

*The End of the Ancient Other World:  
Death and Afterlife between Late Antiquity  
and the Early Middle Ages*

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LECTURE I. *GLORIOSUS OBITUS*: DEATH AND  
AFTERLIFE 400–700 A.D.

In a small book on *The Byzantine Empire*, written in 1925, Norman Baynes placed at the head of one chapter a quotation from Benjamin Franklin: “Nothing in life is certain but death and taxes.”<sup>1</sup> More than any other scholar, it was Baynes who made Byzantium exciting for us, and, with Byzantium, the thought world of late antique Christianity. But Baynes was a man of his age. The chapter dealt with taxes, not with death. It is only comparatively recently that death has attracted the attention of historians of late antiquity and the Middle Ages.<sup>2</sup> As a result of the careful study of

\*The initial research on the themes treated in these lectures was undertaken in Munich, where I owed to the generosity and care of the Carl Friedrich von Siemens Stiftung of Munich a much-needed opportunity to work in research libraries of unrivalled richness and to experience in them the kindness and interest of so many scholars connected both with the University of Munich and with the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*. It was a delight and a source of instruction to me to deliver these lectures at Yale University. Since that time I have received constant help and criticism from friends closer than I am to the early medieval period, most notably, on this occasion, from Caroline Bynum, Henry Chadwick, David Ganz, Thomas Head, Richard Lim, Frederick Paxton, Julia Smith, and Carol Straw. The present text owes much to their advice. The errors remain, alas, very much my own: *ardua est ista via*.

<sup>1</sup> N. H. Baynes, *The Byzantine Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1925), p. 99.

<sup>2</sup> On the issues that concern these lectures alone (quite apart from many other excellent contributions on death-rituals and on funerary practice), see F. Paxton, *Christianizing Death: The Creation of a Ritual Process in Early Medieval Europe* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1990); H. Kotila, *Memoriai mortuorum: Commemoration of the Departed in Augustine* (Rome: Augustinianum, 1992); E. Rebillard, *In bora mortis: Evolution de la pastorale chrétienne de la mort au I<sup>er</sup> et V<sup>e</sup> siècles*, Bibliothèque de l'école française d'Athènes et de Rome 283 (Rome: Palais Farnèse, 1994); M. P. Ciccarese, *Visioni dell'aldilà in Occidente* (Florence: Nardini, 1987); C. Carozzi, *La voyage de l'âme dans l'au-delà d'après la littérature latine (Ve-XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle)*, Collection de l'école française de Rome 189 (Rome: Palais Farnèse, 1994); M. van Uytvanghe, “Les *Visiones* du haut moyen-âge et les récentes ‘expériences de mort temporaire’: Le sens et non-sens d’un comparaison, première partie,” in *Aevum inter utrumque: Mélanges offerts à Gabriel Sanders*, ed. M. van Uytvanghe and R. Demeulenaere (Steenbrugge: Abdij Sint Pieter, 1991), and

the imaginative structures associated with death and with the other world what had once seemed a timeless continuum of Christian dogma has come to be caught in history. Certainly distinguishable constellations of belief, practice, and sentiment, each markedly different from the other, each bearing the imprint of a particular time and place, have emerged, like complex cloud formations detaching themselves from a featureless mist. In an outstanding recent study entitled *In hora mortis: Evolution de la pastorale chrétienne de la mort au I<sup>er</sup> et V<sup>e</sup> siècles*, Eric Rebillard has drawn attention to the profound changes that took place, within less than one century, between the age of Ambrose and that of Pope Leo, in the attitudes of Latin Christians to the “hour of death.” He concluded that the time may have come for the historian “to take the final step, to envisage *des christianismes dans l’histoire*” —to envisage, that is, a succession of distinctive “Christianities” spread out in time.<sup>3</sup>

In allowing myself to be caught up in the enterprise of delineating the forms taken on by Christianity in varying regions and, within the same region, at different times, I have found myself lured increasingly far from my natural habitat as a historian of late antiquity. I have found myself at the very end of my period — in the sixth and seventh centuries. I have come, indeed, with a certain trepidation, to the threshold of what we had once been content to call (with what justice we shall see) the Dark Ages, the postimperial Western Europe of the early Middle Ages. I have touched on regions far from the heartlands of ancient Christianity: Ireland, northern Gaul, and the Hijat are as important, in this story, as are Rome and Constantinople.

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“Deuxième partie,” in *Sacris Erudiri* 23/24 (1993/94): 135–82; J. Le Goff, *La naissance du purgatoire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1981), translated as *The Birth of Purgatory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984); A. Gourévitch, “Au Moyen-Age: Conscience individuelle et image de l’au-delà,” *Annales* 37 (1982): 255–75; J. C. Schmitt, *Les revenants: Les vivants et les morts dans la société médiévale* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994). See now the magisterial survey of A. Angenendt, *Geschichte der Religiosität im Mittelalter* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1997), pp. 659–750.

<sup>3</sup> Rebillard, *In horn mortis*, p. 232.

I have been urged to do this by the growing conviction, which I share with other scholars of the period, that the *end* of late antiquity is now a story well worth telling.<sup>4</sup> For late antiquity itself has gained consistency in our minds as a distinctive phase of ancient history. It is no longer seen as a brief —if breathlessly exciting— moment of transition between antiquity and the Middle Ages. In the eastern Mediterranean, the Christian empire begun by Constantine amounts to half of the entire history of Roman rule. After 324, Anatolia, western Syria, Palestine, and Egypt slowly but surely settled down to enjoy a *pax byzantina* as impressive as that associated with the age of Augustus and the Antonines.<sup>5</sup> The stability of a continuous imperial system was lacking in Western Europe. But there also, styles of culture and imaginative structures set in place in the post-Constantinian empire of the fourth century still formed horizons beyond which most Latin contemporaries of Gregory of Tours were not yet prepared to think.

Yet, if we look back at this period from only a few centuries later, in the early Middle Ages, its ancient, unfamiliar profile stands out clearly. Though plainly continuous in so many ways with a very ancient past, the Christian imagination of Carolingian Europe and of post-Iconoclast Byzantium no longer belonged to the ancient world. The imaginative landscape of Christianity had changed. Pervasive imaginative structures, associated with a late antique Christianity still deeply rooted in the ancient world, had silently lost their power.

The slow and silent setting loose of early medieval Europe and Byzantium from their late antique past is a process that historians

<sup>4</sup> See Averil Cameron, "Byzantium and the Past in the Seventh Century: The Search for Redefinition," in *The Seventh Century: Change and Continuity*, ed. J. Fontaine and J. N. Hillgarth (London: Warburg Institute, 1992), pp. 250–76, at p. 250: "In the modern historiography of the Roman Empire, the 'third century crisis' is now so hackneyed a theme as almost to have lost its meaning. . . . By contrast, the seventh century crisis in Byzantium has yet to be confronted in its full impact and complexity."

<sup>5</sup> Averil Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire: The Development of Christian Discourse* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), pp. 191–92.

can only follow on tiptoe, as discreetly as it occurred. They must remain constantly aware of the weight and texture of the past in what, by the year 700 A.D., was already a very ancient religion. They must be careful not to force the pace of change by ill-timed outbursts of enthusiasm for apparent novelties. Yet, like Galileo, religious historians are entitled to mutter under their breath, *a pur si muove*: “And, nonetheless, it *does* move.” Something changed throughout the Christian world, in the sixth and seventh centuries, that eventually rendered much of the late antique past of Christianity unfamiliar. I would agree with Robert Markus, the finest connoisseur of changes in Latin Christianity in the age between Augustine and Gregory the Great, when he suggested, in a lucid book aptly entitled *The End of Ancient Christianity*, that “in Western Europe, the late sixth century marks a real break with the world of antiquity.”<sup>6</sup>

Markus’s book was devoted to the changing relations between profane and secular culture in the fifth and six centuries. These two lectures will be devoted to similar changes, but on a theme almost too big to be seen — to changing attitudes to the relation between this world and the other world, and hence to death and the afterlife (in the first lecture), to sin, the mercy of God, and the destiny of the soul beyond the grave (in the second).

What I wish to show is that, by the year 700 A.D., an influential segment of opinion in the Latin Christian world, whose views would carry decisive weight in all future centuries, had come to an unprecedentedly high-pitched notion of the “other world” and to a sharply focussed view of the fate of the individual soul within that other world. As a result, Western Europe came to differ significantly, in an important aspect of its imaginative world, from its Christian neighbors in Byzantium and the Middle East, and even more so from the newly formed religion of Islam. Our own notions of the other world go back, effectively, to the seventh cen-

<sup>6</sup> R. A. Markus, *The End of Ancient Christianity* (Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 222.

ture and no further. When we read late antique Christian texts, we find ourselves in a world where, even on an issue as seemingly continuous throughout Christian history as the notion of the after-life, the principal imaginative landmarks of early Christianity seem strangely out of focus, even exotic, to our postmedieval eyes. By contrast, the view of the other world that emerged in Western Europe in the course of the seventh century is still with us. The early medieval debate on the nature of identity beyond the grave — to what extent it can be known, to what extent its experiences could be assumed to be continuous with a former life, and how the actions of the living might affect its destiny — formed a muted, but significant, background to the emergence of a sharply delineated, biographical notion of the individual that has been the hallmark of Western thought and religious sensibility ever since. It is hard to enter imaginatively into a world where such a notion was considerably less prominent.

This said, we must turn to our story. But let us have no doubt about one thing: it is easier to describe the imaginative shift to which I wish to draw attention than to explain it. I can at least begin with an attempt to sum it up, briefly, in “topographical” terms.

In the fifth and sixth centuries, as at an earlier time, the other world was still thought to lie close to hand. The human gaze brushed the very edges of the other world when it looked up at the night sky. For heaven itself lay behind the stars. The blaze of the inner halls of God’s great palace was merely shielded from direct human view by the shimmering veil of the physical heavens. Heaven was near and yet so far. Looking up at the clusters of the Milky Way, one could almost imagine that it was possible “to catch a glimpse of the high pomps within; the vast, lighted concavity filled with music and life.”<sup>7</sup> This is what the stars still meant to Symeon the Mountain Man, as he wandered in the hills

<sup>7</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964), p. 119.

above the Euphrates, in the sixth century: “at every moment he would raise his eyes to heaven, and be lost in ecstatic wonder at the hosts above, how they stood continuously before God without impediment, and that there is no cessation in their song of praise even for a short span.”<sup>8</sup>

Such a view of heaven was “upper-worldly” rather than “other-worldly.”<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, the gulf between heaven and earth was constantly bridged by etherial beings. Angels and demons shared the same physical space as human beings. Far from being empty, the upper air was filled with boisterous, contending powers.<sup>10</sup> Angels stood close to hand, to impart comfort and guidance to the faithful. Demons would frequently create chill pockets of moral and physical disorder in the everyday world. Demons, indeed, were believed to occupy distinct ecological niches on earth, lurking in out of the way corners within the settled world and claiming as their own the threatening silence of the desert spaces. In the words of an exorcistic prayer, scratched on a tile in northern Spain, that was where the demons should remain: “where no cock crows nor hen cackles, where no ploughman ploughs nor sower sows.”<sup>11</sup>

But Paradise, also, lay close to hand. In the monastic settlements of holy persons and at the tombs of the saints, it was possible to find precious cracks in the wall that separated this world from the next. Light had been known to pour through those cracks, as did fragrance, and, with the fragrance, healing of all kinds—the miraculous blossoming of plants, the multiplication of food-stuffs, the flowering again of the shrivelled bodies of cripples and of paralytics, touched by the healing draughts that blew from the

<sup>8</sup> John of Ephesus, *Lives of the Eastern Saints* 16, *Patrologia Orientalis* 17:229.

<sup>9</sup> Peter Brown, *The Making of Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978), pp. 16–18.

<sup>10</sup> Jerome, *In Ephes.* 6.12, *Patrologia Latina* 26:581A.

<sup>11</sup> From a mid-eighth century abjuration against hail found on a slate in northern Spain: Isabel Velázquez Soriano, *Las pizarras visigódas*, *Antigüedad y Cristianismo* 6 (Murcia: Universidad de Murcia, 1989), no. 104 at p. 313.



Paradise in which the saints now dwelt.<sup>12</sup> A hole ground by generations of believers in the side of the sarcophagus of Theomastus, an obscure fifth-century bishop and refugee from the Rhineland, which stood in the courtyard of the church of Saint Hilary at Poitiers, showed that the healing flavor of Paradise was to be found in its very dust: “for the power coming from his tomb proves that he lives in Paradise.”<sup>13</sup> A phial filled with water from the spring in which the head of Saint Julian had been washed after his decapitation quickly took on the wondrous qualities of that adjacent world: it was transformed “into the color, the consistency and the fragrance of balsam.” A visiting bishop had no doubt as to its status. Here was a fragment of the other world in this world: the martyr had “distinguished [it] with the powers of Paradise.”<sup>14</sup>

Paradise was far too heavily charged a notion to be reduced to any one, simple definition. Its actual situation in relation to heaven and earth was subject to a wide variety of views. In the seventh century, for instance, the newly edited biblical commentaries associated with the school of Theodore of Tarsus in Canterbury contain suggestions for any number of locations. These ranged from a position above the fixed stars, for the Celestial Paradise, to a site now occupied by Jerusalem, twenty miles up the road from the

<sup>12</sup> See esp. G. de Nie, *Views from a Many-Windowed Tower: Studies of Imagination in the Works of Gregory of Tours* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1987), pp. 108–28; E. James, “A Sense of Wonder: Gregory of Tours, Medicine and Science,” *The Culture of Christendom: Essays in Medieval History in Memory of Denis L. T. Bethel*, ed. M. A. Meyer (London: Hambledon, 1993), pp. 45–60; Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity AD 200–1000* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), pp. 107–10. For the recovery of Paradise as a theme of eastern asceticism, see esp. B. Flusin, *Miracle et histoire dans l'oeuvre de Cyrille de Scythopolis* (Paris: Etudes augustiniennes, 1983), pp. 125–26, and Peter Brown, *Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), pp. 221–23.

<sup>13</sup> Gregory of Tours, *De gloria confessorum* 52, trans. R. Van Dam, in *Gregory of Tours: Glory of the Confessors* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1988), pp. 60–61.

<sup>14</sup> Gregory of Tours, *De virtutibus sancti Juliani* 41, trans. R. Van Dam, in *Saints and Their Miracles in Late Antique Gaul* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 189.

well-known tomb of Adam, where the original garden of Eden had once stood.<sup>15</sup> Such learned dubitation apart, the notion of Paradise summed up all that was most overpoweringly adjacent and yet poignantly inaccessible in the careworn life of the average Christian. For a poet such as Ephraim the Syrian, Paradise encircled the world much as it ringed the Christian imagination, like a golden crown or the shimmering halo formed around the moon.<sup>16</sup> For the heroes of Christianity, Paradise was only next door. A martyr, such as Perpetua, might sleep, step up into Paradise, and wake the next morning with the heavy taste of its sweetness still in her mouth.<sup>17</sup> It was the gift of holy persons to pierce the veil of the present world and to see how much of the other world lingered insistently, for good or ill, in the world around them. Demons and angels were clearly visible to the eyes of a Martin of Tours.<sup>18</sup>

Altogether, we are dealing with a religious sensibility molded by a haunting awareness of the immanent presence of the other world in this world. In the words of the nineteenth-century religious poet Francis Thompson, cited by Henri-Irénée Marrou in one of his many masterly evocations of the quality of the thought-world of late antiquity:

O world invisible, we view thee,  
 O world intangible, we touch thee,  
 O world unknowable, we know thee,  
 Inapproachable, we clutch thee.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>15</sup>Theodore of Canterbury, *In Pentateuchen I*, 35 and 62, in B. Bischoff and M. Lapidge, *Biblical Commentaries from the Canterbury School of Theodore and Hadrian* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 308–10 and 388, with commentary on pp. 440–41 and 448.

<sup>16</sup>Ephraim, *De paradiso* 1.8, trans. R. Lavenant, in *Ephrem de Nisibe: Hymnes sur le Paradis*, Sources chrétiennes 137 (Paris: Le Cerf, 1968), p. 38.

<sup>17</sup>*Passio Perpetuae* 4, and the vision of her companion, Saturus, *Passio* 11–12, in Ckcaese, *Visioni*, pp. 76–78.

<sup>18</sup>Sulpicius Severus, *Vita Martini* 21.1.

<sup>19</sup>Francis Thompson, *The Kingdom of God*, Modern Library (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1913), p. 357, cited by H. I. Marrou, "La civilisation de l'antiquité tardive," in *Tardo Antico e Alto Medio Evo: La forma artistica nel passaggio dall' antichità al medioevo*, Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei 365: Problemi attuali di scienza e di cultura 105 (Rome, 1968): 383–94, at p. 392.

For the average believer, belief in the almost physical proximity of Paradise went hand in hand with a strong sense of entitlement. The funeral of any baptized Christian, with its fluttering white robes, fragrance, and shimmering candles, was an acting out on earth of the solemn *adventus*, the entry in state of the soul into Paradise. The dark terrors of the grave were not allowed to block out a direct view of the sweet, fragrant grove of Paradise that lay, as it were, just down the road. In the words of Prudentius's *Prayers for the Daily Round*, from around 400 A.D.:

*patet ecce fidelibus ampli  
via lucida iam paradisi.*

See now for the faithful a shining way lies open  
to a spacious Paradise.<sup>20</sup>

Those who passed through the sheltered garden that flanked the basilica of Saint Felix at Cimitille were reminded, by a verse inscription set up by Paulinus of Nola on the side door through which they entered, that they could not have chosen a more appropriate path: "Christian worshippers, take the path to heaven by way of this lovely greenery. An approach by way of bright gardens is fitting, for here is granted to those who desire it their departure to holy Paradise."<sup>21</sup>

A good friend of Gregory of Tours, Salvius of Albi (who died in 584), still lived unquestioningly in such a world. Some years before his death, when in the grip of a severe fever, he had passed away, only to come to life again when already laid out on his bier. He had been carried away by two angels to a place above "this squalid world," even above the stars, until he stood beneath a cloud of unearthly light. There he was engulfed in a fragrance of

<sup>20</sup> Paulinus, *Cathemerinon* 10.161–62, ed. H. J. Thomson, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1961), p. 94; see also J. Guyon, *La cimetière Aux Deux Lauriers: Recherches sur les Catacombes romaines*, Bibliothèque des écoles françaises de Athènes et de Rome 264 (Rome: Palais Farnèse, 1987); pp. 193–94, on the bucolic quality of early Christian funerary decoration.

<sup>21</sup> Paulinus of Nola, *Letter* 32.12, trans. P. G. Walsh, in *The Letters of Paulinus of Nola*, Ancient Christian Writers 36 (New York: Newman Press, 1967), 2:146.

such exquisite perfume that for three days after his return he had felt no need of food or drink. Salvius was sad to find himself back again, “in this black hole of an earthly dwelling place.” The sweet taste of Paradise that still filled his mouth gave way to blisters.<sup>22</sup> But, for Salvius, the darkness to which he returned was never total. After a particularly trying interview with King Chilperic in 580, Salvius and Gregory met to say good-bye in the forecourt of the royal villa at Berny-Rivière. Pointing upward, Salvius said to Gregory:

“Do you see above that roof what I see?” To which I said: “I see only the tiled roof which the king has recently had constructed.” “Do you see anything else?” I answered: “I see nothing else at all.” I thought that he was joking, so I added: “If you see anything more, let me know.” And he, drawing a deep sigh, said: “I see the unsheathed sword of God’s wrath hanging over that house.”

Sure enough, Chilperic’s two sons died within twenty days.<sup>23</sup>

Half a century later the other world seems to have drawn further away from earth. In a very different part of Europe from Gregory’s Gaul, Fursey, an Irish ascetic, came back from the dead on two occasions in the course of a severe illness that had fallen on him sometime in the early 630s.<sup>24</sup> He returned to life quite literally scarred by the experience. Passing through billowing flames, his cheek and shoulder had been jostled by the searing body of a sinner from whom he had once received a gift of clothing in return for the imposition of a lighter penance than his sins required.<sup>25</sup> It had been a rough ride. The opening stages of Fursey’s journey were accompanied by the chilling war-cries of the

<sup>22</sup> Gregory of Tours, *Libri historiarum* 8.1, in Ciccarese, *Visioni*, pp. 76–78.

<sup>23</sup> Gregory of Tours, *Libri historiarum* 5.50.

<sup>24</sup> Carozzi, *Voyage de l’âme*, pp. 99–138. The text of Fursey’s visions is edited by Ciccarese, *Visioni*, pp. 190–224, and Carozzi, *Voyage*, pp. 677–92.

<sup>25</sup> *Visio Fursei* 16, in Ciccarese, *Visioni*, pp. 220–22; Carozzi, *Voyage*, p. 691.

demons, arrayed against him like an army. <sup>26</sup>Swathed in an ominous fire that threatened to search out his every blemish, Fursey, in the person of the protecting angels who spoke on his behalf, faced demonic accusers who were well-versed in Scripture and who appeared to possess a “state of the art” knowledge of the rigors of the penitential system of their time. They knew an “unpurged” sin when they saw one, Hyper-Augustinian in this matter, they pointed out that many of Fursey’s good deeds had not sprung from love alone. The busy preacher and administrator of penance had not always “become a sa little child.” He had not always loved his neighbor as himself, nor, good Irishman that he was, had he always refrained from exacting vengeance. <sup>27</sup> The demons stood on their rights. It was God who was shockingly, inscrutably lax: “This man has neither purged his sins on earth nor has he received vengeance here. Where is the justice of God? . . . Let us get out of here; for here there are no fair rules of judgment.” <sup>28</sup>

By contrast to the experiences related by Fursey, for Salvius the short visit to heaven had been a moment of untroubled deliverance, a jailbreak from the “squalid world” out into the clear light and sweet smell of Paradise. It was a jailbreak as dramatic and as instantaneous as were the miraculous jailbreaks frequently associated with the saints of Gaul, whose very presence, alive or as relics, was believed, on many occasions, to have caused to swing open the doors of the suffocating blockhouses that flanked the palace of the count in every city. <sup>29</sup> For Fursey, by contrast, the journey to the edge of heaven and back had not been a moment of blessed deliverance. Far from it. It had been an awesomely pro-

<sup>26</sup> *Visio Fursei* 5–6, in Ciccarese, *Visioni*, pp. 196–98; Carozzi, *Voyage*, p. 681.

<sup>27</sup> *Visio Fursei* 7–10, in Ciccarese, *Visioni*, pp. 198–206; Carozzi, *Voyage*, pp. 682–86.

<sup>28</sup> *Visio Fursei* 9, in Ciccarese, *Visioni*, pp. 204–8; Carozzi, *Voyage*, p. 684.

<sup>29</sup> E.g., esp. Gregory of Tours, *De virtutibus sancti Martini* 4.26, trans. Van Dam, in *Saints and Their Miracles*, p. 295; F. Graus, “Die Gewalt bei den Anfängen des Feudalismus und die “Gefangenenbefreiungen” der merowingischen Hagiographie,” *Jahrbuch für Wirtschaftsgeschichte* 1961, pt. 1: 61–156.

tracted “journey of the soul.” Fursey’s account of his experience formed the basis for the first entire narrative of such a journey in Latin Christian literature. It marks a significant step in the development of the genre now characterized by Professor Claude Carozzi, in his magnificent study entitled *Le voyage de l’âme dans l’au-delà*.

Carried upward by angels, the Irish abbot eventually reached a heaven that differed little from that of the Gallo-Roman southerner Salvius of Albi. But the approach to heaven now passed through an extensive and menacing no-man’s land. The message of his vision was plain. To die was to experience an *arduum et difficilem transitum*. It involved a journey across a dark frontier, whose faceless perils could only be allayed by being conveyed (in the words of Claude Lévi-Strauss, describing the spirit-journeys of a healing shaman), through the “fabulation of a reality unknown in itself.”<sup>30</sup> By means of such a “fabulation,” the perils of the world beyond the grave were reduced to order in the form of a dramatic sequence of events. Fursey returned to life with a narrative of a journey: he told his hearers of its successive stages, *singula per ordinem*. One encounter had followed the other, as the soul travelled across the seemingly measureless distances of another world.<sup>31</sup>

A later account of the death of Saint Ciarán, an Irish compatriot of Fursey, sums up in one small incident the sense of vertiginous distance, tinged with danger, which Fursey’s narrative had intended to convey. “When the hour of his death approached, Ciarán ordered that he should be carried outside the house in which he lay. And looking up into the sky he said: *Ardua est ista via*. ‘That is a hard haul up.’” That said, he went indoors to die?

<sup>30</sup> C. Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology* (London: Peregrine, 1977), p. 179.

<sup>31</sup> *Visio Fursei* 17, in Ciccarese, *Visioni*, p. 224; Carozzi, *Voyage*, p. 692.

<sup>32</sup> *Vita Ciarani* 32, ed. C. Plummer, in *Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1910), 1:215, cited by H. Lutterbach, “Der locus resurrectionis als Ziel der irischen Peregrini,” *Römische Quartalschrift* 89 (1994): 26–46 at p. 36.

As far as we know, Furseý's authority in later years did not come from his ability to see in this world what others could not see—to see the sword of God where the cautious Gregory had seen only a new pantile roof—but from having come back, as if from the dead, from another world. The uncanny blemish on his face—no small thing among the Irish, who were acutely sensitive to the shame of a damaged countenance<sup>33</sup>—and the fact that he could be seen to sweat, in the chill North Sea winters of East Anglia, whenever he retold the terrors of his journey, were what people remembered about him.<sup>34</sup> Furseý had already seen what all who heard him knew that they must one day see.

Furseý's visions took up the major part of the *Life of Furseý*, which was written in northern Gaul in around 656/57, in connection with the establishment of a cult at the tomb to which his body had been transferred, at Péronne. It represented the coming of age of a distinctly different attitude to the other world from that which Gregory of Tours (who died in 594) appears to have taken for granted. The fact that Furseý claimed to base his authority in Ireland, in the first instance, upon his other-world experiences should not mislead us into positing too local and "exotic" an origin for the new emphasis placed, throughout Latin Christendom, on the *grandeurs et misères* of the soul after death. To speak of a *fleuve visionnaire imprégné des traditions irlandaises*<sup>35</sup> is misleading. It involves both simplifying the religious culture of seventh-century Ireland<sup>36</sup> and overlooking the complexity of the

<sup>33</sup> F. Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law* (Dublin: Institute for Advanced Studies, 1988), p. 132; P. O'Leary, "Jeers and Judgements: Laughter in Early Irish Literature," *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 22 (1991): 15–29.

<sup>34</sup> Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 3.19.

<sup>35</sup> M. Rouche, "Le combat des saints anges et des démons: La victoire de saint Michel," in *Santi e demoni nell'alto Medio Evo*, *Settimane di Studi del Centro italiano sull'alto Medio Evo* 36 (Spoleto: Centro di Studi, 1989), 2:533–60, at p. 544.

<sup>36</sup> See esp. M. Herbert, *Iona, Kells and Derry: The History and Hagiography of the Monastic Familia of Columba* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988): pp. 11 and 16, on the distinctly "this worldly" nature of the earliest traditions on Columba.

religious influences that came together to build up a distinctive spiritual world in northern Gaul in the generations after the death of Gregory of Tours.<sup>37</sup> Altogether, as a device for explaining the religious changes of the early medieval West, “the visionary Celt” is a severely overworked figure.<sup>38</sup> The careful work of Máire Herbert on the earlier traditions concerning the life of Saint Columba show that, in Ireland, saints tended to be admired for their asceticism and their learning, and not as purveyors of News from Nowhere.<sup>39</sup>

We should look elsewhere for the origins of this new sense of distance and potential danger. The visions of Fursey go together with texts that imply similar concerns, such as the second book of Jonas of Bobbio’s *Life of Columbanus* (written around 639–43)—an account that contained a series of gripping deathbed scenes associated with the convent of Faremoutiers<sup>40</sup>—and the vivid *Vision of Barontus*, written at Saint Pierre de Longoret near Bourges, in 678/79—in which a monk recounts a journey of the

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The *testimonia* collected by Cumméne Ailbe emphasized the manner in which the presence of the saint caused incidents of daily life to “take on the hue of the supernatural” (p. 16). This is all the more noteworthy in a writer who was an exact contemporary of Jonas of Bobbio (see n. 40). See also C. Stancliffe, “The Miracle Stories in the Seventh Century Irish Saints’ Lives,” in *The Seventh Century*, pp. 87–115.

<sup>37</sup> A. Dierkens, “Prolégomènes à une histoire des relations entre les îles britanniques et le continent pendant le haut moyen-âge,” in *La Neustrie*, ed. H. Atsma (Sigmaringen: J. Thorbecke, 1989), 2:371–95; I. N. Wood, “A Prelude to Columbanus,” in *Columbanus and Merovingian Monasticism*, ed. H. B. Clarke and M. Brennan, BAR International Series 13 (Oxford: BAR, 1981), pp. 3–32, and “The *Vita Columbani* and Merovingian Hagiography,” *Peritia* 1 (1982): 63–80; see now P. Fouracre and R. A. Gerberding, *Late Merovingian France: History and Hagiography 640–720* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), pp. 100–106 and 313–19.

<sup>38</sup> P. Sims-Williams, “The Visionary Celt: The Construction of an Ethnic Pre-conception,” *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 11 (1986): 71–96.

<sup>39</sup> Herbert, *Iona, Kells and Derry*, p. 11.

<sup>40</sup> Jonas, *Vita Columbani* 2:11–22, ed. B. Krusch, in *Monumenta Germaniae Historica; Scriptores rerum Merovingicarum* (Hanover: Hahn, 1902), 4:130–42, trans. in J. A. McNamara and J. E. Halborg, *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1992), pp. 155–75.



soul as difficult and as fraught with danger as that of Fursey.<sup>41</sup> Taken together, these texts announce the successful establishment, in the Latin Christianity of Gaul and elsewhere, of a newly perfected hybrid plant, destined to flourish exuberantly in all later centuries. The hybrid itself had been bred from strains taken from all over the Christian Mediterranean. To understand the nature of this new hybrid we must look back to the figure who is central to the end of ancient Christianity — to Gregory the Great. So let us turn, inevitably all too briefly, to the *Dialogues of Gregory*, which were written in 594, the year in which the other Gregory, Gregory of Tours, died.

For in the *Dialogues* of Gregory the Great, we can, perhaps, come close to the turning of an age.<sup>42</sup> While Gregory insisted that he wrote of the marvelous events that had occurred in his native Italy “in modern times,” “modern” for Gregory often meant “post-Apostolic”; it did not invariably mean “recent.”<sup>43</sup> What we find, rather, is an exceptionally rich deposit of memories (of which the life of Benedict in the second book of the *Dialogues* is a characteristic example) that come from the more peaceful days of an antebellum Italy, before the furious onslaught of the Lombards.<sup>44</sup> Many of these stories came from areas whose social and ecclesiastical structures had been seriously disrupted by Gregory’s own time. Told to him by immigrants, these were broken shards of local

<sup>41</sup> *Visio Baronti*, ed. W. Levison, in *Monumenta Germaniae Historica: Scriptores rerum Merovingicarum* (Hanover: Hahn, 1910), 5:377–94; Ciccarese, *Visioni*, pp. 236–68; trans. J. N. Hillgarth, in *Christianity and Paganism, 350–750: The Conversion of Western Europe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986), pp. 195–204.

<sup>42</sup> On this topic I owe most to W. D. McCready, *Signs of Sanctity: Miracles in the Theology of Gregory the Great* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediæval Studies (1989), and G. Cracco, “Gregorio e l’oltretomba,” in *Grégoire le Grand: Colloque de Chantilly*, ed. J. Fontaine (Paris: CNRS, 1986), pp. 255–66. See now R. A. Markus, *Gregory the Great and His World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

<sup>43</sup> McCready, *Signs of Sanctity*, pp. 16–32.

<sup>44</sup> Well seen by G. Cracco, “Il tempo fuori del monastero: Tentazione o missione?” *Codex Aquilarensis* 6 (1992): 119–34.

memory, detached from their original context. Picking through the hagiographical debris of an earlier age, Gregory reassembled these stories with consummate literary skill and imposed upon them his own distinctive, I would even say distinctly *avant garde*, interpretation.

In one such vivid narrative, we can see the pope at work, imposing his own, subtly different meaning on a story that had been passed on to him from an earlier age. In the province of Valeria (the hill-country of the modern Abruzzi) a *curialis* had seduced his own god-daughter in memorably shocking circumstances.<sup>45</sup> He was said to have done so when he had returned home drunk from the celebrations that followed the Easter Vigil. It was also said that he had done what any sensible late antique man would do with such a sin on his conscience: he went to the baths to wash away the stain of an illicit act of intercourse. Inhabitants of John Chrysostom's Antioch had done the same on their way home from the brothel.<sup>46</sup> But the *curialis* still had to face the solemn Mass of Easter Sunday. He could not be seen not to take the Eucharist along with his fellow-citizens at that time of high festival. He knew what to fear. "He stood there trembling, with terror creeping up upon him, expecting at any moment that this time he would be given over to possession by an unclean spirit and would fall into an agonizing fit in front of the entire Christian people."<sup>47</sup> Yet nothing happened. He stepped out of the church with a lighter heart. After six days he died of a stroke. Only then was his sin revealed: "Everyone saw a flame shoot up from his tomb."<sup>48</sup>

End of story —or at least so it seemed to those who told Gregory's informant, the bishop of Syracuse. To have one's bones totally

<sup>45</sup> Gregory, *Dialogi* 4.33.1–5, ed. A. de Vogüé, in *Grégoire le Grand: Les dialogues*, Sources chrétiennes 265 (Paris: Le Cerf, 1980), pp. 108–12.

<sup>46</sup> John Chrysostom, *In Ep. 1 ad Cor., Hom.* 18.1; *Patrologia Graeca* 61:146; for other examples, see J. Zellinger, *Bad und Bäder in der altchristlichen Kirche* (Munich: Hueber, 1928), p. 100.

<sup>47</sup> Gregory, *Dialogi* 4.33.2, in de Vogüé, *Grégoire le Grand*, p. 110.

<sup>48</sup> Gregory, *Dialogi* 4.33.3, in de Vogüé, *Grégoire le Grand*, p. 110.

destroyed by fire was the ultimate annihilation: it amounted to a conclusive, fully public condemnation to oblivion of a notorious outcast.<sup>49</sup> That was all. For Gregory, the flame that burst from the tomb was not the end of the matter. It was no more than a “sign.” “It showed what that man’s soul suffered in the unseen world, whose very body even — *cuius etiam corpus* — a flame devoured before human eyes.”<sup>50</sup>

With a slight but decisive twist, Gregory tilted a story of satisfactorily clear retribution in this world, exactly publicly for a secret sin that had breached peculiarly charged sacred boundaries, toward the other world. The dread of the onslaught of demons in a crowded church, the burst of flame from the presumably impressive grave of a local notable, the stuff, that is, of a good, ancient Christian story, are edged from the center of the stage: the avoidance of the one and the swift appearance of the other are now treated as no more than a well-known, “classical” opening movement to a more extensive and far stranger symphony— a tale of exquisite and finely calibrated sufferings in the silent world beyond the grave.

It is important to be aware of the significance of what was, in itself, a tiny nuance. It is not that the good Christians of Valeria

49 Notoriously in the case of the heretical emperor Valens: Orosius, *Historia adversus paganos* 7.33.15: *quo magis testimonium punitionis eius et divinae indignationis terribili posteris esset exemplo*. In late-sixth-century Constantinople, the destruction of the bones and total burning of the body was regarded as an unusually drastic measure, appropriate only to pagans: John of Ephesus, *Historia ecclesiastica* 3:29 and 33, trans. R. Payne-Smith, in *The Third Part of the Ecclesiastical History of John of Ephesus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1860), pp. 216 and 224, and Evagrius, *Historia ecclesiastica* 5.18. See also *Sixth Council of Constantinople* (553 A.D.), *Actio* VII.8.1— the opinion of an opponent of Theodore of Mopsuestia: *et si ossa eius evulsa quispiam de sepultura eiceret et . . . incenderet, grantanter acciperes*, in *Acta Conciliorum Oecumenicorum* 4:1, ed. E. Schwartz (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1971), 189.16. For a later example, in which the prayers of a holy man prevent demons from inflicting the supreme “dishonor” of burning the body of a notorious sinner, whose soul they already possessed: *Life of Saint Andrew the Fool* 11.83 and 86, *Patrologia Graeca* 111: 724D and 728C, now ed. L. Rydén, *Life of St. Andrew the Fool*, 1521 and 1583, *Studia Byzantina Upsaliensia* 4 (Uppsala: Almqvist and Wiksell, 1995), 2:114 and 118.

50 Gregory, *Dialogi* 4.33.4, in de Vogüé, *Grégoire le Grand*, pp. 110-12.

did not believe in Hellfire, nor that some people got there more quickly than others and that their dramatic deaths showed where they had gone.<sup>51</sup> But the otherworldly aspects of these stories did not hold the center of attention. What made a truly memorable story for old-fashioned Christians was one that involved touches of Hell on earth —spectacular condign punishments that fell, here and now, on notable sins, in the form of torment through possession by demons, vengeful flames, most frequently of all, in the form of the “hellish” alternating heats and icy chills of sudden fevers.<sup>52</sup> Gregory was the last person to deny that such things happened and were allowed by God to happen in the here and now. But in the *Dialogues* he went out of his way to place them in a different perspective. They were dwarfed by the looming immensity of the world beyond the grave. Like the opening stages of a Phony War, passing moments of contact with angels and demons in this life seemed inconclusive skirmishes, compared with the final, massed assault that all human beings must face at the hour of death. Memories that had treasured the crackle of visible signs of the presence of the other world in this world paled in comparison with the dread ranks of angels and demons that would gather around each soul at the moment of its passing. With Gregory, we can see an inherited conglomerate of early Christian notions “settle” into a distinctive “tilt” —a “tilt” toward the moment of death and the subsequent fate of the soul in an increasingly circumstantial other world.

It is through this perceptible tilt away from a world rustling with invisible, contiguous powers toward a world beyond the grave —a world clearly visible for the first time at the moment of

<sup>51</sup> Gregory of Tours, *De virtutibus sancti Juliani* 17, trans. Van Dam, in *Saints and Their Miracles*, p. 176.

<sup>52</sup> Eg, Gregory fo Tours, *Libri historiarum* 5.36. On the strict analogy between fever and the heats and chills of Hell: Jerome, in *Job* 24: *Patrologia Latina* 26:725D. On fever as “from the heat of Hell”: al-Bukhàri, *Sahih* 71.28.617–22, trans. M. Muhsin Khàn (Beirut: Dar al Arabia, 1985), 7:416-17. See also F. Paxton, “Power and the Power to Heal: The Cult of St. Sigismund in Burgundy,” *Early Medieval Europe* 2 (1993): 95–110, at pp. 104–6.

death — that the fourth book of Gregory's *Dialogues* set the tone for Latin writers of the seventh century, and, indeed, for all future centuries.<sup>53</sup>

Yet, in his emphasis on the hour of death, Gregory emerges, in many ways, as a "Latin Byzantine." He shared with the Greek authors of his own age a finely developed and long-standing, ascetic sensitivity that saw, in the moment of death itself, a "great mystery," to be contemplated with awestruck, contrite eyes.<sup>54</sup> The movements of the dying person were often terrible to observe. They were the visible signs, quite as chilling as was any incident of possession, of the unseen approach of "The Powers" — of angels in their dignified ranks sent to summon and protect the soul; of demons who gathered in violent and disorderly fashion, jostling the soul like angry creditors; or like unceremonious, no-nonsense tax-collectors, sent to collect outstanding fiscal debts.<sup>55</sup> What mattered in such a deathbed scene was that this was an experience of the other world that all Christians could and, indeed, would share. Other manifestations of the other world in this world were subject to the tyranny of time and space. Not every Christian could expect to witness the public theatre of possession and healing at a major shrine, nor were they certain to encounter a holy person in their own region or lifetime.<sup>56</sup> Death was different. Witnessed by the companions of monks and of nuns, or simply by the members of any Christian family, death ushered every

<sup>53</sup> See esp. J. N. Hillgarth, "Eschatological and Political Concepts in the Seventh Century," in *The Seventh Century*, pp. 212–35, at p. 212, on the decisive role of Gregory the Great in fostering "the awareness of the other world that seems to increase in the age we are describing."

<sup>54</sup> See esp. Anastasius Sinaita, *De defunctis*, in *Patrologia Graeca* 89:1191–1202, at 1196A, and Andrew of Crete, *De defunctis*, in *Patrologia Graeca* 9731281C.

<sup>55</sup> Anastasius Sinaita, *De defunctis*, 1196C; compare the vivid incident of the repentant brigand in the reign of Maurice, in Anastasius, *Oratio in Ps.6*: 1141C, referred to by C. Farkas, "Räuberbehörden in Thrakien," *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 86/87 (1993/94): 462–70. In general, see P. A. Recheis, *Engel, Tod und Seelenreise*, *Temi e Testi* 4 (Rome: Storia e letteratura, 1958), pp. 152–77.

<sup>56</sup> A point well made by P. Horden, "Responses to Possession and Insanity in the Earlier Byzantine World," *Social History of Medicine* 6 (1993): 177–94.

Byzantine into an orchestra seat, just as the curtain was about to rise on the most awesome spectacle of all.

The sermons of Anastasius of Sinai (died ca. 700) and of Andrew of Crete (died ca. 740) on the subject of death and the dying represent one aspect of a cultural agenda characteristic of seventh-century Byzantium and of the orthodox communities of the Middle East now fallen under Arab rule —the search for a religious language in which all orthodox believers could share.<sup>57</sup> Just as all could be assumed to view the sign of the Cross with loyal Christian eyes, so all might be expected to shudder, with a well-schooled Christian sensibility, at the unseen drama that was played out at every deathbed.

In this drama death remained, for Byzantines, the great leveller. The powerful, even the emperor himself, would fall silent at the last moment, “seeing now what they had never seen before, and hearing from the Powers what they had never heard before, experiencing what they had never experienced before.”<sup>58</sup> It is here that we can measure both how near a Latin such as Gregory came to his neighbors in the eastern Mediterranean and yet how far from them he remained. Both wished to tilt the Christian imagination toward the moment of death, as a privileged, because truly universal, instant of contact with the other world. But the Byzantines of the early Middle Ages were urged to look at death still very much with the eyes of the living. They were to gaze with chastened hearts into the utter blackness that would swallow up the brittle pride of the “world.”<sup>59</sup> They were not encouraged to look further.<sup>60</sup> “Do not search out the condition of the soul after its

<sup>57</sup> Well seen by Averil Cameron, “Byzantium and the Past in the Seventh Century: The Search for Redefinition,” in *The Seventh Century*, pp. 250–76, at pp. 264–69.

<sup>58</sup> Anastasius Sinaita, *De defunctis*, 1196C.

<sup>59</sup> Anastasius Sinaita, *De defunctis*, 1193CD.

<sup>60</sup> A point cogently made by H. G. Beck, *Die Byzantiner und ihr Jenseit.r.* Sitzungsberichte der bayrischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Philol.-Hist. Klasse 1977, no. 6 (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1979). The most dramatic and circumstantial

departure from the body, for it is not for you to ask about such things. It is not given to us to know even the nature of the soul; how should we know the nature of its place of rest?"<sup>61</sup>

What is surprising, then, when we turn from Byzantium to the West, is that so many seventh-century Latins fastened so rapidly on Gregory's *Dialogues* not to instill fear in the many — as they might well have done — nor to insist on the universal claims of death on all Christians — as Byzantines tended to do — so much as to heighten public certainty as to the guaranteed excellence of the few. Memorable deathbed scenes, regularly associated with overpowering radiance, with the gentler, heavy scent of perfume, with the clear sight of a luminous body receding, like a cloud, toward a vanishing point above the earth, often accompanied by unearthly music that grew softer as the invisible choir returned to heaven, announced, through clearly visible signs, that the other world had stepped majestically, for a moment, into this world, to claim for itself a privileged soul, whose *merita* entitled it to such a *gloriosus obitus* — so glorious a passing from this world to the next.<sup>62</sup>

It was this element that caught the imagination of later ages. Death was the appropriate moment that ratified the greatness of the great. In 973, Ulrich, bishop of Augsburg, a hardened servant

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form of Byzantine accounts of the journey of the soul is the description of the *telônia* (the "customs-posts" passed by every soul on its way to heaven): see *Vita Basilii Junioris*, ed. A. N. Veselovskij, *Sbornik Otdelenija Russkago Jazyka i Slovnosti Imperatorskoj Akademii Nauk* 46 (St. Petersburg, 1889), pp. 16–28. This, the most circumstantial account, may be mid-tenth century: L. Rydén, "The *Life* of Basil the Younger and the Date of the *Life* of St. Andrew Salos," in *Oceanus: Essay Presented to Ihor Sevcenko, Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 7 (1983): 568–86. What is important to note is that it is not presented as a *personal* journey of the soul, like those described by Fursey and Barontus.

<sup>61</sup> Andrew of Crete, *De defunctis*, 1289C.

<sup>62</sup> *Vita Balthildis* A13, ed. B. Krusch, in *Monumenta Germaniae Historica: Scriptores rerum Merovingicarum* (Hanover: Hahn, 1888), 2:498; trans. McNamara and Halborg, *Sainted Women*, p. 275, and Fouracre and Gerberding, *Late Merovingian France*, p. 128. See now B. Caseau, "Crossing the Impenetrable Frontier between Earth and Heaven," in *Shifting Frontiers in Late Antiquity*, ed. R. W. Mathisen and H. Sivan (Aldershot: Variorum, 1996), pp. 333–43, on the implications of the iconography associated with the sarcophagus of Agilbert, bishop of Paris, at Jouarre.

of the Ottonians, whose timely fortification of his city in 955 had enabled Otto I to fall upon the Magyars gathered outside the walls in the plain of the Lech, set about dying the right way: *formosissime*, that is, with a copy of book four of Gregory's *Dialogues* to hand.<sup>63</sup> We are already looking straight ahead, across the centuries, to the words of Henry James: "So it has come at last—the Distinguished Thing."<sup>64</sup>

We must ask why this was so. Of course, there was nothing new, in itself, in such spectacular scenes, nor in the assumption that the sanctity that had governed the lives of holy persons should be made particularly manifest at the moment of their death. Already in the 430s, the priest Uranius wrote a moving account of the last days of Paulinus of Nola, "so that we should judge his life by the exceptional quality of his death."<sup>65</sup> What was new was the extent to which this one event was allowed to eclipse all other elements in the life and burial of a holy person. Despite his previous visit to Paradise, the actual death of Salvius of Albi had been heroically matter of fact. When the plague came to Albi, he stayed at his post. God revealed to him that his death was near. He chose his sarcophagus. He washed carefully, put on an appropriate garment, and lay down to die.<sup>66</sup> He died as a bishop should die, "according to his *ordo*." In the well-chosen words of Georg Scheibelreiter, the death of saintly and prominent persons was expected to be "a final mighty chord."<sup>67</sup> But it was a prolonged

<sup>63</sup> Gerhard of Augsburg, *Vita Uodalrici* 1:26, ed. W. Berschin and A. Häse (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag, 1993), p. 276.

<sup>64</sup> Leon Edel, *Henry James, The Master: 1901–1916* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1972), p. 542.

<sup>65</sup> Uranius, *De obitu Paulini* 2, in *Patrologia Latina* 53:860A. J. Amat, *Songes et visions: L'au-delà dans la littérature latine tardive* (Paris: Etudes augustiniennes, 1985), gives an excellent impression of the sheer density and endurance over time of late antique Christian imagery of the other world.

<sup>66</sup> Gregory of Tours, *Libri historiarum* 7.1.

<sup>67</sup> G. Scheibelreiter, "The Death of the Bishop in the Early Middle Ages," in *The End of Strife*, ed. D. Loades (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clarke, 1984), pp. 32–43, at pp. 32–33.



chord. It reverberated for many days after the passing of the soul. Death itself marked only the beginning of a process that revealed, in a fully public manner in the here and now, that the threads that linked the holy person to his charges, though seemingly broken at death, had, in fact, been instantly rewoven. For this reason, the more public event, the funeral, overshadowed the deathbed. The funeral began with a shattering display of public, fully human grief. For the dead person seemed to have abandoned the living. But it was a grief that was turned instantly to joy. A miracle of healing, usually connected with the bier or with the garments of the dead person, showed that the sense of irreparable loss, expressed by such grief, was misplaced. The saint was still present among the mourners. Linked to public ceremonies that were now many centuries old, such expectations remained remarkably stable in many environments through the entire period that we are discussing. Here there was no dramatic change. Viewing the funeral cortege of Saint Eustadiola of Bourges, in around 684, Bishop Rocco declared that he had never witnessed such grief, “either at the death of a religious person in the church or at the passing of a royal figure.” *Sed repente* — “but suddenly, by granting healing to various illnesses, Eustadiola showed herself to be still present.”<sup>68</sup> A tomb heavy with miraculous power showed that, as far as the newly arrived denizen of Paradise was concerned, it was “business as usual.” The intermittent “blaze” of *virtutes* (acts of power and healing) that emanated from the tomb, and not the moment of death itself, was the conclusive sign that such persons now dwelt “in glory.” In the apposite words of Michel Rouche: “La tombe miraculeuse éclipse l’interrogation sur la vie d’outre tombe et l’au delà.”<sup>69</sup>

Such a way of seeing the passing of a saint was driven by a dogged need for continuity. We are dealing with a clear case of

<sup>68</sup> *Vita Eustadiolae* 8, *Acta Sanctorum: Jun. II*, p. 133A, trans. McNamara and Halborg, *Sainted Women*, p. 110.

<sup>69</sup> Rouche, “Le combat des saints anges et des démons,” p. 543.

what an anthropologist studying the modern Irish funeral has described as the conversion of death “from problem to opportunity.”<sup>70</sup> Confronted by the death of its prominent members, the community experiences a pressing need to mobilize the memory of the dead in order to assert a brisk and orderly transfer of power in the face of ever-present threats of disruption. A ritual of death, burial, and solemn entombment assumed the most reassuring continuity of all: the unbroken spiritual “presence” of a saint who continued to join this world with the next. As Paul Fouracre has shown, in his study of later Merovingian hagiography, faith in the continued “presence” of the dead was mobilized so as to restrain and mask the horrendous scuffles that accompanied the transfer of episcopal power in most sixth- and seventh-century cities. It was hoped that, sooner or later, a shattered and hate-filled community would eventually find its balance around the memory of the former bishop. The establishment of a new cult, which reasserted the “presence” of the dead bishop both in Paradise and among his flock (a cult frequently instituted by the persons most implicated in the recent dissensions), was supposed to mark the end of strife.<sup>71</sup>

Only in communities endowed with unusual institutional stability, or in groups that were considered to be either so peripheral or so securely privileged as to stand at a distance from the contestational character of normal ecclesiastical life, was it possible for the *gloriosus obitus* of the soul at death to emerge as the sole, unchallenged focus of attention. Reassured on that central point — that the other world had reached out, in a single moment of glory, to take to itself one of its own members — such communities were under less pressure to scan this world for further signs of an abiding “presence” with which to stem an ever-present tide of potential

<sup>70</sup> L. Taylor, “The Uses of Death in Europe,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 62 (1989): 149–54, at p. 149.

<sup>71</sup> P. Fouracre, “Merovingian History and Merovingian Hagiography,” *Past and Present* 127 (1990): 3–38, at pp. 13–27.

disruption. Imaginatively and institutionally, members of such groups may well have felt that they lived in a more solid world. Paradoxically, therefore, Gregory's decisive "tilt" toward the other world, as it was taken up in the seventh century, does not necessarily reflect the anxiety of Christians reeling under the blows of a declining world, as the lamentable state of late-sixth-century Italy, seen through the lens of Gregory's own poignant rhetoric of the end of time, might lead us to suppose and as many outline histories of the Dark Ages seem to imply. Rather, outside Italy, a new style of "otherworldliness" was adopted with gusto by a new class of super-*potentes*, by a clearly marked, if narrow, elite of monks, nuns, and clergy that stretched from Rome and Toledo to Neustria, Iona, and Monk Wearmouth. We are dealing with a Tugendadel, an "aristocracy of virtue," clearly designated, in this period, by the spectacular nature of their deaths.<sup>72</sup>

We can follow this process closely in one region. By the middle of the seventh century, the Faremoutiers of Burgundofara, the Nivelles of Gertrude, and the Chelles, to which Queen Balthildis retired, so as to merit her own *gloriosus obitus*, were convents held to be *hors de concours*.<sup>73</sup> They do not appear to have suffered from the strains that wrought havoc in the convent of saint Rade Gund immediately after her death in 587. Clamorous weeping at Rade Gund's funeral and instant miraculous signs of her continued "presence" among the living did not prevent the eruption of a

<sup>72</sup> M. Heinzelmann, "Sanctitas und 'Tugendadel': Zu Konzeptionen von 'Heiligkeit' im 5. und 10. Jahrhundert," *Francia* 5 (1977): 741–52. See now F. X. Noble, "Rome in the Seventh Century," in *Archbishop Theodore: Commemorative Studies of His Life and Influence*, ed. M. Lapidge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 68–87, at pp. 75–83.

<sup>73</sup> See esp. Dierkens, "Prolégomènes," pp. 388–92; J. L. Nelson, "Queens as Jezabels: Brunhild and Balthild in Merovingian History," in *Politics and Ritual in Early Medieval Europe* (London: Hambledon, 1986), pp. 1–48, at pp. 38–43; I. N. Wood, *The Merovingian Kingdoms* (London: Longman, 1994), pp. 181–202; Fouracre and Gerberding, *Late Merovingian France*, pp. 97–118. While departing from his views on many issues, these are all built on the ground-breaking study of F. Prinz, *Frühes Mönchtum im Frankenreich*, 2nd ed. (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1988).

catastrophic revolt of the nuns only three years later.<sup>74</sup> Carefully protected by kings, queens, and noble clans, convents such as Faremoutiers, Chelles, and Nivelles were built of stronger stuff. From their abbesses down to the youngest child, death might come equally gloriously to all members of such convents. The supreme event could stand by itself, unmanipulated by the needs of factions to turn each death into an opportunity to assert the “presence” of the holy dead, as was the case in the strife-ridden cities of Gaul.

In this respect, it may be significant that the full flowering of a piety of the *gloriosus obitus* is best documented among groups of women. The great convents of northern Gaul were active centers of religious life in their regions, fully integrated into the world by complex privileges and endowments.<sup>75</sup> But notionally, at least, such groups of holy women were expected to stand to one side of the more frankly conflictual concerns of the male world.<sup>76</sup> Already in the *Dialogues* of Gregory, it is stories of nuns, and of noble nuns at that, that seem to look straight across more than a century. They bridge the seeming chasm, geographical and cultural, between the Rome of Boethius and the Faremoutiers of Burgundofara, where Jonas of Bobbio’s *hortamina* addressed to the nuns of the community took the form of a series of dramatic deathbed scenes. Galla the patrician, the daughter of the senator Symmachus, the father-in-law of Boethius, and so a direct descendent of none

<sup>74</sup> Gregory of Tours, *De gloria confessorum* 104, trans. Van Dam; Venantius Fortunatus, *Vita Radegundae* 1.38, in *Monumenta Germaniae Historica: Scriptores rerum merovingicarum* 2:376, trans. McNamara and Halborg, p. 85; see G. Scheibelreiter, “Königstöchter im Kloster: Radegund (+587) und der Nonnenaufstand von Poitiers,” *Mitteilungen des Instituts für österreichische Geschichtsforschung* 87 (1979): 1–37.

<sup>75</sup> I. Hen, *Culture and Religion in Merovingian Gaul, AD 481–751* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), pp. 54–60 and 150–52.

<sup>76</sup> On the entire subject of female monasticism in Gaul, G. Muschiol, *Famula Dei: Zur Liturgie in merowingischen Frauenklöstern*, Beiträge zur Geschichte des alten Mönchtums und des Benediktinertums 41 (Münster in Westfalen: Aschendorff, 1994), is outstanding; see also Julia M. H. Smith, “The Problem of Female Sanctity in Carolingian Europe: 780–920,” *Past and Present* 146 (1995): 3–37, at p. 34.

other than Quintus Aurelius Symmachus, the last defender of the pagan Altar of Victory, died speaking with Saint Peter in a bed-chamber in which great candelabra always burned: for her fine, aristocratic soul craved for soft light at all times. “This event remains a subject of memory in the same monastery up to the present, because it has been narrated by the older ladies to the younger, in such a way that the nuns who are now there tell the tale as if they themselves had been present.”<sup>77</sup>

Contemporary writers frequently gave the impression that the great seventh-century convents and monasteries of northern Gaul and of the British Isles were enclosed places of wonder, lying at “the world’s end, some at the sea jaws/Or over a dark lake. . . .”<sup>78</sup> But we should not be misled by this impression. They were no Little Giddings. They were impressive human settlements, characterized by a complex cultural and economic life,<sup>79</sup> “holy cities” of a new kind. Many such convents were marked off by a sharp, even secretive sense of the sacred. It was a different sense of the sacred from that to which a man such as Gregory of Tours had been accustomed. In the great urban shrines of Gaul, the basilicas were open to heaving crowds of men and women, rich and poor, clergy and laypersons, gathered around fully public tombs, “like a swarm of happy bees.”<sup>80</sup> Paradise came down to earth in a magnificently open-handed manner, in buildings filled with light, with

<sup>77</sup> Gregory, *Dialogi* 4.14.5, ed. de Vogüé, in *Grégoire le Grand*, p. 58.

<sup>78</sup> T. S. Eliot, *Little Gidding I*, in *Four Quartets* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1943), p. 32.

<sup>79</sup> C. Doherty, “The Monastic Town in Early Medieval Ireland,” and L. Swan, “Monastic Proto-Towns in Early Medieval Ireland,” in *The Comparative History of Urban Origins in Non-Roman Europe*, ed. H. B. Clark and A. Simms, BAR International Series 255 (Oxford: BAR, 1985), 45–75 and 77–102; E. James, “Archaeology and the Merovingian Monastery,” *Columbanus and Merovingian Monasticism*, ed. H. B. Clarke and M. Brennan, BAR International Series 113 (Oxford: BAR, 1981), pp. 33–55; and, by implication, for the foundations at Jarrow and Monk Wearmouth, I. N. Wood, “The Most Holy Abbot Ceolfrid,” Jarrow Lecture, 1995.

<sup>80</sup> Gregory of Tours, *De vita patrum* 8.6, trans. E. James, in *Gregory of Tours: Life of the Fathers* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1985), p. 71.

heavy gusts of fragrance and with constant noise. Now Paradise itself became that much more distant; it was no longer “represented” on earth as exuberantly as it had once been, as monastic communities, many of them associated with carefully segregated, upper-class women, took over the care of the saints.<sup>81</sup> Clearly delineated by sacred enclosures, which few laypersons dared to cross, often grouped around caches of precious and exotic relics that outsiders would rarely visit, the *crème de la crème* of the new, Merovingian aristocracy (and their equivalents in England and Ireland), monks and nuns alike, could be presented as waiting for the one supreme, and sufficient, manifestation of the other world in this world, at the moment of their death.

The imaginative structures associated with such death-scenes were shared by both sexes. We are faced by a singularly high-pitched way of validating the identity of a spiritual elite. Here were men and women, like Gertrude of Nivelles, whose deaths declared that “their soul and inner world was all of a piece with eternity.”<sup>82</sup> One is, indeed, struck by a sharpening of the “Platonic” streak in the hagiography of seventh-century Gaul.<sup>83</sup> The soul rises upward from the body with all the solemnity of an ancient moment of apotheosis. In this, the great abbesses of the

<sup>81</sup> Barbara H. Rosenwein, “Inaccessible Cloisters: Gregory of Tours and Episcopal Exemption,” and Julia M. H. Smith, “Women at the Tomb: Access to Relic Shrines in the Early Middle Ages,” in *Gregory of Tours*, ed. I. N. Wood and K. Mitchell (forthcoming). Though revealing in the cases discussed in these articles, the break with the past was neither irreversible nor universal. See now C. Hahn, “Seeing and Believing: The Construction of Sanctity in Early Medieval Saints’ Shrines,” *Speculum* 72 (1997): 1079–1106, and W. Jacobsen, “Saints’ Tombs in Frankish Architecture,” *ibid.*, pp. 1107–43.

<sup>82</sup> *Vita Geretrudis, Miracula* 1, ed. B. Krusch, in *Monumenta Germaniae Historica: Scriptorum rerum Merovingicarum* 2:464, trans. McNamara and Halborg, *Sainted Women*, p. 229; see now the excellent treatment of Bonnie Effros, “Symbolic Expressions of Sanctity: Gertrude of Nivelles in the Context of Merovingian Mortuary Custom,” *Viator* 27 (1996): 1–10.

<sup>83</sup> M. van Uytvanghe, *Stylisation biblique et condition humaine dans l’hagiographie mérovingienne (600-750)*, Verhandelingen van de Koninklijke Academie voor Wetenschappen: Klasse der Letteren, Jaargang 49, no. 120 (Brussels: Paleis der Academien, 1987, pp. 231–42.

north resemble the last pagan Platonists, the philosophers of Athens and Asia Minor, as they are presented to us in Eunapius of Sardis's *Lives of the Sophists* and in Marinus's *Life of Proclus*. They are shown as standing above the treacherous eddies of power. They performed few miracles in their lifetime. They were above such things. For them, as for Eunapius, miracles were garish sparks, struck off by conflict with lower powers in this lower world.<sup>84</sup> It is their death —in the case of leading pagans, a death often described, through the words of an oracle, as a *voyage de l'âme*, an orderly ascent of the soul to its rightful place among the stars<sup>85</sup>— that provided all their admirers needed. The taking of their soul up into heaven provided the final, conclusive glimpse of the dizzying otherworldly heights on which their identity had rested, even in this world. Great differences between the two world views remain. The souls of the great Platonic philosophers had ascended easily to heaven because they had descended from heaven almost as easily, by the happy accident of birth into a human body: the soul of Saint Gertrude was believed to have been finally “released” and set on a safe road to heaven only after years of anxious penance for her sins. But the silent sociological pressure to create imaginative structures that placed a sheltered and influential few as far as possible above human competition ensured that Proclus of Athens —presented by Marinus as the majestically unruffled “hierophant of the entire world”<sup>86</sup> — would have found that he had more in common than he might have expected with Gertrude, the great-aunt of Charles Martel: “For who in Europe [wrote her biographer, in a novel adaptation of the old geographi-

<sup>84</sup> Peter Brown, *Power and Persuasion in Late Antiquity: Towards a Christian Empire* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), pp. 143–44.

<sup>85</sup> Porphyry, *Vita Plotini* 22, commented by R. Goulet, “L’oracle d’Apollon dans la *Vie de Plotin*,” in *Porphyre: Vie de Plotin*, ed. L. Brisson et al. (Paris: J. Vrin, 1982), pp. 369–412.

<sup>86</sup> Marinus, *Life of Proclus* 19, ed. J. F. Boissonnade (Leipzig, 1814; Amsterdam: Hakkert, 1966), p. 16.

cal term] does not know the high status of her kin, their names and their estates?”<sup>87</sup>

The breakthrough of a sense of the distance of the other world, and a growing emphasis on the sheer height and dangers of the threshold that separated all but the most exceptional persons from its inner reaches, cannot be separated from a convergent phenomenon —the emergence, throughout seventh-century Western Europe, of new spiritual leaders, clearly linked to new social elites.

But that, of course, is only half the story. Those who were believed by their contemporaries to have passed most gloriously to heaven were precisely those who saw themselves as most endangered by their sins. Although endowed with a majestic destiny by her biographer, Gertrude of Nivelles was no exception to this fear. Indeed, it may well have been to none other than Ultán, the brother of Fursey, now settled at Fosses, southwest of Namur, that she sent a messenger just before her death, to ask on what day she would die: “for she says that, at one and the same time, she fears greatly just as she also rejoices.”<sup>88</sup> How these fears had changed, and in what manner they came to be relieved in the centuries that stretched from the age of Augustine to Fursey’s journey in the other world and Gertrude’s question to his brother, will be the subject of the next lecture. For in Western Europe, in Byzantium, and in the new world of Islam, the throne of God itself shifted a little in the course of the seventh century: significantly different views on the issue of purification and forgiveness would emerge in different regions, leading, eventually, to the very different worlds of medieval Catholicism, orthodox Byzantium, and Islam.

<sup>87</sup> *Vita Geretrudis*, praef., p. 454, trans. McNamara and Halborg, p. 223, and Fouracre and Gerberding, *Late Merovingian France*, p. 320; Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom*, p. 166.

<sup>88</sup> *Vita Geretrudis* 7, pp. 462–63, trans. McNamara and Halborg, p. 227, and Fouracre and Gerberding, *Late Merovingian France*, p. 235 with note 114.



LECTURE II. THE DECLINE OF THE EMPIRE OF GOD:  
FROM AMNESTY TO PURGATORY

In the first decade of the sixth century, Jacob, future bishop of Batnae in the region of Sarug, south of Edessa, on the road that led westward from Persia toward the Euphrates and Antioch, described the manner in which a parishioner might listen to a sermon:

When the preacher speaks of matters that concern perfection, it leaves him cold; when he tells stories of those who have stood out for their zeal for righteousness, his mind begins to wander. If a sermon starts off on the subject of continence, his head begins to nod; if it goes on to speak of sanctity, he falls asleep. But if the preacher speaks about the forgiveness of sins, then your humble Christian wakes up. This is talk about his own condition; he knows it from the tone. His heart rejoices; he opens his mouth; he waves his hands; he heaps praise on the sermon: for this is on a theme that concerns him.<sup>1</sup>

The Christian churches of late antiquity in all regions were full of such less than perfect persons. It was essential that the *peccata levia*, the lighter, barely conscious sins of the average Christians, should not be held to exclude them altogether from the hope of heaven. In the Latin world, Augustine of Hippo found himself forced to face this issue, in the early decades of the fifth century, in the course of the Pelagian controversy. The Pelagians seemed to imply that every sin was a conscious act of contempt for God and, consequently, worthy of Hellfire. A newly discovered letter of Augustine, written to none other than Cyril of Alexandria, shows that he had to defend himself against Pelagian accusations

Since my first delivery of this lecture, I have treated aspects of the same theme: see Peter Brown, "Vers la Naissance du Purgatoire: Amnistie et pénitence dans le christianisme occidental de l'Antiquité tardive au Haut Moyen Age," *Annales* 52 (1997): 1247–61.

<sup>1</sup>Jacob of Sarug, *On the Penitent Thief* 60, trans. P. S. Landersdorfer, in *Ausgewählte Schriften der Syrischen Dichter*, Bibliothek der Kichenväter (Kempten/Munich: J. Kosel, 1912), p. 363.

of minimizing the dangers of Hell.<sup>2</sup> Of the many grievances brought against Augustine, especially in modern times, softness on the issue of damnation is not the one we would expect! But, by the end of the Pelagian controversy, Augustine had gone out of his way to find room in the Catholic church and hope of heaven for those

who indulge their sexual appetites although within the decorous bonds of matrimony, and not only for the sake of children, but even because they enjoy it. Who put up with insults with less than complete patience. . . . Who may even burn, at times, to take revenge. . . . Who hold on to what they possess. Who give alms, but not very generously. Who do not grab other people's property, but who do defend their own—although they do it in the bishop's court and not before a secular judge.<sup>3</sup>

Though reassuringly average to modern, post-Augustinian eyes, such believers posed an acute problem to the late antique Christian imagination. They would die. Their *peccata levia* —which Augustine considered to be linked to a tenacious, subliminal love of “the world” and to habitual, unthinking overenjoyment of its licit goods —were sufficiently pervasive and elusive not to have been fully atoned for, by penance, in their own lifetime. Their souls were faced with unfinished business in the next world. A residue of unatoned, “light” sin, and, with it, an identity rendered deeply particular by the actions of a past life, crossed the boundary into an other world habitually defined by the absence of such feature.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Augustine, *Ep.* 4\*.4, ed. *Oeuvres de Saint Augustin 46 B: Lettres 1\*-29\**, Bibliothèque augustiniennne (Paris: Etudes augustiniennes, 1987), pp. 112–14; trans. R. Eno, in *Saint Augustine: Letters VI*, Fathers of the Church 81 (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 1989), pp. 42–43.

<sup>3</sup> Augustine, *Contra ii epistulas Pelagianorum* 3.5.14.

<sup>4</sup> Augustine, *Enchiridion* 68–69; *Enarrationes in Ps.* 37.36 and 80.20; see C. Carozzi, *Le voyage de l'âme dans l'au-delà d'après la littérature latine (Ve.–XIIIe. siècle)*, Collection de l'école française de Rome 189 (Rome: Palais Farnèse, 1994), pp. 22–33, with G. R. Edwards, “Purgatory: ‘Birth’ or ‘Evolution’?” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 36 (1985): 634–46, and E. Rebillard, *In hora mortis: Evolution de la pastorale chrétienne de la mort au IV e .et Ve. siècles*, Bibliothèque de l'école française d'Athènes et de Rome 283 (Rome: Palais Farnèse, 1994), pp. 160–67 and 214.

Forced to “think about the unthinkable” on this issue, Christians of the fifth and sixth centuries tended to fall back on the “fixed-components” of their thought-world —to well-established imaginative structures. But no one imaginative structure could do justice to the full extent of the problem. Each structure reflected significantly different areas of experience. As a result, what is usually presented as the emergence of a doctrine of purgatory in the Latin West may best be seen in terms of the inconclusive juxtaposition of two such structures. One structure was associated with the eventual purgation of the soul after death; the other stressed God’s exercise of His sovereign prerogative of mercy.

The two imaginative structures abutted each other somewhat awkwardly in the back of the minds of premedieval Christians, when they addressed the problem of the sinful dead. The opening of the way toward a doctrine of purgatory in the West, in the crucial period between late antiquity and the Middle Ages, came about as a result of shifts in the relative imaginative weight of these two structures. A pervasive and deeply rooted notion of the amnesty of God resolved the problem of the unatoned sins of the average believer by appeal to God’s sovereign, dramatic ability to wipe the slate clean, much as an emperor was expected, at high moments of his power, to offer pardon to minor criminals and to cancel arrears in taxes. This notion enjoyed a density that takes some effort of the modern imagination to recapture. Persistent recourse to the notion of an amnesty of God, freely offered to still imperfect souls, overshadowed and inhibited the growing demand for some form of purgation beyond the grave, by which the souls of the departed were made fully worthy to enjoy God’s presence.

Images of power, grown from the ground up over the centuries among Mediterranean and Near Eastern populations long accustomed to the symbolic weight of empire, came to lose a little of their unchallenged density in regions of the postimperial Latin West. As a result, a new synthesis of amnesty and purgation was free to come to the fore. For only when the spectacular, but studi-

ously unparticularized powers of amnesty associated with the Empire of God receded, if only a little, in the Christian imagination could souls after death come to enjoy (in the minds of the living) the free play of a clear, interim identity, conferred on them by the medieval doctrine of purgatory. They were no longer a somewhat faceless group of erring subjects, waiting to receive, at an ill-defined moment of time, the all-sufficient grace of God's pardon. Hence my title: there is a relation between the "Decline of the Empire of God" and the shift from "amnesty" to "purgatory" that would render early medieval Western Europe different from Byzantium and Islam —both of them societies where the "imperial" image of God emerged, if anything, greatly strengthened by the crisis of the seventh century.

Our first problem, then, is one of imaginative perspective. It is the tradition of Augustine and Gregory the Great, and the consequences that later ages would draw from their works, which seems close to us. This tradition assumed that, since the fall of Adam, spiritual growth must be a prolonged and painful process. It might, indeed, take more than a lifetime to become worthy of the presence of God. Exactly how slow the process of healing beyond the grave might be and precisely what experiences might be associated with it remained open questions. A strongly rooted imaginative tradition gave a major place to the operation of "fire" of some kind.<sup>5</sup> Ever since the third century, Christians had appealed to the authority of Paul's *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, chapter 3, verses 13 and 15: "and the fire shall try every man's work of what sort it is . . . If any man's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: he himself shall be saved, yet so as by fire."<sup>6</sup>

For Clement of Alexandria and for Origen, this was a "wise fire," "strong and capable of cleansing evil."<sup>7</sup> Seen in this way,

<sup>5</sup> See esp. C. M. Edsman, *La Baptême de Feu*, Uppsala Universitet Nytestamentliga Seminar: Acta 9 (Uppsala: Lundqvist, 1940), pp. 3-12.

<sup>6</sup> 1 *Corinthians* 3:13 and 15,

<sup>7</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Eclogae propheticae* 25.4 and *Stromateis* 7.6; Origen, *Hom. 3 in Ps.* 36.1. See H. Crouzel, "L'exégèse origénienne de 1 *Cor.* 3:11-15 et la

fire was a symbol of God's ability to transform every level of His own creation. Yet, at the same time, it was a drastic fire, which guarded the ontological threshold between the human and the divine. The "wise fire" of Clement and his contemporaries demanded a transformation more total than the mere purgation of individual sins. To pass through that fire was to go beyond the human—to approach God by entering a firestorm, in which human beings lost their very nature and took on the fiery essence of the angels who pressed in around His throne.<sup>8</sup> For later Latin thinkers, such an image of transformation by fire was too overpowering to be entirely welcome. Human identity itself, even the all-important distinction between saints and sinners, might be swallowed up in a furnace of such intensity. In the third century, Origen could suggest that "even a Paul and a Peter comes to that fire."<sup>9</sup> This was a thought that Latin Christians of later times, their religious sensibility attuned to the cult of the saints, were unwilling to entertain.

What mattered, rather, for Augustine and Gregory the Great was that the soul must change. It must undergo a process of "purgation" thought of on a largely medical model. In this process, the soul could not be passive. The total mobilization of the patient behind his or her cure, which was the secret of ancient medicine,<sup>10</sup>

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purification eschatologique," in *Epektasis: Mélanges patristiques offerts au cardinal Jean Daniélou*, ed. J. Fontaine and C. Kannengiesser (Paris: Beauchesne, 1972), pp. 273–83; W. C. van Unnik, "The 'Wise Fire' in a Gnostic Eschatological Vision," in *Kyriakon: Festschrift für Johannes Quasten* (Münster in Westfalen: Aschendorff, 1970), 1:277–88; C. Carozzi, *Eschatologie et au-delà: Recherches sur l'Apocalypse de Paul* (Aix-en-Provence: Université de Provence, 1996), pp. 71–76.

<sup>8</sup> E.g., 3 *Enoch* 15.1: "at once my flesh turned to flame . . . and the substance of my body to blazing fire," trans. P. Alexander, in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. J. H. Charlesworth (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1983), 1:267.

<sup>9</sup> Origen, *Hom. 3 in Ps.* 36.1.

<sup>10</sup> A. Rousselle, "Du sanctuaire au thaumaturge: La guérison en Gaule au I<sup>er</sup> siècle," *Annales* 31 (1976) : 1085–1107, and *Croire et quérir: La foi en Gaule dans l'Antiquité tardive* (Paris: Fayard, 1990), p. 101; H. Lutterbach, "Der *Christus medicus* und die *sancti medici*: Das wechselvolle Verhältnis zweier Grundmotive christlicher Frömmigkeit zwischen Spätantike und Frühen Neuzeit," *Saeculum* 47 (1996): 239–81.

was the *sine qua non*, also, of the life of the sincere Christian penitent.

*Virga directionis, virga regni tui.*  
*a rod of setting right is the rod of your kingdom.*  
 (Psalm 45 {44}: 6)

God cannot so act as not to punish sins. . . . While God withholds His hand {in forms of visible punishment} from your sins, withhold not your own. Turn yourself to the punishment of your own sins, since it is not possible for sin to be *unpunished*. The punishment must either be at your own hands or at His. You take it on yourself, that He may forgive you.<sup>11</sup>

It goes without saying that, for men such as Augustine and Gregory the Great, an overwhelming sense of the majesty and mercy of God crowned the great arch of human penance, in this world and in the next. But the base of the arch rested firmly on classical soil. The responsibility of the sinner for his or her own sins linked final forgiveness to personal transformation. God was not content with substandard souls. Each soul must learn to depend “more closely and with greater love” upon Him, so as to absorb into itself, and not merely experience from the outside, “the fine-turned inner rule” of His righteousness.<sup>12</sup> Worked upon continuously by God’s grace, the sinner must be changed from the inside, in a process that admitted no shortcuts. Amnesty *from* God, in itself, would not satisfy a soul that hungered to be *with* God. In this sense, talk of the necessity for the “purgation” of the soul as the *sine qua non* of entry into the presence of God retained a distant link, across the centuries, to the long, austere labor on the self associated with the moral world of the classical philosopher.

What is important to stress is that the moral world of the classical philosopher was notable for a carefully maintained “vacuum

<sup>11</sup>Augustine, *Enarratio in Ps.* 44.18; see J. Burnaby, *Amor Dei: A Study in the Religion of St. Augustine* (1938, repr. Norwich: Canterbury Press, 1991), pp. 196–97.

<sup>12</sup>Gregory, *Dialogi* 4.46.9, ed. A. de Vogüé, in *Grégoire le Grand: Les Dialogues* 3, Sources chrétiennes 265 (Paris: Le Cerf, 1980), p. 166.

of power.” Slow, authentic self-transformation, pursued without fear or favor, had always been the upper-class philosopher’s answer to the proximity of overwhelming power —power of vast might and largely unconsidered motivation, as capable of reckless acts of generosity as of crushing severity. Philosophers should not act in this manner, nor should they depend on the good graces of those who did.<sup>13</sup>

Yet Christianity, like Judaism, had endowed God with just those attributes of infinite power, linked to the sovereign prerogative of mercy, which characterized “the kings of this world.” *Clementia* was an all-important imperial prerogative because the act of forgiveness was a stunning suspension, on the part of a Roman emperor, of an untrammelled power to harm. It was the same with God. The words of the Collect for the twelfth Sunday after Pentecost, in the *Gelasian Sacramentary*, “Deus, qui omnipotentiam tuam parcendo maxime et miserando manifestas,”<sup>14</sup> appeal to a frankly “imperial” virtue in God. It was a virtue still appreciated by those Tudor and Stuart divines who incorporated the same Collect, without change, in *The Book of Common Prayer*: “O God, who declareth thy almighty power chiefly in showing mercy and pity.”<sup>15</sup>

We must be careful not to trivialize the notion of the “imperial” power of God by treating it as a simple projection upward, into heaven, of the workings of the contemporary Roman empire. It drew on images of divine monarchy that reached back for a millennium, to the kingdoms of the ancient Near East and their

<sup>13</sup> Peter Brown, *Power and Persuasion in Late Antiquity: Towards a Christian Empire* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), pp. 62–69; P. Hadot, *La citadelle intérieure: Introduction aux Pensées de Marc Aurèle* (Paris: Fayard, 1992), p. 324.

<sup>14</sup> *The Gelasian Sacramentary* 3.6, ed. H. A. Wilson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1894), p. 227.

<sup>15</sup> *The Book of Common Prayer: Collects. Traditional: Proper 21* (Evanston, 111.: Seabury Press, 1977), p. 182.

Hellenistic successors.<sup>16</sup> It was splendidly nonspecific and, so, capable of forming an imaginative backdrop to many monarchical regimes other than the Roman empire. By the year 400 A.D., it was so pervasive a model of power that it would be impossible to decide whether, in offering the occasional amnesty, an emperor helped to mould the image of the Christian God, or whether, as is more likely, imperial amnesty followed the divine model, in imitating the mercy of God.

But nor should we underestimate the constant presence of imperial practice in the minds of late antique Christians, and the manner in which this practice helped them to frame the question of the forgiveness of unatoned sins beyond the grave. A solution that placed a heavy emphasis upon a relation to the self, favored by Christian moralists such as Augustine and Gregory the Great, was frequently eclipsed by a solution posed in terms of relations with power. God's supreme power assumed, on an imperial model, an uncircumscribed reserve of mercy that overshadowed the strict implementation of His justice. This ultimate, unplumbed reserve of mercy might be tapped, even at the last moment, by the plaintiff sinner. In the *Sacramentary of Gellone*, the soul of the recently deceased, still soiled with sins, is held up to the amnesty of God:

et si de regione tibi contraria . . . contraxit . . . tua pietate abluere indulgendo . . . tu, Deus, inoleta bonitate clementer deleas, pietate indulgeas, oblivioni in perpetuum tradas.

And if this soul has contracted stains which come from this mortal region, so contrary to Your own. . . . May your Piety wash them away by showing indulgence, may You, by the goodness rooted in your nature, annul it with Clemency, that you may remit its debts in an act of amnesty, that You may consign [those debts] to perpetual oblivion.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup>E.g., A. Ziegler, *Die Königsleichnisse des Midrasch beleuchtet durch die römische Kaiserzeit* (Breslau: Schöttlaender, 1903); N. Johansson, *Parahletoi* (Lund: Ohlsson, 1940); H. Mattingly, "The Roman 'Virtues,'" *Harvard Theological Review* 30 (1937): 103–7.

<sup>17</sup>*Sacramentary of Gellone* 2895, ed. A. Dumas, in *Corpus Christianorum*, Series Latina 159 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1981), p. 462. See D. Sicard, *La Liturgie de la*



Furthermore, a long-established model of the workings of royal power had set in place a mechanism for such pleas for mercy to be considered. The notion of absolute power, and the consequent right to exercise amnesty, deliberately left space for a third factor: the presence, near the ruler, of persons whose principal, most publicly acclaimed privilege was the right, bestowed on them by the ruler, to exercise “freedom of speech” so as to forward claims for forgiveness. Those admitted to the presence of God —the angels and the saints—were authorized by Him to plead on behalf of their sinful protégés. They were intercessors. Indeed, they were frankly recognized as *patroni*, as “patrons” sufficiently confident of enjoying the friendship of God to bring before Him, with some hope of success, pleas for mercy on behalf of their many far from perfect clients.

All this is well known. The cult of the saints in the Latin world was characterized, among its most vocal exponents, by an intense piety of grateful dependence upon powerful protectors, thought of as *patroni* at the court of God.” What needs to be stressed, in this context, is the manner in which this warm sense of dependence on the power of others imposed a distinctive structure on the expectations of forgiveness harbored by contemporary Christians.

In the first place, the speculations of anonymous *misericordes*—of “mercifully minded” persons, whose views are referred to by Augustine and others —were more widespread than we might, at first sight, suppose.<sup>19</sup> Late antique Christians did not invariably

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*Mort dans l'Eglise latine des origines à la réforme carolingienne*, Liturgiewissenschaftliche Quellen und Forschungen 63 (Münster in Westfalen: Aschendorff, 1978), pp. 261–345, and F. Paxton, *Christianizing Death: The Creation of a Ritual Process in Early Medieval Europe* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1990), pp. 62 and 116–19.

<sup>18</sup>Brown, *Power and Persuasion*, pp. 67–69; Johansson, *Parakletoi*, pp. 120–78, with Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), pp. 62–68, and *Authority and the Sacred: Aspects of the Christianisation of the Roman World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 73–74.

<sup>19</sup>H. de Lavalette, “L’interprétation du Ps. 1, 5 chez les Pères ‘miséricordieux’ latins,” *Recherches de Science Religieuse* 48 (1960): 544–63.

contemplate with joy the pains of Hell for any but notorious sinners and for blatant, contumacious outsiders. But the misgivings of the “merciful-minded” were not modern misgivings. They did not challenge the severity of God. But they frequently appealed, beyond that severity, to His power. God had a right, uncircumscribed and unplumbed by human expectations, to remit and to deliver from punishment. If this was so, then time itself took on a different meaning in the other world. The necessary time of purgation, for instance, was not the only measure of duration beyond the grave. Indeed, it was not the most important. The punishment of sin might be dramatically shortened for some. For others, the seeming immobility of eternal punishment might yet be broken by mysterious, sovereign acts of remission.

When he came to the penultimate book of the *City of God*, Augustine found that he had to deal with a surprisingly wide variety of views on the amnesty of God, “which I have had experience of, expressed in conversations with me.”<sup>20</sup> In this, he was not reporting only the wishful thinking of woolly minded persons. He was touching the outlines of an imaginative structure endowed with exceptional long-term solidity. What he heard was that, at the Last Judgment, the power of the saints would prevail to obtain forgiveness for all but the worst sinners. For, so the argument went, if the saints had prayed for their persecutors, when alive, how much more effective would their prayers be now that they stood in the presence of God. At that time, their prayers would no longer be impeded by the frailty of their bodies; and their enemies now lay “prostrate before them, as humble suppliants.” What saint could resist such an occasion to show mercy?<sup>21</sup> The amnesty granted by God in answer to the saints, on their great day of intercession, would be wide. It would certainly cover all baptized Catholics who had partaken of the Eucharist and, maybe, many others.”

<sup>20</sup>Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 21.18.1, ed. B. Dombart and A. Kalb, in *Corpus Christianorum* 48 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1955), p. 784.

<sup>21</sup> Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 18.9–11, p. 784.

<sup>22</sup> Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 21.19–23, pp. 785–89.

As for Hell itself, its eternity might also be disrupted by God's amnesty. The purifying fire, of which Paul had spoken, was the fire of Hell itself, into which sinful Catholics would be immersed for a short time.<sup>23</sup>

It was at this that Augustine drew the line. As Brian Daley makes plain, in his admirably clear *Handbook of Patristic Eschatology*, "For Augustine, the aspect of damnation [to Hellfire] that needed most elaborate defence was not its materiality but its eternity."<sup>24</sup> He was unwilling to give a definitive answer on the extent of the power of intercession enjoyed by the saints on the Last Day and on the exact nature of the sins for which this intercession might prove effective. In the *City of God*, as in his preaching,<sup>25</sup> Augustine was a conscientious bishop, who thought that it was better for Christians to remain sorry rather than feel safe: "for perhaps such things remain hidden lest the zeal to make progress slacken in its concern to avoid all sins."<sup>26</sup> But it is on the issue of time that we can sense the collision between a Neo-Platonist's hunger for a "total freedom from duration, extension or sequence"<sup>27</sup> in the presence of God and tacit acceptance, by others, of an "imperial" model, in which amnesty was expected to express itself precisely by the cutting up of time into significant periods of remission.

Thus, in around 400, the poet Prudentius, who, we should remember, was a retired provincial governor, could take for granted when he wrote his *Cathemerinon*, his poem *On the Daily Round*, that every Easter, perhaps even every Sunday, was marked by a spell of remission of punishment for that "population of dark shades" who were confined in Hell or, what amounted to much the same thing, in the Hell-like prison of the netherworld, in which

<sup>23</sup> Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 21.21.13–20, p. 786.

<sup>24</sup> Brian E. Daley, *The Hope of the Early Church: A Handbook of Patristic Eschatology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 149.

<sup>25</sup> E.g., Augustine, *Enarratio in Ps.* 37.6 and 80.20.

<sup>26</sup> Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 21.27.192, p. 804.

<sup>27</sup> Daley, *Hope of the Early Church*, p. 132.

they awaited definitive sentence at the Last Judgement.<sup>28</sup> Such remission was only to be expected. It had worked its way deep into the language of amnesty in a Christian empire. Valentinian I could hardly be called the most gentle of emperors. Yet he knew how to celebrate Easter in a manner worthy of his God: “On account of Easter, which we celebrate from the depths of our heart, We release from confinement all those persons who are bound by criminal charges and who are confined to prison.”<sup>29</sup> In the yet more pious Ravenna of the emperor Honorius, prisoners would be released from jail every Sunday, to be conducted to the local baths, “under trustworthy guard,” subject to the supervision of the local bishop.<sup>30</sup>

These, of course, were temporary measures, from which major criminals were excluded. They did not imply an emptying of the jails. They referred only to pretrial confinement, which was the sole legitimate form of imprisonment admitted in Roman law.<sup>31</sup> Yet such gestures, and the language that they adopted, did ensure that imperial and Christian ideas of the mercy of God kept pace, in a satisfactorily concrete manner, in the minds of late antique Christians such as Prudentius.

By contrast, the idea left Augustine cold. Compared with what was truly at stake for sinners excluded from the presence of God, it was a trivial solution:

There is no harm in their thinking, if this gives them pleasure, that the penalties of the damned are at certain intervals of time somewhat eased. . . . But even if [the physical punishment imposed by] this wrath of God were the slightest that can be imagined—to perish from the kingdom of God, to be alienated from the presence of God, to be deprived of the abun-

<sup>28</sup> Prudentius, *Cathemerinon* 5. 125–36, ed. H. S. Thomson, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1969), 1:46.

<sup>29</sup> *Codex Theodosianus* 9.38.3.

<sup>30</sup> *Codex Theodosianus* 9.3.7.

<sup>31</sup> Brown, *Power and Persuasion*, p. 153; P. L. Gatier, “Nouvelles inscriptions de Gérasa: Le prison de l’évêque Paul,” *Syria* 62 (1982): 297–305.

dance of God's sweetness. . . . So great is *that* punishment, that no torments we have experienced can be compared to it.<sup>32</sup>

Faced by so deeply serious a dismissal, it is difficult to keep in mind the extent to which the immediate future of Christian views of God's amnesty rested with individuals such as Prudentius rather than with Augustine. The issue of periodic respite from punishment in Hell, raised by Prudentius, was, in itself, somewhat peripheral: it was simply a testing of the outer limits of a very solidly established structure of expectations.<sup>33</sup> In the world of Gregory of Tours, even the most seemingly insignificant miracles associated with the tombs of the saints of Gaul were heavy with meaning because they hinted at the eventual power of the saints to secure protection for their worshipers at the Last Day. Tiny wonders in themselves — a remission, for Gregory, of his throbbing headaches, the dramatic shattering of a glass of wine into which a blue-bottle had fallen, in Poitou — they offered a majestic upward glimpse, psychologically magnified to huge dimensions by the surreal insignificance of the incidents in question, of the backdrop against which the saints would finally intervene to protect their charges:

God deigns to protect in this world the foster children who respect His friends {the saints}. He ensures that the martyrs whom He receives after their victory as immortals in the beauty of Paradise will be of assistance when invoked by His [Christian] people. At the moment of Judgment, when eternal glory surrounds the martyrs, either the mercy or their mediating prayers will excuse us or a lenient punishment will pass, for a time, over us.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Augustine, *Enchiridion* 112, trans. E. Evans (London: SPCK, 1953), pp. 97–98.

<sup>33</sup> C. Carozzi, *Eschatologie et au-delà: Recherches sur l'Apocalypse de Paul* (Aix-en-Provence: Université de Provence, 1994), pp. 127–31.

<sup>34</sup> Gregory of Tours, *De gloria martyrum* 106, trans. R. Van Dam, in *Gregory of Tours: Glory of the Martyrs* (Liverpool: University of Liverpool Press, 1988), pp. 133–34.

Reticent about many aspects of himself and his family, Gregory is at his most urgently autobiographical when he thinks of himself on the Last Day:

And when, at the Last Judgment, I am to be placed on the left hand, Martin will deign to pick me out from the middle of the goats with his sacred right hand. He will shelter me behind his back. And when, in accordance with the Judge's sentence, I am to be condemned to the infernal flames, he will throw over me that sacred cloak, by which he once covered the King of Glory [by sharing it with Christ in the form of the beggar with whom he had divided his officer's robe] and will gain a reprieve for me, as angels tell the King. . . . "This is the man for whom Saint Martin pleads."<sup>35</sup>

The world of Gregory of Tours was characterized by repeated, dramatic scenes of amnesty. In this respect, the Merovingian state of the sixth century had remained formidably "sub-Roman." Its upper classes found themselves implicated, on a day-to-day basis, in the stark antitheses of justice and forgiveness, abject humiliation and protection, which formed the ever-present background to the religious sensibility of Gregory himself. Faced by the King of Heaven, kings knew exactly how to behave. In 561, after a reign of fifteen years, the aging king Chlothar came to the shrine of Saint Martin at Tours:

in front of the tomb . . . he went over all the actions in which he had, perhaps, failed to do what was right. He prayed with much groaning that the blessed confessor should beseech the mercy of the Lord, so that, through Martin's intervention on his behalf, God might cancel the account of those things which he had done wrongly.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Gregory of Tours, *De virtutibus sancti Martini* 2.60, trans. R. Van Dam, in *Saints and Their Miracles in Late Antique Gaul* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 259.

<sup>36</sup> Gregory of Tours, *Liber historiarum* 4.21.

The *potentes* of the kingdom were expected to behave in the same manner before their king. *Repraesentari*, to be “led into the presence of the king,” was at once a privilege and a moment of danger.<sup>37</sup> Guntram Boso, for instance, was a notoriously tricky member of the newly formed elite of Austrasia. But he was also sufficiently close to the Catholic piety of Gregory to allow himself, on one occasion, to be persuaded by a soothsayer that he would be Gregory’s successor as bishop of Tours.<sup>38</sup> When he fell out of favor with Brunhild, the queen-mother, he knew what he should do:

He began to go around the bishops and courtiers. . . . He then pinned his hopes on gaining pardon through bishop Agerich of Verdun, who was god-father to the king . . . stripped of his arms and in fetters, he was brought into the King’s presence by the bishop. . . . Falling at the king’s feet, he said: *Peccavi* “I have sinned. . . .” The king ordered him to be raised from the ground and place him in the hands of the bishop: “Holy bishop, he is yours. . . .”<sup>39</sup>

And so, once again, Guntram Boso wriggled free.

Count Leudast, by contrast, failed to heed Gregory’s advice on a similar occasion. When granted an audience with the king in Paris, in 583, he did not go out of his way to gain the good graces of Queen Fredegund: “unforesightful and silly man that he was, he placed his confidence in the fact that he had gained the favor of coming into the presence of the king.” Without the right intercessor, admittance to the royal presence did him no good. Left on his own, unprotected, Leudast was immediately “jumped” by the queen’s servants, taken to a neighboring country villa, and killed in an atrocious manner.<sup>40</sup>

In Gregory’s world, the demons did just that to those who neglected, or who had forfeited, the protection of the saints. Un-

<sup>37</sup> Gregory of Tours, *Liber historiarum* 5.20; 6.10 and 24; 7.38; 8.6.

<sup>38</sup> Gregory of Tours, *Liber historiarum* 5.14.

<sup>39</sup> Gregory of Tours, *Liber historiarum* 9.8.

<sup>40</sup> Gregory of Tours, *Liber historiarum* 6.32.

guarded souls might be swept away by the demons at any time. Neglect of the protection offered by the sign of the Cross exposed even innocent persons to passing affliction in this life.<sup>41</sup> At the moment of death, the themes of protection by the saints and the ever-present threat of ambush by the demons were played out with gripping intensity. The troubled last stages of a deathbed could speak directly of protection and its chilling alternative. When Dioscola, the niece of none other than Bishop Salvius of Albi, lay dying in the convent of Saint Radegund, the efforts of the saints on her behalf were palpable as death approached. Finally, speaking through the persons of the possessed, the demons began to howl with frustration, as Dioscola's soul brushed past them, escorted to safety by Saint Michael.<sup>42</sup> These incidents meant so much to Gregory because they were so many overtures to the final scene of protection, amnesty, and possible abandonment that filled his heart as he thought of the Last Day.

Gregory wrote as he did because he considered that his contemporaries had become complacent. They had allowed that last scene to slip from their minds. His careful calculations of time and detailed record of signs of growing disorder around him were meant to warn those who, unlike himself, were inclined "to place no further hope on the approaching end of the world."<sup>43</sup> Just as Paradise pressed into this world, not only around the tombs of the saints, but into so many unconsidered nooks and crannies of this world, made fragrant with scattered hints of heaven, so the throne of God at the Last Day was a looming presence, rendered perpetually actual to him, in his own world, by so many sharp, small scenes of patronage, protection, and amnesty.

<sup>41</sup> E.g., Gregory of Tours, *De virtutibus sancti Martini* 2.45, trans. Van Dam, in *Saints and Their Miracles*, p. 252.

<sup>42</sup> Gregory of Tours, *Liber historiarum* 6.30.

<sup>43</sup> Gregory of Tours, *Liber historiarum* 1, praef.: *qui adpropinquantem finem mundi disperant*. The reader should know that my interpretation of this phrase differs from the *communis opinio*. L. Thorpe, *Gregory of Tours: The History of the Franks* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974), p. 67, translates "who are losing hope



On both these issues, Gregory may already have come to find himself, by the late 580s, a little out of date. In our last lecture, we have seen how an influential trend in religious sensibility had begun to gather momentum in his own lifetime and in the generation after his death. This would tilt interest in the other world away from its day-to-day manifestations among the living. Serendipitous wonder at the many random hints of the presence of the other world in this world gave way to a more sharply focused emphasis on the world beyond the grave. New forms of literature stressed the prolonged and arduous nature of the journey of the soul after death, thereby conveying a novel sense of peril, which served to heighten admiration for the spectacular deaths of the privileged few.

As a result, the Throne of God itself became that much more distant. The Ireland in which Fursey had his visions, among his kin, in the early 630s, was a land of virtually no state power and, so, a land without amnesty. Irish kings could be as forceful and

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*as they see the end of the world coming nearer.*" I would translate "who do not expect the end of the world to come." *Disperare* can mean "not expect, lose hope of": cf. *Liber historiarum* 4.12, citing Sidonius Apollinaris, *Letter* 2.1: *nec accipiebat instrumenta desperans*, trans. O. M. Dalton, in *The Letters of Sidonius* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1915), 1:35: "nor does he trouble to furnish himself with deeds, knowing it hopeless to prove a title." Commenting on this passage, B. Krusch renders *desperans* as *spem nullam habens*, in *Gregorii Turonensis Opera Historica: Monumenta Germaniae Historica: Scriptores rerum Merovingicarum* 1:1 (Hanover: Hahn, 1951), p. 142, note 2. See also *Sortes Sangallenses* 33, R.8: *Habebis spem fidei, sed de desperato*, in A. Dold, *Die Orakelsprüche im St. Galler Palimpsestcodex 908*, *Sitzungsberichte* 225:4 (Vienna: österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1948, p. 24, with note on p. 110: "from someone you do not expect." See A. H. B. Breukelaar, *Historiography and Episcopal Authority in Sixth-Century Gaul: The Histories of Gregory of Tours Interpreted in Historical Context*, *Forschungen zur Kirchen- und Dogmengeschichte* 57 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1994), p. 300 and note 23, and on Gregory's attitude to the approaching end of time, see pp. 52–55 and 169–74, with M. Heinzelmann, *Gregor von Tours (538–94): "Zehn Bücher der Geschichte": Historiographie und Gesellschaftskonzept im 6. Jht.* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1994), pp. 71–72. See also R. Landes, "Lest the Millennium Be Fulfilled: Apocalyptic Expectations and the Pattern of Western Chronography 100–800 C.E.," *The Use and Abuse of Eschatology in the Middle Ages*, ed. W. Verbeke, D. Verhelst, and R. Welkenhuysen (Louvain: Louvain University Press, 1988), pp. 137–211 at pp. 166–67. Gregory's attitude was that expected of pious persons: see the preamble for a pious foundation in Marculf, *Formulae* 2.3, ed. A. Uddholm (Uppsala: Eranos, 1962), p. 178.

violent as any Merovingian, but their power remained carefully masked by a “polite political discourse,” which saw them, still, as no more than chieftains, surrounded by free clients.<sup>44</sup> It was a world where, in theory at least, status and political power were carefully disjoined in a manner that contrasted sharply with the sub-Roman structures of Gregory’s Gaul.<sup>45</sup> Law and order derived from “elaborate norms of conduct . . . and a set of juridical institutions that positively sanctioned adhesion to these norms.”<sup>46</sup> While a state, such as the Merovingian kingdom, could impose adherence to legal norms by fear of savage punishment tempered by gestures of amnesty, Irish law “controlled through a system of prevention and frustration of individual autonomy, which limited the social damage any one person could do.”<sup>47</sup> Caught in a “system of control embedded in the kinship group,” the life of a compatriot of Furseay notably lacked high moments of amnesty, granted by a superior power. Such power did not exist, or, if it did, it could not show itself in so starkly “vertical” a manner. Life was controlled “horizontally,” as it were. It involved the unremitting accumulation and paying-off of obligations: the making of honor-payments to “restore the face” of injured neighbors; the offering of mutual sureties (which could include the grim exchange of hostages); the creation of agreements sanctioned by liability to distraint of cattle; innumerable claims from fellow-kinsmen, enforced, in the last resort, by “the horror of a visit by a professional satirist.”<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, the working of this system was jealously supervised by a distinct class of professional lawyers,

<sup>44</sup> R. Chapman Stacey, *The Road to Judgement: From Custom to Court in Medieval Ireland and Wales* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1994), p. 111.

<sup>45</sup> N. B. Aitchison, “Kingship, Society and Sacrality: Rank, Power and Ideology in Early Medieval Ireland,” *Traditio* 49 (1994): 45–75.

<sup>46</sup> N. Patterson, *Cattle Lords and Clansmen: The Social Structure of Early Ireland* (Notre Dame, Ind.: Notre Dame University Press, 1994), p. 328.

<sup>47</sup> Patterson, *Cattle Lords and Clansmen*, pp. 328–29.

<sup>48</sup> Patterson, *Cattle Lords and Clansmen*, p. 348.

a group of persons unique in northern Europe, who had recently been challenged to assert their skills in an even more ambitious fashion, through symbiosis with a rival elite, the literate Christian clergy.<sup>49</sup>

No matter how acutely asymmetrical relations of power could become in Irish society, the society's own self-image precluded mercy. No individual had the power to halt the relentless workings of a law by which a society policed itself in the near-absence of the state. While Gregory of Tours looked out on what was still a late Roman society, where the daily exercise of power gave imaginative weight to hopes of amnesty on the Last Day, Fursey saw no such thing. What he saw, rather, was a world where every debt must be paid and every wrong atoned —he saw a world that was a lot more like purgatory.

Hence the deliberately inconclusive nature of Fursey's vision. Part of this comes from the fact that he was a man who had "returned" from the other world, with a message only about its lower reaches. But that genre in itself implied a view of the world that would have puzzled a contemporary Byzantine reader, as would the many absences in Fursey's account. The Throne of God is nowhere to be seen. The escorting angels and the demons act as if they are in a space of their own. The angels have none of the brisk confidence of officials sent directly from the Throne —instantly recognizable as such by their court dress.<sup>50</sup> Nor do the demons offer their challenge according to the correct forms of Roman administrative law. They do not produce a heavy sheaf of documents, to prove their claims for outstanding debts.<sup>51</sup> Instead, the demons line up against Fursey, "in battle array," showering him with

<sup>49</sup> Stacey, *The Road to Judgement*, pp. 127–40.

<sup>50</sup> E.g., Leontius of Neapolis, *Life of John the Almsgiver* 27 and 44, trans. E. Dawes and N. H. Baynes, in *Three Byzantine Saints* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1948), pp. 239 and 255.

<sup>51</sup> Anastasius of Sinai, *Oratio in Ps. 6*, in *Patrologia Graeca* 89:1141C— the story of the death of a brigand chief; see C. Farkas, "Räuberbehörde in Thrakien," *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 86/87 (1993/94): 462–70.

arrows and setting up a spine-chilling battle-yell.<sup>52</sup> They know their rights: “If God is just, this man will not enter the kingdom of Heaven. . . . For He has promised that every sin that is not atoned for on earth must be avenged in Heaven.”<sup>53</sup> Only the angels invoke a higher court, by saying “Let us be judged before the Lord.” For the demons, that is the last straw: “Let us get out of here, for here there are no norms of justice.”<sup>54</sup> In Constantinople, by contrast (and maybe only a generation after the writing down of the *Visions* of Fursey), a vision concerned a monk accused of much the same sin as Fursey himself —the abuse of gifts given to him by a penitent —showed angels and demons appealing jointly, straight to the Throne, and receiving, instantly, a divine reply.<sup>55</sup>

More significant still, the fire that, in a late antique imaginative model, usually ringed the Throne of God, as the last barrier that the human soul must cross, has lost its association with it. Cut loose from the divine Presence, it acts on its own, guarding the threshold between this life and the next: “It searches out each one according to their merits. . . . For just as the body burns through unlawful desire, so the soul will burn as the lawful, due penalty {of each vice}.”<sup>56</sup>

<sup>52</sup> *Visio Fursei* 6, ed. M. P. Ciccarese, in *Visioni dell’aldilà in Occidente* (Florence: Nardini, 1987), p. 198, and Carrotti, *Voyage de l’âme*, p. 681.

<sup>53</sup> *Visio Fursei* 7 and 9, in Ciccarese, *Visioni*, pp. 200 and 204; Carozzi, *Voyage*, pp. 682 and 684.

<sup>54</sup> *Visio Fursei* 7 and 9, in Ciccarese, *Visioni*, pp. 200 and 204; Carozzi, *Voyage*, pp. 682 and 684.

<sup>55</sup> *Life of St. Andrew the Fool*, 32.108, in *Patrologia Graeca* 111: 752C-53A; L. Rydén, *The Life of St. Andrew the Fool*, 1971–2033, *Studia Byzantina Upsalensia* 4 (Uppsala, 1995), 2:146. The reader should know that I remain convinced by the arguments for a late-seventh-century date advanced by C. Mango, “The Life of St. Andrew the Fool Reconsidered,” *Rivista di Studi Bizantini e Slavi* 2 (1982): 297–313. These arguments are not accepted by Rydén, who prefers a considerably later date.

<sup>56</sup> *Visio Fursei* 8, in Ciccarese, *Visioni*, p. 202; Carozzi, *Voyage*, p. 683: see Carozzi, *Voyage*, pp. 133–37 on the purificatory associations of fire in Celtic and northern folklore.

Fursey, we should remember, consigned his *Visions* to writing so as to assert, beyond these scenes of unremitting, demonic legalism, the unplumbed mystery of God's mercy.<sup>57</sup> It is not a rigorist text. But he wrote within a system that now left little room for amnesty. Amnesty no longer occupied the center of attention, as it did for Gregory of Tours. It lay on the edge of the horizon. It was a last resort. Precise sins, if unatoned for on earth, would leave the believer instantly exposed to sanctions in heaven that were as predictable as was the constant petty violence of restraint and the searing, blistering shame inflicted, on earth, by the satirists of Ireland.

Fursey's *Visions* were not a local document. They were written down in northern Gaul. They circulated precisely among the new elite that I described in the first lecture, to such an extent that it was to Fursey's own brother, Ultán, that Gertrude of Nivelles appealed for reassurance as her own death drew near, in 658. Fursey's account of the dialogue on the mercy of God between the angels and the exigent demons can best be seen as a complement and, possibly, even as a corrective to the penitential rigorism introduced into Gaul, a generation earlier, by his compatriot, Columbanus.<sup>58</sup> This penitential system dominated the life of many great convents and monasteries, among them Faremoutiers. It forms a background to the dramatic deathbed scenes, among the nuns of Faremoutiers, described by Jonas of Bobbio in his *Life of Columbanus*. Here death itself was dependent on penance. Only those whose sins had been stripped from them, in a lifelong "ordeal of community,"<sup>59</sup> which included confession three times daily,<sup>60</sup> would be sure to pass gloriously to heaven. More than that: only

<sup>57</sup> *Visio Fursei* 9, in Ciccarese, *Visioni*, p. 204; Carozzi, *Voyage*, p. 684.

<sup>58</sup> See esp. Carozzi, *Voyage*, pp. 112–20.

<sup>59</sup> J. A. McNamara, "The Ordeal of Community: Hagiography and Discipline in Merovingian Convents," *Vox Benedictina* 2 (1986): 293–326.

<sup>60</sup> [Waldebert], *Regula cuiusdam patris ad virgines* 5, in *Patrologia latina* 88:1059D–60A.

those who had done sufficient penance would be allowed to set off on that journey. Jonas's account of the deathbeds of the nuns of Faremoutiers lingers precisely on such delays. Sisetrudis was warned in a dream that she had only forty days in which to complete her penance. Her soul was taken from her and returned on the thirty-seventh day. Angels had held a *discussio* —a tax-audit— of her remaining sins. Three days later, exactly on the fortieth day, even these were paid off. Sisetrudis could die: "I will go now . . . for I am now better prepared for the road."<sup>61</sup>

Behind many scenes, one senses the absolute power of the abbess. As director of souls and regular confessor to her nuns, the abbess was a "silent well of secrets"<sup>62</sup> at the very heart of the convent.<sup>63</sup> She guarded the greatest secret of all —the appropriate moment of death. Only when a nun had totally forgiven her sisters, unburdening herself of all her hidden thoughts about them, would she be set free, by the abbess, to go.<sup>64</sup>

We are dealing with a sense of the self no longer held in abeyance by the vast hope of amnesty. It is a self drawn out by a sense of the long, penitential process that led up to the Throne of God. All outstanding accounts must be paid off, and in detail, even by persons more frail than the nuns of Faremoutiers. A long journey of the soul, similar to that endured by Fursey, awaited every one. In 678/79, Barontus, a late convert to the monastery of Saint Pierre

<sup>61</sup> Jonas of Bobbio, *Vita Columbani* 2.11, ed. B. Krusch, in *Monumenta Germaniae Historica: Scriptores rerum Merovingicarum* 4 (Hanover: Hahn, 1902), p. 130; trans. J. A. McNamara and J. Halborg, in *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1992), pp. 162–63.

<sup>62</sup> F. Nietzsche, *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* 5 (358), Kroners Taschenausgabe 74 (Stuttgart, 1956), p. 268.

<sup>63</sup> [Waldebert], *Regula cuiusdam patris* 7:106B; G. Muschiol, *Famula Dei: Zur Liturgie in merovingischen Frauenklöstern*, Beiträge zur Geschichte des alten Mönchtums und des Benediktinertums 41 (Münster in Westfalen: Aschendorff, 1994), pp. 222–63.

<sup>64</sup> Jonas, *Vita Columbani* 2.12, p. 132; trans. McNamara and Hallborg, in *Sainted Women*, p. 164; cf. *Vita Bertilae* 3, in *Monumenta Germaniae Historica: Scriptores rerum Merovingicarum* 4, p. 106, trans. McNamara and Halborg, in *Sainted Women*, p. 283.

de Longoret, near Bourges — an invaluable specimen for us, an average Merovingian: neither a thug nor a trickster, but a middle-aged former public servant, with three marriages and far too many concubines on his conscience — underwent such a journey.<sup>65</sup> He returned to earth badly shaken. Demons had clawed and kicked him as he made his way through the air above the countryside of Bourges. He never reached the Throne of God. Rather, when brought before Saint Peter, he was accused by demons who showed that they knew him better than he knew himself: “And they went over all the sins that I committed from infancy onwards, including those which I had totally forgotten.”<sup>66</sup>

Seen by the demons, Brontus carried with him an entire life, in its full circumstantiality, made up of nothing other than the sum total of specific sins and virtues. In that sense, the timorous Barontus (though he had hoped to avoid the full weight of his past by cutting off his hair and entering the monastic life) was, indeed, a sign of the future. In the concluding words of Claude Carozzi’s monumental study, *Le Voyage de l’âme dans l’au-delà*, the penitent monk of this period “n’est qu’une première ébauche de la conscience de soi de l’individu en Occident” is only a first sketch of the awareness of the self on the part of the individual in Western Europe).<sup>67</sup>

Barontus and those who read his *Vision* had no doubt that Christ would come again, and perhaps soon. It was not a reassuring prospect. The account ended with a collection of citations from the *Homilies on the Gospels* of Gregory the Great: “Let us consider how severe a judge is coming, who will judge not only

<sup>65</sup> Carozzi, *Voyage*, pp. 142–44; I. Hen, “The Structure and Aim of the *Visio Baronti*,” *Journal of Theological Studies*, n.s. 47 (1996): 477–97, esp. at pp. 493–97.

<sup>66</sup> *Visio Baronti* 12, ed. W. Levinson, in *Monumenta Germaniae Historica: Scriptores rerum Merovingicarum* 5 (Hannover: Hahn, 1910), p. 386; Ciccarese, *Visioni*, p. 254; trans. J. N. Hillgarth, in *Christianity and Paganism, 350–750: The Conversion of Western Europe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986), p. 199.

<sup>67</sup> Carozzi, *Voyage*, p. 638.

our evil deeds, but even our thoughts.”<sup>68</sup> In losing many of the associations of an emperor, Christ had taken on the lineaments of a great abbot. He searched the hearts of all Christians, as an abbot would do, to test the alloy of their penance. A new model of power, based on the monastery, determined His exercise of mercy. In the words of the Old Norse kenning, Christ had imperceptibly become, above all, the *meinalausan munkka reyni*, the “faultless tester of the hearts of monks.”<sup>69</sup>

It was not to be so in other parts of the world. In exactly the same years when Fursey had experienced his visions of the other world, in one stateless society, in Ireland, in another stateless zone, at the other end of the Roman world, in the Hijaz, the visions of Muhammad had set in motion “one of the most radical religious reforms that have ever appeared in the East.”<sup>70</sup> This reform went in the opposite direction from Western Europe. What emerged in the *Qur’ân* and in the Islamic tradition, as it crystallized in the seventh and eighth centuries, was a singularly consequential re-assertion of the Empire of God. In a scenario of the Last Judgment more stunning and immediate even than that contemplated by Gregory of Tours, God would make plain that not only amnesty, but even the power to obtain it through intercession, depended unambiguously on his sovereign will.

Members of a tribal society, which was more oligarchical and gerontocratic and, perhaps, less locked into legal norms by a caste of lawyers than was the Ireland of Fursey, the Arabs of the Arabian peninsula had valued pardon in the great and the skills of intercession (*shafâ’a*) that could extort it. But there was a coziness about such intercession that Muhammad refused to accept.

<sup>68</sup> *Visio Baronti* 22, p. 394; Hillgarth, *Christianity and Paganism*, p. 204, citing Gregory, *Homilies on the Gospels* 2.8, 14.6, and 32.8.

<sup>69</sup> *Landnámabók* S91/H79, ed. Jakob Benediktsson (Reyjavik: Islensk Fornrit, 1968), pp. 132–34.

<sup>70</sup> T. Isutzu, *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qur’ân* (Montreal: McGill University Press, 1966), p. 16.



As the root, *sh-f'*, “to make a pair,” implies, to be an intercessor, in the Arab world, was to claim familiarity with the great —to insinuate oneself into their counsels as a friend and advisor.<sup>71</sup> No created beings could ever enter into such a relationship with God. When the pagans of Mecca suggested that their own, lesser gods — female divinities, such as Allat, referred to mysteriously as “the exalted cranes,” al-gharâniq-might nestle up to the new high God of Muhammad in this manner, it was a notion that Muhammad apparently entertained for a moment, only to reject it fiercely in the famous incident of the “Satanic Verses.”<sup>72</sup> Thoughts of intercessors of that kind could not have come from God. When the pagans claimed that their gods might even protect them from the wrath of the Last Day, the claim was dismissed out of hand. Such *shafâ'a* was no more than a shimmering mirage—a non-existent image that would evaporate, to reveal the clear and utterly empty chasm that separated God from His creatures: “They have no power, not the weight of an atom.”<sup>73</sup>

Drastic though it was, the *Qur'ân's* dismissal of intercession looked inward, into Arabia, and, maybe, to the south, to the well-developed henotheism of Yemen and the Hadramawt. There, a remote and powerful Supreme God, known by the same epithet as that later regarded by Muhammad as the attribute *par excellence* of God, “The Merciful,” might be thought to be dependent for His knowledge of human affairs on the reports of lower beings, who “walked the world up and down,” such as the “sons of God” had been, who are described, in the *Book of Job*, as assembling periodically in His presence.<sup>74</sup> Thought on intercession of this kind

<sup>71</sup> E. Riad, “*Safâ'a* dans le Coran,” *Orientalia Suecana* 30 (1981): 37–62, at pp. 37–42.

<sup>72</sup> I. Lichtenstaedter, “A Note on the *Gharûniq* and Related Qur'ânic Problems,” *Israel Oriental Studies* 5 (1975): 54–61; U. Rubin, *The Eye of the Beholder: The Life of Muhammad as Viewed by the Early Muslims*, Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam 5 (Princeton, N.J.: Darwin Press, 1995), pp. 156–66.

<sup>73</sup> *Qur'ân* 34:22; see Isutzu, *Ethico-Religious Concepts*, p. 133.

<sup>74</sup> *Job* 1:6–7 and 2:1–2; see G. Ryckmans, *Les religions arabes préislamiques* (Louvain: Bibliothèque du Muséon, 1951).

had its back turned on the Christian world and its practices. Debates on intercession, as part of the cult of the saints, played little or no role in the anti-Christian polemics of later Muslims.

Yet Muhammad became, for Muslims, what Saint Martin of Tours had been for Gregory of Tours. By the second century of the Muslim era, it was widely assumed that Muhammad's intercession would protect the majority of Muslims, as they stood before the Throne of God at the Last Day, sweating with fear until the pools of perspiration reached as far as their necks.<sup>75</sup> For many, the *shafâ'a* of Muhammad was their only hope. The Beduin poet Sawad ibn Qarib was even imagined to have expressed such sentiments in a poem composed before the Prophet at Medina:

So be to me an Intercessor on that Day when none [but you]  
possess a right to Intercession that is of any use to Sawad ibn  
Qarib.<sup>76</sup>

What is significant is that, even more clearly than in the late antique Christian imagination, Muhammad's rights of intercession were defined as absolutely dependent on God's prerogative of mercy: they existed only *bi-fadhl rahmatihî*, out of the supreme bounty of His mercy.<sup>77</sup> And this mercy remained consistently overwhelming. The most optimistic estimates of the *misericordes* of late antiquity, as to what the power of God's mercy could achieve for their fellow-Christians, became a central feature of the imaginative world of early medieval Islam. Whatever humans or angels might think, God has kept for Himself "ninety-nine parts of mercy."<sup>78</sup> Even at the very end of the Last Day, He would not be

<sup>75</sup> Jane Idleman Smith and Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, *The Islamic Understanding of Death and Resurrection* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1981), p. 74.

<sup>76</sup> Riad, "Safû'adans le Coran," p. 54.

<sup>77</sup> T. Huitema, *De Voorspraak (Shafâ'a) in den Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 1936), pp. 45 and 56.

<sup>78</sup> al-Bukhâri, *Sahih* 76.19.476, ed. Muhammad Muhsin Khan (Beirut: Dar al-Arabia, 1985), 8:316.

content until the last Muslim crawled out of Hellfire, blackened all over like a coal, except for the unburned patches on his forehead and two knees: for even this sinner had prayed the appropriate prayers as a Muslim should. And God would joke with him, with the *bonhomie* of a great king, imperturbably certain of His power.<sup>79</sup>

It was the notion of inscrutable mercy, linked to absolute power and to the almost unlimited possibility of amnesty for those who accepted the intercession of Muhammad, that held together a notoriously fissile community.<sup>80</sup> If they were to survive at all, Muslims of the seventh and eighth centuries had to see each other as, in some way or other, all members of the *ahl al-janna*: all bound for Paradise. To allow oneself to consider sinful Muslims as already clearly bound for Hell and, so, as clear "apostates," irrevocably cut off from the Community of Believers, was a train of thought that led straight to schism.<sup>81</sup>

When, in 692, 'Abd al-Malik began to build the unusual octagonal shrine on the Dome of the Rock at Jerusalem, he chose the spot where many Muslims of Syria and Palestine had come to believe that God Himself had once trod on this earth, when He spoke with Adam in the earthly Paradise, and to which He would soon return, to set up His Throne of Judgment. An inscription repaired in 831 even referred to Muhammad's power of intercession on behalf of the Muslim community: it may well date from the original foundation of the building.<sup>82</sup> A dramatic version of

<sup>79</sup> al-Bukhâri, *Sahîh* 76.49.574, p. 374; Smith and Haddad, *Islamic Understanding of Death and Resurrection*, p. 84.

<sup>80</sup>J. Van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft im 2. und 3. Jahrhundert Hidschra: Eine Geschichte des religiösen Denkens im frühen Islam* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1991), 1:17-25. Professor Van Ess, to whose advice I owe much, tells me that the issue of intercession will be dealt with in the forthcoming fourth volume.

<sup>81</sup>Huitema, *De Voorspraak*, p. 61.

<sup>82</sup>J. Van Ess, "'Abd al-Malik and the Dome of the Rock: An Analysis of Some Texts," in *Bayt al-Maqdis: 'Abd al-Malik's Jerusalem*, ed. J. Raby and J. Johns (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 89-103, and Oleg Grabar, *The Shape of the Holy: Early Islamic Jerusalem* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996), pp. 61, 64, and 186.

the late antique notion of the “Empire of God” had come true—with a headlong speed and in a manner which Gregory of Tours, for all his urgent calculations of the coming of just that event, could hardly have imagined.

The rise of Islam involved a spectacular working out of a central theme of late antique Christianity along the periphery of the existing Christian world. But, if we go back in time a century, to the generation in which Gregory the Great wrote his *Dialogues*, we can appreciate that, within Christianity itself, views of the other world had come to vary considerably from one region to another. Christians of the East were not prepared to take the steps that Gregory and a succeeding generation of Latin Christians took with confidence. They were content for the other world to remain largely opaque to them. Overshadowed still by the ultimate mercy of God, the fate of souls in the other world was not a topic that they chose to bring into sharp focus.

Thus, when Eustratius, a priest in Constantinople, wrote a treatise on the state of the souls of the departed, in around 580, what concerned him most was to prove that all human souls, and most especially the vibrant souls of the saints, remained “alive” after death.<sup>83</sup> It appalled him to think, as his opponents suggested, that the saints died only so as “to rest and snore” until the Last Judgment.<sup>84</sup> It was equally disturbing to consider that the appearances of saints to their worshipers might not be “real” —that they were “bit parts” played by obliging angeh, or, worse, that such appearances were mere effects of “virtual reality,” brought about, in the

<sup>83</sup> Eustratius, *De animis defunctorum* 9, printed in Leo Allatius, *De utriusque ecclesiae occidentalis et orientalis perpetua in dogmate de Purgatorio consensione* (Rome, 1655), pp. 380–580 at p. 373; see H. G. Beck, *Kirche und theologische Literatur im byzantinischen Reich* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1959), p. 411. On the background to such doubts, see V. Déroche, “Pourquoi écrivait-on des recueils des miracles? L'exemple des Miracles de saint Artémus,” in *Les saints et leur sanctuaire à Byzance*, *Bytantina Sorbonensia* 11, ed. C. Jolivet-Levy et al. (Paris: CNRS, 1993), pp. 95–116, at pp. 113–16. See also L. S. B. MacCoull, “The Monophysite Angelology of John Philoponus,” *Byzantion* 65 (1995): 388–95.

<sup>84</sup> Eustratius, *De animis* 12, in Allatius, *De utriusque*, p. 407.

minds of believers, by the omnipotence of God alone.<sup>85</sup> This was not so. Eustratius insisted that this world was flanked by a great city, peopled by “citizens,” who enjoyed a more vigorous existence than did the living on earth. Yet that is all that he was prepared to say. The basic category that concerned him in souls beyond the grave was their “life” and *energeia*, the effective activity of “living” persons. “Life” is what he defended, with energy, against those who appeared to deny it. Eustratius barely thought of the life of the soul beyond the grave in connection with “sin.” This did not concern him greatly. He took for granted that the abiding “flecks” of human frailty, common to all departed believers, would be forgiven by God in a final, all-embracing, but profoundly unspecific, gesture of amnesty.<sup>86</sup>

Eustratius painted the other world with a broad, old-fashioned brush. We should not forget the extent to which Christian funerary practice supported his attitude. It effectively delineated the horizons beyond which the average late antique Christian was not prepared to think. The departed soul was a “spirit.” Because it was alive, it sought “rest.” Sinners, indeed, annoyed their bishops by saying that they were quite happy to settle for that: *requies aeterna* meant more to them than did the hope of the Kingdom of Heaven.<sup>87</sup> Early Christian epigraphy supported this view,<sup>88</sup> as did funerary practices and attitudes to the tomb that assumed that a “spirit” lay “at rest” in its vicinity.<sup>89</sup> Crude food offerings were

<sup>85</sup> Eustratius, *De animis* 18, in Allatius, *De utriusque*, pp. 488–90.

<sup>86</sup> Eustratius, *De animis* 28, in Allatius, *De utriusque*, pp. 561–63.

<sup>87</sup> Caesarius of Arles, *Sermo* 47.5; the same view distressed Symeon the New Theologian, cited by H. G. Beck, *Die Byzantiner und ihr jenseits*, Sitzungsberichte der bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Philol.-histor. Klasse 1977, no. 6 (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1979), p. 53.

<sup>88</sup> I. Kajanto, “The Hereafter in Christian Epigraphy and Poetry,” *Arctos* 12 (1978): 27–53; F. P. Rizzo, “Il ix volume delle ICUR per una storia dell’immaginario vetero-cristiano sull’aldilà,” *Seia* 3 (1986): 77–92, at pp. 89–90.

<sup>89</sup> K. L. Noethlichs, “Spätantike Jenseitsvorstellungen im Spiegel des staatlichen Gräberschützes: Zur Novelle 23 Kaiser Valentinians III,” in *Jenseitsvorstellungen in Antike und Christentum: Gedenkschriften für Alfred Stüiber*, Jahrbuch für Antike

discouraged. Instead, the Mass came to be seen as a means of turning raw food into a more ethereal menu.<sup>90</sup> A senatorial lady from Lyon regularly offered Gaza wine of rare *bouquet* at Masses for her dead husband. When the priest drank the wine and substituted *vin ordinaire*, the husband appeared in a dream to rebuke her—he did not enjoy being offered vinegar!<sup>91</sup> Regular Masses were important for the lady; but they were hardly seen by her, as they would be seen in later centuries, as a series of sacrifices offered for the progressive forgiveness of the sins of her late husband.<sup>92</sup>

Offerings for the dead and prayers for their soul at the Eucharist were traditional practices that had been hotly defended, in the fifth century, by none other than Cyril of Alexandria, in a fragment preserved for us by Eustratius.<sup>93</sup> But such prayers and offerings were “affirmatory in nature rather than instrumental.”<sup>94</sup> They testified to the fact that the departed had been a member in good standing of the Christian community and so might be entitled to salvation. They also expressed the fact that the dead remained specific members of individual families. In the case of spouses it was particularly important that such links should be publicly maintained: for the freedom to remarry enjoyed by the widow or the widower constantly threatened to condemn the dead former spouse

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und Christentum: Ergänzungsband 9 (Münster in Westfalen: Aschendorff, 1982), pp. 47–54; P. -A. Février, “La tombe chrétienne et l’au-delà,” in *Le temps chrétien de la fin de l’Antiquité au Moyen-Age*, Colloques internationaux du CNRS 604 (Paris: CNRS, 1984), pp. 163–83.

<sup>90</sup> J. C. Schmitt, *Les revenants: Les vivants et les morts dans la société médiévale* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), p. 135.

<sup>91</sup> Gregory of Tours, *De gloria confessorum* 64, trans. Van Dam, in *Gregory of Tours*, pp. 70–71.

<sup>92</sup> A. Angenendt, “Theologie und Liturgie in der mittelalterlichen Toten-Memoria,” in *Memoria: Der geschichtliche Zeugniswert des liturgischen Gedenkens im Mittelalter*, ed. K. Schmid and J. Wollasch (Munich: W. Fink, 1984), pp. 70–199, at p. 159. For a different view of the offering of Masses for the dead, see now M. McLaughlin, *Consorting with Saints: Prayers for the Dead in Early Medieval France* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1994), pp. 2–22 and 178–219.

<sup>93</sup> Eustratius, *De animis* 28, in Allatius, *De utriusque*, pp. 571–77, and *Patrologia Gruera* 76:1324–1425.

<sup>94</sup> McLaughlin, *Consorting with Saints*, p. 183.

to oblivion.<sup>95</sup> What these prayers for the departed envisioned was a high moment of eventual amnesty, where the Throne of God would be surrounded by the clamor of petitions, just as Christ, in the present, was enthroned on the altar at the time of the Eucharist, “as on the fearsome Judgment Seat,” and so available to the noisy and insistent prayers of the faithful.<sup>96</sup> Urgent though these customary prayers might be, they were not thought of as prayers for the gradual purgation of sins, capable of having an immediate effect in an extended process where time beyond the grave mysteriously kept pace with human time.<sup>97</sup>

On such an issue, the tombstones of the Latin West had been notably silent. “The Epitaphic Habit” that characterized late antique Christian cemeteries conferred on the dead no more than the unproblematic, ascribed status of spirits “at rest.”<sup>98</sup> When, at a slightly later time, an unknown bishop at Piacenza spoke of his hope for “dew from heaven” to refresh his thirsty soul,<sup>99</sup> and when Trasimirus, buried outside Narbonne, asked “all men” to pray for his soul,<sup>100</sup> a new, more personal note was struck. In these epitaphs of the seventh century, we begin to hear snatches of autobiography, as a soul in need of prayer speaks to the living from beyond the grave.

<sup>95</sup> E.g., Tertullian, *De monogamia* 10.4 and *De exhortatione castitatis* 11.2; see Carozzi, *Eschatologie et au-delà*, pp. 130–48, for a particularly fine discussion of this issue.

<sup>96</sup> Anastasius Sinaita, *Oratio de Synaxi*, in *Patrologia Graeca* 87:837B; Cyprian, *De oratione dominica* 4; see H. Kotila, *Memoria Mortuorum: Commemoration of the Departed in Augustine*, *Studia Ephemeridis “Augustinianum”* 38 (Rome: Augustinianum, 1992), p. 104.

<sup>97</sup> Carozzi, *Voyage*, p. 635

<sup>98</sup> Carlos R. Galvao-Sobrinho, “Funerary Epigraphy and the Spread of Christianity in the West,” *Athenaeum* 83 (1995): 431–62, esp. pp. 445–53.

<sup>99</sup> E. Diehl, *Inscriptiones latinae christianae veteres* (Zurich: Weidmann, 1970), 1: no. 2425.

<sup>100</sup> Gisela Ripoll López and Isabel Velázquez Soriano, “El epitafio de Trasimirus (Mandourle, Villesèque de Corbières, Aude),” *Espacio, Tiempo y Forma* 3 (1990): 273–87.

In marked contrast to Eustratius and to the attitudes implied in much of Christian funerary practice, Gregory and his interlocutor, Petrus, had set to work, in the *Dialogues*, with fine engravers' tools. They etched memorably individual portraits, using the acid of "unpurged" sins to catch a unique likeness of each person. They asked themselves, for instance, what complex calibration of God's justice could catch the individuality of a man such as the deacon Paschasius. Paschasius had been a learned clergyman, a lover of the poor, altogether a figure from a late antique laudatory epitaph,<sup>101</sup> whose funeral had even been the occasion of a miracle of healing. Yet he had been so pig-headed in his support of an anti-pope that he made his last appearance as a phantom, in the steam of a thermal spa, to ask an astonished bishop for his prayers.<sup>102</sup> A precise notion of temporary suffering after death, undergone for particular sins, offered a way of seeing the respected, but problematic, Paschasius "in the round."

It was "sin" and "merit," now graded with meticulous precision, and not only the "life" of the soul, which mattered most in the definition of the human person, in this world and in the next. In this shift of emphasis, we have come to touch upon a remarkable achievement of the early medieval Latin West. The period has usually been dismissed as a Dark Age of Christian thought, an age of "theology in eclipse,"<sup>103</sup> characterized by "doctrinal stagnation and the riot of imagination."<sup>104</sup> But the heated arguments in the other world, reported by Fursey, and the evidence of lively conflicts of opinion in clerical circles all over northern Eu-

<sup>101</sup> Compare the doublet *cultor pauperum et contemptor sui* used of Paschasius with Diehl, *Inscriptiones latinae christianae veteres*, no. 1195.10: *pauperibus dives sed sibi pauper erat* and 1778.6: *pauperibus locuples, sibi pauper*. See now A. Wirbelauer, *Zwei Päpste in Rom: Der Konflikt zwischen Laurentius und Symmachus (498–514)* (Munich: Tuduv, 1993).

<sup>102</sup> Gregory, *Dialogi* 4.42.1–5, in de Vogüé, *Grégoire le Grand*, pp. 150–54.

<sup>103</sup> A. Angenendt, *Das Frühmittelalter: Die abendländische Christenheit von 400 bis 900* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1990), p. 155.

<sup>104</sup> J. Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 96.



rope and the British Isles, which ranged over issues relating to sin, penance, and the notion of impurity, combine to give a somewhat different impression of the age.<sup>105</sup> Its principal interests were not our own, and so it is easy to miss wherein lay its principal achievements. What the spiritual leaders of the seventh century may have lacked in zest for those aspects of speculative theology that we, as modern persons, tend to value, they more than made up for in a heroic effort to cover all known life, in this world and the next, in the fine web of a Christian notion of sin and forgiveness. They did not read the Early Christian classics that we think they should have read. But they knew a good book when they saw one — a book on handling sins was what they appreciated most, such as the late-seventh-century *Penitential* of Theodore of Tarsus, archbishop of Canterbury, praised, in the age of Charlemagne, by the Lombard Paul the Deacon as “written with wonderful and discerning reflection,” laying down due penance for each and every sin.<sup>106</sup> At the risk of offending fastidious ears, I am tempted to coin a neologism. We are dealing with the final stages of the “peccatization” of the world: not a “culpabilitation,” in the sense of the fostering of a greater sense of guilt in Christian circles; but something more precise and a good deal more significant — the definitive reduction of all experience, of history, politics, and the social order quite as much as the destiny of individual souls, to two universal explanatory principles, sin and repentance.

When this happened, the *mundus* itself grew pale. In a vision told to Boniface, in the late 730s, in Frisia, a view from beyond the grave no longer included the *mundus* in its glory, such as had ap-

<sup>105</sup> R. Meens, “Willibrords boeteboek?” *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 106 (1993): 163–78; “A Background to Augustine’s Mission to Anglo-Saxon England,” *Anglo-Saxon England* 23 (1994): 5–17; “Pollution in the Early Middle Ages: The Case of Food Regulations in the Penitentials,” *Early Medieval Europe* 4 (1995): 3–19; and now *Het tripartite boeteboek: Overlevering en betekenis van vroegmiddeleeuwe biechtvoorschriften* (Hilversum: Verloren, 1994), pp. 267–321.

<sup>106</sup> Paul the Deacon, *History of the Lombards* 5.30; see T. Charles-Edwards, “The Penitential of Theodore and the *Iudicia Theodori*,” in *Archbishop Theodore*, ed. M. Lapidge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 141–74.

peared to pagan mystics of an earlier age, as they ascended through its refulgent layers, to the world beyond the stars.<sup>107</sup> What now mattered for the visionary was a view of the sum total of human secrets. The basic model for such revelations was no longer a longing to embrace the universe from a high point in the stars. It was a longing to unveil the “hidden things” of the religious life, secret sins, secret virtues, secret practices, told in the confessional or whispered into the ears of holy hermits —in sum, to penetrate the secrets of the individual. What the monk reported by Boniface saw was not the *mundus*: it was “the individual merits of almost all persons and the human race and all the world gathered before his gaze as so many individual souls.”<sup>108</sup>

And with that change —a change inevitably made to seem more abrupt, more irreversible, and unidirectional in the short space of two short lectures than it was in reality, but a change all the same —we have reached the end of a very ancient world. It is an ancient world whose unmistakable profile we who study late antiquity have learned to recognize. But the distinctiveness of that profile stands out, also, in contrast to other forms of Christianity, in terms of those imaginative structures that were central to its own life, but which it did not pass on to later ages. After the seventh century, a new style of Christianity, greatly preoccupied with issues of merit, sin, and identity, and so in need of a different imaginative world, peopled with more clearly focussed faces of saints and sinners, did not wish to appropriate the rich imaginative structures of its own, more ancient past. A little bit of the overwhelming exuberance of Paradise, which lay close to this world, and, along with a sense of Paradise, an ancient sense of untrammelled power

<sup>107</sup> A. J. Festugiète, *La Révélation d'Hermès Trismégiste 2: Le Dieu Cosmique* (Paris: Belles Lettres, 1981), pp. 441–46, on the *Dream of Scipio*.

<sup>108</sup> Boniface, *Epistula* 115, ed. M. Tangl, in *Monumenta Germaniae Historica: Epistulae selectae* (Berlin: Weidmann, 1916), p. 248; Ciccarese, *Visioni*, pp. 366 and 370–72. See Carotti, *Voyage*, pp. 200–222.

and mercy associated with the Empire of God<sup>109</sup> were lost along the way. As a result, late antique Christian views of the other world either have remained opaque to us or can seem strangely out of focus. The ancient other world, in its Christian form, is one of those many casualties of time that we tend to sum up in the somewhat anodyne phrase “The Birth of Medieval Europe.”

<sup>109</sup> J. C. Schmitt, “Une histoire religieuse du Moyen-Age est-elle possible?” in *Il mestiere del storico del Medioevo* (Spoleto: Centro di Studi sull’Alto Medio Evo, 1994), pp. 73–83 at p. 82: “Dieu n’est plus maître de toute l’espace et de tout le temps: c’est le sens de la nouvelle doctrine de purgatoire.”