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BOOK REVIEW

Michael McClymond. *The Devil's Redemption: A New History and Interpretation of Christian Universalism*. 2 vols. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018. xxiv and xii + 1325 pp. Pbk. ISBN 978-1-5409-6338-3. \$90.00.

At 1325 pages, Amos Yong remarks that Michael McClymond's *The Devil's Redemption* "leaves no stone unturned" (back cover of volume 1). Indeed, the two-volume work is a major achievement in mapping the history of Christian universalism, moving through a vast landscape from the early church to contemporary times. Not only that, but McClymond also offers an intellectual bargain by including Jewish and Islamic genealogies. Assuredly as a repository of references McClymond's work is invaluable, but (as there always is a "but") the problem is that McClymond does not merely offer a neutral and objective history of universalism. From beginning to end, he makes no apology for advancing an *interpretation* of universalism.

In summary, McClymond argues that universalism finds its genesis in Gnosticism, rather than in any sincere effort to interpret the Bible. Gnosticism was present in the church at the time of Origen, but this version of universalism was reliably struck down at the Council of Constantinople in 553. This set a precedent that all forms of universalism, even hopeful versions and forms that merely have universalistic elements, are anathema. However, he observes that many in church history have rebelled against this conciliar decision and asserts that more recent expressions of universalism originated with Jakob Böhme. He concludes that universalism is founded upon a rejection of God's transcendence, a non-literalist hermeneutic that allows for an appeal to a kind of "esoteric" knowledge that gets behind the Bible, and a kind of metaphysical rebellion against revealed

knowledge, which causes nothing short of an “eclipse of grace” (999), since freely chosen faith is no longer necessary. The project moves from a detailed history of universalism to a historiographic argument of where universalism comes from, to, finally, a sustained theological polemic against it. In doing so, the project’s polemic rests on several historically problematic claims.

First, the central historiographic claim of McClymond’s work is that universalism originated in Gnosticism. However, he bases this discovery on the dated works of Richard Eddy and Hosea Ballou from the 1800s, which make his claim sound as cavalier as Landmark Baptists claiming intellectual lineage with Donatists. This historiography asserts that Gnosticism teaches that the world and its souls came from God, were alienated from God in the fall, and will return to God. Additionally, it is claimed that these notions entered Christianity through the work of Origen. This is inaccurate on two fronts. First, Gnosticism is neither a uniform movement nor is any strand of it straightforwardly universalistic as it was defined in early Christianity. For instance, Valentinian Gnosticism held to a return of the spiritual back to God by the purification of *gnosis*, an *apokatastasis* of sorts. However, this return is dualistic, salvation from material alienation. In other words, this is not so much universalism as annihilationism (yet both are anachronisms). Second, the notion that Origen derives his universalism from Gnostic influence is highly questionable. While Origen’s theory of souls may draw parallels with Gnostic ideas, the universalism held by Origen is drawn from reflection on biblical texts, and his general position is decidedly anti-Gnostic. Thus, attributing the root of universalism to Gnosticism is more of a scapegoat than a genetic link.

The next historiographic blunder comes with McClymond’s sparse and uncritical treatment of the Council of Constantinople in 553. There are two issues here. First, the anathemas against Origen are not a part of the actual proceedings, but rather are appended to them. Were they agreed upon beforehand? Did Justinian insert them afterward? The conciliar status of this is debated, and much of it is fraught with ambiguity and arguments from silence. For something so pivotal to McClymond’s standard of orthodoxy, one would expect a stronger defense of it. Second,

for the sake of argument, even if the anathemas are conciliar, the question of their meaning and application remains. The anathemas against Origen seem to describe a radicalized later version attributed to him. Moreover, the list of names struck down does not include Gregory of Nyssa. These irregularities permit a spectrum of interpretations from sanctioning highly nuanced forms of confident universalism (like Nyssa's) to complete rejection of even the slightest hint of universalism. The council does not interpret itself, but McClymond merely asserts his preference for the later along with others who do the same. As question-begging as this is, on Protestant grounds, this move is especially methodologically inconsistent. Not many Protestants hold to the council's decision that Mary is "ever-virgin." Either tradition is fallible, or it is not. All this begs further questions about what is considered orthodox. Does it mean to be self-consciously biblical, or does it mean adherence to a body of magisterial decisions about the Bible? If the first, then there are some forms of universalism just as committed to the Bible as annihilationism or Calvinism or dispensationalism, etc. If the later, one cannot pick and choose which ecumenical council decisions are binding.

Furthermore, McClymond asserts that modern universalism is rooted in the work of Jakob Böhme. This interpretation, while less important than the preceding points, is similarly inaccurate. Böhme, as McClymond correctly observes, is not a universalist, but he proceeds to assert that there is something about his system of thinking that creates a kind of latent intellectual cradle for later universalists. While it is true that Böhme's influence was wide, so too was disagreement with him. To show intellectual influence, one has to demonstrate that a text of one is being directly appropriated by another. That kind of clear relationship is not substantiated here by McClymond. The notion that, for instance, George MacDonald is a universalist because he adopts Böhme's philosophy is not manifested in his writings. MacDonald based his claims of universalism on his interpretation of the Bible.

Whether he is advocating the idea that Gnosticism influenced Origen or that Böhme influenced the modern universalists, the way McClymond talks about universalism makes it sound almost like a virus that colonizes the mind without one knowing. Such

psychologization is often quite reductionistic and even harder to substantiate. More disconcertingly, this also suppresses a recalcitrant fact of McClymond's inquiry: a lot of Christians come by their universalism by honest and sincere reflection on the Bible's passages and logic.

Thus, McClymond concludes that all universalists resort to a kind of non-literal hermeneutic. This is strange because Origen does not allegorize many of the key passages he cites in support of universalism, and Robin Parry's hermeneutic on this matter is ardently Biblicist. Often, this leads McClymond to cherry-pick his way through a scholar, disregarding their core arguments and best exegesis while focusing on their weakest points. His treatment of Robin Parry's *Evangelical Universalist* (2012) is case in point. The backbone of Parry's book is a detailed exegesis of Col 1, where just as "all things" are "created through him" "all things" are "held together in him," and "through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things" (vv. 15–20). It seems hardly allegorist to insist that "all" literally means "all" in this text. Similar passages, such as Rom 11:36 ("For from him and through him and to him are all things"), form the cosmic return meta-narrative of universalist exegesis. This is not to say universalists are right, but one will note that this passage is antecedent to Gnosticism. The fact that McClymond's project does not concede some modicum of hermeneutical plurality and thus humility, results in this book constantly trying to jam the proverbial square into the round hole.

In the final chapter of the book, McClymond brings these indictments to explicit culmination. Unfortunately, the conclusion is a colossal caricature, filled with straw man arguments. He accuses universalists of not holding to God's transcendence, nor to a strong Christology, nor to free will, etc. For each of these, there are examples in his book of those that do not fit his gross generalizations.

However, there is a further oddity that recurs in McClymond's indictments. He is fond of citing certain authors against universalism, who espouse aspects of universalism themselves. For instance, he cites Greek Orthodox Bishop Hilarion Alfeyev from his *Christ the Conqueror of Hell* (2009), as rebuking any

interpretation that straightforwardly sees Christ's descent into hell as necessitating universal salvation. Nonetheless, he acknowledges Alfeyev's conclusion that it opens up a pathway for all flesh to enter, post-mortem. He then remarks, "The logic of Christ's descent thus falls within the bounds of inclusivism rather than universalism" (51). However, Alfeyev's argument leaves room for the possibility of all being included. His point is that the liturgical tradition of Greek Orthodoxy contains a consistent strand in which there is a post-mortem opportunity for the salvation of all. Since liturgical tradition is a source of dogma (*lex orandi, lex credendi*), Alfeyev notes this possibility is dogma as well. (Add this to the complications around any wholesale adoption of the authority of tradition, if one is so inclined to see the council of 553 as binding in the way McClymond does.) Moreover, this kind of possible universalism is not all that different from others that McClymond denounces, such as Hans Urs von Balthasar, whose sophisticated understanding of how hope is possible was dismissed as wishful thinking (cf. 925, 1033, 1064). Yet, he also states his approval of Oliver Crisp's "optimistic particularism" (1063). Still, another is the most bizarre: he argues universalism relies on a reduction of God's transcendence for an imminent God-for-us, which prevents grace from being free. Surprisingly he cites Karl Barth here in support (1018–19), but it is precisely Barth's commitment to "free grace" that propels Barth to simultaneously refuse dogmatic universalism yet contend for its possibility.

While it is safe to say a dogmatic form of universalism is denounced through church history after 553, an interesting facet of this discourse is that a commitment to God's unlimited grace causes many to have what might be called universalistic elements in their thinking: Maximus' writings, which denied universalism, also refuted the idea that any eternal effects of evil could remain after humanity's resurrection; the visions of Julian of Norwich held that "all shall be well"; Moses Amyrault's four-point Calvinism shows what happens once limited atonement (the TULIP's weakest letter) is abandoned; Charles Wesley's hymn sang "Sinner come and find with me only heaven in his decree"; P. T. Forsyth espouses the possibility of total

sanctification, etc. These do not factor into McClymond's history, nor are they even the most troublesome omissions. Athanasius on many occasions stated his approval of Origen, to which his Christology and soteriology seem highly congruent. Nyssa states his agreement with his brother Basil, who at several points espouses the elements his younger brother later makes clear. Gregory of Nazianzus states his agreement with Nyssa as well on the matter. If Constantinople is decidedly against all forms of universalism, can anyone be confident that the Nicene declarations exclude this possibility?

McClymonds' work will undoubtedly be cited as a kind of arch disproof of universalism for many years to come. Indeed, this work has significantly advanced the conversation, but many will take it to be the final word on the subject. It simply is not. As a work of history, it is a vast catalog of chronological data, but if history is at all an attempt to allow the facts of the past to speak for themselves, the term here can only apply loosely. McClymond's work is heavily filtered and more closely resembles an extended theological polemic in which any biblically minded universalist is an anomaly to his paradigm. The record is just not that tidy. McClymond sees the rejection of universalism as ubiquitous throughout church history while, ironically, citing a massive number of formidable minds who do hold to it (and still a few more he misses). One gets to the end of the book feeling like the greatest rebuttal to this book's thesis is the very fact that this book exists. If the biblical text was clear, whether, in favor of McClymond's position or that of universalists, one suspects this book would not need to have been written.

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