



PURGATORY

The Logic of Total Transformation

JERRY L. WALLS

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To Timothy and Angela Amos
And
Jonathan and Emily Walls

Angela and Jonathan, this is the third
Book I have dedicated to you.
It's not Tolkien, but it
Is a Trilogy.

Heaven is still the one you want
Even if it requires a stint
In purgatory.

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He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, 'Lord, are you going to wash my feet?' Jesus answered, 'you do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand.' Peter said to him, 'You will never wash my feet.' Jesus answered, 'Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.' Simon Peter said to him, 'Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!' —John 13:6–9

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PREFACE

This volume is the third in a series of books on the afterlife, the first two of which are *Hell: The Logic of Damnation* (Notre Dame, 1992) and *Heaven: The Logic of Eternal Joy* (Oxford, 2002). The fact that purgatory is bringing up the rear suggests, truly, that I had no plans to do a trilogy when I wrote my book on hell. Indeed, I had no plans to write about heaven either, for that matter.

The first volume was a revised version of my PhD dissertation at Notre Dame. A few years before writing that book, the historian Martin Marty wrote an article tellingly entitled “Hell Disappeared. No One Noticed. A Civic Argument,” in which he remarked that a bibliographical search for contemporary literature turned up almost nothing on the subject. In the intervening period, that has all changed, and hell is a now a matter of intense debate, particularly in evangelical Christian circles. (Indeed, several months after writing this Preface, a firestorm of controversy erupted in the evangelical world that made national news when popular pastor Rob Bell published a book on hell that challenged certain prevailing views.) Many still defend the traditional notion of eternal damnation, while others are contending for universalism, and still others are making the case that the lost will be annihilated in the end.

I did the second volume after realizing that heaven poses its own distinctive and interesting issues. Heaven has yet to generate the level of interest that hell has stirred in philosophical circles, but there are signs that it is drawing increasing attention, from critics as well as those who hope to end up there. One of the issues I discussed in that book was whether a viable doctrine of heaven needs a doctrine of purgatory. I argued that it did, and thought I was done with the matter.

Subsequent reflection proved otherwise, and again, I saw that purgatory poses a distinctive and fascinating range of issues that deserve sustained consideration in their own right. I was fortunate to return in the fall of 2009 to Notre Dame as a Research Fellow in the Center for Philosophy of Religion, where I completed this project. According to historian Jacques Le Goff, the Notre Dame school of Paris was the birthplace of the doctrine of purgatory in the twelfth century, so perhaps it is fitting in more ways than one that I finished purgatory where I started with hell.

All Souls Day, 2010
Notre Dame, Indiana

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Purgatory is not only a philosophical and theological concept, but an existential reality as well. Here, I limit my thanks only to those persons who have helped me gain a better grasp of the conceptual aspects of purgatory, as it would surely prove an unduly complicated exercise to recall all those who have contributed to my existential understanding of the matter, and the countless ways they have done so.

In the first place, I owe a debt of gratitude to the Center for Philosophy of Religion at Notre Dame, which awarded me a Research Fellowship to complete this book, and to Mike Rea, the exemplary director of the Center, whose encouragement and support is deeply appreciated. I am further grateful to all the Fellows I got to know during my time there, many of whom, along with other participants in the Center, offered helpful comments on various parts of the manuscript, namely: Billy Abraham, Erik Baldwin, Ron Belgau, Andrew Chignell, Paul Draper, Tom Flint, Adam Green, Mike Hickson, Mark Murphy, Jeremy Neill, Ryan Nichols, Alan Rhoda, Todd Ryan, Jeff Schloss, Amy Seymour, Patrick Todd, Chris Tucker, and Liu Zhe.

A number of other persons read individual chapters or parts of the book, and/or offered helpful comments or discussion, including Angela Amos, David Baggett, Kyle Blanchette, Ken Collins, Steve Croft, Bryan Cross, Paul Griffiths, Sam Kimbriel, Kevin Kinghorn, Brian Marshall, Kevin Sparks, Elizabeth Glass Turner, John Walls, Jonny Walls, and Jay Wood. There is no doubt the book is much better due to my time spent at Notre Dame, and is closer to perfection for having passed through the purging fire of all this criticism than it would otherwise be.

Thanks are also due to Phil Tallon not only for several conversations about purgatory, but also for suggesting, in his characteristically creative fashion, the idea for the cover art. I must also mention Trent Dougherty, who several years ago at a conference, insisted that I had to write a book on purgatory since I had already written books on heaven and hell, if for no other reason than because it might raise the probability I would be mentioned sometime in the same sentence with Dante.

I joyfully tip my hat to Notre Dame friends Claire Brown, Lesley-Anne Dyer, Brian Hall, Anna Heckmann, Eleanor Pettus, Cara Polk, Josh and Rachel Rasmussen, Tanya Salyers, Debra Thomas, Andrea Turpin, Luke Van Horn, John Wallbaum and Amanda Weppler for numerous stimulating discussions (a few of which are more accurately described as spirited arguments—some of my friends can be very

contentious) about the plausibility of purgatory. During one of these disputes, Brian made a wager with me that there is no purgatory, and therefore he will spend no time there. If it turns out that he is right and purgatory is a mere fiction, I owe him a six pack of his favorite beer in the life to come. If there is a purgatory, well, I suppose the very fact that he would make such a wager surely increases his chances of spending at least a little time there.

I must also acknowledge the late Father Richard John Neuhaus, whose invitation to me to join The Dulles Colloquium several years ago was due in part to the fact that I am a Protestant who believes in purgatory. My participation in this illustrious group was not only invariably stimulating and highly entertaining, but also honed my thinking about purgatory and a number of related ecumenical issues. I hope Richard is aware that I finally finished this book, and is at least moderately pleased with the result. The fact that circumstances forced me to miss the Spring 2008 meeting of this remarkable group, not knowing it was my last chance to see both him and Cardinal Dulles is a lasting regret only heaven will fully heal.

As always, it has been a pleasure to work with Cynthia Read and the other editors at Oxford University Press who assisted with this book, namely Lisbeth Redfield, Emily Perry and Michael Philoantonie.

Purgatory

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Introduction

Why all this dawdling? why this negligence?
Run to the mountains, slough away the filth
That will not let you see God's countenance.

—Dante

The comedian Jack Handy is famous for his “deep thoughts,” humorous musings and scenarios that are apt to provoke reflection along with a laugh. In one such scenario, Handy tells us a story about a cowboy whose conception of heaven contained a profound absurdity.

He was a cowboy, mister, and he loved the land. He loved it so much he made a woman out of dirt and married her. But when he kissed her, she disintegrated. Later, at the funeral, when the preacher said, “Dust to dust,” some people laughed, and the cowboy shot them. At his hanging, he told the others, “I’ll be waiting for you in heaven—with a gun.”

The absurdity here, of course, lies in the notion that anyone in heaven might be biding his time just waiting for others to arrive so he can wreak havoc—with a gun.

This is not to deny that there may be guns in heaven. We cannot be sure what forms of entertainment and enjoyment may exist to pass the time, as it were. We can, however, be sure that heaven will not include murderous desires for revenge. Heaven may not have a metal detector, but it surely has a malice detector.¹ Anyone who makes it to heaven must be free not only of sinful patterns of behavior, but also of evil dispositions and tendencies. The glorious vision of heaven in the book of Revelation emphasizes that it is a place of light and beauty, and that all forms of impurity are excluded. “But nothing unclean will enter it, nor anyone who practices abomination or falsehood, but only those who are written in the Lamb’s book of life.”²

To put this point more precisely, we can say that heaven is essentially morally perfect.³ What this means is that it is impossible, in a very strong sense of the word, that there could be any sort of sin in heaven. We can explicate this claim in terms of the inhabitants of heaven, beginning with God himself, who is holy in his essential nature, and is therefore incapable of sin. It is not that he merely happens not to sin, or has chosen to this point not to do so. Rather, he cannot sin because he is necessarily perfectly good.⁴ Likewise, if heaven is essentially morally perfect, it must be the case that the creaturely occupants of heaven are also incapable of sin. This is not to say that they are essentially good in the same sense that God is in his very nature, but it is to say that those in heaven must have at the least acquired a nature, or had their nature so transformed that it is impossible for them to sin. In traditional terminology, they must become impeccable, or immutable. They must have a settled character that is good through and through, one that is no longer vulnerable to sin.

Again to cite the language of scripture, heaven demands a kind of holiness that is like God's own. "Like obedient children, do not be conformed to the desires that you formerly had in ignorance. Instead, as he who has called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; for it is written, 'You shall be holy, for I am holy.'"⁵ And again: "Pursue peace with everyone, and the holiness without which no one will see the Lord."⁶

The requirement that we must actually become holy and thoroughly upright in spirit and character is one of the foundation stones of the doctrine of purgatory, the subject of this book. It is not enough that we be forgiven of our sins, or have righteousness imputed to us in a legal or formal fashion. Nor is the initial work of salvation in regeneration sufficient to accomplish the complete transformation we require. While regeneration begins this transformation, it does not entirely rectify our corruption or repair all our moral and spiritual deficiencies.⁷ So we are left with the question of how we acquire the actual holiness that is essential for those who want to see the Lord, to know him in the deeply personal sense of enjoying a genuinely loving relationship with him.

The verse from Hebrews about the necessity of holiness for seeing the Lord was the text of a sermon in the nineteenth century by Anglican theologian John Henry Newman, later Cardinal Newman. Although he rejected the doctrine of purgatory at the time of the sermon, it is interesting to note that his reflections on this text, along with the reality that typically Christians fall so far short of holiness, led him to the gates of purgatory, even if he did not quite walk through them. His ruminations on the necessity of holiness brought into focus a common misconception of heaven, namely, the notion that just anyone would, of course, enjoy being there.

And so indeed it is widely believed that heaven is the sort of place where anyone would love to be, no matter what his tastes, inclinations, desires, and so on, as if it were some sort of a cosmic version of Las Vegas that has something for everyone, whatever he likes. Newman challenged this notion sharply. "For heaven, it is plain from Scripture, is not a place where many different and discordant pursuits can be

carried on at once, as is the case in this world. Here every man can do his *own* pleasure, but there he must do *God's* pleasure."⁸

Newman goes on to illustrate his point with the phenomena of taste and perception. A person whose tastes are distorted cannot enjoy the sweetest of flavors and a person whose sight is impaired will fail to appreciate the most striking beauty nature can offer. Likewise, "there is a moral malady which disorders the inward sight and taste; and no man laboring under it is in a condition to enjoy what Scripture calls 'the fullness of joy in God's presence, and pleasures at His right hand for evermore.'"⁹ So heaven indeed is overflowing with eternal pleasure, but it would not be recognized as such by the man for whom a weekend of riotous living in Las Vegas represents the pinnacle of what life has to offer. The stark implication of this insight is that heaven would not be heaven for one who has not cultivated a taste for the holy. "Heaven would be hell to an irreligious man."¹⁰

This does not bode well for our cowboy or anyone else who has been infected with sin. A recent book on the subject by Old Testament scholar Gary Anderson begins with the bad news that sin is a much bigger deal than merely violating a moral norm and that "the effects of sin are more extensive than a guilty conscience. . . . A wrongful deed creates in its wake some sort of 'thing' that has to be removed."¹¹ Removing this thing is no simple matter, and is typically painful and difficult, as Anderson goes on to explain at length in his book.

To get a better sense of why this is so, let us spell out in more detail the effects of sin on us. According to a classic analysis of the consequences of sin, there are three destructive effects for which fallen human beings need healing. First, sin disorders our minds so that we turn away from God, our true source of good and happiness, and focus unduly on other things. We consequently have a distorted view of reality that keeps us from living truthfully and discerning our true good. Second, we become guilty before God because of our disregard of him and his goodness and justly deserve punishment for our actions. Third, we become weakened in our nature in such a way that we are more prone to sin, and disinclined to do what is good. The more we sin, the more complicated and extensive the damage we do to ourselves, and correspondingly, the more is required for repair and rehabilitation.¹²

Now let us consider our unfortunate cowboy in the light of this analysis. His excessive love of the land, not to mention women, and no doubt wine and song as well, was due to his distorted sense of values, growing out of his disordered thinking. His choice to murder his mockers left a large and ugly stain of guilt on his soul that needs to be removed. And his deeply rooted desire for vengeance reflects a weakened and damaged moral nature that will need extensive repair and renewal before he could truly enjoy being in the presence of a God of holy love. So let us extend his story and assume he is a Christian believer, albeit one who is obviously rough around the edges, and clearly not very faithful at this point of his life. Let us assume, moreover, that before he died he repented of his sin and sought forgiveness for his murder, and even acknowledged that his desire for vengeance was wrong.

Even if we assume all this, including that he was forgiven before he died, it is doubtful that he had cultivated a love of God and a taste for the holy such that he would be fully ready to enjoy heaven. As Newman observed, the transformation from a sinful nature to one that is truly holy takes time. Our tastes and likings are not typically changed in a moment. The gradual change of heart that leads to holiness comes in the school of learning obedience to God and following his will. "To obtain the gift of holiness is the work of *a life*."¹³

And the cowboy is far from alone in his predicament. Indeed, there are Christians of many stages of spiritual maturity and growth in holiness and many, probably most, die far short of perfection. In another sermon, Newman reflected on this reality, observing that there are many persons who may be sincere servants of God who are "dark and feeble" in their religious state. Many others repent late in life, if not on their death bed, and leave few traces of Christian fruit in their lives. And beyond all such cases as these, he pointed out that there are many others who have made a good start and persevered, yet have hardly begun the process of sanctification "when death comes upon them;—many who have been in circumstances of especial difficulty, who have had fiercer temptations, more perplexing trials than the rest, and in consequence have been impeded in their course."¹⁴

Faced with what seems to be this obvious empirical reality, the question remains about the fate of such persons. There are four broad possibilities. First, we might say that they go to heaven with their sins, imperfections, and the like intact, so heaven is not in fact essentially sinless. Second, we might think they will simply be lost and never make it to heaven if they die without actually becoming completely holy. Third, we might say that at the moment of death, God makes people holy by an instantaneous unilateral act, however imperfect, sinful, and immature in character they may be.¹⁵ Fourth, we may say that the sanctification process continues after death with our willing cooperation until the process is complete, and we are actually made holy through and through.

We can rule out the first of these options rather quickly, as it is starkly incompatible with Christian teaching about heaven. The second option, although it has been defended by some theologians, is very much a minority position that is at odds with the broad consensus of Christian belief, and I will not deal with it further. The real contestants are options three and four. The first of these is the position adopted by most Protestants, and the final option, obviously, is the doctrine of purgatory, which is the position I will be exploring at length in the following pages.

We will begin our ascent of Mount Purgatory in the first chapter by way of a brief historical overview of the development of the doctrine, from ancient times to the present. It will chronicle key ideas, figures, issues, and events in the fascinating narrative of this colorful doctrine in order to set the stage for the discussion to follow. Chapter 2 will examine Protestant perspectives on purgatory, both critical and sympathetic, and will explore the various ways in which they provide alternatives to the doctrine of purgatory in their own theological systems of belief. Chapter 3 will spell out different models of purgatory, and will show that there are significantly

different ways to understand the purpose of purgatory. While some of these are at odds with some of the central claims of Protestant theology, other models of the doctrine are quite amenable to at least some Protestant traditions. The fourth chapter will look at the distinctive issues about personal identity raised by the doctrine of purgatory, and will compare different accounts of personal identity and how they fare in light of the doctrine. Chapter 5 will consider the possibility of postmortem probation and repentance, a view often mistakenly identified with the traditional account of purgatory. It will analyze the relation between these two concepts and assess recent proposals that the doctrine of purgatory should be modified to include postmortem repentance. Chapter 6 will delve into the views of purgatory held by one of the most widely read Christian writers of the twentieth century, whose influence continues to grow, namely, C. S. Lewis. It will pose the question of whether his account of purgatory might have ecumenical promise as a version of the doctrine that might appeal to Protestants as well Catholics. The final brief chapter will provide a look back at key issues and summarize how our judgment on them will determine our assessment of purgatory.

Enough then for anticipating what lies ahead. Let us begin to make our way up the mountain.

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