

Peace of Mind

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 20 Apr 1998

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Dan'l Danehy Oakes — 20 Apr 1998, 15:14

This will wander, but I promise it will have some realio trulio Wolfe content before we're done.

Adam wrote:

Incidentally, what is the position of the Catholic church on ghosts? I would think that the idea of all souls going to heaven, hell or purgatory would be inconsistent with the idea of ghosts remaining on earth.

While I'm not 100% certain whether the Roman Catholic Church ("RCC") has a strong position on the subject of ghosts per se, I believe that the general position of the RCC is to discourage superstition in general. In terms of specifics, however, the RCC definitely acknowledges a number of manifestations that one could, without unduly stretching the term, call "ghosts" -- i.e., apparitions of dead saints, etc. I don't suppose any faithful Catholic would refer to such an apparition as a "ghost" (I certainly would not), but it would be hard to draw a meaningful distinction without going into a lot of theological nuances.

Wolfe content(I):

This, I think, relates to aquastors and, um, whatchamacallits. I think these are more like apparitions of saints than what we normally think of as ghosts.

(While I seem to recall reading an article stating that the Catholic church had within the past few years declared purgatory no longer official church doctrine, that would have been after the publication of Peace.)

Not so. What the RCC abandoned a while back was the quasi- doctrine of Limbo. Limbo was never a very well-defined idea; it was an attempt to figure out what God did with the souls of, say, unbaptized infants or virtuous pagans. Some theologians put them in "Limbo," which is where the concept of Limbo is now. I do not believe it was ever a fully-authorized teaching; rather it was a folk teaching, like some of the more exaggerated ideas about the Rosary and suchlike.

Purgatory, on the other hand, is still official doctrine, but a vastly misunderstood one. Many Protestants use the doctrine of Purgatory as "proof" that the RCC is "un-Scriptural" (by which they mean "against Scripture"), when in fact the doctrine is derived from Scripture by the same general process, "development of doctrine," which produced such concepts as the Trinity.

The basic idea is this. (A) Scripture promises that we will all be made perfect. But (B) it seems painfully obvious to most of us that, despite being baptised and working as hard as our particular character permits at becoming perfect, we aren't, and those we know who die in Christ (and I mean Catholics and Orthodox and Protestants and what-all-else) don't seem to have become perfect before dying. Therefore, (C) we conclude that God completes the process in some way. (Indeed, there is Scripture to this effect, though I don't have my references handy.) The RCC calls this

process -- a process of cleansing, or purging -- Purgatory.

Note that it is not defined as a _place_ in even the vague way that Heaven and Hell are defined as places. Some have called it "the first stage of Heaven;" others think of it as something that happens instantaneously upon death; still others actually do think of it as a separate "place." But there is _no_ doctrine to that effect, and despite a really massive accretion of folk doctrine, there never has been. The main thing people seem to agree on is that the process may not be entirely comfortable

-- though the pain is probably more like that of a scab coming off, a good-feeling pain, rather than the despairing pain we associate with Hell.

(So what about the whole "indulgences" thing? That's pretty complex; but the basic idea, the concept that gave rise to the idea of a "90 days' indulgence" or whatever, is that the RCC, in its role as God's vicar and dispenser of grace, may remit some of the pain we associate with the process of Purgation -- what the RCC calls "temporal" punishment as opposed to the eternal punishment of Hell. One way to "earn" this remission is by penitential practices. Other "indulgences" were described, not in "how long in Purgatory" they "buy off" -- though this is how folk-Catholicism came, alas, to understand it -- but in terms of how long a penitence they were equal to. As part of the RCC's overall effort to dispense with the accretions of folk-Catholicism, I believe it has become quite rare to see this terminology at all.)

Wolfe content (II):

Someone asked GW in an interview whether PEACE might be read as a description of Weer in Purgatory, and GW responded in a typically vague but rather positive manner. I believe that this is the _best_ reading of PEACE, and that Wolfe clearly intended this reading. I will probably be rereading PEACE in a few weeks, and will post more detailed comments on this if anyone really cares.

Peace,

--Dan'l Danehy-Oakes	Can you believe that the eagle
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