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Purgatory: Theological and Social Development During the Middle Ages

Introduction

At the onset of the medieval period, references to spiritual purgation of one's sinful nature, symbolized as a cleansing fire, along with the belief in the efficacy of prayers for the dead, had led theologians and church leaders to consider the possibility of a "purgative state," existing after death, which prepares one to enter into paradise. By the 1400's, the church had a well defined doctrine of a third state after death, a state called *Purgatory*, which was a place, somewhere in the upper subterranean realm, where the dead would spend a certain amount of time being purged of their venial sins, that amount of time determined by the number and severity of sins committed during their lives, and possibly shorted by prayers and offerings made by the living for of the dead. By this era, the average person could have a graphic visual image of purgatory, consisting of various forms of torture and punishment, combining elements of fear and dread with hope for relief through eventual release into paradise.

This transition from a theological conceptualization to a firmly established doctrine with numerous popular devotions and imaginative visual imagery took place by in large during the medieval period. The development of purgatory can be traced by noting theological development, and debate, but must also take into account the influence of popular mysticism and social evolution. Through these influences, a doctrine and popular belief would emerge that would not only influence the Eastern Schism and the Reformation, but would make its mark on Christian society as a whole.

Patristic Influences and Augustine

Concepts that would forerun Purgatory were already prevalent within the Patristic period. Offering prayers for the dead had been a long-standing tradition and liturgical practice, with biblical foundation in 2 Mac 12:43-45.¹ It was indeed believed that prayers for the dead would be effective for their well being, as illustrated in ancient writings, like those of Tertullian and Origen, but also in inscriptions written in catacombs, which request prayers of the living for those buried there.² In addition, Fathers like Tertullian, Origen, and Clement considered the possibility of some third state of existence beyond death, through which one may be purified of ones sins. This idea of purification seemed to be justified by such verses as 1 Cor 3:10-15, which refers to purifying fires, giving spiritual cleansing.³ In addition, Tertullian and Irenaeus both referred to an intermediate state, which they call a *refrigerium*, where the dead await the general resurrection.⁴ At times such a state has been referred to as the Bosom of Abraham, particularly by Tertullian.⁵ Also influencing a concept of Purgatory are certain mystical writings, most notably the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*, which relates Perpetua's vision of seeing her dead brother in a state of suffering, only to be freed from it later through her prayers.⁶ Origen also takes up the idea of a purgative state; he would say that after baptism, the Christian undergoes various forms of suffering for the purpose of education and purification, like a purgative fire.⁷ That fire not experienced in life would have to be undergone after death. He however believed this fire would be reserved until the last judgment, and develops a peculiar and

¹ Marmion 123, Atwell 174

² Marmion 123

³ Taylor 28, Atwell 174

⁴ Lampe 62

⁵ Le Goff 46

⁶ Taylor 27, Le Goff 50

⁷ Ombres 35

confusing method of calculating time of purgation.⁸ In any event, these two notions, prayers for the dead, and purgative fire, would be the underpinnings that would lead later church leaders, particularly Gregory I, in the direction of the doctrine of Purgatory.⁹

In addition to holding fast to the practice of praying for the dead, which he regarded as and “integral part of the deposit of the faith,”¹⁰ Augustine considered the possibility of a third state beyond death (in addition to heaven and hell) where one might undergo purifying fires as part of one’s journey towards God.¹¹ This was closely connected to his allowing that between the totally good and the totally reprobate groupings of humanity, there may be a third class, the not totally good, within his system.¹² References to such a purgative fire, which can be found in both *Enchiridion* and *De civitate Dei*,¹³ speak of the duration that one must undergo such fire as being proportional to one’s love of worldly things, or to sins one has not experienced sufficient penance for. He even stated his belief that the righteous dead in such a state may be positively affected by the piety of the living,¹⁴ and prayers and Masses offered for the dead.¹⁵ Augustine has one only reservation to making his conjectures into firm doctrine: the threat of moral laxity that the existence of such a state could encourage.¹⁶ Therefore he suggests that the pain and suffering that must exist in this state would surely be worse than anything experienced in life.¹⁷ In spite of this reservation, and although his systematization of ideas was not as complete as later

⁸ Le Goff 56

⁹ Atwell 174

¹⁰ Le Goff 49

¹¹ Pelikan 33, Matsuda 10

¹² Atwell 176. Le Goff argues that Augustine classified the third category into the not totally good and the not totally evil (69f, 73, 98), Edwards completely disagrees, referring to *Enchiridion*, stating that Augustine always had three categories (639).

¹³ Atwell 176

¹⁴ Ombres, *Theology of Purgatory* 30, Edwards 640

¹⁵ Taylor 29

¹⁶ Atwell 176

¹⁷ Ombres, *Theology of Purgatory* 28

efforts in this area¹⁸, it is generally understood that Augustine was the first to consolidate a position on Purgatory in the West.¹⁹

Popular Belief in Purgatory Leading into the Middle Ages, and Gregory the Great

Caesarius of Arles (c.470-543) shared similar reservations to those of Augustine. In response, he made lists of serious and slight sins, distinguishing the two. In this way, Caesarius contributed to laying the groundwork for what will later be a complicated system of mortal and venial sins, and assisted in the didactic between Hell and Purgatory.²⁰ In addition, Caesarius' writings seem to illustrate the Purgative state in more punitive than curative terms.²¹

During the period leading up to the sixth century, one can see a growing popularity in apparitions, particularly of people returning from the dead and asking for prayers and supplications. Such visions often showed the efficacy of prayers and particularly Masses offered for the deceased. Many considered these visions and miracles to be of great theological value, particularly Gregory the Great, who frequently used visions to substantiate his arguments about a third purgative state.²² This reflected a growing trend towards superstition among many writers in the church during this century.²³ Also by the time of Gregory, there had developed a much more thorough and systematic penitential system, which differentiated mortal and venial sins, and a continuing concern with the subject of merit.²⁴ In addition, the culture had changed. The clear binary social system of Christians and Pagans that was present at the time of Augustine no longer existed. The community of Christian society had become more ambiguous in faith

¹⁸ Atwell 185

¹⁹ Ombres, *Theology of Purgatory* 28

²⁰ Matsuda 10, Ombres, *Theology of Purgatory* 30

²¹ Matuda 11

²² Atwell 180ff., Ombres, *Theology of Purgatory* 31

²³ *ibid.* 184

²⁴ *ibid.* 177

practice. More variety was tolerated.²⁵ These factors would allow Gregory to develop the idea of Purgatory further, from an intuitive idea to a unified theological concept.

For Gregory, forgiveness may remove sin from the soul, but not the “residues of selfishness” that cause people to sin.²⁶ They can be removed by acts of selfishness in life, and if any remain upon death, can be removed prior to the Last Judgment by some kind of purgatorial fire. He makes use of Mt 12:32, claiming that it gives evidence of the forgiveness of sins after death. The location of such a realm was often thought to be where the sins were committed,²⁷ or in some subterranean realm, perhaps the mouth of Hell.²⁸ In any case, imagery often also included fire, and the anguish of separation from God.²⁹ Of course, Gregory placed a strong emphasis on the importance of prayers by the living, the intercession of the saints, and especially Masses for the dead.³⁰ In spite of the enthusiasm with which he grasps onto the idea of Purgatory, Gregory is careful not to open up access to this Purgatory to all sinners, reserving it to the virtuous still stained by sinful natures or guilty by ignorance.³¹

Although Bede’s contribution should be noted in strictly affirming that those in Purgatory were indeed destined for salvation,³² after Gregory, there doesn’t seem to be much theological development of Purgatory until the eleventh century.³³ However, imaginative images, and a popular spirituality of Purgatory did continue to flourish. Visions of Purgatory like the very popular story, *The Purgatory of St. Patrick* (c.1170),³⁴ with its accompanying pilgrimage in Ireland, would fuel the imagination, and the fear, of the Catholic faithful in the West. These

²⁵ *ibid.*

²⁶ Taylor 31

²⁷ *ibid.*

²⁸ Le Goff 90

²⁹ Atwell 178

³⁰ Taylor 31, Ombres, *Theology of Purgatory* 31, Le Goff 91

³¹ Ombres, *Theology of Purgatory* 31, Atwell 175

³² Taylor 33, Ombres, *Theology of Purgatory* 31

³³ Le Goff 96, Taylor 32

³⁴ Marmion 126, Le Goff 193ff.

Irish images certainly were instrumental in preventing Purgatory from deterring people from repentance, through their graphic, violent, and demonic imagery of temporal suffering and purification, and would provide the basis for later imagery, particularly that of Dante.³⁵ It is also to be noted that society was shifting from various binary to ternary systems, most notably the “those who pray, those who fight, those who work” trialectic, and through the growth of cities in later centuries, the emergence of a merchant class to complement the noble and peasant classes.³⁶ This may also be a contributing factor towards a growing acceptance of the idea of Purgatory among the masses.³⁷

During the eleventh century, the feast of All Souls day was introduced at Cluny, with the purpose of commemorating the souls of the dead.³⁸ This practice soon spread throughout Christendom, encouraging even further the concept of Purgatory. At around 1170, the word Purgatory had been used as a noun, a *place* where purification after death could occur. From this point on, Purgatory would occupy a permanent place in Catholic belief.³⁹ It is also to be noted that theological discussion seemed to pick up again leading into the 1200’s, particularly in Peter Lombard’s *Sentences* and subsequent commentaries on it; these written by theologians like Alexander of Hales, Bonaventure, Albert the Great, and most notably, Thomas Aquinas.⁴⁰

³⁵ Le Goff 193

³⁶ Le Goff 225ff.

³⁷ Edwards argues with Le Goff’s idea of linking societal change to eschatology, calling it a “considerable leap of faith.” (639)

³⁸ Le Goff 124f, Taylor 34

³⁹ Taylor 34. Le Goff marks this time as particularly significant in the doctrinal development, claiming that it affected a significant change in the understanding of Purgatory, and marks this time as the “Birth” of Purgatory (135). Edwards on the other hand, argues with Le Goff’s view as an exaggeration and speculation, seeing Purgatory as more the product of doctrinal and social evolution (638).

⁴⁰ Matsuda 17, Le Goff 240f.

Thomas Aquinas, and the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries

Although he saw Purgatory purely in terms of how it fit into the larger picture of sin, redemption and grace, and tended to focus more on final than transitory states of existence (heaven and hell),⁴¹ Thomas Aquinas had a much more systematic approach toward the doctrine of Purgatory than did his theological predecessors. For him, Purgatory was a matter of doctrinal fact, and to deny its existence was to contradict the principle of divine justice.⁴² He saw it as a necessary step towards restoring “an order of relationship between God and man [sic]”⁴³ that had been disrupted by sin. For Aquinas there must be a Purgatory, as it was clear that those who died in a state of grace could not behold the beautiful vision without being totally purified of sin first.⁴⁴

His theology of Purgatory is situated within his doctrine of sin, and the return to God, visual descriptions and locations being of lesser importance to him. According to Le Goff:

What interests Thomas throughout is the sin, the condition of the soul, and not the contingencies of a transitory place of which he is content merely to affirm the existence since it is within the faith and the authority of the Church and in conformity with the rational demonstration of the relations between God and man [sic].⁴⁵

Purgatory thus fits tightly within the already firmly established differentiation between mortal and venial sins. Those who were in a state of mortal sin, and thus without charity, were obviously confined to hell, but those in a state of venial sin remained in a state of grace, and were therefore capable of experiencing the purgatorial cleansing.⁴⁶

⁴¹ Marmion 128

⁴² Ombres, “The Doctrine of Purgatory According to Thomas Aquinas” 279

⁴³ *ibid.* 280

⁴⁴ *ibid.*

⁴⁵ Le Goff 278

⁴⁶ Ombres, “The Doctrine of Purgatory According to Thomas Aquinas” 281

His view also fits well into the prevalent understanding of sin and penance. From the Patristic age there had been a shift from giving absolution after satisfaction for sin through penance to giving it before penance.⁴⁷ This shift, evident in the development of the sacrament of penance, also helped support the notion of Purgatory, which situated punishment after forgiveness and grace. Penance after absolution made it possible for one to develop the proper disposition for repentance that may have been lacking prior to absolution. Thus the efficacy of the sacrament could be maintained despite interior disposition. If one did not make sufficient satisfaction for sins committed in life to create this proper disposition of repentance, satisfaction would be made in Purgatory instead.⁴⁸

Thomas also goes to great lengths to explain the nature of this purgative experience: for him, those in Purgatory are destined for heaven, and are aware that they are so, otherwise they would not request prayers and suffrages, as they had been known to ask from the living in various dreams and visions. To purge is to move towards God.⁴⁹ He also describes the pain of purgatory as twofold, consisting both of punitive fire, and of delay in attaining the beautiful vision.⁵⁰ This pain he describes as worse than any pain suffered on earth, but eased by the assurance of salvation: one day beholding God in his glory.

As for the amount of time spent in Purgatory, it is likely that a soul will be delivered from Purgatory prior to the Last Judgment, the amount of time determined by the number and kind of sins committed in life by the sinner being purged and that person's disposition, of course with the possibility of that time being shortened through prayers, suffrages, and most effectively, Masses offered for the dead.⁵¹ Thomas himself, possibly foreseeing the excesses that would

⁴⁷ *ibid. Theology of Purgatory* 33

⁴⁸ Matsuda 16

⁴⁹ Ombres, "The Doctrine of Purgatory According to Thomas Aquinas" 281

⁵⁰ *ibid.* 282

⁵¹ Le Goff 292

follow in the form of indulgences, sought to avoid rigid calculation of the amount of time one spent in Purgatory.⁵²

It must be noted that Thomas' focus on Purgatory is more in terms of its being an instrument of divine mercy than divine justice.⁵³ He distances Purgatory from Hell, removes the activity of demons from the experience, and views Purgatory purely as a means of restoring humans to God.⁵⁴ Defining Purgatory in terms of hope and love may be Thomas' greatest contributions to the doctrine.⁵⁵ This view marks a shift to a more optimistic view of Purgatory that can be seen in some later mystical writers, like St. Catherine of Genoa (1447-1510), who would described Purgatory as consisting of the "fiery love of God".⁵⁶

As Thomas provided the systematic justification for Purgatory for the scholastic world, Dante (1319) provided the visual description for the masses. In his *Divine Comedy*, specifically in the *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*, Dante synthesizes prior visual concepts of Purgatory.⁵⁷ For Dante, Purgatory is a mountain that must be climbed; it has seven cornices, corresponding to the seven deadly sins, each cornice with its own individual purgations. These purgations involves punishment that "mortifies the wicked passions and instills virtue", meditation on ones sinful nature, and prayer.⁵⁸ Dante described these punishments as graphic and horrible tortures, and of course also includes the image of fire. The purpose of this suffering is to restore the love that sin has removed.⁵⁹ At the base of the mountain is an ante-chamber, where souls must wait before they can begin their climb. At the summit of the mountain awaits the earthly paradise, which leads one into the heavenly paradise (heaven). It is to be noted that Dante parts with doctrine in

⁵² *ibid.*

⁵³ Ombres. "The Doctrine of Purgatory According to Thomas Aquinas" 282

⁵⁴ Ombres. *Theology of Purgatory* 40

⁵⁵ Matsuda 18

⁵⁶ Ombres, *Theology of Purgatory* 42

⁵⁷ Le Goff 334

⁵⁸ *ibid.* 339, Taylor 36, Fox 272

⁵⁹ Taylor 36, Fox 273f.

that he does not reserve Purgatory to those guilty of venial sins only, for clearly the seven deadly sins are all mortal sins. For him, it is a matter of degree, intent and repentance in life that causes one to end up in Purgatory rather than Hell.⁶⁰

Dante's descriptions would further encourage the doctrine of Purgatory to take hold within popular belief. His and other literature describing Purgatory would lead to pictures and images, vivid in their depiction of the tortuous fires of Purgatory, that would take hold within the hearts and minds of the masses.⁶¹ These images would prevail within popular Catholic belief for centuries to come.

Consequences of this more thoroughly defined doctrine cropped up fairly quickly. One can even find some indirect references to Purgatory in wills, in which the deceased bequeathed sums of money to the Church so that masses could be offered for their souls on the anniversaries of their deaths.⁶² Guilds and confraternities also developed; these were associations concerned with funerals and suffrages for the dead, who often linked themselves to new mendicant religious orders.⁶³ In England, where images of Purgatory remained relatively negative, Chantry chapels were also founded, whose primary function was to pray for the relief of the souls in Purgatory, particularly those souls who were wealthy enough to afford to endow them.⁶⁴

As mentioned earlier, precise calculations of the amount of time one was to spend in Purgatory developed very quickly. Subsequently, these calculations were connected to a system of indulgences, which predicted exact amounts of time that could be taken off one's Purgatorial sentence. Often these predictions erroneously identified the amount of time specified by the

⁶⁰ Le Goff 341

⁶¹ Le Goff 356

⁶² *ibid.* 326

⁶³ *ibid.* 327, Ombres, *Theology of Purgatory* 39

⁶⁴ Kreider 40ff.

indulgence with the amount of time remitted from Purgatory.⁶⁵ Not surprisingly, this practice soon led to various abuses in the selling of indulgences for profit,⁶⁶ a factor which would play a significant role in the Protestant Reformation. One of the most famous lines referring to Purgatory, which incidentally was condemned both by Luther in his *95 Theses* (1517), and the Church (1482 by the Sorbonne), referred to how “souls leapt out of the flames of Purgatory as the florins rattled in his coffer.”⁶⁷

Lyons II, Ferrera-Florence, and Trent

Purgatory was ultimately fixed in Catholic doctrine in the councils of Lyons II (1274) and Ferrera-Florence (1439), where it was affirmed against the Greeks, and Trent (1562), where it was affirmed against the Reformation. It should be noted that these councils focused primarily on doctrinal elements, leaving Purgatory’s imaginative content to others.⁶⁸

Purgatory had not caught on in the East as it had in the West, despite early conjecturing of a purgatorial state by Origen. In addition to this divergence from the West, many other cultural and doctrinal differences had developed, exastorbated by growing political strife. Prayers for the dead had been a longstanding tradition in the East, however most understood this practice as praying for those who await the Last Judgment, rather than existing in Purgatory.⁶⁹ Leading up to Lyons, the issue of Purgatory was one of the points of doctrinal division between East and West, and became the subject of a great deal of polemic. Examples of such rhetoric can be seen in the writings of figures like Bardanes, metropolitan of Corfu, the Dominican Master Humbert of Romans, and a document called *Tractatus contra errors Graecorum*, written by an

⁶⁵ Knowles 241

⁶⁶ Le Goff 292, Deansley 113

⁶⁷ Ombres, *Theology of Purgatory* 46f.

⁶⁸ Le Goff 357

⁶⁹ Ombres, *Theology of Purgatory* 44, Marmion 125

anonymous Dominican; all these tended to use questionable logic and even inflammatory language in their argumentation.⁷⁰

In an attempt to reconcile on points of doctrine and politics, the second council of Lyons and the Council of Ferrera-Florence were convened. These reunion councils were intended to bring reconciliation in doctrinal areas like the *filioque*, Papal authority, azymes, the blessedness of the saints, and Purgatory.⁷¹ Purgatory was debated in some detail during these councils, particularly Florence. Ware believes this debate was based largely on a difference in methodology: whereas the Latins wanted to analyze and define in their theological thought, following along the lines of Thomas Aquinas, the Greeks preferred referring to the authority of the early church fathers, who did not make direct reference to Purgatory.⁷² Of course, the Latins also came to these councils armed with a tradition on Purgatory, which included not only systematic theological justification, but also, as Ombres notes:

Latin piety shaped by works of art, liturgies, sermons, the gaining of indulgences, guilds and confraternities, directed toward the plight of those in purgatory. Even in terms of secular poetry they had the massive achievement of Dante's *Commedia* [that is by the time of Ferrera-Florence].⁷³

All these factors make up the tradition of Purgatory that the Latins would have been so familiar with, a tradition that was of course absent in the East. Thus, in reaction to the Latin stance, the Greeks tended to fear the doctrine, believing it could encourage moral laxity, that it tended towards superstition or the Origenist heresy⁷⁴, and catered to Latin greed.⁷⁵ They also preferred

⁷⁰ *ibid.* "Latins and Greeks in Debate over Purgatory, 1230-1439" 2ff.

⁷¹ Ware 205

⁷² *ibid.* 206

⁷³ Ombres, "Latins and Greeks in Debate over Purgatory" 7

⁷⁴ Origen's heresy was to say that there was no sinner so wicked that he could not obtain forgiveness and paradise. Le Goff 55

⁷⁵ *ibid.* 8

to see prayers for the dead as being for *all* the departed, as Mark of Ephesus would write, and did not see this practice as evidence of Purgatory, as did the West.⁷⁶

Some Greeks were swayed for both doctrinal and political reasons to consider the Latin position, but there was little unanimity among them. Lyons II, affirmed by Eastern Emperor Michael VII Palaeogus, made reference to a state in which purgation took place for those who died in a state of grace but not totally free of sin. Ombres notes that this council makes no reference to Purgatory being a place, or to its containing fire.⁷⁷ Regardless, this was the first time Purgatory was defined in Western Church dogma.⁷⁸

The reconciliation of Lyons II was short lived, and led into the council of Ferrera-Florence. Motivated by frustration in the lack of consensus on the issue of Purgatory, Orthodox officials sought to leave out references to Purgatory in their debates, but the Latins would not accept this, and at Ferrera-Florence Greeks reluctantly subscribed to formulas that had been adopted by Latins at Lyons. This agreement was not effective towards bringing reconciliation however: Mark of Ephesus had refused to sign, making him a hero for the cause of Orthodox independence from Rome, and a Saint in his Church.⁷⁹ Thus ended any hope for reconciliation between the two churches on the doctrine of Purgatory.

Of course, in reaction to the Protestant Reformation, the council of Trent finally cemented Purgatory into Catholic Doctrine once and for all. Finding no biblical reference to Purgatory, and reacting strongly against the sale of indulgences as “superstitious”, the Reformers had rejected the doctrine of Purgatory completely.⁸⁰ However, firmly established in Catholic

⁷⁶ *ibid* 11

⁷⁷ Ombres, *Theology of Purgatory* 44

⁷⁸ Taylor 34

⁷⁹ Ombres, “Latins and Greeks in Debate over Purgatory” 14

⁸⁰ Taylor 35

tradition, Purgatory would go on to flourish among Catholics, in doctrine and popular spirituality, most prominently in the fifteenth through nineteenth centuries.⁸¹

Conclusion

The development of Purgatory has been a slow one, taking many centuries, influenced by many different figures and social phenomena. While some individuals and events are more prominent than others in its formation, no single event or person can be considered decisive in giving “birth” to the doctrine of Purgatory. In tracing its historical development, I have found two currents running parallel to each other: the theological development, influenced by great figures like Augustine, Gregory, and Thomas, and popular belief, influenced by visual imagery and spirituality, most notably given to us by Dante. As I followed their development, I found that one current could not be separated from another. Rather the two existed in continual dynamic tension, spurring each other on to move forward, and at times providing corrective influences for each other. In any event, it is interesting to note the influence that the development of doctrine and of popular belief can have on each other, by noting this dynamic in the development of Purgatory.

While it seems at times that Purgatory has fallen out of favor in this era, rarely finding its way into homilies, theological debate, or popular mysticism, one can not deny the influence that Purgatory has had, both in evolving our notions of sin and penance, our celebration of the Eucharist in commemoration for the dead, our eschatological models, and perhaps most notable, the relationship between the Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant Churches. This influence continues to be felt, and as the doctrine continues to evolve, will very likely continue to spur on discussion and debate for years to come.

⁸¹ Le Goff 357

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