Holger Hespen

CONCEPTIONS OF THE AFTERLIFE IN THE WORKS OF GREGORY THE GREAT

MA Thesis in Medieval Studies

Central European University

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by

Holger Hespen

(Germany)

Thesis submitted to the Department of Medieval Studies,

Central European University, Budapest, in partial fulfillment of the requirements

of the Master of Arts degree in Medieval Studies.

Accepted in conformance with the standards of the CEU.

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Budapest, 21 May 2013

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1. Introduction

1.1 Topic and Methodology

Nothing challenges the meaning of all human efforts as radically as death. Arguably one of the most important features of any religion to give answers to the questions provoked by this unavoidable event in everybody's life. What will happen after an individual person deceased? Is there anything like an afterlife; and if so, what does it look like? It is religion as an interpretative system that offers the possibility to transcend the threatening death. The resulting eschatology is usually not just descriptive – it fundamentally influences the *modus vivendi* of the quick.[1] This is not just true for the remote past but still valid for today. Just recently, an intriguing study has shown that American believers in apocalyptic theology are less likely to support policies against global warming. For them, efforts to preserve the earth are "ultimately futile, and hence ill-advised".[2] This is of course just one side of the coin. Like the eschatology influences the behavior of the believers, the beliefs about the afterlife are also shaped by the society in which they exist.

In the late sixth century, a time often described as a period of transformation from Late Antiquity to the Middle Ages, Pope Gregory the Great showed an exuberant interest in eschatological topics as well.[3] In all of his works, he displays a concern about the "last things", at least in a subtle way; but the most fascinating result of his preoccupation is the fourth book of his Dialogues, where he presents colorful visions of the afterlife. These

1 See Hans Wißmann, "Eschatologie, 1. Religionsgeschichtlich," in *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, Vol. 10 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1982), 254-256 (254).

2 David C. Barker, David H. Bearce, "End-Times Theology, the Shadow of the Future, and Public Resistance to Addressing Global Climate Change," *Political Research Quarterly* 66,2 (2012): 267-279 (269).

3 However, like usually, there is no systematic treatment of this theme in any of Gregory's works. This is aptly summarized by C. Dagens: "Comme toujours, l'attitude de Grégoire [en question de l'eschatologie] n'a rien de théorique: il ne faut pas chercher chez lui une philosophie de l'histoire, une théologie des fins dernières ou une réflexion méthodique sur l'eschatologie, mais simplement l'expression de ses convictions par rapport à la fin des temps et aux responsabilités de l'Église en attendant le retour du Christ et l'avènement de son Royaume." (Claude Dagens, *Saint Grégoire le Grand: Culture et Expérience Chrétiennes* (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1977), 345.

influential narratives have shaped the Medieval perception of the Beyond significantly. They have often been interpreted as a decisive break with Antique tradition, as evidence for a distinctively new Medieval theology.[4] However, this interpretation is first and foremost the result of an *ex post* perspective. For a proper understanding of Gregory's ideas about the afterlife, their context-dependency must be highlighted. Just in the light of Gregory's historical and cultural background, it can be understood why the pope was overly occupied with the afterlife and why he described it in his very special way. It will be seen that he was heavily influenced by the circumstances he lived in, but that he also intended to modify the Christian society with his elaborations on the afterlife.

For an analysis of Gregory's conceptions of the afterlife, it is appropriate to use a historical and comparative approach. After a short introduction into the historical background and the biography of the pope, the Dialogues as the main source of this thesis will be at the center of attention. As they are central for the argument, it is important to ensure their authenticity, which had been strongly questioned in the recent decades. Then, a closer investigation of the character of the Dialogues will help to establish the fact that eschatology was an intensively debated topic in Gregory's times which provoked different answers, and that no monolithic dogmatic teaching existed at that period. This being emphasized, a proper reconstruction of the problem of the afterlife in the works of Gregory the Great is necessary. The Dialogues and their depiction of Hell and Purgatory will be in the focus of this part of the thesis. As a contrast, the description of the heavenly reward in Gregory's oeuvre shall be examined as well. In order to understand Gregory's "eschatological urgency", omnipresent in all his descriptions of the afterlife, it is necessary to analyze how the pope perceived his times. This world-view influenced decisively the didactic concept behind his teachings about the "last things". In a last step, his eschatological thoughts shall be compared with those of

4 For example Arnold Angenendt, Geschichte der Religiosität im Mittelalter (Darmstadt: Primus Verlag, 1997), 695-698.

Augustine, who is usually considered as Gregory's biggest inspiration. This brief last chapter does not intend to analyze Augustine's eschatology in minute detail. The elaborations on the afterlife by the African bishop are rather considered as a background against which both the uniqueness and the steadiness of Gregory's afterlife become visible. Like this, historical continuities and discontinuities are emphasized.

That eschatology might be considered as the backdrop of Gregory's whole theology has been realized by scholars before.[5] Two monographs dealt explicitly with this topic so far: Nikolaus Hill's dissertation from the 1940ies, entitled "Die Eschatologie Gregors des Großen", is giving a conventional overview about Gregory's eschatology.[6] Yet it is lacking a systematic approach and is mostly outdated by now. Quite recently, the Serbian theologian Rade Kisić dared a new attempt to devote a lengthy work on the "eschatological dimension of Gregory's theology".[7] Unfortunately, his examination remains on a largely descriptive level; furthermore, Kisić almost totally omits the fourth book of the Gregorian Dialogues as a relevant source for Gregory's eschatology. There is an abundance of further literature about the pope and different aspects about his life or theology. For the sake of brevity, it suffices to mention two of the most important: Robert Markus' analysis of Gregory's world has become a standard work and is essential for the contextualization of the thoughts of the churchman.[8] The spirituality of the pope is described most comprehensively by Claude Dagens' still irreplaceable monograph, which also offers a useful discussion of eschatology.[9]

Besides literature focusing on Gregory the Great, scholarly works on eschatology and its various aspects in Antiquity have to be taken into consideration. Brian Daley's erudite work on the "Hope of the Early Church" in Late Antiquity presents a vast collection of material and

5 See Dagens, Grégoire, esp. 345-373.
6 Nikolaus Hill, *Die Eschatologie Gregors des Großen* (Freiburg: Universitätsschrift, 1941).
7 Rade Kisić, *Patria Caelestis: Die eschatologische Dimension der Theologie Gregors des Großen*, Studien und Texte zu Antike und Christentum, vol. 61 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011).
8 Robert A. Markus, *Gregory the Great and his World* (Cambridge: University Press, 1997).
9 Dagens, Grégoire.

is therefore an indispensable starting point for any research on this topic.[10] However, his enumerating approach results in a lack of contextualization. The most inspiring study of an aspect of the Beyond conducted by a medievalist is J. Le Goff's influential history of the birth of Purgatory in the Middle Ages.[11] His research is based on a very narrow definition of this place, assuming that a *purgatorium* did not exist *ante litteram.* This monograph has recently been complemented by an intriguing study about purgation in Late Antiquity by Isabel Moreira.[12] Finally, Claude Carozzi's study about the soul's journey to the afterlife offers many useful insights.[13]

The Dialogues as the foundation of the research on Gregory's afterlife have been published in an excellent edition in three volumes in the "Sources Chrétiennes" (SC). They are accompanied by comments and a helpful and reliable introduction by the editor Adalbert de Vogüé.[14] References to the afterlife can furthermore be found in the "Homiliae in Evangelia", the "Moralia in Job" and some of his letters. All these sources are easily accessible for the modern reader.

1.2 Eschatology – individual vs. universal

Some theoretical remarks are necessary if one speaks about eschatology, and they are of special importance in the case of Gregory. Eschatology itself is a rather fuzzy term, as it basically just comprises any perceptions and beliefs relating to the "last things" (τὰ ἔσχατα). On an abstract level, the concept can be divided into two main categories (which of course comprise an abundance of sub-categories): beliefs focusing on the destiny of individuals after death (individual eschatology) and others dealing with the ultimate fate of whole mankind or

10 Brian E. Daley, *The Hope of the Early Church: A Handbook of Patristic Eschatology* (Cambridge: University Press, 1991).
11 Jacques Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1990).
12 Isabel Moreira, *Heaven's Purge: Purgatory in Late Antiquity (*Oxford: University Press, 2010).
13 Claude 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, vol. 189 (Rome: École Française de Rome, 1994).
14 Gregory the Great, *Dialogues,* 3 vols., ed. Adalbert de Vogüé, trans. Paul Antin, SC, vols. 251, 160, 265 (Paris: Édition du CERF, 1978-1980).

the world at the end of times (universal eschatology). Only the last kind could also be called "apocalyptic" in the stricter sense, as a universal drama in which the individual person might play a role, but is first of all subordinated to a broader course of events. Eschatology as a concept in Religious Studies is a way too complex topic to be elaborated on here in detail.[15]

However, in the framework of this thesis, it suffices to underline the two most influential strands of it that appeared most prominent in Late Antique Christianity: First of all, there was the conviction that the souls would be reunited with their resurrected bodies at the end of time; their unity being reestablished in that way, they would attain their eschatological destiny in the Last Judgment. The second option was the immediate reward for each soul *post mortem*, without any delay in some intermediary stage. In simplified terms, the main focus of Christian theologians shifts away from the apocalyptic conception towards an individualized understanding of eschatology in the course of Church history.[16] The first mentioned pattern of thought was still the predominant one in early Patristic times.[17] Most prominently it was defended by Irenaeus of Lyons in his pamphlet against the heresies (Adv. Haer. V,31,1). He denied any possibility of a direct access to God right after death and defended the importance of corporeal resurrection at Christ's return vigorously. Until then, the souls would remain separated from the body in an invisible place (Adv. Haer. V,31,2). This attitude is not surprising for an author who contends adamantly the teachings of the Gnostics, who seem to have promised an anticipation of the resurrection already in this worldly existence.[18]

The majority of the early theologians would have agreed with Irenaeus' critique, but nevertheless the idea of a post-mortem reward gradually gained influence. In the course of the centuries, Christians of outstanding merits were more and more perceived as worthy of

15 For a concise overview, see Wißmann, Eschatologie, passim; see also the very brief summary by Klaus Thraede, "Eschatologie," in *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*, vol. 6 (Stuttgart: Hiersemann, 1966), 559-564.

16 Thraede, Eschatologie, 563.

17 See, among others, Matthew Dal Santo, *Debating the Saints' Cults in the Age of Gregory the Great*, Oxford Studies in Byzantium (Oxford: University Press, 2012), 110-111, or the relevant passages in Daley, Hope.

18 See Daley, Hope, 29-30.

immediate compensation for their lives on earth. This applied first for the martyrs, later for the ascetics. As time passed by, even common believers could maintain hopes of a sudden judgment after death.[19] Finally, in the mid-ninth century it was possible to dismiss the early Patristic apocalyptic eschatology entirely, as Patriarch Photius's judgment demonstrates. Directly addressing Irenaeus, he qualifies the idea of a "delayed" judgment as ill-conceived.[20] By then, not only in the Greek but also in the Western sphere, the doctrine of an immediate reward after death prevailed.[21] However, in the meanwhile both eschatologies co-existed and could be integrated into the same system of belief. Gregory the Great is just one example of this development, but a striking one.

19 Dal Santo, Cult, 111-112.

20 Ibid., 113.

21 However, this doctrine was officially proclaimed not until the Papal Bull "Benedictus Deus" of 1336. For an extensive analysis of the events connected to this development, see Ernst Lewalter, "Thomas von Aquino und die Bulle 'Benedictus Deus' von 1336," *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 54 (1935), 399-461.

2. Gregory's times and life

2.1 The Historical Context of Late Sixth-Century Rome

> Daily the world is oppressed by new and growing evils. You see how few of you remain from a countless people; yet daily afflictions still oppress us, sudden disasters crush us, new and unforeseen misfortunes afflict us.[22]

In his *Homiliae in Evangelia*, Gregory describes his own times in these radical words. For him, the catastrophes he describes are clear signs of the end of earthly existence.[23] To illustrate the desperate situation, the Church Father uses the *topos* of the *mundus senescens* (senectitude of the world). While once the world was in full bloom, it is now approaching a tortured death like an old man. Such a pessimistic world-view, loaded with eschatological meaning, is omnipresent in Gregory's works. It is not the result of a downbeat mind, but caused by the actual realities in late sixth century Rome.

Some decades before the papacy of Gregory, the situation in Italy had been more pleasant. Under the reign of the Ostrogoth ruler Theoderic (493-526), the area was prosperous and generally in a peaceful condition. But things changed when Justinian, the Emperor of the East, started to reconquer Italy. In the almost twenty years of the so-called Gothic War, the countryside was devastated and the social structures began to totter. In the city of Rome itself, the consequences of the war were fatal. Many senators were killed or had to flee, so that the importance of the Roman Senate declined rapidly. The aqueducts were finally destroyed, and urban life came almost to rest. Whereas in 530 about 100,000 people lived in Rome, in the late sixth century the population was reduced to 50,000.

22 in Ev.. 1,1,5: *Novis quotidie et crebrescentibus malis mundus urgetur. Ex illa plebe innumera quanti remanseritis, aspicitis; et tamen adhuc quotidie flagella urgent, repentini casus opprimunt, novae nos et improvisae clades affligunt.* Translation by D. Hurst: Gregory the Great, *Forty Gospel Homilies*, trans. by David Hurst, Cistercian Studies Series, vol. 123 (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1990).

23 For the following, see especially Markus, Gregory, 51-67, and Mischa Meier, "Eschatologie und Kommunikation im 6. Jahrhundert n. Chr. – oder: Wie Osten und Westen beständig aneinander vorbei redeten," *Endzeiten. Eschatologie in den monotheistischen Weltreligionen*, ed. Wolfram Brandes and Felicitas Schmieder (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2008), 41-73.

After the victory of Justinian, the order could not be restored. On the contrary, the instability of the region enabled the Lombards to start their invasion. In 568, their king Alboin led them into the peninsula, where they soon seized large cities and started to settle. Unlike the reign of the Ostrogoths, the Lombard presence in Italy led to further economic decline, religious persecution, and violence. Rome formally stayed under the rule of the Exarchate of Ravenna, thus being connected to the Eastern Roman Empire. Nevertheless, the Lombards always remained a considerable threat for the city. In his works, Gregory the Great makes no secret of his hatred towards these invaders.

However, the pope's anticipation of the end of the world, probably reflecting the spread of *Endzeiterwartungen* (expectations of the end of days) in large parts of the society, was not only provoked by the ominous political situation. When Gregory was raised to the papacy in 590, the city of Rome also had to face other serious problems: After heavy rains, the Tiber had overflowed its banks, resulting in great destruction and a horrible famine. What is more, the plague had returned.[24] It was a complicated situation, in which a pope had to be both a political and a spiritual leader. In this respect, Gregory seemed to be the perfect choice at first glance.

2.2 Gregory the Great: A very short biography

Gregory the Great was not a typical Late Antique pope. While the members of the Roman clergy normally originated from a moderate social standing, his background was different. He was a member of the senatorial aristocracy, holding an important office in the year 573, maybe even prefect of Rome. Based on epigraphic findings, some scholars hold the

24 Markus, Gregory, 13. Gregory is not the only Christian theologian who interpreted the plague as a sign of the approaching end of times. Facing a serious epidemic, Cyprian of Carthage expresses similar thoughts. The world in his times is stumbling and falling; this does not indicate its high age, but already its end. Note that the African bishop also uses the *topos* of the *mundus senescens*. However, it must be emphasized that Cyprian's description is much less dramatic than Gregory's. For Cyprian's treatment of the dangerous "Volkscalamität", see Adolf Harnack, *Medicinisches aus der Ältesten Kirchengeschichte* (Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung, 1892), 66-68.

view that Gregory was a member of the *gens Anicii*; although this can hardly be verified, it would fit perfectly in the general view. Nevertheless, he was closely connected to the church. His great-great-grandfather was Pope Felix III, his father was employed by the church, and his sisters had become nuns.[25]

One could assume that with his background, Gregory would have been predestined for the papacy. On the one hand, this post was of course a religious one, but on the other, its political duties and responsibilities had largely increased during the time of the Exarchate. Hence, a person who had experience in the Roman administration and was at the same time involved in the monastic movement met all the demands of a sixth-century pope. But despite his Roman aristocratic background, Gregory was not obsessed with political power. In some of the letters he wrote shortly after he had become pope, he complains about his new worldly duties.[26] Quite the contrary, he always favoured a monastic lifestyle in seclusion. After he finished his public duties in 573, he consequently became a monk. Maybe, by this he wanted to prepare himself for the end of the world.

Gregory's admiration of monasticism never ceased; this is still clear in his later writings, especially in the Dialogues. Here, the Church Father seems to distance himself from highly sophisticated theology and moves close to the ascetic ethos of the monks. In the Dialogues, Gregory advertises the necessity of an ascetic life, leading to individual holiness. With the help of examples, he demonstrates that this ideal is achievable for everyone. Gregory's promotion of this way of life is closely connected to his eschatological fears. As there is no more hope for this world in decay, everyone should be concerned about the destiny in afterlife. Only a Christian life in line with monastic values could guarantee salvation.[27]

25 John Moorhead, *Gregory the Great* (London: Routledge, 2012), 1-2.
26 Ibid., 3.
27 See for example Meier, Eschatologie, 62.

3. Gregory's Dialogues

3.1 Are the Dialogues a reliable source for Gregory's conceptions of the Afterlife?

> Let me … call attention to the strange combination of shrewdness and superstition which characterized the mind of Gregory. It is certainly astonishing that the clear-headed man who managed the Papal estates and governed the Church with such admirable skill, should have contributed to the propagation of these wild tales of demons and wizards and haunted houses, of souls made visible, of rivers obedient to written orders, of corpses that scream and walk. And yet such was the fact. The landlord of the Papal Patrinomies and the author of the *Dialogues* are one and the same person.[28]

F. Homes Dudden's quotation from the beginning of the twentieth century serves as a fitting example of many modern scholar's approaches towards the Gregorian Dialogues. Being sympathetic to the pope in general, Dudden cannot hide his perplexity, even embarrassment, about the character of this work. How could a theologian like Gregory, considered a great Church Father and revered throughout the centuries in East and West, abase himself to write a work loaded with naive folk tales, without any apparent intellectual value?

Doubts about the identity of the author of the Moralia and the Homilies and the person who produced the Dialogues first appeared during Reformation, with the emergence of early literary criticism. For many Reformers, the Dialogues constituted a serious problem: On the one hand, they held the Church fathers in high esteem, appreciating their closeness to the early, *pure* Christian teachings, stainless from Catholic decadence. On the other hand, the Dialogues seemed to propagate everything they abhorred so deeply; above all purgatory, veneration of the saints, and confession.[29] Some scholars concluded therefore that Gregory did not write the Dialogues himself; they are just a forgery, intentionally spread under the

28 F. Homes Dudden, *Gregory the Great: His Place in History and Thought*, vol. 1 (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1905), 356.

29 See Paul Meyvaert, "The Enigma of Gregory the Great's *Dialogues*: A Response to Francis Clark," *JEH* 39 (1988): 335-381 (336).

pope's name to back them up with authority and make them more popular in consequence. This attempt to purify the intellectual output of the revered moral theologian had a considerable legacy in modern scholarship, as the debate about Francis Clark's "The Pseudo-Gregorian Dialogues" shows.[30] This theologian seconds the ideas of Gregory's Protestant critics and refines them with the means of contemporary scholarship. No scholar basing his or her research on the Dialogues nowadays can avoid dealing with Clark's arguments anymore.[31] Clark's analysis of the Dialogues follows a twofold structure: the author intends to prove his thesis that the book is a late seventh-century forgery by scrutinizing what he calls "external" and "internal evidence". That is to say that in his opinion, both an abundance of documents by other authors of the seventh and eighth centuries and a comparison of the Dialogues with Gregory's other works inevitably lead to the conclusion that the pope can under no circumstances be the author of the miracle-stories of the Italian saints. Instead, the Dialogues are a product of the late seventh century, composed by an author Clark calls the "Dialogist". This author tried to lend credence to his forgery by adding paragraphs of authentic Gregorian thought he found in some archives (the so-called IGPs, "Inserted Gregorian Passages"). Clark's clear and comprehensible structure and his talent for arranging a multitude of data in such a way that his whole argument seems to be self-evident lead to an appealing persuasiveness of his thesis. However many of his thoughts are less convincing than they appear at first glance.

Clark is an erudite scholar of early medieval Church history and therefore is familiar

30 Francis Clark, *The "Gregorian" Dialogues and the Origins of Benedictine Monasticism* (Leiden: Brill, 2003). His assumptions, although rejected by most scholars on Gregory the Great, provoked an abundance of fresh thoughts. It is almost impossible nowadays to write about the pope without mentioning Clark and his ideas.

31 This is of course not the place to offer a detailed criticism of Clark's thesis; other authors did that before in a very convincing way. Most prominent among them are: Meyvaert, Enigma; Adalbert de Vogüé, "Grégoire le Grand et ses 'Dialogues' d'après Deux Ouvrages Récents," *RHE* 83 (1988): 281-348; Matthew Dal Santo, "The Shadow of a Doubt? A Note on the *Dialogues* and *Registrum Epistolarum* of Pope Gregory the Great (590-504)," *JEH* 61 (2010): 3-17; Robert Godding, "Les Dialogues … de Gregoire le Grand: À Propos d'un Livre Récent," *AB* 106 (1988): 201-229, just to name the most prominent ones. Most reviews of Clark's work came to similar conclusions.

with the fact that verbatim quotations from the Dialogues exist in other almost contemporary works. Both Gregory's secretary Paterius and Taio of Saragossa made use of the Dialogues in their works in the middle of the seventh century. Clark does not deny that their quotations are really connected to passages of the Dialogues, although he claims this work was written much later. So, in order to solve this problem, he maintains that these passages were indeed written by Gregory. However, they were not directly quoted from the Dialogues, but from a collection of fragments found in the papal *scrinium*. This is where all authors – the"Dialogist", Paterius, and Taio – found the quotations which seem to come directly from the Dialogues. However, Clark cannot explain satisfactorily why this complicated theory based on unverifiable hypotheses should be preferred to a simple dependence of both works on the Dialogues.[32]

Besides the witness of Taio and Paterius, there is a further crucial source that counters Clark's thesis: a letter in which Gregory asks Maximian of Syracus for information about miracles in Italy. At the beginning, the pope reports the reason for his curiosity: "My brethren, who live with me on friendly terms, compel me in every way to write something briefly about the miracles of the Fathers, which we have heard took place in Italy."[33] Here Gregory explicitly states his intention to write a work like the Dialogues – and, ultimately, there is no reason to doubt that the Dialogues are exactly this requested work. Clark tries to diminish the value of this evidence. Either this letter is a real Gregorian composition which inspired Pseudo-Gregory to cobble together his collection of miraculous tales; or, which is more likely in Clark's view, it is a forgery made by the "Dialogist" in order to support the

32 And even if Clark would be right in this point, there are still other witnesses of the Dialogues way before the end of the seventh century. In this cases Clark has to reverse chronological dependencies or to declare documents as spoiled by interpolations or as forgeries as well. For a more comprehensive discussion, see Vögüé, Grégoire, 295-328. While a reader without bias may be willing to believe Clark in the beginning of his argument, soon the whole line of reasoning becomes more and more artificial and implausible.

33 Ep. III,50: *Fratres mei, qui mecum familiariter vivunt, omnimodo me compellunt aliqua de miraculis patrum, quae in Italia facta audivimus, sub brevitate scribere.* Translation by John R.C. Martyn: Gregory the Great, *The Letters of Gregory the Great*, ed. and transl. John R.C. Martyn, 3 vols (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2004).

authentic appearance of his work. In the Middle Ages, it was not exceptional to back up one forgery with the help of another; but if this is really the case here, the forger really executed his task weakly. As Meyvaert has shown, the letter must have been buried in the Lateran Archives, quasi-inaccessible among thousands of other letters.[34] Therefore, nothing finally points towards Clark's interpretation of the letter.[35]

While some of Clark's ideas in his passages on the external evidence are worth further discussion, the foundation of his "internal evidence" is weaker. Clark wants to show that the Dialogues are composed of two clearly distinguishable elements: imaginative miracle tales, compiled by a scribe from the late seventh century, and the "Inserted Gregorian Passages", which contain true Gregorian spirituality. Clark believes that these "Inserted Gregorian Passages" were forcefully inserted into the forged text. Still they are discernible, because they differ not only in content but also in style. At this point, the author's method becomes problematic. The main criterion for distinguishing Gregorian material from the inferior folk tales is what Clark believes to be "authentic Gregorian spirituality". He does not consider that the pope's unusual approach might have been caused by a different intention or audience. Furthermore, he ignores the fact that the Dialogues belong to a different genre and cannot be easily compared with Gregory's sophisticated theological treatises. Instead, he argues for a meticulous analysis of single words which are atypical for Gregory, or some which are seemingly missing from the Dialogues. Unfortunately, he disregards the fact that a narrative requires a different language than an exegetical text. For example, he seriously wonders why words like *enim* or *vero*, abundant in the scriptual commentaries, seldom appear in the Dialogues. Yet, these words are just part of a standardized exegetical style, which is not used in exemplary tales about saints however.[36]

Clark's attempt to free Gregory from the stain of promoting vernacular superstition has

34 Meyvaert, Enigma, 345-348.
35 See also de Vogüé, Grégoire, 310-312.
36 See Meyvaert, Enigma, 368. Many other examples could be added.

been criticized more than once for good reasons. It mostly results from the attempt to adjust Gregory's literary output to modern standards, ignoring that late antique and early medieval Christianity was different from contemporary forms. Certainly, the author brings an impressive number of arguments for his theory, both in his parts on external and on internal evidence – but none of them is strong enough to discredit the authenticity of the Dialogues in the end.[37] Although Clark made the attempt to refute the arguments of his critics in his second major publication on the topic, the majority of scholars still dismisses his thesis.[38] Recently, Matthew Dal Santo has underlined again that the miracle stories of the Dialogues integrate smoothly into the oeuvre of Gregory the Great by comparing them with similar accounts in the papal epistles.[39] Therefore, the Dialogues will be considered as a reliable source for Gregory's conception of the afterlife in this study.

3.2 Gregory's fourth book of the Dialogues and the discussion about the Afterlife of the soul in the late sixth century

The fourth book might appears to be the most suspicious book of the Dialogues to a skeptical reader. In his groundbreaking study about "Le Voyage de l'Âme dans l'Au-Delà", Claude Carozzi concludes that it is first and foremost "un livre de l'âme"[40], dealing with the existence, nature and especially the *post mortem* destiny of the soul. While the first three books follow the clear intention to prove the existence of miracle-working saints in the Italy of Gregory's time, the fourth book serves as a monumental reply to a crucial request of Deacon Peter about the state of the soul. In Dial. III, he asks his spiritual leader:

37 De Vogüé, Grégoire, 347, states it more scathingly: "vingt mauvais arguments n'en font pas un bon". Still, not everything Francis Clark writes is complete nonsense. There are aspects in his section about the "external evidence" which cannot be dismissed easily; for an example see Meyvaert, Enigma, 371-381, on the publication of the Dialogues (although Meyvaert's assumptions are problematic as well at this point). Unfortunately, Clark's meaningful ideas get sometimes lost in his speculations.

38 Clark, however, thinks that the case is still open to debate and that the ratio of supporters of his assumptions and his critics is balanced: Clark, Benedictine Monasticism, 25-36.

39 Dal Santo, Doubt. Clark knows about the stories, but qualifies them either as a fake or as displaying a "different quality" of miracles.

40 Carozzi, Voyage, 44, 60.

> *Quam multos intra sanctae Ecclesiae gremium constitutos de vita animae post mortem carnis perpendo dubitare. Quaeso ut debeas, vel quae ex ratione suppetunt, vel si qua animarum exempla animo occurrunt, pro multorum aedificatione dicere, ut hii qui suspicantur discant cum carne animam non finiri.* (Dial. III,38,5)

Gregory therefore promises *quod anima post carnem vivat, subsequenti hoc quarto volumine demonstrabo.* (Ibid.) Because of this new focus, the saints, although not completely disappearing from view, are at least subordinated to the destiny of the soul. This being the case, sinners and persons with a dubious moral conduct can also become the protagonists of Gregory's vivid narratives.

The concept of the soul as the golden thread of the last book of the Dialogues always has to be kept in mind in the following considerations. Whenever Gregory speaks of the destiny of a person after death in the fourth book of the Dialogues, he refers to the afterlife of the soul, not that of the body! This is even the case for corporeal punishments, an idea which is confusing both for the modern reader and for Gregory's contemporaries, as Deacon Peter's perplexity reveals (IV,29,2).

Those are "thorny issues"[41], indeed, and Gregory does not touch on them without good reason. His need to elaborate extensively on the soul's destiny in the afterlife can be understood by a closer examination of the role of the interlocutor Peter, who constitutes an essential part of the Dialogues. Most probably this person is no literary invention, but part of the higher clergy of Rome. In the context of this analysis, however, this is not of primary importance, because it is clear that the whole work does not render an actual discussion, but that it is an skillfully arranged fictional text. Peter's function here, however, is that of an intercessor for the weak and infidels.[42] Still it remains important to ask if his questions, loaded with critical attitude and surprisingly many doubts, are just Gregory's invention, used

41 Dal Santo, Cult, 86.

42 For references, see Marc Van Uytfanghe, "Skepticisme Doctrinal au Seuil du Moyen Age? Les Objections du Diacre Pierre dans les *Dialogues* de Grégoire le Grand," in *Grégoire le Grand*, ed. J. Fontaine et al. (Paris: Éd. du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1986), 314-326 (323, n. 19).

as connective elements enabling the pope to present his arguments[43], or if they rather represent certain attitudes which were actually wide-spread among contemporary Christians.[44]

The Dialogues basically start with a doubt about thaumaturges in Italy, expressed by Peter: *Bonos viros in hac terra fuisse non dubito, signa tamen atque virtutes .. ab eis nequaquam facta existimo*[.] (Dial. Prol. 7) This expression of doubt seems curious at a time when the miraculous was purportedly omnipresent in the Christian society, and the cult of saints more or less uncontested.[45] Yet it is just one out of many remarks that show a notable doctrinal skepticism in the words of the interlocutor. Peter is similarly doubtful when he interrogates Gregory about the existence of the soul. His questions in this respect cannot be easily put away by the pope, on the contrary: he is facing real challenges and is not able to solve them in every case a thoroughly convincing way. Every fundamental teaching about the soul is questioned in the fourth book of the Dialogues; Gregory even has to struggle with the question if there is actually something like the afterlife of the soul. The pope takes this questions seriously and replies with lengthy explanations; in no other book of the Dialogues does he elaborate as much on Christian doctrine as in the fourth.[46]

Peter tenaciously expresses his doubts about things which are invisible to the human eye. Once, for example, the deacon had been present at the death of one of his brethren, he says. Suddenly, the moribund man exhaled his breath of life (*flatum vitalis*) and died immediately. Did the soul leave the body in this moment? *Sed eius anima utrum egressa sit an non egressa sit non vidi, et valde durum videtur, ut credatur res esse, cum nullus valeat videre* (Dial IV,5,1), Peter says. In an almost "empirical"[47] way, he (or, better, the people he

43 De Vogüé, Grégoire, 291, seems to prefer this solution.

44 The first notable attempt to promote this idea was Uytfanghe, Skepticisme, passim. Based on his preliminary work, Matthew Dal Santo considerably expanded the theory: Dal Santo, Cult, 85-148. See also Gillian R. Evans, *The Thought of Gregory the Great*, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life and Thought 4,2 (Cambridge: University Press, 1986), 14.

45 Peter Brown, "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity," *JRS* 61 (1971), 80–101.

46 This was already noted by A. de Vogüé, Introduction, 66. 25 of the 65 chapters are concerned with questions of doctrine.

47 Uytfanghe, Scepticisme, 319. Kate Cooper, Matthew Dal Santo, "Boethius, Gregory the Great and the Christian 'Afterlife' of Classical Dialogue," in *The End of Dialogue in Classical Antiquity*, ed. Simon

represents) needs to see visible proofs in order to believe.[48] This small episode is just one of many instances in the fourth book of the Dialogues that represents an attitude recently termed "rationalist-materialist" by M. Dal Santo.[49] It is not easy to give substantial evidence against these arguments, which were not only circulating in Rome but also in the Eastern part of the Empire.[50] Gregory counters them with the help of exemplary stories about the soul. It is especially important for him to emphasize the reliability and authenticity of these narratives; therefore he is eager to show that they all stem from particularly trustworthy witnesses.[51]

Goldhill (Cambridge: University Press, 2009), 173-189 (186). However, this doctrinal scepticism notwithstanding, Peter is not the prototype of a modern agnostic. Such a perception would be totally anachronistic.

48 This will become obvious in the following chapters.

49 Dal Santo, Cult, 88-93.

50 Ibid., passim. See esp. 134-148 for the possible influence of contemporary Aristotelianism.

51 Ibid., 106.

4. Hell, Purgatory, and the Heavenly Fatherland in Gregory's works

4.1 Visions of the Afterlife in the Fourth Book of the Dialogues

How could a pious Christian know anything reliable about the other side, except from the vague references to be found in the Bible? Pope Gregory the Great explicitly articulates this need of many believers to have some proof of the existence of heaven and hell: "The carnal humans, because they are not able to know by experience these invisible things, doubt whether exists what they do not see with their corporal eyes."[52] This is exactly the same kind of "empiricist" skepticism Gregory had to face when Peter asked him about the existence of the soul. Unlike Augustine, Gregory does not primarily use biblical references or philosophical reasoning in order to prove the life of the soul in the afterlife, but examples of extraordinary spiritual experiences: Sometimes, the pope states, a soul returns to the body after death and informs the living about heavenly joy and infernal punishment. That does not happen by mistake - *non error, sed admonitio est* (IV,37,2).[53] On the one hand, visiting the other side can in the best case lead to a correction of ones own faults; on the other, the spread of information of this incident reminds the mass of skeptical Christians about the possible results of their deeds in the afterlife.

Gregory describes journeys like that in detail in the fourth book of his Dialogues. The descriptions given here constitute an important part of his eschatology; in some handbooks on eschatology and medieval religion, it even seems like these *Jenseitsvisionen* (visions of the afterlife) dominated his views about the life after death.[54] However, Gregory elaborated his

52 Dial. IV,1,2: *... carnales quique, quia illa inuisibilia scire non valent per experimentum, dubitant utrumne sit quod corporalibus oculis non uident.*

53 However, as can be seen in Dial. 4,37,6, it can still happen that people enter the netherworld by mistake. This episode is puzzling anyway, as it mentions a judgment right after death. But how can God (or one of his judges, whoever that might be) make a mistake and drag a wrong person into hell? Gregory's concept of an otherworldly court seems to be incoherent at this point.

54 For example Daley, Hope, 211-215; Angenendt, Religiosität, 695-698; differently: Kisić, Patria. The descriptions of the afterlife in the fourth book of the Dialogues are certainly more than eschatological excursions (contra Carozzi, Voyage, 54); they are main pillars of this work.

conceptions concerning the afterlife in other of his works as well[55] There are some points in these works that seem to contradict the statements in the Dialogues at the first glance.[56] Such differences, real or imagined, can be explained by a variety of factors.[57]

The beginning of the fourth book of the Dialogues is devoted to what might be called an epistemology of the afterlife. People are interested in their fate after death, but this knowledge is concealed from them. Why is that the case? The ignorance of mankind is without doubt a result of the original sin, Gregory claims. Before the expulsion from paradise, mankind was in a blissful state:

> In paradise, man was obviously accustomed to enjoy the words of God, to be with the spirits of the blessed angels thanks to the purity of heart and the altitude of vision. But when he fell down to this place, he also moved away from the light of soul that had filled him.[58]

Yet, because of Adam's sin, man has been sent into exile, where he has to dwell in blindness. In this state, there is no chance for contemplation of the heavenly fatherland any longer, Gregory says. The lack of knowledge about things in Heaven leads to doubt about whether this invisible world really exists at all. Gregory describes this miserable situation with his own version of a "simile of the cave"[59]: If a woman gave birth to a child inside of a dungeon (*carcer*), without any contact to the outer world, and if she told it about the sun, the moon and the stars, or about horses running wild, would the child believe these things? As it never got to know them by its own experience, it would probably have serious doubts. The

55 Nevertheless, "it was his representation of the afterlife through visionary tales in the *Dialogues* that caught the imagination of his medieval readers." (Moreira, Purge, 85)

56 See for example Dagens, Grégoire, 401: "Quel contraste entre ces représentations du paradis ou de l'énfer, ces récits de l'envol des âmes vers le ciel, et la spiritualisation de l'au-delà que l'on trouve dans les *Moralia*, où le séjour céleste des âmes apparaît comme le prolongement des bons ou des mauvais désirs qu'elles eurent durant leur vie terrestre!"

57 Scholarship has of course recognized this puzzling problem. The most common explanation for the difference in style and approach is probably the idea that the Dialogues are "more accessible to ordinary Christians and appeal to popular tastes" (Moreira, Purge, 240 n. 24.). Although there is a grain of truth in this statement, the following discussions will demonstrate that it needs modification.

58 Dial. IV,1,1: *In paradiso quippe homo adsueverat verbis Dei perfrui, beatorum angelorum spiritibus cordis munditia et celsitudine visionis interesse. Sed postquam huc cecidit, ab illo quo implebatur mentis lumine recessit.*

59 It seems that in the sixth century, this is still the usual way such epistemological questions are treated. For the aftermath of this Platonic idea in Christian tradition, see Dal Santo, Cult, 92 (with references).

situation of mankind is quite similar: "Thus, the humans, born into the darkness of their exile, doubt if it is true when they here that a highest and invisible world exist, because they just know this lower visible world in which they were born."[60] This is where Christ comes into play: He descends from heaven in order to redeem the whole human race, and he sends the Holy Spirit into our hearts, so that we are able to believe what we cannot know from our own experience. But so far just the Christians have received this insight; all the nonbelievers are still blindfolded. For those who are not solid enough in their belief (*non solidus in credulitate*) so far, there are at least the sayings of the *maiores* they have to believe in. They need to rely on such people who have experience in the unseen things with the help of the Holy Ghost.[61]

In the following chapters, Gregory exactly aims at those *audientes* who are skeptical about the things that will happen to them after their death. He gives information about the destiny of men after death by using *exempla*. It was important for him that these stories be verifiable, even if they were "third hand"; confronted with severe doubts, he needed reliable sources to underpin his conceptions of the afterlife. That is why he always offers precise names of the protagonists and concrete places of origin. His informants are usually outstanding Christians, especially monks, or noble laymen. It has to be underlined that Gregory's *exempla* are not randomly chosen, but serve as illustrations for more systematic questions. In an almost mystagogical way, they proceed from more easily understandable teachings to complicated ones.

What are these miraculous narratives about precisely? Although Gregory sometimes mentions the positive rewards for good Christians after death, in most of the passages of the Dialogues he focuses on the negative aspects of the afterlife and describes them in threatening words. Whenever Gregory refers to the torments of hell, he uses concrete

60 Dial. IV,1,3: *Ita in hac exilii sui caecitate nati homines, dum esse summa et inuisibilia audiunt, diffidunt an uera sint, quia sola haec infima, in quibus nati sunt, uisibilia noverunt.*

61 See Dal Santo, Cult, 93.

pictures. Some striking examples can easily show this; they also help to understand why Gregory chooses such a "pictorial" way to describe the eschatological realities.

First is the case of a priest called Tiburtius; the dreadful destiny of this churchman after death is reported by the nobleman (*spectabilis vir*) Reparatus, one of the persons who returned from the afterlife after his seeming death. While spending his time at this *locus poenarum*, he witnessed how the lecherous priest had to pay for the fornication he indulged in during his earthly life: the sinner is painfully burned on a huge pyre. Tiburtius is not the only one to be punished in this way. Another even more impressive pyre has been constructed at the same spot; for whom, the reader of the Dialogues does not get to know.

Then Gregory explains the pedagogical meaning of this story. Reparatus did not see the otherworldly punishments for his own sake, because he died shortly afterward. On the contrary, "he saw it for us, who are still permitted to live, and who therefore still can correct our bad deeds."[62] The destiny of Tiburtius is an *exemplum* and shall lead the quick towards a life agreeable to God. That is why Reparatus has seen a physical pyre made out of wood. Of course, Gregory argues, in Hell there is no firewood needed to light a fire; but with a symbol like this the narrative is easily understandable for the audience. From the accustomed things (*adsueta*) they can deduce the unaccustomed (*insueta*) facts of the afterlife. This passage leads to a better understanding of Gregory's descriptions of the afterlife. Not everything the pope reveals about the existence after death in the Dialogues can be taken at face value; heaven and hell's all too material manifestations in the stories just give an idea about what the humanly imperceptible Beyond could be like.

Another story underlines this kind of symbolic knowledge of the life to come (IV,37,7-39). During the bad times of the plague, a soldier *in extremis* entered the world beyond, but finally returned from there and gave information about the things he had seen on the other

62 Dial. IV,32,5: *nobis illa [vidit], quibus dum adhuc concessum est vivere, licet etiam a malis operibus emendare.*

side. He is quite detailed about the curiosities he has perceived in the Beyond: a bridge (a so-called *Jenseitsbrücke*[63]) over a dark foul river, leading towards a meadow full of fragrant flowers; people in white clothes, living in houses awash with light; a house with golden tiles; but also people trying to cross the bridge in vain, being dragged directly into hell by malicious demons. Deacon Peter is confused by such tangibility in Gregory's descriptions. Let us just consider the golden tiles, he objects: *Ridiculum est valde, si credimus quod in illa vita adhuc metallis talibus egeamus.* (IV,37,15) Soon afterwards, he utters similar doubts about the foul stench, the river itself, and of course the bridge. Gregory agrees: *Quis hoc, si sanum sapit, itellegat?* (IV,37,16) These descriptions are not to be understood literally, but figuratively. Still, they have an important didactic purpose: *Ex rerum, Petre, imaginibus pensamus merita causarum.* (IV,38,3) Again, as in the case of the pyre ablaze, Gregory does not aim at a reliable description of the factual afterlife. He rather circumscribes the destiny of man after his death with the help of intelligible pictures.[64]

The symbols Gregory uses are not randomly chosen. They are, on the contrary, closely connected to moral behavior in this world.[65] Note Gregory's explanation of the golden rooftop: *Nam quoniam praemium lucis aeternae elemosinarum largitate promerebitur, nimirum constat quia auro aedificat mansionem suam.* (IV,37,16) In a similar way, the evil-smelling stench of the river represents the carnal vices (*vitia carnalia*) of this world. People who are not able to refrain completely from such earthly pleasures have to dwell (at least temporarily) in houses permeated by a horrible odor.

Such stories, however tangible they are, still have to be believed by the audience, as their content cannot be perceived by corporal eyes. Yet there is even a possibility to see the nature of hell in this world, namely in places where the beyond is connected to the here and

63 See for example Angenendt, Religiosität, 696, with references; Auffarth, Wege, 29.
64 Carozzi, Voyage, 60 summarizes aptly: "[C]es révélations nous font connaître le sens de ce qui vient, mais ne nous donnent aucune description réaliste de ce qui se passe dans l'Au-delà."
65 See also Dagens, Grégoire, 378.

now. It might seem curious to the modern observer, but Gregory explicitly mentions on many occasions that areas like these exist. The anecdote of the death of King Theoderic might serve as a first example for these "contact zones". On the way back from Sicily to the Italian peninsula, some clerics were stranded on the island Liparis. There, a local hermit revealed to them that the king had died recently. Being asked where he received this information, the man of God answered that Theoderic had been seen nearby. Some of his former enemies, who had died according to his orders, had led him with tied hands towards a volcano; there, they had thrown him into the crater – that is, directly into hell. It can be seen in this episode that the entrance to the place of eternal damnation can be found on earth. In this case, however, Gregory's description is not to be understood in a metaphorical way at all. The volcanos in Sicily fit perfectly into Gregory's cosmology, which is structured like a vertical axis: hell is located in the underworld (below), heaven is above, and the earth is situated in between. Thus, it is no surprise that hell can theoretically be entered from earth through its fiery gates.[66]

Therefore, the reader of the Dialogues can no longer be surprised when Gregory recounts that another deceased person has been led to Sicily – the place where "in an uprising fire the gorges of torment open."[67] The volcanos again have their didactic aim: They offer a glimpse of hell for the skeptics, who do not want to believe what they cannot see. Scared by this prospect, they should realize that it is time for them to change their ways. However, there is another interesting aspect in this story, closely connected to Gregory's own eschatological fears:

> Those, who are familiar with it, tell that the openings [of the craters] widen and grow day by day. The end of the world approaches, and the larger the number of those who will be burned there surely, the more the places of torment seem to be opened likewise.[68]

66 See also Carozzi, Voyage, 56-57.

67 Dial. IV,36,12: ... *eructuante igne tormentorum ollae patuerunt.*

68 Dial. IV,36,12: *Quae, ut solent narrare qui noverunt, laxatis cotidie sinibus excrescunt, ut mundi termino propinquante, quanto certum est illuc amplius exurendos collegi, tanto et eadem tormentorum loca amplius*

Thus the steady widening of the craters is a clear sign for the close approach of eschatological times. There can be no doubt that the Last Judgment is soon to come.[69]

Everything in the other world is eternal. That not only applies to the blissful state of the good believers in Heaven, but also to the punishment of the sinners in hell.[70] Gregory bases this conviction on Mt. 25:46: "And these [the sinners] shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal."[71] Peter, his interlocutor, raises some doubts about the definite character of this statement. What if the threat of a never-ending punishment just serves as a tool in order to scare the doubting Christians, so that they do not dare to sin anymore? The pope does not accept this objection; if the eternal torment is an illusion, this inevitably leads to the conclusion that the promise of heaven is also deceptive – and who would dare say this?[72] Thus, there can be no argument about the fact that eternal punishment is a fact; but is it not unfair that sinners who committed their shameful deeds in this finite world pay for them eternally, Peter wonders? Gregory does not agree. God, he maintains, does not just judge the deeds of people, but their hearts. If those sinners had had the chance to continue with their behavior, they would have done so: "For he, who never refrains from sinning while he lives, shows that he wants to live in sin forever."[73]

Even if one agrees with Gregory's reasoning and accepts eternal torment in hell as just, from the didactic point of view this idea leads necessarily to a problem: In general, physical violence might be a pedagogical means to change the behavior of disobedient persons (although not a very good one, as one would probably agree nowadays). But in eternal

videantur aperiri.

69 See also Conrad Leyser, *Authority and Asceticism from Augustine to Gregory the Great*, Oxford Historical Monographs (Oxford: University Press, 2000), 135, who claims that the "nearness of Judgment is palpable and eerie" in Gregory's works.

70 This view is not restricted to the Dialogues, but is typical for Gregory; see also in. Ev. 2,40,7.

71 *Ibunt hii in supplicum aeternum, iusti autem in vitam aeternam.*

72 Dial. IV,46,2: *Sed quis hoc dicere vel insanus praesumat?*

73 Dial. IV,46,3: *Ostendunt enim quia in peccato semper vivere cupiunt, qui numquam desinunt peccare dum vivunt.*

damnation, there is no longer space for a change (*correctio*). As in heaven, everything will stay the same forever – a clear distinction from the Alexandrinian concept of an *apokatastasis*. Not even the prayers of the beatified can help condemned souls. So, if the torture does not aim at changing the character of the sinners, what is it good for? God does not enjoy the desperate state of the bad ones, Gregory says. Their suffering is useful for one reason:

> All the unjust, given over to the eternal punishment, indeed are punished for their iniquity, but yet they burn for something good, namely that all the just ones see the joy they perceive in God and gaze at the punishments they avoided.[74]

As the blessed ones see the wretched condition of the condemned, they realize that their behavior during lifetime was correct and can appreciate their blissful state even more. This is the remaining purpose of the eternal hellfire.

4.2 The invention of Purgatory?

The Christian ideal of a flawless life without any sin is a sublime one, and even if a person tries the very best, he or she might commit smaller moral mistakes during life, perhaps unintentionally. Gregory knows that many good Christians die without all their sins being repented; but evidently they cannot all be condemned to an eternal suffering in hell as described in the last chapter. Therefore, he describes options for purification before the definite decision of the Judge. First of all, dying in a quick but painful way (*ad modicum dure moriri*) can have this positive effect (Dial. IV,24,2). Death itself is therefore potentially purging minor guilt. Gregory illustrates this with the story of a man of God who disobediently consumed food on his way to Samaria. As a punishment for this wrong, he was killed by a lion. However, the beast did not devour the carrion, but stood beside the corpse

74 Dial. IV, 46,5: *Iniqui omnes aeterno supplicio deputati sua quidem iniquitate puniuntur, et tamen ad aliquid ardebunt, scilicet ut iusti omnes et in Deo videant gaudia quae percipiunt, et in illis respiciant supplicia quae evaserunt*[.]

and did not even touch it. The ugly death purged away the sin of disobedience. Gregory concludes: *Leo ergo, qui prius peccatoris vitam necaverat, custodivit postmodum cadaver iusti.* (Dial IV,25,1) Sometimes, is is even enough to be scared enough in the face of death to be granted access to heaven (IV,48).

But there is one more option for those who were not perfectly just during their existence in the flesh, which constitutes another significant feature of the Gregorian afterlife and had a considerable legacy in the Middle Ages. Again, the topic is introduced by a direct question of the interlocutor Peter: Is there anything like a cleansing fire in the Beyond?[75] (IV,40,13) Gregory's answer is definite – one has to belief in the existence of such a fire (*purgatorius ignis credendus est*), although it can just eradicate minor sins like loquacity or immoderate laughter, not serious ones like slander against the Holy Ghost. Not everyone can profit from this fire, there is a prerequisite: *Hoc tamen sciendum est quia illic saltem de minimis nil quisque purgationis obtinebit, nisi bonis hoc actibus, in hac adhuc vita positus, ut illic obtineat promereatur.* (Dial IV,41,6)

How to imagine this place of purification? Gregory does not present an all-embracing description of the purgatory as a newly established place between Heaven and Hell in the Dialogues. Considering the details, he remains vague to the greatest extent; just three *exempla* of people ending up in this intermediary state after their life convey an impression of this place. Two of these stories are quite similar, as they are both placed in bathhouses.[76] The first is about a deacon named Paschasius, well-known for his (almost) immaculate way of life – he wrote edifying books about the Holy Spirit, supported the poor not only by extensive

75 The most recent publication on the late Antique origins of the purgatory and a useful supplement to Le Goff's famous study is Moreira, Purge, passim; on Gregory, see 85-94.

76 Carozzi, Voyage, 56-57 tries to makes sense of the curious purgation of Paschasius and his "fellow in misery" in this place in a logical way by underlining the connection of the hot springs in the baths to vulcanism. This interpretation appears a bit far-fetched, although the *calor* of the bathhouse is mentioned (IV,42,3); but hot steam is not fire, and it is nowhere implied that Paschasius is purged by it, cf. Robert R. Atwell, "From Augustine to Gregory the Great: an Evaluation of the Emergence of the Doctrine of Purgatory," *JEH* 38 (1987): 173-186 (180), and Dagens, Grégoire, 403. Not every incoherence in the Dialogues can be explained in a "rational" way.

alms-giving and was negligent of his own needs. Despite all of this, he made a mistake during his earthly life which prevented him from an immediate reunification with God. During the quarrels over the Papacy between Symmachus and Laurentius, he had supported the latter, a protégé of the Byzantine Emperor. Although Symmachus was in the end acknowledged as the legitimate pope, Paschasius stubbornly clung to his decision. This opposition to the Church obviously required purgation, as Gregory's *exemplum* shows: After his death, Paschasius ended up as a servant in the hot therms. One day, he met bishop Germanus of Capua at this place; instantly, he besought the cleric to pray on his behalf, so that he would be released from his humiliating work. Germanus did him this favor, and the next time the bishop entered the bathhouse, Paschasius was gone – a proof that the prayers had been successful. Gregory feels the need to emphasize the two most important points of this story: Paschasius' sin was a minor and unintended one, therefore "purgable"; and he merited to be forgiven by his otherwise flawless life on earth (IV,42,1-5). By underlining this, Gregory connects the *exemplum* to what he said before about the purging fire, although, curiously enough, a fire is not mentioned in the story at all. Paschasius does not suffer from bodily pains; his main punishment is to work in an undignified way as a bath attendant, a job usually relegated to slaves.[77]

Answering Peter's question if there is any possibility to help the deceased, Gregory recounts a very similar incident. In the therms, a priest met a servant who always took care of him in an exemplary manner. As a reward, the churchman wanted to give him two *coronae oblationum*[78], but the attendant rejected them politely. Instead, he asked the priest to offer the Eucharist on his behalf, for he was already dead and had to serve in the bath in retribution of his sins. The man of God did so for seven days, and when he returned to the bath, the servant was gone, freed from his intermediary state (IV,57,3-7). The third story differs from the two

77 Moreira, Purge, 88.

78 A special kind of bread in the shape of a crown, commonly used in Italy for the Eucharist. See De Vogüé, Dialogues (Vol. 3), 187 n. 5.

aforementioned. It is an anecdote Gregory himself participates in. In the former monastery of the pope, the monk Justus, proficient in the art of healing, was on his deathbed. Shortly before his death, he confessed that he possessed three coins of gold – a scandal in a community in which own property was forbidden. Gregory came to a very harsh decision: Justus had to be avoided by the fellow monks by any means, and he was not allowed to receive any kind of consolation. Thus in unutterable grief, he should repent for his misdeed, so that his heart could be purged. Not even after his death was he to be treated indulgently:

> *Cum vero mortuus fuerit, corpus illius cum fratrum corporibus non ponatur, sed quolibet fossam in sterquilinio facite, in ea corpus eius proicite, ibique super eum tres aureos quos reliquit iactate, simul omnes clamantes: 'Pecunia tua tecum sit in perditione', et sic eum terra operite*. (Dial. IV,57,11)

The monks followed his orders, but after thirty days, Gregory started to feel compassion with Justus, who was tortured by fire (*igne cruciatur*, IV,57,14) in the afterlife. The churchman decided that the holy sacrifice should be offered for the deceased monk for thirty days, so that he would be delivered from his sufferings.[79] When the days had finally passed, Justus appeared to one of his brothers in a vision. Asked about his condition, Justus answered: *Nunc usque male fui, sed iam modo bene sum, quia hodie communionem recepi.* (IV,57,15)

These three stories can hardly be understood as a description of the real character of the purgatorial fire.[80] Although Gregory intends this anecdotes to illustrate his idea of a purgatory *ante litteram*, at least the first two of them do apparently not refer to any physical suffering, rather a social one. Just his memories about the monk Justus explicitly refer to the fire, although it is not described as a means of cleansing here.[81] What is more, it is unclear where

79 This influential passage led to the belief that thirty masses in a row (trentals or "Gregorian masses") could release a soul from purgatory. In Gregory's time, this was definitely not a custom so far. See Moreira, Purge, 90f.

80 Nevertheless, "they served as the model for anecdotes that the church used to popularize the belief in Purgatory in the thirteenth century". (LeGoff, Birth, 93)

81 Moreira, Purge, 91, makes aware that it is not even clear of Gregory refers to a purifying fire or to the real hell. However, despite some inconsistencies in the story, the second option is improbable, as the pope is very definite about the eternal damnation in hell without any possible exception.

one has to imagine this place of the purifying fire, because Gregory is especially mute about any "topography of the purgatory"[82]. His emphasize lies not on the precise illustration of a cleansing fire; much more important for him is the fact that the living humans can intercede for the dead and shorten their torture in the afterlife (both by individual prayers and, probably more effectively, by the sacrifice of the Mass). In this respect, his choice of the seemingly unfitting anecdotes makes sense: They are supposed to be hard evidence for the efficacy of the care for the dead, convincing for the doubting "empiricists". However, Gregory emphatically insists on the fact that intercession for the dead is just an option, not something one should rely on. He is far from encouraging other people to be relaxed in respect to minor sins. On the contrary, Gregory concludes his Dialogues with the following sentence:

> *Igitur dum per indulgentiae temporis spatium licet, dum iudex sustinet, dum conversionem nostram is qui culpas examinat expectat, conflemus in lacrimis duritiam mentis, formemus in proximis gratiam benignitatis, et fidenter dico quia salutari hostia post mortem non indigebimus, si ante mortem Deo hostia ipsi fuerimus.* (Dial. IV,62,3)

The pope does not want to oppose the common practice of the care for the dead, which is even an essential part of his teachings. Still, it is better to live a flawless life and avoid the risky intermediary state in the purifying fire anyway.

4.3 The hope for the *Patria Caelestis*

The last sub-chapters focused particularly on the description of hell and purgatory in the afterlife, much less on the promise of the paradise in heaven. This is a result of Gregory's conception of the fourth book of the Dialogues as a didactic work, urging his audience for immediate repentance. Although he claims that his overall intention in the Dialogues would be to inflame his audience for the *patria caelestis* (Dial. I,praef.), the "book of the soul" probably rather succeeded in scaring away people from sinful behavior. However, as Rade

82 Peter Habermehl, "Jenseits. B,V. Lateinische Kirchenväter bis zum Ausgang der Spätantike," In *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum,* Vol. 17 (Stuttgart: Hiersemann, 1996), 363-378 (377): "Topographie des Fegefeuers".

Kisic has pointed out correctly, Gregory is in general very eager to kindle the *caeleste desiderium* in his audience.[83] Does he do that by the same means he employs to make the believers fear hell and purgatory?

It has already been shown in the context of the last chapter that visual descriptions of the fatherland in heaven fall comparatively short in the Dialogues. While Gregory's visions of the afterlife have been considered as fundamentally new in their astonishing vividness and rigor, his descriptions of the reward for the just are restrained and conservative to a large extent. Many earlier Christian authors, for example Hilary of Arles, had put their head much more above the parapet in this respect.[84] One very common picture the pope uses in many of his works stems from the tenth book of the Gospel of John, in which Christ proclaims: *Ego sum ostium per me si quis introierit salvabitur et ingredietur et egredietur et pascua inveniet.* (Jh. 10,9) He elaborates on this biblical passage in one of his homilies, and equates the pasture to be found through the belief in Christ with the contemplative vision (*species*) of God: "He will go in to faith; he will go out from faith to vision, from belief to contemplation; he will find pasture in eternal refreshment."[85] And what else can this pastureland be than the internal joy (*interna gaudia*) of the evergreen paradise, he concludes? He continues, a few sentences later, with a further description of the *pascua* and its residents:

> Those who have evaded the traps of temporary pleasures rejoice in those pastures with the fullness of eternity. There are the choirs of angels singing hymns, there the company of heavenly citizens, there the delightful festival of those returning from the sad labor of their exile here[.][86]

Gregory further specifies the inhabitants of the heavenly fatherland: there are the prophets and the apostles; the martyrs, the happier the more they suffered during earthly

83 Kisic, Patria Caelestis, 117-141.
84 Habermehl, Jenseits, 376.
85 In Ev. I,14,5: *Ingredietur quippe ad fidem, egredietur vero a fide ad speciem, a credulitate ad contemplationem: pascua autem inveniet in aeterna refectione.*
86 Ibid.: *In istis pascuis de aeternitatis satietate laetati sunt qui iam laqueos voluptuosae temporalitatis evaserunt. Ibi hymnidici angelorum chori, ibi societas supernorum civium. Ibi dulcis solemnitas a peregrinationis huius tristi labore redeuntium.*

existence; men, women, children, and old persons who had lived a flawless Christian life.

However, all this elaboration has a completely different quality than the otherworldly visions of the Dialogues. First of all, the pope does not come up with the metaphor of the pasture out of the blue, but sticks to it because he finds it in the biblical text he intends to explain. He makes no claim that anyone has ever seen the paradise as grasslands, but just interprets a scriptural verse in an allegorical way. Therefore, the pasture is nothing tangible at all, but just an internal representation of ultimate contemplation. Yet, as it can be seen in the Dialogues, the picture made its way also in the narrative stories about the destiny of the soul in the afterlife. Having crossed the *Jenseitsbrücke*, the virtuous deceased enter green meadows (*prata virentia,* IV,37,8). It is not too far-fetched to identify here an allusion to the pastureland promised in the Holy Scripture, although in a different, non-spiritual context.

The heavenly fatherland, besides its representation as a pasture, is a place that is nowhere sufficiently expounded by Gregory. Again, any modern scholar would yearn after a coherent systematic exposition of the Church Father's thoughts. When discussing salvation history, the pope repeatedly uses a terminology that implies a return to the once existing unity with God (*redire, restaurare* etc.).[87] From this point of view, one could come to the conclusion that the fatherland in heaven is identical with the adamite paradise from which mankind was initially expounded; protology and eschatology seem to be the same. However, Gregory explicitly maintains that the expelled man can finally not only return to the state in which he was initially created, but even surpass this state.[88] Although this assertion probably should not be overemphasized, it implies that the beatitude of heaven even surpasses the bliss of primordial paradise.

Beyond the puzzling incertitude concerning the *patria caelestis*, Gregory is also hesitating to give any way too clear description of state of the soul in heaven. He often

87 See Kisic, Patria Caelestis, 143f.
88 Moral. XVII,15,30.

touches upon this topic, but is nowhere particularly concrete. Whenever the pope starts to talk about the plenitude of heavenly joy in the afterlife, he uses a quite conventional lyrical language full of repetitions and redundancies.[89] Almost everything he has to say about this issue can be discovered, in a comprised form, in the following passage of one of his homilies on the Gospel of Luke:

> *Quae autem lingua dicere, vel quis intellectus capere sufficit illa supernae civitatis quanta sint gaudia, angelorum choris interesse, cum beatissimis spiritibus gloriae conditoris assistere, praesentem Dei vultum cernere, incircumscriptum lumen videre, nullo mortis metu affici, incorruptionis perpetuae munere laetari?*[90]

First of all, accessing the heavenly fatherland means a return to the communion with the angels. This is ultimately nothing more than a reestablishment of the condition before the Original Sin, when men and angels were contemplating God alike. But now, in the sinful condition, *mutabilitas* and *corruptio* hinder humankind from seeing the heavenly father.[91] Already before the ultimate end of days, the blessed deceased dwell in the celestial community together with the angels, a fact that has already been mentioned before. All of them delight in the highest fulfillment of Christian contemplation, that is the vision of God. Contemplation is not just a desirable goal but essentially the purpose of man's existence: "For man was made to contemplate his Creator, that he might ever be seeking after His likeness, and dwell in the [solemnity] of His love."[92] The beatific vision as the goal of this process is crucial for Gregory's understanding of the positive rewards in afterlife. Therefore, closer examination of this topic is inevitable.

The concept of a *visio beatifica* is by no means a highly innovative invention by the Church Father, but a common promise many theologians offered for the afterlife. However, as the Biblical foundation of this teaching is quite ambiguous, it is no surprise that a broad

89 See Dagens, Grégoire, 421.
90 In Evang. II,37,1. A very similar description can also be found in the beginning of the fourth book of the Dialogues.
91 For an abundance of references, see Kisic, Patria Caelestis, 63-65.
92 Mor. VIII,18,34: XXX. Translation by J.H. Parker (1844), accessible online: http://www.lectionarycentral.com/GregoryMoraliaIndex.html, 27.01.2013.

variety of interpretations appeared in the course of Church history. Other than many of his predecessors, Gregory is advocating the concept of an immediate reward for the just souls – that is to say that a divine vision is not just possible after the Judgment, but directly after the individual's death, an appropriate Christian way of life provided. While it is often emphasized how much Gregory's conceptions of hell and purgatory influenced the "popular" belief in the afterlife in the centuries to come, it should not be forgotten that this idea also had an important legacy in Christian theology throughout the Middle Ages.

The pope discusses this topic in the most comprehensive way in the eighteenth book of his Moralia (Mor. XVIII,54,89f.), where he indirectly refutes John Chrysostom's idea of the complete inaccessibility of the essence of God.[93] That the Creator can be reached by the angels is clearly stated in the Scripture, Gregory maintains, referring to Mt. 18,10: "For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven." He concludes that likewise the holy souls will see God – not just at the end of times, but as an immediate reward for the good deeds during life. For Gregory, the vision of God is a vision of light[94]; a light which is contrasted to the "darkness of the mortal state". This light is not just a metaphor, as one might suppose, but it is the simple and unchangeable essence (*simplex et incommutabilis essentia*) and at the same time the nature of God. Considering the importance of light in the eschatological reward, it is certainly no coincidence that it also plays an important part in the narratives of the Dialogues, where it announces the entrance of the saints into heaven.[95]

Yet, the full vision of God is not possible in the bodily state *in via.* To make this clear, Gregory refers to the a passage from Exodus, where God states that no man could see him

93 György Geréby, "Hidden Themes in Fourteenth-Century Byzantine and Latin Theological Debates: Monarchianism and Crypto-Dyophysitism," in *Greeks, Latins, and Intellectual History 1204-1500,* ed. M. Hinterberger and Chr. Schabel, Recherches de Théologie et Philosophie médiévales - Bibliotheca 11 (Leuven: Peeters, 2011), 183-211 (196).

94 As in the aforementioned passage of In Ev. II,37,1.

95 In combination with other features, usually a heavenly fragrance. See for example the death of the nun Redempta: Dial. IV,15,5-6.

and live. (Ex. 33,23). For Gregory this refers of course just to the carnal man in this context. It follows that human beings always have to be careful when they contemplate: "[W]hen the mind (*mens*) is hung aloft in the height of contemplation, whatever it has power to see perfectly and completely is not God."[96] The living saints just have the chance to catch a small glimpse of the divine light, never its totality. As Gregory states in his homilies on Ezechiel, their contemplation can enable them to see God *per speculum et in aenigmate* – but just for a very short while. Immediately, any man's soul will be dragged back into this world by the weakness of the flesh. All in all, Gregory is therefore promoting a negative theology, underlining the distance between God and the humans.[97] But still a small glimpse of the divine essence is intensive enough to arouse the desire for the *visio beatifica* in the afterlife.[98]

The full contemplative experience is just possible after death. Its highest fulfillment, the beatific vision, is not just of a temporary nature, but eternal. Instead of being subject to change, it is rather immutable. Gregory contrasts the calmness and stability of heavenly existence with the unrestricted transience of everything in this world. The *patria caelestis* appears to be a counterdraft to the contemporary situation in Italy: there is peace, while the world is devastated by war; there is filling food for everyone, while on earth people are starving; the *patria* will never cease to exist, while Rome is doomed.[99] Therefore, the historical circumstances not only find their expression in Gregory's thoughts about hell and purgatory, but also in his reflections about the reward in heaven.

96 Mor. V,54,66: XXX.
97 See also: Evans, Thought, 37.
98 Moral. X,15,31; XV,47,53. See also Kurt Ruh, *Die Grundlegung durch die Kirchenväter und die Mönchstheologie des 12. Jahrhunderts*, Geschichte der Abendländischen Mystik, vol. 1 (München: Beck, 1990), 167.
99 See Kisic, Patria, 250 (with references).

4.4 A twofold eschatology

In all his descriptions of the afterlife, Gregory the Great is walking on the fine line between individual and universal eschatology; both of them are indispensable for him and at the same time hard to be reconciled. At a certain point in the Dialogues, Deacon Peter queries if the souls of the just are granted direct access to heaven after their departure from earth (Dial. IV,25,2). Indeed, Gregory affirms, at least the *perfecti iusti* have this privilege and do not have to be patient until the end of days. (IV,26,1-2) The pope knows that he runs risk to neglect the meaningfulness of Resurrection and the Last Judgment like this. Peter points towards the problem, asking him: *Si igitur nunc in caelo sunt animae iustorum, quid est quod in die iudicii pro iustitiae suae retributione recipiant?* (Dial. IV,26,3) Gregory finds a solution for this problem, but he cannot successfully veil that the question presents him with a real problem. The body adds a new quality to the joyful state of the blissful, he explains:

> *Hoc eis nimirum crescit in iudicio, quod nunc animarum sola, postmodum vero etiam corporum beatitudine perfruuntur, ut in ipsa quoque carne gaudeant, in qua dolores pro Domino cruciatusque pertulerunt.*

The twofold glory of the soul reunited with the body safeguards the utility of the eschatological events at the end of times. However, Gregory struggles with a convincing underpinning of this doctrine, trying to make it plausible with reference to Rev. 6,11. In this Bible passage, the saints in heaven receive white robes from God. Afterwards, they are told that they have to wait a while until all the other just Christians arrive and thus their number will be complete. But in fact, Gregory says, the saints will have not only this one robe; they will get a second one for the Judgment, because *in terra sua duplicia possidebunt* (Is. 61,7).[100] Like the souls of the saints enter heaven immediately, the wicked are doomed to eternal suffering in Hell right after their terminal breath. In Peter's point of view, this is opposed to human reason, because the souls of the reprobate should not be punished until Judgment Day.

100 A similar description can be found in the Moralia: Mor. pref. 10,20.

Gregory contradicts: As the Scripture proofs that the blessed are already in heaven, the sinners face their condemnation instantly, too (IV,28,6-29,1). Strictly refuting Peter's argument, he ignores that the majority of his theological predecessors promoted exactly the opposite point of view.

Gregory cannot afford to distance himself from the doctrine of the bodily resurrection and the Last Judgment, as it is solidly grounded in Scripture and tradition. Yet it is visible in this passage that he gets into trouble when he tries to explain their benefit. For basically, in Gregory's perspective, the soul is sufficient for the heavenly unity with God. In his exegesis of Ecclesiastes, he promotes clearly the idea that it is "l'âme qui est la parte importante de l'homme par laquelle il a accès à Dieu"[101]. Furthermore, Heaven and Hell do not change their character after the apocalypse. It follows that the eternal happiness of the saints in heaven continues after the judgment the way it was before; just in a more blissful way, because the body can share the joy. The same applies to the sinners in hell, just the other way round. The eternal hellfire which torments the impure souls directly after their departure is exactly the same that will torture the Devil and his angels after the apocalyptic Last Judgment.[102] However, such a stable conception of the afterlife means that the differences between the individual and the universal eschatology are minimized in Gregory.

In Gregory's world-view, individual and universal eschatology are inseparably intertwined. The visions of the afterlife are therefore not simply proofs of the existence of an invisible world, they are also the first manifestations of the end of days, apocalyptic signs in a stricter eschatological sense. The *saeculum* approaches fast – therefore the visions multiply. It is no coincidence that many of the visions are directly connected to events that are perceived as apocalyptic signs. This is conspicuous in the case of the Justinian plague[103] and the

101 Carozzi, Voyage, 52.

102 See Dial. IV,30,5.

103 The plague almost exclusively appears in the fourth book. A. Hack notices this in his very recent study about illness in Gregory's works (Achim Th. Hack, *Gregor der Große und die Krankheit*, Päpste und Papsttum, vol. 41 (Stuttgart: Hiersemann, 2012), 205.) The relevant passages are Dial. IV,18,2; 27,6; 37; 40,3 (Justinian plague); 27,10 (epidemic under Narses). Hack's monograph approaches the pope's writings

invasion of the Lombards. Of course the visions still inform about the (proto-)eschatological destiny of the individual right after death; but at the same time they are a warning in light of the end of the world which is soon to come.[104]

from the perspective of history of medicine and body history, but (partly conditioned by the sources) conveys an eclectic and slightly disjointed impression.

104 Dagens, Grégoire, 409f., realizes this connection between visions and universal eschatology, but stretches the point by neglecting Gregory's interest in the individual destiny: “Ce n'est pas de la destinée individuelle après la mort qu'il s'agit, mais de la venue dans l'histoire d'un monde nouveau, déjà attesté par ces miracles et ces visions.” See also Ibid., 376.

5. Gregory's conceptions of the Afterlife against the historical background

5.1 Gregory's perception of his times

> In all his words and acts, Gregory considered that the final day and the coming judgment were imminent; the closer he felt the end of the world was coming, with its numerous disasters, the more carefully he pondered all human affairs.[105]

John the Deacon's description of Pope Gregory the Great, written in the ninth century[106], has almost become a commonplace – so regularly is it quoted in the secondary literature on the Church Father. But the popularity of this passage in modern literature is not surprising, as the pope's biographer summarizes Gregory's attitude towards his times in a striking way. As it has been emphasized before, the Italian peninsula and Rome especially were in a pitiful state in the end of the sixth century. Complaints about a feeling of (social, economical, intellectual...) decline can be found in many sources concerning the decades and centuries before; but in Gregory's days the general condition of the heartland of the former Roman Empire must have been particularly shocking. The pope stems from a family background that was connected to the city's traditional aristocracy, and although the heyday of this elite had passed long since, there was still a deep-rooted feeling of *Romanitas* in him.[107] It is not surprising then, that Gregory perceived the horrible situation in the former metropolis as an unprecedented decadence.[108] The overall situation in the *oikumene* was not as dramatic as in Rome and Italy, on the contrary.[109] However, the pope never limits his interpretation of the contemporary events to his direct surroundings, but perceives them as part of a universal decline, annihilating the whole *orbis terrarum*. The particular destiny of his city is just a

105 Vita 4,65, cited in Daley, Hope, 211.
106 Markus, World, 2 calls it "one of the finest medieval biographies".
107 See Kisic, Patria, 54.
108 Dagens, Grégoire, 365.
109 For this, see the very last chapter of this thesis. However, the plague was also ravaging in other parts of the world, esp. Asia minor.

symptom an all-encompassing development leading directly towards the last Judgement.[110]

Gregory gives extensive proof about the precarious situation of the world throughout his oeuvre. Incessantly he returns to this topic. His descriptions go far beyond anything which could be explained simply by the usage of eschatological *topoi*. There can be no doubt that his personal experience of the wretched circumstances constituted the impetus for his strong focus on the life to come. However, catastrophes alone are not sufficient to stimulate an eschatological ardour as overwhelming as Gregory displays it; his interpretation of his times is solidly based on the prophets', the evangelists' and Christ's predictions about the end of the world.[111] Against this background, Gregory could easily decipher the signs he saw all around him:

> Look, we now see everything in this world destroyed, as we heard in the Holy Scripture that it would perish. Cities have been sacked, fortresses razed to the ground, churches destroyed and no farmer inhabits our land. A human sword is raging incessantly against the very few of us who have been left behind for the time being, with disastrous blows from above. Thus we look at the evils of the world that we have long heard were to come; the very destruction of the world has come to look like the pages of our scriptures. And so at the death of all things, we ought to think that what we loved was as nothing. And so observe the approaching day of the eternal judge with a worried mind, and anticipate its terror with your penitence. (Ep. 3,29)

In the decay of the world, Gregory sees the prophecies of the bible fulfilled, as it becomes obvious in this epistle to the Milanese clergy, written in 593: This destruction of the world is totally in line with the teachings of the Bible, he wants to convince his audience. In the introduction to his homilies on the Gospels, the pope underlines this connection to Scripture even more explicitly by comparing the prophecies of Luke 21 step by step with the experiences of his own days (Hom. In Ev. 1,1,1) Nations rise against nations, announced in advance by the appearance of fiery battlelines (*acies igneae*) in the sky; there have been terrible earthquakes which destroyed many cities, and a ravaging plague carried off large

110 Dial. II,15; Rome could resist the Goths and the Lombards – but it has to surrender in the face of the forces of nature, which are extinguishing the whole world. See also Kisic, Patria, 250.
111 See Dagens, Grégoire, 354.

parts of the society. Yet, some signs are still to come, like an incredible surge of the sea or changes in the appearance of sun, moon and stars. But this is just a question of time, as can be seen by changes in the climate. That the Biblical prophecies had been accurate so far is in Gregory's point of view a guarantee for the remaining predictions to take place as well. This also applies to Paul's prediction of the final conversion of the Jews in the end of times (Rom. 11,25ff.) and the coming of the Antichrist.[112] While the first prophecy is just of minor interest for Gregory, the work of the Antichrist was already recognizable in Gregory's time: When the bishop of Constantinople, John the Faster, claimed the title "universal patriarch" for himself, Gregory judges that this action "anticipates Antichrist in his pride."[113]

All of this clearly leads Gregory to the conclusion that the Judgment day is soon to come. As he indicates in ep. 3,29 (quoted above), the coming of the eternal judge should be expected with lots of caution. Threats like that are pretty common in the oeuvre of the pope, who can become much more grim. Writing to the Emperor Maurice in an attempt to make him depart from an invidious law, Gregory gets upset and warns: "For behold, there will be no delay, and as the Heavens blaze, the earth blazes and the elements flash, the terrifying judge will appear with angels and archangels, with thrones and dominions, and with principalities and powers."[114] This is a good example of Gregory's "eschatological urgency"[115]. God is not only a caring and merciful ruler, but also a frightening counterpart whose judgment has to be feared. However, it is not an end in itself for the pope to carry his gloomy perception of the world to excess and to install terror in his audience. The knowledge about the imminent approach of the Last Days and the fair but potentially harsh judgment of the Lord shall make every Christian repent immediately, as long as it is still possible[116]:

112 For detailed references, see Dagens, Grégoire, 352-354.
113 Ep. 7,30: *in elatione sua Antichristum praecurrit.,* This is in parts strong rhetoric to discredit an adversary; but it just makes sense in the general eschatological perception of the world. For an longer discussion of the conflict between Gregory and John, see Martin, World, 91-95.
114 Ep. 3,61.
115 Daley, Hope, 212; This urgency is much more pronounced than in most other theologians; see Atwell, Declining, 13.
116 See also Dagens, Grégoire, 376.

> We must reflect that these troubles are as much unlike the final one as the herald's role is unlike the judge's power. Give hard thought to that day, dearly beloved; amend your lives, change your habits, resist and overcome your evil temptations, requite your evil deeds by your tears. The more you now anticipate his severity by fear, the more securely will you behold the coming of your eternal Judge.[117]

Tribulations in this world are still just a pale foreshadowing of even worse tribulations to come.[118] Disastrous circumstances of hunger, war, and epidemics turn into apocalyptic signs; what would normally be understood as random torments is transformed into *ultimae tribulationes.* In this perception profane events suddenly become necessities and gain new sense as part of a teleological history of salvation. Gregory's pessimistic attitude towards the *mundus senescens* has already been mentioned; other periods in the history of religion know similar attempts to rationalize signs of crisis, e.g. during the Crusades or the Mongol invasion.[119] But Gregory knows about the positive effects of the visible approach of the *saeculum* with all its horrors. The awareness of the forthcoming last days is important to call on the believers to think about the consequences of their deeds. Constantly reminding his audience of the meaning of the declining world is an important part of Gregory's attempt to provide access to salvation for as many people as possible. The *cura animarum* is one of the main driving forces of his papacy. Against this background, his agenda in the fourth book of the Dialogues becomes more understandable.

5.2 Didactics of Fear in an Apocalyptic Age

When Gregory of Tours comes up with Gregory's pontificate in his Frankish history, he gives a report of the pope's actions against the Black Death which was causing havoc in

117 In Ev. 1,1,6: Unde et considerare necesse est, quia ab illa tribulatione ultima tantum sunt istae tribulationes dissimiles, quantum a potentia iudicis persona praeconis distat. Illum ergo diem, fratres carissimi, tota intentione cogitate, vitam corrigite, mores mutate, mala tentantia resistendo vincite, perpetrata autem fletibus punite. Adventum namque aeterni iudicis tanto securiores quandoque videbitis, quanto nunc districtionem illius timendo praevenitis.

118 See for example Daley, Eschatologie, 247.

119 For the Crusades, see Auffarth, Wege, 24; for the Mongols: Johannes Fried, "Auf der Suche nach der Wirklichkeit: Die Mongolen und die europäische Erfahrungswissenschaft im 13. Jahrhundert," *Historische Zeitschrift* 243 (1986): 297-332.

Rome. Following an Eastern custom introduced by Justinian in Constantinople, Gregory the Great initiated a penitential procession throughout the city. His intention was to make every Christian citizen repent as long as it was still possible – the plague was a definite sign of the end of the world, as it has already been underlined. It is remarkable that Gregory does not even pretend that the main aim of this procession is the rescue of the sick people or the elimination of the disease; his only focus lies on the salvation of the Christians in the afterlife, guaranteed by confession and prayer: [*I*]*n unius horae spatio, dum voces plebs ad Dominum supplicationis emisit, octoaginta homines ad terram conruisse et spiritum exalasse. Sed non distitit sacerdos dandus praedicare populo, ne ab oratione cessarent.*[120] This anecdote, whether authentic or not, illustrates in a vivid way Gregory's perception of this life on earth and the afterlife. Survival in this world is no priority at all; what really counts is a good preparation for the heavenly fatherland. Gregory's visions of the afterlife in the fourth book of the Dialogues follow the same aim: With its threatening descriptions, the pope intends to scare his audience and keep them away from sin.

One might conclude that Gregory, desperately trapped in a disintegrating and hopeless world, totally loses track of the positive aspects of afterlife; instead of advertising the blessed existence in an eternal *visio beatifica* of God, he contents himself with threatening words – the joyful Christian promise seems buried under the gruesome vision of eternal suffering in hell. This is of course not true; Gregory even gives many examples of pious Christians whose souls are rewarded with a direct entry into heaven. But while he describes the circumstances of their death at length – often including heavenly choirs singing psalms or a wonderful fragrance never smelled by anyone before – his depiction of heavenly existence remains surprisingly pale. Where it becomes more precise, it is just to have contrast to the pitiable situation in hell.[121]

120 Greg. Tur. Hist. X,1.
121 See for example Dial. IV, 37,9

It becomes clear that for Gregory's pedagogical aim, that is conversion to a truly Christian life, fear is a much more effective force than the promise of reward. This is at least true for the initial stage of a mystagogical process.[122] The pope states this explicitly in the third book of the Dialogues:

> *Principaliter vero compunctionis genera duo sunt, quia Deum sitiens anima prius timore compungitur, post amore. Prius enim sese in lacrimis afficit, quia dum malorum suorum recolit, pro his perpeti supplicia aeterna pertimescit. At vero cum longa moeroris anxietudine fuerit formido consumpta, quaedam iam de praesumptione veniae securitas nascitur et in amore caelestium gaudiorum animus inflammatur, et qui prius flebat ne duceretur ad supplicium, postmodum flere amarissime incipit quia differtur a regno. Contemplatur etenim mens qui sint illi angelorum chori, quae ipsa societas beatorum spirituum, quae maiestas aeternae visionis Dei, et amplius plangit quia a bonis perennibus deest, quam flebat prius cum mala aeterna metuebat. Sicque fit, ut perfecta compunctio formidinis tradat animum compunctioni dilectionis.* (Dial. III,34,2)

This whole principle knits together Gregory's works. Those Christians who are not advanced in their mystical experience but still in an preliminary stage benefit most from the fire and brimstone of the drastic descriptions of the Dialogues. That is why the descriptions of hell and purgatory are so predominant in this work, although the promise of a better future in heaven always subtly resonates in the text. Believers who passed this stage are inflamed in their desire for the heavenly fatherland by different means. For them, Gregory focuses on the positive reward in the afterlife in his other works, in which the places of torment seem to be almost non-existing.

Unsurprisingly, the repentance caused by fear (*Furchtreue*) can hardly be provoked by theologically sophisticated exegetical treatises. On the contrary, for uninitiated listeners such works can even disturb their spiritual development. Therefore Gregory even warns against the use of the Moralia for public lecture. When he heard that the bishop of Ravenna had parts of them them recited in church, he complains: “I was not glad to hear this news, for this [work, i.e. the Moralia] is not a popular work and is likely to generate hindrance rather than

122 This principle – from easily understandable teachings to the more complicated – can already be found in the Apostle Paul: *Lac vobis potum dedi non escam nondum enim poteratis.* (1.Kor.3,2)

advancement to illiterate listeners."[123] In order to arouse repentance in a first stage, pure theological reasoning cannot be sufficient. In the preface of the first book of the Dialogues, Gregory's interlocutor Peter stresses the necessity of another approach:

> In the exegesis of Scripture, we see indeed how virtue is acquired and preserved; but in the narration of miracles we recognize in what way the acquired and preserved virtue is revealed. And there are some who are inflamed for the love of the heavenly fatherland more by examples than by teachings.[124]

In his Pastoral Rule, Gregory himself underlines the importance of examples in a more judgmental way: "The former [sc. wise ones] are for the most part converted by arguments of reasoning; the latter [sc. fools] sometimes better by examples."[125] This passage is based on a statement by the apostle Paul, so that not to much emphasis should be put on the term *hebentes*. The audience of the Dialogues consisted probably not mainly of uneducated persons from the lowest strata of society, but of Christians from a monastic background.[126]

There can be no doubt that the end of the world is near; because of this, Gregory tries to be as insistent as he can. Terms like *emendare* or *correctio*, frequently used in his *exempla*, clearly underline the purpose of the fourth book of the Dialogues – convincing people about the truth of Christian religion before it is too late, an aim of paramount importance for Gregory. Constantly he emphasizes this didactic character of his *exempla*. Visions of the afterlife are useful in two ways, for those who traveled to the afterlife and for the broader audience who learns about the possible destiny in the future.[127] He explicitly states that in the 40th chapter of the final book of the Dialogues:

> *Sciendum quoque est quia nonnumquam animae adhuc in suis corporibus positae poenale aliquid de spiritalibus vident, quod tamen quibusdam ad*

123 Ep. 12,6, translated in Meyvaert, Enigma, 375.

124 Dial. I, Praef.: *In expositione quippe qualiter invenienda atque tenenda sit virtus, agnoscitur; in narratione vero signorum cognoscimus inventa ac retenta qualiter declaretur. Et sunt nonnulli, quos ad amorem patriae caelestis plus exempla, quam praedicamenta succendunt.*

125 Past. 3,6: *Illos [sc. sapientes] plerumque ratiocinationis argumenta, istos [sc. hebentes] nonnunquam melius exempla convertunt.*

126 For Gregory's audience see for example Markus, Gregory, 29-33.

127 Gregory gives more examples for this. See e.g. Dial. IV,18; 22,2; 36,12.

> *aedificationem suam, quibusdam vero contingere ad aedificationem audientium solet.* (Dial. IV, 40,1)

Probus for example, a greedy and concupiscent man, got tortured by awful pitch-black demons on his deathbed. Frightened and despaired he was begging for a postponement of his death, but in vain; the evil ghosts took him directly to hell. Therefore, his visions were of no use for himself. But for his family members, who could not see the demons directly but perceive their presence through Probus' confession, his paleness and his trembling, the suffering was beneficial, as it could motivate them to correct their lives. Gregory summarizes: *De quo nimirum constat quia pro nobis ista, non pro se viderat, ut eius visio nobis proficiat, quos adhuc divina patientia longanimiter expectat.*[128] However, there are other cases in which a vision of the afterlife helps the person who experienced it to change his life. The monk Theodor, who never wanted to become a man of God, felt that a dragon tried to devour him when he was in a dying condition. From that moment on, he promised with greatest sincerity to live like a proper monk and to leave the world behind. This finally guaranteed him salvation (IV,40,2-5).

Knowledge of the atrocious torture that awaits the soul in hell should ideally result in a conversion to a better Christian life. Unfortunately that is not always the case: *Sed quia humanum cor gravis valde duritiae est, ipsa quoque poenarum ostensio aeque omnibus utilis non est.* (Dial. IV, 37,5); in the Dialogues, Gregory illustrates this with two stories of a man called Stephanus (IV,37,5-14). In a kind of near-death experience, this man was led into hell, where he saw all the frightening things he never believed in before – even though he heard about them. But it turns out that his departure from earth just resulted from a confusion with another Stephanus, a blacksmith. The Judge (it is not clear whether this is really God in this case) corrects this mistake, and Stephanus is sent back to the living. Three years later, the man actually died. He had to cross the famous bridge towards the afterlife which served as a

128 Dial. IV, 40,9. A very similar story about the monk Athanasius follows in IV,40,10-12.

trial. Any just person could cross it easily and enter heaven, but the sinners would fall into the nauseating foul river. Obviously his first visit in hell did not shock him enough to change his life considerably, for he is stumbling and almost falling from the bridge. Horrifying men tried to tear Stephanus into the river, while men clothed in white make the attempt to drag him into the heaven. These are the sins of the flesh fighting against the works of charity, because Stephanus had given alms indeed, but he did not resist fornication. This means that he did not improve his life in a proper way, even though he had been warned. He is just one example – while some people profit from the visions of the afterlife, others deliberately choose to ignore what they have seen. Because of their carelessness and ignorance, the latter have to suffer even tougher sanctions during their eternal torture, Gregory concludes.

The double strategy of benefiting both the travelers who returned from the other side and the quick in this world also explains Gregory's apparently merciless treatment of the monk Justus. While it is *prima facie* hardly understandable why he punishes the faithful man, who has just committed a rather minor sin, in such a rigid way, it turns out that this behavior is the result of the same pedagogical effort that led him to recount the collected visions of the afterlife. First of all, Justus should realize that he is in need of sincere repentance; and secondly, his horrible destiny was supposed to provoke a better moral performance of his brethren in the monastery:

> *In quibus utrisque rebus unam morienti, alteram vero volui viventibus fratribus prodesse, ut et illum amaritudo mortis a culpa solubilem faceret, et istos avaritiae tanta damnatio misceri in culpa prohiberet.* (Dial. IV,47,12)

Like in Dial. IV,24, it not just the repentance itself that saves Justus from damnation, but also the bitterness of his death (*amaritudo mortis*) has a purging effect in itself.

In the fourth book of the Dialogues, Gregory the Great chose to describe the afterlife in a symbolic way, by using a variety of *exempla.* Like that, he intended to reach a broader public than he could have ever addressed with a strictly systematic treatise. The Dialogues are

therefore not a work of inferior theological value – they are the result of a conscious decision to present urgent religious messages in the shape of a relatively easily accessible genre. As already mentioned in the introduction of this thesis, Gregory's expectation of the *eschaton* should be considered as a leitmotif of his whole thought world. In the light of the approaching apocalypse, the fourth book of the Dialogues served as one tool in his mission to save the souls of as many people as possible. However, other aspects of his life were led by the same "eschatological urgency". Most prominently, the expectation of a Judgement soon to come was the reason for Gregory's program to convert the pagans, above all the Anglo-Saxons, and the "heretic" Lombards. In older scholarship, Gregory's attempt to spread Christianity was sometimes interpreted as a political act: As the connections with the Eastern part of the Empire slowly but surely faded away, he dared to focus on the Western sphere in order to establish Christian kingdoms there, it was claimed.[129] But it should be clear by now that such an intention must have been far away from the pope: Why would Gregory care about the establishment of new Christian states if this world was supposed to collapse in the close future anyway?[130] On the contrary, not long-term plans motivated his missionary strategy, but the closer future. Because the time of this world was elapsing, as many people as possible had to be acquainted with Christianity and brought under the influence of the Catholic church. Just in this way they could change their life and repent. In this respect, Gregory's literary output and his (seemingly political) actions were just two sides of the same coin.

129 See Walter Ullmann, *The Growth of Papal Government in the Middle Ages,* 2nd. ed. (London: Methuen, 1962), 106.

130 This view is supported by Dagens, Grégoire, 365-366.

6. Gregory and the Augustinian legacy

Introducing the ideas of the Late Antique Latin Church Fathers, Peter Habermehl states that "expectations of the afterlife, fear of raids by barbarian people and the growing concern about the continued existence of the Empire stirred the interest in eschatological topics at the end of the fourth century and did not come to a rest in the fifth century as well."[131] Although this is certainly true for many Christian authors, Augustine, the most influential theologian of the early fifth century, is markedly tame and conservative in his descriptions of the afterlife. One could imagine that a far-reaching and traumatic event like the sack of Rome in 410 would lead towards speculations about the approaching and of the world, as the Roman Empire was regularly perceived as the *Katechon*. Not so in Augustine: *Sed ecce bellum super bellum, tribulatio super tribulationem, terrae motus super terrae motum, fames super famem, gens super gentem, et nondum venit sponsus.*[132] For him, the invasion of Rome does not necessarily mean the end of the world, not even of the city itself: *Forte Roma non perit; forte flagellata est, non interempta; forte castigata est, non deleta. Forte Roma non perit, si Romani non pereant.*[133] The contrast to Gregory's perception of his times could not be more distinctive.

Augustine does his best to refrain from far-reaching eschatological speculation. His descriptions of the other side are generally not overly colorful; yet, they differ in his various works, corresponding to the disruptions in his life and his changing theology.[134] First of all, does Augustine believe in an individual judgment after death or do the souls have to wait until the final resurrection? The bishop is not totally consistent in this respect. In some works,

131 Habermehl, Jenseits, 364: "Endzeiterwartungen, Angst vor den Überfällen barbarischer Völker sowie eine wachsende Sorge um den Bestand des Imperiums lassen das Interesse an eschatologischen Themen gegen Ende des 4. Jh. anwachsen u. auch im 5. Jh. nicht zur Ruhe kommen."

132 Serm. 93,7.

133 Serm. 81,9.

134 For information about Augustine's life, Peter Brown's famous biography is still the best starting point: Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography,* new ed. with an Epilogue (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

for example the “City of God”, he promotes a delay of the judgment until the ultimate end of times (civ. D. 21,1,5). But generally, it seems that Augustine does not doubt an immediate reward for the Just and a punishment for the sinners after their dead. However, this condition *post mortem* is not identical with the final destiny in Heaven and Hell.[135] It is a preliminary state in the *receptiones* or in the *infernum*; often Gregory refers to Biblical metaphors, especially the bosom of Abraham. All in all, it seems that Augustine is insecure about the future of the souls directly after death. But whatever the condition of the dead might be in detail – it certainly does not include the highest goal of every Christian life, a direct vision of God.[136] Neither is the suffering of the sinners complete until the Last Judgement.[137]

Some of the crucial elements of what is to become the purgatory in the Middle Ages are already implied in Augustine's oeuvre.[138] Besides the aforementioned preliminary state of the souls before the Last Judgement, the most important of them is the *ignis purgatorius*. Augustine hints at this purifying fire (fid. et op. 15,24), but is decidedly reticent about its existence in general[139]:

> It is not beyond belief that something of the sort takes place even after this life, and there is room for inquiry whether it is so, and the answer may be found (or not found) to be, that a certain number of the faithful are the more belatedly or the more speedily saved, through a sort of chastening fire, the more they have or the less they have set their affections on the good things that perish.[140]

The third key element important for the development of the purgatory are pious deeds on the behalf of the deceased. Augustine also believes that they are useful. In one of his sermons, he summarizes that prayers, the Eucharistic sacrifice, and alms-giving can make God deal with the dead “more mercifully than their sins have deserved”[141]. But no one should trust in

135 Daley, Eschatologie, 197.
136 Not even the saints are granted an immediate vision of God.
137 See Habermehl, Jenseits, 372-273 with extensive references.
138 See the list in Auffarth, Wege, 167; he is slightly overemphasizing Augustine's role in the development of the purgatory.
139 Atwell, Augustine, 176.
140 Enchir. 18,69. Translation by Atwell, Augustin, 176. See also civ. D. 21,26.
141 Serm. 177,2: *ut cum eis misericordius agatur a domino, quam eorum peccata meruerunt*. English translation: Augustine, *Essential Sermons,* ed. Daniel E. Doyle, trans. Edmund Hill (Hyde Park: New City

such options to be saved, neither in the fire nor in the care of the living for the dead: In the here and now man has to acquire his merits on his own: "So let no man expect that after his death he can make up in the sight of God for his omissions while here."[142]

Following the Biblical allusions and Christian tradition, Augustine is convinced about the existence of a place for eternal punishment after the last Judgment. However, what he has to tell about the concrete circumstances in hell is far from being extensive and innovative. Referring to it in his city of God (civ. D. 21,9), he very close to the Gospel of Mark and describes it as the place "where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched."[143] In other of his works he is slightly more voluble, stating that the sinners will receive special tortures according to their vices (vera relig. 104f.). Unlike Gregory, Augustine does not waste much of his energy on thoughts about the place of hell[144], the nature of the hellfire or the condition of the damned. However, he considers it important that the ultimate punishment is eternal for the Devil, the fallen angels and everyone judged to hell – a clear statement against any Origenist interpretation of the afterlife (civ. D. 21,17).

Like Gregory, Augustine is vague about a description of heaven, although the vision of God plays an important role in his conception of the blessed state of the souls in the Beyond as well. However, the details the conceptions of both churchmen differ. The bishop of Hippo emphasizes that this *visio beatifica*[145] is primarily reserved to the souls in the afterlife.[146] It is a divine gift which is usually not attainable permanently for any human being in his lifetime. However, some outstanding historical figures like Moses, Paul, and the apostles were blessed with the experience of a temporary before their death. Augustine agreed with most early

Press, 2007).

142 Enchir. 29,110. Translation by Atwell, Augustine, 176.

143 Mc. 9,48.

144 Only exceptions: Gen. ad litt. 12,33,62, Retract. 2,50, where hell is located below the earth.

145 He never uses this term, but it applies to the subject he is talking about.

146 Augustine discusses this in two *epistulae:* Ep. 147, entitled "De videndo Deo", and the accompanying ep. 148, a summary written for a certain Fortunatianus, bishop of Sicca. See Frederick Van Fleteren, "De vivendo Dei," in *Augustine through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*, ed. A. D. Fitzgerald (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1999), 869.

patristic theologians that a complete vision of God's essence is only possible in the end of days, after the resurrection: the *visio beatifica* was understood as a "triumphant completion of the whole history of mankind".[147]

Is this vision purely intellectual or does the body play a relevant role in it?[148] In this respect, Augustine's teaching changes throughout the years. This can be explained both by external factors and Augustine's own intellectual progress. His epistles for example, written around the year 413, were directed against the threat of anthropomorphism prevailing at that time and excludes therefore any visibility of God by the means of the corporeal eyes.[149] But if the *visio beatifica* is an inner process, what is the meaning of the bodily resurrection and the Judgment anymore? Augustine shows awareness of this problem in the "City of God" (civ. D. XXII,29), where his description of the *visio* is ambiguous: Still advocating an inner vision of the heart, he adds that the perception of God is also conducted by the eyes of the transfigured body.[150] But it is palpable here that Augustine has problems to integrate both views. He is hesitating in his evaluation of the bodily vision and obviously does not want to give too definite an answer.

Obviously, most aspects that can be found in Gregory's treatment of the afterlife were already bothering Augustine. Although there can be no doubt that Gregory knew about Augustine's statements concerning these topics, he never followed them blindly; on the contrary, he selected, modeled and adjusted the ideas of his forerunner in the light of his own needs. First of all, a comparison between Augustine and Gregory's afterlife underlines the slow but certain shift from an emphasis on apocalyptic judgment to the direct reward or punishment *post mortem*. Augustine promotes some immediate preliminary gratification for

147 Hilary A. Armstrong, "Gottesschau (visio beatifica)," in *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*, vol. 12 (Stuttgart: Hiersemann 1983), 1-19 (16): In der "christl[ichen] Vorstellung [galt die] Visio beatifica als die triumphale Vollendung der ganzen Menschheitsgeschichte".

148 For a brief discussion of this problem, see Daley, Eschatologie, 203.

149 Armstrong, Gottesschau, 17.

150 Habermehl, Jenseits, 373. Such an emphasis on the specific Christian characteristics of the vision of God is Augustine's attempt to distinguish his own teachings from the ideas of the Neoplatonists, especially Porphyry, who extensively refuted the Christian religion.

the just and torture for the reprobate, but the ultimate destiny of the deceased can just be known after the Final Judgment. Gregory however locates the ultimate judgment right after death. This is just watered down a bit by the option of purification. Interestingly, even though Augustine was more eager to postpone the final destiny of every deceased until the bodily resurrection and the Final Judgment than Gregory, his spiritualized (one could say Neoplatonic) concept of the *visio beatifica* on the long run supported the idea of an immediate reward for the souls after death.[151] If the vision is quintessentially spiritual, there is not necessarily the need for a delay of this reward until the reunification of the soul with the body. In this respect, Gregory's mystical theology is betraying an Augustinian legacy, although the African bishop did not intend this development at all.

While Augustine is cautious about the options of purification of the soul after death, Gregory insists emphatically on the existence of a purging fire. In Augustine, there is no direct connection of the care for the dead and the rescue from this *ignis;* Gregory, however, ties the prayers for the dead and the release from "purgatory" inextricably together. In an almost mechanistic act, prayers or sacrifices can free the imperfect souls from their place of intermediary torture. What is more, the care for the dead becomes doctrinal in Gregory (*credendum est*).[152] Augustine, by contrast, just reticently recommends such acts. Yet, both theologians certainly agree that a good way of life on earth is the necessary prerequisite for the care by the living to work – for sinners, there is no hope of purification.

Compared with Gregory, one could be surprised about the blandness of Augustine's hell; but it is the result of both a different theology and a different approach towards the topic. Knowledge of the afterlife cannot result from first-hand experiences in Augustine, as the

151 Armstrong, 18 concludes: "Es ist wohl hauptsächlich diesem direkten, durch Augustinus vermittelten Einfluß des Neuplatonismus zuzuschreiben, daß das westliche Christentum so stark dazu neigte, die G[otteschau] als rein geistige Schau aufzufassen, die sofort nach dem Tod von der entkörperlichten Seele erfahren werden kann u[nd] zu der die Auferstehung des Leibes kaum noch etwas Wesentliches beizutragen vermag."

152 See esp. Atwell, Doctrine, passim.

souls of the deceased are irretrievably disconnected from the world of the living.[153] This excludes the possibility of visions of the afterlife. But what is more, Augustine also does not need them for his purposes, as one does not find in him the same eschatological urgency combined with an emphasis on pastoral care which is consistently perceivable in all of Gregory's works.

It would be too easy to explain the differences between Gregory and Augustine with a radical change of mentality or even a decline of intellectual theology. Both churchmen had to face huge challenges and did this in the way that appeared appropriate to them. Gregory's way to talk about the afterlife in the Dialogues should therefore not be mistaken for a desperate attempt to graft "anecdotical narratives onto a framework of Augustinian theology that has been adjusted to suit the dialogue form."[154] For him, it was just the most fitting way to counter the ideas of his opponents by giving "empirical proof" about the *post mortem* activity of the souls and at the same time to make aware about the otherworldly consequences of earthly behaviour; two of the most urgent tasks in Gregory's point of view.

153 Ibid., 182.
154 Moreira, Purge, 85.

7. Conclusions and prospects

Summarizing Gregory's eschatology, Brian Daley comes to the conclusion that the pope had a "clear and concrete conception of the afterlife, woven together out of the biblical and theological tradition of the West and the popular religion of contemporary Italian believers"[155]. That is true in parts, although it is too narrowly considered in the end. It is definitely correct to say that Gregory's eschatological concepts considerably draw upon ideas he adopted from different sources. He could not neglect the Scriptural foundation of the afterlife, as vague as it might seem in its details; what is more, he was inspired by his Patristic forerunners, first and foremost Augustine. Even the miracle stories, which were to become crucial for his popularity during the Middle Ages, are not exclusively to be found in the Dialogues, but bear obvious resemblances to other sources. Such dependencies can be detected throughout his oeuvre – thus from this point of view, Pope Gregory was not particularly innovative. However, it is important to keep in mind that an "involvement in cultural transmission need impose no constraint on originality"[156]. Any diachronic basis of his ideas notwithstanding, it is much more important which of the existing elements Gregory chooses, how he (re-)arranges and interprets them. This creative work by the pope depends primarily on the historical, social, local, and intellectual context, that is to say on synchronic factors.[157]

Gregory was in the center of religious and political power in a time that can be called troublesome at least. His direct involvement in secular affairs seems to have enhanced his pessimistic view of the world. Gregory perceived the historical circumstances he was living in as a time in which the apocalypse was fast approaching; its first signs were already visible. In this way, eschatological considerations influenced his actions considerably. His main

155 Daley, Hope, 214.
156 Leyser, Authority, 133.
157 Some theoretical remarks on this can be found in Auffarth, Wege, 29-30.

concern was to save the souls of as many people as possible, be they Anglo-Saxon pagans who need to be converted or Italian Christians who do not practice their religion wholeheartedly enough. But this second mentioned task was complicated by a new wave of skepticism – why should anyone care for the Judgment if an afterlife does not even exist? Writing the miraculous narratives of the fourth book of the Dialogues, he followed two goals: Convincing his audience about the existence of an afterlife for the soul by giving "objective" proof of it, and at the same time emphasizing the possible negative outlook of this afterlife in order to scare people away from sin. This was the tactic he perceived as most promising; kindling the desire for the heavenly fatherland was just a second mystagogical step for those who were advanced in their belief. Gregory's *exempla* always underline important points, for example the efficacy of intercession for the dead or the correspondence of earthly conduct and heavenly reward. Sometimes, they seem to be problematic or unfitting from a theological point of view. However, Gregory accepts such incoherences without any problem; they are obviously much more puzzling for modern scholars unwilling to accept contradictions in the oeuvre of a "Church Father".

Such conclusions about the heavy dependency on the historical and cultural context of Gregory's conceptions of the afterlife (and finally: of any concept in the history of thoughts) become even clearer in a synchronic perspective. It is already sufficient to avert ones gaze from the "lombardo-byzantine" area for a while, and to have a look at contemporary Francia, where Gregory of Tours warns about false prophets invading the country. Like every good Christian who had read the Gospel of Matthew, Gregory knew that this was a sign of the approaching end of the world. Furthermore, he was not blind to the symbolic meaning of the natural disasters and diseases which occurred during his lifetime.[158] However, this background does not lead to such an extraordinary presence of eschatological fears in his

158 For the importance of eschatology in the work of Gregory of Tours, see: Martin Heinzelmann, *Gregor von Tours (538–594). "Zehn Bücher Geschichte". Historiographie und Gesellschaftskonzept im 6. Jahrhundert* (Darmstadt: WBG, 1994).

oeuvre as in the case of Gregory the Great. At least in parts, the reason for this can be found in the fundamentally different political and social environment under the Merovingians. Although Francia was divided between potentially conflicting kingdoms during this era, it still remained a pretty stable confederation in general. Compared to Rome, "a larger measure of old-world solidity existed."[159] Accordingly, Gregory of Tours does not expect the end of the world in his own lifetime, but at a much later date.[160]

It is worth as well to take a look beyond the seeming "intellectual gulf"[161] that separates – if one decides to follow the *communis opinio* – Western and Eastern Christianity already in the sixth century. Just recently, Matthew Dal Santo has emphasized the similarities in the eschatology of Gregory the Great and Eustratius, a contemporary theologian from Constantinople.[162] This case is particularly exciting, as Gregory might have made acquaintance with Eustratius' thoughts when he was as a *apocrisarius* (papal envoy) in Constantinople (579-586). Be that as it may, it cannot be denied that theologians in both parts of the former Roman Empire struggled with very similar problems. Still, it is revealing how different they set their priorities and in what aspects their solutions differ.

Introducing his handbook of Early Christian eschatology, Brian Daley reveals the limitations of his work: focussing on an overview of the history of an idea, i.e. eschatology, he does not extensively take into account the social and cultural background of this phenomenon. He therefore realizes that a "broad, interpretative historical synthesis" of Christian eschatology in Antiquity is still a *Forschungsdesiderat*.[163] The analysis delivered in this thesis attempted to analyse Gregory the Great's thoughts about the life after death against a cultural and historical background. Placed in a larger synchronic and diachronic context, it

159 Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christianity. Triumph and Diversity AD 200-1000* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 103.
160 Meier, Eschatologie, 64-66.
161 Matthew dal Santo, "Gregory the Great and Eustratius of Constantinople. The Dialogues on the Miracles of the Italian Fathers as an Apology for the Cult of Saints," *JECS* 17,3 (2009): 421-457 (427).
162 Ibid., passim. The source has been recently published in a critical edition: Eustratius of Constantinople, *De statu animarum post mortem,* ed. Peter van Deun, CCSG, vol. 60 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2006)
163 Daley, Hope, xii (Preface).

could be a first step towards such a synthesis, which should necessarily also include a larger variety of sources (e.g. inscriptions, liturgy). Like that, it could contribute to an important aspect about the intellectual history between the poles of Antiquity and the Middle Ages (and likewise between East and West).

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All abbreviations follow the standard of the Année Philologique:
AB: Analecta Bollandiana
JECS: Journal of Early Christian Studies
JEH: The Journal of Ecclesiastical History
JRS: Journal of Roman Studies
RHE: Revue d'histoire ecclésiastique
RQA: Römische Quartalschrift für christliche Altertumskunde und Kirchengeschichte
ZKG: Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte