



THE PROBLEM OF HELL: THE PRESENCE-UNION MODEL

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ABSTRACT: This article focuses on addressing Marilyn McCord Adams' 'Problem of Hell' - the argument that eternal damnation is incompatible with divine goodness and omnipotence. While Adams proposes universalism as the solution, this raises concerns about preserving human freedom and moral responsibility. Drawing on insights from Thomas Hopko, Richard Swinburne, Jacques Maritain, and Alexander Pruss (as supported by various Christian patristic writers), I develop the 'Presence-Union' model of hell that reconciles eternal separation from God with divine goodness. This model demonstrates how the unveiled presence of divine love, combined with a miraculous restoration of natural felicity and the distinction between formal and real union with God, provides a coherent alternative to both traditional views of hell and universalism, and maintains both divine mercy and the gravity of human moral choice.

KEYWORDS: Problem of hell; presence-union model; problem of hell; universalism; divine hiddenness; theosis

Introduction

Marilyn McCord Adams (1991) identifies the traditional doctrine of hell – wherein some rational creatures endure unending torment and irrevocable separation from God – as arguably the most severe problem of evil for Christian theology. We can term this the 'Problem of Hell', which fundamentally questions how the existence of eternal damnation can be reconciled with the nature of God, specifically his perfect goodness, love, and omnipotence. The core issue is the apparent untenability of affirming both God's character and the possibility of hell. This "untenability" can be understood primarily as a challenge to the *logical coherence* of holding both beliefs simultaneously, suggesting a potential contradiction between divine perfection and eternal ruin for creatures. Adams argues that such an outcome represents a state of affairs so contrary

to divine goodness that it appears logically impossible for a perfectly loving and omnipotent God to permit. The Presence-Union model aims to resolve this logical tension by proposing a conception of hell that is arguably compatible with divine attributes, demonstrating how one might rationally endorse both the existence of hell and a robust understanding of God's character without falling into contradiction. More precisely, as formulated specifically by Adams and addressed in this article, the problem highlights the apparent contradiction between a God who is perfectly good and desires the flourishing of all creatures, and the reality or possibility of some creatures ending in a state of eternal horror, devoid of all possible goods, within a world He creates and sustains. While Adams focuses on the implication of God creating such a situation, it is acknowledged that other models of hell, such as separationist views where individuals are seen as 'sending themselves' to hell (e.g., Lewis 1946), frame divine causality differently. This article primarily engages with the problem as posed by Adams, focusing on whether the state of hell itself, however arrived at, is compatible with divine goodness, rather than extensively debating the precise causal chain leading to it. We can thus state the specific formulation of the problem addressed here more succinctly as follows:

- (1) (Problem of Hell) In light of the attributes of God, it is argued to be philosophically and theologically untenable (specifically, logically incoherent) that God would create and permit a situation in which even a single rational creature ends in eternal horror, devoid of all possible goods.

Adams (1991, pp. 301-305) argues that such an outcome irreconcilably conflicts with the core attributes of the Christian God. She contends that if God truly possesses perfect love for all his creatures, then consigning even one individual to everlasting misery seems to represent a radical dissonance between divine character and divine action. It's important to distinguish here between God's perfect will and his desire; while God might desire universal salvation, other factors, such as respecting creaturely freedom, might prevent his will from perfectly aligning with this desire in every case. However, for Adams, the very possibility of eternal hell calls into question God's benevolence and the moral structure of creation. Adams further emphasizes that the problem of hell presents a unique challenge compared to ordinary earthly suffering. While temporal evils might arguably be outweighed or redeemed by greater goods within a life, Adams (ibid., p. 309) posits that the infinite and permanent loss incurred by eternal damnation can never be balanced or defeated (ibid., p. 309). This is primarily due to the infinite 'size gap' between God and creatures; God's infinite goodness should, Adams (1999, pp. 36-39) suggests, overcome any finite evil a creature might

embrace. In a scenario featuring eternal damnation, God's aims for universal good and the integrity of divine love appear fundamentally compromised. The traditional doctrine, therefore, risks portraying God not as a loving Father, but as a perpetrator of ultimate, irredeemable harm.

From Adams's (1991, p. 314) perspective, the issue is rooted in the ontological and axiological disparity between God and creatures. God's free creative act aims to communicate divine goodness; thus, it seems morally incongruent for God to permit any individual to be permanently cut off from their final end and highest fulfilment in Him. Adams argues that the problem cannot be resolved by appealing solely to creaturely sinfulness or divine justice, because no finite fault can warrant an infinite penalty. Nor is it sufficient to claim God owes creatures nothing. Given the profound disproportion involved and the nature of divine love, traditional hell remains an unmitigated moral horror.

Consequently, Adams (ibid., pp. 324-327) contends that securing the consistency of Christian theology requires rejecting eternal, irredeemable punishment. If God is infinitely resourceful and genuinely wills each creature's ultimate good, He would surely not create beings destined for eternal ruination. This reasoning appears to strongly support universal salvation. However, it is debatable whether Adams herself unequivocally presents universal salvation as the only option. While she argues compellingly against traditional hell and finds universalism the most promising resolution—as Adams (ibid., p. 326) writes: “Universalism seems best suited to reflect the metaphysical facts”—she primarily presses the logical implications that some radical revision is unavoidable to maintain the coherence of Christian theism. Taking Adams's critique into account, the challenge can be formalized. Let's restate the Problem of Hell Argument, incorporating God's knowledge as Adams implicitly does, as follows:¹

(2) (Problem of Hell Argument)

P1: A perfectly good and omnipotent God desires the ultimate, unsurpassable good (eternal flourishing in communion with Him) for every rational creature He creates, and knows the possible outcomes for each creature.
P2: The traditional doctrine of hell entails that some rational creatures endure eternal suffering and irrevocable separation from God, thus failing to achieve this ultimate good.

¹ Divine omniscience sharpens the problem: a God who knows in advance that a creature will end in eternal horror faces a difficult moral choice regarding that creature's creation, adding another layer to the tension with divine goodness.

P3: An omnipotent and omniscient God is capable of knowing how to and being able to ensure that every rational creature achieves this ultimate good or preventing the creation of those known inevitably to fail.

P4: A perfectly good God (given P1 and P3) would ensure that every rational creature He creates achieves this ultimate good, or would not create creatures destined solely for irrevocable ruin.

C: Therefore, the traditional doctrine of hell (entailing P2) is incompatible with the existence of a perfectly good, omniscient, and omnipotent God.

Despite the force of Adams's critique, affirming universalism straightforwardly raises its own complications, particularly concerning creaturely freedom and moral responsibility. If universal salvation is the inevitable outcome, does this render human moral agency illusory or inconsequential? This objection mirrors charges against figures such as St. Gregory of Nyssa (1903, 1993), suggesting universalism neglects robust libertarian freedom. Thus, while Adams compellingly argues against the moral possibility of traditional eternal damnation, simply substituting universalism risks shifting the tension: reconciling universal salvation with genuine freedom requires careful consideration. Specifically, a successful universalist account needs a more nuanced theory of divine action and creaturely freedom than is often assumed. It must explain how God can ensure universal reconciliation while preserving the authenticity of creaturely choice, perhaps exploring models beyond Adams's own framework, such as Molinism or theological compatibilism, both of which offer accounts (though controversial) of reconciling meticulous providence with human freedom.

Therefore, Adams's powerful critique, while effectively dismantling traditional views of hell, doesn't automatically establish universalism as the sole viable alternative without addressing these significant philosophical challenges regarding freedom. The task remains to develop a model of post-mortem reality that honours both divine goodness and the gravity of free moral choices, avoiding both eternal horror and simplistic determinism. Hence, simply dismissing the eternal hell scenario in favour of universalism without addressing these philosophical challenges leaves a conceptual gap. Just as traditional hell doctrines appear incompatible with divine goodness, so a simplistic universalism may appear incompatible with genuine libertarian freedom. Hence, we encounter a similar logical structure: we must classify the outcome as either necessarily universal or contingently universal. The former option seems to preclude

the possibility of meaningful moral decisions, the latter to conflict with the necessity of divine benevolence as established by Adams.

Now, the focus of this article will not be on achieving that specific goal,² neither will it contest Adams's core problem regarding the incompatibility between traditional eternal damnation and divine goodness. Instead, we will explore a philosophical approach to resolving the tension her argument creates and provide an alternative to the universalism that she puts forward as the best option. Specifically, we will focus on proposing a new, combinatorial model of hell, through the utilisation of concepts from Thomas Hopko (on divine presence), Richard Swinburne (on epistemic distance), Jacques Maritain (on natural felicity), and Alexander Pruss (on *agápeic* love and formal/real union), this article aims to construct a conception of hell – termed the 'Presence-Union' model (PU model) – that addresses Adams's concerns. This model incorporates the unveiling of divine presence and a potential restoration of natural felicity, thereby avoiding unending misery while maintaining eternal separation from 'theosis' (i.e., formal *and* real union with God through His energies) and upholding the significance of human moral freedom.

The plan of action is as follows: in section 2 ('The Nature of Hell Foundation (i)'), we will examine Hopko's understanding of hell as the experience of God's unveiled presence, including a detailed discussion of how this divine presence becomes either joy or torment depending on one's spiritual disposition. In section 3 ('The Nature of Hell Construction (i)'), we will apply Swinburne's concept of epistemic distance to further explicate why the removal of divine hiddenness results in suffering for those who have rejected God. In section 4 ('The Nature of Hell Foundation (ii)'), we will explore Maritain's vision of how the damned may experience a form of natural felicity through divine mercy, even while remaining separated from the theotic union. In section 5 ('The Experience of Hell Construction (ii)'), we will employ Pruss' understanding of *agápeic* love to distinguish between the formal and real unions possible with God, clarifying the eternal state of both the saved and damned. In section 6, ('Dealing with the Problem of Hell: The Presence-Union Model and Adams' Objection') we will see how the PU model meets the critical demands raised by Adams' argument, thus offering a theologically and philosophically coherent solution to the problem at hand. Finally, in Section 7 ('Distinguishing the Presence Union Model from Universalism, Eternal Conscious Torment, and Annihilationism'), we will locate the PU model within the contemporary taxonomy of Christian eschatological positions by clarifying its points of divergence from these three leading alternatives. After this there will be a concluding section ('Conclusion'), which will summarise our findings and conclude the article.

² For that see (Sijuwade, 2025).

The Nature of Hell Foundation (i): Hopko on Divine Presence and Hell

According to Thomas Hopko (1976), the nature of hell is fundamentally rooted in the reality of God's love and presence, which will be fully revealed at the end of the ages in the coming of Christ.³ The ultimate reality of hell is not to be understood as a separate place of punitive retribution, but rather as the very presence of the God, in Christ, experienced in a state of estrangement and rejection.⁴ This is the doctrine of the final manifestation of God's glory in Christ – a reality that can be succinctly expressed as follows:

(3) (Nature of Hell₁) In the end, all rational creatures will behold the unveiled presence of God's radiant love in Christ; for the righteous, this will be unending joy and fulfilment, while for those who reject divine love, the same presence will be an eternal torment and sorrow.

More fully, this eschatological event, Hopko contends, will constitute the final judgment of all human beings, as each person is confronted with the undeniable reality of God in Christ. At the consummation of all things, the 'Kingdom of God' will thus be fully revealed in the person of Christ, and all will be compelled to confront His glory 'face-to-face'. In the present age, as noted by Hopko (1976), it is possible for some to live as though there were no God – denying the reality of Christ's incarnation, resurrection, and the life of the Holy Spirit in the Church. And such indifference or hostility may persist for a time, but at the end of the ages, according to Hopko (1976), every created being will stand before the truth of Christ's victory. At that moment, the hiddenness of God will be lifted, and the divine love, as Hopko notes, that now shines secretly in the faithful will blaze forth with irresistible splendour. Those who have united their hearts to Christ in this life, as noted by Hopko, will recognise in His presence their eternal beatitude – an infinite blessedness of communion, knowledge,

³ An influential account of this conceptualisation of hell within Eastern Orthodox theology, alongside that of Hopko's (1976), is provided by that of Alexandre Kalomiros (1980). Moreover, it is important to note that R. Zachary Manis (2019, 2024) has extensively developed and defended a similar view, termed the 'Divine presence model'. The 'Presence-Union' model, within this section, can be taken to be viewed as an alternative model to the one proposed by him. More fully, my Presence Union model aligns with Manis by rejecting any straightforward separationist picture and by treating the eschatological crisis as an encounter with divine love rather than a mere divine absence, yet it departs from his Divine presence model by adding a principled mitigation of unrelieved misery through Maritain's notion of restored natural felicity and by deploying Pruss's distinction between formal and real union, so that divine mercy can secure a stable natural good for the damned while still preserving the non-universality of theosis. Hence, my model is a deliberately combinatorial proposal, drawing in distinct ways on Hopko's account of hell as the unveiled presence of divine love, Swinburne's epistemic-distance framework, Maritain's speculation about a merciful restoration of natural felicity, and Pruss' agápēic distinction between formal and real union.

⁴ The term 'hell' is taken to apply here primarily to the state of the 'damned' after judgement, but what is also going to be developed below applies to the experience of hell immediately after death.

and love. Conversely, those who have willed to live without God, shutting themselves off from divine grace – let's term those individuals the 'damned' – will find this very presence to be unbearable. It is not that God's love changes, or that His glory inflicts arbitrary punishment; rather, the very same divine radiance that illuminates 'the saints' will burn as a scourge in the hearts of those who hate the Lord. This aligns precisely with the teaching of St. Basil the Great (1963), who in his exegesis of the Psalms articulates that the voice of the Lord divides the flame of fire; this division implies that the fire possesses both a burning and an illuminating quality, whereby the light is allotted to the righteous for their enjoyment, while the burning quality is reserved for the ungodly as a source of pain. Thus, the 'Kingdom of Heaven' – at the end of the ages – is not a different state for the saved and the damned; it is the one reality of God's revealed glory. Specifically, the very presence of Christ, who suffered and died for the salvation of all, will itself be the judgment, thus rendering impossible any further evasion or denial of God. This is the 'scourge of love' – the inescapable revelation of divine love and glory that will either illuminate or consume each human soul, depending on their inner disposition towards God. For those who have cultivated a love for God and His creation throughout their earthly lives, then Christ's presence will be experienced as infinite joy, paradise, and eternal life. Consequently, having made God their 'all' in this life through prayer, virtue, and spiritual purification, they will find in His unveiled face the fulfilment of all they have sought. In other words, divine love will be for them radiant bliss and unspeakable delight, as they participate forever in the very life of the Trinity.

For those, however, who have rejected or disregarded God in this life, making themselves and earthly things their 'all', the same revelation of Christ's glory, according to Hopko, will be experienced as infinite torture, hell, and eternal death. The 'all-consuming fire' of God's love will be for them an unbearable scourge, as the truth they have sought to evade or suppress is made irresistibly manifest. In this way, Hopko affirms a symmetrical understanding of heaven and hell as the same divine reality experienced differently depending on the state of each human soul. And this corresponds to the view of St. Gregory of Nyssa, who likens the presence of God to a refiner's fire that separates gold from dross – with St. Gregory arguing that the agony arises not from the fire itself, but from the soul's stubborn attachment to the dross of vice, which the divine presence necessarily consumes. Hence, there is no separate 'place' of material fire or physical torment created by God to punish sinners. Rather, it is the unmediated presence of God's glorious love itself that will be the source of either eternal joy or eternal suffering. As St. Isaac the Syrian (1984) vividly expresses, those who find themselves in hell will be 'chastised by the scourge of love' – a greater suffering than any external torture could inflict. For to sin against love, and to know that one has done so, is the greatest of all sorrows. At the same time, as Hopko notes, along with St. Isaac (1984), that hell cannot rightly be construed as a deprivation of God's love. Indeed, the fire of divine love is present to all – but it acts in two different ways according to the spiritual state of the recipient. For the redeemed, it is radiant joy, but for the reproved, it will be experienced as anguish. The damned suffer not from any deficiency in God's love, but rather from their own incapacity to receive it as love. Thus, they are tormented not by the absence of God, but by His very presence,

which has become unbearable to them. In this understanding of hell, Hopko locates man's eternal destiny entirely in His response to the love of God made fully manifest in Christ. Heaven and hell are not separate 'places' prepared by God, but rather the ultimate consequences of each person's fundamental orientation towards divine love. One's eternal fate, in this sense, is the result of a process of choice and character formation in this life, which reaches its definitive conclusion at the final revelation of Christ in glory.

With this view, Hopko aims both to uphold the reality of hell as the ultimate consequence of human freedom, and to make clear that damnation is not a result of any failure or limit in divine love. God desires the salvation of all, but He will not override the creature's faculty of choice, even if that choice be for eternal misery. Hell, in this sense, is the logical outworking of the very love and glory that make heaven what it is. The two are inseparable aspects of the one final truth of divine love, which will embrace all of creation at the end of the ages. While all must behold Christ's love and glory, the response to that love and glory is shaped by each creature's freely formed character and will. The eternal destinies that unfold – eternal joy or eternal torment – are thus not imposed arbitrarily. Instead, they emerge organically from the creature's own spiritual trajectory. The very knowledge of God's unimaginable love, if rejected, becomes a source of intolerable pain.

Now, one might question the coherence of this model, asking if hell becomes merely subjective or perspectival – simply a 'state of mind' dependent on perception, rather than objective eternal unhappiness (cf. Lewis (1946)). Hopko's model resists this reduction. While the *experience* is subjective (joy vs. torment), the *reality* encountered – God's unveiled presence – is objective and universal. The state is not *merely* psychological; it is the ontological condition of a creature whose formed character is fundamentally misaligned with the ultimate reality (God's love and glory) it now irrevocably confronts. Hell, on this view, is not just perceiving things negatively; it is the genuine, objective *unfittiness* and resultant suffering of a permanently disordered soul encountering perfect Goodness. This model appears coherent provided one accepts that i) God's presence is the ultimate reality, ii) creaturely disposition can be definitively fixed in opposition to God, and iii) the confrontation between a fixed evil disposition and inescapable divine goodness inherently results in suffering. This suffering, the 'scourge of love', constitutes a state of eternal unhappiness because the creature is eternally locked in a condition contrary to its own created nature and ultimate good, even though the source of the torment is, paradoxically, Love itself.

In light of this conception of the nature of hell that has been provided by Hopko, it will be helpful to now further explicate the reason why the beholding of God's love, goodness and glory, in Christ, results in the experience of 'hell' for those who have not submitted to these things before the end of the ages. To do this, we will now focus on the notion of the 'epistemic distance', as conceptualised by Richard Swinburne.

The Nature of Hell Construction (i): The Suffering of Divine Presence

As noted, the PU model's concept of hell can be further elucidated using Swinburne's (2004) notion of epistemic distance and its removal. Hell involves experiencing God's unmediated presence, bringing fulfilment to the righteous and torment to those oriented toward evil. This gains clarity via Swinburne's insights into epistemic distance and choice—with the PU model seeking to build upon, and in some areas refine, these insights. Hence, we can state this elucidation of the first foundational element of the PU model as follows:

(4) (Nature of Hell ₂)	In the end, when God removes all epistemic distance at the final judgment: <ul style="list-style-type: none">(i) Each rational creature will have a certain and profound awareness of the divine presence. Those who have oriented themselves toward divine goodness will find this presence their eternal joy.(ii) Conversely, those whose characters are inclined toward evil—and who can no longer ignore God's reality—will be compelled toward the good despite having disordered desires, resulting in a state of significant inner conflict and anguish.
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Central to our further explication of the notion of hell is Swinburne's view that genuine free moral choice requires not only the possibility of evil but also a certain 'epistemic distance' from God. According to Swinburne, if a person became fully and unequivocally aware of God's presence in the present life—recognising God as the all-good creator who approves of good and disapproves of evil—then, provided they possess even a moderate desire for divine approval, it would become almost impossible to choose evil. The knowledge that wrongdoing would displease a perfectly good, loving God, on whom one's very existence depends, would strongly favour choosing the good. In that situation, choosing evil would *seemingly* no longer be a realistic option but an inexplicable deviation. However, Manis (2019, pp. 262-269) critiques this line of reasoning, arguing it rests on the suppressed and contestable assumption that the desire for divine approval invariably outweighs all competing desires, even for fallen creatures. He suggests that concupiscence or deeply ingrained vice could lead individuals to choose against God even with full awareness of His reality and disapproval. While acknowledging Manis' critique, the PU model maintains that the *removal* of epistemic distance fundamentally alters the conditions for choice, making sustained, free rebellion against a fully manifest God

psychologically untenable for reasons explored below, even if Manis is correct about choices made *under* conditions of hiddenness.

To grasp this all more fully, we must consider the human desires involved. That is, as Swinburne notes, it is natural and appropriate to seek approval, to value esteem and friendship – especially friendship with goodness itself, and ultimately with God; being loved by a perfectly good, all-powerful, and supremely wise God is of immense value. Morally and spiritually, it would be problematic not to care whether such a being regards us well. However, if our awareness of God's reality is so immediate and undeniable that we cannot doubt His existence or question His disapproval of evil, then our desire for divine approval, combined with natural affection, would create a moral environment devoid of genuine temptation. The inclination to choose the good would be so dominant that choosing evil would cease to be a real possibility. Thus, a genuine choice between good and evil requires some tension between desires. Now, one might raise the charge that this appears to conflict with the traditional Christian account of the fall in Genesis 3, where Adam and Eve seemingly chose evil despite being in God's presence. However, the PU model posits that the *post-Fall* condition, marked by corrupted nature and will, combined with the *eschatological, unveiled* presence of God, creates a unique dynamic not present in the *pre-Fall* state described in Genesis. The argument here pertains specifically to the conditions after the final judgment.

Hence, one must be able to be tempted by what we know is wrong and resist that temptation if we choose. Without epistemic distance – that is, with God's presence fully manifest – our awareness of God's approval of the good and disapproval of evil would resemble a parent's vigilant gaze over a child seeking their favour (Swinburne *ibid.*, p. 269). In such circumstances, the 'temptation' to do wrong would be so diminished as to remove the possibility of a genuine moral struggle. One would 'inevitably do the good' (*ibid.*, p. 269) not through free moral effort, but because rational and emotional pressures to act otherwise would no longer exist. The only way that a strong awareness of God's presence could coexist with genuine free will would be if God created individuals sufficiently malicious or perverse to value evil more than divine approval. Yet, according to Swinburne, this would be an undesirable scenario – endorsing cruelty, harm, and selfishness over divine love is not a commendable state of affairs. Since natural dispositions themselves can be good or evil, and not all goods can be realised simultaneously, God maintains a degree of epistemic distance in our earthly life. This distance enables authentic moral choices amid uncertainty, temptation, and competing desires. It is, therefore, a necessary condition for the meaningful exercise of free will. Thus, one's present moral freedom depends on God's self-concealment, as without epistemic distance, the moral landscape would be skewed: God's unmistakable presence, combined with our desire for His approval, would render wrongdoing an irrational anomaly rather than a plausible choice. And

thus, in building on this, it is now posited that only in the final eschatological moment, when this epistemic distance is removed, does the full significance of our character formation emerge. Those with malformed characters will find themselves in a conflict they cannot resolve, experiencing what we term ‘hell’. That is, to preserve genuine freedom, God remains epistemically hidden during our earthly lives. By allowing uncertainty, God ensures that we have a variety of motives: we want to be loved by the good (including God), but we also face real temptations to selfishness, cruelty, or dishonesty. This tension allows for genuinely free moral decisions. We can resist temptation out of love and respect for goodness—despite not fully comprehending its source—or we can yield to evil when we fail to trust what is not fully apparent. Thus, epistemic distance is a necessary precondition for moral agency during earthly life. Without it, moral growth through choice would not be possible.

At the eschatological event, however, the period for moral growth based on faith amid uncertainty ends. God appears in undeniable glory, and epistemic distance concerning God's reality, goodness, and power is lifted or drastically reduced. Whether this distance is removed *entirely* or *asymptotically*—progressively diminishing yet never fully reaching zero given God's infinite depth—is debatable. For the purposes of this model, the crucial point is that the distance is reduced to such an extent that ignorance or doubt about God's essential nature and moral authority is no longer a viable basis for creaturely choice. Furthermore, while the epistemic distance between the creature and *God* is catastrophically diminished, it's conceivable that some epistemic distance *between creatures* might remain, potentially allowing for ongoing relational dynamics, even negative ones, though the capacity for *moral growth* in the sense of fundamentally altering one's orientation towards God is considered closed. That is, when Christ appears in unveiled glory at the eschatological event, this epistemic distance regarding God's existence and character is effectively removed. No rational agent can remain ‘agnostic’—in that the fact of God's existence, goodness, and disapproval of wrongdoing becomes entirely or overwhelmingly certain. Even if God's infinite nature prevents absolute removal of all distance, enough is revealed to make the truth about God's reality and moral character unavoidable, sufficient for judgment and the consequences described. Hence, under these conditions, the psychological and spiritual dynamics that shape character in this life undergo a radical transformation. As, before this, balanced ignorance and uncertainty allowed for genuine moral effort: we could choose good or evil in the face of incomplete information. Afterwards, no such ambiguity remains: everyone now recognises that wrongdoing elicits divine disapproval, and *perhaps* everyone knows that God is infinitely worthy of love and obedience. The PU model thus posits a complete removal of epistemic distance regarding God's reality and moral character, while arguing that the experience of this revealed reality differs based on creaturely disposition. Moreover, the PU model suggests the final unveiling *constitutes* hell for the unprepared, forcing a recognition of

God's worth even if it conflicts violently with their formed character, leading to the anguish described. Hence, for those conformed to the good, the inclination to act rightly becomes decisive.

Yet, this situation presents a paradox for those who have chosen evil. As in their earthly life, they developed character traits oriented toward malice, selfishness, cruelty, and indifference to divine love. And such ingrained dispositions do not disappear at the moment of revelation. Instead, the individual, as they have become, now stands before the overwhelming reality of God's love and moral perfection. On the one hand, they have every reason and motivation to do what is right—that is, the desire for divine approval cannot be dismissed. On the other hand, their character is deeply corrupted and inclined toward wrongdoing—their will is oriented toward evil, yet the conditions for freely choosing evil (e.g. moral ambiguity and epistemic distance)—no longer exist. The soul desires the good because it now knows, beyond doubt, that it is the better path, that God's love is supremely desirable, and that God's disapproval is dreadful. However, since the soul's character was formed against this truth, it experiences severe tension and torment. In this state, the corrupt character drives the individual to resist the good, but it cannot rationally choose evil in the face of clear knowledge of God's nature and will. The individual is 'stuck' in a situation where the natural spiritual outcome would be to embrace the good. However, since it is still internally aligned with evil desires, it faces an internal compulsion in direct opposition to those desires. Hence, by God removing the epistemic distance between Him and all humans eliminates the former equilibrium: now one cannot sin casually or 'in secret', cannot rely on agnosticism, and cannot pretend that it does not matter. The divine love once spurned is now fully revealed, producing constant internal friction that manifests as agony, regret, and suffering.

This state thus corresponds to what we have described as hell: the souls encountering God's presence with morally deformed hearts are not subjected to external punitive measures; instead, they undergo the natural consequences of confronting truth and goodness without any remaining illusions. Their anguish arises from recognising that their entire character formation is opposed to what they now unavoidably perceive as the ultimate good. This is, they cannot return to ignorance and sin effortlessly, nor can they readily embrace the divine love they once rejected. The intensity of God's presence now ensures that they would inevitably do what is good if their character permitted it, but their malformed will prevent them from taking pleasure in what they must acknowledge as right. Therefore, hell is not merely the pain of existing in opposition to an 'abstract' form of divine love; rather, it is the torment of a soul trapped in moral contradiction. One's deepest habits and inclinations have been shaped by evil, yet the undeniable awareness of God's goodness renders further wrongdoing no longer a free choice but a psychological impossibility. The resulting imbalance, internal conflict, and remorse are a continuous source of

suffering. And a further patristic analogue for this loss of life-giving participation appears in St. John of Damascus (1899), who describes humanity as originally led ‘through communion with Himself to incorruption’, while transgression leaves us ‘stripped of our communion with God’ and ‘shut out from life’, which mirrors the emphasis that has been made here on anguish as the consequence of confronting God without restorative communion.

The application of Swinburne’s concept of epistemic distance to our first conceptual foundation concerning hell, provided by Hopko, thus clarifies and reinforces the traditional understanding: the torment of hell is the inevitable consequence when uncertainty is removed and a soul that has chosen evil must now face, unavoidably, the radiant reality of God’s love, goodness and glory. With this we have detailed, and further explicated, our first foundational element of the nature of hell proposed by the PU model. It will be important to turn our attention now onto our second foundational element, which concerns the nature of the experience of hell for the ‘damned’, as has been proposed by Jacques Maritain.

The Experience of Hell Foundation (i): Maritain’s Reverie

For Maritain, rather than one envisioning the damned in hell as experiencing a life that is permanently consigned to unrelieved agony, one should, if speculatively, hold to the position that, after the final judgment, God may confer upon them a miraculous restoration of their natural love for the Creator. While this does not constitute redemption or a return to grace, it does provide a form of ‘natural felicity’ that ameliorates certain aspects of their suffering. We can state this position more succinctly as follows:

(5) (The Experience of Hell₁) In the end, at the final judgment, the damned remain in hell yet experience a transformative elevation from a lower, more tormenting region to a higher state marked by natural love for God as the author of their being. Although the pain of loss—namely, the permanent deprivation of theosis—remains intact, it now coexists with a degree of natural insight and gratitude.

Within this perspective, hell can thus be understood in a nuanced way that reconciles the traditional doctrine of eternal damnation with an appreciation of God’s universal mercy. Maritain (1997) proposes that after the final judgment, God may grant the damned a ‘special grace’, restoring them to a state of natural love for God as the author of their being. This would not constitute a form of universalism or apokatastasis, as it

would not involve the restoration of the damned to the supernatural theosis. Rather, it would be a mitigation of their suffering – a transfer from the depths of hell to a higher state of ‘natural felicity’. This miraculous intervention would be brought about through the prayers of the saints, who intercede for the conversion of all, even the eternally lost. And a patristic warrant for this framing of post-mortem intercession as meaningful, even when the departed are morally compromised, appears in St. Cyril of Jerusalem’s (1953) account of Eucharistic commemoration, since he writes that when we offer to Him our supplications for those who have fallen asleep, though they be sinners, we offer Christ ‘propitiating our merciful God’ for them as well as for ourselves. And God, in His infinite power and goodness, could *perhaps* choose to suspend the ordinary laws of nature and penetrate the core of the damned soul, reorienting its will towards the natural love of God.

This suggestion by Maritain, however, presents difficulties for an anti-universalist framework. If God *can* unilaterally reorient the will of a damned soul towards the natural good, even without restoring grace, the question arises: why wouldn’t He do so for *all* souls to the degree necessary to prevent their damnation in the first place, or at least to prepare them for His unveiled presence? If such intervention is possible without violating essential creaturely freedom (as Maritain seems to imply by distinguishing it from salvation), it challenges the idea that damnation results from an irrevocable creaturely choice that God *cannot* overcome. The PU model incorporates Maritain’s idea of natural felicity as a speculative possibility, granted through mercy, that mitigates the *misery* (pain of sense) but not the *separation* (pain of loss) of hell. It does not rely on the claim that God *suspends laws* or *reorients the will* in a way that contradicts the finality of creaturely choice against the supernatural good. The natural love restored is seen as a merciful baseline state for creatures eternally separated from theosis, not an intervention negating their prior decisive choices. This would not negate the reality of damnation or the pain of loss – which is understood as the eternal separation from ‘theosis’ – and so the damned would still experience remorse for their sins and their rejection of grace. However, their sorrow would be tempered by gratitude for the natural felicity granted to them. Moreover, as Maritain proposes, this restoration would occur gradually over the course of eternity. The saints continue to pray, and individual souls would be transferred from the depths of hell to a ‘limbo’ of natural happiness. And given infinite time, all the damned,⁵ would eventually be brought back to the natural love of God, though forever marked by the humiliation of their fall and the loss of theosis. This intervention, as Maritain emphasises, would be a free gift of divine mercy, not a matter of necessity, as God is not obliged to restore the damned to natural felicity but may choose to do so out of boundless compassion. This all offers a vision of how God’s universal salvific can find expression even in the midst of eternal loss – in that it suggests that the final state of creation will not be a stark dualism of heaven and hell, but a type of ‘hierarchy of being’ in which all creatures find some degree of fulfilment proportionate to their nature and choices. Hence, in this framework, hell remains a state of irrevocable loss of supernatural beatitude, yet it is not an absolute vacuum of meaning or consolation.

⁵ Maritain (1997) includes Satan in this as well.

A crucial question arises here: can a state involving 'natural felicity' truly be called 'hell'? If hell, according to a generic definition (e.g., Seymour 2000, p. 6), requires 'eternal unhappiness' where each moment is 'subjectively bad as a whole', does Maritain's concept qualify? The PU model incorporates Maritain's 'natural felicity' not as eliminating the unhappiness of hell, but as defining its specific character and mitigating its absolute horror. The 'pain of loss' – the eternal deprivation of theosis, the supernatural union with God – remains the dominant and defining characteristic of the damned's state. This loss is understood as an infinite one, constituting a profound and unending source of suffering and unhappiness, even if some natural goods are perceived. The natural felicity (gratitude for existence, appreciation of natural order) coexists with, but does not negate, this primary pain of loss. Therefore, the damned's state remains one of 'eternal unhappiness' because the absence of their ultimate supernatural end renders their existence 'subjectively bad as a whole', despite the presence of lesser, natural goods. Hell 'hurts' profoundly due to the loss of God, even if divine mercy prevents it from being an existence of unmitigated, purely negative torment devoid of any appreciation of goodness. Hence, the damned, having lost the fullness of divine intimacy through their own volitional refusal, now inhabit a sphere in which their spiritual desolation is partially tempered by a renewed capacity to appreciate God's goodness at the level of nature. The ultimate result, according to Maritain (1997), is a vision of hell as a multi-dimensional reality that bears witness both to divine justice and to a measured manifestation of divine mercy, thereby reshaping the traditional understanding of eternal punishment. And this is not just limited to Maritain, although St Augustine rejects the claim that punishment ends, he nevertheless articulates a conceptual space in which divine mercy could mitigate punishment without overturning judgement, since he speaks of wrath being 'pacified' in a way that 'mitigat[es] his punishment', which is the kind of limited, non-salvific amelioration that Maritain aims to model. Moreover, at a general level, because patristic writers repeatedly identify the gravest loss as estrangement from God, St. Augustine's description of the soul's death as being 'forsaken of God' supports the insistence here that any 'natural felicity' would, at most, coexist with an overriding 'pain of loss', rather than replacing it with a state that would no longer be hell in the relevant sense.

Nonetheless, the 'pain of sense', which is traditionally understood as unremitting physical or sensible torment, is altered through the operation of divine mercy and the prayers of the saints. Instead of absolute agony, the damned are thus granted a stable apprehension of God's creative goodness. This knowledge instils in them, as noted by Maritain, a sense of natural appreciation, and their suffering, while still real and rooted in the self-inflicted loss of grace, becomes integrated with a recognition of the justness of their condition. This is, they continue to grieve their definitive exclusion from the order of grace, the absence of which they now clearly perceive as eternally tragic. Yet, according to Maritain, this grief is intertwined with a stable acknowledgement of the goodness inherent in the natural order, and they find a certain equilibrium that leaves them neither annihilated by despair nor capable of supernatural joy. This conception is thus predicated on the idea that the final obstinacy of the damned – commonly considered irrevocable within the ordinary metaphysical order – may be superseded

by a divine intervention that does not restore grace, but does restore the proper functioning of their natural capacities. By virtue of a miraculous suspension of the ordinary ontological laws, as Maritain contends, the ordinary ontological laws, God can, in response to the petitions of the elect, rectify the damned will concerning the natural good without altering its definitive rejection of supernatural fulfilment. The damned thus remain eternally estranged from the higher order of divine life, yet are no longer mired in futile rage and denial. Instead, they experience a measured, as Maritain notes, natural contentment as rational beings who acknowledge the justice of their plight. They bear the indelible scars of their own choice to reject grace, and this enduring awareness sustains their humility—they recall what they forfeited (e.g. intimacy with the God of grace)—while simultaneously affirming what they still possess: a clear comprehension of God’s creative benevolence. This reconciliation of divine justice and mercy, as noted previously, does not constitute an apokatastasis, since it does not culminate in the restoration of supernatural communion. Instead, it reconfigures the eschatological landscape so that the hierarchy of creation, in its final consummation, manifests the full complexity of divine governance. Hence, even the experience of hell, while irrevocably distanced from divine glory, is not utterly devoid of goodness, order, or meaning. Through this nuanced adjustment, God’s glory is more fully displayed: the cosmos, though stratified according to the eternal consequences of free choices, unfolds in a manner that does not abandon any rational creature to an entirely senseless fate. Instead, it presents a final scene in which divine justice and mercy interact to produce a stable, if diminished, good in the very depths of damnation. In so doing, Maritain thus offers a vision of hell that is at once starkly realistic about eternal loss and daringly expansive in its assertion that divine mercy can reach even those forever excluded from the realm of grace, thereby allowing them to share, at the natural level, in the goodness of the Creator’s design. On the basis of the conception of the experience of hell that has been proposed by Maritain, it will be helpful to now further explicate the nature of the distinction between the ‘damned’, who experience hell, and the ‘saved’, who experience heaven, through the specific aspect of the good that the former have forgone, which results in the suffering that they will experience—though slightly alleviated through their restoration of natural felicity. To do this, we will now focus on the notion of ‘agápēic love’, and specifically that of ‘formal’ and ‘real’ union, as conceptualised by Alexander Pruss.

The Experience of Hell Construction (ii): The Lack of Real Union

As has just been noted, the nature of the experience of hell that is affirmed within the PU model can be further elucidated in light of Pruss’ (2012) notion of agápē, which allows us to understand the state of the damned as one of partial union with God, in contrast to the complete union enjoyed by the blessed in heaven. Above we have taken it to be the case that after the final judgment, God may grant the damned a special grace, restoring them to a state of natural love for God as the author of their being. This would thus involve a mitigation of their suffering—a transfer from the depths of

hell to a higher state of natural felicity. In the proposed framework, the damned, who remain experiencing hell, and thus are irreversibly deprived of supernatural grace and theotic communion with God. Nonetheless, through a miraculous intervention prompted by the prayers of the saints, the damned may come to possess a form of 'natural felicity' rooted in a restored capacity for the natural love of God as the author of their being. Importantly, this restoration does not imply salvation or participation in the supernatural order of grace; it remains strictly a natural orientation. Thus, while Maritain does not affirm universalism or apokatastasis, he envisages a transformative scenario in which the damned, though still enduring the pain of loss, gain a modicum of natural appreciation for divine goodness, thereby moderating certain aspects of their suffering. We can state this elucidation of the second foundational element of the PU model as follows:

(6) (The Experience of Hell₂) In the end, at the final judgment:

- (i) Those experiencing heaven, theosis, constitute a perfect agápēic relationship with God, one that integrates both formal and real union.
- (ii) Contrastingly, the damned, who will all be continuing to experience hell, as they have undergone the miracle of restoration, will enter into an agápēic relationship with God, but only experience in this relationship a formal union with Him, and thus will be forever being excluded from a real union with Him.

In the conception of love proposed by Pruss (2012), agápē is best understood as a multi-formed love characterised by three interrelated elements: complacent, benevolent, and unitive. These elements jointly constitute a comprehensive vision of love as an active determination of the will in favour of the beloved, encompassing both an appreciation of their intrinsic worth (complacent), a genuine concern for their good (benevolent), and a striving for some degree of union (unitive). Agápē is thus a dynamic concept that can manifest in various forms—romantic, filial, fraternal, or otherwise—but all forms share these core elements.

Now, what is important to Pruss' account for our specific task, is the distinction between two broad types of union that agápē seeks: 'formal union' and 'real union'. Formal union is essentially a union of mind and will. In formal union, the lover understands the beloved from within their own perspective, wills their good as if it were the lover's own, and thereby 'indwells' the beloved intellectually and

volitionally. This form of union depends solely on the lover's act of love and can exist without reciprocation; it is achieved whenever love is present—and, as we will see below, this accurately describes God's perfect, unreciprocated *agápē* towards the damned.

Real union, by contrast, involves the beloved's active participation and reciprocation, culminating in a deeper ontological alignment that transcends mere intellectual and volitional harmony. Real union, according to Pruss, is instantiated in shared activities and common ends, and it takes on specific forms depending on the nature of the relationship, such as the biological and emotional intimacy characteristic of romantic love or the cooperative endeavours of friendships and other familial bonds—and, as we will also see below, it is precisely this real union, requiring the creature's free response of love, that is lacking in the relationship between God and the damned.

In its fullest expression, *agápē* aims at integrating both formal and real union. The most complete *agápēic* relationships, as Pruss notes, involve not just a meeting of minds and wills but also an ontological sharing of life and reality. Within this ideal of complete *agápēic* union, each party appreciates the other's value, acts for the other's sake, and seeks a mutual embedding of their lives to the point where their joys and sorrows are meaningfully intertwined. Such a relationship is, in Pruss' framework, one in which love realises both intellectual-volitional harmony (formal union) and a deeper participation in each other's being (real union). This conceptual framework enables one to distinguish between degrees and types of *agápēic* union. This is, not every instance of love attains real union, and some relationships remain partial, reflecting only a formal unity of minds and wills without the ontological integration that real union requires. Likewise, some forms of *agápē*, such as those that are unreciprocated or constrained by external circumstances, may remain at the level of formal union, never achieving the fullness of *agápē* that real union would afford.

Now, it is against this conceptual backdrop that we can integrate our previously elucidated conception of the experience of hell. By integrating Pruss' notion of *agápē* and its twofold schema of formal and real union, we can delineate the state of the damned. Following Maritain's speculation about natural felicity, the damned, despite their definitive rejection of supernatural grace, might achieve a *formal union* with God at the natural level. That is, *they* (the damned) acknowledge God's creative goodness and appreciate his natural order, achieving a limited alignment of mind and will with the divine.

One might question the psychological coherence of this state: is it truly possible for the damned to simultaneously experience the torment stemming from the loss of real union and the confrontation with divine glory, while also acknowledging God's creative goodness and experiencing a form of natural gratitude or alignment (formal union)? The PU model suggests this complex state is indeed possible, arising from the

unique eschatological situation. The torment stems from the *irrevocable loss* of the highest good (real union/theosis) and the internal conflict caused by confronting divine goodness with a malformed character (as discussed in Section 3). The natural insight and gratitude, however, stem from the *inescapable perception* of reality once epistemic distance is removed. Faced with the undeniable truth of God as Creator and sustainer of the natural order, a rational creature, even one eternally separated from grace, can still possess the capacity to recognize and acknowledge these fundamental truths. The gratitude is not for their overall state (which remains one of loss and suffering), but a specific, limited acknowledgment of God as the source of their being and the natural order they perceive. This cognitive acknowledgment (formal union at the natural level) does not erase the affective and volitional torment caused by their separation from the supernatural good and their internal disorder. The two states – intellectual recognition of natural good and profound suffering from supernatural loss – coexist in tension.

Hence, this formal union arises from God's unwavering love and the creature's restored natural capacity, representing the maximal state possible given the creature's rejection of supernatural union. However, they remain forever excluded from the *real union* – the mutual indwelling and ontological participation in divine life – that characterises heaven. The barrier to real union lies squarely with the damned's failure to reciprocate God's love and accept his offer of grace; it is *their* choice that thwarts the full agápēic relationship. This aligns with the necessity, for a successful theodicy of hell, to show that God *cannot* achieve universal salvation due to broadly logical constraints related to creaturely freedom, not due to any lack on God's part. The damned thus experience a refined hell: possessing natural felicity (formal union) but perpetually aware of the loss of theosis (the absence of real union). This distinction mirrors the cosmological framework of St. Maximus the Confessor (2014), who differentiated between mere 'being' – which is a gift God grants to all creatures irrevocably – and 'ever-well-being', which requires the active, volitional cooperation of the creature with divine grace; thus, the damned retain their fundamental existence and a relationship to the Creator (formal union) but fail to attain the participatory and theotic beatitude (real union) that constitutes the true end of rational nature.

This distinction ensures that the boundary between the saved and the damned is maintained – in that, the saved enjoy complete agápēic union with God, encompassing both formal and real dimensions – such that they have not only intellectual and volitional harmony with God but also share in God's life in an ineffable ontological manner. And, patristically, theosis is frequently articulated as precisely this participatory elevation, since St. Athanasius (2011) famously writes, 'For He was made man that we might be made God', which underwrites our claim that heaven involves real communion rather than mere recognition or alignment. The damned, on the other hand, cannot enter into such a state – in that, they lack the transformative

incorporation into divine life that characterises the beatified. This is such that their love for God is thus truncated: they can appreciate and will the good of the Creator at the natural level, and this grants them a mitigated form of contentment. Yet they remain painfully conscious of their (freely-chosen) exclusion from the deeper,⁶ grace-filled relationship—a full *agápēic* union—that they themselves rejected. In this way, the damned experience a refined hell—they find a certain equilibrium and order—but are still deprived of the *agápēic* perfection that would have resulted from achieving a real union with God. The damned therefore fall short of the unitive goal that *agápē* naturally seeks. While they attain a formal unity of mind and will with God at the natural level—and thus possess natural felicity—they lack the deeper, ontological communion that characterises authentic friendship and filiation in the order of grace. This higher telos is likewise expressed by St. Irenaeus (1885), who identifies human life in its fullest sense with the vision of God, since he writes that 'the life of man consists in beholding God', which thus fits naturally with the here contrast between formal acknowledgement and real participatory enjoyment. *Agápē*'s full actualisation demands a consummation of the relationship that transcends merely formal union, moving into a realm where the beloved and the lover share in one another's very being. Those experiencing heaven partake of this transcendent union. Those who experience hell, by contrast, have only a partial realisation: they perceive God's goodness and conform to the natural order he instituted but remain forever unable to enter into the full *agápēic* relationship, never to know the divine life they forfeited.

In this manner, this further refinement of the PU model clarifies the distinction between the beatified and the damned: while both may acknowledge God's goodness, only the blessed partake in the deep ontological union that *agápē* entails at its highest level. The damned remain aware of what they have lost, and this awareness intensifies their pain of loss, preventing them from ever fully participating in the relationship of *agápē* that would bring about perfect union (though without them also experiencing the pain of the senses, which has been mercifully remitted by God). In short, the damned achieve a limited and natural form of unity with God that delivers them from complete chaos and despair, but they remain eternally barred from that complete *agápēic* relationship that constitutes true and final beatitude, which is solely reserved for those who experience heaven—by them having conformed their wills towards the good and God in their pre-mortem lives.

⁶ Freely-chosen in their pre-mortem state.

Dealing with the Problem of Hell: The Presence-Union Model and Adams' Objection

On the basis of the previous unpacking and detailing of the central elements of the conception of the nature and experience of Hell as proposed by the PU model, we can bring the central elements of the model together and state the full PU model succinctly as follows:⁷

(7) (The Nature and Experience of Hell) In the end, when God removes all epistemic distance at the final judgment:

- (i) All rational creatures will behold the unveiled presence of God's radiant love in Christ; for the righteous, this will be unending joy and fulfilment, while for those who reject divine love, 'the damned', the same presence will be an eternal torment and sorrow.
- (ii) At some point in the eschatological future, the damned experiencing hell will experience a transformative elevation from a lower, more tormenting state to a higher state marked by natural love ('felicity') for God as the author of their being. Although the pain of loss—namely, the permanent deprivation of theosis—remains intact, it now coexists with a degree of natural insight and gratitude.
- (iii) Those experiencing heaven, theosis, constitute a perfect *agápēic* relationship with God, one that integrates both formal and real union.
- (iv) Contrastingly, the damned, who will all be continuing to experience hell, as they have undergone the miracle of restoration, will enter into an *agápēic* relationship with God, but only experience in this relationship a formal union with him, and thus will be forever being excluded from a real union with him.

⁷ In the PU model itself, unlike that of Maritain's view, there is no assumption that Satan will experience the transformation marked by natural love that the damned will experience at some point.

Thus, in synthesising the insights from Hopko, Swinburne, Maritain, and Pruss, the PU model offers a coherent resolution to Adams's Problem of Hell without resorting to universalism. The model posits hell as the experience of God's unveiled presence (Hopko) by a morally malformed soul whose freedom is no longer shielded by epistemic distance (Swinburne). Crucially, Adams's central objection—the incompatibility of eternal misery with divine goodness—is addressed through Maritain's concept of natural felicity and Pruss' distinction between formal and real union. That is, God's mercy may grant the damned natural felicity, alleviating absolute torment (addressing the 'misery' concern) and establishing a formal union. However, their eternal state remains one of separation from theosis due to their own rejection of grace, thus lacking real union. This eternal separation upholds the gravity of free choice, distinguishing the PU model from universalism. Hell, therefore, is not unending, pointless suffering, but a state of limited, formal union reflecting the consequences of creaturely choice against the backdrop of God's unwavering love and maximal mercy. While terms like 'natural peace' or 'contentment' (as might be inferred from 'natural felicity') must be understood carefully, they refer solely to the natural level of acknowledging God as Creator, providing a stable baseline compared to utter chaos or despair. This state does not equate to happiness or negate the overriding reality of hell as eternal unhappiness, defined primarily by the irrevocable 'pain of loss'—the forfeiture of real union with God. The limited 'peace' exists within the broader context of eternal loss and the suffering inherent in confronting divine glory with a resistant will. The damned's eternal state remains one of 'separation' from God due to their own rejection of grace, thus lacking real union.

At this point one can ask some final important questions: does the intervention of natural felicity and formal union posited by the PU model pose a moral problem? Does God, by 'imposing' this state, override the damned's freedom or engage in a form of psychological coercion, perhaps making them worse off by forcing an appreciation they cannot fully embrace? The PU model contends that this does not constitute coercion that undermines the model's respect for freedom. Firstly, the natural felicity/formal union is presented as a *consequence* of encountering unveiled reality and a *merciful mitigation* of suffering, not an overriding of the primary choice against God's supernatural grace. The damned freely chose separation from the *real union*; the resulting formal union (acknowledgment of natural truth) is arguably an inescapable cognitive outcome of facing reality, coupled with divine mercy preventing utter annihilation or despair, rather than a forced acceptance. God respects their choice to reject theosis; the natural acknowledgment is a baseline reality. Secondly, it is questionable whether being left in utter despair, rage, and delusion would be 'better off' or more respectful of their personhood than experiencing the torment of loss alongside a clear perception of natural truth. The model attempts to balance the gravity of choice (eternal loss of real union) with divine mercy (prevention of absolute misery via formal union/natural felicity), arguing that this balance better reflects a perfectly good God than alternatives. Thus, while the PU model offers a potential resolution to Adams' specific problem, further work would be needed to fully motivate its adoption over competitors (such as traditional views, alternative non-traditional views, or

refined universalist models) and explore its own limitations or potential objections in greater detail.

Distinguishing the Presence-Union Model from Universalism, Eternal Conscious Torment, and Annihilationism

Before we conclude the article, it will be important to distinguish the model that has been presented in this article from the other views available within Christian thought. That is, the Presence-Union model is best understood as a fourth position in the contemporary taxonomy of Christian eschatological views, distinct from universalism, eternal conscious torment, and annihilationism. Its distinctiveness lies in how it combines four claims: (i) the final state is a universal encounter with God's unveiled presence, (ii) the damned experience genuine inner torment because their disordered character cannot harmonise with the divine glory they can no longer deny, (iii) divine mercy can nevertheless bestow a mitigated natural felicity and a limited formal union on the damned, and (iv) the decisive and permanent difference between the saved and the damned is the presence or absence of real union with God, understood as ontological participation in the divine life (that is, theosis). This combination allows the model to retain the gravity of free moral refusal while denying that God either inflicts unending torture or extinguishes rational creatures. First, the model is not universalism, because it maintains the real possibility of a final and irreversible refusal of theosis. Universalism, at least in its straightforward form, claims that every rational creature is ultimately reconciled to God in the full sense of beatific communion. By contrast, the Presence-Union view permits an eternal outcome in which some creatures remain excluded from real union precisely because they have rejected the Gospel in their pre-mortem life. The model does not claim that God fails to love such creatures, nor that God lacks the power to save, but that real union is not a merely unilateral state that can be conferred without remainder. It is, by its nature, a consummated *agápēic* relationship requiring a creaturely response that God does not override. The result is a permanent distinction between (a) a mercifully stabilised acknowledgement of God at the level of nature and (b) the supernatural participation in God that constitutes final beatitude. In this way, the model resists the universalist inference that divine goodness requires universal theosis, while still taking seriously Adams's claim that divine goodness cannot be compatible with a creature's being abandoned to an eternal state devoid of all goods.

Second, the model is not eternal conscious torment, because it denies that the essence of damnation is a divinely imposed penal regimen of unrelieved suffering. Eternal conscious torment, in its standard construal, involves interminable, conscious suffering that is inflicted as punishment and is not intrinsically connected to the agent's own moral orientation except as a basis for desert. The Presence-Union view relocates the core of hell's suffering in the encounter between unveiled divine love and a settled, disordered character. The torment is therefore primarily interior and moral, not externally administered, and it is inseparable from the very same divine presence that constitutes heaven for the righteous. Moreover, the model introduces a further

mitigation by divine mercy: at some point within the damned's post-mortem state, natural felicity is mercifully bestowed on them, together with the conditions for formal union, so that their experience is not a total horror devoid of any goods. The pain of loss remains definitive, because real union is absent, but the model rejects the picture of God as an eternal torturer and rejects the claim that hell must be an existence of nothing but misery in every respect.

Third, the model is not annihilationism, because it denies that the final resolution of evil is the cessation of the damned's existence. Annihilationism seeks to preserve divine goodness by removing the prospect of interminable suffering, typically by holding that the unrighteous are finally destroyed or allowed to pass into non-being. The Presence-Union model instead maintains that God continues to sustain rational creatures in being and that this continued existence is not morally gratuitous, since it remains the arena in which divine mercy, justice, and the creature's own responsibility remain intelligible. The damned are not extinguished, and their end is not mere negation; rather, they persist in a state structured by (i) the irrevocable loss of theosis and (ii) a mercifully granted stability at the level of nature through natural felicity and formal union. In this respect, the model preserves a robust continuity of personal identity and moral accountability, while avoiding the annihilationist implication that divine victory over evil requires the removal of the creature from existence.

Taken together, these contrasts clarify the distinctive explanatory ambition of the Presence-Union model. Against universalism, it affirms that theosis is not inevitable and that the refusal of grace can have permanent consequences; against eternal conscious torment, it denies that damnation consists in externally imposed, unmitigated torture and locates suffering in the inner contradiction of a disordered will before unveiled love; against annihilationism, it denies that divine goodness is best expressed through the extinction of the creature and instead affirms a continued, albeit diminished, form of creaturely existence shaped by mercy and justice. The model therefore aims to preserve what each competitor emphasises, namely divine goodness, the seriousness of moral freedom, and the rejection of gratuitous cruelty, while avoiding what it takes to be their respective liabilities.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Presence-Union model, drawing from Hopko (divine presence), Swinburne (epistemic distance), Maritain (natural felicity), and Pruss (formal/real union) (as all supported by various Christian patristic writers), presents a nuanced alternative to traditional hell and universalism. It resolves Adams's Problem of Hell by reconciling eternal separation (the loss of real union) with divine goodness, affirming both maximal divine mercy through the possibility of natural felicity and formal union (preventing absolute misery) and the ultimate significance and consequences of creaturely freedom in rejecting supernatural grace, thereby offering a theologically and philosophically coherent framework that avoids the perceived logical contradictions of traditional hell and the challenges to freedom posed by simple universalism.

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