Research and Science TODAY
www.rstjournal.com

OPEN ACCESS

Section: *Social Sciences and Humanities*
Issue: *1/2026*
Article number: *12.2026*

DOI
https://doi.org/10.38173/RST.2026.1.12

The Fertile Silence of the Middle Ages: Universal Salvation and the Few Theological Voices That Dared to Dissent (9th–14th c.)

Alexandru LAZĂR [1]

[1] PhD Student, "Babeș-Bolyai" University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania, Email: Alexandru.05.lazar@gmail.com

Received: *27 January 2026*
Revised: *15 February 2026*
Accepted: 4 March 2026
Available online: 13 March 2026

Suggested citation
A. Lazăr. "The Fertile Silence of the Middle Ages: Universal Salvation and the Few Theological Voices That Dared to Dissent (9th–14th c.)", Research and Science Today, vol. 2026, no. 1, art. no. 12.2026, pp. 1–8, 2026, doi: 10.38173/RST.2026.1.12.

Abstract
This article examines the relative eclipse of explicit universalist theology in the Latin Middle Ages (9th–14th centuries) and argues that this period should not be understood as one of doctrinal absence, but of conceptual transformation. Following the condemnation of Origen in the sixth century and the growing consolidation of the paradigm of eternal damnation, Western theology appears to have entered a prolonged phase of eschatological consensus. Yet beneath this apparent stability, significant theological tensions persisted regarding the scope of divine mercy, the finality of judgment, and the ultimate destiny of creation. Focusing on John Scottus Eriugena, Anselm of Canterbury, and Julian of Norwich, the study explores diverse modes in which the question of universal restoration reemerged, through speculative Neoplatonism, juridical soteriology, and affective mysticism. While none of these figures articulated a formal doctrine of apocatastasis in the Origenist sense, each introduced conceptual or experiential elements that complicate a strictly retributive eschatology. Brief reference is also made to figures such as Amalric of Bena and Meister Eckhart, whose metaphysical and mystical frameworks further destabilized rigid binaries between salvation and damnation. By interpreting the medieval period as a "fertile silence," the article contends that universalism did not vanish after Late Antiquity but migrated into symbolic, metaphysical, and mystical registers. This reframing allows for a more nuanced understanding of medieval eschatology and clarifies how the theological seeds of later universalist revivals were preserved, transformed, and transmitted within the very structures that seemed to suppress them.

Keywords: *Apocatastasis; Universal Salvation; Christian Universalism; Medieval Eschatology; Eternal Damnation; Eschatological Hope*

INTRODUCTION

The condemnation of Origen in the sixth century, ratified in the context of the Second Council of Constantinople (553), produced a long-lasting theological effect upon the Christian eschatological imagination [1]. Suspicion toward the doctrine of apocatastasis, the final restoration of all beings, gradually consolidated the "classical" paradigm of eternal damnation, both in the Greek East and the Latin West. Between the ninth and fourteenth centuries, the Latin world appears, at first glance, to be governed by a silent consensus: salvation is particular, judgment is definitive, and the eschatological order is irreversible.

And yet, this silence was not sterile. Beneath the dense layer of scholastic orthodoxy and the juridical-penitential systematizations of salvation, a few voices reopened, sometimes discreetly, sometimes at considerable risk, the question of divine finality. This article seeks to explore this "fertile silence" of the Middle Ages by focusing on three significant figures: John Scottus Eriugena, Anselm of Canterbury, and Julian of Norwich. Though differing in method and context, a speculative Neoplatonic philosopher, the architect of a juridical theory of satisfaction, and a mystic grounded in interior revelation, each, in distinct ways, problematizes the relationship between divine justice and the universality of God's love.

Alongside them, or at the margins of institutional orthodoxy, other figures also stretched the boundaries of medieval theological discourse. Amalric of Bena was associated with pantheistic tendencies and a radical vision of universal divinization [2], which led to the posthumous condemnation of his teachings. Later, Meister Eckhart articulated a theology of the birth of God in the soul and of the radical unity between God and creature, accents that were perceived as ambiguous or even dangerous for the traditional boundaries between salvation and damnation [3]. Although none of these figures formulated an explicit, systematic doctrine of apocatastasis in the Origenist sense, their language and metaphysics reopened the horizon of a possible universal restoration, or at least challenged a strictly retributive eschatological imagination.

Thus, between the ninth and fourteenth centuries we do not encounter a total absence of Christian universalism, but rather a transformation of its mode of expression. If in Late Antiquity the issue was debated in cosmological and ontological terms, in the Middle Ages it migrated into the domains of participatory metaphysics, the theology of divine will, and mystical experience. Universalism no longer appeared as a frontal thesis, but as an inner tension within reflections on the nature of the supreme Good, on the relationship between freedom and grace, and on the infinity of divine love.

This article will argue that the so-called medieval "silence" was not a capitulation before the Origenist condemnation, but a period of conceptual sedimentation and reconfiguration. During this time, universalism did not disappear; it retreated into symbolic language, metaphysical speculation, and mystical revelation, perhaps unintentionally preparing the ground for the renewed controversies of the fifteenth century and beyond.

JOHN SCOTTUS ERIUGENA: COSMIC *REDITUS* AND THE HORIZON OF UNIVERSAL RESTORATION

In the case of John Scottus Eriugena (c. 810–877), the question of universal salvation receives a formulation far closer to the metaphysical structure of apocatastasis than in most other medieval authors. Deeply influenced by Neoplatonic thought and by the Latin reception of Pseudo-Dionysius, Eriugena develops in the *Periphyseon* (*De divisione naturae*) a vast cosmological vision structured by the dynamic of *exitus–reditus*: the procession of all things from God and their final return to Him [4].

For Eriugena, "nature" comprises four divisions [5]:

1. that which creates and is not created (God as principle),

2. that which is created and creates (the primordial causes),
3. that which is created and does not create (the world of effects),
4. that which neither creates nor is created (God as final end).

This ontological architecture implies that all creation originates in God and is inevitably oriented toward reversion into Him. History is not an open process susceptible to ontological failure, but a teleological movement of restoration.

Within this framework, evil has no proper ontological status. It is not a substance but a privation, a deviation of rational will. As privation, it cannot possess eternal consistency. Even punishment is interpreted less in retributive terms and more in pedagogical and purificatory ones. The eschatological fire does not annihilate being; it burns away disorder, leading the creature back to its true nature. In this respect, Eriugena's thought echoes, without simply reproducing, the speculative intuitions of Origen and aspects of the Greek tradition concerning final restoration.

A decisive element in the direction of universal salvation lies in his anthropology. For Eriugena, human nature is one in all individuals; multiplicity does not fracture the ontological unity of humanity [6]. In Christ, this nature is assumed and restored. If Christ restores human nature in its integrity, the question arises whether part of that nature could remain eternally excluded without compromising its ontological unity. The logic of Eriugena's system tends toward the restoration of nature as such, rather than toward the eternal preservation of division. Although Eriugena acknowledges differences in participation and the consequences of sin, the structure of his metaphysics points toward a universal reintegration of creation. The return to God does not signify annihilation but transfiguration and fulfillment. God will be *"all in all" (1 Cor. 15:28)* [7], a verse he interprets in strongly unitive terms. The end of history is not an everlasting dualism between the saved and the damned, but a recapitulation of all things in God.

Eriugena does not, however, articulate a fully explicit doctrine of universal salvation in juridical or pastoral terms. His language remains symbolic and metaphysical. This ambiguity afforded him speculative freedom but also provoked later suspicion: certain propositions from the *Periphyseon* were condemned in subsequent centuries [8]. Precisely the radical character of his ontology, in which nothing can exist outside participation in God, renders the idea of eternal damnation in a strict sense metaphysically difficult to sustain.

Within the medieval "fertile silence," Eriugena represents perhaps the boldest speculative moment in the direction of universal restoration. If in Anselm of Canterbury the tension unfolds within the coherence of the divine attributes, and in Julian of Norwich within the register of mystical hope, in Eriugena universalism is inscribed into the very ontological structure of reality. For him, the *reditus* is not a secondary possibility but the inevitable telos of creation: the return of all things to the primordial unity from which they have proceeded.

ANSELM OF CANTERBURY: JUSTICE, SATISFACTION AND THE LIMITS OF UNIVERSAL RESTORATION

At first glance, Anselm of Canterbury appears to stand firmly within the classical Latin rejection of universal salvation. In works such as *Cur Deus Homo*, he develops a rigorous account of sin, justice, and satisfaction that seems to exclude any possibility of apocatastasis in the Origenist sense [9]. Yet a closer examination reveals a more complex theological landscape, one in which the universality of divine will and the coherence of God's attributes generate tensions that deserve careful analysis.

Anselm's soteriology is structured around the concept of *satisfaction* [10]. Sin constitutes an offense against the infinite honor of God, creating a moral imbalance that humanity, being finite and fallen, cannot repair. The Incarnation becomes necessary because

only a being who is both fully divine and fully human can offer adequate satisfaction [11]. This logic appears to reinforce a binary eschatology: those who are incorporated into Christ share in the satisfaction He offers [12]; those who refuse remain under the weight of unredeemed guilt [13].

However, Anselm's thought also contains elements that complicate a strictly retributive framework [14]. First, he strongly affirms that God wills the salvation of rational creatures and does nothing unjustly. Divine justice is not arbitrary but intrinsically rational and ordered. In *Proslogion* and elsewhere, Anselm insists that God is "that than which nothing greater can be conceived", and therefore perfectly just and perfectly merciful. Justice and mercy are not competing attributes; they coincide in the divine simplicity. This raises a theological question: if God's will is perfectly ordered toward the good and His mercy is not extrinsic to His justice, can eternal damnation be understood as the ultimate and definitive frustration of divine intention? Anselm himself does not resolve this tension in favor of universal salvation. He affirms the eternity of punishment for the unrepentant, grounding it in the gravity of sin and the permanence of disordered will. For him, the rational creature who irrevocably refuses God confirms its own exclusion.

Yet it is significant that, in Anselm's framework, damnation is not the expression of divine wrath as passion, but the consequence of justice understood as right order [15]. God does not delight in punishment; rather, punishment follows necessarily from the creature's persistent refusal of the supreme Good. This distinction subtly shifts the emphasis from divine vindictiveness to ontological disorder. Damnation is not so much imposed as it is endured as the logical outcome of a will turned away from its proper end. Anselm's emphasis on the objective sufficiency of Christ's satisfaction introduces a universal dimension: the redemptive act of Christ possesses infinite value. Its scope, in principle, is not limited by intrinsic insufficiency but by the subjective participation of rational creatures. Later theological developments would explore this asymmetry, between the infinite adequacy of redemption and its finite reception, in ways that reopened universalist questions [16].

Thus, while Anselm cannot be classified as a proponent of universal salvation, his theology provides conceptual tools that later thinkers could reinterpret. His insistence on the coherence of divine attributes, the rational intelligibility of justice, and the superabundant sufficiency of Christ's work creates a structured but dynamic soteriological system. Within this system, the tension between divine universal benevolence and eternal exclusion remains real, even if unresolved.

In the context of the medieval "fertile silence", Anselm represents not a dissenter in favor of apocatastasis, but a theologian whose rigorous logic intensifies the very questions universalism seeks to answer. By grounding salvation in the inner necessity of divine justice and love, he helped shape a theological grammar that later mystical and speculative voices, such as Julian of Norwich, could inhabit and subtly expand.

JULIAN OF NORWICH: ESCHATOLOGICAL HOPE AND THE LOGIC OF DIVINE LOVE

Subsection Among the most remarkable medieval voices to reopen the horizon of eschatological hope stands Julian of Norwich (c. 1343–after 1416). Writing in the aftermath of the Black Death and amid profound social and ecclesial instability, Julian did not construct a systematic theology of universal salvation. Yet her *Revelations of Divine Love* [17] articulates a theological vision in which the coherence of divine love appears ultimately irreconcilable with the final loss of any creature. Without explicitly reviving Origenist apocatastasis, she destabilizes the imaginative and affective foundations of eternal damnation.

The most frequently cited passage: "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well" [18] is not a naïve optimism, but the culmination of a profound struggle with the problem of sin and judgment. Julian does not deny sin; indeed, she calls it "behovely" (necessary or fitting) [19], insofar as it becomes the occasion for humility and deeper union with God. What she cannot reconcile, however, is the idea that sin could ultimately frustrate the divine will [20]. For Julian, God's love is not reactive but primordial, preceding creation itself. If God creates out of love and sustains all things in love, then the final horizon of history must reflect that same unwavering intentionality [21].

A central theological move in Julian's vision is her reframing of divine justice. Rather than opposing justice and mercy, she subsumes justice into love. God does not relate to humanity through retribution but through what she repeatedly calls "courtesy," "homeliness," and maternal tenderness [22]. Her well-known maternal imagery for Christ intensifies this logic: just as a mother does not will the destruction of her child, so God does not will the final ruin of those whom He has brought forth. This maternal Christology subtly undermines any eschatology grounded in strict distributive justice [23]. Julian's treatment of wrath is equally significant. She famously claims that she "saw no wrath in God", only in human perception. Wrath, in her account, is a projection arising from fear and misunderstanding; in God there is only love and compassion. Such a claim, while not formally denying hell, shifts its theological grounding. If wrath is not intrinsic to God, then eternal punishment cannot be understood as the positive expression of divine anger [24]. The metaphysical weight of damnation is thereby weakened.

Moreover, Julian insists on the ontological bond between God and the soul. Humanity is described as "oned" to God in love, a union that is wounded but never severed by sin. This participatory ontology, reminiscent, though not derivative, of earlier Neoplatonic currents, suggests that the creature's ultimate destiny lies in restoration rather than exclusion [25]. Even when she acknowledges the Church's teaching on damnation, she frames it as a mystery whose resolution is hidden within the deeper wisdom of divine love.

Importantly, Julian never openly contradicts ecclesial doctrine. Her strategy is contemplative rather than polemical. She places side by side two truths: the Church teaches that some will be lost, yet Christ reveals that "all shall be well" [26]. Instead of resolving the tension through dialectical argument, she entrusts it to the eschatological unveiling of God's purposes. This suspension is itself theologically generative. It creates a space in which hope expands beyond the limits of dogmatic formulation [27].

In this sense, Julian represents neither a systematic universalist nor a simple reiterator of orthodoxy. Rather, she embodies the "fertile silence" characteristic of the medieval period. Universal salvation is not proclaimed as a thesis; it emerges as a consequence of her unwavering confidence in the absoluteness of divine love. Her theology does not abolish judgment, but it relativizes it within a larger narrative of restoration.

Although her language and tone are deeply mystical and affective, Julian of Norwich can be seen as operating within the theological horizon shaped by Anselm of Canterbury, particularly in her insistence on the inner coherence of the divine attributes and on the necessity that the economy of salvation remain fully consonant with both the justice and the love of God, even as she reconfigures this logic in a predominantly contemplative and experiential key.

Thus, in the fourteenth century, long after the shadow of the Origenist condemnations had shaped the contours of Western eschatology, Julian of Norwich reintroduced, through mystical vision and affective theology, the possibility that the final word of God over creation is not separation, but reconciliation. Her contribution lies precisely in this shift of emphasis: from fear to trust, from retribution to healing, from definitive exclusion to an eschatological

hope that dares to imagine that, in ways beyond present comprehension, all may indeed be made well [28].

CONCLUSION

The medieval period between the ninth and fourteenth centuries has often been interpreted as a time of doctrinal consolidation and increasing theological uniformity, in which the condemnation of Origen was thought to have effectively silenced speculative universalism and closed the space for any serious reconsideration of apocatastasis within the Latin West; yet the figures examined in this study: John Scottus Eriugena, Anselm of Canterbury, and Julian of Norwich, demonstrate that this apparent silence was neither absolute nor inert, but rather profoundly fertile: a period in which the question of universal salvation did not disappear, but migrated from explicit doctrinal assertion into the deeper strata of metaphysical architecture, the disciplined pursuit of rational coherence within the divine attributes, and the contemplative horizons of mystical vision [29].

In Eriugena, the logic of *exitus–reditus* embeds restoration within the ontological structure of reality itself. Universal return is not framed as a pastoral claim but as the metaphysical telos of creation. In Anselm, the rigorous articulation of divine justice and satisfaction appears to reinforce the boundaries of eternal exclusion; yet his insistence on the unity and coherence of God's attributes intensifies the unresolved tension between infinite mercy and definitive damnation. In Julian, the issue emerges not through speculative system but through contemplative assurance: the absoluteness of divine love expands the horizon of hope beyond the limits of juridical imagination.

Taken together, these voices do not amount to a formally articulated medieval doctrine of apocatastasis, nor do they present a coordinated theological movement aimed at rehabilitating universal salvation in explicit opposition to ecclesial authority; none of them openly challenges the Church's rejection of Origenist universalism or attempts to reintroduce it in systematic, programmatic form. And yet, precisely in their restraint, each introduces, within a distinct theological register, a destabilizing force that unsettles the adequacy of a strictly retributive eschatology: John Scottus Eriugena does so ontologically, by embedding return within the very structure of being; Anselm of Canterbury logically, by insisting upon the inner coherence and indivisibility of divine justice and mercy; and Julian of Norwich affectively, by expanding the horizon of hope through an uncompromising confidence in the absoluteness of divine love. The cumulative effect is not open dissent or doctrinal rupture, but a sustained and subtle internal pressure within the theological tradition itself, a pressure generated by the relentless effort to think, without contradiction, the infinity of divine goodness, the integrity of divine justice, and the ultimate destiny of creation.

Thus, the so-called "silence" of the Middle Ages appears less as suppression than as transformation. Universalism did not vanish; it was refracted through metaphysics, disciplined by rational theology, and interiorized within mystical experience. The question of whether God will ultimately be "all in all" remained present, not as an overt thesis, but as an unresolved horizon within the medieval imagination.

In this sense, the Middle Ages did not close the debate on universal salvation. They preserved it in latency. By embedding the tension within the very grammar of divine justice, ontology, and love, medieval theology ensured that the question would reemerge in later centuries with renewed conceptual depth. The fertile silence was not the end of universalist hope, but its quiet transfiguration. Soon the real universalist disputes will appear on the stage of history, and this concept will gradually shift toward United States of America [30].

Author Contributions: The author confirms being the sole contributor to this work and has approved it for publication.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Ethical review and approval were not required for this study.

Informed Consent Statement: The manuscript does not contain identifiable personal data.

Data Availability Statement: All relevant data are included in the manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declare no conflict of interest.

REFERENCES

[1]. Alexandru Lazăr, „The Politico-Dogmatic Stage of the Apocatastasis' Condemnation. Post-synodal Perspectives", *Teologia*, Vol. 92, Issue 3/2022, pp. 136-154
[2]. Michael McClymond, *The Devil's Redemption: A New History and Interpretation of Christian Universalism*, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, MI, 2018, p. 293.
[3]. Meister Eckhart, *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart*, The Croosroad Publishing Company, New York, 2009, p. 559.
[4]. Raluca Mocean Pleșa, *Actualitatea Apocatastazei. Între iubirea lui Dumnezeu și libertatea umană*, Editura Eikon, București, 2021, p. 62.
[5]. Andrew Tostenko, Svetlna Kuznetsova, „Doctrine of Eriugena in Relation to Immaterialism and Idealism", *European Journal of Science and Theology*, Vol. 15, Nr.1 p. 154.
[6]. Wojciech Szczerba, „The Concept of Apokatastasis as a Symbol of Human Equality and Religious Inclusion", *Forum Philosophicum: International Journal for Philosophy*, Vol. 27, Nr. 2, 2022, p. 251.
[7]. Maksim Medovarov, „George Macdonald and the Heritage of John Scotus Eriugena: Between Celtic and Eastern Christian Traditions", *Journal of Scottish Thought*, Vol. 12, Nr. 1, 2020, p. 162.
[8]. Raluca Mocean Pleșa, *Actualitatea Apocatastazei. Între iubirea lui Dumnezeu și libertatea umană*, Editura Eikon, București, 2021, p. 62.
[9]. Judith Dunthorne, „Anselm of Canterbury and the Development of Theological Thought, c. 1070-1141", Durham e-Theses, 2012, DOI: http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/6360/
[10]. Roberto J. De La Noval, „Divine Drama or Divine Disclosue? Hell, Universalism and a Parting of the Ways", *Modern Theology Month*, 2019 DOI: https://doi.org/10.1111/moth.12555
[11]. Rik Van Nieuwenhove, „St Anselm and St Thomas Aquinas on "Satisfaction": or how Catholic and Protestant understandings of the Cross differ", *Angelicum*, Vol. 80, Nr. 1, 2003, p. 159-176
[12]. Aaron Brian Davis, „Hopeful universalism and the goodness of God: a fittingness approach", *International Journal for Philosophy of Religions*, Vol. 97, 2025, p. 242. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/s11153-025-09953-5
[13]. Roberto J. De La Noval, „Anselmian Apocatastasis: The Fitting Necessity of Universal Salvation in St Anselm's Cur Deus Homo", *Scottish Journal of Theology*, Volume 71, Nr. 2, 2018, p. 142-158.DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930618000042
[14]. Christopher Bobier, „Revisiting Anselm on Time and Divine Eternity", *The Heythrop Journal,* Vol. LXIII, 2021, p. 665. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1111/heyj.13593
[15]. Daniel Waldow, „A Love Greater Than Which Cannot Be Imagined: Divine Goodness and Mercy in Anselm's Cur Deus Homo", *The Heythrop Journal*. Vol. LXIII, 2021, p. 709. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1111/heyj.12822
[16]. Christian Gobel, God, „Salvation and Freedom: Reconsidering Anselm's Theological Program, *Saint Anselm Journal*, Vol. 19, Nr. 1, Fall 2023, p. 29-56. DOI:c https://muse.jhu.edu/article/917832
[17]. Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love,* Oxford University Press, 2015.
[18]. Gregory Macdonald, *All Shall be well: Exploration in Universalism and Christian Theology from Origen to Moltmann*, Cambridge, James Clarke&Co, 2011.
[19]. Nicholas Watson „The Composition of Julian of Norwich's Revelation of Love", *Speculum*, Vol. 68, Nr. 3, 1993, p. 677. DOI: https://doi.org/10.2307/2864969

[20]. Jana Trajtelova, „All Shall Be Well: On Sin, Antinomies, and Transformation of Images in Julian of Norwich", p. 699. DOI: 10.17265/2159-5313/2019.11.005
[21]. Joan Nuth, „Two Medieval Soteriologies: Anselm of Canterbury and Julian of Norwich", *Theological Studies,* Vol. 53, Nr. 4, 1992, p. 616.
[22]. Matthew Burkholder, „God Our Suffering Mother? Kenotic Atonement in Julian of Norwich's Revelations of Divine Love", *McMaster Journal of Theology and Minisitry*, Vol. 21, 2019-2020, p. 47.
[23]. Margaret Palliser, *Christ, Our Mother of Mercy: Divine Mercy and Compassion in the Theology of The Shewings of Julian of Norwich*, Walter de Gruiter, New Work, 1992, p. 231
[24]. Denys Turner, *Julian of Norwich, Theologian*, London, Yale University Press, 2011, p. 104.
[25]. Kerrie Hide, „Only in God Do I Have All: The Soteriology of Julian of Norwich", *The Downside Review*, Vol. 122, Nr. 426, 2004, p. 55. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/001258060412242604
[26]. Richard Harries, „Universal Salvation", *Theology*, Vol. 123, Nr. 1, 2020, p. 7-8. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/0040571X19883532
[27]. Bernard McGinn, „Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism, 1350-1550". *The Presence of God: A history of Christian Mysticism*, Vol. 5, New York, Crossroad, 2012, p. 456.
[28]. Maureen Walsh, „Re-Imagining Redeption: Universal Salvation in the Theology of Julian of Norwich", *Horizons* Vol. 39, Nr. 2, 2012, p. 207. DOI:https://doi.org/10.1017/S0360966900010677
[29]. Alexandru Lazăr, „The Theory of Apocatastasis: New Theological Opinions on an Old Dogmatic Controversy", EON, Vol. 6, No. 4, 2025, p. 530 DOI: 10.56177/eon.6.4.2025.art.15
[30]. Alexandru Lazăr, „Începuturile universalismului în America: context și cauze", *Studia Theologica Orthodoxa Doctoralia Napocensia,* Vol. 5, Nr. 2, 2022, p. 206-215,