



Time, Eternity and Purification. An Attempt to Solve Five Aporias of the Traditional Idea of Purgatory

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Czas, wieczność i oczyszczenie. Próba rozwiązania pięciu aporii tradycyjnej idei czyśćca

STRESZCZENIE

Tradycyjna koncepcja czyśćca wymaga odpowiedniej aktualizacji. W artykule zaproponowano trzy kryteria teologiczne, w świetle których sformułowano i oceniono pięć aporii, które uniemożliwiają obecnie zrozumienie centralnej intuicji leżącej u podstaw idei oczyszczenia pośmiertnego. Autor proponuje pięć innych refleksji o charakterze systematycznym, których celem jest rozwianie pięciu aporii i zaoferowanie odnowionego i pełnego sensu zrozumienia zasadniczej treści oczyszczenia istoty ludzkiej w obliczu nieskończonej miłości Boga, a także wszystkich innych kwestii teologicznych bezpośrednio z tym związanych, zwłaszcza wszystkiego tego, co odnosi się do relacji między zwykłym czasem historii a wiecznością Boga.

Słowa kluczowe: czyścić, czas, wieczność, eschatologia

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1. The traditional idea of purgatory

In the old part of Santiago de Compostela is the *Capela Xeral de Ánimas*. On its façade you can see the following high relief:



Five female and four male figures – two with beards and two without – suffer, with sad faces, the heat of rising flames that consume two thirds of their bodies, while they seem to beg for mercy, resignedly raising their gaze, while four of them join their hands to ask for forgiveness more intensely.

The traditional idea of purgatory, which has become practically a small provisional hell, cannot be more eloquently represented. It could be summed up as follows: when we die, our soul separates from our body. The latter becomes a corpse and the former immediately receives reward or punishment, awaiting the final day on which the universal resurrection of the dead and the final judgment will take place. Between death and the day of judgment, the souls of the deceased are in an intermediate and incorporeal state. In this situation, some already enjoy the beatific vision and others damnation, although all of them subsist awaiting the final resurrection of the flesh. A special case – the one that concerns us here – is that of those separated souls who, being fundamentally good, are nevertheless in need – due to minor faults – of some kind of *post-mortem purification*. In purgatory, they experience the purifying effect of a fire which, as happens in a crucible, burns the spurious substances of sins and makes the virtues shine.

We are thus faced with a painful process – judging by the images – but, it seems, also necessary, which we the people who are living now can shorten and soften if we give alms, do penance, obtain indulgences, offer prayers or celebrate masses for the souls of our loved ones. In return – according to the traditional idea – we can also obtain favors for their intercession before God.

But in this traditional idea not everything is clear. What we propose to study here is the possibility of rescuing the central intuition that hides behind traditional imagery and, even, proposing a new way of solving some of its classic eschatological aporias. But before we go into a concrete analysis of these difficulties, let us present, in a condensed form, three essential theological criteria in light of which we will be able to evaluate the deficiencies or excesses to be corrected in the traditional idea of purgatory.

2. Three theological criteria of a structural character

2.1. First criterion: the central criterion

If there is one thing that is absolutely central and unquestionable in the NT that should govern as the indisputable center of all Christian theological reflection, it is the absolute, infinite and unconditional character of the love of God manifested in Jesus Christ (Rom 8:35-39)¹. There is no other essential

¹ Cf. Francis' *Apostolic Exhortation »Evangelii Gaudium«*: „All revealed truths proceed from the same divine source and are believed with the same faith, but some of them are more im-

core in the *kerygma* of the resurrection of the Nazarene than the diaphanous revelation, as a constitutive reality of the very being of God, of that omnipotent and eternal love that gives life to the dead and calls into being things that do not exist (Rom 4:17). That the divinity adored by Israel consists, then, in being pure love and pure forgiveness, without a shadow of duplicity or trace of meanness, who loves His creatures even beyond what parents do with their children (Is 49:15), is none other than the essential center around which the preaching about the Kingdom of God of Jesus of Nazareth himself revolves (Lk 15:1-32). We do not have here a debatable or peripheral theological assertion, but the central affirmation of New Testament revelation that must act as the backbone of all further explanation and all further theological development.

This is the source from which all the articles of the Creed flow and the ultimate end toward which they are directed. So much so that it can be useful to establish that the infinite love that God himself is (1 Jn 4:8) not only can but must be the *central criterion* of all theological statements. It must be said that a theological assertion will be all the more decisive and important the more it is able to delve into and explain the infinite primacy of that ineffable love. And vice versa: a supposedly theological assertion will become suspect and will even have to be rejected or, at least, relegated to the realm of irrelevance if it clouds, obscures or contradicts the clarity and fullness of God's absolute love.

In the light of this criterion we must evaluate the relevance of all eschatological statements referring to the question of purgatory.

2.2. Second criterion: the protological criterion

The second theological criterion is a direct consequence of the first. If the benevolent fatherhood of God reveals the mystery of an absolute, infinite and unconditional love at the centre of the easter *kerygma*, this means that Christian theology cannot recognise any other principle at the root of all that exists than the free creative will of this omnipotent love of God². If we have called the first guiding principle the *central criterion*, then this second can be described as a *protological criterion*.

The protological criterion, first of all, shows the secondary character of all theological reflection, since theology is never prior to the proclamation of the *kerygma*, but rather the consequence of its analysis and development. Therefore, based on what happened in Christ, in the fullness of the oppor-

portant because they express more directly the heart of the Gospel. In this fundamental core what shines forth is the *beauty of God's saving love manifested in Jesus Christ who died and rose again*" (EG, 36).

² Cf. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Teología Sistemática*, vol. II, (UPCo: Madrid, 1996), 1-9; *Gaudium et Spes*, 2: „quem christifideles credunt ex amore Creatoris conditum et conservatum”.

tune moment – that is, in the *kairos* attested by the NT – the protological criterion delves deeper, looking back to the beginning of time, into the eternal character of that love of God which, in a non-temporal way, precedes the most remote origin of all centuries. This means that it is presented to us as a necessary consequence derived from the central criterion of all theology that we must broaden the reflective framework in which Christianity thinks about the mystery of the human being and that of the world. The empirical limits of historical existence cannot be the epistemological limits of Christian theology. Theological reflection must necessarily go beyond this narrow framework if, standing firmly on the confession of faith on which the central criterion is based, it wishes to illuminate the existence of the world and of the human being in the light of the eternal love of God who gives life to all creation.

In contrast to Marcionites, Gnostics, Manicheans and radical dualisms of all kinds, Christianity has always maintained that at the absolute beginning of all that exists there is no other underlying principle that disputes the hegemony of the infinite love of God. The *protological criterion* maintains that there is no kind of original darkness, primordial opposition, radical negativity, nor any seed of latent evil in the realm of the divine that transcends the absolute beginning of creation. The only thing that is beyond the totality of what exists is the infinite clarity of the love of God, because evil, in itself, lacks any kind of transcendence.

2.3. Third criterion: the eschatological criterion

It is easy to see the relevance of the third theological criterion. It is only the eschatological complement of this second criterion. If the totality of existence has no other absolute beginning than the omnipotent love of God revealed in Christ, it is understandable that Christian theology maintains it also has no other definitive end than the perfect union with that same eternal and unfathomable mystery.

The *eschatological criterion* affirms, therefore, that the infinite love of God endows the creature with an infinite life, so that *the life that God himself is, is the life that God himself gives*. And God is eternal life, and so the creature receives, with creation, the gift of a life that, from God, never ceases to be life even with death, however much its mode of existence changes and transforms. The eschatological criterion maintains, then, that, just as birth is a coming from the eternity of God into space-time, so too is death a transition from space-time to the eternity of God. For Christian theology it is an unnegotiable imperative to clarify the mystery of man in light of the mystery of the Word incarnate (GS, 22). And if anything is perfectly clear in

the easter mystery, it is the infinite opening to an eternal life that, breaking down the last wall, dies no more.

It is important to emphasize that the eschatological criterion – in reciprocal coherence with the protological criterion – prevents the granting of any kind of transcendence to evil. Because evil is neither divine, nor omnipotent, nor eternal, since only the trinitarian mystery of God is divine, eternal and omnipotent. And God is, according to Christian revelation, absolute, infinite and unconditional love in the Trinitarian life. Just as in the protological realm of the divine there is not and cannot be any evil root behind the absolute principle of all that exists, neither is there nor can there be in the eschatological Kingdom of God any kind of evil that could reach, hurt or diminish the fullness of God's love. Only the love of God transcends the world, since evil lacks transcendent power and, therefore, evil always remains in the realm of space and time. For the question of purgatory that we are studying, this will be, as we will see shortly, of the utmost importance.

3. The recovery of the central idea and the attempt to unblock the five aporias

It is important to go back to the essentials. And in the eschatological question of purgatory, what is essential? The possibility that, effectively, after death, we can see ourselves completely free from evil, even if we die with guilt and wounds from which it has not been possible to be freed and healed in life.

3.1. First difficulty: suffering or love?

It is worth insisting on this, since it is precisely a matter of completely reversing the most characteristic features of the traditional idea of purgatory. In this, everything seems to revolve around the punitive suffering that the deceased must endure before their entry into heaven, as if it were a painful and annoying toll that God, if He wanted, could well avoid, but which, in fact, He does not avoid, given that the rigor of His justice would prevail over His mercy³.

If, on the contrary, we invert the approach and conceive of pain, suffering and guilt as forms of evil that parasitize, eat away at and erode our existence, so that God hates nothing more – like all mothers and fathers – than that which harms, corrupts and disturbs the integrity of his creatures, then, it is possible to conceive as very good news the fact that His absolute, infinite and unconditional love – according to the *central criterion* of theology – not only fights and opposes evil in the space-time of history – as the

³ Cf. Medard Kehl, *Escatologia* (Sígueme: Salamanca, 2003), 285-288.

theology of grace assures us – but, even beyond death, it fights and melts it until its total extinction.

In this case, the doctrine of purgatory speaks to us of a new and definitive opportunity for liberation from evil, of an insurmountable opportunity for healing from that which harms us and makes us sick. It is not a divine punishment or a painful obligatory toll, but rather a possibility of healing at the root of the insurmountable evils in history. Because, in fact, we all carry, in one way or another, faults similar to broken vases whose repair in life is already impossible. The complete overcoming of guilt is not achieved by forgetting it, but by restoring the state of things prior to the rupture caused by evil. But time is irreversible and for this reason it does not seem possible, under the conditions of existence, that all the evil we may have done can achieve, sooner or later, a fair and complete reparation. The testimony of the victims and the analyses of the question of sexual abuse are making this very clear. There are ruptures without remedy and wounds that never heal. In such cases, we can only refer to the *central criterion* of all theology, which establishes the absolute primacy of the omnipotent love of God, who not only unconditionally forgives all evil and all guilt, but also – as the *protological and eschatological criteria affirm* – since He also had the power to create heaven and earth *ex nihilo*, He also has the power to cure the incurable, to restore the impossible and to save what seems unsalvageable.

The question of purgatory is not, then, about the punitive value of a suffering correlated to the gravity or lightness of certain sins, but about the saving action of God's love – that is, the fullness of His grace – which, face to face with His creature, cleanses him of all evil, dresses him in the best clothes and places the filial ring on his finger, like the merciful father in the parable of the prodigal son. The suffering, the faults and the darkness that we carry with us until the day of our death, like chains that shackle us to our past, are destroyed by the clarity of an infinite love that detests what harms us and strengthens what fulfills us.

3.2. Second difficulty: minor sins or all kinds of evil?

It may make more sense to think of such a liberation as operating on the totality of our sins, freeing us from all our faults, rather than just those considered to be of a minor nature. Is it not the infinite power of God's love that operates in the purification of evil? Is it conceivable that any kind of evil could offer eternal resistance to God's omnipotence? If in such a process of purification it is not so much a matter of the capacity for punitive suffering as a healing force, but of the transforming power of God's love, then it is possible to conceive of a *post-mortal process* of liberation from evil at the end of which we can be freed, in effect, not only from the evil caused by minor

infractions, but, more inclusively, from all kinds of evil. Let us not think of purgatory as a rigidly priced torment, but rather as a warm, restorative and comforting bath after the hard journey of a life in which we not only end up with dirty, sore and exhausted feet, but also with scars and open wounds in our spirit that await healing.

The love of God that bathes the entire divine realm in crystalline transparency can perhaps be compared to the clarity of the atmosphere that surrounds our planet. Just as bodies foreign to Earth navigate peacefully through the cosmos until they enter into a combustion by friction that consumes their outer layers when they enter the Earth's atmosphere, perhaps, in an analogous way, we can think that the incrustations of evil that burden and darken our condition as creatures can also be consumed and purified by their friction with divine love in their *post-mortal approach* to God. If crossing the tunnel of death consists in advancing towards an incandescent light that knows no sunset, why not imagine that in this gradual process of dying, every last remnant of pain, suffering and guilt is set alight, so that we wake up in the day without night being eternally that which has resisted combustion by friction with the purifying love of God?

Let us not forget that this is only an image, a comparison, an analogous proposal that, perhaps, will help us to think differently about the eschatological encounter between the creature and its Creator, more in line with the *central criterion* of theology that underlines the absolute, infinite and unconditional character of God's love.

3.3. Third difficulty: time or eternity?

In this sense, and going deeper into what has been said, it is worth asking: what happens with the relationship between time and eternity? Does not death represent the end of all historical temporality and the transition to an eternity in which it is no longer possible to think of sequential processes such as those presupposed by the traditional idea of purgatory?

In this regard, I must admit that the theological controversy between those who maintain the resurrection in death and those who postulate a time and an intermediate state between death and resurrection on the last day seems to me, modestly, poorly posed. It is possible to detect in both positions inadequate presuppositions regarding eternity and time. Let us examine the question a little more closely⁴.

⁴ Cf. Joseph Ratzinger, "Escatología", in *Obras Completas*, vol. X (Madrid: BAC, 2017), 1-253; Hans Küng, *¿Vida eterna? Respuesta al gran interrogante de la vida humana* (Madrid: Cristiandad, 1983), 230-236; Gilbert Greshake, Lohfink Norbert, *Naherwartung, Auferstehung, Unsterblichkeit. Untersuchungen zur christlichen Eschatologie* (Freiburg: Herder, 1978); Bruno Forte, *Teología de la historia. Ensayo sobre revelación, protología y escatología* (Salamanca: Sígueme, 1995), 386-392. An updated view of the problem that, in my opinion, goes beyond the

The former are right against the latter in refusing to project the sequential nature of ordinary historical time onto God's eternity. As if God's eternity could be conceived as an infinite time, without beginning or end, whose course would advance along a superior and parallel path to the equally horizontal but inferior time of the universe. In eternity, they argue, time reaches its end, so that eternity is characterized, then, by being the absence of time and, therefore, the gradual sequential nature of the interior of common history cannot be projected onto this new dimension. If this is so – argue those who support resurrection in death – when a person dies, he or she is resurrected *ipso facto* in God's eternity, so that it is not possible to postulate any type of temporal interval in which his or her soul, separated from their body, could experience any type of *post-mortem purification*. If there is to be any kind of purification – they add – it must be simultaneous with death, but never subsequent to it, because when death makes its presence felt, all temporal categories lose their active value⁵. Resurrection would therefore be resurrection in death, and the only meaning that could be recognized in the question of purgatory is the possibility of a concomitant purification by finding oneself in the immediate presence of God. The deceased are already, instantly after their death, enjoying the eternal bliss that only participation in the absolute mystery of God's love can provide.

But who can deny that those who critically point out, to the contrary, are partly right, that such a conception does not pay sufficient attention to the undeniable fact that the history of the world continues its course when a person dies, so that to postulate its immediate consummation in the fullness of God is, at the very least, to ignore the undoubtedly constitutive character of all the relationships of love, friendship and kinship that prove so decisive in relation to our happiness or unhappiness? Is it possible to think that a deceased mother can enjoy eternal bliss apart from the eventual misfortunes that her children are still suffering or may suffer in the history of this world that never stops?⁶ Does it make sense to conceive of the resurrection as the entry into a new form of *post-mortal existence* in which participation in the eternal love of God would make us forget and completely ignore the fate of those we claimed to love in life?⁷

limits of this controversy, substantially improving it, can be seen in Andrés Torres Queiruga, *Repensar a resurrección. A diferenca cristiá na continuidade das relixións e da cultura* (Vigo: SEPT, 2001), 151-156, 247-252.

⁵ Cf. Küng, 234.

⁶ Cf. Torres Queiruga, *Repensar a resurrección. A diferenca cristiá na continuidade das relixións e da cultura*, 250-251; Ratzinger, "Escatología", 169: "a heaven on an earth that is a hell would not be heaven".

⁷ Pedro Castelao, "La crisis ecológica en la antropología teológica. La necesaria recuperación del «triángulo primordial»". *Estudios Eclesiásticos* 95, 373 (2020): 263-314.

If this is so – say those who do not think of death and resurrection simultaneously – it is necessary to address in theological terms the still unfinished state of those who have already died, but still await the resurrection of the body on the last day. It is precisely in this diastasis that some of these theologians place the relevance of purgatory, namely: of a process of purification that happens and develops in a truly sequential way, given the active and open character of a history of the world that, while it does not reach its definitive end, continues to develop and advance for all living beings towards an unknown temporal future⁸.

In my view, both positions have insufficiently consistent conceptions of time and eternity. I think that those who refuse to conceive the eternity as an indefinite temporal sequence are right, but they are wrong when, in reaction to this infinite time, they speak of the eternal as pure timelessness⁹. Time and eternity cannot be contrasted as antagonistic and mutually exclusive realities, since, according to Christian theology – as the *protological criterion reminds us* – time, like every reality distinct from God, is a creature that has its absolute beginning and definitive end in the eternity of the divine. This means that at the deepest root of all temporality is the eternity of God as the ultimate source that makes time the constant flow of infinite instants of which it consists. Time is not alien to eternity, since it proceeds from it, nor is eternity alien to time, since eternity is the origin and ultimate goal of all time¹⁰.

How can we venture another way of imagining that *post-mortal state* in which eternity is neither a simple absence of time nor its identical reproduction?

Experience teaches us that, regardless of the uniform passage of chronological time set by clocks, the internal experience of time changes considerably as we grow up. As children, a year seems like a century. And the joy of playing makes time pass without us realizing it. As we grow up, time is experienced in a very different way.

I wonder, then, if it would not be possible, taking as a basis the obvious and evident character of this pointed experience, to postulate a special relationship between the process of increasing concentration of time – linked to the increase in age and to moments of happiness and joy – and the way in which the creature experiences time before God.

⁸ This is supported mainly by J. Ratzinger and B. Forte. This is not the case with Torres Queiruga. Cf. Andrés Torres Queiruga, *Qué queremos decir cuando decimos “infierno”* (Santander: Sal Terrae, 1995); Andrés Torres Queiruga, *Repensar o mal. Da poneroloxía á teodicea* (Vigo: Galaxia, 2010), 442-470, esp. 459.

⁹ Cfr. J. Ratzinger's critique, in: Joseph Ratzinger, “El fin del tiempo”, in *Obras Completas*, vol. 10 (Madrid: BAC, 2017), 582-600.

¹⁰ Cf. Pedro Castela, “La vida temporal y la vida eterna”, *Sal Terrae* 111 (2023): 901-913.

Could it be that, having crossed the threshold of death, the usual rhythm of time is maintained for all those who remain in history, while an infinite concentration of indescribable density occurs in the subjective experience of time of the one who dies towards the interior of the eternal life of God?

The psalmist says, referring to God, that a thousand years in His presence are but yesterday (Ps 89:4). And in 2Pet 3:8 we can read: “Before the Lord, a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years like a day.” What if the normal flow of time, from our intramundane perspective, were to accelerate, concentrate and contract infinitely as we approach the ineffable joy of the presence of the Lord? What if someone who, before God, experienced such a contraction could not notice from within the slightest difference between time and eternity? What if that “day” lived before God were for the creature who has already abandoned space and time perfectly coextensive with those “thousand years” that the psalm names? The case of Saint Ero of Armenteira perfectly illustrates what I want to propose here¹¹.

Legend has it that, one afternoon, the saintly founder of the Cistercian monastery in the Salnés region was out for a walk when his attention was drawn to the soft song of a little bird. Approaching it, the good monk became so absorbed in the enjoyment of the melody that, when he came to, he felt as if he had returned from a long journey. The fact is that, after nightfall, upon returning to the monastery that he had only left for a few hours, he knocked insistently on the door. A monk appeared who he had never seen before. He was also unknown to the hostler. When the entire community was informed that the person who called himself the abbot of the monastery was at the door, the abbot who now lived within those walls asked him to identify himself by giving his name and surname. They consulted the archives and, indeed, they recorded that three hundred years earlier an abbot called Ero had lived in Armenteira, of whom nothing had been heard since one afternoon when he had disappeared into the forest. The monks understood what had also become clear to the holy abbot: in the song of the little bird Ero had experienced a small foretaste of the eternal glory of God, in which a thousand years in His presence are but yesterday. So, indeed, a few hours in the presence of eternity could also have been equivalent to three centuries of ordinary time. Saint Ero had experienced an unnoticed contraction of time caused by the sublime song of the little bird. And this ineffable contraction had been convergent and coextensive with the slow and measured passage of three hundred years.

¹¹ Cf. José Filgueira Valverde, *Tiempo y gozo eterno en la narrativa medieval* (Vigo: Xerais, 1982); Damián Yañez Neira, “San Ero de Armenteira”, accessed 18 November, 2022, <https://dbe.rah.es/biografias/45938/san-ero-de-armenteira>. Another echo alluding to this same theme is found in cantiga CIII of Alfonso X the Wise.

What if the process of purification that the doctrine of purgatory seems to imply could be conceived with this idea of the maximum contraction of time, so that, not through suffering, but through the closeness of the light and joy of God, the abandonment and destruction of all the remains of evil that we might bring attached to our spirit would acquire a new meaning? What if the process of combustion by atmospheric friction with the love of God to which we referred earlier lasted only a few brief moments for those who experience it and, nevertheless, seemed to extend for millennia for those who continue to inhabit the horizontal time of the universe? Would we not have here a hypothesis that reconciles the positions of those who maintain the resurrection in death with those who affirm the delay between living in Christ after dying and the final resurrection on the „last day“?

3.4. Fourth difficulty: sacrifice or communion?

Intercessory prayer cannot be conceived within the logic of courtly favors. The love of God – *the central criterion* – would be seriously damaged if he were conceived as a sovereign who is imperturbable before the world, whose attention and pity for poor mortals must be continually implored by those who would be better placed in heaven. As if prayer could function within the structure of favoritism, cronyism or nepotism that obtains benefits and privileges through recommendations and influences that are all the more effective the closer the one imploring the favor to the throne. Or, on the contrary, as if the suffering that God’s justice would have imposed on the one who is purified in purgatory could be reduced, diminished or alleviated by sacrifice and prayers that the living people offer to that wrathful God for the dead. It is obvious that today no one prays with such a lack of focus, but it is not so obvious that – safeguarding the best of intentions – the objectivity of many prayers and many forms of worship can be subject to deficits of this type.

Here too, the reversal of the perspective previously proposed on the question of purgatory, in the light of the three theological criteria stated, forces us to conceive prayer and the communion of saints in a completely different way. The intuition that we must recover, update and maintain points to an extraordinarily positive dimension of prayer and liturgy that, fortunately, is completely removed from the mercantile logic just mentioned. The profound meaning of prayer for the dead reveals the very healthy need to experience that the existential bond that has kept us united to our loved ones during life has not been interrupted by death. If God is a God of the living and not of the dead, it is perfectly reasonable to postulate the communion of saints as the possibility of continuing to deepen this mutual indwelling, given that, just as we think that the dead continue to live in God

– but, equally, in some way, also in us – we can also think that we already inhabit, in a certain sense, the eschatological Kingdom of God, by forming a constitutive part of those who have loved us and still love us in the eternity of the Father. To pray for our dead – who already live forever – is, then, to pray with them before the same God whose face we still seek and they already contemplate, after having left all evil behind them – by contact with the love of God – as happens to the shooting stars that cross the firmament. It makes no sense, then, to conceive of intercession as if it were the search for graces or privileges, in the logic of what Jesus himself condemns in the brothers Zebedee (Mk 10:35-45). It only makes sense as a deepening of the intimacy of God's love in which our loved ones already exist and in which we too are invited to remain. For death does not break our relationships, but on the contrary, they are infinitely strengthened by the absolute, infinite and unconditional love of God.

3.4. Fifth difficulty: intermediate state or essentialization?

What can be said of that eventual „intermediate state” in which the soul – according to the traditional idea of purgatory – would find itself, after death, deprived of its body and waiting to be reunited with it, when, at the end of the history of the world, the resurrection of the flesh takes place on the „last day”?

This idea owes much to a problematic anthropological structure, since, due to its simplicity, it fails, in my opinion, to account for the complexity it deals with. Trying to express the nature of the human being with the ontological contrast of two elements from whose unity a „composite human” would emerge is similar to trying to enter the world of values with the simple antagonism between good and evil, into the world of law with the sole contrast between justice and injustice, or even into the world of aesthetics with a meager palette of colours containing only black and white.

On the contrary, it must be said that human life is complex, multiform, multidimensional and multicoloured. At the very least, first of all, we can see an inorganic dimension that points towards the physical and chemical interactions of the nanoparticles that make up our individuality. Secondly, this inorganic substrate acquires greater complexity in our physiological dimension, since our cells and biomolecules interact organically according to the logic of all living systems. Thirdly, the inorganic and physiological dimensions are raised to a new level of complexity with the psychic dimension. Thanks to it, we relate to the environment in which we grow, we react to nearby stimuli and we acquire an initial perception of ourselves in relation to everything that surrounds us. But it is the spiritual dimension, fourth and last, which, encompassing the previous dimensions like a giant *matryoshka*,

reaches the zenith of the development of our personality by allowing us conscious access to the world of morality, culture and religion.

This means that the reality of the human being is better understood if we consider, at the very least, these four dimensions that bear witness to the inseparably unitary and extremely complex character of human life, instead of approaching it with the unjustly simple scheme of a dualism of entities called „body and soul.” It seems to me more appropriate to understand the complex unity of the human being with the procedural dynamics of an „essentialization” in which its plurality of dimensions meet, pointing toward a goal that even leads it beyond itself¹². „Essentialization” is the process of development and consummation through which the human being gradually reaches its most genuine, most authentic and significant identity, after shedding everything that prevents it from being who it is and infinitely maximizing its own potentialities. The dominant idea in this conception is the relationship of absorption and development that the dimension of the spirit has with respect to the other inferior dimensions of human life. In the spiritual dimension of life, the inorganic, physiological and psychic dimensions that make up our material, vegetative and animal substrata are contained, affirmed and overcome, so that the human spirit does not live contrary to them, but thanks to them and all of them are included in it. And it is precisely on this basis that human life, in the dimension of the spirit, enters – as I have said before – into the realms of morality, culture and religion, transcending the horizontal life of matter, plants and animals, while affirming and surpassing it.

The basic claim of Christianity regarding *postmortem* life involves the totality of created reality, that is, its multidimensional unity without any kind of exception, since the affirmation of the ontological goodness of all creation encompasses everything from matter to spirit¹³. This means that, by emphasizing the necessary process of transformation brought about by death – in line with the *essentialization* mentioned above – it is not necessary to postulate a split of the human being in the well-known duality to imagine the ultimate destiny of the deceased in the presence of God. It is equally possible to conceive of a unitary and gradual process – with the characteristics imagined in the example of Saint Ero in relation to time and in that of atmospheric friction in overcoming evil – when it comes to representing,

¹² Cf. Paul Tillich, *Teología sistemática*, vol. III (Salamanca: Sígueme, 1984), 480ss. The original idea of the “essentialization” is that of Schelling, cf. Friedrich W. J. Schelling, “Über den Zusammenhang der Natur mit der Geistenwelt. Ein Gespräch. Fragment (Aus dem handschriftlichen Nachlass)”, in Idem, *Schellings Werke*, hrsg. M. Schröter (München: Vierter Ergänzungsband, 1959), 103-212.

¹³ Cf. Karl Rahner, *Curso fundamental sobre la fe* (Barcelona: Herder, 1989), 216-231.

even in the form of mythical images, the ultimate destiny of those who have already left this life to reach the shores of eternity.

One can, however, ask, when death comes, what about the corpse. The corpse is not the body of the human being, but their mortal remains. Sooner or later all the mortal remains of creatures that were once alive end up disappearing. They disappear when they decompose. They disappear, in cremation, when they are calcined. They disappear in the tombs when they finally become dust of the earth. It makes no sense, then, to think of a „last day” in which the resurrection of the flesh is conceived as a corpse leaving the grave to go to who knows where, because such reanimation – more appropriate for a *zombie* than for someone resurrected in Christ – would always be related to the space and time of the cemetery. If the resurrection is not, then, the reanimation of a putrefied corpse, what prevents us from affirming that the corporality of the resurrected implies the complete transformation of their inorganic and physiological materiality, since „flesh and blood cannot inherit the Kingdom of God (1 Cor 15:50)”?

Just as in the dream world which we visit every night, even if we do not remember it, we all recognize ourselves, since even when we dream, we have the same face and the same body as during the day – even if our body lies asleep in bed – so, I wonder, could we not imagine ourselves in the eternity of God possessing a *soma pneumatikon* which perfectly accounts for our own identity, despite the gradual decomposition of our mortal remains in space and time? What if the process of „essentialization” were to extract from matter its purest and most essential identity without being caught up in its spatial and temporal extension? What if our personal identity could subsist in the eternity of God by bringing with it *spiritualized matter* which, precisely because it is transfigured, no longer experiences any change or degradation or any dependence on the conditions of existence?

If this were so, we could think of an essential consummation of all created reality by considering the density of matter in the dimension of the spirit as assumed and transformed – not abandoned. And nothing prevents this from being so.

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Time, Eternity and Purification. An Attempt to Solve Five Aporias of the Traditional Idea of Purgatory

SUMMARY

The traditional concept of purgatory needs an appropriate update. In this paper, three theological criteria are proposed, in light of which five aporias are enunciated and evaluated. These aporias make a current understanding of the central intuition that underlies the idea of postmortal purification impossible. Furthermore, the author proposes five other reflections of a systematic nature with the intention of unlocking these aporias and offering a renewed and significant understanding of the essential content of the purification of the human being in the presence of the infinite love of God and also of all those other theological questions directly related to it, especially everything that refers to the relationship between the ordinary time of history and the eternity of God.

Keywords: purgatory, time, eternity, eschatology

