If you search Google for “purgatory”, you will be provided with colourful and sometimes bizarre results. Apparently, “purgatory” is the name of a climbing tour at the North pillar of Acopan Tepui in Venezuela, there is a German roller girl whose alias is “Polly Purgatory” and a Saxon death metal band called “Purgatory”, as well as a gay and lesbian disco in Augsburg.

The term purgatory seems to call forth manifold associations, which obscure the real meaning of the underlying term. Therefore, I would like to clarify what I mean by purgatory before coming back to the functions of this notion. To make things simpler, I will avail myself of the Catholic dogmatic theology, not because I am a Catholic theologian myself, but because the term purgatorium traditionally has its place in the Roman Catholic Church.

According to Catholic belief, the souls of the deceased who are destined for heaven, but who have not yet rendered complete satisfaction for their sins, will go to purgatory. Between death and the vision of God these souls have to undergo purification, which can be described by the image of ‘fire’. The souls of the deceased have to endure this fire, since they cannot do anything about it themselves, but rather depend on the living. First and foremost, it is by the celebration of Mass and prayers that believers can help the souls of the deceased in the otherworld.

Thus, the idea consists of several components: an intermediate state or place between death and the vision of God, a satisfactory and at the same time cathartic punishment, and the possibility that the punishment might be mitigated by the help of the living. This basic idea is realised in different contexts, in which it develops specific functions. Jacques LeGoff, as is well known, observed the social and economic functions of purgatory in the High Middle Ages. His masterly book, although open to criticism in some respects, starts off with many details, but then leads the reader directly to the heyday of purgatory.
Here, as the 12th century came to an end, he sees the birth of this idea. Even though LeGoff has opened a wide horizon, his focus on the Middle Ages has had one adverse consequence: That the idea of purgatory had emerged in antiquity. Therefore, I would now like to concentrate on the question: What function does the idea fulfil in the contexts in which it first appeared?

The basic idea of purgatory first occurred in North Africa and Alexandria at the turning-point of the second to the third century. In Alexandria, with the works of Clement and Origen this is clear. For the North African literature, I myself proved this in a short study myself. In this historical context, three functions of this concept of the netherworld can be observed. The first one may be termed ecclesiological or sociological. It is pertinent to the church as a comprehensive community of solidarity (1). The second one, the (controversial-)theological function, is aimed at the view of God (and the corresponding world picture) (2). The third one, connecting the other ones, is concerned with the cultural significance of purgatory (3).

1. The Integrative Power of Purgatory: Ecclesiological and Sociological Functions

Purgatory primarily fulfils an integrative function, wherein its ecclesiological and sociological significance lies. It unites saints and sinners, the living and the dead, clergy and laymen, devout souls and sharp brains.

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