

Who's in hell

By [David Heim](#)

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Even

before Rob Bell's book *Love Wins* (see

the *Century* [review](#)

by Peter Marty)

came out, conservative evangelicals lit up the blogosphere with their insistence--against Bell--that God's condemnation of the wicked to hell is a nonnegotiable part of orthodoxy.

But in fact, Christian tradition has been rather

reticent on the topic of hell. In a [Century symposium](#) a few years ago, Paul Griffith maintained that hell exists but pointed out that the Catholic Church "has very little developed

hell-doctrine, teaching almost nothing *de fide* about who is in hell, whether anyone is, what it's like to be there and so on."

In his book [Dare We Hope 'That All Men Be Saved'?](#) the Catholic theologian Hans Urs Von Balthasar does not deny the existence of hell or argue for anything like universalism,

but he does show how nuanced the discussion of hell can be even within the parameters

of strict orthodoxy. Balthasar argues that the salvation of all is the will of God (as scripture says) and that it is proper for the church to pray that God's will be done. Therefore, he concludes, if the church is truly acting out of love and hope, it can and perhaps must pray that all will be saved.

Balthasar's approach would, I suspect, lead to

the same practical approach to the world as Bell's assertion that God's love "wins."

Perhaps the best wisdom on hell is summed up by

this old axiom: Only an ass would deny the existence of hell, and only an ox would

pretend to know who is in it.