THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE EARLY CHRISTIAN AFTERLIFE

From the Passion of Perpetua to purgatory

The resurrection was undoubtedly the most spectacular aspect of the Christian ideas about the 'life everlasting', but what about the other aspects? Although the New Testament offers only a few clues to the views of Jesus and his earliest followers about the afterlife, later Christians had much more to say, and their views have often been studied. Unfortunately, these analyses are rarely satisfactory from a historical perspective, since the leading surveys and dictionaries usually provide the reader with enumeration of these views rather than with analysis offering explanation by attempting to trace historical connections. Therefore, I would like to try to answer three questions which, as far as I can see, have been rarely posed in combination. First, how did the views on afterlife develop among the early Christians in the first centuries of its existence? Secondly, from where did the early Christians derive their ideas: from Judaism, from the surrounding Greco-Roman society, or from their own community? Thirdly, is it possible to identify contributing factors to this rapid development of the idea of an afterlife?

Naturally, in the scope of one chapter we cannot survey the whole development of Christian thought on the afterlife or answer in detail all three questions. So I will focus on the Passion of Perpetua, a report of a martyrdom from about 200 AD, which contains several visions of heaven and, perhaps, hell. This choice has the advantage that it enables us to look at the beliefs of a specific community at a specific time and specific place. Taking these beliefs as our point of departure we can compare them with other early Christian views (section 2). For a second topic I have chosen the 'birth' of purgatory in the twelfth century. Not only was purgatory the last great official addition to traditional Christian afterlife, but its acceptance is also an interesting illustration of the speed with which a religion, if necessary, can adapt its views of the afterlife (section 3). Before we come to the Passion, though, we will first take a short look at the New Testament.

1. The New Testament

The earliest references in the New Testament to the afterlife are found in the writings of Paul, although he speaks about a fate after death in not very
explicit terms. But both in his *Letter to the Philippians* (1.22–3) and in *2 Corinthians* (5.1–10) he seems to suggest that he will be with Christ immediately after his death. Among the evangelists, Luke is the only one to relate the parable of the rich man, who after death stays 'in Hades', and poor Lazarus, who 'was carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom' (16.19–31). He is also the only one to mention Jesus' words to the robber on the cross: 'Truly I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise' (23.43). Luke's history of the earliest Christian church from the birth of Jesus to Paul's enforced stay in Rome, which at an early date was divided into his Gospel and the *Arts of the Apostles*, probably dates from the end of the first century. His interest in these words of Jesus may already reflect contemporary Christian concern about what happened after death. In the equally late *1 Peter* it is said that Christ 'preached to the spirits in prison' (3.19), which expression is probably derived from a description in pre-Christian *I Enoch* (10.11–15) and which was taken by some early Christian authors as a concern for those who had died before Christ. The most detailed description in the later books of the New Testament is found in *Revelation*, where the author speaks of the 'souls of those slain because of the word of God and the witness they had borne' under a heavenly altar (6.9) and of a first resurrection, a reign of thousand years (20.4–6), and a second, definitive resurrection when the Last Judgement will come, when 'who was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire' (20.15). The New Testament, then, has very little to say about the existence of heaven, hell or purgatory, but concentrates its attention wholly on the resurrection and the Last Judgement.

2. The Passion of *Perpetua*

Nearly a century later the situation had completely changed. This becomes very much apparent from the so-called *Arta martyrum*, reports about the deaths of martyrs from the middle of the second century onwards, which Christians started to preserve and communicate in order to encourage the faithful to endure persecutions. Their documentation of legal hearings often contains authentic material, although their adaptations to varying aims also contain much that is fictional. Moreover, the *Acta* have the great advantage over the more apologetic works of the same period in that they allow us to observe both male and female Christians of all ranks and ages, and from all corners of the Roman Empire. They are thus valuable witnesses to the ways the Christian faith was lived rather than conceived.

One of these texts deserves our attention in particular. The aforementioned *Passion of Perpetua* is the fascinating report of the final days of a North African young woman who was executed on 7 March 203. She was only twenty years old, 'of high birth, educated in a manner befitting her status and formally and properly married' (2.1, tr. Shaw). Her education and high status explain why she was able and allowed to keep a diary in prison which, after her death, was
In her diary Perpetua recorded two visions, one of her own and the other of her spiritual advisor's, both of which tell us something about the ways in which heaven was imagined by early Christians. Admittedly, Perpetua's own vision clearly reflects her worries about her forthcoming death, but this circumstance does not seem to have affected her picture of the afterlife. The high respect in which her Passion was held in North Africa shows that these visions must have been widely acceptable as valuable representations of the life to come. In fact, it may not be chance that they derive precisely from North Africa, since funerary inscriptions from that area were more directed to the life hereafter than those in Rome and Italy, just as in Africa there was more attention to the cult of the dead, even in Christian circles, than in Italy.

Perpetua herself dreamt that she climbed a long ladder up to heaven, where she saw 'an immensely large garden, and in it a white-haired man sat in shepherd's garb, tall and milking sheep, and many thousands of people dressed in white garments stood around him.' He raised his head, looked at me and said: "It is good that you have come, my child" (4.5-9). Perpetua also recorded a vision experienced by her spiritual advisor, Saturus, who related how, after his death, he was carried by four angels beyond the present world to an intense light, where he arrived in 'a great open space, which looked like a park, with roses as high as trees and all kinds of flowers. The trees were as high as cypresses and their leaves were constantly singing (11.5-6). Then we came near a place whose walls seemed to be constructed of light. And in front of the gate stood four angels, who dressed those who entered in white garments. We also entered and heard the sound of voices in unison chanting endlessly: "Holy, holy, holy" (12.1-2). Among those present Saturus 'recognized many of our brethren, martyrs among them. All of us were sustained by an indescribable fragrance that satisfied us' (13.8).

These visions raise a number of questions. To begin with, when did these martyrs expect to go to heaven? Saturus' vision shows that he evidently expected to ascend straight to heaven after his martyrdom. And indeed, this view was widely shared by his fellow martyrs. In the middle of the second century the aged bishop of Smyrna, Polycarp, when tied to the stake, prayed: 'May I be received this day among them [the martyrs] before your face as a rich and acceptable sacrifice' (Mart. Polyc. 14.2). In 180 one of the martyrs from the small North African town of Scillium, Nartzalus, said to his judge, the proconsul Saturninus: 'Today we are martyrs in heaven. Thanks be to God' (Passio Scill. 15). An even more striking illustration of this belief is found in the Passio Fructuosi (5). When in 259 AD together with two companions the Spanish bishop Fructuosus was executed by burning, some Christians saw them rising up to heaven, still tied to their stakes! However, it was not only the martyrs who went straight to heaven. According to the Shepherd of the Roman Hermas, normally dated around 140 AD, immediate entry after death is given to all Christians, although the martyrs sit at the right hand of Christ
and the others at his left; variations of this view can be found among many earlier Church fathers, such as Hippolytus, Clement and Origen.  

On the other hand, both the idea of an immediate entry into heaven and the admission of all Christians did not go undisputed. Admittedly, Saturus saw 'many of our brethren, martyrs among them', but Tertullian (On the Soul 55.4) writes that 'on the day of her passion the most heroic martyr Perpetua saw in the revelation of Paradise only her fellow-martyrs'. It seems that at this point Tertullian used the name of the famous martyr deviously to canvass his own views about the admission into heaven, since the Passion of Perpetua does not contain such a passage and the vision of Saturus explicitly contradicts his words. According to Tertullian and Church Fathers such as Papias and Irenaeus, the dead were first detained in a subterranean abode pending the Resurrection and the thousand-year reign of Christ preceding the definitive Last Judgement. Others thought that, before the resurrection, they would first rest in a kind of sleep, as appears from the Christian term coemeterium, 'sleeping place', the verbal ancestor of our 'cemetery', but initially a term for a single grave.  

These alternative views eventually depended on the Jewish Apocalyptic tradition of 4 Ezra and 2 Baruch, but they became gradually marginalised as Jewish influence was replaced by that of Greco-Roman traditions. Yet the doctrine of a temporary abode had a long life in the West and disappeared definitively only during the battle of the Church against the Cathars in the fourteenth century (section 3). The vision of a thousand-year reign had an even longer life and remained immensely influential in the history of the Western World, where it became the source of many a revolutionary ideology.  

The problem of the exact time and nature of the resurrection would continue to occupy Christian theologians in the coming centuries, but the event itself is rarely mentioned in earlier Christian epitaphs, which become more numerous after the conversion of Constantine and generally focus on immediate entry into heaven. It seems that in this respect the cessation of the persecutions led to different emphases in the eschatological expectations of the faithful.  

Having taken a brief look at the 'when' and the 'who', let us now turn our attention to the 'where' and the 'what'. The latter expression suggests a certain dualism of body and soul, yet in his vision Saturus walks round in his own body. And indeed, the Acta of the early martyrs nowhere display a marked body-soul opposition, which is also absent from the earlier Christian epitaphs. It is only in the later, often inauthentic, reports and epitaphs that we find such a clear contrast, which was first introduced by Justin and Tatian, Christian intellectuals who were heavily influenced by Greek philosophy. They used the Greek concept of the immortal soul in order to bolster their arguments for the resurrection, albeit with a number of modifications, such as different fates for sinners and the saved.
The development of early Christian afterlife

Several Christian intellectuals, such as Origen, even espoused the Orphic view of the body as the prison of the soul, which also occurs in some late Christian poetic epitaphs, but he was an exception, as he often was in his views on the hereafter. The Orphic idea clearly went against the early Christian expectation of the resurrection of the body. The same expectation also prevented the acceptance of the doctrine of reincarnation, which never acquired many adherents, although Origen and his later follower Evagrius were prepared to consider the possibility. Considering their negative views on the resurrection (Ch. 4.4), it is hardly surprising that reincarnation was acceptable to the Gnostics even though they limited its numbers.

In his Ecclesiastical History (6.37), Eusebius records that Arabs still believe that the soul dies with the body, but will be revived with the resurrection. In 1941 this notice was confirmed when a report was discovered in Egypt of a debate between Heraclides, a local bishop, and Origen, who apparently was reputed to be a kind of ‘specialist’ on the hereafter, at a provincial conference, probably sometime between 244 and 248 AD. It strongly appears that in their outlying area Arabs had preserved a belief which may well have been shared by the earliest Jewish Christians before the Platonic opposition gradually gained the upper hand.

What did heaven look like? As we saw, before actually entering heaven Saturus already saw an intense light. The Orphics had also stressed the light in the underworld, and more or less contemporary pagan funerary poetry spoke of the purpureus perpetuusquedies, a picture probably derived from Vergil’s:

```
largior hic campos aether et lumine vestit
purpureo, solemque suum, sua sidera norunt
```
Here an ampler air clothes the plains with brilliant light,
And always they see a sun and stars which are theirs alone"

But whereas in pagan epitaphs light plays on the whole a very limited role as a dominant characteristic of the hereafter, literally dozens of Christian funerary epitaphs speak of heaven as a lux vera, a lux perpetua, an expression which has even been incorporated into the Christian liturgy. The characterisation of heaven as a place full of light probably derives from the New Testament, where Revelation states that in the new Jerusalem ‘there shall be no night there; and they need no candle, neither light of the sun; for the Lord God giveth them light’ (22.5). If anything, light was the striking characteristic of heaven for the Christian faithful.

Having passed the light, Saturus arrived in a kind of park and Perpetua in a garden. This garden-like picture of the hereafter already appears in the Apocalypse of Peter (ca. AD 135), where God ‘showed us a great open garden. [It was] full of fair trees and blessed fruits, full of fragrance of perfume. Its fragrance was beautiful and that fragrance reached to us. And of it . . . I saw many fruits.’ A comparable picture appears in other North African authors
and seems to have already been the ruling image at the time." It probably reached its finest expression in a hymn (9) of Ephraem the Syrian (ca. 306–73 AD), in whose Paradise the souls of the blessed are even depicted as living in trees which offer shelter, fruit and perfume – the round of the seasons having disappeared." The idea was extremely popular in the Christian epitaphs, which frequently referred to the flowers in heaven but also mentioned grass, fragrant herbs, lush meadows and brooks." In an epitaph from 382 AD a husband even described his young deceased wife as being in an eternal spring-like landscape. The reference to spring as the favourite time of the year may be also present in Saturus’ mention of roses, the spring-flower par excellence in antiquity.41

Similar descriptions were not absent from pagan funerary poetry, but the Christians greatly elaborated upon the motif, which they derived from literary descriptions of the locus amoenus, a traditional topos in Latin poetry.42 A pagan origin of the motif is the more probable, since the garden is virtually absent in New Testament eschatology, although it is important in Jewish eschatology, as the projection in the Endzeit of the Urzeit Garden of Eden:" As was the case with the presence of light, we notice here that the other-worldly tendency of the Christians had led them to intensify the beauty of heaven in comparison with pagan descriptions of the undervorld.

In addition to the garden-like appearance of heaven, we are struck by the stress on the presence of many others in heaven: Perpetua sees 'many thousands of people' and Saturus 'many of our brethren'. This multitude of people fits in with the description of heaven as a large place. The idea frequently recurs in the early Christian epitaphs where the dead are being said to have joined the beati, insti, electi and sancti, whereas the pagan deceased of that period wander rather lonely in the Elysian Fields." Although in pagan epitaphs the dead are sometimes represented as coming together in festal processions, we never find in them the overwhelming sense of community, which is already heavily stressed in the New Testament, where the apostle Paul calls the addressees of his letters 'saints' or 'holy ones', where the faithful are each other's 'brothers' and 'sisters', and where the members of the Church together constitute the 'body of Christ'. This feeling of closely belonging together, which must have sustained the early Christians in a hostile world, is here transferred to the hereafter: the Christian community on earth is continued in heaven." The visions also tell us something about the activities of the blessed in heaven. Saturus heard people singing in unison 'Holy, holy, holy'.46 The words are a straight quotation from one of the visions of Revelation (4.8) where the beasts round the throne of God 'rest not day and night, saying, Holy, holy, holy. Lord God Almighty, which was, and is, and is to come'," although eventually they derive from a vision in Isaiah (6.3); the Greek form of the words may well point to its use in contemporary liturgy.48 Praising a divinity became typical in the Hellenistic period, when in hymns and aretologies
worshippers eulogised their god, be it Isis, Dionysos or Zeus, as in the famous hymn of Cleanthes. However, such praise is virtually absent from pagan funerary poems and rather infrequent in early Christian thought. One may even wonder whether it is not typical of North Africa, since in Christianity this praise of God is raised to the foremost activity of the blessed by Augustine, who states, 'we will see God as he is, and when we see him we shall praise him. And this will be the life of the saints, the activity of those at rest: we shall praise without ceasing' (Sermon 362.30–31) and 'All our activity will be "Amen" and "Alleluiah"' (Sermon 362.28–9), once again liturgical terms.

Others were much more reticent. In fact, the very detailed index of Daley's recent handbook of patristic eschatology, The Hope of the Early Church (n. 1), clearly shows that most reports about the activities of the blessed occur in later authors, not in those of the first three centuries. Apparently, 'to be with Christ' was enough for those who believed in the immediate ascension into heaven, whereas the millenarians, naturally, did not give much thought to the interim period at all.

It was not the case, however, that the worshippers had to give everything and received nothing. When Perpetua entered heaven, Christ said to her: 'It is good that you have come, my child'. The affectionate tone fits in with the special relationship with God that we already find in the New Testament, where the language expressing the relationship between God and the faithful complements the close bond between the faithful themselves. God is 'the Father' and the Christians are his 'children'. He 'loves' them and they 'love' him. Many of us have heard these words so often that we have become deaf to their originality in these first Christian centuries, but Aristotle could still say: 'it would be absurd if someone were to say that he loves Zeus' (MM. 1208 b 30).

In this respect the early Christians probably developed ideas which were already current in contemporary Judaism, since one of the thanksgiving hymns of Qumran says:

> For my mother did not know me,  
> and my father abandoned me to you.  
> Because you are father to all the [son]s of your truth.  
> You rejoice in them,  
> like her who loves her child,  
> and like a wet-nurse,  
> you take care of all your creatures on (your) lap.

(1QH* XVII.35–6)

Besides this striking example, there was in Greco-Roman antiquity no cult in which the special relationship between god and worshipper was marked as intensely as in Christianity. There are many passages in the martyrs' Acts which show that the early Christians had a close bond with their Saviour. It may suffice here to quote two more passages from Perpetua's Passion. Her
brother could suggest to Perpetua that she should ask for a vision because she held 'intimate conversations with the Lord' (4.2: *fabularicum Domino*) and she walked into the arena as 'a *matrona* of Christ' (18.2). As we saw with the 'communion of saints', once again the situation in the hereafter reflected the situation on earth."

Now the more merciless among you may be getting impatient and wonder: 'what about hell?' The nearest we come to it in Perpetua's vision is in a passage about her deceased brother Dinocrates, whom she suddenly remembered in prison. Having began to pray she saw him 'appearing from a dark place (along with many others), very hot and thirsty, repugnant to see, with a pale colour, and with the facial cancer visible as when he died' (7.4). After more prayers she saw him again in a vision a few days later, 'clean, well-dressed, healed (*refrigerantem*), a scar where his wound had been' (8.1), but still in the very place where she had seen him first. It has been argued that the place where Dinocrates was staying was hell or, as others have argued, purgatory (section 3), but the identity of the place before and after Dinocrates' healing hardly makes an interpretation as hell very likely. The few details Perpetua supplies about the place — it was dark, hot and crowded — strongly suggests that its image was inspired by her own prison, which she also described as dark, hot and filled with people (3.5-6).52 Evidently, Dinocrates was not in heaven, but it is impossible to say on the basis of Perpetua's diary what she herself thought about the place where she saw her brother.

The absence of hell from Perpetua's visions does not mean that hell was unknown.51 On the contrary. At the moment of their death the thought of hell could weigh heavily on the minds of martyrs. In the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* the following altercation took place between Polycarp and the Roman governor, who said to the martyr: "'Since you are not afraid of the animals, then I shall have you consumed by fire — unless you change your mind." But Polycarp answered: "The fire you threaten me with burns merely for a time and is soon extinguished. It is clear you are ignorant of the fire of everlasting punishment and of the judgment that is to come, which awaits the impious. Why then do you hesitate? Come, do what you will.'" In a letter that the churches of Lyons and Vienne in Gaul wrote to those in Asia and Phrygia in order to inform them about their sufferings during the persecution in 177 it is mentioned that a woman, called Biblis, *who* had denied Christ, 'once on the rack she came to her senses and awoke as it were from a deep sleep, reminded by that temporal torment of the eternal punishment in Gehenna (Ch. 1.3)'. And in Thessalonica in 304, one of a group of girls, when asked to eat the sacrificial meat and to sacrifice to *the* gods, said: 'No, I am not prepared to do it for the sake of the almighty God, who has created heaven and earth and the seas and all that is in it. Great is the penalty of eternal torment for those who transgress the word of God.'54

Like the resurrection (Ch. 4.2), the roots of hell go back at least to *J* Enoc (*18.14–16*).55 In Christian literature the already mentioned *Apocalypse of Peter*
THE DEVELOPMENT OF EARLY CHRISTIAN AFTERLIFE

(Ex. 7–11 of the Ethiopic translation) is the first to describe in great detail the suffering of fornicating men and women, murderers, those who have procured abortions, slanderers, frauds, usurers, worshippers of idols, girls who had not preserved their virginity before marriage. In short, all those who did not follow the early Christian ideals had to ceaselessly chew their tongues and were tormented by fire – to mention only the less horrible tortures. Comparable descriptions are found in the Apocalypse of Paul, which probably originated in the third or fourth century, with the interesting difference that it directs much of its attention to the sufferings of those members of the clergy who had not performed their duties in a righteous manner. Both Apocalypses were closely inspired by Jewish traditions.

Gehenna as the valley of fiery hell had been taken over by the New Testament and the early Christians from their Jewish tradition (Ch. 1.3), but its torments were rarely gloated over. In fact, the representation of hell could be rather subdued: according to Perpetua’s contemporary, Tertullian (On the Soul 55.1), it was a waste space in the interior of the earth. Hell remained harrowing, but Christian literature of the first three centuries contains very few references to hell as a specific place; "the Last Judgement did not figure in early Christian epitaphs, and early Christian art did not produce an iconography of hell or the Last Judgement." Evidently, hell became theologically interesting only after the mass conversions caused by the Christian take-over of the Roman empire, whereas early Christian eschatological expectations were overwhelmingly directed towards the promise of salvation, not damnation.

3. The roots and consolidation of purgatory

Unlike hell, purgatory as the place where the souls are purified before definitively entering heaven is not mentioned in our texts. Where and why, then, did the idea originate and why was it eventually officially accepted by the Church? Purgatory has of course long received the attention of scholars, but all previous studies have been surpassed by the imaginative analysis of the French historian Jacques Le Goff, who has studied the development of purgatory from the earliest Judaic-Christian times until its triumph, which reached its apogee in Dante’s Divine Commedia. The book has been widely discussed by medievalists, but their critiques have almost exclusively focused on his location of the 'birth of purgatory' in the second half of the twelfth century and the reasons adduced for this development. As they have tended to neglect his picture of the roots of purgatory, we shall first discuss that part of his book before coming to its main thesis.

In his search for the typical characteristics of purgatory, such as a specific place, intercession and purification, Le Goff rightly did not look for Jewish antecedents, since Jewish ideas do not seem to have been of any influence on Christian eschatological speculation in this particular point, even though some ideas about an intermediate state could already be found in the Jewish
writings of the period between the destruction of the Temple in 70 and the revolt of Bar Kocliya (1.32–135). Instead he starts the prehistory of purgatory with Tertullian and the Passion of Perpetua but explicitly leaves out Gnosticism, which lie seems to consider as a different religion.\footnote{This position is rather unfortunate, since some Gnostics, such as the authors of the Apocryphon of John (27.4–11) and the Pistor Sophia (144–7), speak of a process of purification, the latter even of purification by fire.} Moreover, such a position misjudges the fact that early orthodox Christian eschatology was partially developed in discussion with the Gnostics. In fact, Irenaeus only began to espouse the doctrine of the subterranean abode for the Christian dead (section 2) in order to bar the Gnostic dead from immediate entry into heaven.\footnote{And it is this temporary abode for the blessed which Tertullian calls the refrigerium interim in his treatise Against Marcion (4.34), although the term does not point to a circumscribed space, as has often been suggested,\footnote{but to the refreshing nature of the stay of the blessed in their subterranean abode.} Moreover, this temporary abode is not a kind of purgatory either. The souls are not purified, but those which are less than perfect have to wait a bit longer for their first resurrection and it is not at all clear that Tertullian expected them to suffer retributive pains in the meantime.} Le Goff, then, did not notice that Tertullian’s view was just one in a whole series of early Christian theologians who denied that the blessed entered heaven immediately after their death.

In his search for a specific place Le Goff understandably looked at the ‘dark place’ of Perpetua’s brother Dinocrates (section 2). However, considering the identity of the place where Dinocrates stays before and after his healing, it is not very likely that we find here a prefiguration of purgatory for exactly the same reason as it is not an image of hell. Moreover, the Christians strongly combated the Greco-Roman view that prematurely deceased children—and Perpetua’s brother was only seven years old at the time of his death (7.5)—went to a different place, as we will see in Chapter 6. Finally, contrary to what Le Goff suggests, the fact that Perpetua calls her brother refrigerantium after his healing, does not point to Tertullian’s refrigerium interim, since the verb normally indicates physical well-being in the Passion.\footnote{The brother was healed through Perpetua’s intercession, and Le Goff notes only one more parallel for such an early intercession: the prayer of Thecla in the Acts of Paul (29) for the daughter of Queen Tryphaena. In fact, Perpetua may well have read the Acts of Paul, as we know that the apocryphal Acts of the Apostles were popular among Carthaginian women.} In both cases, it was the prayer of a future martyr which was deemed important and effective. This interpretation is confirmed by an interesting passage in Tertullian’s De pudicitia (22.1–5), which has been overlooked by Le Goff. In this treatise, which dates to his Montanist period, we find a whole harangue against those people who beseech martyrs to forgive them their sins. The attention paid to the subject clearly demonstrates the supposed power of martyrs.\footnote{The idea of intercession itself probably stems from the Jewish background of Christianity, since in}
both Jewish and early Christian apocalypses exemplary figures, like Ezra or Paul, intercede on behalf of the damned."

One of the effects of the persecutions was the replacement of these exemplary figures by the martyrs. The idea is already found in Origen, although in his work its Jewish origin is still visible," but the elevated status of the martyrs becomes manifest in the funerary practices of the early Christians, who en masse wanted to be buried next to, or sometimes even in, their graves. A fine example occurs in the Acts of Maximilian, the report of the execution of a young African martyr on 12 March 295. After his martyrdom, a Roman lady, Pomponia, took the body of Maximilian, transported it in her own chariot and buried it next to that of the Church Father Cyprian, who had been executed for his faith in AD 257; she was buried there as well when she died only thirteen days later: clearly, this lady left nothing to chance. But what did she and her fellow Christians expect from the martyrs? The funerary inscriptions leave little doubt in this respect: the martyrs were supposed to 'defend' or to 'intercede' with Christ on behalf of 'their' dead at the moment of the Last Judgement, but they could not effect a transfer before that day, as would become possible in the heyday of the official doctrine of purgatory."

In these early examples, then, we do not find a purgatory avant la lettre or a purification of the souls but only the possibility of intercession. Purification of souls first became a theme in the work of those Alexandrian theologians who were steeped in Greek philosophy, Clement and Origen. In his classic commentary on Aeneid VI, the German scholar Eduard Norden (1868–1941) connected the idea with Greek predecessors, such as Plutarch and Posidonius, and Le Goff points to the famous verses about purification in Aeneid VI (741–2, 745–7), but it is not at all clear that these sources influenced the earliest Church Fathers. Both Clement and Origen knew about the practice of purification from literature (Ch. 7.1) and, perhaps, real life. They hardly needed Plutarch to give them their ideas.

If, then, I cannot follow Le Goff in his search for the very beginnings of purgatory, what about his views about the actual 'birth' of purgatory? As his point of departure Le Goff took a linguistic event that had previously aroused little scholarly interest, that is, the absence of the noun purgatorium as a substantive before about 1170. Although the foundations of purgatory had been laid by Augustine, with his differentiation between a purifying fire and the fire of the Last Judgement, and by Gregory the Great, with his highly popular Dialogues, it was only this invention, so Le Goff argues, that located the purgation of souls in the subterranean space of the medieval world. Whereas people previously spoke of an ignis purgatorius and had rather vague ideas about its whereabouts, the new noun demonstrated the spatialisation of this process of purification, officially accepted by the Church during the Lateran Council in 1254. Le Goff explains this introduction of an intermediate stage between heaven and hell by a general change in medieval society at the turn of the millennium. Instead of the usual binary patterns of God and Satan,
poor and powerful, virtues and vices, clergy and laity, he suggested that ternary and even septenary patterns started to take over, such as a new division of society into three classes (clergy, nobles and peasant masses) and the appearance of the seven sacraments or seven capital sins. 

Criticisms of Le Goff's book have been rather ambivalent. The originality and the scope of the book has been warmly praised, but no serious review has accepted its main thesis. 

Rightly so. Le Goff not only overlooked the fact that purgatorium is already attested as the term for 'purge-pipes' on the Norman plan of the monastic offices of the Cathedral of Canterbury (ca. 1165 AD), but also does not demonstrate anywhere that his sociological changes necessarily led to change in understanding views of normative afterlife. In fact, the new division postulated by Le Goff is not even always three-fold, but in the case of the famous Purgatory of Saint Patrick four-fold. On the other hand, a non-specialist can only be struck by the fact that, although reviewers have pointed to the influence of scholasticism and monasticism or changes in penitential theology, none of them has managed to explain the sudden popularity of the noun purgatorium or why the idea of purgatory as a specific place was taken up by the Church so quickly.

We may therefore be excused for offering a new suggestion. Until now we have stressed several times that attention should always be given to the precise historical context of important changes, such as relating belief in reincarnation to increasing marginalisation of the aristocracy (Ch. 2.3) and in resurrection to the Seleucid persecutions (Ch. 4.2). We have also pointed to the importance of competition in explaining religious changes (Ch. 4.4). Can we apply these insights to the problem of purgatory? What was happening around 1140 AD which could have provoked the sudden rise of purgatory as a specific place?

If we define the problem in this way, our attention is irresistibly drawn to an important religious event of the time, the rise of Catharism. The precise origin of this movement, which constituted one of the more serious threats to normative Western Christendom, is still unclear. Even the origin of its name has not yet been definitively clarified. In the book that put the post-war study of Catharism on a new footing, Arno Borst has stated that the 'heretics' called themselves Cathars from the Greek word katharos, but he is evidently mistaken, since Cathars do not apply the name to themselves in any of our sources. In fact, Ekbert of Schonau, who was the first to use the name 'Cathars' (1163 AD) in his Sermones contra Catharos, relates that they call themselves Ecclesia Dei, 'Church of God'. The most recent standard study of the Cathars, on the other hand, ascribes the invention to Ekbert, but this also cannot be true, since Ekbert says of the heretics he is concerned with: 'They are those whom they generally call Cathars.' In other words, the designation already was in use among his fellow clerics and monastics; similarly, it were the Romans who gave the name 'Christians' to the followers of Jesus (Appendix 1). That is why a different explanation is preferable.
Our starting point should be the fact that the term 'Cathari' has always been known throughout the Middle Ages. Originally, it was the self-designation of the Novatianists, who took their name from the mid-third-century Roman 'anti-pope' Novatian. Novatian was probably the first Roman theologian to write in Latin and coined such fateful terms as *praedestinatio* and *incarnari*. He also advocated that Christians should remain *katharon*, 'pure'. Like the Donatists to whom they are sometimes compared, the Novatianists denied reconciliation to those Christians who had lapsed during persecutions. "" This intransigence turned them into the heretics *par excellence* in the eyes of early Councils and Church Fathers. "" In the West we can follow the knowledge and usage of the term through the centuries from Late Antiquity to Ekbert: Isidore of Seville (ca. 560–636: *Etym*. 8.5.28), Raban Maur (ca. 780–856), "" Paschasius Radbertus (ca. 790–860), "" Humbert of Silva Candida (ca. 1000–1061), "" Peter Damian (ca. 1007–1072), "" Landulf Senior (d. after 1085), "" Bernolcl of Constance (d. 1100), "" Ivo of Chartres (ca. 1040–1116), "" Gratian (d. ca. 1160), "" and Peter Lombard (ca. 1100–1160)10s – to name only a few.

In the High Middle Ages it was normal to designate new dualist movements with names of heresies familiar from Late Antiquity, such as Arianism and Manichaeism. "" It is therefore not surprising that Ekbert's contemporaries applied the name Cathari to the dualist heretics they had encountered. Ekbert himself undoubtedly associated the name with the ancient movement as mentioned in Augustine's *De haeresibus* (38), where the bishop of Hippo elucidates the movement of the Novatiani/Cathari, since he appends an excerpt of this treatise to his *Sermones*. We know that Guibert of Nogent had also used it in connection with heresy (see n. 104), just as Humbert (2.34), Gratian and Peter Lombard, directly or indirectly, did consult Augustine: all three mention the fact that the Novatiani/Cathari opposed a remarriage of widows – a detail mentioned only by Augustine. Although this aspect of the ancient Cathari, then, probably led theologians to apply the old name to the new movement, since we know that the Cathars too rejected remarriage, "" it does not explain the 'success' of the term 'Cathars'. The reason may well have been the folk etymology that connected Cathars with cats (*cat(t)lus*) and the allegation that Cathars kissed the behind of the cat, 'in whose shape, as they say, Satan appears to them', an allegation already attested for the twelfth century. "" The other names used for the dualists did not conjure up such a powerful image and may therefore not have caught on.

The reasons for the popularity of the Cathar movement are not yet fully understood, but important factors must have been the model life (at least in theory) of their 'perfects', which appealed to a population appreciative of poverty and self-sacrifice; the possibilities it gave to women were perhaps not as great as is sometimes claimed but are certainly not to be underestimated, and the storytelling of its convoluted teachings, which clearly enjoyed a great popularity among the Cathar faithful. "" These teachings need not concern us here, except for their views of the afterlife. According to the Catliars, the soul
was locked in the body as in a prison,"" a clear echo of the old Orphic teaching (Ch. 2.2) which experienced a long popularity well, into the Middle Ages.""

Through a virtuoso's life the soul could become a higher being via reincarnation."" One of the 'perfects' related that he had been a horse and found a shoe which he had cast off in his previous life."

It was only by the possession of a valid *consolamentum*, the Cathar 'sacrament' for the dying, that the faithful would go to the heaven of the good creation. Evidently, this ritual of the *consolamentum* guaranteed instant salvation without the fear of hell. Whereas the early Church had confined public penance for serious sins to once in a lifetime,"" from the time of Augustine, Christians had increasingly become concerned with salvation from sins at the moment of death.""

With their sacrament Catharism scored best at this point by offering clear hope.

At the moment that Catharism spread from the Rhinelands to Southern France we find the two oldest certain testimonies of purgatorium as a noun in a Cistercian milieu, namely in sermons by Bernard of Clairvaux (d. 1153) and of Guerric of Igny (d. before 1155), who may well have taken the term from the 'purge-pipes' (above) of their daily environment. In 1143 Bernard preached against the heretics and in 1145 even conducted a mission in the Languedoc against the Cathars. The origin of the *spatialisation* of purgatory in the circle of Clairvaux could thus perfectly fit the historical context.

Is it possible that the Church took Catharism into account when it created purgatory? The data we have do not enable us to give a firm answer to this question, but a feeling of urgency would explain the energy invested in purgatory, a concept that would soon be pushed down the throat of Eastern Christians as well. The massive force of the Church's teaching is illustrated by the fact that already around 1300 the last Cathars had to some degree appropriated the doctrine of purgatory.

4. The roots of Christian afterlife

It is clear that for a long time Christians continued to develop their views on life hereafter, but it is also clear that at the time of Perpetua the outlines of traditional Christian afterlife were already visible, even though virtually all its elements would remain objects of discussion for many centuries to come. Some of these elements came straight from the New Testament, such as heaven,"" the Christocentric quality of Christian hope, the stress on the resurrection, the fear of the Last Judgement and the fiery nature of hell. Behind the New Testament there was of course the contemporary Jewish tradition — or, better, traditions,"" since in this matter opinions varied widely, as the ancient Jewish epitaphs and the literature of the Second Temple Period show. These influences should not conceal that there were also important differences. To name only two, in Luke's story of the crucifixion it is a criminal who is invited into Paradise, which is in line with Jesus' attention to publicans, prostitutes and other sinners but impossible to parallel in
contemporary Judaism, where the place of honour is usually given to the righteous. Moreover, the early Christian tradition rarely limits the number of those eligible for a place in the lieareafter, whereas, for example, in 4 Ezra (7.47, 8.1) it is stressed that the numbers will be only few, a view also found in the Jewish-influenced (section 2) Apocalypse of Paul (20). In addition to the Jewish background, contemporary Greco-Roman views of the afterlife also made their contributions, such as the idea of heaven as a locus amoenus, the prominence of light, the soul-body opposition and the location of heaven beyond the stars. Typically Christian, on the other hand, was the presence of a multitude of blessed and the affectionate relationship between God, or Christ, and the blessed.

Yet a simple enumeration of themes does not explain why they were developed and gradually integrated into a comprehensive set of doctrines. For this development the persecutions must have been a most important factor, since they raised the question as to what would happen with the martyrs after their violent deaths. Another important factor was competition with the Gnostics, the Marcionites (if to a much lesser extent), and, perhaps, the Cathars. Discussions with these opponents forced the orthodox Christians to clarify and, if necessary, to adapt their own views or even to invent new ones. Expositions of Christian eschatology should never forget that even its most cherished hopes were not made in heaven but only gradually found on earth.