

HELL IS WRITTEN WITH CAPITAL LETTERS!

Fr. Prof. PhD. Adrian D. COVAN

Lecturer, Faculty of Letters, History, Philosophy and Theology, Universitatea de Vest,
Timișoara, ROMANIA

Email: adrian.covan@e-uvv.ro

ABSTRACT

Hell – the most terrifying place in creation! At the thought of his existence, all mankind is horrified by the prospect of eternal torments that this fearful realm promises. Most of the world's religions also contain in their doctrinal register the teaching about a certain place/state of eternal punishment. Flames in which the souls of wicked people are tormented, demons with hooves, horns and tails that torment the unfortunates who have arrived there, creatures (terrible snakes, large worms or other repulsive creatures) that torture the souls of sinners, etc. a. These are the most common representations of hell. Is there such a place in God's world?

Keywords: hell, Gehenna, Kingdom of God, judgment, Holy Scripture, Fathers of the Church.

INTRODUCTION

Immortality has a personal character, being an eternal communion with God. This belief in immortality, as a personal act, is founded upon the belief in a personal God. Christian teaching considers earthly life as an integral part of eternal life. The Christian conception of immortality is concentrated around the person of Jesus Christ, true God and true man, and His work of redemption, especially centered upon His resurrection from the dead. This aspect is intrinsically related to the promise He made Himself: „Because I live, you will live also.” (John 14, 19).

According to the Orthodox doctrine, heaven and hell are concrete and completely conscious states of being. They are quantified from the fact that the soul of human beings shall eternally partake either from the joy or the suffering of their deeds in their early life.

1. THE TEACHING ON HELL IN THE CORPUS OF GODLY REVELATION

„Knowing that eternal life is a mystery, the Church has not dogmatized its eschatological teachings. In the Creed, its symbol of faith, it has only dogmatized the belief in resurrection and life ever after: *I look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come*. All other hypotheses regarding the life beyond are nothing but speculations and personal opinions”¹. The dogmatization of this teaching that the previously mentioned author recalls refers to synodal tomes from the period in which ecclesial dogmas were crystalizing, a period that spans the years 325-787.

The Holy Scriptures lay before our eyes the fortifying image of the Kingdom of God, in which justice, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit abound (according to *Romans 14, 17*). The first step toward communing with God is the fact that God is the one who works with man to acquire eternal bliss. The second step consists of the complete surrender of man into the

¹ Vasile RĂDUCĂ, *Ghidul creștinului ortodox de azi (A Guidebook for the Orthodox Christian Nowadays)*, Humanitas Publishing House, Bucharest, 1998, p. 197.

hands of God. Communion with He who is the Eternal Being means that He dwells within us, works with us, that our soul is cloaked with Him and that our thoughts, our feeling and our will are guided by Him. „Saint Simeon the New Theologian says that it is not what we do or what we believe, but what we *are* that determines our future state: «In the life to come, a Christian shall not be judged by whether they have renounced the world for the love of Christ, or whether they have shared their wealth with the destitute, or whether they have fasted, watched, prayed, or whether they have wept and wailed for their sins, or whether they have done any other good in this life, but they will be thoroughly searched to see whether they have any *likeness* to Christ, as a child has a likeness to their father»”². In the doctrine of the Orthodox Church, hell is opposed to Heaven, and Gehenna is opposed to the Kingdom of Heaven. As such, if the Kingdom of Heaven is eternal life and bliss itself³, then Gehenna is an eternally dark and tortuous state of existence⁴.

To answer this challenge, one must comprehend the terms that are used in the description of the life beyond death. Some liturgical hymns of the funeral rite invite a glimpse into the terrifying panorama of eternal torment, reminding us of the possibility of a permanent separation from God: *From the ever-burning fire, from the darkness without light, from the gnashing of teeth, from the worm that torments without ceasing, and from all punishment, deliver, o, our Savior, those who died in faith...*⁵. At the same time, the warning of a great saint of our Church is worth taking into consideration. He says: „This, then, is hell! Envy is the worm, wrath is the fire, hatred is the gnashing of teeth, lust is the outermost darkness!”⁶.

If, even during their earthly life, one relates to God as their only source of life (according to *John* 1, 4), then, one cannot affirm that the state of hell is life, but only the inferior form of existence, which *borders* unbeing. On the other hand, if Christ Himself refers to damned sinners, states: „These will go into eternal punishment (*Matthew* 25, 46),

² James BERNSTEIN, *Uimit de Hristos. Călătoria mea de la iudaism la ortodoxie (Surprised by Christ: My Journey from Orthodox Judaism to Orthodox Christianity)*, translated from English by Dragoș Dâscă, Ecclesiast Publishing House, Sibiu, 2011, p. 270.

³ Saint Simeon the New Theologian writes about the renewed creation of the age to come: „It will all be beyond words, as something to surpass all thought, and the godly and spiritual shall unite with the intelligible and turn into another intelligible Heaven, a heavenly Jerusalem, likened and united with the heavenly, and a rock-solid inheritance for the sons of God”, in *Discursuri teologice și etice, Discursul I, (Theological and Ethical Discourses, Discourse 1)*, translation and introductive study by Ioan I. Ică Jr., Deisis Publishing House, Sibiu, 2001, p. 130.

⁴ Although incomplete and not definitive, the state of the soul after death is one of real awareness and feeling. The state of happiness or unhappiness is felt with an intensity that is incomparably higher than that during one's lifetime, both because it is continuous, and because it relates to conscience, and consequently brings solace or chastisement. According to Abba Dorotheus: „For just as the righteous, as the saints have declared, receive those bright habitations and angelic delights that correspond to their good deeds, so are sinners relegated to dark and somber places filled with fear and terror [...] Then the very accusation of one's conscience and the very remembrance of what one has done, as we said above, will be more intolerable than numberless and unutterable tortures”, in *Despre frica de chinurile viitoare (Concerning the Fear of Future Torture)*, XII, 3-4, in *Filocalia* 9, translated by Dumitru Stăniloae, Humanitas Publishing House, Bucharest, 2017, p. 522).

⁵ Kallistos WARE, *Împărăția lăuntrică, (The Inner Kingdom)*, translated from the French by Eugenia Vlad, Christiana Publishing House, Bucharest, 1996, p. 130.

⁶ Saint THEOPHAN THE RECLUSE, *Răspunsuri la întrebările intelectualilor (Answers to the Questions of Intellectuals)*, translated by Adrian and Xenia Tănăsescu-Vlas, Sophia Publishing House, Bucharest, 2007, p. 130.

we reckon that by the word *eternal*⁷, one understands something without end, but also something that goes beyond the *realm* of time⁸, something extratemporal and supratemporal at the same time. Certainly, if someone is facing punishment and suffering, even though they are in hell, they shall continue to exist. As follows, hell, like Heaven, is that which the soul inherits from their earthly life, forever⁹. As stated before, the Orthodox understanding of hell was formulated in a satisfying manner in the age of ecumenical synods, when the great Fathers and teachers of the Church lived, and its quality has been unchanged ever since.

However, a great challenge which concerns the thought of many theologians even nowadays is the problem of apocatastasis, which means universal salvation. The bases of this teaching were formulated by the great Christian thinker Origen in the 3rd century AD. Nevertheless, apocatastasis was never acknowledged as an official doctrine of the Church, but accepted, at most, as a theological opinion, though it has the appreciation of many bright minds. Since, in every generation, the aforementioned doctrine finds passionate believers, the infallible

Church must offer/reoffer solid explanations regarding the infidelity of this doctrine. The difficult aspect related to the understanding of this matter, for most of those who support it, is due to the fact that the Holy Scripture clearly mentions: „God is love” (1 John 4, 16). Thus, „the impossibility of loving God is the more tortuous the more He is acknowledged as worthy of love. And the condemnation of some to torment is not an act that comes from the absence of His love, but it consists of their very inability to love Him, which they have caused themselves through the lack of effort from their will to respond to His love with their acts. In the final judgment that God pronounces upon mankind, one can nevertheless see the respect that God has for the freedom of human beings, whose love He has been waiting for. It is not God who punishes human beings for offending Him, but they punish themselves, becoming unable to love Him”¹⁰. Judging the ideas of the supporters of apocatastasis, we can all agree that, in theological approaches, the theme of hell is not a pleasant topic.

⁷ When the Holy Scripture references that place of torment, failure and unfulfillment, it is revealed that God has no contribution to the eternal fate of sinners, but that the terrible destiny that they follow is entirely their own: „If your hand or foot causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you. It is better for you to enter into life lame or maimed, rather than having two hands or two feet, to be cast into the everlasting fire” (Matthew 18, 8); „Then He will also say to those on the left hand: Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels” (Matthew 25, 41) „And these will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life” (Matthew 25, 46); „but he who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is subject to eternal condemnation” (Mark 3, 29); „and come forth – those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation” (John 5, 29); „These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power (2 Thessalonians 1, 9); „And the angels who did not keep their proper domain, but left their own abode, He has reserved in everlasting chains under darkness for the judgment of the great day; as Sodom and Gomorrah, and the cities around them in a similar manner to these, having given themselves over to sexual immorality and gone after strange flesh, are set forth as an example, suffering the vengeance of eternal fire” (Jude 1, 6-7); „Raging waves of the sea, foaming up their own shame; wandering stars for whom is reserved the blackness of darkness forever” (Jude 1, 13).

⁸ In the world beyond, souls lose touch with the limits of biological life, time and space, entering *chronotaxia*.

⁹ „Saint Isaac says: «Heaven is the love of God, wherein dwells the sweetness of all blessings» «Hell is the absence of love, and those who are tormented are struck with the whip of love». When a human being completely acquires the love of God, they acquire perfection. Therefore, Saint Isaac recommends: «Gain first the love of God, which is the true form of human contemplation of the Holy Trinity» (Iustin POPOVICI, *Credința ortodoxă și viața în Hristos (Orthodox Faith and Life in Christ)*, translated by Paul Bălan, Bunavestire Publishing House, Galați, 2003, p. 58).

¹⁰ Saint Confessor Father DUMITRU STĂNILOAE, note 39 from Saint MAXIM THE CONFESSOR, *Scrieri (Writings)*, part 2, IBMBOR Publishing House, Bucharest, 1990, p. 25.

Nonbelievers refuse to acknowledge its existence, and most Christians ignore it. Even the most conservative of those with knowledge of the written revelation hold their silence, feeling awkward. Hell, more than any other biblical doctrine abundantly found in patristic exegesis, seems to be completely out of touch with the times we are living in. „Our thoughts on the torments of hell are very scattered, and as such, we end up forgetting about them. In the world, they are completely forgotten. The devil has made us all believe that neither he, nor eternal torments, exist. However, the Holy Fathers teach that our union with Gehenna, like that with eternal happiness, begins from here, which means sinners feel the torments of hell while still on earth, and the righteous – eternal happiness, the difference being that in the age to come, they will both be felt much more intensely”¹¹.

The Holy Scripture states that although all human beings will be resurrected at the end of the age, the happy or unhappy existence of every human being, prior to the universal resurrection, depends upon their freedom to do good or bad deeds, upon the affirmative or negative answer of every human being to the love of God: „For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad” (2 *Corinthians* 5, 10). Nevertheless, our attitude as Christians regarding the doctrine of hell has undergone major transformations in recent years. Most of the time, we are tempted to understand hell as a story ripped from horror films, not as an eternal reality which belongs to those who have lived upon Earth for thousands of years.

Is the infinite love of God compatible to the existence of an eternal Hell in which human beings are permanently tormented for the sins which they have committed in their earthly life? The answer to this challenge comes from a great Orthodox Father, Saint Isaac the Syrian. The illustrious mystic states that it is not fair to say that God loves those in Heaven and hates those in Hell, for His entire being is Love – but only that He becomes joy to those who have responded to His love and chastising fire for the consciences of those who have not. So, „saying, nevertheless, that He would give us up to fire, sorrows, torments and all manner of evil, means attributing to the Nature of God an enmity toward His rational creatures, wrought through Grace, or making Him work or think with resentment, or as though He were enacting vengeance”¹².

In the same key of interpretation, the authorized intervention of the saint and confessor priest Dumitru Stăniloae, who mentioned: „A question is thus posed: how is God then reconciled to their suffering? God accepts this state of theirs because He respects their freedom. Here, we have the great mystery of the freedom of human beings, which, for a while, has been united with their weakness. A true human being is revealed through their strength, and God wants them strong”¹³.

Both those who lived in the past and those who live nowadays find that a majorly compromising issue for all religions that believe in the existence of an eternal place of punishment is the issue of hell.¹⁴ Mankind, in general, asks the following questions, quite

¹¹ Saint BARSANUPHIUS FROM OPTINA, *Filocalia de la Optina (The Optina Philokalia)*, Egumenița Publishing House, Galati, 2009, p. 9.

¹² Saint ISAAC THE SYRIAN, *Cuvinte către singuratici (Words to the Lonely)*, vol. II, translated by Ioan I Ică Jr, Deisis Publishing House, Sibiu, 2003, p. 370.

¹³ Saint Confessor Father DUMITRU STĂNILOAE, *cited note*, p. 25.

¹⁴ „Beyond – however much we may yearn (and this is the meaning of the parable of the righteous Lazarus and the uncharitable rich man) – we can never (*nevermore*, as Poe puts it), do anything: the verb *to do* perishes, as though it never existed. However, what remains in all its terrible fullness is the verb *to be* – it and nothing else...if *here*, in the prison cell where one finds oneself alone, time is so hard to bear, if *here to be* can be

legitimately: how can God, Who is loving and merciful, eternally punish a mortal person who lives in conditions that are far from ideal on Earth? Or how could an eternal punishment be in accordance with the conditions of this passing life?

At the same time, we, who are faithful to the dogmatic truths revealed by God and kept unaltered in the *collection* of divine revelation ask ourselves: could it be that the tendency to stifle the doctrinal thesis which (also) affirms the existence of a place of eternal suffering is because of emotional turmoil, of the loss of awareness regarding salvation, or is it simply due to an erroneous interpretation of sacred texts along the centuries?

Unfortunately, most people do not live with the awareness of their eternal nature; they believe themselves to be ephemeral, and to disappear into nothingness once they die. Using a purely human logic, they reckon that the coordinates of their present life do not allow applying an eternal punishment to any human being, because human beings live in a certain context, in which human responsibility must be judged. According to them, the so-called evolution of species is based upon the struggle for existence, in which man is also included. This is why human laws are conceived to function according to the conditions under which human beings live their earthly lives.

The introduction of an extraneous element, sin, which does not correspond whatsoever to human nature, inasmuch as holiness is not specific to this nature, cannot justify the enforcement of otherworldly punishments, which contradict the natural substance of man. Human beings only respond in accordance with their education to respect the laws of society, within the limits of their nature. Everything that goes past these natural limits, based upon supernatural principles, foreign to human nature, cannot attract the eternal responsibility of human beings.

However, godly revelation looks at the ephemeral and relative nature of one's bodily life from the opposite angle. Death has remained, even for the righteous, an essential law for every living being on Earth (according to *Romans* 5, 12 and *Hebrew* 9, 27). It has even remained the same for those who were completely cleansed of their sins, because their bodies bear the weaknesses that have entered it as a consequence of original sin. In fact, this weak body must die just as the body of Christ died, so that human beings could receive it completely changed, free from every weakness and want, so that it may not stand in the way of utter bliss in the life to come. Saint Paul the Apostle says: „Foolish one, what you sow is not made alive unless it dies” (*1 Corinthians* 15, 36).

Therefore, the death of the righteous is no longer a punishment for sin, but a passage toward a perfect life. Through death, human nature escapes the final weakness that has entered it via the *gene* of sin. However, this is only because human beings rise through their working faith in the love of Christ. More than death, and having stopped fearing it in their earthly life, human beings await the chance of growing closer to Christ, the *spring of eternal life*. As they are freed of their other weaknesses, facing them with a will strengthened by the Grace of the Holy Spirit, so they shall be freed of death, enduring it fearlessly, with the same strength from the Holy Spirit. Such is the way of the righteous. Saint Paul says that he wishes to be with Christ, but for the betterment of men, it would be better if he lived more (*Philippians* 1, 23-24 and *2 Corinthians* 3, 6-8).

On another note, the first thing that happens to every soul after death is the particular or provisory judgment. This act of justice differs from the collective or universal judgment,

overlapped with torment, eternal being, absolutely pure, stripped of all sweetness and becoming – by the mere fact of its existence - more and more oppressive, must seem all the more frightening” (Nicolae STEINHARDT, *Jurnalul Fericii – The Diary of Happiness* – , Rohia Monastery Publishing House, Rohia, 2005, p. 357).

known as The Last Judgment, which will be enacted upon all human beings, at the same time, at the end of the world, after the resurrection of the dead. Through this, objective and provisory judgment, the state in which human beings leave their earthly life is considered. If this state is good, the soul is taken by the angels of light to bliss, and if that state is bad, it is taken by the spirits of darkness and taken to torment.

The bliss to which those found righteous are taken is symbolically called „the bosom of Abraham” (*Luke 16, 22*) or „heaven” (*Luke 23, 43*), and the torments to which unbelievers and sinners are subjected are called „hell” (*Luke 16, 22*). That this judgment and sentencing of human beings to heaven or hell takes place right after death can be seen from the words that our Savior speaks to the thief on the cross: „Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise” (*Luke 23, 43*), or from the words of Saint Paul: „And as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment” (*Hebrew 9, 27*), as well as the places he mentions that he is overcome by the wish of death, so he may dwell with the Lord (*2 Corinthians 5, 6-8* and *Philippians 1, 21*).

2. BIBLICAL TERMINOLOGY ON HELL, BETWEEN ERROR AND HERMENEUTICAL ACCURACY

The text of the psalm: „Whither shall I go from Thy Spirit? and whither shall I flee from Thy presence? If I ascend up to heaven, thou art there; if I go down into hell, thou art there present” (*Psalms 138, 7-8*) raises the following question: can there be a *zone* in the Universe where God the Creator is not present? The feeling that God is everywhere and fills everything is presented both in the Old Testament and the New Testament. According to Saint Paul the Apostle, the eschatological accomplishment we are all waiting for is very simple: „That God may be all in all” (*1 Corinthians 15, 28*).

The will of God is followed exactly in the Kingdom of Heaven. In fact, one will perceive the true value of this place if their will is entirely in accordance with the will of God. But if their will is not entirely in accordance with the will of God, then Paradise ceases to be Paradise, meaning the place of eternal joy and happiness. In the end, there is something that I do not want, something I am not compatible with. But still, Heaven remains paradise for those who are compatible with it, and to me, it becomes a place of torment, where the presence of God is unbearable, and His light, instead of warming, burns.

God, from the love He manifests toward every human being, and considering the freedom of decision He has given human beings, gives every one of them the possibility of remaining with Him for eternity, or the possibility of refusing communion with Him. Therefore, based upon the choice they make, human beings become responsible.

Basically, hell is a consequence of the distortion of man’s will, who is separate from the will of God, and from the consequence of committing sin¹⁵. Apart from deceit, demons are but a source of vice, evil, frustration, a restless conscience and of divisive malice. I would see eternal cohabitation with them as a horror film, as a never-ending nightmare. I do not know who could want this uncontrollable and deceitful *partnership* of ego, frustration and

¹⁵ „Deaths come from God; however, death is not bad, except for the case in which one refers to the death of a sinner, as for the sinner, freedom from the suffering endured on Earth is the beginning of the torments in hell, and the author of the torments in hell is not God, but our own selves, the beginning and the root of sin dwell within us and our freedom” (Saint BASIL THE GREAT, *Scrieri, Partea întâi. Omilii la Hexaameron. Omilii la Psalmi. Omilii și cuvântări*, (Writings, Part 1, Homilies on the Hexaameron. Homilies on the Psalms. Homilies and Speeches. That God Is Not The Author of Evil), III, in the collection *Fathers and Writers of the Church*), in translation, with introduction, notes and indexes by Dumitru Fecioru, IBMBOR Publishing House, Bucharest, 1986, p. 436).

hatred, one that cannot offer anything good, but, on the contrary, *fills one's being* with every evil thing in creation. The hatred of demons toward mankind is perpetual, because through the harm that they have done to human beings up to this moment, they are outpouring their rebellion toward God.

The following verse: „And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it” (*John* 1, 5), refers to post-adamic times, to a sin-ravaged world, where God – the perfect light of existential understanding – is received as an external object; human beings become mortal because they are no longer capable of hosting God within themselves. Darkness, in this verse, may also mean the implicit place in which God does not objectively exist, but is received exclusively via perception.

One can draw a parallel with another New Testament passage in this case, from *The Gospel of Matthew*, chapter 6, verses 22-23: „The lamp of the body is the eye. If therefore your eye is good, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If therefore the light that is in you is darkness, how great is that darkness!” What could the Lord Jesus Christ be referring to here? The fact that the two post-mortem states, also known as Heaven and hell, as light and darkness, begin here, on Earth.

In the third Gospel, Christ the Lord states the following: „The kingdom of God does not come with observation; nor will they say, ‘See here!’ or ‘See there!’ For indeed, the kingdom of God is within you” (*Luke* 17, 20-21). There are no similar expressions about the hell in the Gospel, but based upon the logic of the Gospels, that which applies to Heaven also applies to hell¹⁶. Of course, both in Old Testament and in New Testament texts, a detailed description of hell is often encountered. What we must understand is that using anthropomorphisms, the meaning is adapted to the perception of each person. If we look closely at how the Holy Fathers *painted* the picture of hell, we will notice that the terrible detailed images that are related to the materiality of future suffering were almost always eliminated from the *agenda* of expression.

Thus, Saint Basil the Great, in reference to the torments of Hell, emphasized the fact that evildoers will come back to life for the shame of their chastisement, and to see the vileness of the sins that they have committed, for the harshest punishment one can endure is eternal shame and accursedness. Saint John Chrysostomos, commenting upon the interventions of our Savior Jesus Christ, on the weeping and gnashing of teeth, the worm that does not die and the eternal fire, mentioned the fact that these do not apply to images themselves, being part of the metaphorical *apparatus* of the Gospel, but he says: „It is better for you to endure numerous strikes of lightning than to see the kindly visage of our Savior distracted and unwilling to look upon you”. Basically, Hell also chastises through the fact that God turns His face from those who are there. And what could be worse than that.

¹⁶ Regarding hell, opinions are mixed in Orthodoxy. According to some, for example, Saint John Chrysostomos, the location of hell is somewhere outside this world, however, he does not offer any other details: „And where – sayest thou – might hell be? But what do you care? The problem being posed is that of acknowledging the existence of hell, not knowing the exact place where it is to be found. There are some who, uttering old wives’ tales, say it is in the valley of Jehosaphat. But Scripture does not say so. In what place would it be? Somewhere outside – as I do believe it myself – the entire world. In the same manner as kingly prisons and metal mines are far from the palace, so is hell far and outside of this world. Therefore, let us not seek to find out where it is, but mind that we do not end up within it. If God does not punish people according to their deeds here, we should believe in future punishments, even though God is loving and ever-patient” (*Omilia la Epistola către Romani, Omilia XXXI – Homilies on the Epistle to Romans, Homily XXXI* – , translated by Teodor Atanasiu, revised and curated by Cezar Păvălașcu and Răzvan Untea, Christiana Publishing House, Bucharest, 2005, p. 265). According to others, hell is on the inside of Earth).

The Romanian translation of the Holy Scripture renders the word ᾗδης (read *hades*) as hell, instead of *sheol*, extending this word to where the vocabulary item *Gehenna* is used in the Greek text, which is not a word of Greek origin. This is an example: „And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and hell (in Greek ᾗδης) gave up the dead who were in them, and all were judged according to what they had done. Then Death and hell (in Greek ᾗδης) were thrown into the lake of fire (λίμνην τοῦ πυρός). This is the second death” (*Book of Revelation* 20, 13-14).

Thus, the following question arises: whyever was the word *Gehenna* translated as hell, if in Greek it appears as *Gehenna*, a word taken directly from the Hebrew. *Gehenna* is wholly unrelated to ᾗδης, which is equivalent to the Hebrew word *sheol*, meaning *dwelling place of the dead* in the entire Holy Scripture. In fact, in the Septuagint, ᾗδης is used instead of *sheol*. In this case, we wonder: whyever was the expression λίμνην τοῦ πυρός translated as the fire of hell, when the correct version is the *Gehenna of fire*? ᾗδης does not appear in this expression either. As such, there is an error when the meaning of the word ᾗδης, transforming its original semantics (*dwelling place of the dead*).

When encountering the word „hell”, most of us understand it to be the place of eternal torment destined to sinners, but in the Biblical context, ᾗδης only bears this meaning partially. But whatsoever did the ancient Greeks mean by the word ᾗδης? Hades was a god from Greek mythology, who reigned over the *realm* of the souls of the dead, underground, also known as *hades*, named after this god. Entering the underground was possible through a cave crossed by a river. Before entering that place, all the souls of the dead were to pay the ferryman with a coin, to cross the river of fire and lava called Styx. Hades was guarded by a three-headed dog named Cerberus. He would not let the souls of the dead leave the inferno. Hades had three levels, being divided as follows: the first level was the place where the souls of the dead were until the separation between the living and the dead, so a provisory place; the second level contained fields known as the *Elysium Fields*, designed to be the place where righteous souls revelled, and the final level was the place of punishment known as Tartarus, a place filled with fire, smoke and lava, where the souls of the wicked were tormented. Thus, not even pagan Greeks understood that Hades, in its entirety, was a place of torment, but only one of its levels has this destination of suffering and pain for those who did not have any chance of rehabilitation.

3. THE EPOS AND THE ETHOS OF HELLFIRE – BETWEEN SYMBOL AND REALITY

Paradoxically, hell began in Heaven, the heavens of God, under the all-encompassing gaze of *Yahweh Tsebaoth*, when *the morning star* (Lucifer) started the first rebellion in the history of the unseen world. In parallel, but not at the same time, Heaven began on Earth: „And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and there He put the man whom He had formed” (*Genesis* 2, 8).

The Pauline verse from the *Epistle to Hebrews* 12, 29 is a reiteration of the text: „For the Lord your God is a consuming fire, a zealous God” (*Deuteronomy* 4, 24). The work of the Church must focus on how each of us will see God, not whether anyone will see God. It is an absolute necessity that the Church should focus on revealing to people that God truly exists, and that He is revealed either as light or as consuming fire. These are the ways in which we shall see Him during His second coming. Hellfire is a reality, but it does not exist because God wants to punish the wicked through it. Sharing this idea means attributing a human weakness to the Nature of God. God, being ageless love, pours His love over everyone.

Thus, even those in hell have godly love. „But what is hell? Dostoyevsky understands it as the pain of those who cannot love. I believe this is also about not violating their liberty. Saint Isaac the Syrian says: «Do not imagine that in hell God does not love, but love works in different ways». Just between us, I believe that those who speak the most about love are exactly those who cannot understand it. Very few people understand what it means, in its divine nature! Continuing the words of Saint Isaac: «Even in hell, there is love, but love, in those who love, works in the spirit of communion, and in those who do not love, it burns like a flame»¹⁷.

Speaking of the unmitigated presence of the *flames* of love, one of our very wise Romanian proverbs confirms the words of the Saint, namely: „The greatest vengeance is when your enemy is forced to admit that you are good and they are evil”. Thus, those who have done evil, under its different forms, are tormented by the presence of God’s love¹⁸, while to those who have loved God and fulfilled the Gospel of serving their neighbour, it will bring endless bliss. Behold how wondrous the laudatory exclamation of Saint Nikolaj Velimirovich on the presence of God on both *realms* is: „Thou (Lord) writest thy name over the ash of all things and the flame of Thy brightness casts away the smoke of all things. Thy flame is dew for the thirsty who find refuge in Thy embrace. But Thy flame is all-consuming fire for those who flee from it. Truly, Thou art Heaven for the pure and hell for the impure”¹⁹.

To understand this truth, we shall make use of the following analogy: the same light is received by a healthy eye as a token of joy, whilst, for the sick eye, it becomes a reason of real suffering. „Do not believe that this is a fire akin to the material one. For material fire burns man to nothingness, and man, upon dying, ceases to feel the burn. Hellfire, on the other hand, will continue to burn those it engulfs for an eternity. That is the very reason it is called «the fire that shall never be quenched» (*Mark* 9, 43)²⁰. As follows, the flames of hell must be regarded as pure proof of God’s love. This is the reason why Saint Basil the Great, reflecting upon this theme, emphasizes the following: „Hence, a doctrine secretly teaches us that when we answer for what we have done in life, the nature of the fire shall be divided for one into light, to the delight of the righteous, and for another, into burning pain, meant for the damned”²¹.

Nevertheless, even whilst referring to a tormented state of existence, the presence of fire reveals that God does not wish to let us perish forever. Saint John Damascene shows that existence in hell, even though it is the most miserable of them all, is preferable to nothingness or the regression into non-being. It is beneficial to remember that God forsakes

¹⁷ Constantin GALERIU, *Dialoguri de seară cu Andrei Pleșu, Gabriel Liiceanu și Sorin Dumitrescu (Evening Dialogues with Andrei Pleșu, Gabriel Liiceanu and Sorin Dumitrescu)*, Harisma Publishing House, Bucharest, 1991, pp. 111-112.

¹⁸ „Remember all of this in council with thyself, chiefly in the silence and dark of night, and fortifying thy fear of God, fear sin, as though through it, the flame of the eternal fire were slipping inside of thee” (Saint THEOPHAN THE RECLUSE, *Tâlcuiri din Sfânta Scriptură pentru fiecare zi din an (Holy Scripture Readings for Every Day of the Year)*, translated from Russian by Adrian and Xenia Tănăsescu-Vlas, Sophia Publishing House, Bucharest, 2015, p. 22).

¹⁹ Saint NIKOLAJ VELIMIROVICH, *Rugăciuni pe malul lacului (Lakeside Prayers)*, translated from Russian by Paul Bălan, Anestis Publishing House, Bucharest, 2006, p. 33.

²⁰ Saint JOHN CHRYSOSTOMOS, *Problemele vieții (The Problems of Life)*, translated by Cristian Spătarelu and Daniela Filioreanu, Egumenița Publishing House, Galați, 2006, p. 58.

²¹ Saint BASIL THE GREAT, *Omilii la Hexameron (Homilies on the Hexameron)*, VI, 3, in the PSB (FWC) collection, vol. 17, translation, introduction, notes and indexes by Dumitru Fecioru, IBMBOR Publishing House, Bucharest, 1986, p. 134.

no one. If those in hell have forsaken God in this life, He forsakes no one. This is why hellfire is eternal, for His all-loving presence is eternal as well. It is not fire itself that is a bearer of torment, for it is the fire of godly love, but the state of man turns it into a cause for suffering. In other words, all human beings shall see the glory of God, and from this point of view, everyone meets the same end. They will all certainly see the glory of God, with the difference being that the redeemed shall see the light of God as an ever-sweet, never-fading light, while the doomed shall see the same glory as an all-consuming fire, feel it as a flame that burns them. This, the fact that we shall all see the glory of God is certain and predictable. Seeing God, meaning His glory, His Light, is a thing that will happen, whether we want it to or not. But the way we experience this Light is different for every one of us²².

Hellfire, according to the interpretation of many Church Fathers, means a spiritual void, a ceaseless remorse of human conscience, for having refused, during earthly life, to answer God's love with love. „When an object touches fire, it changes; it is either burnt or tempered. The same is true of human beings, when they touch God, they either perish or get saved. Fire is always fire! But one can see that from its touch, either ash or steel comes, according to that which is touched. The same happens to man, and it all depends upon what man can bring to the fire of God, which means, what state man is in when he touches God”²³.

Iconographic ecclesiastical art is the excellence of Church dogma illustrated via imagery. One can notice in the iconography of certain churches in Moldova and Bucovina, that the fire of hell spews from underneath the throne of the Righteous Judge. Said fire is love unanswered with love, and it creates a spiritual void, a loneliness and a suffering, for the very reason that God respected the freedom that human beings have of answering or not answering His love and openly manifesting their love for their neighbours. Basically, every human being has chosen for themselves, either heaven or hell.

CONCLUSION

The process of death is a particularly important one for every human being, for in front of them lies either the road to salvation or the road to perdition. Despite this, most human beings only take their physical health into account, without considering their journey to eternity. Although the soul is separate from the body, the hypostasis of man continues to exist. After death, everyone shall see the glory of God, the difference being that the redeemed shall see it as a light that brings joy and peace, and the damned shall feel the same glory as a burning fire. Seeing God, meaning His glory, His light, is a fact that will occur, whether we want it to or not. But the experience of this light will be different for some compared to others. Both the fire and the light are the glory of God, the uncreated energy which, at the same time, is personal, meaning self-aware, because it always manifests by making a distinction. Thus, we see how the light of God is endowed with a paradoxical characteristic, as it works differently within sinners and the righteous, being the same uncreated work of God's Being.

²² For details, see Ioannis ROMANIDES, *Dogmatica patristică ortodoxă. O expunere concisă (Orthodox Patristic Dogmatics. A Concise Exposure)*, translated by Dragoș Dâscă, Ecclesiast Publishing House, Sibiu, 2010, pp. 98-100.

²³ Saint JOHN MAXIMOVICH, *Predici și îndrumări duhovnicești (Sermons and Spiritual Guidance)*, translation and notes by Elena Dulgheru, Apologeticum Publishing House, Bucharest, 2006, p. 101, (electronic version).

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