CHRISTIAN HISTORY
Issue 70: Dante's Guide to Heaven and Hell

Dante and the Divine Comedy: Did You Know?

What a famous painting suggests about Dante's life, legend, and legacy.

Big Man in the Cosmos

A giant in the world of which he wrote, laurel-crowned Dante stands holding his ***Divine Comedy*** open to the first lines: "Midway this way of life we're bound upon, / I woke to find myself in a dark wood, / Where the right road was wholly lost and gone." Of course, his copy reads in Italian. Dante was the first major writer in Christendom to pen lofty literature in everyday language rather than in formal Latin.

Coming 'Round the Mountain

Behind Dante sits multi-tiered Mount Purgatory. An angel guards the gate, which stands atop three steps: white marble for confession, cracked black stone for contrition, and red porphyry for Christ's blood sacrifice. With his sword, the angel marks each penitent's forehead with seven p's (from Latin ***peccatum***, "sin") for the Seven Deadly Sins. When these wounds are washed away by penance, the soul may enter earthly paradise at the mountain's summit.

Starry Heights

In Paradiso, the third section of the Comedy, Dante visits the planets and constellations where blessed souls dwell. The celestial spheres look vague in this painting, but Dante had great interest in astronomy. One of his astronomical references still puzzles scholars. He notes "four stars, the same / The first men saw, and since, no living eye" (***Purgatorio***, I.23-24), apparently in reference to the Southern Cross. But that constellation was last visible at Dante's latitude (thanks to the earth's wobbly axis) in 3000 B.C., and no one else wrote about it in Europe until after Amerigo Vespucci's voyage in 1501.

Doomed

The gate to Dante's hell, on the left side of the painting, bore the dire message "Abandon hope, all who enter here." Condemned sinners didn't actually walk into hell but were ferried there by Charon, whom Dante borrowed from classical mythology. They were then sentenced by Minos, another classical figure, to their appropriate punishments. The very bottom of hell was not fiery, as this image seems to suggest, but a frozen lake.

Wanted: Dead

Dante was banished from his hometown of Florence (shown at right in the painting, which was commissioned for the Duomo—the domed building beneath the painted sun) in 1302 and threatened with incineration if he tried to return. But the poet made quite a name for himself in exile, and upon his death, in 1321, Florence wanted his body back. Ravenna, his adoptive hometown, refused. Florence repeated its demand a century and a half later, this time backed by Pope Leo X. Ravenna relented ... or so it said. The city fathers actually shipped a sham coffin. Dante's true remains were discovered in Ravenna in 1865 as the town was preparing to celebrate the 600th anniversary of his birth.

Screen Screams

In addition to countless paintings by artists from Sandro Botticelli to Salvador Dali, Dante's ***Comedy*** has inspired several films. A silent ***Dante's Inferno***, released in 1924, was shot in black and white, but the fires of hell were elaborately tinted. In 1935 Spencer Tracy and Rita Hayworth appeared in a carnival-themed ***Dante's Inferno***, the slogan for which proclaimed, "It will burn in your memory forever!" More recently, the first eight cantos of Inferno were imaginatively recreated as A TV Dante for BBC Channel Four. The late Sir John Gielgud starred as Virgil.

Instant Classic

Students today may grumble about having to read the ***Comedy***, but Dante's contemporaries loved it. More than 600 fourteenth-century copies survive, attesting to its wide circulation. At least 12 commentaries had been written about it by 1400. Later it was among the earliest books to be set in movable type. But the poem lost favor with the rise of rationalism, and only three editions were printed in the seventeenth century. The Pre-Raphaelites helped bring the poem back into fashion in the nineteenth century, and its status now seems assured. More than 50 English translations of ***Inferno*** were published in the twentieth century alone.

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 70: Dante's Guide to Heaven and Hell

Dante and the Divine Comedy: From the Editors - How Not to Read Dante

American literary education absolutely mangles the Divine Comedy.

Elesha Coffman

First, most anthologies print big hunks of ***Inferno*** and then abruptly cut the poem off or zoom straight to the end of ***Paradiso***. This treatment suggests that Dante's journey through the afterlife climaxes with his vision of Satan. Wrong. If you imagine Dante's pilgrimage as a road trip on Route 66, Cocytus would be Oklahoma City—a significant stop at the one-third mark, but a long way from the desired destination. (Note: No further parallels are implied between Oklahoma's fine capital and Dante's hellish lake of ice.)

Second, anthologies give inordinate attention to footnotes, riddling the poetry with superscripts and piling lines of explanatory text at the bottom of every page. Readers need some information on the many people, places, and events Dante mentions, because otherwise the poet's points would be entirely lost. But overemphasis on names and dates causes the Comedy to read more like an old newspaper than like an artistic masterpiece. Returning to the Route 66 analogy, footnote freaks are the well-meaning parents who stop at every historical marker along the road. Educational, yes, but also extremely jarring.

Perhaps the biggest mistake made by many teachers and anthologists, though, is believing that a small dose of ***Divine Comedy*** will produce lasting benefits for their pedagogical patients. More often, the dose inoculates students against ever wanting to see the poem again.

We assume most of you dutifully received your Dante vaccinations, but we hope that the ill effects have worn off and you are ready to give the poet another try. He has so much to offer—adventure, romance, humor, reflection, and the most engaging expression of the medieval Christian worldview available.

The ***Comedy*** cannot be taught or appreciated on a syllabus schedule, because savoring it is a lifetime project. As twentieth-century poet T. S. Eliot wrote, "The majority of poems one outgrows and outlives, as one outgrows and outlives the majority of human passions. But Dante's is one of those one can only just hope to grow up to at the end of life."

Yet even a little taste of the ***Comedy***, as we hope to offer in this issue, yields rewards. In the words of C. S. Lewis, "There is so much besides poetry in Dante that anyone but a fool can enjoy him in some way or another."

CHRISTIAN HISTORY
Issue 70: Dante's Guide to Heaven and Hell

A Polysemantic Country Song?

If you still can't grasp what Dante meant to say in the Comedy, this may (or may not) help.

Dante

While in exile, Dante relied on wealthy friends for lodging and other support. In return, he offered his creations. In the letter excerpted below, he dedicates Paradiso ***to his friend Can Grande della Scala and attempts to tell the nobleman what the work is about.***

To the great and most victorious lord, Lord Can Grande della Scala, Vicar General of the Principate of the Holy Roman Emperor in the town of Verona and the municipality of Vicenza, his most devoted Dante Alighieri, Florentine in birth but not in manners, wishes him a happy life through long years, as well as a continuous increase in his glorious reputation. ...

For me to be able to present what I am going to say, you must know that the sense of this work is not simple, rather it may be called polysemantic, that is, of many senses; the first sense is that which comes from the letter, the second is that which is signified by the letter. And the first is called the literal, the second allegorical or moral or anagogical.

Which method of treatment, that it may be clearer, can be considered through these words: "When Israel went out of Egypt, the house of Jacob from a barbarous people, Judea was made his sanctuary, Israel his dominion" (Douay-Rheims, Ps. 113:1-2).

If we look at it from the letter alone, it means to us the exit of the Children of Israel from Egypt at the time of Moses; if from allegory, it means for us our redemption done by Christ; if from the moral sense, it means to us the conversion of the soul from the struggle and misery of sin to the status of grace; if from the anagogical, it means the leave taking of the blessed soul from the slavery of this corruption to the freedom of eternal glory.

And though these mystical senses are called by various names, in general all can be called allegorical, because they are different from the literal or the historical. Now, allegory comes from Greek ***alleon***, which in Latin means "other" or "different."

Now that we have seen this, it is obvious that the subject around which the two senses turn must be twofold. And therefore it is to be determined about the subject of the whole work, taken only from a literal standpoint, is simply the status of the soul after death. The movement of the whole work turns from it and around it. If the work is taken allegorically, however, the subject is man, either gaining or losing merit through his freedom of will, subject to the justice of being rewarded or punished. ...

In order to understand, you need to know that ***comedy*** comes from ***komos***, "village," and ***oda***, which means "song," whence comedy sort of means "country song." And comedy is a kind of poetic narration, different from all others.

It differs, therefore, from the tragedy, in matter by the fact that tragedy in the beginning is admirable and quiet, in the end or final exit it is smelly and horrible; and it gets its name because of this from ***tragos***, which means "goat," and ***oda***, sort of like "goat-song," that is, smelly like a goat, as can be seen in Seneca's tragedies. But comedy begins with harshness in some thing, whereas its matter ends in a

good way. ...

And from this it is obvious that the present work is called comedy. And if we look at the matter, in the beginning it is horrible and smelly, because ***Inferno***; in the end it is good, desirable and graceful, for it is ***Paradiso***; as to the manner of speaking, it is easy and humble, because it is in the vulgar [common] tongue, which also women communicate. And thus it is obvious why it is called ***Comedy***.

CHRISTIAN HISTORY
Issue 70: Dante's Guide to Heaven and Hell

Divine Imagination

By describing a pilgrimage through the realms of death, Dante shares his vision of how Christians should live.

Rolland Hein

> ***The chief imagination of Christendom,***
> ***Dante Alighieri, so utterly found himself***
> ***That he has made that hollow face of his***
> ***More plain to the mind's eye than any face***
> ***But that of Christ.*** —W. B. Yeats

Scanning the "Book Review" section of the ***New York Times*** in 1999, I was surprised to see on the final page—a page generally devoted to a human interest story—the image at left. I will not speculate on the motivations of the editors for printing it; I doubt they were intending to further Christianity.

I can, however, guess what many readers were thinking: ***Science has brought us so far from that silly myth***. But diagramming the great beyond was never Dante's main objective. He was less interested in the question, "What happens when we die?" than the more pressing question, "How should we live in light of eternity?"

Is it not instructive that the picture in the ***New York Times*** needed no caption, no comment? Seven hundred years after Dante's composition, his images remain familiar and forceful. This is because the principles that shape the images of the ***Divine Comedy***, even if vehemently denied, still answer to something deep within the human consciousness. And it is the principles, not the images as such, that really matter.

What it is, and isn't

Dante was fully conscious that he knew no more about the realities faced by departed souls than does anyone else. But as a mature Christian of his time, he was convinced of the reality of hell, purgatory, and heaven.

These convictions guided his fertile imagination as it speculated upon the concrete forms these realities might take. In giving them narrative embodiment, he expended great effort to achieve utter consistency, thoroughness, and comprehensiveness.

The form and structure of the ***Divine Comedy*** symbolize unity and completeness. The numbers three (for the Trinity), four (for man), and one (for final unity), as well as the "perfect" number ten, are omnipresent.

Consider the most obvious instances. The poem consists of three groupings of 33 cantos (poetic chapters) each, which, with the addition of the introductory canto, make 100, the square of 10. Dante's ***terza rima*** stanzas consist of three lines each, with interlocking rhymes; the first and third line of each stanza rhyme with the second line of the previous stanza.

Each canto ends with a one-line stanza. Each of the three regions of the afterlife has ten compartments grouped into seven and three. Pythagoras is reputed to have said the world was created by number. Dante's world certainly is.

The ***Divine Comedy*** offers compelling answers to many questions about the purpose of life and the principles of eternity.

The mythopoeic writers who follow in Dante's wake—Edmund Spenser, John Milton, John Bunyan, George MacDonald, C. S.Lewis— each have strengths, but none rises to the same level of comprehensiveness. Furthermore, they all owe a debt to Dante, an obligation many of them overtly acknowledge.

Dante's bedrock beliefs

Among the basic convictions that shape the story line of Dante's great poem are these:

- People are responsible to God whether they know it or not.
- The human race was created by a loving God whose purpose was for people to choose righteously through life in order to see and be with God.
- Because people possess free will, their choices between good and evil shape their experience of life for time and eternity, and because decisions are shaped by desires, people must learn to desire God and his will.
- Right understanding leads to right conduct, while wrong choices frustrate God's intentions and justly lead to negative consequences.
- Unforgiven sin diminishes sinners, depriving them of their very humanity, whereas Christian virtues enable people to develop into the full stature God intended them to have.

These principles must not be confused with the sometimes peculiar and eccentric images Dante uses to convey them.

God as Dante envisions him is no petty tyrant or vindictive divinity, as some cursory readers have concluded. Nor is Dante, writing as a political exile, a bitter curmudgeon gleefully assigning his friends to heaven and his enemies to hell.

Instead, the ***Divine Comedy*** presents a vision of the love of God evident in his government of the universe and in his grace expressed to humankind. The poem explores the central issues affecting the meaning and purpose of life and culminates in consuming praise for the wisdom of God's ways.

One should not assume, however, that it is a great theological treatise buried within a curiously medieval narrative or an intellectual puzzle to decipher. Dante is doing his utmost to engage our imaginations. The ***Divine Comedy*** is first of all an engaging story and should be read as one would read a novel, fully imagining the images and identifying with Dante the character as he gives testimony of how he was led on a complete tour of hell, purgatory, and heaven.

In the beginning

In his famous opening lines, Dante introduces himself as a middle-aged man who was lost in a wilderness, having wandered from the right path:

Ay me! How hard to speak of it—that rude
And rough and stubborn forest! The mere breath
Of memory stirs the old fear in the blood;

It is so bitter, it goes nigh to death;
Yet there I gained such good, that, to convey
The tale, I'll write what else I found therewith.

(***Inferno***, I.4-9)

The reader readily understands the allegorical level: Dante has sinned and is filled with distress and deep regrets. Whatever moral waywardness he had lapsed into, he profits from the experiences by coming to understand through them the nature of God. He acquires this knowledge, and shares it with his readers, as we travel with him through the realms of the afterlife.

Dante casts himself as an all-too-human pilgrim. He often seems just as bewildered as his readers by what he sees and learns from his guide Virgil, the image of the wisdom available to the natural man.

Virgil has been sent by the heavenly Beatrice, who allegorically represents the love of God expressed to humankind. The wisdom these two guides impart brings ecstasy to Dante the pilgrim, just as Christian truth thrills the soul and transforms it.

Because Dante at the beginning of the poem is astray in a "rough and stubborn forest," his way up Mount Purgatory—which he sees in the distance—is blocked by a leopard, a lion, and a she-wolf. These signify respectively the sins of lust, pride, and fraud, acts that prevent people from attaining righteousness.

Only after Virgil has led Dante through the nether regions of hell, sternly impressing upon him the dehumanizing nature of all sins, can Dante understand the necessity of being freed from enslavement to them.

The hell through which Dante travels is a region God intended for Satan and his followers, not for people. Sinners adamant in their sins, however, inevitably and justly experience its myriad horrors.

The figures Dante meets as he funnels to the center of the earth are but the hulls of their former selves. They have, in Dante's famous phrase, "lost the good of intellect" (***Inferno***, III.18) and become the sins they embraced.

The ultimate specimen is the great traitor Satan encased in Cocytus, the lake of ice at the center of the earth. The image of his immobility reinforces Dante's emphasis upon free will and human responsibility. The inhabitants of hell may not blame Satan for their bad choices, because his power over them is severely limited.

Stairway to heaven

Readers who disagree with the doctrine of purgatory can nevertheless greatly profit from reading the second portion of the ***Divine Comedy***. Whether one believes that the soul can be purified after death or that Christian maturity is pursued only on earth, the steps of growth that Dante experiences in purgatory are necessary for drawing nearer to God.

While climbing Mount Purgatory, Dante learns to desire God and his good above all else, then to see all things in relation to him, and to act accordingly. To achieve this knowledge he must be freed from the Seven Deadly Sins: pride, envy, wrath, sloth, covetousness, gluttony, and lust. These

natural tendencies must be replaced with the Christian virtues of humility, generosity, meekness, zeal, liberality, temperance, and chastity—all components of that holiness without which no one will see God.

In medieval Catholic theology, the qualities one has not acquired by the time of death must be gained in the next life. No careful reader of the ***Divine Comedy***, however, can conclude that Dante is suggesting a Christian can afford to neglect virtues now, or that they are purely the product of human effort.

Triumphing over sins and mastering virtues here and now are tasks Christians dismiss to their own inevitable sorrow. Dante sympathizes with the largeness of the task and eagerly points his readers to the beauty and glory of the prize.

The process of becoming holy is initiated by conversion: the three steps leading to the gate at the base of Mount Purgatory (canto IX) signify confession, contrition, and blood satisfaction. The necessity of dying to the tyranny of sin is suggested by Cato, who guides Virgil and Dante up the mountain. Cato was a Roman statesman who, rather than submit to Caesar, committed suicide.

The rule of the mountain is that none can climb by night: God's enabling grace, symbolized by the sun, gives the essential light.

At the top of Mount Purgatory Dante enters the Earthly Paradise—he has been restored to the condition of unfallen man. He has achieved wholeness of being in righteousness. Virgil bids him farewell with the benediction:

> No word from me, no further sign expect;
> Free, upright, whole, thy will henceforth lays down
> Guidance that it were error to neglect,
> Whence o'er thyself I mitre thee and crown.
>
> (***Purgatorio***, XXVII.139-142)

At the top of the mountain, Dante receives the heavenly Beatrice as his guide. The glories into which she then leads him stand quite beyond the reach of natural reason.

In real life, Dante had met Beatrice only once when both were children and once again nine years later, but he was always attracted to her as the very incarnation of divine love. Although both she and he married other spouses and she died as a young woman, her image inspired him throughout his life.

Allegorically, Beatrice unites both ***eros*** and ***agape***—love as desire and as self-giving. From heaven she commissions Virgil to help Dante regain the right road. In seeing natural reason and loving relationships as prime vehicles of the love of God, Dante is affirming that any aspect of life can be a vehicle of God's grace.

Land of the free

In paradise Dante, guided by Beatrice, moves joyously through a world completely centered on God. Images of light, dance, and music abound. Since thinking rightly is indispensable to beatitude, Dante receives much theological instruction, mostly following the thought of Thomas Aquinas. He converses with saints who, no matter if they disagreed with one another on earth, are now perfectly united in love.

As Dante rises into the ultimate heights of heaven, he is enraptured by a momentary vision of the Triune God bathed in radiant light:

> And so my mind, bedazzled and amazed,
> Stood fixed in wonder, motionless, intent,
> And still my wonder kindled as I gazed.
> That light doth so transform a man's whole bent
> That never to another sight or thought
> Would he surrender, with his own consent;
> For everything the will has ever sought
> Is gathered there, and there is every quest
> Made perfect, which apart from it falls short.
>
> (***Paradiso***, XXXIII.97-105)

Dante's engulfing rapture depicts the true end of man, complete in righteousness, finding satisfaction, contentment, and peace in fellowship with God. His journey consummated, Dante closes his great poem by affirming that his will and his desire are now "turned by love, / The love that moves the sun and the other stars."

Just another quest?

In shaping the great Christian myth, Dante inevitably turns many of the archetypal images of the mythological past—such as the hero, the quest, and the afterlife—on their heads. They are displaced by the Christian fulfillments they foreshadowed.

Consider the image of the hero. Homer's warrior hero Odysseus succeeds in a grand search for glory and adventure because he is cunning, daring, resourceful, and proud. In the ***Divine Comedy***, however, those traits land Odysseus in the eighth circle of hell.

Dante's Christian hero, on the other hand, seeks not external glory but inner holiness. His quest, therefore, is the pursuit of virtues—such as self-sacrificing love, meekness, peacefulness, and moral purity —that are radically different from the ***arete***, or manly excellence, modeled by the ancient Grecian warrior hero.

It is impossible to reconcile Christian virtues with the pagan ideal of the warrior-hero. Dante may be viewed, nevertheless, as attaining heroic status in a Christian sense, as he becomes the ideal of what God intends for humankind. He also sets the Christian standard for literary achievement.

Some Christians would argue with the finer points of Dante's theology, but none can disagree with the principles that shape his work, nor has anyone found a more imaginative way to express them. Were Dante with us today, he may ask to be forgiven his images, but he would affirm with joy the truths they convey.

Rolland Hein is professor emeritus of literature at Wheaton College.

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 70: Dante's Guide to Heaven and Hell

The Rest of the Stories

Dante's other books further illuminate his medieval mindset and shed light on the Comedy.

Oscar Kuhns

The works of Dante are not many. They consist of prose and poetry, the former comprising the so-called "Banquet" (***Convivio***) and the essay on "Universal Monarchy" (***De Monarchia***). The "Banquet" was to have been finished in fifteen books or chapters, but is only a fragment of four. It is a sort of encyclopedia of knowledge, such as were so popular in the Middle Ages, but written in Italian, in order to bring it within the reach of the unlearned reader. It is full of the scholastic learning of the time, and while not attractive to the ordinary reader, is of great importance for a complete understanding of the ***Divine Comedy***.

Likewise important in this respect is the political treatise on the "Monarchy," in which Dante sums up his theory of world politics. This book, written in Latin, is divided into three parts: in Book I, the author shows the necessity of a universal empire; in Book II, he shows the right of Rome to be the seat of this empire; in Book III, he shows the independence of the emperor in his relations to the pope. This theory of the separation of the church and state runs like a thread through the whole of the ***Divine Comedy***, in which Dante constantly attributes the sufferings of Italy to the lust for temporal power on the part of the pope and clergy.

For the general reader, however, the most interesting of Dante's writings, after the ***Divine Comedy***, is the "New Life" (***Vita Nuova***), a strange and beautiful little book that serves as a prologue to the ***Divine Comedy***. It is the story of Dante's love for Beatrice Portinari, the daughter of Folco, a neighbor and friend of the poet's father. It is a simple story, containing but few actual events, the details consisting for the most part of repetitions of the theory of love propounded by Guido Guincelli, of analyses of Dante's own state of mind, and of mystical visions. The form of the book is peculiar, part prose, part poetry, the latter being accompanied by a brief commentary. Yet there is a truth and sincerity in the book that proves it is no mere allegory or symbol, but the record of an actual love on the part of Dante for the fair young Florentine girl who is its heroine.

***—Oscar Kuhns,* The Great Poets of Italy**

CHRISTIAN HISTORY
Issue 70: Dante's Guide to Heaven and Hell

A Poet Without Honor

Banished from his hometown, Dante became lonely, bitter, and inspired.

Bonnie C. Harvey

A Poet Without Honor - page spread

Shortly before giving birth in 1265, Dante's mother had a vision. According to fourteenth-century chronicler Giovanni Boccaccio:

"The gentle lady thought in her dream that she was under a most lofty laurel tree, on a green meadow, by the side of a most clear spring, and there she felt herself delivered of a son, who in shortest space, feeding only on the berries which fell from the laurel tree, and the waters of the clear spring, grew up into a shepherd, and strove with all his power to have of the leaves of that tree whose fruit had nourished him; and as he struggled thereto, she saw him fall, and when he rose again, she saw he was no longer a man, but had become a peacock."

This dream so startled her that she awoke and quickly delivered a son, naming him "Dante," which means "giver." Boccaccio adds: "This was that Dante granted by the special grace of God to our age. This was that Dante who was first to open the way for the return of the Muses, banished from Italy. 'Twas he that revealed the glory of the Florentine idiom. ... that brought under the rule of due numbers every beauty of the vernacular speech. ... and brought dead poesy [poetry] to life."

When Dante arrived, Florence had come to a crossroads between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Dante helped lead the city into a new era. Ironically, though, this poet who embraced the Muses and exalted Florentine speech spent much of his life in exile. Only after Dante's death did Florence want him back.

"Holy seed" on rocky soil

Dante's Italy was a tumultuous place. Kings and emperors battled with each other and the papacy, pitting church against government. Guilds and powerful families carved Florence into spheres of influence. Fortunes could be gained or lost overnight.

Dante's family, the Alighieri, was of noble origin but no longer wealthy. Still, Dante took immense pride in his ancestry. In ***Inferno*** XV, he claims descendence from the "holy seed" of the Romans who colonized Florence under Julius Caesar.

When Dante was still a child, his mother died and his father remarried. Dante speaks affectionately of a sister in the ***Vita Nuova***, but it is uncertain whether she was his full sister or a half sister. He also had

three half-brothers.

Like most educated men of his day, Dante studied grammar, logic, and rhetoric (the basic academic ***trivium***, from which we get "trivia"), as well as arithmetic, music, geometry, and astronomy (the more advanced ***quadrivium***). Boccaccio records that Dante also learned the arts of poetry, painting, and music. In the ***Vita Nuova***, for example, Dante shows close familiarity with poems by Provencal (French), contemporary Italian, and classical authors.

Before Dante turned 18, his father died. Prior to his death, however, he had arranged for Gemma Donati to be Dante's wife. The couple had three or four children together.

Although Dante includes numerous accounts of his contemporaries, friends, and enemies in the ***Divine Comedy***, he says nothing of Gemma. Some commentators take this as a negative reflection on their relationship, but the memory might have been too painful.

Love divine

The most important event in Dante's childhood was his first encounter with Beatrice Portinari at her father's house, when she was 8 and he was 9. In the ***Vita Nuova***, Dante describes the event:

"She was dressed in a very noble color, a decorous and delicate crimson, tied with a girdle and trimmed in a manner suited to her tender age. The moment I saw her I say in all truth that the vital spirit, which dwells in the inmost depths of the heart, began to tremble so violently that I felt the vibration alarmingly in all my pulses. ... From then on indeed Love ruled over my soul. ... [and] I was obliged to fulfill all his wishes perfectly."

Ever afterward, Dante considered Beatrice the love of his life.

He next met her nine years later, when he saw her on the street dressed in white and accompanied by two other girls. She greeted him sweetly by name, and he was enraptured. A short time later, having heard his name linked with someone else, Beatrice passed him without speaking, and Dante mourned for days.

Dante and Beatrice never shared a love affair in any modern sense. Their meetings were no more intimate than passing in the street, and both of them married other people. Dante's feelings for her fit into the tradition of courtly love, in which the woman was idealized and eternally out of reach. A physical relationship with her was neither possible nor desirable.

Beatrice died when she was only 24, but Dante kept writing sonnets about her. Then, following a marvelous vision, Dante resolved "to write no more of this blessed one until I could do so more worthily." He challenged himself "to compose concerning her what has never been written in rhyme of any woman." The result was the ***Divine Comedy***.

In both the ***Comedy*** and the ***Vita Nuova***, Dante's love for Beatrice takes on supernatural attributes. She becomes a holy figure, comparable to the Virgin Mary. Beatrice comforts the poet, scolds him after he commits an unknown sin, and inspires him to write of his heavenly vision. Some consider her the symbol or embodiment of divine love.

The bread of strangers

Dante's life changed forever when he became involved in the war between two Florentine political parties, the White Guelfs and the Black Guelfs.

The parties had originally split over a family squabble, but they came to represent the division between the tacky, new-money Cerchi family (Whites) and the classier, old-money Donati family (Blacks). Dante was unfortunate enough to be a White, married to a Black, ascending to political office—Florence's priorate—just as conflict between the parties escalated into street warfare.

When the Blacks overthrew the Whites in 1302, Dante was swept up in the party purge. He was accused of barratry (the sale of political office), fined 5,000 florins, and exiled for life. He spent the rest of his years boarding with various patrons and writing. Though the ***Comedy*** is set in 1300, Dante wrote the entire work after he left Florence.

Dante wandered all over Italy and central Europe, tossed, he writes in ***Convivio***, "as a ship without sails and without rudder, driven to various harbors and shores by the parching wind which blows from pinching poverty." Along the way, he learned (as described by Cacciaguida in ***Paradiso***, XVII.59-60) "How salt the bread of strangers is, how hard / The up and down of someone else's stair."

In 1312 the leaders of Florence declared a general amnesty for political exiles. Dante could have returned to his home and his family, but he would have been forced to accept humiliating conditions. He declined the offer and wrote to a friend in Florence:

"This is not the way of coming home, my father! Yet, if you or other find one not beneath the fame of Dante and his honor, that will I gladly pursue. But if by no such way can I enter Florence, then Florence shall I never enter."

Eventually Dante settled in Ravenna, where, writes Boccaccio, "he was honorably received by the lord of that city, who revived his fallen hopes with kindly encouragement, and, giving him abundantly such things as he needed, kept him there at his court for many years." Dante's sons Pietro and Jacopo and his daughter Beatrice came to live with him there.

In the summer of 1321, while on a diplomatic mission to Venice, Dante became ill. When he returned to Ravenna, he lingered until fall, then died the night of September 13.

Ravenna buried its adopted son with honors, rebuffing Florence's request for the body. The city fathers believed Dante would not have wished to return. He had stated his opinion clearly in the full title of his masterwork: ***The Comedy of Dante Alighieri, Florentine by Citizenship, Not by Morals***.

Perhaps Dante's greatest achievement, aside from sheer aesthetic triumph, is to make his readers ponder what they are truly living for. James Russell Lowell suggests:

"In the company of the epic poets there was a place left for whoever should embody the Christian idea of a triumphant life, outwardly all defeat, inwardly victorious, who should make us partakers of that cup of sorrow in which all are communicants with Christ."

"He who should do this would indeed achieve the perilous seat, for he must combine poesy with doctrine in such cunning wise that the one lose not its beauty nor the other its severity—and Dante has done it."

"As he takes possession of it we seem to hear the cry he himself heard when Virgil rejoined the company of great singers—All honor to the loftiest of poets!"

Bonnie C. Harvey has written a number of nineteenth-century biographies including **Fanny Crosby** ***(Bethany House),*** **Charles Finney** ***(Barbour), and*** **Daniel Webster** ***(Enslow).***

CHRISTIAN HISTORY
Issue 70: Dante's Guide to Heaven and Hell

Dante in Love

The poet's feelings for Beatrice far exceeded a childhood crush.

Charles Williams

Charles Williams (1886-1945), a regular member of the Oxford "Inklings," was a literary critic as well as a prolific writer of poetry, novels, drama, and theology. He believed that human love and divine love are intricately connected and that earthly pleasures, often seen as distractions or even evils, can actually bring people closer to God. He explores this idea at the beginning of his landmark book on Dante, The Figure of Beatrice***, excerpted here.***

Dante is one of those poets who begin their work with what is declared to be an intense personal experience. That experience is, as such, made part of the poetry; and it is not only so, with Dante, at the beginning, but also when, in his later and greater work, the experience is recalled and confirmed.

He defined the general kind of experience to which the figure of Beatrice belongs in one of his prose books, the ***Convivio*** (IV.xxv). He says there that the young are subject to a "stupor" or astonishment of the mind which falls on them at the awareness of great and wonderful things. Such a stupor produces two results—a sense of reverence and a desire to know more. A noble awe and a noble curiousity come to life.

This is what had happened to him at the sight of the Florentine girl, and all his work consists, one way or another, in the increase of that worship and that knowledge. ...

He was nine when he first met Beatrice, and she was eight. He saw her, during the next nine years, on a number of occasions, but it was not until he was eighteen that she spoke to him. She was then walking in the street with two other ladies, rather older than she was; she had on a white dress, and as they passed him she looked at him and "saluted" him. It was nine on a May morning of the year 1283, in a street in Florence. Those two meetings together, with all that went between, formed the "falling in love" of Dante Alighieri, the first but obscure emergence in him of that "quality" of love. ...

The appearance of Beatrice, her "image"—"***la sua immagine***"—produces at their first meeting three distinguishable effects, which he attributed in the physiological and poetic habit of his day to three centers of the human body. ...

The "spirit of life," which dwells in the most hidden chamber of the heart, trembled and said: "Behold a god stronger than I who is come to rule over me."

The "animal spirit," which lived in the brain where all sense-perceptions are known, was amazed and said: "Now your beatitude has appeared."

The "natural spirit," which dwelled "where nourishment is distributed"—that is, in the liver—begins to weep and says: "O miserable wretch! how often now shall I be hampered!" ...

It is not, I think, too much to say that his sex, like his intellect, was awakened. That he had, there and perhaps therafter, no direct desire of Beatrice sexually is likely enough; first love often happens so. But

that the potentiality of [physical desire] was there is also likely. When, later, he says that his "natural" spirit was "impeded in its operations," so that he became weak and frail, and his acquaintances grew curious and even spiteful, he must mean at least that this potentiality was present. Long afterwards he was to cry out: "The embers burn, Virgil, the embers burn," and the fire was general throughout him.

CHRISTIAN HISTORY
Issue 70: Dante's Guide to Heaven and Hell

A Cathedral of Ideas

From elements of many traditions, Dante fashioned a towering new theology.

Hans Urs von Balthasar

Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905-1998) was an influential, if sometimes controversial, Catholic thinker. A doctor of literature who had also studied theology and philosophy, he drew his ideas from a range of sources. Though his thinking was broadly Thomistic, he became frustrated with Scholasticism and investigated writings of figures like Hegel and Heidegger. He conducted conferences with Martin Buber and counted Karl Barth as a friend. Von Balthasar finds a similar eclecticism and creativity in Dante, whose theological aesthetics he describes in this excerpt.

Dante wrote his major works in the vernacular in about 1300 and, in so doing, was conscious of taking a momentous step in the history of mankind. He was, of course, the inheritor of Latin scholasticism, but that tradition lay behind him. Apart from Thomas Aquinas (and even he was more of a philosopher than a theologian), ... no theologian writing subsequently in Latin made a really significant contribution to the history of the human spirit. ...

Dante studied the Schoolmen, just as he studied Aristotle, [Aristotelian philosophers] Averroes and Siger, but when he meets scholasticism in the heights of Paradise, in the sun, in the lowest of the "higher spheres," the impression left on him by the round dance of the "twice twelve teachers of wisdom" (the two groups led by Thomas and Bonaventure) is of the subtle interlocking mechanism of a clock with its chimes, or of a holy mill. And so the Dominican sings the praises of Francis, and the Franciscan praises Dominic.

Finally, Dante, entranced, sees a third round dance detach itself from the other two—"just as on the approach of evening new lights begin to appear in the sky so that the sight seems and seems not real." ... His eyes, overcome, cannot bear the sight, and Beatrice, laughing, draws him on to another sphere. It is not inconceivable that Dante considered himself to be the originator of this new, third theology. ...

[***The Divine Comedy***], inseparable both from its unique divine mission and from its historical existence, carved out like a statue or monument, Dante regarded as a venture into the new, the unknown. "I want to demonstrate truths that no one else has dared to attempt. For what kind of contribution would it be if a man were merely to prove once again a theorem of Euclid, or to demonstrate for the second time the nature of happiness, which Aristotle has already done?" And he says this at the beginning of ***De Monarchia***! ...

There is, of course, a long tradition, both in Antiquity and in the Christian era, of journeys to the hereafter, of transcendental adventure stories and reports of ecstatic experience. However, Dante should be seen in stark contrast to this whole literary tradition because of his awareness, both theological and aesthetic, that he was setting down something that had never existed before and that in its own way is inimitable, a work that raises him high above his own age, plants him in the future, in eternity itself.

[Even so, Dante represents] a synthesis of scholasticism and mysticism, of Antiquity and Christianity, of the sacral concept of Empire and the spiritual Franciscan ideal of the Church, and—even more stunningly—a synthesis of the courtly world ... and the very different world of scholastic wisdom. In his own way

we can class Dante with the great cathedral builders of the Middle Ages, with whom for the last time ethics and aesthetics peacefully coexisted and furthered and strengthened one another.

—from* The Glory of the Lord, Vol. III: Studies in Theological Style: Lay Studies*, p. 9-13

CHRISTIAN HISTORY
Issue 70: Dante's Guide to Heaven and Hell

Dante's Turbulent World: Christian History Timeline

CH Timeline

Dante Alighieri

1265 Dante born, possibly May 29

1274 First meets and falls in love with Beatrice Portinari

1283 Soon after his father's death, Dante marries Gemma Donati, with whom he has three or four children

1289 Fights on the side of the victorious Guelf League (Florence and Lucca) against the Ghibellines of Arezzo at the Battle of Campaldino

1290 Beatrice dies

1292 Writes the ***Vita Nuova***

1295 Joins the guild of physicians and apothecaries for the purpose of entering public life

1297 Borrows more than 750 florins from various lenders—probably a sign of economic hardship

1300 Serves on Florence's priorate for two months (June 15-August 15); fictional date for ***Divine Comedy*** (Eastertime)

1301 Travels to Rome as an envoy to Pope Boniface VIII

1302 Banished from Florence after Black Guelfs seize power

1303 Separates from a group of exiles who were plotting a return to Florence

Politics, Art, and Religion

1265 Pope Urban IV enlists Charles of Anjou to expel Ghibelline party from Florence; philosopher Duns Scotus born

1266 Giotto di Bondone, Dante's friend and the "father of modern painting," born

1267 Eighth and final Holy Land crusade launched by leaders of France and England

1271 Kublai Khan becomes emperor of China

1273 Thomas Aquinas abruptly ceases work on ***Summa Theologica***

1274 Aquinas, Bonaventure die; Guido Guinicelli, the most illustrious poet in Italy before Dante, expelled from Bologna; Latin and Greek theologians meet at the Council of Lyons

1285 Philip the Fair (Philip IV) becomes king of France

1290 Jews expelled from England; Osman I founds Ottoman dynasty

1291 Christian military presence in Holy Land ends as Muslims take Acre

1294 Hermit Peter Morone elected Pope Celestine V, resigns after five months; Benedict Gaetani becomes Pope Boniface VIII

1295 Marco Polo returns to Venice with fantastic tales of the Far East

1300 Black and White Guelfs begin street warfare in Florence; Boniface VIII proclaims Jubilee; poet Guido Cavalcanti, Dante's friend whom he had reluctantly banished from Florence, dies of illness contracted during exile

c. 1304 Writes ***De Vulgari Eloquentia*** ("On Common Speech"), a history and rhetoric of vernacular literature, and begins ***Il Convivio*** ("The Banquet"), an encyclopedia of knowledge

1306 Probably the year in which Dante interrupts the ***Convivio*** and begins the ***Comedy***

1310 Possible date of ***De Monarchia*** ("On Universal Monarchy")

1311 Writes an epistle to Emperor Henry VII, whose coronation at Milan he likely attended

1312 Declines amnesty offered in Florence

1314 In a letter, rebukes Italian cardinals and urges return of the papacy to Rome; ***Inferno*** published

1315 Works on ***Purgatorio*** and ***Paradiso*** while lodging with Can Grande della Scala in Verona

1319 Moves to Ravenna, where he is the guest of Guido Novello da Polenta; Latin correspondence with humanist Giovanni del Virgilio

1320 Writes ***De Aqua et Terra***, a treatise on the relative proportions of land and sea on the earth

1321 Finishes ***Comedy***; falls ill on return from Venice, where he had been sent as ambassador by Guido Da Polenta, and dies September 13 or 14

1301 Charles of Valois called to pacify Florence but takes Black Guelf side instead

1302 In the bull ***Unam Sanctam***, Boniface VIII makes sweeping claims of papal supremacy

1303 Boniface VIII founds University of Rome, then dies after confrontation with King Philip's men

1304 Petrarch, celebrated humanist poet, born

1305 Papacy begins "Babylonian Captivity" at Avignon, France

1307 To seize their wealth, King Philip begins slandering and torturing the Knights Templar, a military order founded to protect Holy Land pilgrims

1308 Giotto's teacher, artist Giovanni Cimabue, dies

1311 Henry of Luxembourg crowned Holy Roman Emperor Henry VII

1312 Henry lays siege to Florence, then abandons campaign to unify Italy

1313 Giovanni Boccaccio, author of the ***Decameron***, born in Paris

c. 1320 Aztecs found their capital at Tenochtitlán (modern Mexico City)

1321 William Bélibaste, the last Albigensian perfect in Languedoc (southern France), is burned at the stake

CHRISTIAN HISTORY
Issue 70: Dante's Guide to Heaven and Hell

The Root of All Kinds of Evil

The *Inferno* is crammed with greedy Florentines receiving their due.

Elesha Coffman

Dante proclaims in ***De Monarchia***, "Greed is the extreme opposite of justice, as Aristotle says in the fifth book of his ***Nicomachean Ethics***. Take away greed completely and nothing opposed to justice remains in the will."

As a Catholic and a son of the Roman Empire, Dante believed passionately in justice. But as a Florentine, he knew firsthand how much greed, graft, and gluttony stood in the way of his ideal.

Like many Italian cities, Florence boasted a well-developed economy by Dante's day. It also featured a system of government, codified in 1293 in the ironically titled "Ordinances of Justice," where money translated directly into political power.

In theory, the Florentine system was a popular regime, because neither popes nor nobles held sway. In practice, though, the city lay in the grip of seven commercial guilds: judges and notaries, bankers and cloth traders, money changers, silk merchants, doctors and apothecaries, wool merchants, and fur dealers. A handful of families dominated the guilds, which further consolidated power.

Members of Florence's ruling body, the priorate, were selected solely from the guilds. Individuals could hold office only for short periods of time, with periods of ineligibility in between, but the same men were chosen over and over.

Rich business leaders, or ***magnates***, were known for their power but not for their morality. In common speech, "magnate" often doubled for "tyrant." To make matters worse, ruling families feuded incessantly.

Laborers, who had almost no real rights, resented the upper classes and even staged several uprisings in the fourteenth century.

The behavior of individual magnates did little to buff this image. In the 1330s, for example, members of about two-thirds of the power families were convicted of crimes against communal law, though most were able to purchase pardons.

Guild feuds and depravity touched the lives of all Florentines, but Dante observed them especially closely. His father was a banker or money changer, and his brother-in-law was a moneylender.

An inside job

In 1295 Dante joined the guild of physicians and apothecaries, an influential conglomerate that included writers (because books were sold in drugstores), painters (considered "purveyors of colors," a subset of apothecaries), and the mighty Medicis (a name that literally means "doctors").

By joining a guild, Dante became eligible to serve in the priorate, to which he ascended in the summer of 1300. Unfortunately, by this time the prominent Florentine families had split into warring factions, and

part of Dante's job was to keep the peace.

He tried to calm the situation by banishing instigators from both sides, including one of his close friends, the poet Guido Cavalcanti, and one of his wife's kinsmen, Corso Donati. Cavalcanti, with Dante, sided with the White Guelf political party. Donati, with Dante's wife, sided with the Blacks.

Cavalcanti was allowed to return because he said he had been sent to an unhealthy place—a reasonable claim, since he died in August of an illness contracted during exile. This show of mercy would cost Dante dearly, however, when his Black Guelf enemies denounced it as favoritism and charged Dante with corruption.

Whatever charges were brought, the fact was that Dante represented the wrong side in the factional battle. When the Blacks took over in 1302, he simply could not stay in Florence any longer.

Because it was during his exile that he composed the ***Comedy***, and because many of Dante's political enemies appear in the Inferno, some commentators view the poem as an exquisite form of revenge. But political affiliation is not what has earned Dante's Florentine sinners their places in hell. The condemned represent an array of guilds and families, but they do have something in common—fully half of them suffer punishment for money-related offenses.

Florentines in hell

Dante meets about 30 identifiable Florentines on his guided tour of hell. The group includes suicides, sodomites, heretics, and a host of other wrongdoers, but Florence is particularly well-represented among thieves and usurers. There are also lines in the poem in which Dante or one of the condemned souls castigates the city as a whole for its greed, deceptive business practices, or other misdeeds.

Early in the poem, Dante converses with a Florentine glutton nicknamed Ciacco, meaning "pig." Ciacco describes Florence as a place "where envy teems / And swells so that already it brims the sack" (***Inferno***, VI.49-50). He also cites "Three sparks from Hell—Avarice, Envy, Pride" (VI.74) as the cause for the continuing strife in the city. All three relate to property.

Dante finds no familiar faces among the hoarders and spendthrifts—though he expects to—because these sinners have no faces. His guide, Virgil, explains, "Living, their minds distinguished nothing; dead, / They cannot be distinguished."

The poet meets a whole pack of hometown "heroes" among the usurers. Their faces are scarred by raining embers, but Dante recognizes them by the family crests on the purses they wear around their necks. The Gianfigliazzi, identified by an azure lion on gold, were notorious for usury. The Ubbriachi, associated with a white goose on red, and Giovanni Buiamonte, tagged with three goats, had similar reputations.

Usury was a touchy subject in Dante's day because, after all, interest on loans helped build the Florentine economy. Dante had personal connections to the practice, too—his name first appears in public record books as the owner of a debt.

On paper, the Roman Catholic church opposed charging any interest on loans, but its practices hardly reflected such a conviction. Several Florentine bankers grew rich by managing the pontiff's assets and underwriting his military endeavors.

Collecting papal taxes was particularly lucrative. Firms would send loan sharks out ahead of the tax collectors to lend money, always at exorbitant interest, to peasants who could not pay their taxes. Then

the tax collectors would sweep through, take the loaned money, and leave the empty-handed peasants to pay the interest.

Even though he surely knew about practices like this, Dante refrains from condemning moneylending in general. Most likely he considered banking a legitimate venture but felt that bankers who gouged their customers deserved punishment.

Dante discovers five townsmen among the thieves, most from prominent families. He has a hard time identifying them, though, because their bodies constantly collide, morph, and redivide in altered forms. Translator Dorothy Sayers explains in her notes that on earth these men had no regard for "mine" and "thine," so in hell they cannot even keep their bodies to themselves.

The sight of these five swindlers prompts Dante's harshest reproach of his hometown:

> Florence, rejoice, because thy soaring fame
> Beats its broad wings across both land and sea,
> And all the deep of Hell rings with thy name!
>
> Five of thy noble townsmen did I see
> Among the thieves; which makes me blush anew,
> And mighty little honor it does to thee.
>
> (XXVI.1-6)

The thieves, along with all other residents of the eighth circle of Hell, inhabit a region called the "Malebolges" or "Malebowges," which means "sacks of evil." The sack image both describes the physical landscape, concentric pocket-like trenches, and reinforces the connection between the hellish City of Dis and earthly cities, like Florence, that are obsessed with wealth.

The last major concentration of Florentines is found in canto XXX among the falsifiers—a subset, like the thieves, of the fraudulent. As the worst of the fraudulent, the falsifiers occupy a ring just above the traitors in nether hell. And while falsification is not necessarily money-related, all of the Florentines here did falsify for gain.

The story of Gianni Schicchi illustrates the depths to which some Florentines would sink for profit. Schicchi had been hired by Simone Donati to impersonate Simone's deceased father, Buoso, and dictate a will. Buoso's estate included a lot of stolen property, and Simone was afraid that the old man had succumbed to pangs of conscience and willed the booty back to its legitimate owners.

As requested, Schicchi dictated a sham will that bequeathed the loot to Simone. He also secured himself a tidy sum and swiped the best mare from the dead man's stables.

Deaf ears

By exposing his city's corruption in the Comedy, Dante hoped, vainly, to steer Florence onto a higher path. He grieved for the city's doom:

> "A glut of self-made men and quick-got gain
> Have bred excess in thee and pride, forsooth,
> O Florence! till e'en now thou criest for pain."
>
> (XVI.73-75)

Dante was not alone in his concern. Many fourteenth-century humanists, including Petrarch and Salutati, argued that wealth did not lead to virtue. One Tuscan writer, Poggio Bracciolini (1380-1459) devoted an entire dialogue, ***On Avarice***, to the problem.

Near the end of Bracciolini's dialogue, theologian Andrea of Constantinople reflects:

"[I]t is strange that despite the counsel of many fine men, despite so many authoritative opinions and sober judgments placed before our eyes, which ought to affect the minds of mortals, still there are those who, impervious to every argument, continue to dedicate themselves to avarice and worship it as a god. Let them repent while there is still time and attend to their future life."

Dante is not among the "fine men" Bracciolini names as critics of materialism, but Dante surely would have appreciated the younger author's point. He also would have been disappointed that, a generation after his ***Comedy***, Florentines still needed such a stern warning about greed. One can only imagine how discouraged he would be to see how his advice remains unheeded 700 years later.

Elesha Coffman is associate editor of **Christian History*.***

CHRISTIAN HISTORY
Issue 70: Dante's Guide to Heaven and Hell

The Pilgrim's Way

The dream of reaching heaven by visiting holy sites inspired millions of medieval Christians—including Dante.

Jeanetta R. Chrystie

How well it is for the Christian soul to behold the city which is like a heaven on earth, full of the sacred bones and relics of the martyrs, and bedewed with the precious blood of these witnesses for truth; to look upon the image of our Saviour, venerable to all the world; ... to roam from tomb to tomb rich with memories of the saints, to wander at will through the Basilicas of the Apostles with no other company than good thoughts."

With these words the Italian poet Francesco Petrarch described the value of making a pilgrimage to Rome, which he did in 1350. Dante Alighieri had made the same journey in 1300. Pilgrimages captured the energy and imagination of millions of medieval Christians—a captivation reflected in the numerous pilgrim references in the ***Divine Comedy***.

From crusades to Jubilees

At first, pilgrimages focused on Jerusalem. Such journeys served to unify God's people as early as King David's reign. After the establishment of the church, Christian pilgrimages to Jerusalem continued until the latter 1200s.

Pilgrimages changed during the Crusades, when many travelers had to arm themselves for protection. Then in 1291 Acre, the last Christian stronghold in the Holy Land, fell to the Muslims, making travel to Jerusalem perilous.

Loss of contact with Christianity's motherland was traumatic. Pope Boniface VIII responded in 1300 by establishing the first Jubilee pilgrimage to Rome. "Jubilee" refers to the Old Testament tradition of holding a Jubilee every fiftieth year during which slaves were freed, debts were canceled, and land reverted to its original owners.

Boniface had prepared his capital well for visitors. He was one of a series of popes who recreated Rome as a flourishing city that attracted numerous artists to work on its churches and palaces. So when the fall of Acre made it difficult for Christians to visit the Via Dolorosa and walk in Christ's footsteps, edifices like St. John Lateran and St. Peter's Basilica stood as ready alternatives.

The Jubilee Pilgrimage greatly increased Rome's prestige as a destination. As an anonymous fourteenth-century English poem, ***The Stacions of Rome***, promised:

> Hit were no neod to man in cristiante
> To passe in to the holy lond over the see
> To Jerusalem ne to kateryne
> [St. Catherine's monastery]
> To bringe mannes soule out of syne
> For pardoun there is with-outen ende
> Wel is him that thider may wende.

To make a Roman trek even more attractive, Boniface offered pilgrims previously unheard-of indulgences. The author of the ***Stacions*** reckoned that truly devout pilgrims could rack up 32,000 years of pardon for sin—including seven years for each step up or down the stairs at St. Peter's.

Pilgrims flooded into Rome in such numbers that a new gate was opened in the city walls. Travelers in search of insights, blessings, and indulgences came from all across Europe, the British Isles, and parts of Asia. They arrived by ship, animal, and on foot. Some historical records indicate nearly two million visitors, which would have been almost 50 times the city's normal population.

Innkeepers were not the only ones profiting from the traffic. One merchant told of two clerics "standing day and night by the altar of St. Paul's literally raking in the pilgrims' offerings." Such stories led to accusations that the pope was using the pilgrims, selling indulgences to get rich and to finance wars. Technically, however, the offerings were voluntary and had no bearing on whether a pilgrim was granted an indulgence.

A pilgrim's life

Medieval pilgrims set off for a variety of reasons. Some sought indulgences or the cure for an illness. For others the pilgrimage was an act of penance or the fulfillment of a vow. Still others journeyed to give thanks for a blessing or to reap benefits for someone else—a sort of pilgrimage by proxy.

Early pilgrims often dressed in a sackcloth habit, usually hooded. They carried food and money in a soft leather purse that they attached to their sash-style belts. Pilgrims also generally carried a metal-tipped staff. Some pilgrims received their staff as part of an elaborate ceremony of blessing, commissioning them for their journey.

Gradually, the pilgrim robes took on symbolic significance. Returning pilgrims who had visited famous destinations often carried symbols or badges on their clothing: natural souvenirs such as scallop shells or palm leaves, or keys from Rome. These trophies were highly valued, and unwary pilgrims could be robbed of their provisions and prizes.

Pilgrims were not the only ones who had to worry about larceny. Pilgrimage sites competed for saints' remains, and many were robbed. Black-market relic trading became a problem, which is one reason the Vatican does not officially endorse the legitimacy of any relics. It would be impossible to verify them all.

Before and after Dante's time, skeptics questioned the value of pilgrimages. In the seventh century, an English missionary in Germany wrote to Cuthbert, archbishop of Durham, charging that some men and women were traveling abroad "for the purpose of living licentiously, without the restraint they would find at home, or are tempted by the vices of the cities of France and Lombardy to fall from the path of virtue."

One unnamed performer in Thomas More's sixteenth-century ***Dialogue on the Adoration of Images*** claimed that many pilgrims to Canterbury "cometh for no devotion at all, but only for good company to babble thitherward, and drinke dranke there, and then dance and reel homewards."

Geoffrey Chaucer's fourteenth-century ***Canterbury Tales*** also suggests that a pilgrimage is an opportunity to have a good time. Dante, however, sided with the majority who applauded the spiritual benefits of making a holy pilgrimage.

Pilgrim passages

As the ***Comedy*** unfolds, Dante tells the story of a pilgrim's journey through hell, purgatory, and heaven during the Holy Week of 1300. The opening lines of the poem describe the pilgrim as "midway in life," probably referring to Dante's thirty-fifth birthday in the spring of 1300. Age 35 would be half the biblical life span of "three score and ten years."

In the eighteenth canto of ***Inferno***, Dante compares a procession in the eighth circle of hell to the Roman traffic pattern during the Jubilee:

> In the bottom were naked sinners, who, our side
> The middle, moved to face us; on the other,
> Along with us, though with a swifter stride.
>
> Just so the Romans, because of the great smother
> Of the Jubilee crowds, have thought of a good device
> For controlling the bridge, to make the traffic smoother,
>
> So that on one side all must have their eyes
> On the Castle, and go to St. Peter's; while all the throng
> On the other, towards the Mount moves contrariwise.
>
> (***Inferno***, XVIII.25-33)

If, as a few historians maintain, Dante did not participate in the Jubilee pilgrimage of 1300, he must have been very familiar with it to have described such intricate details.

In the second canto of ***Purgatorio***, Dante describes new arrivals from a waiting area at the Tiber River. The musician Casella, a dear friend of the poet, arrives a long time after his death. When Dante asks him the reason for the delay, Casella replies that he was often refused passage, but Boniface's declaration of indulgences had enabled him to leave the waiting area and begin purifying his soul.

In the thirty-first canto of ***Paradiso***, Dante describes a Croatian pilgrim in St. Peter's who is much affected by viewing the veil of Christ. According to legend, Veronica (not a real name, but a combination of words meaning "true icon") offered Christ a veil as he was carrying the cross to Calvary. This veil is said to bear the imprint of Christ's face. The veil's ability to inspire awe in pilgrims reportedly influenced Boniface to grant the centennial indulgence.

For Dante, as for many believers before and after him, all of life is a pilgrimage. Some Christians, like those who participated in Jubilee 2000, still undertake physical journeys. Others apply the pilgrim concept to their everyday walk of faith. Either way, the idea holds eternal appeal.

Jeanetta Chrystie is a freelance writer living in Kirkland, Washington.

CHRISTIAN HISTORY
Issue 70: Dante's Guide to Heaven and Hell

Dante's Guide to Heaven and Hell: The Gallery - Walk of Fame

Star sightings in the *Comedy* highlight Dante's religious and political views.

Steve Gertz; Janine Petry

Boniface VIII
(Benedict Gaetani)
1235-1303
Power-grabbing pope

Benedict Gaetani would be bullied by no one. Accusing professors at the University of Paris of dabbling in papal affairs, the 39-year-old cardinal promised the university's destruction if they continued on their course. "You Paris masters at your desk seem to think that the world should be ruled by your reasonings. I tell you that this is not so—it is to us that the world is entrusted, not to you." It would not be the last threat Gaetani (later Pope Boniface VIII) would make against Paris's elite.

Born into a modest Italian family, Gaetani coupled a sharp legal mind with iron determination to advance to the Sacred College, the body responsible for electing the pope. Once inside the papal palace, Gaetani persuaded the inexperienced and weak Pope Celestine V to renounce the papacy and return to his monk's cell. (In Dante's universe, this "great refusal" earns Celestine a place in hell's vestibule, home of the futile.)

Acting quickly, Gaetani negotiated support from his fellow cardinals and in January 1294 entered St. Peter's Cathedral in Rome as the victorious Boniface VIII. Many people hated him, though, believing he had usurped the papal throne.

Boniface lost little time securing fortune for himself and his family. He spent one-fourth of his pontifical revenue buying land for the Gaetani. The rival Colonna family despised him for it, so Boniface destroyed them. The pope's critics accused him of simony—selling church offices and indulgences.

Boniface appears in the ***Comedy*** as the greedy pope next in line for the terrors of hell. Mistaking Dante for Boniface, Pope Nicholas III (another simoniac) cries out:

> "Art standing there already, Boniface?
> Why then, the writ has lied by many a year.
> What! so soon sated with the gilded brass
> That nerved thee to betray and then to rape
> The Fairest among Women that ever was?"
>
> (***Inferno***, XIX.53-57)

Nicholas proclaims that "the writ has lied" because, if Dante were Boniface, he had arrived ahead of schedule—Dante set the ***Comedy*** in 1300, three years before the pope's death. "The Fairest among Women" is the church.

Dante had special enmity toward Boniface, for in March 1302, the pope had sentenced him to death for his political involvements in Florence. Dante then fled into exile, where he wrote the ***Comedy***. He accused the papacy of "fornication with the kings of the earth," believing Boniface's use of power compromised the church's spiritual mission.

True to Dante's assessment, Boniface showed far more interest in politics than spirituality. He desired supreme authority in Europe, but he had to fight King Philip IV of France to get it.

"To Boniface, who calls himself pope," Philip wrote, "little or no greeting. Let your stupendous fatuity know that in temporal matters, we are subject to no man." To this Boniface replied, "Our predecessors have deposed these kings of France. Know—we can depose you like a stable boy if it prove necessary."

But Boniface had met his match. Shortly after issuing the bull ***Unam Sanctam*** in 1302, which proclaimed the pope earthly ruler over all Christians, Boniface was captured and humiliated by Philip's agents. Among them was Sciarra Colonna, seeking his family's revenge. Though the pope's allies rescued him from Philip's men, Boniface never recovered from the shock. He died shortly afterward.

Giovanni Villani, a Florentine, gave this appraisal of Boniface's life:

"He was very wise in learning and natural wit, and a man very cautious and experienced and of great knowledge and memory. Very haughty he was, and proud and cruel towards his enemies and he was of great heart and much feared by all the people ... a man of large schemes and lordly who sought for much honor."

In the end, Boniface's search for earthly honor failed. He is numbered among the worst popes in history.

Steven Gertz is editorial coordinator for **Christian History*.***

Emperor Henry VII

c. 1275-1313

"Sole ruler of the world"

Dante positively gushed about the young king from Luxembourg: "Rejoice, O Italy! ... Soon you will be envied throughout the world! For your bridegroom, the solace of the world and the glory of your people, the most clement Henry ... hastens to the nuptials!"

In 1309 the princes of Germany had chosen an obscure count named Henry to be their new king. Within the year, Henry had also emerged as Holy Roman Emperor. But winning the title was the easy part; actually ruling over that far-flung constellation of princes and principalities proved more challenging.

Henry was neither particularly rich (as kings go) nor particularly influential before his selection as king and emperor. He was obliged to build up good will little by little, working throughout northern Europe to forge a host of diplomatic alliances.

He succeeded at this difficult task and soon yearned to bring similar unity and peace to Italy. Unfortunately, he underestimated the maze of political interests and ancient hatreds—not to mention the power of emerging city-states—that divided the Italian peninsula into countless factions.

Before visiting Italy, Henry sent ambassadors on an advance mission. The promises of loyalty they received bolstered the impression that Italy was ready for a benevolent emperor. After assembling an honor guard to escort him to Rome for his formal coronation, Henry crossed the Alps in 1310.

At first all went well, as northern Italy quickly lined up behind the emperor-elect. But opposition to Henry's rule soon erupted elsewhere in Italy, centering in Florence.

The resistance wasn't personal. As the historian William Bowsky notes, "Even Henry's enemies

acknowledged his noble virtues, his valiance, courage, magnanimity, and generous pacific intentions." But politics overcame personal esteem.

Henry's forces were pressed into battle throughout the peninsula. Henry did make it to Rome to be formally crowned king of the Romans on June 29, 1312, but he never came close to unifying Italy.

In August 1313 he took ill (innocently enough from a fever, despite conspiracy theories involving poison) and died near Pisa. Henry's spectacular failure to control Italy under the aegis of Holy Roman Emperor marked the last time anyone would make the attempt.

While it lasted, Henry's mission seemed to Dante to be a divinely appointed occasion for peace in Italy and a new order in politics. Dante envisioned a king subject to the authority of the pope only in spiritual matters, not beholden to him in secular political affairs. In Henry, he saw the best chance to realize this vision.

In the ***Divine Comedy***, Henry merits a select spot in heaven as the "soul predestined emperor ... who will rise one day / To straighten Italy" (***Paradiso***, XXX.136-138).

In his public letters, Dante goes so far as to compare Henry to the Messiah, suggesting that "Isaiah had pointed the finger of prophecy [at Henry], when by the revelation of the Spirit of God he declared, 'Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows.' "

Dante called Henry the "sole ruler of the world" and the "new offspring of Jesse," as if he were a latter-day King David. But David had successfully united the 12 tribes of Israel. Despite Henry's best attempts, Italy remained as fragmented as ever.

Jonathan Boyd works as a freelance historian in Chicago.

Virgil
(Publius Vergilius Maro)
70-19 B.C.
Dante's wise guide

Dante's companion through most of his journey is no stranger to him. Dante had already traveled to the underworld with Virgil through the ***Aeneid***, so he knew the poet would be a trustworthy guide.

One of the most influential Roman authors in history, Virgil was recognized even by his contemporaries as an exemplary poet and a model of tenderness, humanity, and deep religious sentiment. He was born a peasant in Andes, near Mantua (now Pietole). His love of the Italian countryside and those who cultivated it permeates his poetry.

Because Virgil lived before Christ, he appears in the ***Comedy*** in Limbo with the other righteous pagans. Unlike most denizens of Limbo, however, Virgil enjoys the freedom to travel through hell and even purgatory. As the representation of human wisdom, he can roam as high as earthly paradise, but because he lacks faith in Christ he cannot enter heaven.

But did Virgil know about Christ? Some of Dante's contemporaries thought he might have.

In the ***Eclogue*** (iv), Virgil anticipates the birth of a Wonder-Child who would restore the Golden Age. He was probably writing about an emperor's expected baby, but medieval Christians interpreted his lines as an unconscious prophecy of Christ. Dante quotes the Eclogue almost verbatim in ***Purgatorio***, XXII.70-72:

" 'To us,' thou saidst, 'a new-born world is given,
Justice returns, and the first age of man,
And a new progeny descends from Heaven.' "

Because of this revelation, medieval Christians sometimes called Virgil "Maro, Prophet of the Gentiles."

In her introduction to ***Purgatorio***, translator Dorothy Sayers writes, "Virgil is necessary to Dante; he is his 'contact' in the world of spirits, lending him eyes to behold the secret things; he sustains and heartens him for the steep ascent, his teachings lay the foundations for the loftier revelation to come, he is the preparation for the Gospel here as in the world of the living."

Janine Petry is editorial coordinator for* Christian History*.

Bernard of Clairvaux
1091-1153
Militant Marian monk

"O Virgin Mother, Daughter of thy Son,
Lowliest and loftiest of created stature,
Fixed goal to which the eternal counsels run ..."

(***Paradiso***, XXXIII.1-3)

When Dante quotes Bernard of Clairvaux near the end of the ***Comedy***, he uses the language Bernard applied to the Virgin Mary throughout his sermons, epistles, theological treatises, and homilies. Bernard was famous for his special devotion to Mary, so he became the natural choice for a heavenly guide to address the Virgin on Dante's behalf.

Bernard, the son of noble parents in Fontaines, a village in Burgundy, soon exchanged material wealth for spiritual riches. He became an abbot of the Benedictine order, and at age 24 he was selected to lead a branch of the monastery of Citeaux. With a small group of devoted followers, including family members, Bernard set out for a site in Champagne, where he founded his famous abbey of Clairvaux.

Bernard led a remarkably public life, defending the faith against heresy, calling the church to crusades, and championing the papacy. (Dante's great-great-grandfather Cacciaguida was among those who died after answering the call to the Second Crusade in 1147. He appears in ***Paradiso*** in the fifth heaven with other warriors of God.)

When describing his involvement in so many arenas of life, Bernard declared he was "a kind of chimaera ... neither cleric nor layman."

A few years after his death, Bernard was canonized by Pope Alexander III.

In paradise, Bernard symbolizes the contemplation that allows man to behold the vision of the deity. He replaces Beatrice as Dante's guide when she returns to her place among the blessed, points out the principal saints, explains the arrangement of the thrones of the elect, and solves the poet's doubts regarding the salvation of infants.

In the poem's final canto, Bernard offers a famous prayer to the Virgin, pleading for her intercession so that Dante may see a vision of God. At the end of his prayer, Bernard signals to Dante to look up, and Dante beholds the "eternal light," the "Infinite Good" whose glory far exceeds human description.

—Janine Petry

Cato
(Marcus Portius Cato the Younger)
95-46 B.C.
Purgatory paradox

To find such a notable character as Cato of Utica in Dante's narrative is not surprising. But to find him in purgatory is.

Great-grandson of Cato the Censor, Cato the Younger was a Roman statesman, a leader of the Optimates (the conservative senatorial aristocracy), and a strict republican of the old school. He tried to preserve the Roman government against power seekers, particularly Julius Caesar.

In 49 B.C., when Caesar waged civil war on Pompey and the Optimates, Cato took action. Although Cato had formerly opposed Pompey, he fought beside the Roman general, realizing that this was the last chance to save the republic.

Leading a small remnant of troops, Cato shut himself up in the north African city of Utica. Even after the decisive defeat of the republican forces at Thapsus, he kept the gates closed until all his allies could escape by sea. When the last transports had left, Cato, rather than make terms with the victor or endure imprisonment, committed suicide.

In canto XIII of ***Inferno***, Dante watches those who committed suicide suffer terrible punishment—transformed into withered trees, they pour out blood and sorrow when their limbs are broken. But Cato appears later as the old man with flowing beard and "reverend mien" guarding the way up Mount Purgatory.

While pleading with the statesman on Dante's behalf, Virgil recounts Cato's deeds at Utica and his passion for liberty. He asks Cato to be merciful to Dante, who also seeks liberty. With these words, permission is granted, and the journey continues.

In a corrupt age, Cato provided the Optimates with honest leadership, and he became for Romans the model of Stoic virtue. In Dante's mind, therefore, his suicide was not a moral failure but rather the expression of supreme devotion to liberty. Commentators believe that this is why the pagan statesman guards the way upward, toward freedom.

—Janine Petry

CHRISTIAN HISTORY
Issue 70: Dante's Guide to Heaven and Hell

Goodness, Gracious(ness), Great Balls of Fire

Visions of eternity just aren't what they used to be.

Jeffrey Burton Russell

The modern image of heaven—clouds, harps, and a perpetual Sunday service—is hardly inspiring. Even hell sounds like an improvement. It may be fiery and dark, but interesting people live there, and at least the demons have some fun.

Such views would have seemed ludicrous to Christians in Dante's day. Dante and his contemporaries had inherited rich images of heaven and hell from the Bible, early Christian writings, and the great imaginations of the Middle Ages. These shifting images reflect both the enormous range of human creativity and our ultimate inability to grasp what only God understands.

Biblical descriptions

The Bible mentions heaven frequently and hell rarely. Both are depicted as places with physical characteristics but also as conditions: heaven is a state of being eternally with God in unending love for him and for our neighbors, while hell is a state of being eternally separated from God and neighbor, owing to a person's refusal to accept love.

The Old Testament focuses on the covenant (contract) between the Lord and the community: the people of Israel. For the Hebrews, salvation involved the whole community, not just the individual. As an extension of this community experience, the Hebrews identified heaven with the City of Jerusalem.

The prophet Zechariah proclaimed that Jerusalem was the center of Israel now and in the future: "This is what the Lord says: 'I will return to Zion and dwell in Jerusalem' " (Zech. 8:3). There the resurrection and judgment will take place, and the Messiah will bring the Kingdom of God to earth with the return of the people of Israel to the Promised Land.

The New Testament epistles and gospels say little about the celestial realm. The Book of Revelation contains the most descriptive treatment of heaven, revealing that the world will be renewed: "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. ... I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband" (Rev. 21:1-2).

Revelation continues with more lavish imagery:

> "The city was laid out like a square, as long as it was wide. [The angel] measured the city with the rod and found it to be 12,000 stadia in length, and as wide and high as it is long. He measured its wall and it was 144 cubits thick, by man's measurement, which the angel was using. The wall was made of jasper, and the city of pure gold, as pure as glass. The foundations of the city walls were decorated with every kind of precious stone. The first foundation was jasper, the second sapphire, the third chalcedony, the fourth emerald, the fifth sardonyx, the sixth carnelian, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth chrysophase, the eleventh jacinth, and the twelfth amethyst. The twelve gates were twelve pearls, each gate made of a single pearl. The great street of the city was of pure gold,

like transparent glass" (Rev. 21:16-21).

The New Testament gives no such detailed description of hell, though Jesus says that at the final judgment his father will tell the unrighteous, "Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels" (Matt. 25:41). Jesus also describes hell as "the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matt. 25:30) and, quoting Isaiah, as the place where "their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched" (Mark 9:48).

Revelation adds a few more vivid descriptions of unrepentant sinners' agony. An angel says of those who receive the beast's mark, "the smoke of their torment rises for ever and ever," and they have no rest day or night (Rev. 14:11). Later in the book, death and Hades are "thrown into the lake of fire," which is "the second death" (Rev. 20:14).

Early church speculations

Of all the early Christian writers and philosophers who expanded the concept of heaven, the most important was Irenaeus (c. 130-200), a bishop, theologian, and opponent of heresies. He summed up the tradition of heaven as it was in his time: Paradise is the beginning, heaven the end. Humanity was created in paradise without flaw but fell through its own deliberate sin; humanity redeemed by Christ is in heaven without flaw. All the blessed in heaven will see Christ, the glory of the communion of saints, and the renovation of the world. They will dwell in their true home, where with Christ they enjoy eternal peace and comfort.

Hell plays only a minor part in the writing of the orthodox Christian writers. Early Christian apocalyptic literature, however, which was often unorthodox, greatly amplified and popularized the more vivid aspects of Matthew and Revelation.

For example, the "Apocalypse of Paul," a widely circulated (and roundly denounced) early fourth-century manuscript, describes the horrors reserved for the damned: "And I saw there a river of fire burning with heat, and in it was a multitude of men and women sunk up to the knees, and other men up to the navel; others also up to the lips and others up to the hair."

In this account, different types of sinners receive different punishments. "Pits exceeding deep" hold those who refused to trust God, while worms crawl out of the mouth and nostrils of an immoral deacon. The merciless are "clad in rags full of pitch and brimstone of fire, and there were dragons twined about their necks and shoulders and feet, and angels having horns of fire constrained them and smote them and closed up their nostrils."

Dante was almost certainly familiar with this work.

It was more common for early writers, more spiritual and poetic than theoretical, to describe heaven vividly. Ephraim (306-373), a monk in Syria, wrote:

> "If you wish to climb to the top of a tree, its branches range themselves under your feet and invite you to rest in the midst of its bosom, in the green room of its branches, whose floor is strewn with flowers. Who has ever seen the joy at the heart of a tree, with fruits of every taste within reach of your hand? You can wash yourself with its dew and dry yourself with its leaves. A cloud of fruits is over your head and a carpet of flowers beneath your feet. You are anointed with the sap of the tree and inhale its perfume."

An anonymous "Vision of Paul" from the third or fourth century describes "the third heaven": "I looked at [the door] and saw that it was a golden gate and that there were two golden pillars before it and two golden tables above the pillars full of letters."

The "Passion of Perpetua" (203) records the visions of a young mother taken from her family and condemned to die because of her faith in Christ. She saw "a golden ladder of great size stretching up to heaven. ... I saw a garden of immense extent, in the midst of which was sitting a white-haired man dressed as a shepherd; he was tall, and he was milking sheep. And he raised his head and looked at me and said, Welcome, child. And he called me and gave me a mouthful of cheese from the sheep he was milking; and I took it with my hands and ate of it, and all those who were standing about said, Amen."

The most influential theologian of all time, Augustine of Hippo (354-430), expressed his ideas of heaven most fully in his greatest work, ***City of God***. He develops the ideas of Paul and John the Evangelist, contrasting the Kingdom of God with the Kingdom of This World.

Augustine is careful about describing heaven, because it is ineffable (unable to be expressed in speech), but he is sure in describing the human need for heaven. At the outset of his other famous book, ***Confessions***, he observes that "our heart does not rest until it rests in God," and in ***City*** he declares that "God is the font of our beatitude and the goal of our desires." At the end of ***City***, he affirms that there we shall "rest and see, see and love, love and praise."

Augustine's heaven is a free and unshakable embrace. Ever here, ever open to those who long for it, heaven is the enjoyment of God and of our fellow lovers of Christ by the whole human person, body and soul. Each of the blessed retains his or her own personality, distinct from God and from others. More important, though, salvation incorporates the whole community of those who love God.

Augustine's personal experiences deeply influenced his theology, including his theology of heaven. In ***Confessions*** he describes a day, not long before his mother's death, when he and she were standing together at the window of an inn in Ostia looking out at the garden. There they experienced the presence of God:

> "Rising as our love flamed upward, ... we passed in review the various levels of bodily things, up to the heavens themselves, whence sun and moon and stars shine upon this earth. And higher still we soared, thinking in our minds and speaking and marveling at Your works: and so we came to our own souls, and went beyond them to come at last to that region of richness unending, where You feed Israel forever with the food of truth: and there life is that Wisdom by which all things are made: ... it is as it has ever been, and so it shall be forever."

Medieval dreams and nightmares

Augustine's thought dominated medieval Catholicism as it would Reformation Protestantism. Still, his experiential vision of heaven was hardly the last word on the subject. Bede (673-735), the great English monk, historian, and natural scientist, reports the vision of a man named Drythelm who had returned from the dead:

"When we came to the wall, we were presently, I know not by what means, on the top of it, and within it was a vast and delightful field, so full of fragrant flowers that the odor of its delightful sweetness immediately dispelled the stench of the dark furnace [of hell]. So great was the light in this place that it seemed to exceed the brightness of the day, or the sun in its meridian height. In this field were innumerable assemblies of men in white, and many companies seated together rejoicing."

That was as close as Drythelm got to innermost heaven before he was obliged, like Dante, to begin his return to earth.

In tenth-century Ireland, a Saint Adamnan experienced a remarkable vision of how the blessed in heaven all face God without facing away from one another:

> "A gentle folk, most mild, most kindly, lacking in no goodly quality, are they that dwell within that city; for none come there, and none abide there ever, save holy youths, and pilgrims zealous for God. But as for their array and ordinance, hard it is to understand how it is contrived, for none turns back nor side to other, but the ineffable power of God has set, and keeps, them face to face, in ranks and lofty coronets all round the throne, circling it in brightness and bliss, their faces all towards God."

Dante communicates a similar idea with his heavenly rose.

In about 1150, an Irish monk named Tondal had a vivid experience of heaven:

> "Looking in, he sees holy men and women like angels, hears their voices more exquisite than any instruments, smells their delightful scent. The firmament above is shining intensely. From it hang golden chains through which are woven silver boughs, and from these hang chalices and cruets, cymbals and bells, lilies and golden orbs. A throng of golden-winged angels flying among these ornaments make sweet music. Now Tondal turns and sees a great tree in a green meadow flocked with lilies and herbs; the tree bears sweet fruit, and birds sing in its branches."

An angel explains that the tree is the church and that the men and women under its branches are builders and defenders of churches. As with Drythelm before and Dante afterward, the vision ends before Tondal can see God himself.

Hell always played a more vivid role in folk religion than it did in theology. With lurid descriptions of darkness, fire, worms, and torture, hell, the Devil, and death often took on striking, malevolent personalities. For Tondal, as for many other medieval writers, hell became at least as vivid as heaven:

"This horrible being [the Devil] lay prone on an iron grate over burning coals fanned by a great throng of demons. ... Whenever he breathed, he blew out and scattered the souls of the damned throughout all the regions of hell. ... And when he breathed back in, he sucked all the souls back and, when they had fallen into the sulphurous smoke of his maw, he chewed them up."

This sort of dire medieval vision set the tone for Dante's ***Inferno***, whereas medieval theology set the tone for ***Paradiso***.

Scholastic insights

In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, scholastic theologians, usually university professors, applied rational philosophy to traditional doctrine. Scholasticism culminated at the University of Paris in the brilliant, detailed philosophy of Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274).

According to the scholastics, our salvation or blessedness—our complete fulfillment, where each person realizes his or her complete potential—cannot consist of any created good, but only of the universal good, which is God. Yet Aquinas and most scholastics argued against the idea that in heaven we are dissolved in or merged with God. Rather, we enjoy the beatific vision, which means seeing, understanding, and loving God and his creatures in peace and harmony and with dynamic and growing intensity.

The beatific vision is based in the New Testament: "We shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2), and

"Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me?" (John 14:9-10).

The scholastics attempted a complete, coherent view of the cosmos through philosophy, as Dante did through poetry. But unlike Dante, the scholastics showed little interest in concrete imagery.

For Aquinas, heaven consisted of perfect vision and the satisfaction of all desires, especially desires for delight, honors, knowledge, and security. He writes in the twelfth article of his catechism, "In heaven there will be the happy society of all the blessed, and this society will be especially delightful." He makes no further attempt to describe it.

Aquinas gives only a slightly more vivid picture of hell, that place where the wicked, separated from God, suffer remorse and despair: "It is the fire of hell which tortures the soul and the body; and this, as the Saints tell us, is the sharpest of all punishments. They shall be ever dying, and yet never die; hence it is called eternal death, for as dying is the bitterest of pains, such will be the lot of those in hell: 'They are laid in hell like sheep; death shall feed upon them' [Ps. 49:14]."

The scholastics gave scant attention to imagery because they were primarily interested in the moral, not the physical, cosmos. For them, knowledge of the material world yielded only inferior truth that pointed to the greater truth—theological, moral, and even divine.

By contrast, the modern worldview assumes that material things are more real than spiritual things. Perhaps this is why so many people have impoverished ideas about heaven and hell—places they cannot see or touch and therefore fail to imagine. Visualizing the striking images of Dante and others restores a sense of wonder to the ancient creedal affirmation: "I believe in the resurrection and the life of the world to come."

***Jeffrey Burton Russell is professor emeritus of history at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and author of 17 books including* A History of Heaven *and* The Devil: Perceptions of Evil from Antiquity to Primitive Christianity.**

CHRISTIAN HISTORY
Issue 70: Dante's Guide to Heaven and Hell

What About Purgatory?

The doctrinal grounding of Dante's mysterious mountain.

Dennis Martin

Dante was the first writer to draw an elaborate map of Mount Purgatory, but he did not invent it. The idea of a place between death and heaven, as well as the practice of praying for the dead, dates back to the earliest days of the church.

Though not directly mentioned in the Hebrew canon that became the basis for the Protestant Old Testament, prayers for the departed are encouraged in the Greek Septuagint, on which the Catholic and Orthodox Old Testaments are based. For example, 2 Maccabees states: "It is therefore a holy and wholesome thought to pray for the dead, that they may be loosed from sins." Other verses cited as proof of purification after death include 2 Samuel 12, 1 Corinthians 3:11-15, and Matthew 12:32.

The latter verse, in which Jesus declares that "anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come," struck Augustine. He argued in ***City of God***, "That some sinners are not forgiven either in this world or in the next would not be truly said unless there were other [sinners] who, though not forgiven in this world, are forgiven in the world to come."

Words of hope and comfort (precursors to the modern "Rest in Peace") appear on many early Christian monuments, especially in the catacombs. Believers gathered there on death anniversaries to ask mercy for the departed souls. Expansions of this practice, such as granting indulgences for the dead, developed later.

Another aspect of the doctrine of purgatory is that some sins will be punished more severely than others—a concept vividly illustrated in the ***Divine Comedy***. The distinction between major and minor sins and the belief in cleansing after death are found in early Christian texts, notably in the visions of Perpetua, a third-century North African martyr. Greek and Latin church fathers of the second and third centuries (Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Origen) refer to these as established doctrines.

Belief in purgatory was widespread throughout the early Latin Middle Ages, but it was not unchallenged. In the fourth century, Acrius taught that prayers for the dead were fruitless—an assertion Epiphanius, bishop of Salamis, rebutted in his "Refutation of All the Heresies." Some early Greek (Eastern) theologians also dissented from the emerging consensus on purgatory, while others supported it.

Later in the Middle Ages, the Albigensians, Waldensians, and Hussites all rejected purgatory, though for different reasons. So did John Calvin and to a slightly lesser extent Martin Luther. At the same time, though, Latin theologians were systematically developing the doctrine. It was affirmed after discussions between Latin and Greek theologians at the Second Council of Lyons in 1274.

Purgatory was defined at the Council of Trent in 1545-1563: "Whereas the Catholic Church, instructed by the Holy Ghost, has from the Sacred Scriptures and the ancient tradition of the Fathers taught in Councils and very recently in this Ecumenical synod that there is a purgatory, and that the souls therein are helped by the suffrages of the faithful, but principally by the acceptable Sacrifice of the Altar."

Though intricately described by Dante and others, the Catholic doctrine of purgatory boils down to a short list of essentials. Sin estranges us from God. By virtue of Christ's paying our eternal penalty on the cross,

God forgives us. At that moment the guilt and eternal punishment owed for having betrayed him is removed as far from us as east is from west. But the wound remains—not in God, but in us.

God is pure holiness. No imperfection can enter his sight (Hab. 1:13). The temporal traces left behind by sin must be removed before we can enter God's presence. In purgatory the fire of God's love burns away the impurities not already removed by devotion to God before death, readying us for God's presence.

Purgatory is not a second chance to accept or reject God's ever-proferred grace. Only those who will eventually reach heaven spend time there. Thus it is not a question of ***if*** a soul in purgatory will see God, but ***when***.

Dennis Martin is associate professor of historical theology at Loyola University (IL). Elesha Coffman contributed to this article.

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 70: Dante's Guide to Heaven and Hell

Dante's Guide to Heaven and Hell: Christian History Interview - Classics of Common Memory

Why Dante's medieval masterwork continues to thrive in translation.

conversation with Robert Pinsky

With 1994's The Inferno of Dante ***(Farrar, Straus, and Giroux), Robert Pinsky, America's poet laureate from 1997 to 2000, joined the long line of bards—including Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Dorothy Sayers, and John Ciardi—who had translated at least one canticle of Dante's*** Divine Comedy ***into English. Earlier Pinsky had been among 20 poets tapped by author and anthologist Daniel Halpern to translate one or two cantos of*** Inferno ***for a new collection. That volume's introduction hinted at the potential for 20 new translations, but so far Pinsky is the only writer to take the challenge.***

To find out what drew this contemporary poet to the nearly 700-year-old Comedy***,*** Christian History ***e-mailed Pinsky at Boston University, where he teaches English and creative writing. He also serves as poetry editor for the online magazine*** Slate.

You have said that you had "a religious upbringing"—your parents were nominally Orthodox Jews, your grandfather married a Christian, and you were intrigued by the Catholic church across the street from your childhood synagogue. How did this heritage intersect Dante's worldview as you worked on *Inferno*?

I could share some of his disgust with orthodoxy and clergy, his sense of being saturated with invasive but precious conceptions, images, forces. Above all, I could relish and try to imitate the patchwork, syncretic, improvising, sometimes outrageously eclectic nature of his historical imagination. The unlikeliness.

You began translating Inferno as part of a larger project, but there's a big difference between translating two cantos and translating 34. What made you want to continue the project?

I did the translation because I could. I saw a way that I could make a close, faithful translation of the ***Inferno*** that was also a work of art in English. No one had done that since Longfellow. To put it differently, it was the technical challenge that drew me on.

Unconsciously, the notion of another exchange with the familiar yet alien world of Christianity may have had some appeal.

You've translated only Inferno, not the other two sections of Dante's poem. Is some of the meaning of Inferno changed or lost when it is read on its own?

Yes, beyond a doubt. The action of the ***Inferno***, a going-down-and-through to get out on the other side, is not the turning of Purgatorio or the lifting of ***Paradiso***. ***Inferno*** is about sadness, not about work or elevation. The whole Comedy traces an arc through depression, striving, and elevation.

What was the most difficult part of completing the translation? What was most rewarding?

The answer to both is the same: getting the sounds right while maintaining as much as possible of the speed and crispness of the original. Immersion in that difficulty was immensely rewarding. On a different level, of course, the pleasure readers take in the translation is rewarding, after the fact.

What do you hope readers will learn or experience through reading this translation?

It is the most profound work ever written about ***wanhope***, which we name depression. Like the plays of Shakespeare, it exerts the astonishing power of what is simultaneously remote and intimate.

Mark Galli, the former editor of *Christian History*, kept two quotes from you tacked above his desk. One is, "A people is defined and unified not by blood but by shared memory." Can you elaborate on this?

I hope to be a kind of remote nephew of figures like Dante or [seventeenth-century devotional poet] George Herbert. By memory. Only in the most remote way, as a member of the same species, am I likely to be related to them by blood. That's it on an individual level.

On a national or communal level, I take this idea to be one of the great goals and premises of the United States of America.

The other quote is, "Deciding to remember, and what to re-member, is how we decide who we are." What did you mean by that?

Americans, I hope, remember Duke Ellington and Emily Dickinson, the Bill of Rights and the films of Preston Sturges, the Dodgers of Jackie Robinson and Willa Cather's ***My Antonia***, the Declaration of Independence, and—yes, in another way—the ***Inferno*** of Dante.

Not all of us all the time, but enough of us enough of the time, share certain memories, carry certain things inside us. And what we choose to carry around in us and to carry from one generation to another expresses our will and belief as to who we are.

How has the *Divine Comedy* functioned as "shared memory" over the centuries? Do you think it will continue to function this way?

The answer to the second part is "yes"—the poem has become seasoned wood, like iron at this point. I won't presume to answer the first part; it would be like writing the history of the world.

The heroes of epics had been noble galoots with sword. Here is a comedy, and the hero is a sometimes timid, irritable fellow with a pen. He mixes his personal grudges with the largest tides of history, his town's politics with cosmology, his jokes and wonderments with metaphysics. He bridges realms.

CHRISTIAN HISTORY
Issue 70: Dante's Guide to Heaven and Hell

Dante and the Divine Comedy: Recommended Resources

Dante and the Divine Comedy

In a 1993 lecture on the authenticity of Dante's letter to Can Grande della Scala (see "A Polysemantic Country Song?), Princeton Danteist Robert Hollander noted, "As far as Dante studies are concerned, a debated issue that has only a 174-year history is, relatively speaking, barely out of its adolescence." He wasn't kidding.

People have been examining Dante and his work from nearly every imaginable angle for centuries—and producing a mountain of books to support their theories. The following short list mainly includes resources we used for this issue.

By Dante

Obviously an investigation of this topic must begin with the ***Divine Comedy***, but which translation? That depends. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's is a classic. Dorothy Sayers's has the best notes. Robert Pinsky's (Inferno only) is probably the most accessible to a modern reader.

Vita Nuova, Dante's combination of poetry, autobiography, and writer's workshop, brings the author to life. ***Il Convivio*** ("The Banquet") and ***De Monarchia*** ("On Universal Monarchy") explore his philosophical and political ideas. These are all readily available in print and online.

On the *Comedy*

Robert Royal's ***Dante Alighieri: Divine Comedy, Divine Spirituality*** (Crossroad, 1999) serves as a basic guide to the complicated poem. Kathryn Lindskoog leads readers through ***Dante's Divine Comedy: Purgatory*** (Mercer, 1997) by retelling the story in her own words. Rodney J. Payton also aims for accessibility in ***A Modern Reader's Guide to Dante's Inferno*** (Lang, 1992).

Geoffrey F. Nuttall takes the ***Comedy*** as the basis for warm, almost devotional, commentary in ***The Faith of Dante Alighieri*** (SPCK, 1969). ***From Hell to Paradise*** (Washington Square, 1996), by Olof Lagercrantz, offers a breezy walk-through of the poem but questions some Christian ideas, such as a literal hell.

From here, the thicket of Dante commentaries grows much denser. Sayers's ***Introductory Papers on Dante*** (Barnes & Noble, 1969) goes beyond the generalist notes in her translation into specialist territory. Charles Williams's ***The Figure of Beatrice*** (Faber & Faber, 1943) yields profound insights into Dante's thoughts on divine love, but it's a demanding read.

In ***The Invention of Dante's Commedia*** (Yale, 1974), John G. Demaray highlights images and ideas—especially the concept of pilgrimage—that influenced Dante's writing. Joan Ferrante takes a different approach in her influential ***The Political Vision of the Divine Comedy*** (Princeton, 1984).

On Dante and his world

A reader can find basic—though occasionally contradicting—information on the poet in a variety of

sources, including ***Dante and His World*** by Thomas Caldecot Chubb (Little, Brown & Co., 1966), ***Dante Alighieri, His Life and Works*** by Paget Toynbee (Methuen & Co., 1900), and ***Dante and His Time*** by Karl Federn (Haskell House, 1970). Hollander's "Dante: A Party of One," which appeared in the April 1999 issue of ***First Things***, is also a nice introduction.

Dante becomes the subject of deeper inquiry in books like Deborah Parker's ***Commentary and Ideology: Dante in the Renaissance*** (Duke, 1993), James Collins's ***Pilgrim in Love: An Introduction to Dante and His Spirituality*** (Loyola, 1984), and Erich Auerbach's important ***Dante, Poet of the Secular World*** (University of Chicago, 1961).

To get a feel for Dante's milieu, one can start with Charles L. Mee's well-illustrated ***The Horizon Book of Daily Life in Renaissance Italy*** (McGraw-Hill, 1975) or Margaret Oliphant's quirky ***The Makers of Florence: Dante, Giotto, Savonarola and Their City*** (Burt, 1897). For more serious study, see ***A History of Early Renaissance Italy, from the Mid-thirteenth to the Mid-fifteenth Centuries*** (St. Martins, 1973) by Brian S. Pullan or ***The World of Dante*** (Clarendon, 1980), edited by Cecil Grayson.

A devoted reader with a large travel budget (or a vivid imagination) could follow the route proposed by Anne Holler in ***Florence: Four Intimate Walking Tours*** (Holt & Co., 1982).

Online

Dante sites online truly form a worldwide web—one page leads to another in an interconnected universe of text and links. These are just a few possible entry points:

- Digital Dante, http://dante.ilt.columbia.edu
- Dante Alighieri on the Web, www.greatdante.net
- Otfried Lieberknecht's Homepage for Dante Studies, http://members.aol.com/lieberk/welc%5Fold.html
- Dante Divine Comedy Links, http://pages.ancientsites.com/~Torrey_Philemon/calliope/dante.htm
- Renaissance Dante in Print, www.italnet.nd.edu/Dante/

NOTE: the following are available in the ChristianityToday.com bookstore:

On the Comedy
Robert Royal's Dante Alighieri: Divine Comedy, Divine Spirituality (Crossroad, 1999)
Dante's Divine Comedy: Purgatory (Mercer, 1997)