
A MARGINAL IDEA, A PERSISTENT QUESTION: CHRISTIAN UNIVERSALISM IN THE CONTEXT OF THE RADICAL REFORMATION

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Abstract: *This study examines the status and transformations of Christian universalism within the theological landscape of the sixteenth-century Radical Reformation. While the major reformers, such as Martin Luther and John Calvin, explicitly rejected any form of universal restoration, the broader dynamics unleashed by the Reformation, particularly the emphasis on Scripture and individual conscience, created space for alternative and often marginal theological developments. Focusing on the diverse currents of the Radical Reformation, especially Anabaptist circles, the paper highlights the emergence of ideas that challenge the notion of eternal damnation and suggest the possibility of a final restoration of all beings. Although difficult to systematize, such perspectives are attested both in contemporary polemical sources and in later historical analyses, as well as in the doctrinal reactions they provoked, including condemnations found in documents like the Augsburg Confession. Particular attention is given to the thought of Hans Denck, whose theological vision, while not articulating a formal doctrine of universal salvation, opens a conceptual horizon in which such a possibility becomes intelligible. His emphasis on the inner transformation of the believer, the universality of divine action, and the dynamic relationship between God and the human person contributes to a reconfiguration of soteriological categories beyond rigid confessional boundaries. The study argues that, although marginal and frequently condemned, universalist tendencies represent a persistent and meaningful strand within the Radical Reformation. Rather than constituting a fully developed doctrine, they function as a recurring theological question, reflecting deeper tensions between divine justice and the universality of salvation in early modern Christian thought.*

Keywords: *Universal Salvation, Christian Universalism, Apokatastasis, Radical Reform, History of Salvation.*

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INTRODUCTION

The problem of Christian universalism, understood as the hypothesis of the final restoration of all, traverses the history of theology as a recurrent theme that is often marginalized yet never entirely absent. From the speculative formulations of Origen to its reappearances in moments of crisis and doctrinal reconfiguration, this idea has functioned as a point of tension between the demands of divine justice and the radical affirmation of God's love (Lazăr, 2025). At a deeper level, it also raises the question of the coherence of the divine will itself, namely whether the ultimate purpose of God can remain only partially fulfilled.

Following the condemnation of apocatastasis in the sixth century, the theme appears to withdraw from explicit theological discourse, a silence that extends to the threshold of early modernity. This silence, however, is not one of disappearance, but rather a fertile quietness, within which a few isolated voices continue to sustain, discreetly, the possibility of universal restoration (Lazăr, 2026). Such continuity is not expressed through a stable doctrinal tradition, but through scattered intuitions, spiritual currents, and occasional speculative returns that resist complete suppression. The Reformation of the sixteenth century, although it did not place universalism at the center of its debates, nevertheless provides a privileged framework for observing how such intuitions re emerge and are transformed in periods of theological rupture.

Traditionally, the Reformation is associated with the clarification of doctrines concerning salvation, grace, and the authority of Scripture (Kiwiet, 1957), especially through the contributions of figures such as Martin Luther and John Calvin. Within these theological systems, the emphasis falls on the seriousness of divine judgment and on the firm distinction between the saved and the condemned, which seems to exclude any universalist perspective. Yet it is precisely the dynamic opened by the Reformation, its contestation of traditional authority, its affirmation of direct access to Scripture, and its emphasis on individual conscience, that created the conditions for the emergence of alternative interpretations, often situated at the margins of the movement. In this sense, the very radicality of Reformation theology, particularly its stress on divine sovereignty, contributes indirectly to the reappearance of the problem it appears to exclude.

The present study aims to analyze these marginal forms of universalism within the context of the Reformation, with particular attention to radical milieus, especially Anabaptism. In the German space, these tendencies manifest themselves within heterogeneous groups marked by a more flexible theology and an emphasis on inner transformation and direct religious experience. In England, they appear on the background of a Reformation initiated for politico ecclesiastical reasons, but which, through its openness to Scripture, favors the proliferation of diverse dissenting currents and alternative theological explorations.

A special place in this analysis is occupied by the thought of Hans Denck, whose theology, without explicitly formulating a doctrine of universal restoration, opens a horizon in which such a possibility becomes intelligible. Through his emphasis on the interiority of the relationship between God and the human person and on the universality of divine action, he shifts the focus from external structures of salvation to an inward process that potentially concerns all humanity. In this way, the question of restoration is no longer confined to a distant eschatological outcome, but is rooted in the present and universal activity of the divine Word.

The present approach does not seek to demonstrate the existence of a systematic universalism within the Reformation, but rather to highlight the ways in which this idea persists, is reconfigured, and provokes reactions, even when it is officially rejected. In this sense, universalism functions as a sensitive indicator of deeper theological tensions, revealing both the limits of doctrinal closure and the enduring force of certain fundamental intuitions concerning the nature of God (Lazăr, 2025). The



analysis thus contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the theological plurality of the sixteenth century and of the internal tensions that accompanied the process of redefining Western Christianity.

CHRISTIAN UNIVERSALISM WITHIN THE REFORMATION

In the age of the Reformation, reflection on Christian universalism does not occupy the center of doctrinal disputes, but persists in a secondary, almost latent register. It does not disappear, however. It reappears discreetly within a context marked by profound reconfigurations of scriptural authority and of the understanding of grace, where older questions are taken up again in new forms.

For representative figures of the Reformation, such as Martin Luther and John Calvin, the hypothesis of a universal restoration remains unacceptable (DeYoung, 2024). Their theology insists on the decisive character of divine judgment, on the reality of perdition, and on the definitive separation between the saved and the rejected. In particular, the system of John Calvin, articulated around the doctrine of double predestination, structurally excludes any perspective of universal salvation. Thus, rather than reactivating certain marginal patristic intuitions, such as those associated with Origen, the Reformation consolidates a more severe soteriological vision, in which the finality of human destinies is fixed without remainder. And yet, this dominant position does not exhaust the theological landscape of the century. Even within the Reformation movement itself, nuances emerge, while at its periphery, in less institutionalized circles, plurality becomes visible. Wherever ecclesial authority is relativized and the direct inspiration of the Spirit is claimed, space is created for bold rearticulations of doctrine (Yarnell, 2013). In these zones of tension, the idea of universal salvation, long marginalized, finds once again a place, insinuating itself through the openings that the Reformation itself has produced.

A relevant indication of this underlying continuity appears even in the writings of Martin Luther. In a correspondence from 1522 with Hans von Rechenberg, he refers to the existence of an opinion, supported by authors such as Origen, according to which the idea of a universally eternal condemnation is incompatible with divine goodness. The arguments invoked draw both on the psalmist's questioning of the limits of divine wrath (Psalm 77) and on the Pauline affirmation of God's will that all people be saved (1 Timothy 2:4). From this perspective, the history of salvation does not end in definitive separation, but tends toward a final restoration of all (Parry and Ramelli, 2019).

This orientation becomes more explicit in spiritualist and Anabaptist milieus, where the critique of the institutional church is combined with a theological vision that is less normative and more open to the living dynamic of the relationship between God and the human person (Pavey, 2013). In these contexts, God is no longer understood primarily as a judge who ratifies an irreversible separation, but as an active principle of universal transformation, whose work does not cease before reaching its fulfillment in the whole of creation.

ANABAPTISM AND THE UNIVERSALIST HORIZON IN THE GERMAN REFORMATION

The overall picture of the religious groups that emerged in the German space during the age of the Reformation remains inevitably incomplete. The sources are scarce, fragmentary, and most often mediated by the polemical discourse of their opponents. What has been transmitted to the present is frequently filtered through official Church histories or through the confessional controversies of the period. Yet, beyond these limitations, one can discern a certain continuity with older traditions, such as those associated with the Paulicians (Ladrière, 2025) or the Cathars, in



which conceptions appear that relativize the idea of eternal punishment, either through the affirmation of a final disappearance of evil or through the interpretation of “hell” as a present experience already lived within the human condition.

Within this framework, the Anabaptists emerge as the most visible and coherent expression of these tendencies within the Reformation. Their rapid expansion in Germany and in neighboring regions was accompanied by intense social and religious tensions, which contributed to a generally negative perception of the movement. This image, however, does not fully reflect reality, since many Anabaptist communities were characterized by a deeply committed religious life and a rigorous moral ethos.

Within the diversity of Anabaptism, one can identify significant indications of the presence of universalist conceptions (Beougher, 1998). Certain testimonies suggest that some groups limited the duration of eschatological punishments and ultimately affirmed the restoration of the entire creation, including fallen beings. Such ideas are recorded by authors such as Louis Maimbourg (Tinsley, 2001) and are taken up in later polemical traditions, which associate Anabaptists from the Rhineland with the belief in universal salvation. In contemporary scholarship, figures such as Morwenna Ludlow (Ludlow, 2004), Robin Parry and Ilaria Ramelli (Parry and Ramelli, 2019), and Michael McClymond (McClymond, 2018) have shown that in the thought of leaders such as Hans Denck or Melchior Hoffman one can detect coherent, though often implicit, forms of Christian universalism. This trajectory becomes explicit in disciples such as Clement Ziegler or Jakob Kautz, where the idea of universal restoration is formulated without ambiguity. An important indication of the existence of these currents is also provided by the official reaction of the Magisterial Reformation. In the Augsburg Confession, drafted by Philipp Melanchthon and presented to Charles V, the doctrine of eternal punishments is firmly reaffirmed, and those who deny them are explicitly condemned, a transparent reference to certain Anabaptist groups. The polemic itself thus becomes an indirect source confirming the circulation of these ideas (Augustana, 2025).

Overall, even if the extent of the phenomenon cannot be determined with precision, universalism appears as a real presence within the Radical Reformation. It does not constitute a dominant doctrine, yet it cannot be reduced to mere polemical accusations. Moreover, the harsh reactions of authorities, both ecclesiastical and civil, indicate that these currents were perceived as sufficiently significant to require suppression. Reformers often supported the necessity of repressing them, fearing that the initial break with Rome might degenerate into an uncontrolled proliferation of sectarian movements.

Within this climate, the Anabaptists became one of the most persecuted groups in Europe, not only because of their possible universalist tendencies, but also due to other theological positions regarded as deviant. The logic of such persecutions is expressed suggestively in the position of Mary I of England, who justified the punishment of heretics by analogy with divine judgment. If eternal punishment is inevitable, then temporal punishment merely anticipates and confirms it (Powys, 1997).

THE REFORMATION IN ENGLAND: ANABAPTISM AND THE QUESTION OF CHRISTIAN UNIVERSALISM

In the English context, the influences of the Radical Reformation on the continent become visible especially after 1547, with the arrival of groups of religious refugees from the Low Countries and the German territories (Whittemore, 1830). Among them were adherents of Anabaptism, who settled in London and in other important urban centers. Documents of the period, such as the records of the Privy Council from the years 1549 to 1552, reflect the concern of the authorities regarding the spread of these ideas, perceived as destabilizing for the religious and social order (Welker, 2016).



In contrast to continental developments, the English Reformation initially had a predominantly politico ecclesiastical character. Under the reign of Henry VIII, the break with Rome meant above all a reorganization of religious authority around the Crown, without an immediate doctrinal transformation. Only later, under the influence of Thomas Cranmer (O'Donovan, 2015) and during the reign of Edward VI, did the Reformation acquire a clearer theological orientation, expressed through the introduction of the English language into worship and through the wider dissemination of Scripture among the faithful (Pollard, 2018).

This opening, the direct access to the biblical text, and the affirmation of individual responsibility in interpretation led to a rapid diversification of the religious landscape. In this context, numerous dissenting groups emerged, among which the Anabaptists occupy a significant place, alongside other radical movements. Influenced by developments in the German and Netherlandish spaces, these groups found in England a favorable environment, especially during moments of relative political tolerance.

The Anabaptists are distinguished by their rejection of infant baptism, their emphasis on the community of believers, and, at times, by a critical attitude toward both civil and ecclesiastical authority. The movement, however, was far from homogeneous. Alongside radical tendencies there coexisted communities marked by piety, nonviolence, and serious theological reflection. Within this doctrinal diversity, one can also identify accents close to Christian universalism. Although difficult to assess in terms of scope, there are indications that some groups affirmed the temporary character of eschatological punishments and the possibility of a final universal restoration. Even if marginal, these ideas were sufficiently visible to provoke official reactions.

In the process of consolidating the English Reformation, the Church of England sought to establish a coherent doctrinal framework. Under the coordination of Thomas Cranmer, a confession of faith with national authority was formulated, known as the Forty Two Articles. Completed in 1552 and promulgated in 1553 under Edward VI, this document aimed both to distinguish the Church of England from Catholic doctrine and to reject the radical currents that had emerged in the context of the Reformation (Ayris, 2005).

In this regard, Article XLII explicitly condemns the doctrine of universal salvation, considered dangerous for theological order:

"Not all men shall finally be saved. Also to be condemned are those who attempt to restore that pernicious opinion that all men, however ungodly, shall at length be saved, when for a certain time appointed by divine justice they have endured punishment for their sins" (Burnet, 1829).

Adherence to this confession was not optional. Clergy and those involved in theological education were required to subscribe to it, under penalty of losing their positions or academic privileges. This requirement reflects the desire of the authorities to impose doctrinal unity in a context marked by the proliferation of divergent interpretations.

The situation changes, however, under the reign of Elizabeth I, when the text is revised and reduced to the Thirty Nine Articles, later confirmed in 1571. In this form, the article explicitly condemning universalism is removed. The reasons for this decision remain debated. Scholars have pointed to the influence of Matthew Parker, the diminished relevance of Anabaptism, or, more plausibly, the fact that the doctrine of universal salvation was no longer perceived as a major threat. This change suggests a certain recalibration of theological sensitivity in the second half of the sixteenth century (Whittemore, 1830), in which the emphasis shifts away from the explicit condemnation of marginal positions and toward the stabilization of a broader doctrinal consensus.



Hans Denck and the Reconfiguration of Universalism in the Radical Reformation

Within the diverse landscape of the Radical Reformation, the figure of Hans Denck occupies a distinctive place, both through the depth of his theological reflection and through the way in which he reinterprets the relationship between salvation, human freedom, and the presence of God in the world (Steinmetz, 2001). In contrast to the more systematic formulations of the magisterial Reformation, his thought develops in a markedly interiorized register, shaped by an emphasis on direct spiritual experience and on the transformative dynamics of grace.

Formed within a humanist milieu and influenced by a spiritual reading of Scripture, Denck distances himself both from ecclesiastical formalism and from the doctrinal rigidity of his contemporaries. At the center of his theology lies the conviction that God works universally within the human heart, calling each person to an inner transformation that cannot be reduced to visible membership in a religious institution. As shown in the sources, Denck explicitly affirms that God addresses the human being even prior to engagement with Scripture, while the Bible functions only as a witness to this inner encounter rather than its source (Kiwiet, 1957). This perspective entails a fundamental reevaluation of the criteria of salvation: emphasis is no longer placed on confessional boundaries, but on the free human response to the inner working of God.

Within this framework, the theme of universalism does not emerge as a systematically articulated doctrine, but rather as an implicit consequence of a broader theological vision. For Denck, the salvific will of God possesses a universal scope, and divine love cannot be coherently conceived in terms of definitive exclusion. Although he does not explicitly formulate a doctrine of universal restoration, his thought leaves open the possibility of a salvation that transcends the visible limits of the Church and even those of historical existence. Indeed, contemporary testimonies report that Denck held that "the blasphemy of the damned will eventually cease", suggesting that even those in hell may ultimately be reconciled to God (Raines, 2022).

A decisive element in his theology is the relationship between human freedom and divine initiative. Denck insists that the human being is called to cooperate actively with grace; however, this cooperation is not externally imposed but arises from an authentic inner transformation. As other studies confirm, Denck rejects the idea of a completely passive human will and affirms a real capacity for response to God's call (Gockel, 2000). In this sense, judgment is not conceived primarily as an external juridical act, but as the unveiling of the inner truth of each person in relation to God. Such a shift in emphasis contributes to a relativization of traditional schemes of definitive condemnation.

Furthermore, Denck's critique of ecclesiastical authority and of strictly literal interpretations of Scripture belongs to a broader vision in which religious truth is not the monopoly of any institution, but is revealed dynamically within the conscience of the believer. He explicitly maintains that those who possess the truth inwardly are able to recognize it even without recourse to Scripture (Kiwiet, 1957). This position places him in proximity to other spiritualist currents of the period, yet also grants his thought a distinctive originality through the coherence with which he integrates these ideas into a profound theological anthropology.

An important aspect of the debate surrounding Denck concerns the nature of postmortem punishment. According to testimonies preserved by his contemporaries, Denck understood divine judgment in a purificatory rather than purely retributive sense. God is described as "an eternal fire" that consumes whatever is opposed to Him, not in order to annihilate the person, but to purify what



resists divine goodness (Raines, 2022). This interpretation aligns with statements found in his own writings, where punishment is understood as a pedagogical and restorative process through which God seeks the ultimate good of the human being. Consequently, the notion of eternal punishment is reinterpreted not as endless torment, but as a prolonged process of purification oriented toward restoration.

The reception of Denck's thought was, predictably, marked by suspicion and marginalization. The absence of a rigorously defined dogmatic system, combined with his openness to interpretations deemed dangerous, led to frequent accusations of heterodoxy (Ludlow, 2004). Many of his contemporaries explicitly associated his teaching with the “Origenist error” of universal restoration and condemned it as socially and theologically destabilizing (Raines, 2022). Nevertheless, modern scholarship has shown that such accusations cannot be dismissed entirely as misunderstandings, given the consistency of contemporary testimonies and their convergence with Denck's broader theological framework (Raines, 2022)..

Moreover, Denck's influence can be traced in later figures within the Anabaptist and spiritualist milieu. His ideas are reflected, for example, in the thought of Clement Ziegler, who explicitly formulates a doctrine of universal salvation, extending even to the restoration of all souls (Raines, 2022). Similarly, other early Anabaptists developed inclusive soteriological perspectives that expanded the scope of salvation beyond visible ecclesial boundaries. These developments confirm the existence of a broader universalist current within certain strands of early Anabaptism.

In conclusion, the significance of Hans Denck does not lie primarily in the explicit formulation of a universalist doctrine, but rather in the reconfiguration of the theological framework within which such a doctrine becomes possible. Through his emphasis on the universality of divine action, the interiority of religious experience, and the dynamic character of the relationship between God and the human person, Denck opens a theological horizon in which the question of universal salvation can be articulated beyond the rigid oppositions of his time. His thought thus represents a crucial moment in the history of Christian reflection on the scope of divine mercy and the ultimate destiny of humanity.

CONCLUSION

This analysis has sought to bring into focus the ambiguous yet persistent status of Christian universalism within the Reformation, with particular attention to the radical milieus in which this idea found a more visible expression. Far from constituting a central doctrine, universalism appears rather as a recurring question, one that occupies a liminal space between legitimate theological reflection and the suspicion of heterodoxy.

The dominant positions of the Reformation, articulated by figures such as Martin Luther and John Calvin, clearly excluded the prospect of a universal restoration. In doing so, they consolidated a soteriological framework marked by sharp distinctions and a strong emphasis on divine judgment, election, and the finality of damnation. Yet the internal dynamics of the Reformation, especially its encouragement of personal engagement with Scripture and its relative weakening of centralized institutional authority, created conditions in which marginal voices could emerge. These voices, often situated at the edges of confessional legitimacy, revisited and reformulated older intuitions concerning the universality of salvation.

Within this broader context, the Radical Reformation, and particularly Anabaptist circles, proved to be privileged spaces for the articulation of such alternative perspectives. Although the available



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sources are fragmentary and frequently mediated through polemical accounts, they nonetheless point to the presence of conceptions that relativize the definitive character of condemnation and that affirm, whether explicitly or implicitly, the possibility of an ultimate restoration. The very need for official doctrinal responses, such as those formulated in the Augsburg Confession or in the Articles of Religion of the Church of England, confirms, by contrast, the visibility and perceived threat of these tendencies.

The figure of Hans Denck exemplifies this tension in a particularly illuminating way. Without articulating a systematic doctrine of apocatastasis, his thought nonetheless opens a theological horizon in which universalism becomes conceivable. This is achieved through his emphasis on the inwardness of the relationship with God, the primacy of the living Word within the believer, and the universal scope of divine action. In this sense, his contribution lies less in the explicit affirmation of a doctrinal solution than in a subtle but significant reconfiguration of the conceptual framework within which the problem itself can be posed.

Taken as a whole, Christian universalism in the age of the Reformation cannot be adequately understood either as a mere marginal deviation or as a latent dominant doctrine. Rather, it should be seen as a structural tension within theological reflection itself. Its persistence suggests that the question of humanity's final destiny, and of the relationship between divine justice and mercy, remains fundamentally open, even within doctrinal contexts that seek to close it. In this respect, the Reformation does not so much resolve the problem as it marks a new stage in the history of a question that continues to traverse Christian thought.



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