

## **12 Purification, Purgation and Penalty: Christian Concepts of Water and Fire in Heaven and Hell**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

In Christian tradition, 'The landscape of Hell is the largest shared construction project in imaginative history [and] if Heaven is spiritual, Hell is oddly fleshly' (Turner 1995: 3). The images of Hell are, however, rather few in the Bible and not as vividly depicted as they become later in the Christian tradition. In the Old Testament there is a development in the Otherworldly eschatology with regards to damnation and penalty, and in the New Testament there are only 12 references to Hell. Nevertheless, the beliefs and images of Hell have had a pervasive impact in Christianity, but, although they have references in the Bible, these religious thoughts are invented belief systems which have formed the Christian tradition and religion. Thus, Christian concepts of water and fire for purification, purgation and penalty developed through time and reached in the late Middle Ages and the European Renaissance the most elaborate and coherent system of metaphors defining the Otherworldly spheres. In all world religions, water and fire are used to define and express understandings of Heaven and Hell, but it is possible to argue that the thoughts and images of Hell in the Christian tradition are more extreme than in other religions. Hence, it is of interest to analyse what characterises the eschatological thoughts and metaphorical qualities of water and fire in Christianity, which may enable one to grasp and identify some structuring roles and properties of metaphors at work in the creation of tradition and belief systems in society and religion.

Hell is more elaborate than Heaven and is traditionally and commonly understood as an abyss of fire, but the torturing role of fire is often coupled with various types of malevolent water. Life in Heaven, on the other hand, is more difficult to grasp and less

elaborated in tradition, but it is quite different from anything on earth: 'No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him' (1 Corinthians 2:9). According to parts of the Christian beliefs, water and fire are both used by God and Satan in defining Heaven and Hell respectively, and humans imagine the divine realms with these elements as metaphors because they enable beliefs and ideas grasping the content of Heaven and Hell which no other metaphors or elements are capable of. Thus, water and fire both define, and are entrances to, the Otherworldly realms, whether Heaven or Hell. Crucial in these processes is the question of how water and fire, on the one hand, are used for purification and purgation and, on the other hand, are media for penalty and torture. Thus, the aim of this article is to analyse the qualities and capacities of water and fire in Christianity by 1) presenting a brief history of the development of Hell, 2) discussing the Deluge and Doomsday, 3) analysing God and Satan as opponents, and finally 4) synthesising the different ways water and fire have been used throughout parts of the history of Christianity.

## QUALITIES OF FIRE AND WATER

Water and fire, particularly when used in combination, have a unique capability to define and express symbolically human and divine matters (e.g. Oestigaard 2005). Although theoretical approaches to metaphors have emphasised the role of metaphors in the constitution of language and mind (Lakoff and Johnson 1980), the flesh and the embodied mind (Lakoff and Johnson 1999) and materiality (Tilley 1999), fewer studies have focussed on the elements, and in particular water and fire and their interchangeability of qualities. In Hinduism, water and fire are used to express differences and sameness and at the same time transcend and unite dichotomies (e.g. O'Flaherty 1981a, 1981b). The changing character of water enables expressions of both the unique and the particular, and hence it has been forcefully used in cultural constructions and religious metaphors throughout time in most societies (Tvedt and Oestigaard 2006, 2008). In Western thought, the elements – water, fire, air and earth – have played an intrinsic part in philosophy and religion since before Socrates (Stroud 1994), with implications for the development of Christianity. Gaston Bachelard, who worked from a philosophical point of view, is one of the few writers who has extensively analysed the qualities of water and fire in his books *The Psychoanalysis of Fire* (1968), *The Flame of a Candle* (1988), *Fragments of A Poetics of Fire* (1990), and *Water and Dreams. An*

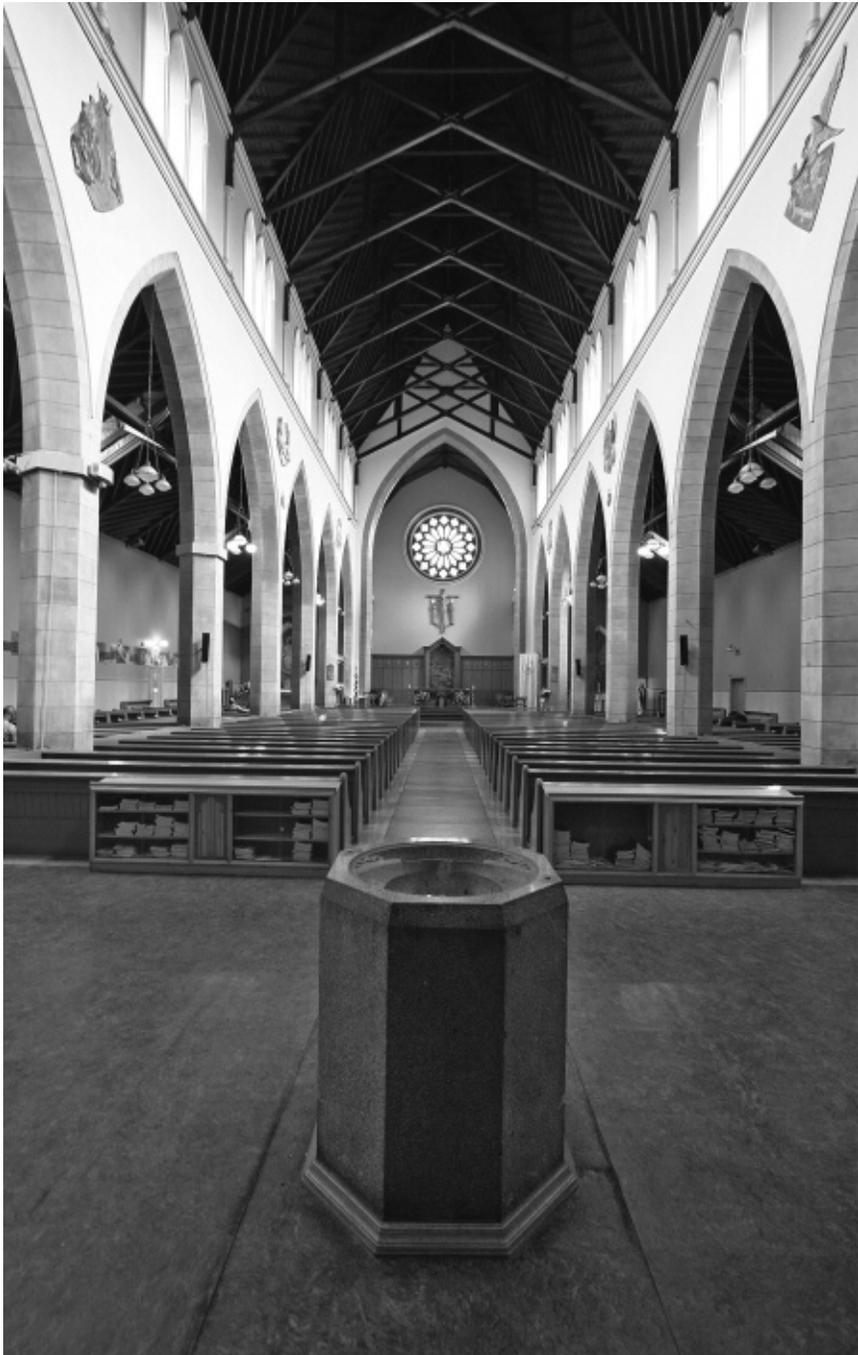
*Essay on the Imagination of Matter* (1994). Bachelard is concerned with images of matter or images that stem directly from matter because in aesthetic philosophy there has been a neglect of the material causes for imagination (Bachelard 1994: 1–2). He describes the specific qualities of water and fire, which have also shaped Western thought and beliefs with direct relevance for Christian concepts, in this way:

Fire is thus a privileged phenomenon which can explain anything [...] Among all phenomena, it is really the only one to which there can be so definitely attributed the opposing values of good and evil. It shines in Paradise. It burns in Hell. It is gentle and torture ... It is a tutelary and a terrible divinity, both good and bad. It can contradict itself; thus it is one of the principles of universal explanation. (Bachelard 1968: 7)

[Water] can be cursed ... evil can put it in active form ... what is evil in one aspect, in one of its characteristics, becomes evil as the whole. Evil is no longer a quality but a substance [...] Clear water is a constant temptation for a facile symbolism of purity [...] it is the one that constantly breathes new life into certain old mythological forms. It gives life back to forms by transforming them, for a form cannot transform itself. It is contrary to its nature for a form to transform itself [...] but] water is the most perfect liquid, it is the one from which all other solutions get their fluidity. (Bachelard 1994: 93, 134, 139)

In order to understand how and why water and fire have been used and understood in parts of the Christian tradition, one must look at a basic concept in religion: sin. Humans are not only ‘less than God’, they are also ‘guilty before God’ (Hayes 1992: 95). The possibility of committing sins, which deviates from God’s will, is a sign of free will (Hertz 1996). Ever since the fall, when humanity was expelled from Paradise, humans have been born with sin. This original sin can be interpreted merely as mortality, since humans do not live eternally on earth, and any impermanence is incompleteness (Oestigaard 2004).

Nevertheless, original sin has traditionally been interpreted as the guilt that we are born with, and baptism is then a means whereby the water cleanses humans and is mandatory for reaching the Kingdom of Heaven: ‘The inward and spiritual grace in Baptism is union with Christ in his death and resurrection, birth into God’s family the church, forgiveness of sins, and new life in the Holy Spirit’ (The Book of Common Prayer 1990: 858). Baptism signifies the entry of a newborn baby into the church, and this act has been necessary for turning the infant into a full human being (Figure 1). According to



**Figure 1.** Baptismal font, Aberdeen. Photo: Rune Oestigaard.

the common custom of the church, baptism is administered to newborn babies because they are actually born in sin passed on by their origin. However, it is possible to argue that baptism is not given to cleanse them from sin, but rather to initiate and admit them into the Kingdom of God, to which there is no admission except with baptism. This has its scriptural evidence in the Bible, where the Lord says: 'Except a man be born of water, and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God' (John 3:5). Therefore, if unbaptised children cannot reach the Kingdom of God, there must be some sin in them (Aquinas 1975: 214):

Regarding the spiritual generation which takes place in baptism, one must consider that the generation of a living thing is a kind of change from non-living to life. But man in his origin was deprived of spiritual life by original sin ... and still every single sin whatever which is added draws him away from life. Baptism, therefore, which is spiritual generation, had to have the power to take away both the original sin and all the actual, committed sins ... because the sensible sign of a sacrament must be harmonious with the representation of its spiritual effect, and since washing away filth in bodily things is done more easily and more commonly by water, baptism is, therefore, suitably conferred in water made holy by the Word of God. (Aquinas 1975: 250)

Baptism constitutes necessary but not sufficient conditions for salvation, because after baptism humans inevitably will sin again, and most likely more gravely. Thus, it seems that water has only limited capacities to purify human sins, and since the character of the committed sins are worse and more sincere, one way to cleanse oneself from committed sins has been through a medium which involves torments: fire. Water and fire may have the same capacities to purify, but most often fire has been seen as a more powerful remedy, with some notable exceptions. Purgatory has generally been seen as the means by which the elected has reached perfection before entering the Kingdom of Heaven. In the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the final purification or purgatory is defined as such:

All who die in God's grace and friendship, but still imperfectly purified, are indeed assured of their eternal salvation; but after death they undergo purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven ... The Church gives the name Purgatory to this final purification of the elect, which is entirely different from the punishment of the damned ... The tradition of the Church, by

reference to certain texts of Scripture, speaks of a cleansing fire ... As for certain lesser faults, we must believe that, before the Final Judgment, there is a purifying fire [...].<sup>1</sup>

With regards to both water and fire as purifying media, following the philosophy of the flesh (Lakoff and Johnson 1999), the rationale for Purgatory and indeed Hell is that sin is embodied. The flesh is an intellectual matter, or the flesh mirrors at least the state of intellectual purity or impurity a person has achieved. The human flesh is therefore an approach to an understanding of Christian eschatological concepts, particularly Hell and Purgatory, and how water and fire have been employed to achieve spiritual purity and Heaven (Oestigaard 2003). Seen from this approach, however, purgatory is an incomplete purging method because it cannot enable purification from all kinds of sins. Or, in other words, denying God and rejecting his grace is such a heinous sin that a separate locale is needed, Hell, and here the fire changes its function from purification through purging to penalty. This change is, however, the outcome of over 3,000 years of religious history.

### **3,000 YEARS WITH A CHANGING HELL**

Hell is traditionally understood as a gloomy furnace where the sinners are tortured to eternity, but this image is a late construction. The history and development of Hell goes through at least five phases: 1) God penalises humanity with the Deluge, 2) Sheol, 3) Gehenna, 4) the medieval everlasting, torture chamber of fire, and 5) Hell as the absence of God.

With the fall from grace whereby Adam and Eve and subsequently humanity were expelled from Paradise, the history and development of Heaven and Hell started. During the First Commonwealth (until c. 539 BCE), the belief in an individual life after death had almost no religious importance. Although there are some references which may indicate an afterlife, there was a development of the ideas regarding a separate place or system of personal punishments for sins conducted by humans. Originally, it seems that God punished human disobedience collectively with plagues, fevers, conquests, famine and exile rather than with individual repentance. A collective system of rewards and punishments in this life rather than in an Otherworldly realm cannot imply a Heaven or Hell. Moreover, particular destiny which awaits a person at the moment he or she dies is not mentioned. Following the early scriptures, immortality therefore has to be seen more as the succession of future generations than a belief

in a supernatural and personal afterlife. The death of an individual would not bring him closer to God, and there were no places for Otherworldly rewards or punishments. The righteous man protected his progeny through righteous deeds, whereas evil-doers harmed his posterity and the descendants were punished in future generations. Hence, there was no life after death as such, immortality was progeny through one's children, and God's wrath extended beyond the individual and harmed his family and society (Segal 1997; Hachlili 2001).

The Deluge has to be seen in this light. God's divine wrath harmed everyone and erased all humans from earth, with one exception; Noah and his progeny. In Genesis 6:13, Yahweh warned Noah: 'The end of all flesh is come before me; for the earth is filled with violence through them; and, behold, I will destroy them with the earth.' Erasing all life on earth but one pair of each species is a way of harming society in general, and only Noah's progeny continued to live after the Flood (Figure 2). Thus, there were no



**Figure 2.** *The Deluge*. From Doré 1884.

needs for other penalties for the rest of humanity because they were dead and could never be immortal. The importance is that God's wrath was solely upon this world, and there were no Otherworldly penalties. After the Flood, God repented and promised that he would never curse the earth again, and if human beings were wicked and disobedient in the future, he would only annihilate the sinners. This promise might be the origin of Heaven and Hell, and the eschatology of punishment turned from this world to an Otherworld becoming personal rather than collective (Oestigaard 2004).

Nevertheless, in the Old Testament the condition and state of the dead were not fully resolved. The term Sheol has been used to designate Hell, and a common biblical expression is that the departed 'goes down to Sheol'. The term occurs 65 times in the Old Testament and the etymology is uncertain, and there have been different interpretations according to the context in which the term occurs. It was thought of as a land of darkness and has been translated as 'grave' 31 times, 'hell' 31 times, and 'pit' three times (Walvoord 1992: 14). Ezekiel associates Sheol with the pit and the deep waters (Bernstein 1993: 146): 'For they are all given over to death, to the netherworld among mortal men, with those who go down to the Pit. Thus says the Lord God: When it goes down to the Sheol I will make the deep mourn for it, and restrain its rivers, and many waters shall be stopped' (Ezekiel 32:14–15). The most common understanding and interpretation have nevertheless been that the word stands for 'grave' and that there was some judgement after death. The character of the punishment and retribution is, however, more uncertain (Walvoord 1992: 16–17).

In the New Testament there are more elaborate images of the place destined for evildoers, but there are not more than 12 references to Hell or Gehenna (Matthew 5:22, 5:29 and 30, 10:28, 18:9, 23:15, 23:33; Mark 9:43–4, 9:45, 9:47–8 Luke 12:5; and Jacob 3:6). Gehenna was a garbage dump outside Jerusalem where bodies of criminals were also burnt (Forsyth 2003: 201). It is presented as a fiery furnace where people will 'weep and gnash their teeth' (Matthew 13:42; cf. 25:30, 41) or be thrown in an 'unquenchable fire' (Mark 9:43). All this is narrated in the parable of the rich man, which explains that Hell is a place of eternal suffering, with no possibility of return, nor of the alleviation of pain (cf. Luke 16:19–31). The Book of Revelation also portrays a 'pool of fire' where those who have excluded themselves from the book of life face a 'second death' (Revelation 20:13f.), where the unsaved stay 'in the fiery lake of burning sulphur' (Revelation 21:7–8). Hell was an 'eternal destruction and exclusion from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might' (2 Thessalonians 1:9). Nevertheless, although

the belief in Hell has a scriptural basis with a dozen references in the New Testament, in the early development of Christianity it was perceived more as a metaphor than real, physical place with eternal suffering (Le Goff 1984).

In medieval Europe, Hell acquired certain particular and new characteristics. Hell, Purgatory and the Devil played a minor role in Christian religion until the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, but at that time Christianity developed the most dogmatic and gruesome system of eternal suffering and damnation through fire that perhaps ever have been invented in the history of religions. Purgatory is a Hell of limited time and suffering, and the idea of purgation started at a level of popular piety and moved eventually into the theological elaboration where it became officially recognised. This was a movement from symbolism of purgation to the concrete idea of a physical place where the purging took place. In order for Purgatory to be created, the notion of a place of 'intermediary' had to be developed where it was possible to suffer (Le Goff 1984: 3–10). Based on textual analyses, Le Goff suggests that the real Purgatory did not exist before 1170 at the earliest. Before 1170 Peter Comestor used the then current expression of a 'purgatorial fire', and as his ideas developed between 1170 and his death in 1178 or 1179, the term 'purgatorium' which he later used must have been introduced in the decade 1170–80. This was *the* place for purgation (Le Goff 1984: 157).

The church made the formal promulgation of the doctrine of purgatory in a papal letter in 1253, but before this event there were no real advances in the intellectual thought of Hell (Turner 1995: 89, 127). In the process of developing a proper Hell, the problem of what kind of fire existed in Hell had to be figured out. The problem was that if it was ordinary fire, which consumes, then Hell would not be eternal because everything would burn up. The thirteenth-century bishop of Paris (1228–49), William of Auvergne, solved this problem. Hellfire was different from the kind of fire we were familiar with on Earth. Since the damned should be tortured unto eternity, Hellfire burned without consuming. Thus, fire was designated to expiatory and purification processes in Purgatory (Le Goff 1984: 245), but not in Hell. Nevertheless, Hell as a construction was not fully developed before the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, where there was only a torturing abyss of fire in Hell. In earlier versions of purgatory during the Medieval period, for instance Dante's *Inferno* and *Purgatory* (Dante 1990), fire was coupled with water. The symbolic pair of water and fire for Hell and Purgatory was represented in the different locales where the penalties took place: one fiery, the other damp; one hot, the other cold; one in flames, the

other frozen. The trial where the deceased were subjected to purgatory was not a simple passing through fire, but involved passing in succession through fire and then through water (Le Goff 1984: 9). This seems to have been a general understanding of Hell at that time, as for instance expressed by Saint Birgit of Sweden (c. 1303–73):

The fire of the furnace boiled upward under the feet of the soul like water rising through a pipe to the point where it bursts in an overhead geyser, so that its veins seem to flow with the blaze. The ears were like a smith's bellows blasting through the brain. The eyes seemed reversed, looking to the back of the head. The mouth hung open and the tongue was drawn through the nostrils and hung down to the lips. The teeth had been driven like nails into the palate. The arms were stretched down to the feet, and both hands held flaming pitch. The skin seemed like a hide covering the body and like a linen garment spattered with semen; it was icy cold and exuded a discharge like that oozes from infected ulcer, with a stench worse than anything in the world. (Turner 1995: 103)

Fire came to occupy a prominent place in Hell, but the nature of Hell was not agreed upon. The Reformists did not accept the belief in Purgatory, and there are also indications that both Calvin and Luther interpreted the 'eternal fire' metaphorically rather than literally (Walvoord 1992: 44). If there had been some lingering doubts about the reality of Hell in Protestantism, later traditions interpreted it as real, in the words of the eighteenth-century theologian Jonathan Edwards, who imagined Hell as a raging furnace of liquid fire which tortured both the material and the spiritual:

The body will be full of torment as full as it can hold, and every part of it shall be full of torment. They shall be in extreme pain, every joint of 'em, every nerve shall be full of inexpressible torment. They shall be tormented even to their fingers' ends. The whole body shall be full of the wrath of God. (Gerstner 1980: 54)

The most extreme tortures were not only, in the worst cases, a penalty for wicked men, but also a reward and pleasure for the blessed. According to Augustine, believers would experience even more satisfaction of being blessed by seeing those who suffered. 'The unjust will burn to some extent so that all the just in the Lord may see the joys that they receive and in those may look upon punishments which they have evaded', Augustine said, 'in order that they may realize the more that they are richer in divine grace unto eternity' (Pinnock 1992: 155). If it was once believed that seeing

everlasting torments gave pleasure, the current definition of Hell is absolutely reversed: today, Hell is seeing the everlasting grace of God without being able to partake in the divine pleasures. Pope John Paul II officially redefined Hell on 28 July 1999, and today the Catholic definition of Hell is ‘absence of God’ without any physical pain and torture by fire:

God is the infinitely good and merciful Father. But man, called to respond to him freely, can unfortunately choose to reject his love and forgiveness once and for all, thus separating himself for ever from joyful communion with him. It is precisely this tragic situation that Christian doctrine explains when it speaks of eternal damnation or hell [...].

The images of hell that Sacred Scripture presents to us must be correctly interpreted. They show the complete frustration and emptiness of life without God. Rather than a place, hell indicates the state of those who freely and definitively separate themselves from God, the source of all life and joy. This is how the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* summarizes the truths of faith on this subject: ‘To die in mortal sin without repenting and accepting God’s merciful love means remaining separated from him for ever by our own free choice. This state of definitive self-exclusion from communion with God and the blessed is called “hell”.’<sup>2</sup>

Thus, in the history of the development of the Christian tradition, the physical attributes of Heaven, and in particular Hell, have been in a constant process of change and have included both fire and water. Traditionally, Hell has been Satan’s realm and domain, and the means by which Satan has been believed to penalise sinners have first and foremost been through fire, but also water, and then preferably water that was boiling hot or ice cold.

## THE DELUGE AND DOOMSDAY

Traditionally, not only has the Devil penalised his people with fire and water as evident in constructions of Hell, as for instance the one Dante depicted; God has too. A common theme throughout the Old Testament is that God penalised his people with plagues and famines if they had been disobedient and sinned; we must bear in mind that at this time there were no personal systems of rewards or retribution, and Heaven and Hell did not exist as such. God punished collectively, as with plagues and famines, but the Deluge was at a different scale and the punishment was, according to Christian tradition, the

harshest ever inflicted on the earth by God. The Deluge killed everything and everyone who was not onboard the Ark. However, rather than the Flood being perceived as a hostile and destructive force, it became a 'type' of saving rite similar to baptism but at a collective level. This theme occurs frequently in the writing of the Fathers. The world emerged purified from the Flood. The fact that the Flood rose high above the mountains signified for Augustine that the Flood was prefiguring the Church and the saving rite of baptism (Cohn 1996: 30–1). The Flood cleansed the sins of the world, and Cyprian of Carthage made the comparison explicit by stating that the Deluge is 'that baptism of the world' (Cohn 1996: 30). During the seven days between the closing of the Ark and the onset of the Flood, both the humans and animals that had not been taken onboard stayed around the Ark: 700,000 humans had remained unrepentant. When the Flood started rising, people tried to storm the Ark. Wild beasts attacked and killed many of them, but the destiny of the rest was worse: 'The waters of the Flood were boiling hot, for only so could the inflamed sensuality of sinners be appropriately punished; the generation of the Flood was tormented like the people of Sodom, who were consumed by fire' (Cohn 1996: 35).

What caused God's wrath and the subsequent penalty is another question, but what is interesting in this regard is the way God escalated his penalty and retribution on humans. Famines and plagues were insufficient remedies, even though they could have erased most of the world's population. On an increasing scale of painful penalties possible for God to use for erasing humanity, water and fire were two of the alternatives. One reason why water may have been chosen instead of fire is the outcome afterwards: fire would have destroyed the earth whereas water gave new life to the human and animal survivors, which seems to have been part of God's plan. However, seventeenth-century thinkers believed that the Deluge was sea-water, which would have made the land barren, and this caused problems for scientific and religious thought at that time since the fields were cultivatable after the waters had receded (Allen 1963).

Regardless of these scientific discourses, according to the Bible Noah built an altar and made a sacrifice after the Flood. God enjoyed the offering and promised Noah that all living things should be food for humans as long as nothing was eaten alive and no blood drunk. God promised furthermore that the world would never be destroyed by water again (Allen 1963: 70).

Still, the use of boiling hot water seems to be an analogous process to the torments of Hell, which later were developed and

employed. Therefore, it seems that implied in the Deluge was a process of purgation by water and that this water had to be qualitatively different from the water used in baptism. This may also relate to the difference between original and committed sins: the water for erasing committed sins had to be different from the one used in baptism. On the other hand, the only function of the Deluge was to erase the human race with one exception, which may rule out the theory of expiation, and the Deluge was different from the waters in the medieval Hell where sinners suffered to eternity. The rationale behind the Deluge was first and foremost to erase humanity, and even though the deaths were not pleasant the aim was to 'baptise the world' and not to let the sinners suffer to eternity. Moreover, although the Deluge is normally connected to the Flood of water, as late as the seventeenth century it was also believed that there would be a Deluge of Fire in the future at Doomsday. 'The baptism of the world' and the Deluge cleansed humans of sins in the beginning, and the baptism of fire and the Deluge of Fire at Doomsday would eventually purge humans' sins as a whole at the end of this world. Thomas Burnet elaborated on the Deluge of Fire in *The Theory of the Earth – The Third Book* from 1690. He writes, imagining that

if we could look down upon this burning World from above Clouds, and have a full view of it, in all its parts, we should think it is a lively representation of *Hell* it self ... Here are Lakes of fire and brimstone: Rivers of melted glowing matter: Ten thousand Volcano's vomiting flames all at once. Thick darkness, and Pillars of smoke twisted about with wreaths of flame, like fiery Snakes. Mountains of Earth thrown up into the Air, and the Heavens dropping down in lumps of fire ... But if we suppose the storm over, and that the fire hath got an entire victory over all bodies, and subdued every thing to itself, the Conflagration will end in a Deluge of fire: Or, in the Sea of fire, covering the whole Globe of the Earth. (Burnet 1965 [1685–90]: 305)

Thus, the Deluge of water in the past and the Deluge of fire in the future are related and part of the same logic, whereby water and fire may be used as purifying processes sharing the same interchangeable qualities and properties, but they may nevertheless be used to express different types of annihilations of sinners, which may be seen in light of what types of sins should be repented. The same principles and ways of thinking were invoked in both these processes, and it seems that fire would be employed at the end partly because Doomsday implies the termination of all life on this earth forever. After Doomsday, humans' future existence and lives

will be either in Heaven or Hell, which may explain why the Flood could not have been a Deluge of fire, but a flood of water creating life for Noah's progeny and the other species which were onboard the Ark, giving life and prosperity for humanity in the 'baptised world'. If the Deluge of boiling water bears similarities to the torments in Hell, at Doomsday it seems that God will take full advantage of all his apocalyptic means, which will be a Hell on earth for a limited time. Why this is necessary and how it relates to Purgatory and Hell are other questions, but the Deluge of Fire will be part of the cosmic drama and battle which will unfold where evil finally is combated. However, a Deluge of Fire at Doomsday does not solve the problem of evil.

Hell is a place where evil is taken care of, but also the place from where it originates. The question whether Hell is dependent or independent of God is not the topic here, since it raises the question of the nature and character of evil: does it exist on its own means or not (Kvanvig 1993)? Evil is qualitatively different from sin. Sin is a human weakness and capability to turn away from God's grace and disobey his laws. Evil, on the other hand, is a quality closely associated with Satan. When transferred onto humans, however, it leads to the most heinous sins. Those sentenced to Hell have committed grave sins, basically rejecting God's grace or being in a pact with the Devil. If one assumes that Satan is solely in charge of Hell with its eternal torments, it seems that God applied the same means which have been operative in Hell when he erased the earthly sins as seen with the boiling hot waters of the Deluge and the believed forthcoming Deluge of Fire at Doomsday. Thus, based on traditions and beliefs, it seems that both God and Satan may use water and fire to penalise humans when they annihilate sin, but there are two differences. First, whether it is the Deluge or Doomsday, God's wrath is for a limited time and concerned with venial sins and hence works as an extended or collective Purgatory. Second, deadly sins and evils are retributive in Hell, but the torments necessitate a different type of fire since Hell is eternal: Hellfire which does not consume, but only torture. Thus, the qualities associated with water and fire differ in Heaven and Hell, and ideas about the Deluge, the Doomsday and Hell may give clues to how God and Satan have been believed to work in different ways through water and fire as media with regards to purification, purgation and penalties, and, indeed, against each other.

## GOD AND SATAN AS OPPONENTS

Traditionally and theologically, Satan has been seen as God's main opponent. Water, in particular, and fire have been used both by God and Satan as a means against each other in this cosmic drama between good and evil, where the different qualities of water have been indications or manifestations of God or Satan respectively. The various qualities attributed to water have enabled more coherent eschatological frameworks with direct implications for humans and their legislative practices in a cosmological perspective. Water has not only been used as a means of purging and purification and indeed penalty, but also to identify demons and witches. It was commonly agreed that the Devil was allergic to holy water, and wherever his influence was suspected water was an appropriate remedy to trace evil (Thomas 1971: 30). The water test was a trial whereby people who were accused of being witches were tested. The water was seen as parallel to baptism, which would reject those who had renounced it. If the water rejected the woman and she floated, she was a witch because God would not accept evil. Water was the means by which humans could see who were accepted by God, and immersion was believed to break the witch's contract with the Devil (Thomas 1971: 551). It was also believed that those who practised sorcery lost their specific gravity (Zguta 1977: 220), which enabled them to fly.

However, there was a difference in practice in the medieval West and the Eastern Slavic world (Zguta 1977). Although the water ordeal was used in the Western regions, torture was seen as the best way to get a witch to confess, as indicated in *The Malleus Maleficarum*, but also because it was believed that torture could break the witch's pact with the Devil (Kramer and Sprenger 1971 [1484]). The water test was also problematic because the Devil was assumed to manipulate the water (Bodin 1980 [1580]). Moreover, it was generally assumed that every witch was baptised and inscribed in the black book as a part of the pact with the Devil (Figure 3) (Behringer 2004: 138). Thus, water was an ambivalent matter which could have been cursed where evil was put in active form (Bachelard 1994: 139). In other words, the water test was not water proof.

Apart from general *maleficium* – sexual orgies, cannibalism, child murders or other crimes that witches were accused of – witchcraft was traditionally associated with weather-making such as thunderstorms, rain, hail, snow and frost, which could harm society (Behringer 2004: 88). In the Eastern Slavic world, pagans were not seen as being in a pact with the Devil as such, but paganism was a veneration of nature. In these areas the water ordeal was particularly restricted to cases involving drought and famine, and it was generally



**Figure 3.** Mock baptism. After Guazzo in Rodker 1929: 14.

accepted that certain people possessed the power to make rain, bringing warmth and making the land fruitful: ‘When prolonged drought set in and the community was threatened with famine and death, it was not uncommon, particularly in parts of the Ukraine, for all the women, peasants and gentry alike, to be subjected to the swimming ordeal’ (Zguta 1977: 299). The last multiple witch-swimming in the Ukraine took place in 1885, and in 1872 all the women from the village of Dzhurkovo were herded together, stripped, bound and thrown in the river (Zguta 1977: 228–9).

Although witchcraft was believed to cause famines and lack of rain, the predominant view in Western regions was that the witches were in a personal and sexual pact with Satan, and consequently God’s main opponents and the major threat to the Kingdom of Heaven. This duality and ambiguity, where both God and the Devil controlled and used water as a means in the cosmic battle, can be seen in the church’s attitude and response to holy wells in Great Britain and Ireland. Water had a crucial place in the Celtic religion (Green 1986: 138), and these perceptions were transformed and included in Christianity. Water was believed to have the capacity to reveal truth, and the holiness of water was thought to cure any kind of sickness or

disease. Nevertheless, water worship was still banned into the twelfth century, but gradually the old customs and pagan aspects of water worship were hidden behind the Christian façade (Bord and Bord 1985: 19). When the Christians transformed the pagan water beliefs, the early missionary monks included the wells in their religion, and they built the churches and monasteries near them since these wells offered a handy supply of water, thus ensuring their physical continuity (Gribben 1992: 15) as well as a religious transformation of former pagan beliefs. According to the lore of holy wells, many of them were said to actually have been created by saints, often in miraculous ways, and there are a number of wells with Christian names in Wales, Scotland and England (Bord and Bord 1985: 22–4).

Even though the Reformation tried to end water worship, the cult was so deep-rooted that it continued for centuries, and nobles as well as commoners made pilgrimages to the holy wells for long life and prosperity. The wells were believed to have various healing powers and the potential to cure any kind of ailment, disease, illness or infertility, to predict the future (Bord and Bord 1985: 32–7), and to illuminate brilliance and wisdom (Ford 1974: 70). The church did not deny the role of supernatural action, but maintained it could only come from either God or the Devil (Thomas 1971: 254). According to a story from Scotland, the success of the holy well of St Drostan was so harmful to the local doctors that they planned to contaminate it with poison. When the local villagers heard that, they wanted to attack and kill the doctors (Bord and Bord 1985: 46). Regarding superstitious beliefs, the Council of Malines ruled in 1607: 'It is superstitious to expect any effect from anything, when such an effect cannot be produced by natural causes, by divine institution, or by the ordination or approval of the Church.' Hence, it was not superstitious to believe 'that the elements could change their nature after the formula of consecration had been pronounced over them: this was not magic, but an operation worked by God and the church; whereas magic involved the aid of the Devil' (Thomas 1971: 49). Thus, as long as the church sanctified holy wells and the use of their water this was not magic, but if water revealed capacities on its own it was evidently the work of the Devil. In particular, water from wells was seen as dangerous. Hell was considered to be beneath the earth in the underworld (Muchembled 1993: 56), a belief which was also shared not only by common people but also by Thomas Aquinas (Dinzelbacher 1986: 70). Although wells were perceived as holy when sanctified by the church, wells and springs were also points of contact with the underworld, which included supernatural beings (Turner and Turner 1978: 144), and consequently an ambivalent source that was potentially dangerous and harmful.

On the other hand, the power of water rituals was believed to shorten or change the process of purgation after death. St Patrick's Purgatory is a pilgrimage shrine located in Lough Derg in County Donegal in north-western Ireland. The etymological meaning of Lough Derg (*dearg* means 'red') relates the name to the blood of a serpent slain by St Patrick. The lake is about five square miles in area, and is dotted with 46 small islands. Two of them have been important for the pilgrimage: Station Island and Saints' Island. Medieval sources concluded that Purgatory was originally located on Saints', and transferred to the smaller islands somewhere around 1200–30 (Turner and Turner 1978: 108–12), and today Station Island is the holy pilgrimage site: 'The not inconsiderable number of pilgrims from mainland Europe in the Middle Ages tended to regard Ireland as a stage on the soul's journey after death to its ultimate destination in the farthest west – in Christian terms, as an entry to purgatory – and the island cave Lough Derg as the very gate to that western netherworld' (Turner and Turner 1978: 112). Today, by performing rites and penances, pilgrims can shorten and even terminate the time in Purgatory, not for themselves, but for dead relatives or friends, which is in accordance with Catholic dogma. Many pilgrims believe that the more they suffer deprivation, the more torment they are able to ease for their beloved (Turner and Turner 1978: 121).

Lough Derg has been considered by many to be one of the most difficult pilgrimages in the Christian world (Lehrhaupt 1985: 107). In the Middle Ages it was seen as a real Purgatory, where those who survived the ordeal were exempt from the pains of Purgatory after death (Zaleski 1985: 467). *Tractatus de Purgatorio Sancti Patricii*, composed by an English Cistercian monk towards the beginning of the thirteenth century, is one of the most important early accounts of the site, which described the pilgrimage of the mythical hero Knight Owen (Zaleski 1985: 470). In *Tractatus* the terrestrial topography was linked to the extraterrestrial topography, and Knight Owen stepped through a physical doorway to another world, which he insisted was not visionary. Owen visited four places of punishment where sinners were devoured by dragons, and he was cast into the mouth of Hell. He fell endlessly, but through divine intervention he remembered the invocation and a tongue of flame lifted him up: 'From the well, they travel to a river of fire and sulphur, spanned by the bridge which Owen must cross. If he falls off the bridge, he will land in the clutches of demons who will drag him down to hell' (Zaleski 1985: 475). After completing the ordeal, he walked to Heaven before he had to return back: 'having begun his journey by being locked into Purgatory, Owen ends it by being locked out of

heaven' (Zaleski 1985: 477); but then as a purified human who will immediately pass through Purgatory when he dies.

In this latter case the use of water and fire and their qualities were shared by both God and Satan within a coherent eschatology uniting the rewards and penalties in Heaven, Purgatory and Hell, thus fulfilling the same aim. The topography of an island whereby the departed had to cross the water to get to it is a classical feature reflected in medieval literature. A river of baptism, a ship of religion, and a bridge over the River of the World are common images symbolising the departure to the other side (Dinzelsbacher 1986: 80). In Dante, the souls destined for salvation were carried across the river to Purgatory, and 'in this form the water boundary of Heaven is virtually indistinguishable from the fiery stream that becomes the painful way to Hell' (Silverstein 1938: 57), as seen with Owen in St Patrick's Purgatory. Thus, this case and, for instance, Dante's *Divina Commedia* (Dante 1990) suggest that in the Christian tradition there were ideas of a coherent belief system with regards to the qualities of water in general and holy water in particular, as well as the use, function and beliefs associated with fire in Heaven and Hell. If this was the case, although it might be true that it is better for Satan to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven (Forsyth 2003: 157), Satan may have served God on his premises in Hell, although such a position implies that Hell is dependent on, and created by, God (Kvanvig 1993). Regardless of this theological discussion, the use and qualities of water and fire in Heaven and Hell have had different ideas and purposes attributed to them.

## **WATER AND FIRE IN CHRISTIAN TRADITION**

According to Christian beliefs, both God and Satan have used fire and water, often for the same purposes, but there are distinctive qualities and powers associated with the elements. God and Satan have used different types of fire and water, which may also indicate an inherent and coherent logic in the beliefs.

### ***Purification***

Baptism and other sacraments have been seen as remedies against sin. All who have been baptised in Christ have been baptised in His death (Romans 6:3–4), and therefore those who have been baptised once cannot be baptised again. Baptism is an immersion in water and an emergence from it, which signifies a dying of sin and the rise to

righteousness (Beasley-Murray 1962: 73). Still, there has also been a baptism of fire. The phrase 'baptism in fire' occurs only seven times in the New Testament, but other phrases which may be equivalent, such as 'receiving the Spirit' and 'the gift of the Spirit', appear more frequently (Harper 1970: 5–6). The baptism of fire has been seen as related to the day of Pentecost since six out of seven references directly refer to it. The 12 disciples experienced the baptism of the Spirit, and this had nothing to do with water baptism (Harper 1970: 10), but was another baptism for those destined for Heaven who already had been baptised with water. The Holy Ghost proceeded from both the Father and Son and he was called the Spirit of Christ (Romans 8:9). After the resurrection of Christ, he told his disciples that they would be 'baptized with the Holy Ghost' from whom they would receive power (Acts 1:4–8). On the first Pentecost Jesus' disciples received The Holy Ghost, and his gifts were first and foremost God's grace, divine knowledge, and spiritual fruits. This fire was pure, pleasant and a sign of brilliance and grace, and had nothing to do with the purgatorial fire. On the other hand, water used in baptism is traditionally believed to be holy and purifying, but the water the Devil used when baptising witches was malevolent and evil put in active form, which enabled the witches to receive the 'spirit' of Satan. Thus, with regards to purification, the traditional beliefs and qualities associated with water and fire in Christianity could be reversed; fire may have enabled purification and water was in some cases malevolent, enabling Satan's mock baptism.

### ***Purgation***

For those who committed sins after baptism, the water of baptism was replaced by other means. The fire of purgatory had different qualities from that in the baptism of fire. The fire for purgation was painful, whereas the fire for the purified ones who received the Holy Ghost or Spirit illuminated God's grace and love. The first was a remedy against sin; the latter a spiritual enlightenment. This is similar with water used for purgation and baptism. The first is torturing whether it is boiling hot or ice cold, whereas the latter is pure and divine. One may ask why there has been no second baptism with water after death without pain instead of purgation by fire, since baptism and holy water have erased sin and prepared humans and in particular children for the Kingdom of Heaven. One reason might be that one can only be baptised once, but the character of sins may be another reason. The original sin belonged to a separate category of sins since humans were born with it without having sinned personally. Committed sins were a result of

human weakness and disobedience. Water may have had the potential to erase the first type of sins, but the latter may have required fire as a medium. Therefore, it seems to be an escalating ladder of expiatory means from baptism and the Flood to Purgatory and Doomsday, which has culminated in the traditional beliefs with regards to the fiery and torturing Hell, where there is no expiation but only torments. Nevertheless, in the *Apocalypse of Paul*, which is an apocryphal text dating to c. 380 CE, there is not a clearly defined Purgatory in front of the city of Christ. Instead, 'the angel takes Paul across Lake Acherusia, where the repentant are baptised by angel Michael. This baptism cleanses them so that they may join those who have not sinned' (Bernstein 1993: 295). Thus, within the Christian tradition there have been beliefs that water had the capacity to cleanse humans from committed sins in a second baptism in Heaven, thus challenging the need for a painful purgatorial fire since the qualities and capacities of water and fire may have been identical and interchangeable.

### **Penalty**

The water of the Deluge was boiling hot, and since the function of this water was to erase all humans on earth, the quality of the water itself may not have differed from that which is believed to have been used for purgation, but the process would have differed in intensity and length. The water in the Deluge was made to be lethal; the purgatorial water was only for torments, which would eventually stop before killing those who have made repentance. The fire God allegedly will use in the Deluge at Doomsday is equally devastating, deadly and all-consuming. The fire in Hell is, on the other hand, qualitatively different. In Purgatory, fire is believed to be expiatory, preparing for Heaven through torments. In Hell the fire is not physical and does not consume, but only tortures. Moreover, the fire in Hell is imagined as dark and Hell itself is dark: 'Whereas the righteous enjoyed light without heat, the damned suffered heat without light' (Almond 1994: 88–9). The waters in Hell, when applied, are torturously hot or cold and smell bad, and in Isaiah (67:13) they attain certain particular characteristics: 'These waters of judgement are poison to the bodies of the [kings, rulers, and exalted ones] as well as sensational to their flesh; (hence) they will neither see nor believe that these waters become transformed and become a fire that burns forever' (Bernstein 1993: 194). Thus, according to these beliefs, when Satan uses torturing waters, they may become fire, which again put emphasis on the interrelation between malevolent water and fire both transcending and uniting the elements.

When God and Satan have been believed to employ water and fire, the qualities of the elements differ and they are essentially not the same fire and water. From God's perspective, the water of baptism is the entrance to the Kingdom of Heaven for newborn babies, and Catholics have to pass through the purgatorial fire; even the Deluge of water and fire at Doomsday differ from the water and fire in Hell. Hell is defined by the fire, but it is not like any earthly or purgatorial fires. The elaborations of Heaven are rarer than Hell, but when Heaven is described in terms of water, these waters are also unlike any water on earth, but in positive terms. Returning to the *Apocalypse of Paul*, in his visions of Heaven he sees four rivers distinguished by particular virtues: 'The River of Honey irrigates the land of the twelve prophets, where those live who on earth renounce their own will. The River of Milk nourishes the innocent and those who preserve their chastity. On the banks of the River of Wine, Paul ... learns that the river rewards those who freely offered hospitality. The River of Oil traverses the country of those who praise God' (Bernstein 1993: 296). Thus, according to Christian tradition, the fires and waters of the Devil are evil whereas God's are good and the best for humanity (including interpretations of the Deluge of water as erasing all earthly sin as a baptism of the world, and the Doomsday of Fire as that which will prepare for Heaven). Water and fire are distinctively different and used in particular ways by God and Satan. Hence, it is possible to combine the fires and waters of Heaven and Hell in the same belief systems regardless of whether Satan is God's opponent or servant. Or in other words, God cannot use the particular types of water and fire that Satan does, and vice versa. Therefore, it is possible to combine all these images in one cosmological scheme and indeed at one place, which is the case with St Patrick's Purgatory. On the other hand, within the respective realms of Heaven and Hell, it seems that the qualities and uses of water and fire have been interchangeable in some cases. Beliefs that there will be a second baptism in Heaven would have replaced the Purgatorial fire as a purifying and mandatory process before entering Heaven, and the torturing and boiling waters in Hell would have had the same function as Hellfire enabling eternal suffering.

## CONCLUSION

An analysis of water and fire in Heaven and Hell may identify certain qualities of the two elements and how they have been believed to be fundamental in the constitution of the Otherworldly spheres with regards to eternal blessing in Heaven and damnation in Hell,

respectively. The entrances to, and the locales of, Heaven and Hell are defined by water and fire, and indeed the whole Christian eschatology can be seen as based on the many metaphors it is possible to spin around water and fire. These two elements can take on any quality or form and can be used for purification, purgation and penalty, but the ways the water and fire have been employed in belief systems have not been arbitrary. God's use of water and fire has been believed to have expiatory and purifying functions, and also, in the cases of holy wells, curing and healing ones. Satan's uses of fire and water have been destructive and torturing, and in this world the aim of malevolent water was to harm people and society. When all the different qualities of how water and fire have been employed are combined, they can be presented into the same eschatological system: the dual nature of water and fire allows Heaven and Hell to be separated and completely different and opposite because God is in charge of, and uses, the good waters and fires, while Satan uses the evil ones.

## NOTES

1. [http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc\\_css/archive/catechism/p123a12.htm#1030](http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p123a12.htm#1030)
2. [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/audiences/1999/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_aud\\_28071999\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/audiences/1999/documents/hf_jp-ii_aud_28071999_en.html)

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