sup> The implication is that non-Christians, who are linked to Christ in an ontological way, must also be confronted with Christ epistemologically in one way or another. *Fides qua* must go together with *fides quae*, the act of faith and the content of faith are both necessary for salvation.

b) ... But also Epistemologically

D'Costa rules out a straightforward application of the Catholic tradition of 'implicit faith' as a solution to be applied to non-Christians, even if there is a long lineage of arguments in this direction.

Another solution to the problem is also critiqued. As noted before, D'Costa disagrees with Rahner's idea of the 'anonymous Christian' as it fails "to explain how such people become explicitly aware of the Blessed Trinity when they die unaware of the Blessed Trinity and are not allowed to make any more free decisions after death."<sup>101</sup> D'Costa fears that Rahner gives up on the particularity of Jesus Christ. Faith, according to D'Costa, is not just a formal category, but also a material one. The material aspect of faith concerns its object.

Therefore, D'Costa tries to develop another line of tradition, which explains how people who have never been exposed to Christ and the Church, but can be said to be ontologically related to Christ, can attain salvation. His solution concerns "the limbo of the Just for the unevangelized."<sup>102</sup>

The limbo of the Just, or limbo of the Fathers (*limbus patrum*) was understood by the early Church as an abode of hell in which the Old Testament Saints (and according to some, also the holy Pagans) were awaiting the victory of Christ. When Christ descended to hell, after the crucifixion and before the resurrection, he liberated those in the *limbus patrum* and took them with him to heaven.

Already in 1990, D'Costa averred that, "This category [of the Just who lived before Christ and who are saved] was understandably not extended by the Fathers to apply after Christ. However, logically, this category can be extended to those after Christ who have never been confronted by the gospel historically and existentially."<sup>103</sup> We notice

100. D'Costa, *Christianity and World Religions*, 29.

101. *Ibid.*, 163-164.

102. *Ibid.*, 159-187.

103. Gavin D'Costa, "'Extra Ecclesiam Nulla Salus' Revisited," *Religious Pluralism and Unbelief: Studies Critical and Comparative*, ed. Ian Hamnett (London: Routledge, 1990) 136.

that, with the addition of 'existentially', D'Costa enlarges the group of people who have not been confronted with the gospel. Many people, probably even those who are brought up in a Christian environment, have never been existentially confronted with the gospel, although they may have heard it proclaimed several times.<sup>104</sup>

We had to wait till 2009 before D'Costa made a full exposition of this renewed traditional argument.<sup>105</sup> In recovering and reusing the creedal statement that Christ 'descended into hell', D'Costa tries to salvage the unity between the causal, ontological and epistemological necessity of Christ for salvation understood as the beatific vision. D'Costa extends the existence of the *limbus patrum* to after the resurrection of Christ, as a 'logical space' for those non-Christians who, during their lifetime, were already ontologically related to Christ. At their death, these people are not yet ready for the beatific vision as they are unaware of Christ and the Trinity.<sup>106</sup> The fullness of salvation cannot be attained without knowledge of Christ, the Church and the Trinity. At the point of death, the category of non-Christians who are ontologically related to Christ are marked for salvation and must come to know Christ. In a similar move as Christ's proclamation of salvation to the Just, these non-Christians encounter Christ in the *limbus patrum*.

D'Costa makes it clear that this does not entail a 'second chance'. He maintains the Augustinian opinion that no new choices can be made *post-mortem*. This category of non-Christians are not converting in the proper sense of the word, for they are already (ontologically) related to Christ. What happens in the 'limbo of the Just' is not a 'new choice', but a 'maturation' of something that took shape during the lifetime of the person in question. These people discover in the *limbus patrum* whom they have been following and whom they have been worshipping, even if only implicitly.

104. This is exactly the point that Stephen Bullivant makes and expands to fine-tune D'Costa's suggestion. Bullivant proffers arguments from the history of theology and from the sociology of language to explain how people who have formally been exposed to the Gospel, yet without accepting it, can under certain circumstances still be considered inculpably ignorant of the Gospel. Stephen Bullivant, *The Salvation of Atheists and Catholic Dogmatic Theology*, Oxford Theological Monographs (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) 115-147, especially 131-146.

105. D'Costa, *Christianity and World Religions*, 159-187.

106. They cannot immediately go to purgatory, because, according to D'Costa, the *purgatorium* is also christologically oriented. A meeting with Christ prior to purgatory is therefore necessary.

#### IV. *Extra mundum nulla salus* or *extra mundum nulla damnatio*? Evaluating the Recent Proposal

The question of the salvation of the non-Christians remains an urgent topic in theology. This has only been exacerbated by the awareness of the many moral upright adherents of other religions who will never be existentially confronted with the gospel during their lives. It seems that a number of solutions are being proffered, again or anew, in order to account for their salvation. We could call some of these solutions ‘*extra mundum* solutions’, in that they deal with the issue after a person has left this world. These suggestions include a *peri-mortem* or *post-mortem* (i.e., a second) chance to choose Christ, the admission of non-Christians into purgatory, and Christ’s descent into Hades as an evangelisation of the not yet evangelised. These solutions come from across the confessional board.

There is a tendency towards soteriological universalism,<sup>107</sup> something that has been the case among Roman Catholic theologians for many decades already,<sup>108</sup> and in (liberal) Protestantism since the nineteenth century.<sup>109</sup> This was not always so. Augustine, and those following him, clearly thought that only a small number of the ancient Jews were saved, i.e., only the holy men (for example, the prophets). But now, it seems as if it is hard to find someone who will remain in hell, even if most theologians would state that this possibility cannot be excluded

107. Perhaps the notion of ‘asymptotic universalism’ covers this tendency: it is not quite an absolute universalism, but the closest to it possible.

108. In 1991, John Sachs could argue that “Rahner, like virtually every other contemporary Catholic theologian, explicitly rejects a ‘positive, theoretical doctrine about an apocatastasis’ but at the same time argues for an ‘unshakable hope’ that in the end all men and women will in fact enjoy eternal life.” John R. Sachs, S.J., “Current Eschatology: Universal Salvation and the Problem of Hell,” *Theological Studies* 52, no. 2 (1991) 227-254, p. 242. In a recent monograph, Ralph Martin argues at length against this tendency of exaggerated salvation optimism in Roman Catholic theology. Based on an extensive discussion of *Lumen Gentium* 16, he drives home the urgency of evangelisation. The fact that it is considered necessary to write such a work, proves that a ‘hopeful universalism’ is indeed prevalent. See Ralph Martin, *Will Many Be Saved? What Vatican II Actually Teaches and Its Implications for the New Evangelization* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012) especially 54-56.

109. It is interesting to note that soteriological universalism is beginning to be taken seriously as an option within Evangelicalism as well. Recognizing this change of mentality, Robin Parry who published in 2006 a monograph defending universalism from an Evangelical perspective under the pen name Gregory MacDonald, gave up pseudonymity a couple of years later. Gregory MacDonald, *The Evangelical Universalist: The Biblical Hope that God’s Love Will Save Us All* (London: SPCK, 2008; reprint, 2006).



*a priori*.<sup>110</sup> This asymptotic universalism has certainly gained ascendance through the experience of the vast number of non-Christians geographically and historically. This leads one to an interesting observation: as the awareness of the number of non-Christians increases, the number of those considered to be 'damned' decreases.<sup>111</sup> Ironically, this observation has a seemingly perverse corollary: when the thoroughgoing secularisation process is put to its extreme, and there are no longer Christians, i.e., if none are saved inside the Church then no one at all will be damned, because they will (almost) all be saved *extra mundum*. The new axiom would then be, *intra ecclesiam nulla salus, sed extra mundum nulla damnatio*.

However, notwithstanding this tendency to acknowledge salvation *extra mundum*, we must reckon with Edward Schillebeeckx's important reminder that salvation is always mediated socio-historically. He captured this conviction in the statement that, *extra mundum nulla salus*.<sup>112</sup> Schillebeeckx is here arguing against spiritualizing tendencies – also within Christianity – stressing that salvation is at the very least *human* salvation, including the historicity of humans. In being true to its origins, Christianity, according to Schillebeeckx, must insist that, *extra mundum nulla salus* – there is no salvation outside the world. Or put differently, salvation is necessarily mediated in a socio-historical way.

Although we concur with Schillebeeckx, one wonders if it is not one-sided to stress socio-historical mediation to the detriment of the eschatological dimension of salvation. Is not salvation (particularly in Roman Catholic theology) an ongoing process that finds its culmination eschatologically, thus, in some sense, *extra mundum*? Recognition of this dimension is not a negation of historicity, but an acknowledgment of the finitude of

110. As previously noted, Ralph Martin tackles this tendency head on (Martin, *Will Many Be Saved*). The many appraisals on the book cover and first pages, several from bishops and cardinals, suggest that perhaps the tide will turn.

111. See also Capéran, *Le problème (essai historique)*, 506-507. "Une évolution s'est accomplie, mais beaucoup moins dans l'ordre spéculatif que dans l'ordre psychologique. Elle peut se résumer en deux mots: progrès peu sensible dans les formules théologiques – elles étaient suffisamment larges – mais adoucissement notable dans les sentiments de ceux qui les appliquent; nul élargissement des principes et de l'enseignement théoriques, mais bienveillance plus grande dans le jugement des faits. Au lieu d'être enclin à la sévérité, on pousse le plus loin possible les limites de l'indulgence humaine, et, à l'instant même où l'on doit s'arrêter on veut songer encore que Dieu, comme dirait Leibniz, est 'plus philanthrope que les hommes'."

112. Letter from Edward Schillebeeckx to the Participants in the Symposium 'Theology for the 21st Century: The Enduring Relevance of Edward Schillebeeckx for Contemporary Theology' (Leuven – December 3-6, 2008) – also in Edward Schillebeeckx, "Questions on Christian Salvation of and for Man," *Toward Vatican III: The Work That Needs to be Done*, ed. David Tracy, Hans Küng, Johann Baptist Metz (Dublin: Gill and MacMillan, 1978) 3.

our historicity. It is precisely in recognizing the limits of our humanity, and hence the *partial* outworking of our salvation in this life, that we give historicity its full weight. Salvation begins – necessarily *intra* mundum. But we confess that it is *extra* mundum that it finds its fulfilment. Denying this would be a presumptuous over-realized eschatology.

It is, of course, difficult to imagine what happens, if anything, between death and final judgement. It is a balancing act to steer between an overly spiritualised understanding of the intermediate state and an excessively historical one. Matthew Levering contrasts in this respect the opinion of N. T. Wright<sup>113</sup> and Hilarion Alfeyev.<sup>114</sup> He is concerned that Wright's conception of the intermediate state is not sufficiently "connected to human history, especially the history of salvation,"<sup>115</sup> whereas his concern about Alfeyev's portrait of the intermediate state is that it offers the soul awaiting the resurrection of the body "a new historical life with a new opportunity to hearing the Gospel."<sup>116</sup> According to Levering, "There cannot be one life for the human person as a soul-body unity, followed by another life – with the same fundamental choice at stake – as a separated soul."<sup>117</sup> Aquinas steers between these two extremes, avers Levering, in understanding Christ's descent into hell as a vindication of Israel through the salvation of the Old Testament saints, while at the same time staying away from interpreting the descent as a new soteriological mission.<sup>118</sup>

It seems to us that D'Costa's solution complies with these desiderata, although it goes considerably beyond the salvation of the Old Testament saints. In D'Costa's solution, and others like it, there is recognition of the trans-historical aspect of salvation which is being argued for through the liberation of those in 'hell'. Whatever the specifics of this 'hell' (limbo, *damnatorium*, or even *purgatorium*), it confirms (1) the Lordship of Christ and the sufficiency of his salvation, (2) the presence of the Holy Spirit even outside the bounds of the visible Church, for he blows where he wills, (3) and the love and justice of God the Father, who wills that all should come to salvation and does not deny anyone the possibility of being related to the paschal mystery.<sup>119</sup>

113. N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008).

114. Alfeyev, *Christ the Conqueror of Hell*.

115. Levering, *Jesus and the Demise of Death*, 19.

116. *Ibid.*, 22.

117. *Ibid.*

118. *Ibid.*, 26.

119. Cf. *Gaudium et Spes: Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* (www.vatican.va, 1965) #22.

This does not mean that this solution is without its problems. Capéran critiqued this solution proffered by nineteenth-century Protestant theologians in rather harsh words: "The theory of evangelisation in hell gives the impression of being an outdated construction that has been replastered by lack of a better shelter."<sup>120</sup> In his theological evaluation of his exhaustive historical study, Capéran claims that Protestant theologians solve the complex situation of the salvation of non-Christians through a sort of *deus ex machina*.<sup>121</sup> Though D'Costa's solution is more sophisticated than the ones Capéran criticises, some would claim that it still feels like playing a trump card.

Nevertheless, we are in basic agreement with D'Costa's schema, especially if its fine-tuning by Bullivant is adopted. Earlier, we mentioned that he explains what prevents people to be existentially confronted with the Gospel.<sup>122</sup> Bullivant also offers reasons for optimism regarding the possible salvation of atheists. From the magisterial documents, one could get the impression that adherents of other religions have more opportunities than atheists for encountering grace. The religions function in some sense as *praeparatio evangelica*, offering their adherents means of encountering grace, means which are not at the disposal of atheists. Bullivant suggests that Mt 25:31-46, properly understood, gives atheists equal opportunities to be saved. What they have done to "the least of these my brothers," says Jesus, they "did it to me." "The principle," argues Bullivant, "is this: for an atheist who is inculpably ignorant of the gospel, the objective encounter with Christ in his *minimi* [the least of these my brothers] is the pre-eminent *locus* for him or her receiving the grace necessary for (eventually) attaining salvation."<sup>123</sup> When such an atheist dies, he or she encounters Christ, "not as some totally new reality, but rather, as one in whose presence [he or she] has already been."<sup>124</sup>

There remain, however, some problems with D'Costa's approach. Particularly, the concept of the ongoing reality of the *limbus patrum* as a 'logical space' after Christ's descent, is not without problems. Edward Oakes points in the right direction in seeing "the underworld as less

120. "La théorie de l'évangélisation aux enfers a l'air d'une construction surannée, recrépie tant bien que mal faute de meilleur abri." Capéran, *Le problème (essai historique)*, 587 (my translation).

121. "Ainsi les théologiens protestants contemporains dénouent par une sorte de *deux* [sic] *ex machina* la situation compliquée des infidèles." Capéran, *Le problème (essai théologique)*, 5.

122. See footnote 104.

123. Bullivant, *Salvation of Atheists*, 168.

124. *Ibid.*, 172.

differentiated at the moment of Christ's descent [...]."<sup>125</sup> Oakes thinks that after Christ's resurrection, purgatory applies to non-Christians and is, "for all souls who die [...] an encounter *with Christ*."<sup>126</sup>

Our own suggestion, however, is that between the resurrection of Christ and the general resurrection at the Last Judgment, there is only one objective intermediate state, distinguished in two subjective states: the righteous and baptized in one, the unrighteous in another.<sup>127</sup> The first, which includes non-Christians who during their lifetime were ontologically related to Christ, experience their state as 'Paradise', even if they are still awaiting the resurrection of their bodies. In that intermediate state, the souls of the faithful departed are in a dynamic relation with Christ and each other.<sup>128</sup> If the souls of the Christian faithful in that intermediate state, proclaim Jesus some way or another, those who during their lives on earth never heard of Jesus, are now given the opportunity to recognize him whom they met in the least (Mt 25), as Jesus, their Christ and Saviour.<sup>129</sup>

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125. Oakes, "Descensus and Development," 20.

126. *Ibid.*, 21.

127. We will develop this in a future article.

128. This secures the Christological character of the intermediate state, and the communion of the saints.

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