

## INTRODUCTION

*Testing claims to grace: the intensification  
of time*

It has become nearly a truism to suggest that Western societies have become inordinately serious about time, but it is not entirely clear why that should be so. The villains of the pieces written on this subject are often the Protestant ethic or the spirit of capitalism: surrogates of the “civilizing process” (Elias 1992). Other writers have noted that millenarian myths also have a way of making at least the mean-time very serious, but so do myths of a future that will outdo the present and the past (Cohn 1970; Boyer 1992). In this essay I will touch on some of the literature on this subject in the course of investigating another possible source for the Western seriousness about time. Here I will be inquiring how the doctrine, myth, and popular belief in purgatory have informed and shaped the Western consciousness of time.

Time in modern societies is often thought to be unduly serious and scarce because of pressures arising from industrialization, from increasing complexity, and from the need to prepare for surprises and threats or to synchronize one’s actions with others. Of course, time is more scarce for some than for others; time pressures depend on one’s control of one’s work or of everyday life, and that control in turn depends on one’s place in an organization, in a chain of command, in a hierarchy of social status, or one’s other resources. The pressures of time also vary, of course, along with such other factors as one’s age and time in life, one’s health or frailty, and one’s time horizons. No wonder, say some sociologists, that people arrange for “time out” or “time off,” and these interludes may provide respites that enable one to return to ordinary time constraints or places

from which to rebel against the social construction and control of time. From the point of view of some sociologists, waiting, for instance, is imposed by those with more social power on those with less, e.g. the constraints imposed by prisons, schools, or hospitals on their inmates. We cannot always assume, however, that the experience of time as “waiting” reflects either a lack of synchronization between parts of a society or the weight of institutional demands and pressures.<sup>1</sup> It may come from infancy, as desires for the satisfactions of adulthood are frustrated by the realities of childhood. Fully to understand the significance of waiting, as of other ways in which the meaning and passage of time are intensified and made additionally burdensome on the psyche, it is necessary to turn to the work of historians who have understood the meaning and impact of the doctrine of purgatory.

All societies construct time in the interests of their own continuity and survival and therefore make the observance of certain “times” obligatory on each individual. The problem, however, is not simply with public time, socially constructed time, or even with the invention of the clock. Note that the clock entered Western history along with the notion of purgatory. Indeed, Dante Alighieri is reported to have been delighted and fascinated with the clock (Neustadter 1992:281). The problem we are investigating has to do not only with the scarcity of time or with time-pressures themselves but with seriousness about time itself. Here we will be investigating the meeting ground between individual anxieties about time and the tendency of Western societies to impress individuals with their social obligations by creating a social character that is subservient to requirements for the use of time. In the doctrine of purgatory and its later developments, I will argue, a myth was created that brought together popular anxieties over running out of time with the church’s own attempts to control and constrain the individual.

As Karl Rahner (1978:442) has observed, the doctrine of

<sup>1</sup> In this paragraph I have drawn on a recent and quite useful review of some of the sociological literature on time: Bergmann 1992.

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purgatory concerns a place or a time-interval in the full development of the individual with regard to the core of the person, to the body, and in relation to the world as a whole. The doctrine, he argues, still needs to be perfected, and it should be understood in relation to such Eastern notions as reincarnation. Certainly a society may construe social obligations in terms of time and timeliness, whether or not that society is Christian or Western, industrialized or preindustrialized, and whether or not its calendars and schedules are governed by the cycles of the sun or the rotation of hands on the face of a clock (O'Malley 1992). Nonetheless, I am suggesting that the notion of purgatory, both as doctrine and as folklore, has added a particular intensity to the experience and meaning of time in Western societies. That intensity cannot be accounted for merely by the replacement of the sundial by the clock, or merely by industrialization that has supplanted agrarian ways of life, but by a social character that embodies what I will call a "purgatorial complex."

To imagine that the constraints and domination of time in everyday life are remedial or progressive, to make time of the essence of the individual's growth or rehabilitation, is to confuse the disease with its cure. Western societies have long insisted on efficiency and punctuality as virtues, on measuring personal growth and productivity in time, and on paying one's debt to society by "doing time." Any society that insinuates the pressures of time, not only into work and politics but into the crevices of the private world and into the psyche, stains the soul with what Dante – in describing purgatory – called "the taint of time," which is sin itself. In this book I will argue that American society in particular has become a secular purgatory without hope of redemption from the pressures and illusions, the fictions and the constraints of time. Indeed one's lifetime becomes a theater in which the drama of the soul is played out and its substance or destiny both determined and revealed.

How can a myth like purgatory, whether Dante's version or some other, ever be considered to be part and parcel of the culture of modern societies such as Britain and the United States? Has not Anglo-American culture separated this world

from the next, disenchanted the social universe, and relegated magical thinking to entertainment and private neuroses? Not at all. I will inquire here into the possibility that a secularized form of purgatory endures in the West and has so intensified both the meaning and experience of time as to be responsible for some of the ailments of modernity. In doing, so, however, I do not wish to suggest that other Western societies are fundamentally different in this regard. Le Goff (1984:289) makes it clear that purgatory has been enormously popular in the public imagination and “provided a meeting ground where the aspirations of the Christian masses could find their accommodation with the prescriptions of the Church.” The doctrine invented a place where popular fears of running out of time, and the widespread experience of the dead in dreams, visions, and apparitions could be rationalized in accordance not only with the church’s demand for the satisfaction of its penances but with an increasingly exact scholastic calculation of place and time (Le Goff 1984:243ff.).

As purgatory has become popularized, the consciousness of time has become a continuous – and for some an excruciating – burden. An overburdened awareness of time, once the sign of a sinful consciousness, is now regularly produced by a wide range of social institutions, from therapy to manufacture, from the school to the boardroom. The cure for the disease of sin has become indistinguishable from the disease itself. That is why I will sometimes call it the “purgatorial complex.” How so?

First, chronological time came to be embodied in what Wagner (1981:59) would call “a creative swoop of compulsive invention,” i.e. in the doctrine of purgatory. While this is not an essay in the history of doctrine, it should be noted that – as a doctrine – purgatory came into being in the year 1274. As a notion about purificatory fires prior to the Last Judgment, however, it has roots in ancient near Eastern apocalypticism. As Le Goff (1984:52ff.) points out, Origen knew the soul to require more time for growth and purification after the death of the individual, and Augustine himself regarded as purificatory the trials of the soul between death and the soul’s entrance into paradise. Later in this book I will be arguing that this life

becomes purgatorial in a process of secularization through which the other-worldly becomes this-worldly. It is important at the outset, however, to note that the seeds for this development are to be found in Christian theology itself. Here is Le Goff's considered judgment on the this-worldly dimensions of Augustine's thought on life after death long before doctrine made purgatory a specific time and place in the journey of the soul:

Explicitly, it may be true that Augustine situates the time of purgation prior to the Last Judgment, in the period between death and ultimate resurrection; but in the final analysis his deeper instinct is to situate it even earlier than that, in this world rather than the next. Underlying this instinct is the idea that earthly "tribulation" is the primary form of "purgatory." This accounts for Augustine's hesitation as to the true nature of purgatorial fire. If it burns after death there is no reason why it cannot be "real"; but if it burns on this earth, its nature must be essentially "moral" ... (Le Goff 1984:69–70)

The need to give the time of purgatory a specific place only becomes explicit, however, in the twelfth century, when the first use of purgatory as a singular and proper noun rather than as an adjective qualifying "fire" or various "places" comes into textual usage (Le Goff 1984:133ff.). "By the century's end, purgatory would exist as a distinct place" (Le Goff 1984:135). Indeed, the notion that the living could perform services for the dead emerges by the end of the century, when "a liturgical chain was forged binding the dead to the living" (Le Goff 1984:152–153). Those services involved the completion of penance, through which the living pay the penalty for sin that has been repented of and confessed, but for which the sinner did not provide satisfaction prior to his or her death. (These are distinctions, as Le Goff [1984:210ff.] notes, which reflect a corresponding development and sophistication in medieval conceptions of crime, justice, and personal responsibility.) It is still later, in the latter half of the thirteenth century, that the Church propounds the doctrine of purgatory as a place in Innocent IV's official letter to the Greeks (1254) and, later, at the Second Council of Lyons in 1274 (Le Goff 1984:283, 237).

Simultaneously, therefore, in what the anthropologist Roy Wagner (1981) would call a return to conventional forms of social control, purgatory became secularized in prescriptions for spiritual progress and the achievement of selfhood.

The creation of Purgatory combined a process of spatialization of the universe with an arithmetic logic that governed the relationship between human behavior and the situation of the soul in Purgatory. Before long we find discussions of the proportion between the time spent in sin on earth and the time spent in torment in Purgatory, or again, of time in relation to the suffrages offered to the dead and in relation to the acceleration of their liberation from Purgatory. This bookkeeping was further developed in the thirteenth century, the century of the rise of cartography and the unfettering of calculation. Later, Purgatory time became mixed up with the bewildering question of indulgences . . . The Church and the sinners in its charge began keeping double-entry accounts with respect to earthly time and the time of Purgatory. (Le Goff 1984:227–229)

It is important to recognize, moreover, that even the attack of reformers like Luther on the practice of indulgences did not initially threaten the doctrine of purgatory itself. In his Ninety-Five Theses, for instance, Luther was attacking only the excessive Papal traffic in indulgences (Dillenberger and Welch 1954:17). Luther objected to the mis-use of indulgences when their purchase inspired the hope of being saved from the pains of purgatory. As Bainton (1985:40) puts it, “God must kill before he can make alive. This is the pain of purgatory, and one should not seek to be released from it, for in this disturbance salvation begins.” While the Pope could release the individual from penances imposed by the Pope, the power of the church could not be used to provide release from the pains of purgatory. Spiritual account-keeping must continue in the next life. There the penitential path is followed only by those willing to do time in this life as well as the next. Conversely, in this life one can purchase time off from purgatory not only for the departed but even for oneself (Cf. Dillenberger and Welch 1954:13).

The intensification of the meaning and experience of time, a sense of being burdened, obsessed, defeated, or constrained by

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time, is the outward and visible sign of a social character shaped and constrained by the residues of purgatory's effect on the religious imagination and on ecclesiastical doctrine. Those residues leave the modern soul with the experience of time as both fundamental and scarce, as essential for the realization of the self and yet as continually running out, as it were, without the means of grace or hope of glory. More is at issue here than whether one has fulfilled one's obligations to the community or to the creation through the proper use of one's time; it is the life of the soul itself that is at stake.<sup>2</sup> That life, moreover, is on a continuous trajectory linking this life to the next on a single arc of justice, recompense, and renewal:

Death was less and less a frontier. Purgatory became an annex of the earth and extended the time of life and of memory. Suffrages became an increasingly active business. And the revival of the last will and testament also helped to push back the frontier of death, even though Purgatory is not mentioned in these documents until quite late ... (Le Goff 1984:233)

The notion that souls will have time to purify and perfect themselves in the next life keeps open a sense of endless spiritual possibility. Indeed, I will be arguing that purgatory marked the beginning of the modern era's emphasis on the individual as the site of moral responsibility and spiritual possibility. It is not a novel assertion. Le Goff has put it very well:

Purgatory was one of the first signs of the increased importance attached to individual judgment in the final centuries of the Middle Ages. The purgatorial time ascribed by God to each soul at the moment of death was pre-eminently an individual time in the sense that, like a person's time on earth, it varied from individual to individual. What is more, its duration was in part the responsibility of

<sup>2</sup> O'Malley (1992) is quite right, it seems to me, to point out that cultural seriousness about time does not depend on whether the society in question is Christian or not, on whether it is pre-industrial or industrialized, or on whether time is measured by the cycles of nature or by more abstract and mechanical formulae. The line between "nature" and "culture" is always drawn by ideology, and no community is without its ideological ways of sanctifying the uses of time. All time, even one's subjective sense of time, is socially constructed, as the phrases "doing time" or "making up for lost time" suggest. He does not attend to the question that I am raising here, however, of how the sanctuary of the self, so to speak, is invaded and governed by time.

the individual. While the suffrages of others mattered after death, what counted initially was each person's individual merits and demerits, virtues and vices, repentances and relapses, confessions and omissions . . . If the Renaissance is individualism, then as far as attitudes toward mortality are concerned it begins at the turn of the thirteenth century. If the Middle Ages are community, then the Renaissance remains profoundly medieval, for collective responsibility for the souls in Purgatory did not end, at least not in the Catholic part of Christendom. With respect to purgatorial time and in other ways, the Renaissance was but an episode in an extended Middle Ages . . . (Le Goff 1988:77)

With the prospect of future beatitude on one's mind, it is very difficult to waste time, and every moment becomes filled with nearly infinite possibility. Our witnesses will be not only Dante but Catherine of Genoa: not only Catholic saints but Protestant preachers like Richard Baxter in seventeenth-century England and William Ellery Channing in New England in the early part of the nineteenth century. The prospect of joining the saints in the "everlasting rest" has produced centuries of exhortation to remember the future in the present.

Paradoxically the opposite is also the case. That is, in remembering the saints who have entered into their rest, the devout are also remembering their past. The saints, showing the way, got there first. The anticipation of future beatitude not only kept open the seemingly endless prospect of spiritual perfection. The same prospect rekindled affections for those who had indeed gone before. As Le Goff puts it, purgatory was very much an affair of the family and of intimates:

In reality . . . responsibility for suffrages fell primarily to the relatives and friends of the deceased. We thus touch upon two of the fundamental structures of medieval society: kinship and community . . . (1988:76)

In remembering the prospect of future beatitude, the saints also kept alive the possibility of seeing again those who may still be in the very purifying and refreshing fires of purgatory. Like Beatrice, purgatory was a place where old flames and ancient passions still burned. There, souls still seeking perfection made a claim on the affection and memory of the living. In this essay

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I will therefore be asking how purgatory not only made the present subject to the future but also beholden to the past. A present so burdened with obligations was serious indeed.

There is a direct line, I will argue, linking purgatory with the exhortations of preachers from Baxter to Channing and evangelical piety. The preaching of evangelists in the United States has placed the soul before a divine tribunal in a moment of anticipatory judgment that initiates purgatorial suffering and purgation in this life. The tears streaming down the faces of the penitent souls listening to the sermons of Wesley and Whitehead in England and the United States, however, have their origins in the spiritual tears of medieval piety. As McEntire has argued, they are the tears of a spiritual mourning that give evidence of compunction:

In effect, wherever European medieval literature, before and after 1215, contains a penitential moment, the nature of that moment must be examined in the light of the spirituality of compunction . . . Dante, too, may have had spiritual mourning in mind when, in *Purgatorio* xxx and xxxi, he repeatedly weeps at the sight of Beatrice . . . Dante's tears . . . result from the remembrance of past sins. Furthermore, Beatrice herself admits to prayer with tears for him and, before he swoons, indicates that this further penitence is necessary before he will be permitted to pass through the final healing waters of Lethe and forgetfulness into joy-filled blessedness . . . (McEntire 1990:162–163)

As I have already noted, Western societies are not the only ones where people remain emotionally attached to the departed. If this were a work on comparative ethnology, we would therefore compare the ways in which various tribes or communities have sought to separate the living from the dead. In funeral rites powerful passions of love and hate are vented. The bodies of the dead are cared for, loved, and venerated, but their bodies are often burned or their skulls cracked. Drums beat, and spears are brandished. The reasons given for such dramatic gestures often mention the needs of the departed for a safe and swift departure, but it is, in retrospect and from the observer's point of view, clearly the living who are the beneficiaries of these rites. The living need to be able to part not

only with the dead but with the potent emotional ties, both positive and negative, that bind them to the past. In the West, however, tears of compunction for one's past sins and for the loss of time have been crucial to the relation of the living and the dead. Indeed, the tears of penitence flow into weeping for the sins of others whose souls are saved in this "lacrimal [sic] washing" (McEntire 1990:174).

Unless a community can successfully cut its ties to the dead, new situations will be burdened with the memory and the affections of the past. It will be difficult to enter into new liaisons without rekindling old passions; it will also be difficult to enter new battles without being burdened by the memory of old conflicts. The heart of the lover cannot be free for a new romance unless old affections are consumed in a sacrificial fire. Psyche, according to the myth, is therefore given a funeral, although she remains alive, before she can be lifted on the wings of love to her new dwelling place. Warriors tend to panic when they hear an ancient prophecy that there will be a massacre near the scene of the forthcoming battle. There must be new sacrifices to ensure that the omens have therefore changed for the better and that old scores will not have to be settled in the new battle. Without these sacrifices, every new love repeats the old, and the old passions may well have been incestuous. The burden of guilt is therefore two-fold: guilt over the failure to seize new opportunities and fulfill current passions; and guilt over affections and hatreds.

It does not matter that the living often never do act out their passions. The conscience, we have learned from Freud, instills guilt over acts that one has not committed but has only imagined. The imagination of incest or patricide may not be conscious; it could well surface only in dreams, myths, or literary creations. Nonetheless the burden of such imaginary guilt seems real and can often be intolerable.

Religion has been the primary institution by which societies not only have adjudicated the claims of the living on the dead but have heard the claims of the living to be free from old passions so that they can fulfill the new. The conflict between old and new loves, between former attachments and aspir-