

**Eternal Damnation: A Reply to Karori Mbugua's  
“Gentler Theology of Hell”<sup>1</sup>**

**Reginald M.J. Oduor**

**Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies**

**University of Nairobi, Kenya**

**rmjoduor@gmail.com**

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*thoughtandpractice@gmail.com*

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### **Abstract**

This article is a reply to Karori Mbugua's article titled "The Problem of Hell Revisited: Towards a Gentler Theology of Hell" (*Thought and Practice: A Journal of the Philosophical Association of Kenya*, New Series, Vol.3 No.2, December 2011, pp.93-103). The present article does *not* in any way seek to argue for or against the existence of eternal damnation. Instead, it advances the view that while Mbugua raises important philosophical issues around the question of eternal damnation, those questions deserve a more incisive treatment than Mbugua accorded them. The article further argues that as with all other matters touching on the way things *are* rather than the way they *ought to be*, the answer to the question as to whether or not eternal damnation exists cannot be determined by our opinions - its existence or non-existence is an objective fact. Consequently, philosophers cannot revise the fact to their liking; what they can do is to accept or reject the doctrine of eternal damnation altogether on rational grounds, but with no assurance that the objective fact is on their chosen side.

### **Keywords**

Eternal damnation, hell, attributes of God, biblical doctrine

### **Introduction**

The question as to whether or not there is life after death is of great concern to the vast majority of humankind. This is evident in the various religious doctrines about some form of life after death, including belief in eternal life in heaven, resurrection and reincarnation (see Hick 1990, Chapters 10 and 11). As Waterhouse observed more than eighty years ago, "The belief that death is not the cessation of existence is in some sense characteristic of every form of religion ..." (Waterhouse 1933, 215). However, what is of even greater concern to many is the doctrine of eternal damnation for unrepentant sinners. It has generated considerable debate since the advent of Western modernity. Nevertheless, even prior to this, Roman Catholicism had already introduced the doctrine of purgatory - a place not as torturous as "hell" but not as blissful as "heaven", and from where sinners could exit into heaven after some

"cleansing", mainly facilitated by the prayers and indulgences of their living family and friends. Some Protestants believe in annihilationism, which holds that sinners will not experience eternal conscious punishment, but will suffer for a while and then be caused to cease to exist. For example, as far back as 1927, Bertrand Russell noted that belief in eternal damnation was already no longer part of English Christianity:

Belief in eternal hell fire was an essential item of Christian belief until pretty recent times. In this country, . . . , it ceased to be an essential item because of a decision of the Privy Council, and from that decision the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Archbishop of York dissented; but in this country our religion is settled by Act of Parliament, and therefore the Privy Council was able to override their Graces and hell was no longer necessary to a Christian (Russell 1927).

In his article titled "The Problem of Hell Revisited: Towards a Gentler Theology of Hell", Karori Mbugua asserts that the followers of both Christianity and Islam "believe that after the last judgment, all wrongdoers will be consigned to hell to suffer everlasting punishment (with no room for escape), while non-sinners will go to heaven to enjoy a life of everlasting happiness. This is what is referred to as the traditional doctrine of hell" (Mbugua 2011, 94). For him, this raises the question of how a loving God, as conceived by both religions, could "condemn his own creation to a life of endless suffering for sins/crimes committed in a finite duration of time". He therefore sets out to argue that it is time to abandon the traditional view of hell as a place of eternal torment, and to replace it with a more human-friendly account of the sinner's destiny (Mbugua 2011, 94).

In the present article, I do *not* in any way seek to argue for or against the existence of eternal damnation. Indeed, from a purely empirical standpoint, no human being can verify or falsify claims about the existence of eternal damnation. The goal of this article is therefore only to show that the philosophical concerns that Mbugua raised and reflected upon are more intricate than he presented them. Furthermore, although Mbugua focused on both the Islamic and what he calls the "Christian" doctrines about eternal damnation, I will restrict myself to philosophical reflections on the biblical doctrine of eternal damnation. I avoid using the term "hell", preferring to use the compound term "eternal damnation" instead because of the way in which several

terms in the original text of the Bible (chiefly *sheol*, *gehenna* and *haides*) are rendered “hell” in English translations, thereby causing substantial confusion.

I set out by briefly commenting on Mbugua’s presentation of the biblical doctrine of eternal damnation. I then assess Mbugua’s treatment of several philosophical questions arising from the doctrine. The article is a contribution to the lively contemporary discourse on eternal damnation undertaken by, among many others, Cain (2002), Himma (2003), and Buckareff and Plug (2005).

### **The Bible on Eternal Damnation**

Mbugua sets out by offering an outline of his understanding of the Christian, Judaist and Islamic teachings about eternal damnation. In his view, the doctrine is much more developed in Christianity and Islam than in Judaism which views *Sheol* as a holding room prior to the resurrection (Mbugua 2011, 94-96). However, my focus in this article is on the biblical doctrine of eternal damnation.

Mbugua’s account of the Christian doctrine of eternal destiny is by and large the commonly held one, namely, that the dead individual’s *spirit* goes to “heaven” or “hell” to live there eternally, implying that the destiny of the individual is to live eternally as a disembodied spirit. In contrast to such a view, the Bible teaches that at the end of time the dead will rise *physically* and be judged to determine which of them will enjoy eternal bliss, and which ones be relegated to eternal damnation (John 5:26-29, 1 Corinthians 15, 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, Philippians 3:20-21, Revelation 20:11-15). Furthermore, like many philosophers who address the doctrine of eternal damnation, Mbugua does not say anything about the biblical doctrine of the new heaven and new earth, with righteous humankind dwelling with God on the new earth rather than in the new heaven:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and there is no longer any sea. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them, and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer

be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away." And He who sits on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new " And He said, "Write, for these words are faithful and true" Revelation 21:1-5, NASB).

In the next section, I examine Mbugua's treatment of the philosophical questions arising from the biblical doctrine of eternal damnation.

## **The Biblical Doctrine of Eternal Damnation: Some Philosophical Concerns**

### **The Retributive Defense and the Argument from Free Will**

Mbugua first examines two arguments that he refers to as "Arguments in Defense of Hell". The first of the two arguments is "the retributive defense", which, he explains, "looks at the past in order to determine what to do in the present" (mbugua 2011, 96). He claims that from a retributivist point of view, sinners ought to be punished because all sin is an offence against God; and since God is infinite, the degree of punishment ought also to be infinite (Mbugua 2011, 96). However, there is no evidence of this line of reasoning (that eternal damnation is based on God's infinity) in the Bible. Instead, the biblical doctrine of eternal damnation seems to rest on the view that morality is universal and timeless, so that moral culpability cannot be limited to or by space and time (see Romans 2:1-16).

Mbugua goes on to assert that an adequate theory of justice (he probably means "theory of punishment") ought to seek to rehabilitate, incapacitate or deter actual or potential offenders. Nevertheless, such a prescription has a temporal rather than eternal view: it focuses on the maintenance of social harmony on the conviction that rightness or wrongness is to be determined purely on the basis of consequences. This is probably why he relies on the highly secular Jeremy Bentham to support his view. On the other hand, the biblical perspective is that the human person was created to live eternally, so that his/her choices in time must be seen from that perspective.

Mbugua goes on to assert that punishing an individual eternally for offences committed over a finite period of time is unjust, as it violates the principle that the punishment ought to fit the crime: “To justify eternal punishment, the sinner must have caused infinite harm” (Mbugua 2011, 97). This position proceeds from the assumption that only the consequentialist view of morality has anything useful to say about punishment. Indeed, Mbugua is using a consequentialist argument to rebut a retributivist one, and this seems to me to be incoherent. The fact is that deontological theories, with their emphasis on conscientiousness, also say something important about moral responsibility, namely, that while morally desirable action often produces beneficial consequences for its performer, one ought to do the right thing even when there is no immediate benefit accruing to oneself. The case of the moral exemplars, that is, those who engage in acts purely for the benefit of others and way beyond the call of duty (supererogatory acts), is often cited in this regard (see Urmsion 1958). What is more, in the eighth chapter of his *The Problem of Evil*, C.S. Lewis (1940) proposes a rationale for the eternal punishment of action performed in finite time:

Another objection turns on the apparent disproportion between eternal damnation and transitory sin. And if we think of eternity as a mere prolongation of time, it is disproportionate. But many would reject this idea of eternity. If we think of time as a line - which is a good image, because the parts of time are successive and no two of them can co-exist; i.e., there is no *width* in time, only length - we probably ought to think of eternity as a plane or even a solid. Thus the whole reality of a human being would be represented by a solid figure. That solid would be mainly the work of God, acting through grace and nature, but human free will would have contributed the base-line which we call earthly life: and if you draw your base line askew, the whole solid will be in the wrong place. The fact that life is short, or, in the symbol, that we contribute only one little line to the whole complex figure, might be regarded as a Divine mercy. For if even the drawing of that little line, left to our free will, is sometimes so badly done as to spoil the whole, how much worse a mess might we have made of the figure if more had been entrusted to us? ... (Lewis 1940).

The second argument in defense of eternal damnation which Mbugua examines is that from free will - the view that those who end up in eternal damnation do so out of their own choice, that is, by their immoral actions they elect to end up eternally damned. Following Thomas Talbott, Marilyn McCord Adams and J.L. Mackie, Mbugua contends that no one could choose eternal damnation if he/she could choose otherwise, insisting that anyone who performs actions that would end him or her in

eternal damnation must have an impaired free will which a loving God ought to override (Mbugua 2011, 97-98). Nevertheless, C.S. Lewis replied to earlier proponents of this view as follows:

...man has free will and ... all gifts to him are therefore two edged. ... it follows directly that the Divine labour to redeem the world cannot be certain of succeeding as regards every individual soul. Some will not be redeemed. .... If a game is played, it must be possible to lose it. If the happiness of a creature lies in self surrender, no one can make that surrender but himself (though many can help him to make it) and he may refuse. I would pay any price to be able to say truthfully "All will be saved". But my reason retorts, "Without their will, or with it?" If I say "Without their will" I at once perceive a contradiction; how can the supreme voluntary act of self surrender be involuntary? If I say "With their will", my reason replies "How if they will not give in? (Lewis 1940).

Mbugua goes as far as stating that "it is difficult to understand why God did not create a world free of evil, so that humans could choose only what is good" (Mbugua 2011, 98). However, the assertion that God ought to have created the world such that humans only had good alternatives to choose from produces its own philosophical worries, namely, how such a world would look like, and how meaningful human choice would be. A world with only good choices could be construed as a world with no real choices, since God would have taken away a sizeable portion of what constitutes meaningful choice, namely, the ability to choose between desirable and undesirable alternatives.

In addition, following T. Talbott, Mbugua asserts that if God foreknows which persons will be irredeemable, he ought not to create them in the first place (Mbugua 2011, 98). This objection assumes that every such person would prefer never to have existed than to have come into existence and to have made their choices. Nevertheless, it is difficult to rule out the possibility of some wicked persons preferring to exist and to commit their wickedness and bear the eternal consequences of their actions.

Furthermore, following S. Kershner, Mbugua objects to the free will argument on the basis that "going by it [the free will defense], God bears some responsibility if he sets up the levels of well-being that a person receives from his or her choices" (Mbugua

2011, 98). In other words, God is responsible for having created the world in such a way that certain kinds of actions produce certain kinds of consequences, so that the sinner ought not to be blamed for operating as he or she does in this world. However, this argument seems to boil down to one of the previous ones, namely, that God ought to have created a world with only good options to choose from, in which case my earlier answer applies to this second formulation of the same objection.

Moreover, Mbugua points to the charge that free will itself is a misnomer because no created being can be really free since it is not the cause of itself; instead, the creator determines what kind of beings to create, and in the case of humans, this includes the state of their minds (which, presumably, determines the kinds of decisions they make). Thus since humans are not the cause of their own existence, they cannot be *fully* responsible for their sins (Mbugua 2011, 98). I think this observation ought to be taken seriously because a creature is, by definition, subject to its creator. For example, when God creates humankind without wings, he precludes their choice as to whether or not to fly. Nevertheless, the objection presupposes that God is unable to create humans whose freedom is meaningful, albeit limited by their creature-status: why should this be too difficult for him? Since according to the Bible God is both omnipotent and omniscient, I see no reason why he should be unable to create beings who can freely choose between alternative courses of action with attendant consequences.

### **Argument from Injustice and Argument from the Incompatibility of “Hell” and “Heaven”**

Mbugua then examines two arguments against eternal damnation, namely, the “argument from injustice” and the “argument from the incompatibility of hell and heaven”.

On the argument from injustice, Mbugua argues:

Hell as traditionally understood involves infinite suffering, and such suffering is unjust since no finite sin deserves infinite punishment. Because humans are finite, they can only commit a finite number of sins, yet hell is an infinite punishment. Eternal punishment is therefore ‘overkill’. .... In sum, consigning sinners to hell would be barbarous

vengeance, since no sin can deserve an infinite amount of punishment (Mbugua 2011, 99).

However, the argument above is based on the assumption that there is a correlation between time and moral responsibility, so that finite moral wrongdoing deserves finite punishment, and infinite moral wrongdoing (if it were possible) infinite punishment. The problem with this assumption is that it is difficult to demonstrate the correlation between time and moral value. For example, an individual can perform one single action at a specific point in time (finite time) which has far-reaching ramifications. Thus a person who deliberately poisons the water supply of a large city can negatively affect not only the immediate consumers of the water, but their descendants as well. If the poison is the kind that causes harmful mutations in the immediate consumers with devastating results to them and to their descendants for countless generations, the fact that the action was performed within finite time would pale into insignificance compared to the ongoing harm arising from the person's malicious action. Consequently, to argue that since it only took the person a quarter of an hour to poison the water he/she ought to be punished for a quarter of an hour would be awkward indeed.

Besides, an examination of the alleged correlation between time and moral value would require a drawn out discussion between philosophers of time and moral philosophers, with no assurance of a definitive answer at the conclusion of the venture. On the one hand, philosophers of time seek to understand the nature of time, the relationship between time and mind, and why there is time instead of no time, among several other questions (Markosian 2014; Dowden n.d.). On the other hand, moral philosophers investigate the principles by which to determine the rightness or wrongness of human action and the virtuousness or viciousness of human character, as well as the meaning of moral judgments and concepts (Oduor 2009, 16-23). Indeed, it seems to me that we have a reasonably adequate knowledge of the functioning of morality, but a very limited appreciation of time. Consequently, it is strange to assume that the two are related.

Mbugua goes on to explain that medieval thinkers such as Augustine of Hippo and Thomas Aquinas contended that infinite punishment for offences against God are

justified on the basis that the correct punishment for an offence ought to be proportional to the status of the wronged individual (Mbugua 2011, 99). It will be recalled that he had earlier presented this view without indicating its source, and that I had noted that it has no basis in the text of the Bible. Mbugua's own assessment of the view of the medieval thinkers whom he cites is that an infinite, omnipotent being cannot be infinitely harmed by finite action, and as such infinite punishment for finite sins is unjustified. This rebuttal seems to me to have some merit on the grounds that it avoids anthropomorphism - the erroneous thought that the infinite God experiences and views life exactly as we human beings do, that is, creating God in our own image.

On the argument from the incompatibility of hell and heaven, Mbugua explains that it can be traced back to the nineteenth century philosopher and founder of modern theology, Friedrich Schleiermacher. He tells us that according to Schleiermacher, the damnation of even a single person would make it impossible for the inhabitants of heaven to experience eternal bliss (Mbugua 2011, 100). To the answer sometimes given that God will cause the inhabitants of heaven to forget their loved ones in "hell", Mbugua asserts that given that God does not engage in deception, he cannot possibly conceal the suffering of the damned in hell from the inhabitants of heaven (Mbugua 2011, 100). However, it is erroneous to assert that any time a person withholds information he or she is engaging in deception. Many moral philosophers would agree that intentionality is crucial in determining the moral worth of an action. Thus if I withheld some information in order to protect someone else from physical or emotional harm, I would not be morally culpable. Instead, my action would be morally justifiable because my intention would not be to mislead but rather to avoid causing harm.

Mbugua and others of his persuasion that the existence of eternal damnation would of necessity mar eternal bliss should consider a possible alternative explanation. In at least one place in the Bible, the "new heavens and ... new earth" (eternal bliss) is described as a place "where righteousness dwells" (2 Peter 3:13, NASB). The idea here is of a place characterised by righteousness, that is, where righteousness holds sway. Suppose some people are totally unwilling to give up their evil ways; suppose further that God's omnibenevolence allowed them into eternal bliss: would they not mar that very bliss by being a nuisance to those sold out to righteousness? According

to the tenor of biblical doctrine, God's infinite love is not his only attribute - he is also infinitely rational, and as such cannot succumb to the irrationality of allowing evil people to destroy the eternal bliss on the basis of his infinite love. Or does Mbugua and those of his persuasion require God to compartmentalise paradise into a place for those sold out to evil and those sold out to righteousness?

Nevertheless, to Mbugua's credit, he dismisses the view that if God allowed even a single person to go into eternal damnation, he (God), because of his omnibenevolence, would suffer infinite pain. Following L. Ahluwalia, he points out that God cannot suffer since he is pure actuality and changeless, and yet a God who suffered would be subject to change (Mbugua 2011, 100).

Mbugua then focuses specifically on the argument from God's love, citing John Hick who contended that the doctrine of eternal damnation attributes to God an insatiable cruelty, and can only be the product of sinful imagination (Mbugua 2011, 100). C.S. Lewis responded to earlier proponents of this view as follows:

Picture to yourself a man who has risen to wealth or power by a continued course of treachery and cruelty, by exploiting for purely selfish ends the noble motions of his victims, laughing the while at their simplicity; who, having thus attained success, uses it for the gratification of lust and hatred and finally parts with the last rag of honour among thieves by betraying his own accomplices and jeering at their last moments of bewildered disillusionment. Suppose, further, that he does all this, not (as we like to imagine) tormented by remorse or even misgiving, but eating like a schoolboy and sleeping like a healthy infant - a jolly, ruddy-cheeked man, without a care in the world, unshakably confident to the very end that he alone has found the answer to the riddle of life, that God and man are fools whom he has got the better of, that his way of life is utterly successful, satisfactory, unassailable. .... Supposing he *will* not be converted, what destiny in the eternal world can you regard as proper for him? Can you really desire that such a man, *remaining* what he is (and he must be able to do that if he has free will) should be confirmed forever in his present happiness - should continue, for all eternity, to be perfectly convinced that the laugh is on his side? And if you cannot regard this as tolerable, is it only your wickedness - only spite - that prevents you from doing so? Or do you find that conflict between Justice and Mercy, ..., now actually at work in your own mind, and feeling very much as if it came to you from above, not from below? You are moved not by a desire for the wretched creature's pain as such, but by a truly ethical demand that, soon or late, the right should be asserted, .... In a sense, it is better for the creature itself, even if it never becomes good, that it should know

itself a failure, a mistake. Even mercy can hardly wish to such a man his eternal, contented continuance in such ghastly illusion.

.... The demand that God should forgive such a man while he remains what he is, is based on a confusion between condoning and forgiving. To condone an evil is simply to ignore it, to treat it as if it were good. But forgiveness needs to be accepted as well as offered if it is to be complete: and a man who admits no guilt can accept no forgiveness (Lewis 1940).

However, about two centuries earlier, David Hume had contended that most human beings do not act in the extreme of virtue or vice, so that there is no basis for making the afterlife absolute through eternal bliss and eternal damnation (Hume 1954). Nevertheless, Hume's position disregards the biblical doctrine that to God motives are infinitely more important than actual actions (Matthew 5:21-28), that is, "God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7b, NASB). Consequently, "everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matthew 5:28, NASB) and "Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer" (1 John 3:15a, NASB). Thus people who we might deem to be relatively morally upright could, from the point of view of divine omniscience, be reprobates.

Mbugua also cites A. Buckareef and A. Plug, who argue that given God's all-loving character, it would be most rational for him to have an open door policy towards the inhabitants of "hell", making it possible for them to escape on the basis that His divine mercy requires that he be infinitely patient with sinners (Mbugua 2011, 100-101). Nevertheless, God's omniscience should enable him to give adequate opportunities for repentance on earth, thereby rendering unnecessary the giving of further chances in the afterlife. As Lewis observed in a slightly different context, "... a master [teacher] often knows, when boys and parents do not, that it is really useless to send a boy in for a certain examination again. Finality must come some time, and it does not require a very robust faith to believe that omniscience knows when" (Lewis 1940).

## **Belief in Eternal Damnation as Deterrence?**

Mbugua then comes to a section on "Belief in Hell as a Deterrence to Sin". In a previous section he had asserted that "unless the inhabitants of hell are given a chance to escape, there can be no heaven if by heaven we mean a place of eternal bliss" (Mbugua 2011, 99). Now he restates his view that "By its very nature, eternal punishment would neither act as deterrence nor would it reform the offender. Unless there is a possibility of escaping from hell ..., eternal punishment would be meaningless" (Mbugua 2011, 101). However, human beings do not have the power to determine what happens with regard to eternal damnation any more than they do the power to determine which direction the sun rises from. If inescapable eternal damnation exists, humans simply have to come to terms with it; if it does not, they can take a deep sigh of relief.

Besides, I find it surprising that immediately after his assertion concerning the need to insert an "escape clause" into the doctrine of eternal damnation, Mbugua contends that "even if belief in hell is not true, it has a social value in helping to deter potential sinners from sinning. Perhaps it should even be encouraged since it helps to regulate and sustain the moral foundation of society" (Mbugua 2011, 101). In other words, Mbugua is asserting that the doctrine of eternal damnation is a convenient tool for manipulating members of society into leading morally upright lives. This, in my view, is itself morally inadmissible because it entails deception. Besides, such a strategy for social control opens wide the door for a malevolent clique to keep on improvising deceptive measures in the name of promoting social harmony while in reality pursuing its own selfish goals. Such a strategy exposes society to deceptions reminiscent of the stories that Moses the tame raven told about "Sugarcandy Mountain" in George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (Orwell 1945) and those about "the beastly" in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (Golding 1954), all of which merely served to hoodwink their hearers, thereby rendering them incapable of acting to change their miserable circumstances here on earth. What is more, moral growth entails an increase in critical thinking and conscientiousness, both of which cause fear to recede (Oduor 2009, 13-15). Consequently, Mbugua's proposal to use the doctrine of eternal damnation to scare people into behaving in morally acceptable ways despite his conviction that the doctrine is not defensible on rational and moral grounds would

stunt such growth, and the action thus produced would not be genuinely moral even though it might coincide with moral action.

Thus if Mbugua is convinced that the doctrine of eternal damnation is false, the right thing for him to do is to reject it altogether as thinkers such as David Hume (1954), Bertrand Russell (1927) and John Hick (1996) have done (more on Hume and Russell below): Mbugua's proposal to sustain "the moral foundation of society" through an allegedly implausible doctrine of eternal damnation is objectionable on moral grounds not only because it is deceptive, but also because it is paternalistic (treats adults as though they were minors for whom decisions had to be made because they were incapable of taking personal moral responsibility).

A recurrent feature of Mbugua's article is his apparent conviction that the doctrine of eternal damnation is one which humans can review and revise as they please. Consider the following paragraph at the beginning of his section titled "Towards a Gentler Theology of Hell":

... the traditional understanding of hell as a place of eternal torment is no longer tenable. It is not only morally repugnant; it is also unjust because no sin deserves infinite punishment. This picture of hell as a never-ending torture chamber needs to be modified if the justice of hell is to be defended. Alternatively, the idea of hell will need to be discarded altogether. However, I should not be construed to be advocating a version of annihilationism - the doctrine that sinners will be caused to cease to exist. Offering the inhabitants of hell a chance to escape would perhaps be the best solution to the God-hell paradox. Because God is infinitely patient, the opportunities for sinners to repent should also be infinite (...). What is more, assuming that the inhabitants of heaven will have a free will, similar opportunities to repent ought to be extended to them, since there is no guarantee that they will not yield to temptation (Mbugua 2011, 101-102).

Mbugua later asserts that "One could also acknowledge the existence of hell, but argue that the amount of suffering that sinners undergo is not intense enough to preclude the possibility of happiness. Effectively this would entail that we abandon the torture-chamber view of hell" (Mbugua 2011, 102).

However, as I earlier indicated, the question as to whether or not eternal damnation exists, and, if it does, how fair it is, is not one to be settled as we wish because it has to do with objective facts: if it exists, it exists regardless of our knowledge and/or

acceptance of it; similarly, if it does not exist, it does not exist regardless of our knowledge and/or acceptance of it. Consequently, philosophers cannot revise the facts to their liking; what they can do is to accept or reject the doctrine of eternal damnation altogether on rational grounds, but with no assurance that the objective fact is on their chosen side.

Furthermore, going by the second to last quotation above, Mbugua thinks that there is the possibility that those who are in eternal bliss could yield to temptation. Nevertheless, according to biblical doctrine, believers shall attain physical and moral perfection at the resurrection (Philippians 3:20-21; 1 Corinthians 15:52; 1 John 3:2). Consequently, such conjecture is inadmissible within the biblical framework.

Some of Mbugua's objections to the doctrine of eternal damnation are in the tradition of, among others, David Hume (1711-1776) and Bertrand Russell (1872-1970). In "Of the Immortality of the Soul", Hume (1954) advances metaphysical, moral and physical arguments against the existence of an afterlife, and by implication, eternal bliss and eternal damnation. Part of his metaphysical argument is that if the mind is a substance, we should expect it to have the properties that all other substances have, among which are the characteristic of disintegration: since the physical substance (the body) disintegrates and loses its identity at death, there is no reason why the mind should not go through similar disintegration. With regard to his physical argumentation against belief in the existence of an afterlife, part of what Hume does is to attempt a rebuttal of the widely held view that because the mind is immaterial it is also immortal. He contends that our experiences indicate that our thought and consciousness depend on our physical existence, so that the death of the body must imply the death of the mind.

Of greatest relevance to the present article are Hume's moral arguments against immortality, since, as is evident from our reflections thus far, the doctrine of eternal damnation has moral implications. On the view that there is an afterlife so that the good can be rewarded and the wicked punished, Hume, in "On the Immortality of the Soul" (Hume 1954), contends that we cannot infer God's justice from the world, presumably because we cannot infer perfection from imperfection. Indeed, more than

two centuries before Mbugua, Hume had contended that if God metes out infinite punishment for offences committed in time and which, by their very nature are finite, God is omni-vindictive. Similarly, contended Hume, it would be unjust for God to give infinite rewards for morally desirable actions performed in finite time. What is more, Hume had already asserted that punishment without an opportunity for reformation ought not to be endorsed by a perfect God.

Similarly, according to Bertrand Russell in his “Why I am not a Christian” (Russell 1927), Christ taught several highly commendable things. However, “There is one very serious defect to my mind in Christ's moral character, and that is that He believed in hell. I do not myself feel that any person that is really profoundly humane can believe in everlasting punishment” (Russell 1927). After a copious review of biblical passages in which Christ spoke about eternal damnation, Russell declares: “I must say that I think all this doctrine, that hell-fire is a punishment for sin, is a doctrine of cruelty. It is a doctrine that put cruelty into the world, and gave the world generations of cruel torture; and the Christ of the Gospels, if you could take Him as his chroniclers represent Him, would certainly have to be considered partly responsible for that” (Russell 1927).

### **Conclusion**

Mbugua concludes that the doctrine of eternal damnation cannot be reconciled with an account of God as just, loving and all good:

We need to modify our theology of hell by taking God's character seriously. His infinite mercy and patience should motivate him to always give a chance to sinners to escape from hell and be reconciled to him. The other alternative would be to reject the doctrine of hell altogether (Mbugua 2011, 102).

However, it is apparent that the option of revising the doctrine of eternal damnation is not viable because it is not in our power to determine the nature of reality, natural or supernatural. This being so, the only two realistic options are to accept or reject the belief altogether on rational grounds, while bearing in mind that the objective existence or non-existence of eternal damnation is, *ipso facto*, independent of our preferences. It is also apparent that the discussion on eternal damnation would get a

more thorough treatment if discussants made the important distinction between the biblical doctrine on the subject and the diverse doctrines that have arisen in various religious traditions such as Roman Catholicism, classical Protestantism, liberal Protestantism, and Seventh Day Adventism, among others. Failure to do this exposes discussants to a very real danger of committing the strawman's fallacy - coming up with their own versions of the doctrine which they then dismiss through argumentation while believing that they have responded to the doctrine as it is held by various religious groups.

All in all, the foregoing reflections indicate that none of the objections against eternal damnation that Mbugua raises, all of which have been raised in one way or another by other scholars, is immune to rebuttal. This does *not* in any way imply that eternal damnation exists; but it does point to the danger of presuming that those thinkers who are against the doctrine of eternal damnation have adequately demonstrated its irrationality.

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