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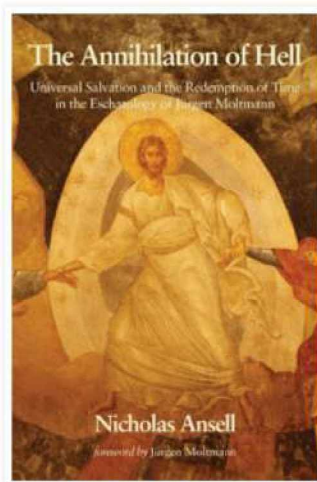
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On (Not) Accepting Reality: Introducing The Annihilation of Hell

Posted by: [Dean Dettloff](#)

By *Nik Ansell*



A couple of months ago (on March 5, 2015), we had a book launch event at ICS for my monograph, *The Annihilation of Hell: Universal Salvation and the Redemption of Time in the Eschatology of Jürgen Moltmann* [1]. Before I said a few words to introduce the book, Jim Olthuis, my ICS promotor for the dissertation version that I defended at the VU, Amsterdam, and Jon Stanley, one of my own ICS doctoral students, also my RA, who helped me get the published version into shape, also spoke. So together, we represented three generations of ongoing ICS work in philosophical theology. After thanking Jim and Jon for their kind words, I introduced my presentation, which is reproduced below, with the following question:

I wonder if anyone knows which famous person said the following: “*Hope is a tease designed to prevent us from accepting reality.*”

I’ll give you a clue:

The year is 1924.


Remarkably, the identical words, with the same intonation, are also uttered 90 years later.

The place is England.

The speaker is someone who resists all historical change.

But she is also known and loved for her withering wit.

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Despite her name, she is no shrinking Violet.

She is a central character in a historical drama.

Played by Maggie Smith.

The one and only Dowager Countess of Grantham (Violet Crawley).

Downton Abbey, season five; episode four.



“Hope is a tease designed to prevent us from accepting reality.” Accepting reality. *Facing* reality. Who can argue with that? Rhetorically, this kind of claim seems so strong. To not accept reality, after all, is to practice denial, isn’t it? To engage in fiction, in the bad sense. In the clash between hope and reality, surely reality must win. Reality is simply . . . *reality*.

I think that Jürgen Moltmann would likely say that faith is not about accepting reality, or denying reality; it’s about *changing* reality. Or, to be more precise: faith in Christ is the hope and trust that through the cross and resurrection, God has changed and will change *the very conditions of possibility*. Hope is about what was really *impossible*—prior to, and apart from, Christ’s descent into hell and resurrection from the dead—becoming possible. In that light, Moltmann can say that the resigned, conservative posture that would merely “accept reality” is itself a posture of denial.

Now if you are a good Calvinist, or a better-than-average *neo*-Calvinist (!), talk about changing the very conditions of possibility—a.k.a. the creation order—could be unsettling. But the idea that hope in the resurrection is about the transformation of reality appeals to something that resonates deeply for many Christians, Calvinists included. All of which meant that, some time ago, I was intrigued. How might Moltmann’s focus on hope and the advent of the New cohere with the neo-Kuyperian, or reformational, tradition at its best? How might a creation-affirming tradition and an eschatological re-envisioning of theology enter into conversation?

The Annihilation of Hell—my take on that conversation—is very much rooted in my time as a Junior Member at ICS. So this takes me back to a seven-year period from 1986 to 1993. At that time, my friend Henk Hart was going through a shift in his understanding of order. And this shift had a knock-on effect for an understanding of normativity and how to best find spiritual direction—a knock-on effect I am still exploring. But back then, this shift frustrated the heck out of me! When I arrived at ICS, I thought I “had the reformational paradigm down” and simply could not get my head around this. So I realized that if I was ever to come to terms with this frustration, I was going to have to read what he was writing as closely and as carefully as I could. As it turns out, this was one of the best decisions I could have made. Among other things, this meant I read his 1984 book *Understanding Our World* [2] not once but at least twice, the second time as part of my doctoral studies around 1993. By which time, I was tuning in to a difference between the main body of the text, which went back to his thinking in the mid-70s, and some of the footnotes that had taken shape later, when this shift was more underway.



King Canute Rebukes the Waves

Fast-forward to the year 2000 and the second time I got to meet with Moltmann in London,

England. On that occasion I also got to hear him give a paper (“Progress and Abyss: Remembering the Future of the Modern World,”) that I would not see in published form for several years (when I was in the midst of submitting my dissertation). But it was very providential that I heard it at that time, as Moltmann in that essay in particular was very explicit about there being two (opposing) directions of time (the historical and the eschatological)—an idea that I quickly connected to a brief yet wonderfully suggestive discussion of the foundational and transcendental directions of time that was part of the earlier material in *Understanding Our World* [3]. All of a sudden, I had found my “way in” to Moltmann along with a key to the creation-eschaton relation that had some philosophical depth and nuance. (All of this lead to an early version of what would become chapter five of the dissertation, written long before the rest of it; which also got distilled into a piece for the Henk Hart *feestschrift* edited by Ron Kuipers and Jan Wesselius [4].)

Henk’s discussion of the two directions of time was clearly indebted to Dooyeweerd, though it also promised many new insights. Furthermore this reformational link to Moltmann also gave me a link to Vollenhoven (the other Dutch Christian scholar who has shaped thinking at ICS). For years I had been in classes in which Jim’s exciting interpretation of Vollenhoven’s “problem-historical method” allowed for an in-depth engagement with a variety of philosophers and theologians. Moltmann’s philosophy of time, I began to see, was shaped by a way of thinking that Jim Olthuis (and Cal Seerveld) called “contradictory monism.” Rather than this being a way of lumping Moltmann in with thinkers such as Hegel and Pannenberg, Jim’s way of working with Vollenhoven allowed me to see how I could gain insight into what was unique about Moltmann in this context.



Gustav Dore depicting Dante outside the gates of Hell

So much for time! Let me say a few words about *Hell*—as this is also a central concern in the book. As you may know, Moltmann is a convinced believer in universal salvation. The main way I chose to analyze and evaluate him here was to ask the question: what would it take for Moltmann’s universalism to win a respectful hearing in the theological mainstream—and as widely as possible across the theological spectrum? So I paid special attention to the main objections to universalism to see how his position might fare. Calvinists and Augustinians in this context worry

about the eclipse of God’s sovereign freedom, while theologians in the more Arminian (or semi-Pelagian) traditions are concerned to safeguard human freedom. Others worry that the salvation of everyone undermines the cry for justice or undercuts the motivation for evangelism. Last but not least, many Christians wonder how on earth such a theological position can be squared with the biblical witness, not least the words of Jesus.

Sometimes it was a matter of pulling together what Moltmann had said on these topics in different places to present him more systematically than he had presented himself. Sometimes it was a matter of joining some dots, plugging some gaps, and making some suggestions. Many of my own suggestions came in the area of biblical interpretation. If you are interested in my own ideas in this area, then in addition to reading the book, and chap. 7 in particular, there is an article I wrote for *The Other Journal*—“[Hell: The Nemesis of Hope?](#)”—and an interview I did that engages this and related matters on Ground Motive, called “[Trading Hell for Hope](#)”.

I’ve mentioned the help I got from Dooyeweerd, via Henk, and from Vollenhoven, via Jim. There is one other thing in particular that I picked up in my student days at ICS that I trust is evident in the book: what I like to think of as a “healthy biblical obsession”—or *HBO* for those of you who like initialisms, or *True Blood*, or both! Thanks to a number of people who were around at ICS between ’86 and ’93, it became increasingly clear to me that a *biblical* Christianity, far from being narrow or defensive, can be a *radical, creative, engaged* Christianity: a Christianity that can foster radical hope in the face of denial.

So I am extremely grateful to ICS for its tradition and for what that gave me as a student as I was working on the dissertation and later on the book version. I hope that *The Annihilation of Hell* can, in its own way, help introduce others to that tradition and stimulate its ongoing development.

Thank you!

[1] Nicholas Ansell, *The Annihilation of Hell: Universal Salvation and the Redemption of Time in the Eschatology of Jürgen Moltmann* [foreword by Jürgen Moltmann]. Paternoster Theological Monographs (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster Press, 2013; Eugene, OR: Cascade [Wipf and Stock], 2013).

[2] Hendrik Hart, *Understanding Our World: An Integral Ontology* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1984).

[3] See *Understanding Our World*, 264-65.

[4] See Nicholas Ansell, "Foundational and Transcendental Time: An Essay," in *Philosophy as Responsibility: A Celebration of Hendrik Hart's Contribution to the Discipline*, ed. Ronald A. Kuipers and Janet Catherina Wesselius (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2002), 63-79.

[5] <http://theotherjournal.com/2009/04/20/hell-the-nemesis-of-hope>. This piece goes back to a workshop at an ICS worldview conference held at The King's University in Edmonton in 2004.

Nik Ansell is a Senior Member at the Institute for Christian Studies. His work weaves together biblical studies, theology, and philosophy. For more of Ansell on "changing the conditions of possibility," see his reflection posted around Easter [here](#) at Ground Motive.

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