

"Purgatory"

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Prolegomena

The English word "purgatory" is a technical term belonging to Christian doctrine. As such, it translates the Latin *purgatorium*, and means "place of purification": just as the *refrigerium* is the place in which you're cooled off after a hot bath, so the *purgatorium* is the place in which you're purged after over-indulgence, the place, that is, in which whatever impurities you suffer are removed.¹ In its most general Christian-doctrinal sense, the word denotes a place (or condition or state) entered at death, remained in for a time, and then left for heaven. Those who enter purgatory are certain of heaven, for the only exit from it leads directly to there, and purgatory is by definition temporary. A sojourn in purgatory purifies those who undergo it from whatever separates them from the love of God, and they leave it when that has been achieved. Purgatory's inhabitants, then, are in an intermediate state between death and heaven. They are in heaven's antechamber: like the bride in her dressing-room preparing for the marriage bed, they are preparing for eternal, loving intimacy with God.

This is a bare-bones statement of the Christian doctrine of purgatory. Even this much has not been uncontroversial among Christians, although a majority would accept it (even if not always under that name) because there are significant elements of Christian thought that do and should dispose Christians toward such an idea. But the bare-bones concept has often (especially by poets and painters, but sometimes also by theologians and philosophers) been embellished in such a way as to introduce claims of a vastly more controversial sort, such as: that purgatory is a place of torment by fire; that its inhabitants are without bodies; that it is possible to tell from someone's spiritual condition at death how long they will spend in purgatory; that purgatory has a particular geographic location; that the inhabitants of purgatory can offer intercessory prayers to God for those not yet dead; that only sins of a particular kind require expiation in purgatory; and that someone's time in purgatory can be measurably reduced by prayers or other acts undertaken by the living. The main interest of this essay is not in these controversial particulars (though some of them will come up for discussion) but rather in the meaning and plausibility of the bare-bones doctrine as defined in the preceding paragraph.

The word "purgatory" does not belong only to Christian doctrine. In everyday English, it and its derivatives have come to mean something simpler like "place of pain," and this sense of the term now has sufficient currency that most speakers of English do not distinguish the term from "hell": both are simply places of torment, and the distinctions between them in terms of what they lead to and who is an appropriate inhabitant of which have been largely lost. But in this article I shall treat only the specifically Christian use of the term.

An essay on purgatory does not, strictly speaking, belong in a volume on eschatology. This is because eschatology's topic is the last things (the traditional four for Christians being death, judgment, heaven, and hell), and purgatory is not a last thing. It is,

at least as I've characterized it, a penultimate thing, a state or condition or place followed by heaven, which is properly a last thing. Furthermore, as this way of putting it suggests, life in purgatory has a narrative structure: things change (for the better), and a crisis or culmination is reached in which purgatory is left behind. None of this is so of the truly last things: life in those is beyond the reach of narrative. The denizens of heaven and hell are like the cockroaches in the roach motel: they've checked in, but they'll never check out. But the inhabitants of purgatory do check out, inevitably, and always for a better place. In that respect, purgatory is like life here below: all human beings inevitably exit this life by death (with a few possible and controversial exceptions: Enoch, Elijah, Mary), and in similar fashion all inhabitants of purgatory inevitably leave it, though in this case only for heaven.

Why then treat purgatory under the rubric of eschatology? A simple reason is that it follows upon death, and everything after death, it makes some intuitive sense to say, is among the last things. Another is simply traditional: there is already a long history of including discussions of purgatory under eschatology's rubric, although it must also be said that as the doctrine developed, it was increasingly separated conceptually (if not in its place in manuals of theology) from eschatology in the strict sense, as is evident in the increasingly clear distinction between the fires of hell (these are a last thing in the proper sense, for they do not go out and those burned by them never cease to be) and those of purgatory, which are temporary and purifying rather than merely agonizing. A third—and this the most compelling—is that although purgatory is an antechamber to heaven's courts, it is one from which entry to those courts is assured. It therefore makes some sense to think of purgatory as part of heaven proper: perhaps as heaven for novices, heaven for those who aren't yet quite ready to settle down and enjoy the real thing but who nonetheless are assured of eventually being so.

This is not, however, the usual Christian line. More often, in technical theological discussion, purgatory is assimilated to hell: both are places of torment, usually by fire (and very often the torments of purgatory are depicted as more intense than those of hell); and both are located beneath rather than above the earth. Purgatory is certainly much worse in almost every respect than such pleasant places of the medieval imagination as the limbo of infants, in which babies burdened only by original sin and not by any actual sins of their own making live for eternity; or the limbo of the patriarchs, also sometimes known as Abraham's Bosom, in which righteous Jews who died before Christ's coming lived, and in which, according to some, may be found pagan luminaries such as Aristotle and Vergil.² These places (or states) are free from physical pain, and although they may be suffused with a melancholia produced by a half-awareness of the absence of true intimacy with God, they are certainly not places of torment. They are, however, places in hell, which means that there is no way out; and since purgatory lacks this essential feature, it is reasonable to treat it as part of heaven rather than as quintessentially hellish: only people worthy of heaven inhabit it, after all. And even though treating purgatory as part of heaven rather than as part of hell is a minority position within the Christian tradition, it is not absent. Dante, for instance, the pre-eminent poet-visionary of purgatory, depicts it as a mountain rising above the earth toward heaven (its top is the earthly paradise once inhabited by Adam and Eve), and thus as spatially opposed to hell, which is inside the earth, beneath our feet. And even though the inhabitants of Dante's purgatory undergo various intense physical torments, these are always accompanied by the deep joy of knowing that progress is being made toward God.

But assimilating purgatory to heaven and assimilating it to hell are not the only possibilities. It may also be assimilated to life on earth. Those who take this line emphasize the continuities and similarities between life on earth and purgatorial life: here, as there, there is tribulation and suffering that may have the result of bringing us closer to God; here, as there, we may make progress, which is to say that life in both places is ordered by time and therefore has a structure that can be narrated. In all these ways, purgatorial life is more like earthly life than either heavenly or hellish life.³

Purgatory, then, is like heaven in being bound irreversibly to salvation; like hell in intensity of suffering; and like earthly life in being ordered around the removal of sin by penance through time. It is the thread that binds heaven, hell, and earthly life together, conceptually speaking. What led Christians to develop such an idea?

Christian reasons for affirming purgatory

The idea of purgatory did not spring full-grown from the head of Zeus. Nor, for that matter, was it an unlooked-for revelatory gift from God's mouth to Christian ears. Instead, it was slowly woven from some ancient and significant threads in the fabric of Christian thought, and its emergence in mature form in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in the Latin West has, to the historian looking back, an air of inevitability. That emergence is easily explained by appeal to three patterns of Christian thought: the conviction that living Christians have a continuing, intimate, and transformative relationship with the Christian dead; the idea that there is an intermediate state between individual death and the final judgment; and the belief that even good and faithful Christians typically die with a burden of unexpiated sin. I'll treat these in order, with an eye to their relevance to the doctrine of purgatory.

Christians from the beginning had a strong sense of their continuing and intimate connection with the Christian dead. They believed themselves to be members of a communion of saints, a communion restricted neither to humans (angels were included), nor, among humans, to the living: it comprised also those among the Christian dead whose final salvation was thought certain (Mary and the apostles, for example) or possible (faithful Christians; perhaps the righteous pagans). The term "communion" suggests a loving intimacy between dead Christians and living, and this intimacy showed itself in the caress of intercessory prayer: what more loving and intimate thing can be done for the dead—especially those who have died burdened with sins of various kinds—than to pray for their eventual entry into paradise? And the practice of such prayer almost inevitably carries with it the belief that it might be efficacious. Why, otherwise, do it?

Prayer for the dead has some scriptural support. In the second book of Maccabees (12:38-46), for instance, Judas Maccabeus is depicted as discovering that some Jews had been killed in battle wearing amulets dedicated to idols. Judas and his men offer prayers 'that the sinful deed might be fully blotted out,' and take up a collection to be sent to Jerusalem to 'provide for an expiatory sacrifice.' These actions, the text emphasizes, assume that there will be a resurrection of the dead; they also assume (although the text emphasizes this less) that prayers offered by the living for the dead might have some causal connection to the occurrence of particular cases of the resurrection. This latter implication was certainly taken to heart by Christian readers and interpreters of Second Maccabees, and it was buttressed by interpretations of some Pauline texts that suggest (or

can be read to suggest) that he too meant to affirm that what the living do can affect the eternal destiny of the dead.⁴

Evidence of the practice of praying for the dead in the belief that doing so can achieve some good is everywhere in the literature of early Christianity. Consider the following striking passage from the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*, a third-century work (the first-person speaker is Perpetua, a young Roman matron facing martyrdom; Dinocrates was her younger brother who had died some years before):

I saw [in my dream] Dinocrates, very hot and thirsty and pale and filthy, coming out of a shadowy place along with many others. ... It was for him I prayed. Between him and me there was a great gulf, so that we could not approach one another. And in that place where Dinocrates was there was a pool full of water; its rim was higher than the boy's height ... he could not drink because of the rim's height. Then I woke up and realized that my brother was suffering, but I believed that I could help him in his suffering, and I prayed for him every day ... with tears and sighs that this might be granted to me. [Later] I had this shown to me: I saw the same place which I had seen before, with Dinocrates now clean, well dressed, and cool ... and the pool which I had seen before now had its rim lowered to the level of the boy's belly, and he was continually drinking from it.⁵

Dinocrates had not been in a good place, and Perpetua seems sure that her prayers have contributed, causally, to getting him out of it. And in the conviction that such things are possible she is joined by most Christians, past and present.⁶

Praying for the dead and judging it possible to change their condition for the better thereby (if not all the dead, then at least some of them—those whose condition is neither beyond help nor harm) is the first pattern of Christian thought and practice that disposed Christians toward acceptance of the idea of purgatory. For if at least some of the dead are in purgatory, these things make immediate and good sense, while if there is no such place then intercessory prayers for the dead make little sense.

The second pattern of thought is the idea that there is an intermediate state of some sort between the individual's death and the last judgment—or at least that this is so for all those who have died before Christ's return. This is an almost universal idea among Christians because it is so widely believed that there will be a last judgment involving the return of Jesus Christ to earth, the bodily resurrection of all the dead, and the final and decisive separation of the righteous from the unrighteous, the members of each then going to the appropriate final destiny. If this idea is coupled with the obvious fact that this return, final judgment, and general resurrection have not yet happened, then the thought that there is an intermediate state for those who die before the last judgment is inevitable. Imaginations of this intermediate state, however, have been enormously varied in their details, and only some of them have been hospitable to the idea of purgatory and contributed to its maturing. The dominant Christian view about the intermediate state, however, which I'll call the classic schema, has nurtured purgatorial thinking.

The classic schema claims two stages to post-mortem existence. The first happens immediately upon an individual's death: when you die you suffer immediate pain or bliss, whichever is appropriate to your condition, combined in both cases with the sense that

there is something more yet to happen, which is to say with an eager or agonized expectation, depending upon the case. The second stage occurs with the final and universal judgment and the resurrection of the body: with your resurrected body you enter hell or heaven, and there suffering or bliss continues for eternity, though now without the expectation of anything further or different still to come. This classic schema has many versions, differentiated by their detailed answers to questions such as: Are the dead in the first stage embodied or not? What is the nature of the punishments or rewards in the first stage? Is there a change of 'place' for the dead following upon the general resurrection, or is it better to say that they are already in heaven (or hell) but not yet with their resurrected bodies? But all versions of the classic schema preserve the two-stage structure. This was the ordinary Christian imagination of what happens when you die from at least the third century until recent times. It is also the dogmatic position of the Roman Catholic Church.⁷

The fact of post-baptismal sin is the third factor that disposed Christians toward the idea of purgatory. It is a standard Christian claim that baptism removes the stain of sin by signifying and effecting the dying and rising of the baptized with Christ. Those who've been baptized are washed entirely clean: they have become a new creation, prepared for eternal loving intimacy with God. But, obviously, the baptized do not thereupon stop sinning: they lie, kill, steal, commit adultery, and perform all the petty and quotidian sins to which human beings are prone. What is to be done about the burden of filth (Christian writers of all periods have favored metaphors of weight—sin's burden—and impurity—sin's filth—for these matters) produced by post-baptismal sin? This burden, too, it was thought, unfits people for heaven; but since re-baptism is by most Christians not thought proper (it is a rite of initiation undergone just once), some other remedy must be found for it if the large proportion (all? almost all?) of Christians who suffer from it is not to be barred from heaven.⁸

The remedy found was *medicamenta poenitentia*, the medicines of penance.⁹ As it gradually became accepted by Christians that the baptized would continue to sin (and this took a surprisingly long time), those sins began to be categorized and ordered hierarchically into the less and more serious (here lie the roots of the distinction between venial and mortal sins). Particular kinds of sin were then linked with particular penitential acts that would remove their burden, cleanse the soul of their impurity, and so fit it once again for heaven. These penitential acts might be personal austerities (fasting, prayer), or acts of charity by which a wrong done might be set right (return of stolen property). Whatever their particulars, their purpose was always the same: to restore the sinner to a harmonious and loving relation with God, a relation that had been broken or damaged by sin. The language used to describe the relation between sin and penance was varied: sometimes it was medical (a sickness healed), sometimes financial (a debt paid), sometimes judicial and penal (a sentence served); but whatever the preferred metaphor, the imagery served the same purpose, which was to describe how penance could remove sin, as well as the residues and after-effects of sin. It is important to this way of thinking to deploy a distinction between a sinful act and its deforming results. Even when a sin is no longer being committed and has been confessed as such, it may still have lingering effects upon the will and affections, much as long-past gastronomic indulgences may have on the figure.

The practice of penance had entered deeply into the life of the church by the early Middle Ages, and was linked with the habit of confessing sins, either communally or in

private to a personal confessor, usually a priest. These practices began in the religious orders, but soon spread to the church as a whole, and by the eleventh and twelfth centuries they had become a standard part of the church's life. This was also the time at which the mature doctrine of purgatory emerged, and there is an obvious connection: why should death bring with it an end to need for the medicines of penance? If Christians are bound by post-baptismal sin in this life, it is likely that some (perhaps many, perhaps most) are still so bound at death, for not all will by then have fully comprehended or confessed or expiated their sins. They will, therefore, or so it commonly came to be thought, not yet be ready for the unmediated and scarifyingly direct vision of God proper to heavenly life. But such people are also usually not fitted for damnation: they are, after all, faithful Christians, baptized, turned by habit and intention toward God and away from sin's abyss and evil's void. For such people, purgatory is the necessary place: in its agonizingly purifying fires, the remnant of sin's burden can be scorched away and the faithful thereby prepared for heaven. Purgatory came to be seen as an extension beyond death of the discipline of penance, and while there were the predictable debates about its details (How long would it last? What proportion of the baptized would need it? Would those who did need it suffer its pains with the same body they would receive at the general resurrection? Was the idea of a material fire essential to it?), it came to be largely accepted in this sense by the thirteenth century.¹⁰

Prayer for the dead, an intermediate state between individual death and the general resurrection, and penance for post-baptismal sin—the idea of purgatory wove these threads together into an ornate, beautiful, and persuasive fabric. This fabric has since been adorned by the Christian imagination for more than a thousand years. But it has also proved profoundly unpersuasive, sometimes in its details but sometimes also in whole cloth, to some Christians, and it is important now to turn to an examination of the principal causes of this. Some of them are the same as those that have made the thought of purgatory largely unappealing to non-Christian contemporaries as anything other than poetry, and not very appealing even as that.

Christian reasons for denying purgatory

Some Christians have been rhetorically sharp, not to say vituperative, in their rejection of the idea of purgatory. This is most commonly true of Protestants, and the rhetoric about the question reached its highest pitch in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when the rejection of purgatory was among the ways in which the emerging Protestant churches marked their separation from Roman Catholicism. Consider, for example, the twenty-second of the 39 Anglican articles of religion, found in all editions of *The Book of Common Prayer* since 1571:

The Romish Doctrine concerning Purgatory, Pardons, Worshipping and Adoration, as well of Images as of Relics, and also invocation of Saints, is a fond thing, vainly invented, and grounded upon no warranty of Scripture, but rather repugnant to the Word of God.

The Anglican Church was not alone at this period in vehemently objecting to purgatory. Calvin's language was at least as strong; and although Luther's opinions about purgatory fluctuated, they too were in the end violently negative.¹¹

There are arguments and tropes shared by the various Protestant rejections of purgatory, and at least two of them are evident in the Anglican article just quoted. The first is an objection to the very idea of a continuing and intimate relation with the dead, whether saved ('invocation of Saints') or otherwise, and the second is the idea that the doctrine of purgatory has insufficient scriptural backing, or is plainly opposed to scripture.

The first issue, that of relations with the dead, shows a fundamental concern with the individual's responsibility for his or her own salvation, and with the mechanisms by which salvation was brought about. If prayers for the dead could change their condition ('Pardons')—which is integral to the idea of purgatory, as we've seen—then, as the reformers saw it, salvation was no longer dependent upon the all-sufficient sacrifice of Christ on the cross and the individual's faithful response to that sacrifice, but rather upon ancillary matters, such as what prayers are said by whom; or even, in the more rococo versions of Roman Catholic ideas about how to shorten your own or your loved ones' time in purgatory, what monies are paid to whom. This is the idea of indulgences, about which oceans of ink have been spilled and against which innumerable pulpit denunciations have been given. Briefly and broadly, an indulgence is granted by the church in response to some meritorious act done by an individual. The meritorious act might be prayer, fasting, pilgrimage, or the gift of money, land, or property to the church; the indulgence might be offered to the one performing the meritorious act, or to someone designated by him or her; and among the most common forms of the indulgence was remission of time in purgatory. All this was profoundly objectionable to Lutherans, Calvinists, Anglicans, Methodists, Anabaptists, and others (also, it must be said, to many contemporary Catholics);¹² and this perceived (and to some extent real) intertwining of the doctrine of purgatory with the granting of indulgences provided Protestants with one of their main sources of ammunition against the idea of purgatory. All this lurks beneath the surface of Article 22.

The indulgence is an extreme case of the logic of penance, in some cases a perversion of it.¹³ Whether or not this was so in the practice of early-modern Catholicism, it was certainly taken to be so by the Reformers. And they often went so far as to reject not only indulgences, but also all forms of penance. The underlying thought here was that not only was it illegitimate to say that what someone else might do for you could in any way affect your relationship with God; it was also improper to say that anything you might do could have such effects. On this view (it is actually a family of views), even faith is a gift given by God which those who receive it can do and have done nothing whatever to merit or deserve. All the more, good conduct (abiding by the Ten Commandments, say) is sheer gift, at most a sign of salvation and certainly not a cause of it. On such views, penance has neither purchase nor meaning; and the systematic linking of particular sins and particular penances by double-entry book-keeping, so that salvation cannot be attained until the accounts balance, is a horror and a blasphemy. The rejection of purgatory follows nicely from the rejection of penance, for the one makes little sense without the other.

Such views tend naturally to be predestinarian (though not all with the same degree of commitment), and this shows with still more clarity why they sit uneasily with purgatorial thought. These broadly predestinarian views are, interestingly, often held together with some version of what I've called the classic, two-stage schema for explaining

what happens when you die (individual death first, followed later by final judgment and general resurrection). This is a little odd, because predestinarian views can have little to say about the nature or purpose of the intermediate state, the first of the two stages, and this places them at a disadvantage in comparison to the (usually Catholic) proponents of purgatory. It certainly explains why they tend to be modest and restrained in their depictions of the intermediate state, often claiming that it would be arrogant or blasphemous to attempt to depict it.

The second anti-purgatory trope evident in the Anglican article quoted is that the idea of purgatory is opposed to scripture, or at least not adequately supported by it. This was very widely discussed in the Catholic-Protestant polemical literature of early modernity. About this I'll say only that the debate was (and is) not conclusive, mostly because the participants in it generally had incompatible ideas about the principles that should govern scriptural interpretation, as well as about the proper relations between scripture and church doctrine. All sides agreed that there is no developed scriptural doctrine of purgatory (or the intermediate state in general), prayer for the dead, or penance. They disagreed about whether purgatorial thought is consonant with scripture; and they disagreed, too, about whether there are any scriptural texts that can properly be read explicitly to support the idea of purgatory.¹⁴

There is yet another set of Christian objections to the idea of purgatory, in addition to problems about prayers for the dead, objections to penance in this life or the next, and difficulties with scripture. This set of objections rejects the idea of an intermediate state that is anything other than experientially null, and generally does so on the basis of objections to dualism as that doctrine applies to human persons. The kind of dualism rejected claims that disembodied existence is possible for human persons, which is also to say that what constitutes you, the properties that you have essentially, need include none that are physical. And those who reject dualism of this sort often reject purgatory along with it because they assume that purgatorial existence is disembodied; heavenly and hellish existence, by contrast, follow upon the resurrection of the body, and can therefore be affirmed without also affirming dualism. These objections have been pressed by a small minority among Christians.¹⁵

On this view, when you die it will not continue to seem like anything to you to be the person you are with the character and weight of sin that is yours: experience will cease until the last judgment and the bodily resurrection that accompanies it. Until then, you will be as though in a deep and dreamless sleep—just dead, we might say, though not irreversibly so. Only at the general resurrection will you receive your reward and your resurrected body, only then will you enter, finally and irrevocably, into heaven or hell. This doesn't mean that you cease to exist during the (perhaps very long) temporal interval between your death and the general resurrection. It means only that the existence you will then have is exclusively physical. This is most commonly put by saying that there is something physical—perhaps, to use Paul's language, a *gymnos kokkos* (Greek), or *nudus granus* (Latin), or 'naked kernel'¹⁶—that does continue to exist after physical death and which at the general resurrection is reshaped or reconfigured into a resurrected body suitable for eternal life in heaven or hell.

This is not the place for a detailed discussion of dualism and materialism, or of the view that human beings are essentially embodied. It must, however, be noted that purgatorial thought does not require the view that those in purgatory are disembodied.

More often the contrary: detailed verbal and visual imaginations of purgatory typically represent the inhabitants of purgatory as embodied, and often (as in Dante) place a great deal of emphasis on the importance of the fact that they are embodied. The exact relation between the purgatorial body and the resurrected (heavenly or hellish) body is of course difficult to specify, as are the differences between the purgatorial body and the ordinary earthly body; but dualism's falsehood does not entail a rejection of purgatory; neither does the assumption that dualism is false yield the conclusion that the period between the individual's death and the general resurrection is experientially null.

There is no decisive or final resolution of these Christian arguments for and against purgatory. The scriptural witness is certainly not strongly supportive of the idea, but neither does it decisively rule it out. Purgatory makes beautiful sense of some Christian beliefs and practices very deeply woven into the fabric of the religion: that most faithful Christians die as sinners; that living Christians have a continuing, intimate, and lovingly transformative relation with their dead; and that there is an intermediate state with experiential content between the individual's death and the general resurrection. The only decisive reason for rejecting the essentials of the doctrine is a root-and-branch repudiation of the sin-and-penance complex of thought and practice, and this repudiation sits most comfortably with predestinarianism of one sort or another, which is itself a minority Christian view. Basic, unelaborated purgatorial thought, therefore, has a strong claim to be considered a proper part of the grammar of Christian thought. Recent discussion among Catholics and Protestants certainly shows a tendency among the latter to step back from sixteenth-century rejections of the idea, and in some cases to affirm it.¹⁷

Recent Catholic thought on purgatory typically preserves the essential elements of the basic doctrine while also offering second-order speculative interpretations of these elements—for example, about the nature of purgatorial time, the purgatorial body, or the relation between purgatorial purification and the final or general resurrection. Karl Rahner, for instance, writing on the subject in the 1950s and 1960s, suggested that it might be possible to understand the passage of time in the intermediate state analogically (that is, as sharing some features with time's passage in this life, but also as differing in some respects), and thereby to understand the doctrine of purgatory as "in fact a kind of thanatology presented with a different imagery and under different aspects."¹⁸ He was concerned to reject a univocal identification of purgatorial time with time as experienced before death because he thought that this would require a systematic and deep-going distinction between the soul's immortality, located temporally in purgatory, and the body's resurrection, postponed until the time of the general resurrection. But, as we have seen, the basic doctrine requires no such distinction, and is not committed to any particular understanding of the nature or extent of purgatorial time. Rahner's speculations about the precise nature of purgatory's time and the purgatorial body are quite compatible with the basic doctrine.

Some similar concerns are evident in Joseph Ratzinger's textbook analysis from the 1970s. He wants to understand purgatorial time as *Existenzzeit*, an existential time in which occurs "the inwardly necessary process of transformation in which a person becomes capable of Christ, capable of God and thus capable of unity with the whole communion of saints."¹⁹ And he wants to understand purgatorial fire as Jesus Christ himself: he takes it as a metaphor for what Jesus' love effects in us. Our fiery immersion in that love is, for him, entry into our definitive and final destiny. Fire's metaphorical caresses—the heat of the

lover's hands and lips—are the medium in which all the dead live. The heart of the doctrine of purgatory, for Ratzinger, is the need of the dead to be transformed by Christ. This, he thinks, comports well with and may even require the capacity and duty of the living to pray lovingly for the dead who are being thus transformed, as well as the capacity and duty of the dead to intercede for the living with the Christ who is transforming them. Here too the elements of the unelaborated basic doctrine are all present.²⁰

The basic doctrine and its imaginative elaboration

The basic doctrine, however, rarely remained unelaborated. Many of the poetic and artistic embroideries upon it do contain elements that cannot so easily be considered a proper part of the grammar of Christian thought, and even the Roman Catholic Church, the only Christian church that propounds purgatory as binding doctrine, has realised this and is very modest in what it claims, doctrinally, about purgatory. In 1563, at the Council of Trent, the Catholic Church propounded a decree on the subject, part of which reads as follows:

[T]he catholic church has taught ... that purgatory exists (*purgatorium esse*), and that the souls detained there are helped by the prayers of the faithful (*fidelium suffragiis*) and especially by the acceptable sacrifice of the altar [i.e., the Mass]. This holy council commands the bishops that they should diligently work to see that the sound doctrine of purgatory (*sanam de purgatorio doctrinam*) handed down by the holy fathers and councils is believed and maintained by the Christian faithful and everywhere preached. However, the more difficult and subtle questions which do not tend toward edification, and which do not, for the most part, yield any increase in piety, should be excluded from popular instruction given to uneducated people. They [sc. the bishops] should not permit to be publicly treated those things that are uncertain, or that have the appearance of falsehood. Even more should they prohibit everything that serves curiosity or superstition or savors of filthy money (*turpe lucrum sapiunt*) as scandalous and offensive to the faithful.²¹

The only substantive claims made about purgatory here are that it exists, and that those in it can be helped by what the living do—specifically by intercessory prayer and the corporate worship of the church. Only this is binding upon the Roman Catholic faithful. The *difficiliores ac subtiliores quaestiones* about purgatory, some of which I've briefly discussed, are explicitly ruled out as not being edifying or productive of piety. And, in what is certainly a reference to the abuse of indulgences, the Council exhorts the bishops not to permit the teaching of what "savors of filthy money" in connection with purgatory. This is a minimal and modest doctrinal statement. On its content, most Christians can agree.

The idea of purgatory mostly held by detractors and proponents is not, however, anywhere nearly so modest. It is a creature not of churchly doctrinal pronouncements but of the creative imaginations of poets, visionaries, and artists. It was exactly as such that it was rejected by (largely Protestant) ascetics of the imagination; and exactly as such that it was affirmed, elaborated, and acted upon by (mostly Catholic) poets, liturgists, and

ordinary people. Since these are the forms of purgatorial thinking that have actually nourished the western imagination, it seems appropriate to conclude with a brief depiction of one of them, that by Dante.

Dante Alighieri's *Commedia*, completed not long before his death in 1321, is a long poem of 100 cantos, each containing about 150 lines of Italian *terza rima* verse. The first third of the poem, the *Inferno*, treats hell; the second, *Purgatorio*, treats Purgatory; and the last, *Paradiso*, treats heaven. Dante's treatment of all three places is the most detailed, complex, and poetically imaginative of any in literature; it is also the one that has entered most deeply into the imagination of the West.. This is especially true of his treatment of purgatory, for in depicting it he had fewer predecessors than was the case for heaven and hell, and so also fewer competitors.

The *Purgatorio* begins thus: "Now I shall sing the second song/where the human soul is purified/and made worthy to go up to heaven" (i.4-6).²² The expected theme is sounded: this is a place of purgation or purification, and those in it are on the way to heaven. Dante throughout imagines purgatory as a place on earth, a place with latitude and longitude as we would say: it is a mountain in the southern hemisphere, directly opposite Jerusalem (iv.58-85).²³ If a hole were drilled through the center of the earth from Calvary, the drill would break the surface on the other side of the globe at the base of purgatory's mountain. And not only does Dante locate purgatory in earthly space: he explains how the dead for whom it is the appropriate place get there. They gather, ghost-like and invisible to the living, at a kind of dock on the Tiber, near Ostia, Rome's seaport. And then, after a time of waiting (the length of time depends upon the condition of the sinner) they embark on an angel-piloted boat and are taken at great speed across the ocean to purgatory's shores. There they disembark, and begin, after various preliminaries, their ascent up the mountain.

Dante's description of the mountain's space is linked with references to the time it takes to climb it. The central conceit of the poem is the living Dante's pilgrimage through the post-mortem realms with Vergil as guide, and the poet weaves throughout a pattern of temporal symbols to match the spatial ones. Dante and Vergil arrive at purgatory at dawn on Easter Sunday, 1300 (i.13); they complete their journey to the top of the mountain at noon on Wednesday of Easter Week (xxxiii.103-105). It would almost be possible to calculate distances, since Dante often says how many hours it took the travelers to traverse particular parts of the mountain. But here one must be careful, for sometimes large distances seem to be traversed quickly, in a dreamlike daze; while at other times short distances require a slow slog. The principal point of the frequent references to time is to differentiate purgatory from hell: the inhabitants of Dante's hell cannot know the past and future, and do not act in time; they are locked in an endlessly repetitive present. In purgatory, however, everyone anticipates: they know where they are, where they have been, and above all where they are going (heaven, always), and so there is a very strong sense of temporal location and progress. There is also the joy produced by anticipation.

The dead in Dante's purgatory have bodies, though they are very unlike earthly bodies of flesh. It is a constant theme of the *Purgatorio* that the dead are aware that Dante is not dead exactly because of the differences between their bodies and his. His casts a shadow and theirs do not (iii.88-90); he breathes while they do not; and he cannot touch their bodies (ii.76-81), though he can see and hear (and occasionally smell) their presence. He is simply much more solid than they. However, they do have bodies: ethereal, airy bodies, bodies that have location and can experience time but are nonetheless very

insubstantial. Dante has a theory about how these bodies come to be and what their nature is;²⁴ but all that need be emphasized here is that the dead in purgatory (as also in hell and heaven) have bodies. There is no ammunition in Dante for those who would reject purgatory because they think dualism false.

The lower part of the mountain is a kind of preparation for purgatory (ante-purgatory, Dante calls it). It is for people whose earthly dilatoriness (in repentance, in charity) require them to wait before purification can begin. When those who wait are ready to go on they pass through an entrance-gate to purgatory proper, and this part of the mountain is divided into seven terraces, each for one of the seven deadly sins or capital vices, which in Dante's order are: pride, envy, wrath, sloth, avarice (and prodigality), gluttony, and lust. In each stage, satisfaction is made for sin by means of penance. Those who have been especially subject to the sin of a particular terrace may have to spend a great deal of time there—hundreds of years, perhaps, as in the case of Statius on the terrace of prodigality (xxi.67-69); but those who have not been troubled by a particular sin may pass its terrace very quickly. But in every inhabitant of purgatory's case there is something to be corrected, made straight, or 'dis-eviled', to translate Dante's coinage, *dismalare* (xiii.3). The disharmony in the will and the affections produced by habitual sin on earth needs to be removed (scraped away, ii.122-123; paid for, x.106ff; and so on) before the vision of God can be endured.

The removal of sin's residue by penance can be illustrated by the treatment of envy in the *Purgatorio's* thirteenth chapter. For Dante, envy is desire that someone else should lose a good they have; it is often accompanied by actions aimed at causing them to lose it, and by delight if they do lose it. The envious are not particularly interested in getting the goods of others for themselves. They are, instead, oppressed and agonized by the very fact that others have them; that is why they indulge themselves in *Schadenfreude*. Dante gives as example one Sapia,²⁵ a woman who tells the pilgrim Dante that she rejoiced even at the defeat and death of her own kinsmen in war because, she says, "another's harm made me far happier than/My own good fortune" (xiii.111-112). This is why she suffers in purgatory, and the principal reason why she is there rather than in hell is that at the end of her life she repented and sought peace with God.

Sapia, in spite of her repentance, has still a debt to pay, and it gets paid in two ways. The first is that she, like the other envious ones, has her eyelids "all sutured through and sewn/shut with an iron wire" (xiii.69-70). This physical blindness, freely accepted, is the symbolic reversal of her misuse of vision in life: Sapia, like the other envious, had used her eyes in life to identify goods possessed by others and thereby to excite her wishes that they would lose them. It would have been better for her to be blind than to see in this way, and so she is temporarily blinded in purgatory. But that is not all: Dante says that the cheeks of the envious in purgatory "were glistening with the tears they pressed/through the horrible seams" (xiii.83-84) of their sutured eyelids. These tears are of sorrow for what had been done in the past. They are not tears of grief at the pains of purgatory. The eyelids of the once-envious are not sutured to prevent further occurrences of envy—Sapia is past that; she, like all the inhabitants of purgatory, no longer sins or wishes to. The sutures and the tears are, instead, expiatory: they remove the greasy film or scum (*schiume*, xiii.88) of sin in the only way that Dante thinks justice and good psychology permit, which is by expiatory action.

But Sapia's own purgatorial sufferings are not the only way in which sin's scum is removed from the conscience. There are also the prayers of the living, and Sapia mentions a specific instance to Dante: "[P]enitence/would have decreased nothing of my debt/If Pete the Comb Man in his holy prayers/had not remembered me, for when I died/he felt the pitying warmth of charity" (xiii.125-129). Not much is known about this comb-seller; his trade tells us that he was not important in the world (he may have sold his goods to prostitutes), and that too is part of Dante's point. The great and powerful, popes (there are several in purgatory), kings, and nobles, may benefit from the prayers of the poorest and humblest living Christians, and Sapia ends her talk with the pilgrim Dante by asking him to "renew her name" (xiii.150) among her countrymen so that they may pray for her soul. This is typical of the *Purgatorio*: Dante emphasizes again and again that those in purgatory can gain "much profit from what prayers on earth obtain" (iii.145).

Dante's poetic imagination provides, then, a detailed depiction of the place that is purgatory. It is a place of intense suffering shot through with the joy of certainty in progress toward the vision of God. It is both heaven's antechamber and earthly life (embodied, time-bound, penitential) as it should be—earthly life without actual sin, though with sin's memory and effects, and also with an increasing sense of God and an unshakeable certainty of eventually seeing and knowing God as he is. Dante wanted, as most painters of purgatory want, to encourage living Christians to make their earthly life as much like the purgatorial life as possible. Heaven is beyond us here on earth, but purgatory is not; imaginations of it may, if allowed their proper force and value and chastened by properly modest doctrinal formulations, begin to transfigure life on earth into their own image.

Notes

¹ On the history of the word *purgatorium* see Jacques Le Goff, *La Naissance de purgatoire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1981) pp. 488-493 (appendice II).

² Some Christians think, in accord with the credal claim that Jesus descended into hell, that on Holy Saturday Jesus emptied hell of the righteous—that, as the old phrase has it, he harrowed hell. This theme has been most thoroughly developed in recent Christian thought by Hans Urs von Balthasar, especially in *Mysterium Paschale: The Mystery of Easter*, transl. Aidan Nichols (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1990).

³ Richard K. Fenn's *The Persistence of Purgatory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) interestingly analyzes the assimilation of late-modern earthly life to purgatory, as well as the depiction of purgatory in terms of features drawn from Christian life here below. Some of this is implicit already in Augustine: see Henry Bettenson, transl., *St. Augustine: Concerning the City of God Against the Pagans* (London: Penguin, 1972), Book 21, pp. 964-1021.

⁴ The text from Second Maccabees discussed in this paragraph is canonical for Catholic and Orthodox Christians because it is part of the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament made in the third century BC. It is, however, at best deuterocanonical for most Protestants because it is not in the (Hebrew) canon of the Masoretes. But for most Christian exegetes prior to the sixteenth century, the Septuagint was the authoritative text (it is, for the most part, what's quoted in the New Testament). As for the Pauline texts: the most important among these are: 2 Timothy 1:18, which can be read as an intercession by Paul (if his authorship of the letter is allowed) on behalf of Onesiphorus, by then dead; and 1 Corinthians 15:29, which has the famously obscure reference to the practice of baptism on behalf of the dead. Whatever exactly this means, it certainly suggests some causal connection between the actions of the living and the condition of the dead.

⁵ Translating *Passio Sanctarum Perpetuae et Felicitatis* §§7-8, from the Latin given in Herbert Musurillo, ed. & transl., *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), pp.114-116. This volume also contains a (not very good) English translation. For a study of (and further bibliography on) *Perpetua*, see Joyce E. Salisbury, *Perpetua's Passion: The Death and Memory of a Young Roman Woman* (New York & London: Routledge, 1997). There is a tradition attributing *Perpetua* to Tertullian, who died in the 220s; if correct, this would show at least that one of the earliest Christian thinkers to give systematic attention to eschatological questions found purgatory-like ideas unavoidable.

⁶ Of course not only by Christians. The Jewish *kaddish*, prayed for the dead for almost a year after their deaths, exhibits a similar conviction and appears to have taken shape, perhaps under Christian influence, at about the same time that Christians were formalizing their own prayer-practices of this sort. See Leon Wieseltier, *Kaddish* (New York: Knopf, 1998), pp.193-194 (he denies Christian influence on the Jewish practice); and Stephen

Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), pp. 8-9, for some discussion.

⁷ See, for example, Benedict XII's Bull *Benedictus Deus* (1336), to the effect that entry into heaven follows for every holy individual immediately upon death, and thus before the general resurrection, while those who die in mortal sin enter upon their hellish eternal destiny with just as much rapidity. See Henricus Denzinger & Adolfus Schönmetzer, ed., *Enchiridion Symbolorum* (36th ed.; Rome: Herder, 1976), §§1000-1001.

⁸ Early Christians, notoriously, sometimes delayed baptism almost until death in order to avoid the possibility of post-baptismal sin. See, for example, Augustine's discussion of this: Henry Chadwick, transl., *Saint Augustine: Confessions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), i.11.17-18, pp. 13-14.

⁹ I take this phrase from the title of the eleventh chapter of Peter Brown's *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity, A.D. 200-1000* (2nd ed. Oxford: Blackwell, 2003). This chapter contains an excellent analysis of early-medieval penitential theory and practice. Brown in turn borrows the phrase from Columbanus, an Irish monk of the late sixth century.

¹⁰ This general agreement was on the basic, unelaborated doctrine only, and was entirely compatible with continuing deep disagreements as to particulars between Catholics and Orthodox, disagreements that had to do as much with interpretation of the patristic evidence as with systematic theological considerations. The debates about the matter between Orthodox and Catholics in the 15th century show that while the former were not in principal opposed to the basic doctrine, they were very much opposed to its elaborations by the latter and the confidence with which these elaborations were taught. On these debates see: James Jorgenson, "The Debate Over the Patristic Texts on Purgatory at the Council of Ferrara-Florence, 1438," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 30 (1986), 309-334. Robert Ombres, "Latins and Greeks in Debate over Purgatory," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 35 (1984), 1-14.

¹¹ For Luther's final rejection of purgatory see "Widerruf vom Fegefeuer," [Rejection of Purgatory] in *Martin Luthers Werke*, vol. 30/2 (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1909), pp.360-390. For Calvin, see *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book 3, ch.5, transl. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), pp. 670-684.

¹² For recent Catholic statements on indulgences see Paul VI's *Indulgentiarum Doctrina* (1967), and John Paul II's *Incararnationis Mysterium* (1998).

¹³ Among the most extravagant instances of the purchases of indulgences to shorten one's time in purgatory is that of Henry VII of England, who made provision in his will for 10,000 masses to be said for his soul after his death, and who built an ornate chapel at Westminster for the sole purpose of housing monks who would pray in perpetuity for the

repose of his soul. This was a king who was taking no chances. See Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory*, pp. 22-23, for some discussion.

¹⁴ Paul's pregnantly obscure words in 1 Corinthians 3:10-17 about (perhaps) the post-mortem testing and purification of individuals by fire is certainly the most often and most fiercely discussed purgatorial text. See also Matthew 5:25-26, 12:31-32. In 1651 Thomas Hobbes gave a splendidly vigorous conspectus and treatment of all the major scriptural texts taken to be relevant to the issue (from a position that on most definitions is heretical by both Protestant and Catholic standards): C. B. Macpherson, ed., *Thomas Hobbes: Leviathan* (London: Penguin, 1968), ch. 44, pp. 627-657.

¹⁵ For Hobbes' version of this materialist view, see Macpherson, ed., *Leviathan*, ch.38, pp.478-496. For a modern version of this position, see Peter van Inwagen, "Dualism and Materialism: Athens and Jerusalem," in van Inwagen, *The Possibility of Resurrection and Other Essays in Christian Apologetics* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview, 1998), pp. 53-67.

¹⁶ 1 Corinthians 15:37. The whole chapter is of great interest for the question.

¹⁷ David Brown, for instance, an Anglican, argues (in "No Heaven Without Purgatory," *Religious Studies* 21 [1985], 447-456) that the doctrine of heaven makes no sense without the idea of purgatory. The discussion in William Crockett, ed., *Four Views on Hell* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1992), pp.89-131, between Zachary Hayes, a Catholic, and three evangelical Protestants shows some willingness on the part of the Protestants to consider the doctrine as true; Jerry Walls, a Methodist, has argued strongly in support of the doctrine in "Purgatory for Everyone," *First Things* 122 (April 2002), 26-30; and Richard Swinburne, in *Providence and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), pp.197-201, acknowledges the doctrine as at least possibly true. C. S. Lewis, too, affirmed the doctrine in several works, and gave it some of its most appealing recent imaginative elaborations. There is, of course, still Protestant opposition, for recent examples of which see Jürgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), pp.96-101; Hans Schwartz, *Eschatology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2000), pp. 352-264.

¹⁸ Karl Rahner, "Purgatory," in idem, *Theological Investigations*, vol.19, transl. Edward Quinn (New York: Crossroad, 1983), pp. 181-193, at p. 186.

¹⁹ Joseph Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, transl. Michael Waldstein (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1988), p. 230.

²⁰ N. T. Wright thinks positions like Rahner's and Ratzinger's are a "radical climb-down from Aquinas, Dante, Newman and all that went in between (*For All the Saints? Remembering the Christian Departed* [Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Morehouse, 2004], p.11). But this view fails to discriminate between the fundamental commitments of the doctrine of purgatory—as expressed for example at the Council of Trent, which certainly came

between Aquinas and Newman—and speculative understandings of its inessentials. Wright's own view is in fact largely in accord with Trent.

²¹ Translating from the Latin of the first section of the *Decretum de Purgatorio* given at Trent on 3-4 December 1563, in Norman P. Tanner, ed. & transl., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1990), vol. 2, p. 774.

²² Parenthetical references are to canto- and line-numbers of the Italian text of the *Purgatorio*. I generally quote (but occasionally silently modify) Anthony Esolen's English translation as given in his *Dante: Purgatory* (New York: Modern Library, 2003); this translation also provides the Italian text.

²³ Dante provides frequent references to and descriptions of the constellations visible from purgatory (i.22-30; ii.1-6; & passim). It is important to him to engage the visual and geographic imaginations of his readers and hearers by means of such realistic details, in much the same way as do writers of copy for vacation catalogs. Dante's purgatory is a place that he wants you to imagine you might visit. That, indeed, is a good part of the point.

²⁴ He places the theory on the lips of the Roman poet Statius in the 25th canto of the *Purgatorio*.

²⁵ Sapia was a real person, as are so many of the characters in the *Commedia*. She was a Sienese woman who had died in 1274, perhaps forty years before Dante wrote about her.

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