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**CHRISTIAN
UNIVERSALISM AS A
HISTORICAL MAJORITY?**

A BROAD INTRODUCTION:

At one point or another, I'd like to look into Christian Universalism's exegesis more, and I am currently reading David Bentley Hart's defense of Universalism because it has been praised as one of the critical works on the issue. At this point, however, I'm fixated on a singular claim that Universalists keep making without citation or proof, "All historical evidence suggests that universalists were the majority within the early church." My observations are that they substantiate this claim by:

- 1) Taking Origen's (185-253) articulations and importing them into other writers along with various presuppositions (i.e., that "all" means everyone without exception in every context that deals with Jesus' atonement and the restoration of creation must denote the salvation of all human beings without exception).
- 2) Strange polemics that argue, in essence, that only the church in Alexandria knew Greek, that Alexandrian Christians were all Universalists, and views other than Universalism were the results of the Latin West.
- 3) When a given Christian writer doesn't make a claim for Universalism, this must mean they were not against it.
- 4) When an author does make a statement about the eternity of punishment, "eternity" becomes a temporal age, and they must have meant the lake of fire purifies.

Whenever they move into church history, they'll often begin by citing Augustine (and Basil in some cases) who note that there were Universalists in the church, which doesn't surprise many given the popularity of Origen by that point in time. Origenists being present isn't surprising, but does this denote a "majority view" regarding Origen's eschatology and Universalism? And does this 4-5th century presence characterize "the majority in the early church"? Many Christian Universalists don't even hold to the view of pre-existent souls that was the basis for Origen's articulation.

When pressed to defend the statement that "the majority view of Christians held to universalism," we find the argument (when boiled down) to be that the school in Alexandria (Origen's locale) held to it; therefore, it must be a majority. Aside from the fact that there were over a hundred Christian communities very early on, and Alexandria was only one of five major centers of Christianity, I don't believe this can be considered a "majority." And then, specific names are pulled: Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, and a few after them. It is always these three men, with the occasional bold assertions such as claiming "Athanasius" as a universalist on the grounds of the presuppositions mentioned in points 1, 3, and 4 above. One of the fascinating ways this is articulated is in the idea of these writers being "closet universalists." This is problematic for a number of reasons. First, it's begging the question. Second, assuming such a claim is the case, why would these writers feel compelled to hide their position if their position was the dominant position within the church?

EXAMINATION OF SOME EVIDENCES:

Ilaria Ramelli is one of the big names in Christian Universalism. She has a 900-page tome that can be read online for free called "*The Christian Doctrine of Apokatastasis: A Critical Assessment from the New Testament to Eriugena*." I skimmed over the biblical exegesis (I use exegesis lightly) because my primary interest at this point is (again) the claim that the majority of the church were Christian universalists.

My general observations of her work, which Christian universalists have praised:

1. It does much of what I said previously (go back and refer to those points)

2. While the book claims to be a historical analysis of the doctrine, the book seems to be an admirer of Origen's doctrine of Universalism, who takes his understanding and places it upon the text of the New Testament and those around him.
3. When a writer is closer to her position, they are "a scholar, a great Christian writer," When they are not close to her position, they are "the so-called Apostolic Fathers."
4. She makes many cases that she reverses herself.

A Case Study can be seen in the Christian writer, Irenaeus. For Ramelli, this Christian writer is sympathetic to Christian Universalism. Ramelli states that

"Irenaeus speaks of the condemnation of those who do not believe and do not do God's will, but he does not say that it is eternal; he seems to conceive only demons as enemies."

Problematic is that in Against Heresies 4.27.4, Irenaeus states,

"As formerly the unrighteousness, the idolaters, and fornicators perished, so also it is now; for both the Lord declares that such persons are sent into eternal fire, and the apostle says, 'Do you not know that the unrighteousness shall not inherit the Kingdom of God?'"

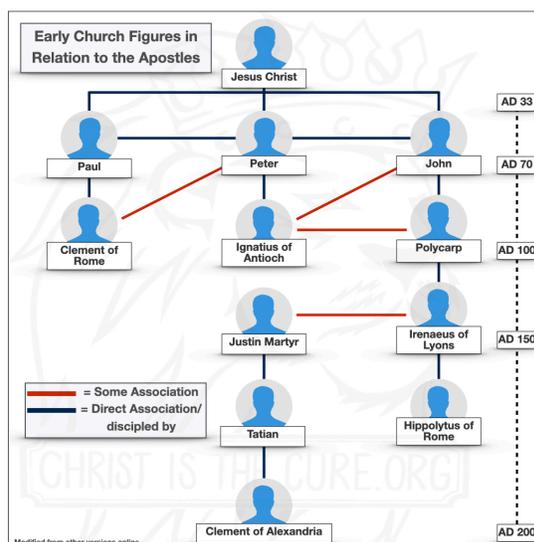
In short, Irenaeus says the complete opposite of what Ramelli claims, that is, there is "eternal fire," and the "enemies" in this text are the unrighteous persons, not mere demons. Of course, Ramelli states later, "Irenaeus does not formulate a doctrine of universal salvation nor a theory of universal apokatastasis." In short, despite recognizing this fact and stating it plainly, her methodology led her to interject "sympathies" onto Irenaeus.

There are many questionable examples she picks from, but one of the worthy scholars she cites is Bardaisan of Edessa with the heading of "Not a Gnostic." Historically, however, this writer was and is considered a Gnostic with many questionable doctrines. This is juxtaposed to her heading, "The So-Called Apostolic Fathers."

Dr. Ramelli properly states,

"In the group of writings stemming from the second century CE and collectively labeled 'Apostolic Fathers', the doctrine of apokatastasis as eschatological universal restoration appears to be missing."

I find this to be a significant admission since the Apostolic Fathers were those closest to the disciples of Jesus. Regardless, following this statement, Ramelli begins to grasp for straws by quoting Ignatius of Antioch, appealing to his account that Jesus was lifted up and "attracted all human beings to himself, for their eternal salvation." (Chap. 2, to the Smyrnaeans). This, again, is begging the question and is similar to using John 3:16 as a proof text without regard to verses 17-18.



Aside from the text form being in question, the verses before this proof-text in Ignatius are speaking against unbelievers and toward believers reminding them of the Gospel. In Chap. 4, Ignatius tells the church to beware of heretics and to stay away from them (the heretics sounding very much like Gnostics who deny the reality of Jesus' physical work). After continuing this warning, chapter 6 is all about unbelievers being condemned, "Unless he believes...he shall not obtain eternal life." In the following chapters, he also reiterates that Christians should flee from such abominable heresies.

After quoting chapter 2 of Ignatius, Ramelli moves to Origen's use of Ignatius and then quotes more of Ignatius. This time she quotes where Ignatius is comforting his community [who are Christians] and exhorts them; they should hold to Christ to be saved. Her utilization here makes it sound as if she believes this strengthens her case that eventually unbelievers will be saved.

From here she loosely uses Justin Martyr and states that because he held to the restoration of creation, this must strengthen her case while also noting that

"in Justin there is no affirming of an eventual universal salvation, but there is the language of apokastastasis and its application to an eschatological context, moreover with strongly inclusive elements."

Here I am left wondering how we reason through this statement unless any notion of restoration of creation automatically denotes the universal salvation of all peoples for Ramelli. I am left believing that this is what things must be. Justin clearly is not a universalist in his work, but because he speaks of the renewal of creation, he must logically be a universalist. Nonetheless, Ramelli moves on from the Apostolic Fathers to other proofs. Quite fascinating is that in her examination of Ignatius, she failed to mention texts such as these, which make it clear that Ignatius did not view John 3 in a universalistic framework:

Christ "truly raised up Himself, not, as certain unbelievers maintain, that He suffered in appearance only...Indeed, their fate will be determined by what they think: they will become disembodied and demonic' (Ignatius, Smyrn. 2:1).

On false teachers, chapter five notes, "Certain people ignorantly deny him [Jesus] or rather have been denied by him, for they are advocates of death rather than of the truth" (v 1). He points out that anyone who doesn't hold that Jesus took on flesh "denies him completely and is clothed in a corpse" (v. 2). Ignatius ends this section by saying we ought not even remember these false teachers unless they change their minds regarding the passion and resurrection to life. Following this, 6, "Let no one be misled. Even the heavenly beings and the glory of angels and the rulers, both visible and invisible, are subject to judgment if they do not believe in the blood of Christ." Of course, the Christian Universalists will affirm the judgment but state that the lake of fire is a purgatory that cleans the unbeliever. However, such an idea, as noted by Ramelli, is not present in Ignatius.

Examples abound, but here are a few more to consider:

In Ignatius to the Ephesians, chapter 11, "These are the last times. Therefore let us be reverent; let us fear the patience of God, lest it becomes a judgment against us. For let us either fear the wrath to come or love the grace that is present, one of the two; only let us be found in Christ Jesus, which leads to true life." (v. 1). For Ignatius, the wrath is to come, and grace is presently available - there are only two options: Be found in Christ Jesus, which leads to true life available in this present grace, or fear the wrath to come.

In chapter 16, against evil teachings,

"Do not be misled, my brothers and sisters: those who adulterously corrupt households will not inherit the kingdom of God. Now if those who do such things physically are put to death, how much more if by evil teaching someone corrupts faith in God, for which Jesus Christ was crucified! Such a person, having polluted himself, will go to the unquenchable fire, as will also the one who listens to him."

Indeed, the citation of John 3 and the bronze serpent was not understood in a universalistic framework, as Ramelli subtly suggests above.

While Ramelli has pointed out the Apostolic Fathers do not teach her view; their writings counter her position altogether. We will look briefly at some of the writings in the collection designated as "The Apostolic Fathers."

THE APOSTOLIC FATHERS:

1 **Clement**, written in Rome about the time when John was writing the book of Revelation, speaks to the Christians of Corinth. Tradition states that this letter was written by Clement of Rome, who learned under Paul). In chapter 22, after speaking much about Christian virtue, particularly humility, Clement stresses the reasons for such observance and states,

"The eyes of the Lord are upon the righteous and his ears are turned to their prayers. But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil, to destroy any remembrance from them from the earth."

And,

"The Father, who is merciful in all things, and ready to do good has compassion on those who fear him, and gently and lovingly bestows his favors on those who draw near to him with singleness of mind. Therefore, let us not be double-minded, nor let our soul indulge in false ideas about his excellent and glorious gifts" (23:1-2).

He warns again that of the coming judgement that none can escape in chapter 29. In chapter 39, Clement speaks against those who mock Christians and wish to boast before God. Clement argues none are clean and none can escape, and those who mock and boast before God, are "crushed" like a

"moth and between morning and evening they cease to exist. Because they could not help themselves, they perished. He breathed upon them and they died, because they had no wisdom. But call out, if some one should obey you, or if you should see one of the holy angels. For wrath kills the foolish person, and envy slays one who has gone astray. And I have seen fools putting down roots, but suddenly their house was consumed. May their children be far from safety. May they be mocked at the doors of lesser men, and there will be none to deliver them. For the things prepared for them, the righteous shall eat; but they themselves will not be delivered from evil." (v. 5-9).

Such warnings continue in subsequent chapters, such as 57.

Second Clement, which was not written by Clement, but is one of the oldest surviving Christian sermons outside the New Testament, simply states, "For if we do the will of Christ, we will find rest; but if we do not - if we disobey his commandments - then nothing will save us from eternal punishment" (6:7). Here the author is clear; there is no second chance - nothing will save us from eternal punishment.

The Martyrdom of Polycarp, the oldest written account of Christian martyrdom outside of the New Testament, states that Polycarp, the disciple of the Apostle John, says, "You threaten with a fire that burns only briefly and after just a little while is extinguished, for you are ignorant of the fire of the coming judgment and eternal punishment, which is reserved for the ungodly." (11:2).

The Didache is one of the most influential works in the early church and was traditionally known as the twelve apostles' teaching. The primary presentation of the Didache is the "Two Ways" of life and death. The materials have been described as being instructions regarding the Christian life prior to one's baptism. When we examine such themes of the Two Ways in Christian Literature, we cannot limit what the 'way of death' entails. Every Christian, as Polycarp experienced, will face physical death and recognize the death of the body was inevitable. Thus, the death presented in Christian literature has an eschatological implication; it deals with the final state of persons.

The Didache opens its discussion with the way of death by pointing out that "The way of death is this: first of all, it is evil and completely cursed." (5:1). We often miss the weight of "curses" within this era. A curse is antithetical to blessing, and it is the withholding of blessing and a calling down of punishment. The term used in the Didache (καταρα) can be found in Galatians 3:10 in regards to those who failed to observe all of the law. R.K. Fung points out that the cognate of this term, anathema, refers to various persons and denotes being delivered up to the judicial wrath of God (Fund, Dictionary of Paul's Letters, Curse). The Didache, after providing positive exhortation, ends with a mini-apocalypse that closes with saints being saved and many falling away and perishing (16:2)

The Epistle of Barnabas is also one of the earliest texts outside of the New Testament that discusses early questions presented to Christians. The author is not Barnabas but was a popular text for early Christians and included in the Apostolic Father's collection. Not only that, but scholarship has held that this epistle likely originated in Alexandria. This text has a heavy apocalyptic discussion where the struggle in the present age of evil will end with the arrival of the age to come, which has judgment. Like most Christian writings, the epistle presents the "two ways," one of life and one of death (or light and darkness).

On the way of darkness, the epistle states, "But the way of the black one is crooked and completed cursed. For it is a way of eternal death and punishment" (20:1). In his concluding remarks, the author's states,

"For the one who does these things [who follows the way of light] will be glorified in the kingdom of God; the one who chooses their opposites will perish together with his or her works. This is why there is a resurrection, this is why there is recompense." (21:1).

The entire eschatological warning within the epistle is summed up with, be found in the Lord, and in the way of light, lest you perish.

The Shepherd of Hermas is additionally a highly revered work in the early church, with more surviving copies than many canonical texts and included in NT collections. A significant theme of the Shepherd of Hermas (or Hermas) is whether or not repentance and forgiveness are possible after one has been baptized. Hermas answers yes, but this is only offered once and for a limited time. Thus, the author is heavily emphatic on Christian moralism. What is fascinating is the Hermas was considered canonical by Irenaeus and Clement of Alexandria. Origen as well thought it canon, but not for too long. (see; Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers*). The Messenger in chapter 95 answers his inquirer's question about those who knew God but became worse off than those who don't know God by stating,

"Those who do not know God and do evil receive some punishment for their evil, but those who have come to know God ought no longer to do evil but to do good. So if those who ought to do good do evil, do they not appear to do greater evil than those who do not know God? This is why those who have not known God and do evil are condemned to death, whereas those who have known God and have seen his mighty works and yet do evil will be doubly punished and die forever. In this way, therefore, the church of God will be purified." (95:1-2).

How is the church purified in the view of the Messenger? By being punished and dying forever. In verse 3c the Messenger points out that after all the wicked have been cast out, "the church of God will be one body, one thought, one mind, one faith, one love; and the Son of God will rejoice and be glad in them because he has received back his people pure" (v. 4).

Here, the pure church, united in Christ, is accomplished when the wicked have been cast out. In chapter 110, the angel of repentance states, "hear my words, and walk-in them...if you persist in wickedness and bearing malice - no one of this kind will live to God." (v. 1). In terms of the difference in the punishment which seems to be present here, every view of hell recognizes degrees of punishment to one extent or another.

A FINAL EXAMINATION:

One website¹ states,

"The early church from the time of the Apostles until the 4th century was primarily a Universalist church. Most of the church fathers during this period believed that all people will be saved. Over time, alternative doctrines about the fate of sinners grew more popular, such as annihilationism and eternal conscious torment. These doctrines were often held by Christians who could not read the New Testament in the original Greek language in which it was written, and who interpreted the Bible through the lens of barbaric forms of paganism. It is noteworthy that Irenaeus the Bishop of Lyons wrote a lengthy book called *Against Heresies* in the late 2nd century, which never once mentioned universal salvation as a heretical belief. This is because for the first few centuries of Christian history, Universalism prevailed as the mainstream understanding of the Gospel."

Here is the claim that the church was primarily a universalistic church with "most of the church fathers" believing in Universalism. Aside from begging the question with the biblical text, its authors' first proof text is Clement of Alexandria (150-220).

¹ <https://christianuniversalist.org/resources/articles/history-of-universalism/>

Further,

"These doctrines were often held by Christians who could not read the New Testament in the original Greek language in which it was written, and who interpreted the Bible through the lens of barbaric forms of paganism."

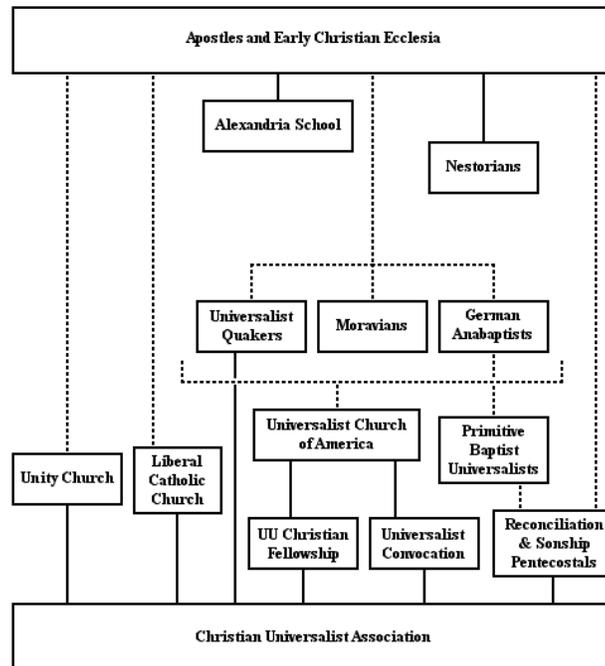
Yet, the Apostolic Fathers, especially the citations I mentioned before, are translations *from their original writings in Greek*. Not only this, but many of the Apostolic Fathers wrote openly against "barbaric forms of paganism." I'm not quite sure what is in view at this particular point.

The author further states,

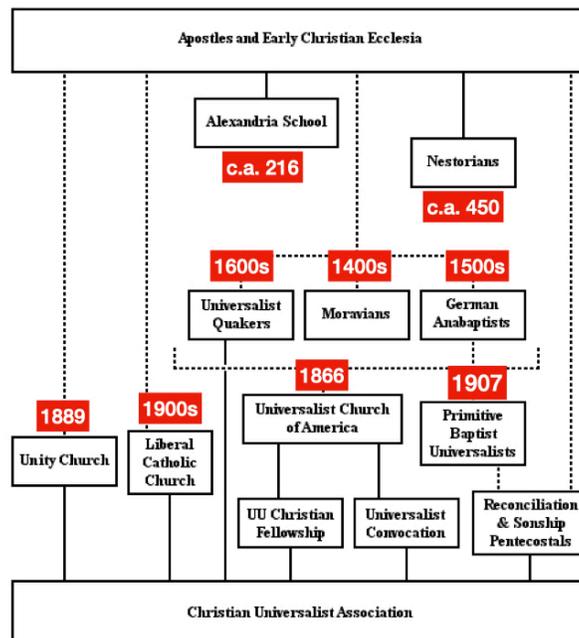
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This is logically fallacious, an argument from silence and begging the question. To the former, it could be easily argued that he didn't speak against such a doctrine because his primary concern was against Gnostics or even perhaps because Christian Universalism wasn't a prevalent issue at this point. In either case, it's a poor argument. Additionally, I will remind the reader of the discussion on Irenaeus above. While Irenaeus didn't speak against Universalism, he wasn't one himself, which is clear enough for my taste.

The Website charts the history of Christian Universalists- Solid lines indicate direct descent from a group, and dashed indicates a historical relationship of indirect influence:



Here is their chart with my own modification; dates added to some of the groups:



This paints a more clear picture, I believe, of the alleged continuity. First worth observing is that the first two solid lines, indicating a direct descent from the apostles and early Christians (whom these early Christians are, we aren't told), consist of the Alexandrian school and the Nestorians. Of course, the data is misleading because only some Nestorians were universalists, not all Nestorians (Bauckham, *Universalism: A Historical Survey*). Although, of course, Nestorians were condemned 5th-century heretics, and the 5th century is hardly indicative of pre-Origenist Universalism.

Granting the Alexandrian school as a point of descent, we still find Alexandrian Christians and writings that did not express Universalism. The dating I placed on the chart is based on Pantaenus, whom I know little about aside from being a Stoic philosopher who converted to Christianity and founded a school in Alexandria. Yet, placing Alexandria on the map, we still have the same isolated group of Christians cited as those who held to Universalism, which again suggests, as historians have often said, Christian Universalism was a fringe opinion within the early church. Finally, on the chart, we get to the 1400s, which is quite a leap when it comes to claiming continuity. A quick note is that Anabaptists were not uniform, so classifying them as such is misleading. Additionally, "the Unity Church" grew out of Transcendentalism and was known for its part in the New Thought movement (i.e. New Age Syncretism).

Many have quickly dismissed the condemnation of Apokatastasis in the 5th ecumenical council (and others) on various grounds, yet, the acceptance of those canons in history (despite modern scholars' debate over them now) is indicative of the ancient church's view on the subject. Further, the 5th century So-called Athanasian Creed begins with, "Whosoever will be saved, before all things it is necessary that he hold the Universal Faith: Which Faith except every one do keep whole and undefiled: without doubt, he shall perish everlastingly."

And ends with:

"And they that have done good shall go into life everlasting: and they that have done evil, into everlasting fire. This is the Universal Faith: which except a man believe faithfully, he cannot be saved."

CONCLUSION

With all that has preceded this, I have difficulty taking the claims of Universalism as a majority position in the early church seriously. But, I will stress again that I believe it is clear why the same select representatives appear when the rubber meets the road.

I hope that someone who is well versed in patristics will pick up Ramelli's newest book on the subject "A larger hope" and deal with her topic. Undoubtedly, these broad and sweeping statements about what the church believed historically need to be dealt with.

We also must recognize there is still a limitation to the historical witness. Yet, I postulate Universalists must appeal to that witness as much as they do because that is where their doctrine is found, within the Orgienist movement. It is difficult to get through the New Testament and the Apostolic Fathers and believe in the philosophy of universal reconciliation, as pleasant as that philosophy is. Traditionalists (Eternal Conscious Adherents) would do well, however, in recognizing that there are proof texts within Christian Universalism that are difficult. Thus it is at this point, it is worth stating that there are some difficulties adherents of Eternal Conscious Torment will face when discussing the text of scripture with a Christian universalist, namely, how can the proponent in Eternal Conscious Torment account for the notion of all evil, pain, and suffering being absent from the new world? Or how can we account for all things being united in Christ? Emotionalist arguments aside, there are issues that should be thought through and traditionalist proponents need to dive into those texts.

With this said, I believe there is a good debate between Conditional Immortality and Eternal Conscious Torment. I would be dishonest if I didn't express that the former has merit in how it can solve tensions that Eternal Conscious Torment fails to deal with while rejecting the sweeping contradiction of scripture's overarching narrative via Christian Universalism. Historically, both Conditional Immortality and Eternal Conscious Torment can be accounted for in the church. Both views recognize the eternity of the punishment; that there is no end to the sentence, and that it will not be reversed. Where they disagree is on what that punishment entails - everlasting death or everlasting torment (of course, this description is a bit simplistic). In either case, Revelation's final chapters remain coherent, and we need not assume that writers saw the lake of fire as a type of purgatory and that the end of Revelation was not the actual eschaton.

Nicholas Campbell

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