

## APPENDIX 4

### THE RIVER OF FIRE

**A reply to the questions: Is God really good?**

**Did God create hell?**

**Dr Alexandre Kalomiros**

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

There is no doubt that we are living in the age of apostasy predicted for the last days. In practice, most people are atheists, although many of them theoretically still believe. Indifference and the spirit of this world prevail everywhere. What is the reason for this state?

The reason is the cooling of love. Love for God no more burns in human hearts, and in consequence, love between us is dead, too.

What is the cause of this waning of men's love for God? The answer, certainly, is *sin*. Sin is the dark cloud which does not permit God's light to reach our eyes.

But sin always did exist. So how did we arrive at the point of not simply ignoring God, but of actually hating Him? Man's attitude toward God today is not really ignorance, or really indifference. If you examine men carefully you will notice that their ignorance or indifference is tainted by a deep hate. But nobody hates anything that does not exist.

I have the suspicion that men today believe in God more than at any other time in human history. Men know the gospel, the teaching of the Church, and God's creation

better than at any other time. They have a profound consciousness of His existence. Their atheism is not a real disbelief. It is rather an aversion toward somebody we know very well but whom we hate with all our heart, exactly as the demons do.

We hate God, that is why we ignore Him, overlooking Him as if we did not see Him, and pretending to be atheists. In reality we consider Him our enemy par excellence. Our negation is our vengeance, our atheism is our revenge.

But why do men hate God? They hate Him not only because their deeds are dark while God is light, but also because they consider Him as a menace, as an imminent and eternal danger, as an adversary in court, as an opponent at law, as a public prosecutor and an eternal persecutor. To them, God is no more the almighty physician who came to save them from illness and death, but rather a cruel judge and a vengeful inquisitor.

You see, the devil managed to make men believe that God does not really love us, that He really only loves Himself, and that He accepts us only if we behave as He wants us to behave; that He hates us if we do not behave as He ordered us to behave, and is offended by our insubordination to such a degree that we must pay for it by eternal tortures, created by Him for that purpose.

Who can love a torturer? Even those who try hard to save themselves from the wrath of God cannot really love Him. They love only themselves, trying to escape God's vengeance and to achieve eternal bliss by managing to please this fearsome and extremely dangerous Creator.

Do you perceive the devil's slander of our all-loving, all-kind, and absolutely good God? That is why in Greek

the devil was given the name διάβολος, "the slanderer."

## 2.

But what was the instrument of the devil's slandering of God? What means did he use in order to convince humanity, in order to pervert human thought?

He used "theology." He first introduced a slight alteration in theology which, once it was accepted, he managed to increase more and more to the degree that Christianity became completely unrecognizable. This is what we call "Western theology."

Did you ever try to pinpoint what is the principal characteristic of Western theology? Well, its principal characteristic is that it considers God as the real cause of all evil.

What is evil? Is it not the estrangement from God Who is Life? Is it not death? What does Western theology teach about death? All Roman Catholics and most Protestants consider death as a punishment from God. God considered all men guilty of Adam's sin and punished them by death, that is by cutting them away from Himself; depriving them of His life-giving energy, and so killing them spiritually at first and later bodily, by some sort of spiritual starvation. Augustine interprets the passage in Genesis as, "If you eat of the fruit of this tree, you will die the death."

Some Protestants consider death not as a punishment but as something natural. But is not God the creator of all natural things? So in both cases, God — for them — is the real cause of death.

And this is true not only for the death of the body. It is

equally true for the death of the soul. Do not Western theologians consider hell, the eternal spiritual death of man, as a punishment from God? And do they not consider the devil as a minister of God for the eternal punishment of men in hell?

The "God" of the West is an offended and angry God, full of wrath for the disobedience of men, Who desires in His destructive passion to torment all humanity unto eternity for their sins, unless He receives an infinite satisfaction for His offended pride.

What is the Western dogma of salvation? Did not God kill God in order to satisfy His pride, which the Westerners euphemistically call justice? And is it not by this infinite satisfaction that He deigns to accept the salvation of some of us?

What is salvation for Western theology? Is it not salvation from the wrath of God?

Do you see, then, that Western theology teaches that our real danger and our real enemy is our Creator and God? Salvation, for Westerners, is to be saved from the hands of God!

How can one love such a God? How can we have faith in someone we detest? Faith in its deeper essence is a product of love, therefore, it would be our desire that one who threatens us not even exist, especially when this threat is eternal.

Even if there exists a means of escaping the eternal wrath of this omnipotent but wicked Being (the death of His Son in our stead), it would be much better if this Being did not exist. This was the most logical conclusion of the mind and of the heart of the Western peoples, because even eternal Paradise would be abhorrent with

such a cruel God. Thus was atheism born, and this is why the West was its birthplace. Atheism was unknown in Eastern Christianity until Western theology was introduced there, too. Atheism is the consequence of Western theology. Atheism is the denial, the negation of an evil God. Men became atheists in order to be saved from God, hiding their head and closing their eyes like an ostrich. Atheism, my brothers, is the negation of the Roman Catholic and Protestant God. Atheism is not our real enemy. The real enemy is that falsified and distorted "Christianity."

### 3.

Westerners speak frequently of the "Good God." Western Europe and America, however, were never convinced that such a Good God existed. On the contrary, they were calling God good in the way Greeks called the curse and malediction of smallpox, *evlogia* (εὐλογία), that is, a blessing, a benediction, in order to exorcise it and charm it away. For the same reason, the Black Sea was called the *Euξενος Ποντος* — the hospitable sea — although it was, in fact, a dreadful and treacherous sea. Deep inside the Western soul, God was felt to be the wicked Judge, Who never forgot even the smallest offense done to Him in our transgressions of His laws.

This juridical conception of God, this completely distorted interpretation of God's justice, was nothing else than the projection of human passions on theology. It was a return to the pagan process of humanizing god and deifying man. Men are vexed and angered when not taken seriously and consider it a humiliation which only

vengeance can remove, whether it is by crime or by duel. This was the worldly, passionate conception of justice prevailing in the minds of a so-called "Christian" society.

Western Christians thought about God's justice in the same way also; God, the infinite Being, was infinitely insulted by Adam's disobedience. He decided that the guilt of Adam's disobedience descended equally to all His children, and that all were to be sentenced to death for Adam's sin, which they did not commit. God's justice for Westerners operated like a vendetta. Not only the man who insulted you, but also all his family must die. And what was tragic for men, to the point of hopelessness, was that no man, nor even all humanity, could appease God's insulted dignity, even if all men in history were to be sacrificed. God's dignity could be saved only if He could punish someone of the same dignity as He. So in order to save both God's dignity and mankind, there was no other solution than the incarnation of His Son, so that a man of godly dignity could be sacrificed to save God's honour.

#### 4.

This paganistic conception of God's justice which demands infinite sacrifices in order to be appeased clearly makes God our real enemy and the cause of all our misfortunes. Moreover, it is a justice which is not at all just since it punishes and demands satisfaction from persons which were not at all responsible for the sin of their forefathers. In other words, what Westerners call justice ought rather to be called resentment and vengeance of the worst kind. Even Christ's love and sacrifice loses its significance and logic in this schizoid notion of a God

who kills God in order to satisfy the so-called justice of God.

Does this conception of justice have anything to do with the justice that God revealed to us? Does the phrase "justice of God" have this meaning in the Old and New Testaments?

Perhaps the beginning of the mistaken interpretation of the word *justice* in the Holy Scriptures was its translation by the Greek word δικαιοσύνη. Not that it is a mistaken translation, but because this word, being a word of the pagan, humanistic, Greek civilization, was charged with human notions which could easily lead to misunderstandings.

First of all, the word δικαιοσύνη (*dikaosine*) brings to mind an equal distribution. This is why it is represented by a balance. The good are rewarded and the bad are punished by human society in a fair way. This is human justice, the one which takes place in court.

Is this the meaning of God's justice, however?

The word δικαιοσύνη, "justice," is a translation of the Hebraic word *tsedakà*. This word means "the divine energy which accomplishes man's salvation." It is parallel and almost synonymous to the other Hebraic word, *hesèd* which means "mercy," "compassion," "love," and to the word, *emèth* which means "fidelity," "truth." This, as you see, gives a completely other dimension to what we usually conceive as justice. This is how the Church understood God's justice. This is what the Fathers of the Church taught of it. "How can you call God just," writes Saint Isaac the Syrian, "when you read the passage on the wage given to the workers? `Friend, I do thee no wrong; I will give unto this last even as unto thee who worked for

me from the first hour. Is thine eye evil, because I am good?" "How can a man call God just," continues Saint Isaac, "when he comes across the passage on the prodigal son, who wasted his wealth in riotous living, and yet only for the contrition which he showed, the father ran and fell upon his neck, and gave him authority over all his wealth? None other but His very Son said these things concerning Him lest we doubt it, and thus He bare witness concerning Him. Where, then, is God's justice, for whilst we were sinners, Christ died for us!"

So we see that God is not just, with the human meaning of this word, but we see that His justice means His goodness and love, which are given in an unjust manner, that is, God always gives without taking anything in return, and He gives to persons like us who are not worthy of receiving. That is why Saint Isaac teaches us: "Do not call God just, for His justice is not manifest in the things concerning you. And if David calls Him just and upright, His Son revealed to us that He is good and kind. 'He is good,' He says, 'to the evil and impious.'"

God is good, loving, and kind toward those who disregard, disobey, and ignore Him. He never returns evil for evil, He never takes vengeance. His punishments are loving means of correction, as long as anything can be corrected and healed in this life. They never extend to eternity. He created everything good. The wild beasts recognize as their master the Christian who through humility has gained the likeness of God. They draw near to him, not with fear, but with joy, in grateful and loving submission; they wag their heads and lick his hands and serve him with gratitude. The irrational beasts know that their Master and God is not evil and wicked and vengeful,



but rather full of love. (See also St. Isaac of Syria, *Σωζόμενα Ἀσκητικά* [Athens, 1871], pp. 95-96.) He protected and saved us when we fell. The eternally evil has nothing to do with God. It comes rather from the will of His free, logical creatures, and this will He respects.

Death was not inflicted upon us by God. We fell into it by our revolt. God is Life and Life is God. We revolted against God, we closed our gates to His life-giving grace. "For as much as he departed from life," wrote Saint Basil, "by so much did he draw nearer to death. For God is Life, deprivation of life is death." "God did not create death," continues Saint Basil, "but we brought it upon ourselves." "Not at all, however, did He hinder the dissolution ... so that He would not make the infirmity immortal in us." As Saint Irenaeus puts it: "Separation from God is death, separation from light is darkness ... and it is not the light which brings upon them the punishment of blindness."

"Death," says Saint Maximus the Confessor, "is principally the separation from God, from which followed necessarily the death of the body. Life is principally He who said, 'I am the Life.'"

And why did death come upon the whole of humanity? Why did those who did not sin with Adam die as did Adam? Here is the reply of Saint Anastasius the Sinaite: "We became the inheritors of the curse in Adam. We were not punished as if we had disobeyed that divine commandment along with Adam; but because Adam became mortal, he transmitted sin to his posterity. We became mortal since we were born from a mortal."

And Saint Gregory Palamas makes this point: "[God] did not say to Adam: return to whence thou wast taken;

but He said to him: Earth thou art and unto the earth thou shalt return .... He did not say: `in whatsoever day ye shall eat of it, die!' but, `in whatsoever day ye shall eat of it, ye shall surely die.' Nor did He afterwards say: `return now unto the earth,' but He said, 'thou shalt return,' in this manner forewarning, justly permitting and not obstructing what shall come to pass." We see that death did not come at the behest of God but as a consequence of Adam's severing his relations with the source of Life, by his disobedience; and God in His kindness did only warn him of it.

"The tree of knowledge itself," says Theophilus of Antioch, "was good, and its fruit was good. For it was not the tree, as some think, that had death in it, but the disobedience which had death in it; for there was nothing else in the fruit but knowledge alone, and knowledge is good when one uses it properly." The Fathers teach us that the prohibition to taste the tree of knowledge was not absolute but temporary. Adam was a spiritual infant. Not all foods are good for infants. Some foods may even kill them although adults would find them wholesome. The tree of knowledge was planted by God for man. It was good and nourishing. But it was solid food, while Adam was able to digest only milk.

## 5.

So in the language of the Holy Scriptures, "just" means good and loving. We speak of the just men of the Old Testament. That does not mean that they were good judges but that they were kind and God-loving people. When we say that God is just, we do not mean that He is

a good judge Who knows how to punish men equitably according to the gravity of their crimes, but on the contrary, we mean that He is kind and loving, forgiving all transgressions and disobediences, and that He wants to save us by all means, and never requites evil for evil. In the first volume of the *Philokalia* there is a magnificent text of Saint Anthony which I must read to you here:

*God is good, dispassionate, and immutable. Now someone who thinks it reasonable and true to affirm that God does not change, may well ask how, in that case, it is possible to speak of God as rejoicing over those who are good and showing mercy to those who honour Him, and as turning away from the wicked and being angry with sinners. To this it must be answered that God neither rejoices nor grows angry, for to rejoice and to be offended are passions; nor is He won over by the gifts of those who honour Him, for that would mean He is swayed by pleasure. It is not right that the Divinity feel pleasure or displeasure from human conditions. He is good, and He only bestows blessings and never does harm, remaining always the same. We men, on the other hand, if we remain good through resembling God, are united to Him, but if we become evil through not resembling God, we are separated from Him. By living in holiness we cleave to God; but by becoming wicked we make Him our enemy. It is not that He grows angry with us in an arbitrary way, but it is our own sins that prevent God from shining within us and expose us*

*to demons who torture us. And if through prayer and acts of compassion we gain release from our sins, this does not mean that we have won God over and made him to change, but that through our actions and our turning to the Divinity, we have cured our wickedness and so once more have enjoyment of God's goodness. Thus to say that God turns away from the wicked is like saying that the sun hides itself from the blind. [Chap. 150]*

## 6.

You see now, I hope, how God was slandered by Western theology. Augustine, Anselm, Thomas Aquinas and all their pupils contributed to this "theological" calumny. And they are the foundations of Western theology, whether Papist or Protestant. Certainly these theologians do not say expressly and clearly that God is a wicked and passionate being. They rather consider God as being chained by a superior force, by a gloomy and implacable Necessity like the one which governed the pagan gods. This Necessity obliges Him to return evil for evil and does not permit Him to pardon and to forget the evil done against His will, unless an infinite satisfaction is offered to Him.

We open here the great question of pagan, Greek influence on Christianity.

The pagan mentality was in the foundation of all heresies. It was very strong in the East, because the East was the crossroad of all philosophical and religious currents. But as we read in the New Testament, "where sin abounded, grace did much more abound." So when

heresies flourished, Orthodoxy flourished also, and although it was persecuted by the mighty of this world, it always survived victorious. In the West, on the contrary, the pagan Greek mentality entered in unobtrusively, without taking the aspect of heresy. It entered in through the multitude of Latin texts dictated by Augustine, bishop of Hippo. Saint John Cassian who was living then in the West understood the poison that was in Augustine's teachings, and fought against it. But the fact that Augustine's books were written in Latin and the fact that they were extremely lengthy did not permit their study by the other Fathers of the Church, and so they were never condemned as Origen's works were condemned in the East. This fact permitted them to exercise a strong influence later in Western thought and theology. In the West, little by little knowledge of the Greek language vanished, and Augustine's texts were the only books available dating from ancient times in a language understood there. So the West received as Christian a teaching which was in many of its aspects pagan. Caesaro-papist developments in Rome did not permit any healthy reaction to this state of affairs, and so the West was drowned in the humanistic, pagan thought which prevails to this day.

So we have the East on the one side which, speaking and writing Greek, remained essentially the New Israel with Israelitic thought and sacred tradition, and the West on the other side which having forgotten the Greek language and having been cut off from the Eastern state, inherited pagan Greek thought and its mentality, and formed with it an adulterated Christian teaching.

In reality, the opposition between Orthodoxy and

Western Christianity is nothing else but the perpetuation of the opposition between Israel and Hellas.

We must never forget that the Fathers of the Church considered themselves to be the true spiritual children of Abraham, that the Church considered itself to be the New Israel, and that the Orthodox peoples, whether Greek, Russian, Bulgarian, Serbian, Romanian, etc., were conscious of being like Nathaniel, true Israelites, the People of God. And while this was the real consciousness of Eastern Christianity, the West became more and more a child of pagan, humanistic Greece and Rome.

## 7.

What were the principal characteristics of this difference of thought between Israel and paganism? I call your attention to this very important matter.

Israel believes in God.

Paganism believes in creation. That is to say, in paganism creation is deified. For the pagans, God and creation are one and the same thing. God is impersonal, personified in a multitude of gods.

Israel (and when we speak of Israel we mean the true Israel, the spiritual sons of Abraham, those who have the faith given by God to His chosen people, not those who have abandoned this faith. The real sons of Abraham are the Church of Christ, and not those carnal descendants, the Jewish race), Israel knows that God and creation are two radically different kinds of existence. God is self-existent, personal, eternal, immortal, Life and the Source of life, Existence and the Source of existence; God is the only real Existence: Ὁ ὢν the Existing, the Only

Existing; this is the meaning of the article 'O.

Creation, on the contrary, has no self-existence. It is totally dependent on the will of God. It exists only so long as God wants it to exist. It is not eternal. It had no existence. It was null, it was completely nothing. It was created out of nothingness. By itself it has no force of existence; it is kept in existence by God's Energy. If this loving Energy of God ever stops, creation and all created beings, intellectual or non-intellectual, rational or irrational will vanish into non-existence. We know that God's love for His creation is eternal. We know from Him that He will never let us fall into non-existence, from which He brought us into being. This is our hope and God is true in His promises. We, created beings, angels, and men, will live in eternity, not because we have in us the power of eternity, but because this is the will of God Who loves us. By ourselves we are nothing. We have not the least energy of life and of existence in our nature; that which we have comes entirely from God; nothing is ours. We are dirt of the earth, and when we forgot it, God in His mercy permitted that we return to what we are, in order that we remain humble and have exact knowledge of our nothingness. "God," says Saint John Damascene elsewhere, "can do all that He wills, even though He does not will all things that He can do — for He can destroy creation, but He does not will to do so." (Ibid. I, 14)

In the *Great Euchologion* (Venice, 1862), a fundamental liturgical book of the Church, we read:

"O God, the great and most high, Thou Who alone hast immortality" [7th prayer of Vespers, p. 15];

"Thou Who alone art life-giving by nature...O only immortal" [Ode 5, Funeral Canon for Laymen, p. 410];

"Thou art the only immortal: [p. 410];

"The only One Who is immortal because of His godly nature" [Ode 1, Funeral Canon for Laymen, p. 471].

This is the faith of Israel.

What is the teaching of paganism? Paganism is the consequence of the loss of contact with God. The multitude of the sins of humanity made men incapable of receiving the divine light and of having any union with the Living God. The consequence was to consider as something divine the creation which they saw before them every day.

Paganism considers creation as being something self-existent and immortal, something that always existed and will always exist. In paganism the gods are part of creation. They did not create it from nothingness, they only formed the existing matter. Matter can take different forms. Forms come into existence and vanish, but matter itself is eternal. Angels, demons, and the souls of men are the real gods. Eternal by their nature, as is matter itself, they are, however, higher than matter. They might take different material forms in a sequence of material existences but they remain essentially spiritual.

So in paganism we see two fundamental characteristics: (1) An attributing of the characteristics of godhood to the whole of creation, that is: eternity, immortality, self-existence. (2) A distinction between the spiritual and the material and an antagonism between the two as between something higher and something lower.

Paganism and humanism are one and the same thing. In paganism, man is god because he is eternal by nature. This is why paganism is always haughty. It is narcissism. It is self-adoration. In Greece, the gods had human



characteristics. Greek religion was the pagan adoration of man. The soul of man was considered his real being, and was immortal by nature.

So we see that in paganism the devil succeeded in creating a universal belief that men were gods and so did not need God. This is why pride was so high in Greece and why humility was inconceivable. In his work *The Nichomachean Ethics*, Aristotle writes the following words: "Not to resent offenses is the mark of a base and slavish man." The man who is convinced by the devil to believe in the error that his soul is eternal by nature, can never be humble and can never really believe in God, because he does not need God, being God himself, as his error makes him believe.

This is why, from the very first, the Fathers of the Church, understanding the danger of this stupid error, warned the Christians of the fact that, as Saint Irenaeus puts it: "The teaching that the human soul is naturally immortal is from the devil" (*Proof of the Apostolic Preaching*, III, 20. 1). We find the same warning in Saint Justin (*Dialogue with Trypho* 6. 1-2), in Theophilus of Antioch (*To Autolytus* 2. 97), in Tatian (*To the Greeks* 13), etc.

Saint Justin explains the fundamental atheism which exists in the belief of the natural eternity and immortality of the human soul. He writes: "There are some others who, having supposed that the soul is immortal and immaterial, believe though they have committed evil they will not suffer punishment (for that which is immaterial is also insensible), and that the soul, in consequence of its immortality needs nothing from God" (*Dialogue with Trypho* 1).

Paganism is ignorance of the true God, an erroneous belief that His creation is divine, really a god. This god, however, who is Nature, is impersonal, a blind force, above all personal gods, and is called Necessity ('Ανάγκη). In reality, this Necessity is the projection of human reason, as a mathematical necessity governing the world. It is a projection of rationalism upon nature. This rationalistic Necessity is the true, supreme blind god of the pagans. The pagan gods are parts of the world, and they are immortal because of the immortality of nature which is their essence. In this pagan mentality, man is also god like the others, because for the pagans the real man is only his soul, and they believe that man's soul is immortal in itself, since it is part of the essence of the universe, which is considered immortal in itself and self-existent. So man also is god and a measure of all things.

But the gods are not free. They are governed by Necessity which is impersonal.

## 8.

It is this pagan way of thought that was mixed with the Christian teaching by the various heresies. This is what happened in the West, too. They began to distinguish not between God and His creation, but between spirit and matter. They began to think of the soul of man as of something eternal in itself, and began to consider the condition of man after death not as a sleep in the hands of God, but as the real life of man, to which the resurrection of the dead had nothing to add and even the need of the resurrection was doubtful. The feast of the Resurrection of our Lord, which is the culmination of all feasts in

Orthodoxy, began to fall into second place, because its need was as incomprehensible to the Western Christians as it was to the Athenians who heard the sermon of the Apostle Paul.

But what is more important for our subject, they began to feel that God was subject to Necessity, to this rationalistic Necessity which was nothing else but human logic. They declared Him incapable of coming into contact with inferior beings like men, because their rationalistic, philosophical conceptions did not permit it, and it was this belief which was the foundation of the hesychast disputes; it had already begun with Augustine who taught that it was not God Who spoke to Moses but an angel instead.

It is in this context of Necessity, which even gods obey, that we must understand the Western juridical conception of God's justice. It was necessary for God to punish man's disobedience. It was impossible for Him to pardon; a superior Necessity demanded vengeance. Even if God was in reality good and loving, He was not able to act lovingly. He was obliged to act contrary to His love; the only thing He could do, in order to save humanity, was to punish His Son in the place of men, and by this means was Necessity satisfied.

## 9.

This is the triumph of Hellenistic thought in Christianity. As a Hellenist, Origen had arrived at the same conclusions. God was a judge by necessity. He was obliged to punish, to avenge, to send people to hell. Hell was God's creation. It was a punishment demanded by

justice. This demand of justice was a necessity. God was obliged to submit to it. He was not permitted to forgive. There was a superior force, a Necessity which did not permit Him to love unconditionally.

However, Origen was also a Christian and he knew that God was full of love. How is it possible to acknowledge a loving God Who keeps people in torment eternally? If God is the cause of hell, by necessity then there must be an end to it, otherwise we cannot concede that god is good and loving. This juridical conception of God as an instrument of a superior, impersonal force or deity named Necessity, leads logically to *apokatastasis*, "the restoration of all things and the destruction of hell," otherwise we must admit that God is cruel.

The pagan Greek mentality could not comprehend that the cause of hell was not God but His logical creatures. If God was not really free, since He was governed by Necessity, how could His creatures be free? God could not give something which He did not possess Himself. Moreover, the pagan Greek mentality could not conceive of disinterested love. Freedom, however, is the highest gift that God could give to a creature, because freedom makes the logical creatures like God. This was an inconceivable gift for pagan Greeks. They could not imagine a creature which could say "no" to an almighty God. If God was almighty, creatures could not say "no" to Him. So if God gave men His grace, men could not reject it. Otherwise God would not be almighty. If we admit that God is almighty, then His grace must be irresistible. Men cannot escape from it. That means that those men who are deprived of God's grace are deprived because God did not give His grace to them. So the loss

of God's grace, which is eternal, spiritual death, in other words, hell, is in reality an act totally dependent on God. It is God Who is punishing these people by depriving them of His grace, by not permitting it to shine upon them. So God is the cause of the eternal, spiritual death of those who are damned. Damnation is an act of God, an act of God's justice, an act of necessity or cruelty. As a result, Origen thought that if we are to remain Christians, if we are to continue to believe that God is really good, we must believe that hell is not eternal, but will have an end, in spite of all that is written in the Holy Scriptures and of what the Church believes. This is the fatal, perfectly logical conclusion. If God is the cause of hell, hell must have an end, or else God is an evil God.

## 10.

Origen, and all rationalists who are like him, was not able to understand that the acceptance or the rejection of God's grace depends entirely on the rational creatures; that God, like the sun, never stops shining on good or wicked alike; that rational creatures are, however, entirely free to accept or reject this grace and love; and that God in His genuine love does not force His creatures to accept Him, but respects absolutely their free decision. He does not withdraw His grace and love, but the *attitude* of the logical creatures toward this unceasing grace and love is the difference between paradise and hell. Those who love God are happy with Him, those who hate Him are extremely miserable by being obliged to live in His presence, and there is no place where one can escape the loving omnipresence of God.

Paradise or hell depends on how we will accept God's love. Will we return love for love, or will we respond to His love with hate? This is the critical difference. And this difference depends entirely on us, on our freedom, on our innermost free choice, on a perfectly free attitude which is not influenced by external conditions or internal factors of our material and psychological nature, because it is not an external act but an interior attitude coming from the bottom of our heart, conditioning not our sins, but the way we think about our sins, as it is clearly seen in the case of the publican and the pharisee and in the case of the two robbers crucified with Christ. This freedom, this choice, this inner attitude toward our Creator is the innermost core of our eternal personality, it is the most profound of our characteristics, it is what makes us that which we are, it is our eternal face – bright or dark, loving or hating.

No, my brothers, unhappily for us, paradise or hell does not depend on God. If it depended on God, we would have nothing to fear. We have nothing to fear from Love. But it does not depend on God. It depends entirely upon us, and this is the whole tragedy. God wants us to be in His image, eternally free. He respects us absolutely. This is love. Without respect, we cannot speak of love. We are men because we are free. If we were not free, we would be clever animals, not men. God will never take back this gift of freedom which renders us what we are. This means that we will always be what we want to be, friends or enemies of God, and there is no changing in this our deepest self. In this life, there are profound or superficial changes in our life, in our character, in our beliefs, but all these changes are only the expression in

time of our deepest eternal self. This deep eternal self is eternal, with all the meaning of the word. This is why paradise and hell are also eternal. There is no changing in what we really are. Our temporal characteristics and our history in life depend on many superficial things which vanish with death, but our real personality is not superficial and does not depend on changing and vanishing things. It is our real self. It remains with us when we sleep in the grave, and will be our real face in the resurrection. It is eternal.

## 11.

Saint John of the Ladder says somewhere in his work that "before our fall the demons say to us that God is a friend of man; but after our fall, they say that He is inexorable." This is the cunning lie of the devil: to convince us that any harm in our life has as its cause God's disposition; that it is God Who will forgive us or Who will punish us. Wishing to throw us into sin and then to make us lose any hope of freeing ourselves from it, they seek to present God as sometimes forgiving all sins, and sometimes as inexorable. Most Christians, even Orthodox Christians, have fallen into this pit. They consider God responsible for our being pardoned or our being punished. This, my brothers, is a terrible falsehood which makes most men lose eternal life, principally because in considering God's love, they convince themselves that God, in His love, will pardon them. God is always loving, He is always pardoning, He is always a friend of man. However, that which never pardons, that which never is a friend of man, is sin, and we never think

of it as we ought to. Sin destroys our soul independently of the love of God, because sin is precisely the road which leads away from God, because sin erects a wall which separates us from God, because sin destroys our spiritual eyes and makes us unable to see God's light. The demons want to make us always think of our salvation or our eternal spiritual death in juridical terms. They want us to think that either salvation or eternal death is a question of God's decision. No, my brothers, we must awaken in order not to be lost. Our salvation or our eternal death is not a question of God's decision, but it is a question of *our* decision, it is a question of the decision of our free will which God respects absolutely. Let us not fool ourselves with confidence in God's love. The danger does not come from God; it comes from our own self.

## 12.

Many will say: "Does not Holy Scripture itself often speak about the anger of God? Is it not God Himself Who says that He will punish us or that He will pardon us? Is it not written that 'He is a rewarder of them that diligently seek Him' (Hb.11:6)? Does He not say that vengeance is His and that He will requite the wickedness done to us? Is it not written that it is fearful to fall into the hands of the living God?"

In his discourse entitled *That God is not the Cause of Evil*, Saint Basil the Great writes the following: "But one may say, if God is not responsible for evil things, why is it said in the book of Esaias, 'I am He that prepared light and Who formed darkness, Who makes peace and Who creates evils' (45:7)." And again, "There came down evils



from the Lord upon the gates of Jerusalem" (Mich.1:12). And, "Shall there be evil in the city which the Lord hath not wrought?" (Amos 3:6). And in the great Ode of Moses, "Behold, I am and there is no god beside Me. I will slay, and I will make to live; I will smite, and I will heal" (Deut.32:39). But none of these citations, to him who understands the deeper meaning of the Holy Scriptures, casts any blame on God, as if He were the cause of evils and their creator, for He Who said, "I am the One Who makes light and darkness," shows Himself as the Creator of the universe, not that He is the creator of any evil .... "He creates evils," that means, "He fashions them again and brings them to a betterment, so that they leave their evilness, to take on the nature of good."

As Saint Isaac the Syrian writes, "Very often many things are said by the Holy Scriptures and in it many names are used not in a literal sense... those who have a mind understand this" (*Homily* 83, p. 317).

Saint Basil in the same discourse gives the explanation of these expressions of the Holy Scriptures: "It is because fear," says he, "edifies simpler people," and this is true not only for simple people but for all of us. After our fall, we need fear in order to do any profitable thing and any good to ourselves or to others. In order to understand the Holy Scriptures, say the Fathers, we must have in mind their purpose which is to save us, and to bring us little by little to an understanding of our Creator God and of our wretched condition.

But the same Holy Scriptures in other places explain to us more accurately who is the real cause of our evils. In Jeremy 2:17,19, we read: "Hath not thy forsaking Me

brought these things upon thee? saith the Lord thy God .... Thine apostasy shall chastise thee and thy wickedness shall reprove thee; know then, and see that thy forsaking Me hath been bitter to thee, saith the Lord thy God."

The Holy Scriptures speak our language, the language which we understand in our fallen state. As Saint Gregory the Theologian says, "For according to our own comprehension, we have given names from our own attributes to those of God" And Saint John Damascene explains further that what in the Holy Scriptures "is said of God as if He had a body, is said symbolically ... [it contains] some hidden meaning, which through things corresponding to our nature, teaches us things which exceed our nature."

### 13.

However, there are punishments imposed upon us by God, or rather evils done to us by the devil and permitted by God. But these punishments are what we call pedagogical punishments. They have as their aim our correction *in this life*, or at least the correction of others who would take a lesson from our example and correct themselves by fear. There are also punishments which do not have the purpose of correcting anybody but simply put an end to evil by putting an end to those who are propagating it, so that the earth may be saved from perpetual corruption and total destruction; such was the case in the flood during Noe's time, and in Sodom's destruction.

All these punishments operate and have their purpose

in *this* corrupted state of things; they do not extend beyond this corrupted life. Their purpose is to correct what can be corrected, and to change things toward a better condition, while things can still change in this changing world. After the Common Resurrection no change whatever can take place. Eternity and incorruptibility are the state of unchangeable things; no alterations whatever happen then, only developments in the state chosen by free personalities; eternal and infinite developments but no changing, no alteration of direction, no going back. The changing world we see around us is changing because it is corruptible. The eternal New Heavens and New Earth which God will bring about in His Second Coming are incorruptible, that means, not changing. So in this New World there can be no correction whatever; therefore, pedagogical punishments are no longer necessary. Any punishment from God in this New World of Resurrection would be clearly and without a doubt a revengeful act, inappropriate and motivated by hate, without any good intention or purpose.

If we consider hell as a punishment from God, we must admit that it is a senseless punishment, unless we admit that God is an infinitely wicked being.

As Saint Isaac the Syrian says: "He who applies pedagogical punishments in order to give health, is punishing with love, but he who is looking for vengeance, is devoid of love. God punishes with love, not defending Himself – far be it – but He wants to heal His image, and He does not keep His wrath for long. This way of love is the way of uprightness, and it does not change with passion to a defense. A man who is just and wise is like God because he never chastises a man in revenge for

wickedness, but only in order to correct him or that others be afraid" (*Homily 73*).

So we see that God punishes as long as there is hope for correction. After the Common Resurrection there is no question of any punishment from God. Hell is not a punishment from God but a self condemnation. As Saint Basil the Great says, "The evils in hell do not have God as their cause, but ourselves."

#### 14.

One could insist, however, that the Sacred Scriptures and the Fathers always speak of God as the Great Judge who will reward those who were obedient to Him and will punish those who were disobedient, in the day of the Great Judgment (2Tm.4:6-8). How are we to understand this judgment if we are to understand the divine words not in a human but in a divine manner? What is God's judgment?

God is Truth and Light. God's judgment is nothing else than our coming into contact with truth and light. In the day of the Great Judgment all men will appear naked before this penetrating light of truth. The "books" will be opened. What are these "books"? They are our hearts. Our hearts will be opened by the penetrating light of God, and what is in these hearts will be revealed. If in those hearts there is love for God, those hearts will rejoice in seeing God's light. If, on the contrary, there is hatred for God in those hearts, these men will suffer by receiving on their opened hearts this penetrating light of truth which they detested all their life.

So that which will differentiate between one man and

another will not be a decision of God, a reward or a punishment from Him, but that which was in each one's heart; what was there during all our life will be revealed in the Day of Judgment. If there is a reward and a punishment in this revelation – and there really is – it does not come from God but from the love or hate which reigns in our heart. Love has bliss in it, hatred has despair, bitterness, grief, affliction, wickedness, agitation, confusion, darkness, and all the other interior conditions which compose hell (1Cor.4:6).

The Light of Truth, God's Energy, God's grace which will fall on men unhindered by corrupt conditions in the Day of Judgment, will be the same to all men. There will be no distinction whatever. All the difference lies in those who receive, not in Him Who gives. The sun shines on healthy and diseased eyes alike, without any distinction. Healthy eyes enjoy light and because of it see clearly the beauty which surrounds them. Diseased eyes feel pain, they hurt, suffer, and want to hide from this same light which brings such great happiness to those who have healthy eyes.

But alas, there is no longer any possibility of escaping God's light. During this life there was. In the New Creation of the Resurrection, God will be everywhere and in everything. His light and love will embrace all. There will be no place hidden from God, as was the case during our corrupt life in the kingdom of the prince of this world. The devil's kingdom will be despoiled by the Common Resurrection and God will take possession again of His creation. Love will enrobe everything with its sacred Fire which will flow like a river from the throne of God and will irrigate paradise. But this same river of Love – for

those who have hate in their hearts – will suffocate and burn.

"For our God is a consuming fire" (Hb.12:29). The very fire which purifies gold, also consumes wood. Precious metals shine in it like the sun, rubbish burns with black smoke. All are in the same fire of Love. Some shine and others become black and dark. In the same furnace steel shines like the sun, whereas clay turns dark and is hardened like stone.

The difference is in man, not in God. The difference is conditioned by the free choice of man, which God respects absolutely. God's judgment is the revelation of the reality which is in man.

## 15.

Thus Saint Macarius writes, "And as the kingdom of darkness, and sin, are hidden in the soul until the Day of Resurrection, when the bodies also of sinners shall be covered with the darkness that is now hidden in the soul, so also the Kingdom of Light, and the Heavenly Image, Jesus Christ, now mystically enlighten the soul, and reign in the soul of the saints, but are hidden from the eyes of men ... until the Day of Resurrection; but then the body also shall be covered and glorified with the Light of the Lord, which is now in the man's soul [from this earthly life], that the body also may reign with the soul which from now receives the Kingdom of Christ and rests and is enlightened with eternal light" (*Homily 2*).

Saint Symeon the New Theologian says that it is not what man does which counts in eternal life but what he is, whether he is like Jesus Christ our Lord, or whether he is

different and unlike Him. He says, "In the future life the Christian is not examined if he has renounced the whole world for Christ's love, or if he has distributed his riches to the poor or if he fasted or kept vigil or prayed, or if he wept and lamented for his sins, or if he has done any other good in this life, but he is examined attentively if he has any similitude with Christ, as a son does with his father."

## 16.

Saint Peter the Damascene writes: "We all receive God's blessings equally. But some of us, receiving God's fire, that is, His word, become soft like beeswax, while the others like clay become hard as stone. And if we do not want Him, He does not force any of us, but like the sun He sends His rays and illuminates the whole world, and he who wants to see Him, sees Him, whereas the one who does not want to see Him, is not forced by Him. And no one is responsible for this privation of light except the one who does not want to have it. God created the sun and the eye. Man is free to receive the sun's light or not. The same is true here. God sends the light of knowledge like rays to all, but He also gave us faith like an eye. The one who wants to receive knowledge through faith, keeps it by his works, and so God gives him more willingness, knowledge, and power" (*Philokalia*, vol. 3, p. 8).

## 17.

I think that by now we have reached the point of understanding correctly what eternal hell and eternal

paradise really are, and who is in reality responsible for the difference.

In the icon of the Last Judgment we see Our Lord Jesus Christ seated on a throne. On His right we see His friends, the blessed men and women who lived by His love. On His left we see His enemies, all those who passed their life hating Him, even if they appeared to be pious and reverent. And there, in the midst of the two, springing from Christ's throne, we see a river of fire coming toward us. What is this river of fire? Is it an instrument of torture? Is it an energy of vengeance coming out from God in order to vanquish His enemies?

No, nothing of the sort. This river of fire is the river which "came out from Eden to water the paradise" of old (Gn.2:10). It is the river of the grace of God which irrigated God's saints from the beginning. In a word, it is the out-pouring of God's love for His creatures. Love is fire. Anyone who loves knows this. God is Love, so God is Fire. And fire consumes all those who are not fire themselves, and renders bright and shining all those who are fire themselves (Hb.12:29).

God many times appeared as fire: To Abraham, to Moses in the burning bush, to the people of Israel showing them the way in the desert as a column of fire by night and as a shining cloud by day when He covered the tabernacle with His glory (Ex.40:28,32), and when He rained fire on the summit of Mount Sinai. God was revealed as fire on the mountain of Transfiguration, and He said that He came "to put fire upon the earth" (Lk.12:49), that is to say, love, because as Saint John of the Ladder says, "Love is the source of fire" (Step 30, 18).



The Greek writer, Fotis Kontoglou said somewhere that "Faith is fire, and gives warmth to the heart. The Holy Spirit came down upon the heads of the apostles in the form of tongues of fire. The two disciples, when the Lord was revealed to them, said `Did not our heart burn within us, while He talked with us in the way?' Christ compares faith to a `burning candle.' Saint John the Forerunner said in his sermons that Christ will baptize men `in the Holy Spirit and fire.' And truly, the Lord said, `I am come to send fire on the earth and what will I if it be already kindled?' Well, the most tangible characteristic of faith is warmth; this is why they speak about `warm faith,' or `faith provoking warmth.' And even as the distinctive mark of faith is warmth, the sure mark of unbelief is coldness.

"Do you want to know how to understand if a man has faith or unbelief? If you feel warmth coming out of him – from his eyes, from his words, from his manners – be certain that he has faith in his heart. If again you feel cold coming out of his whole being, that means that he has not faith, whatever he may say. He may kneel down, he may bend his head humbly, he may utter all sorts of moral teachings with a humble voice, but all these will breathe forth a chilling breath which falls upon you to numb you with cold."

Saint Isaac the Syrian says that "Paradise is the love of God, in which the bliss of all the beatitudes is contained," and that "the tree of life is the love of God" (*Homily 72*).

"Do not deceive yourself," says Saint Symeon the New Theologian, "God is fire and when He came into the world, and became man, He sent fire on the earth, as He Himself says; this fire turns about searching to find

material – that is a disposition and an intention that is good – to fall into and to kindle; and for those in whom this fire will ignite, it becomes a great flame, which reaches Heaven .... this flame at first purifies us from the pollution of passions and then it becomes in us food and drink and light and joy, and renders us light ourselves because we participate in His light" (*Discourse 78*).

God is a loving fire, and He is a loving fire for all: good or bad. There is, however, a great difference in the way people receive this loving fire of God. Saint Basil says that "the sword of fire was placed at the gate of paradise to guard the approach to the tree of life; it was a terrible and burning toward infidels, but kindly accessible toward the faithful, bringing to them the light of day." The same loving fire brings the day to those who respond to love with love, and burns those who respond to love with hatred.

Paradise and hell are one and the same River of God, a loving fire which embraces and covers all with the same beneficial will, without any difference or discrimination. The same vivifying water is life eternal for the faithful and death eternal for the infidels; for the first it is their element of life, for the second it is the instrument of their eternal suffocation; paradise for the one is hell for the other. Do not consider this strange. The son who loves his father will feel happy in his father's arms, but if he does not love him, his father's loving embrace will be a torment to him. This also is why when we love the man who hates us, it is likened to pouring lighted coals and hot embers on his head.

"I say," writes Saint Isaac the Syrian, "that those who are suffering in hell, are suffering in being scourged by

love .... It is totally false to think that the sinners in hell are deprived of God's love. Love is a child of the knowledge of truth, and is unquestionably given commonly to all. But love's power acts in two ways: it torments sinners, while at the same time it delights those who have lived in accord with it" (*Homily 84*).

God is love. If we really believe this truth, we know that God never hates, never punishes, never takes vengeance. As Abba Ammonas says, "Love never hates anyone, never reproves anyone, never condemns anyone, never grieves anyone, never abhors anyone, neither faithful nor infidel nor stranger nor sinner nor fornicator, nor anyone impure, but instead it is precisely sinners, and weak and negligent souls that it loves more, and feels pain for them and grieves and laments, and it feels sympathy for the wicked and sinners, more than for the good, imitating Christ Who called sinners, and ate and drank with them. For this reason, showing what real love is, He taught saying, 'Become good and merciful like your Father in Heaven,' and as He rains on bad and good and makes the sun to rise on just and unjust alike, so also is the one who has real love, and has compassion, and prays for all."

## 18.

Now if anyone is perplexed and does not understand how it is possible for God's love to render anyone pitifully wretched and miserable and even burning as it were in flames, let him consider the elder brother of the prodigal son. Was he not in his father's estate? Did not everything in it belong to him? Did he not have his

father's love? Did his father not come himself to entreat and beseech him to come and take part in the joyous banquet? What rendered him miserable and burned him with inner bitterness and hate? Who refused him anything? Why was he not joyous at his brother's return? Why did he not have love either toward his father or toward his brother? Was it not because of his wicked, inner disposition? Did he not remain in hell because of that? And what was this hell? Was it any separate place? Were there any instruments of torture? Did he not continue to live in his father's house? What separated him from all the joyous people in the house if not his own hate and his own bitterness? Did his father, or even his brother, stop loving him? Was it not precisely this very love which hardened his heart more and more? Was it not the joy that made him sad? Was not hatred burning in his heart, hatred for his father and his brother, hatred for the love of his father toward his brother and for the love of his brother toward his father? This is hell: the negation of love; the return of hate for love; bitterness at seeing innocent joy; to be surrounded by love and to have hate in one's heart. This is the eternal condition of all the damned. They are all dearly loved. They are all invited to the joyous banquet. They are all living in God's Kingdom, in the New Earth and the New Heavens. No one expels them. Even if they wanted to go away they could not flee from God's New Creation, nor hide from God's tenderly loving omnipresence. Their only alternative would be, perhaps, to go away from their brothers and search for a bitter isolation from them, but they could never depart from God and His love. And what is more terrible is that in this eternal life, in this New Creation, God is

everything to His creatures. As Saint Gregory of Nyssa says, "In the present life the things we have relations with are numerous, for instance: time, air, locality, food and drink, clothing, sunlight, lamplight, and other necessities of life, none of which, many though they be, are God; that blessed state which we hope for is in need of none of these things, but the Divine Being will become all, and in the stead of all to us, distributing Himself proportionately to every need of that existence. It is plain, too, from the Holy Scriptures that God becomes to those who deserve it, locality and home and clothing and food and drink and light and riches and kingdom, and everything that can be thought of and named that goes to make our life happy" (*On the Soul and the Resurrection*).

In the new eternal life, God will be everything to His creatures, not only to the good but also to the wicked, not only to those who love Him, but likewise to those who hate Him. But how will those who hate Him endure to have everything from the hands of Him Whom they detest? Oh, what an eternal torment is this, what an eternal fire, what a gnashing of teeth!

Depart from Me, ye cursed, into the everlasting inner fire of hatred, saith the Lord, because I was thirsty for your love and you did not give it to Me, I was hungry for your blessedness and you did not offer it to Me, I was imprisoned in My human nature and you did not come to visit Me in My church; you are free to go where your wicked desire wishes, away from Me, in the torturing hatred of your hearts which is foreign to My loving heart which knows no hatred for anyone. Depart freely from love to the everlasting torture of hate, unknown and foreign to Me and to those who are with Me, but prepared

by freedom for the devil, from the days I created My free, rational creatures. But wherever you go in the darkness of your hating hearts, My love will follow you like a river of fire, because no matter what your heart has chosen, you are and you will eternally continue to be, My children.

Amen.

10. [Ed. Note:] The answer is that he did not. In fact, St Makarios never wrote anything at all. Even the “Spiritual Homilies” of Pseudo-Makarios were known not to have been written by the Saint.