

SIN, PENANCE AND PURGATORY IN THE ANGLO-NORMAN REALM: THE EVIDENCE OF VISIONS AND GHOST STORIES*

The eleventh, twelfth and thirteenth centuries witnessed dramatic changes in the way the next world was understood. Historians of theology, monasticism, the ‘schools’ and the crusades, among others, have all contributed to a complex picture of changing thought within the Church about the ‘last things’ and the geography of the other-world.¹ A crude sketch of these findings might highlight two particular areas of transformation. First, there was a significant reconceptualization of penance, driven by a complex mixture of lay needs and theological imperatives. By the late eleventh century, the daunting ‘fully satisfactory’ penances of the early Middle Ages (designed to expunge entirely the stain of sin) were seen as increasingly impracticable by men and women who lacked the capacity to perform them, and who therefore batted on to alternative strategies for salvation such as crusading or monastic benefaction. From Anselm (d. 1109) onwards, penitential theology also cast growing doubt on the idea that any earthly penance could adequately recompense God for

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¹ The literature here is vast: some of the better-known contributions to discussion in these areas include: Bernhard Poschmann, *Penance and the Anointing of the Sick* (London, 1964); Cyrille Vogel, *Le Pêcheur et la pénitence au moyen âge* (Paris, 1969); and, for a thorough recent discussion, Sarah Hamilton, *The Practice of Penance* (Woodbridge, 2001). On the other-world, see n. 2 below, and esp. Jacques Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (London, 1984). An important account of monasticism with a bearing on this topic is H. E. J. Cowdrey, *The Cluniacs and the Gregorian Reform* (Oxford, 1970), esp. 121–8. For discussions of penance in a crusading context, see Jonathan Riley-Smith, *The Crusades: A Short History* (London, 1987); Jonathan Riley-Smith, *The First Crusaders, 1095–1131* (Cambridge, 1997); Marcus Bull, *Knightly Piety and the Lay Response to the First Crusade: The Limousin and Gascony, c.970–c.1130* (Oxford, 1993), esp. 155–203. For developments in the ‘schools’, see J. W. Baldwin, *Masters, Princes and Merchants: The Social Views of Peter Chanter and his Circle*, 2 vols. (Princeton, 1970).

human sin. Under these gathering shadows of sinfulness, 'contritionist' thinking about penance cast rays of light. In his *Sentences* of the 1150s, Peter Lombard expressed the new emerging orthodoxy that the guilt of sin could be separated from the punishment due for it, that the absolution of a sorrowful penitent after confession could snatch his or her soul from the jaws of hell, and that the 'satisfaction' still required could be made after death in purging fires of the middle places — which came to be known as purgatory. Under this new penitential regime, even serious sins, once confessed, could be expiated after death. Out of such thinking grew also a renewed emphasis on the power of good deeds done in one's life and suffrages — intercessory prayers — performed by others after one's death to speed a soul through *post-mortem* torments. The second area of change, associated with the first, saw the redrawing of maps of the other-world: maps on which purgatory began to appear as a sharply defined, distinct space between heaven and hell. The nature of purgatory's emergence — whether a sudden birth (marked by the appearance of the noun *purgatorium* in the 1170s) or a slower evolution (in which the name was simply a 'handier coin' struck for the sake of convenience) — has been argued vigorously by historians as eminent as Jacques Le Goff and Sir Richard Southern.²

Historians have tended to explore these two changes of the 'long twelfth century' — the reinvention of penance and the rise of purgatory — in isolation from each other. Here I intend to focus on the relationship between the two, and to look in particular at one aspect of it: the implications of theological change for perceptions of the fate of the dead. Central to this is a consideration of how those charged with the pastoral care of the lay community responded to new penitential and purgatorial ideas evolving within the Church. Who, in particular, among them was trying to disseminate the new thinking in the wider world, and at what point was it spreading? Were the secular diocesan clergy or regulars such as the Augustinian canons its earliest champions? How might local communities have responded to these innovations, and how far can we detect their reactions? Such questions are not easily answered, not least because they lead one away from scholastic argument to complex debates about 'popular',

² These complex issues are sketched in Le Goff, *Birth of Purgatory*; G. R. Edwards, 'Purgatory: "Birth" or "Evolution"?', *Jl Eccles. Hist.*, xxxiv (1985); R. W. Southern, 'Between Heaven and Hell', *Times Lit. Suppl.*, 18 June 1982, 651–2.

'folkloric', 'local' or 'traditional' religion. The difficulties are compounded by problems over sources. In this period, prior to the evangelizing activities triggered by Lateran IV in 1215, sources for local community beliefs about the next world are meagre. They are largely restricted to glimpses in miracle collections, frequent but often formulaic observations in charters, and passing references in episcopal *acta*.³

In the face of problematic and limited resources, perhaps the place to begin a search for more evidence might be vision-narratives.⁴ These are hardly easy sources to use. Most visions were the product of the cloister, often recording the alleged experiences of monks or nuns, mainly for clerical consumption. But texts also survive which claim to represent the experiences of the laity. Vision-narratives do not simply reflect, but rather refract, the cultures which produced them.⁵ They can capture aspects of contemporary religious culture, but, in a quest for authority, visions also self-consciously placed themselves in a living textual tradition which can be traced back through the vision-accounts of Gregory the Great and Bede to the late fourth-century vision of St Paul.⁶ Later visions located themselves in this established canon by direct reference, and also by the borrowing of motifs and topoi. Yet, while little was entirely new in descriptions of the sulphurous fires and flowery meadows of the hereafter, emphases shifted, new elements intruded, and motifs rose and sank. This essay is about some of the currents which brought about such turbulence.

³ For some of the problems of the sources, see Emma Mason, 'The Role of the English Parishioner', *Jl Eccles. Hist.*, xxvii (1976).

⁴ A seminal exploration of visions is E. J. Becker, *A Contribution to the Comparative Study of the Medieval Vision of Heaven and Hell* (Baltimore, 1899). Among important recent discussions are Jacques Le Goff, *The Medieval Imagination*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago, 1984), 86–92, 232–42; Peter Dinzelbacher, *Vision und Visionsliteratur im Mittelalter* (Stuttgart, 1981); Steven F. Kruger, *Dreaming in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1992); Carolly Erickson, *The Medieval Vision: Essays in History and Perception* (Berkeley, 1976); D. D. R. Owen, *The Vision of Hell: Infernal Journeys in Medieval French Literature* (New York, 1971); Claude Carozzi, 'La Géographie de l'au-delà et sa signification pendant le haut moyen âge', in *Popoli e paesi nella cultura altomedievale* (Settimane del Studio Centro Italiano di studi sull'Alto Medioevo, xxix, Spoleto, 1983); Carol Zaleski, *Otherworld Journeys: Accounts of Near-Death Experience in Medieval and Modern Times* (Oxford, 1987).

⁵ On these methodological problems, see Paul E. Dutton, *The Politics of Dreaming in the Carolingian Empire* (Lincoln, Neb., 1994), chs. 2–3.

⁶ On the late Antique and early medieval origins of the vision-writing tradition, see Martha Himmelfarb, *Tours of Hell: An Apocalyptic Form in Jewish and Christian Literature* (Philadelphia, 1983).

In turning to twelfth-century visions which claim to represent something of belief in the local parishes, we find some recorded by parish priests and others by regular clergy with a taste for visionary experiences. Some of these appear in chronicles, others as part of more explicitly didactic collections. Here, I want to explore the ways in which we might read these texts to see if they can tell us anything concerning the wider community's beliefs about the other-world. The primordial and unavoidable problem is that we are compelled to see the beliefs of parishioners through clerical eyes. I can promise no solution to this issue, but I might question the extent of the problem. If we are inclined to divide medieval religion into elite and popular, or clerical and lay, belief, then there is a significant difficulty. The cultural worlds of clerical scribe and lay visionary would be sufficiently alien to make it hard to discern whose voice and whose religious beliefs we were hearing in any report.⁷ If, on the other hand, we abandon these quite rigid categories and think instead of medieval religion as a kind of spectrum, our difficulty shrinks to more manageable proportions, because clerical authors might now be seen as sufficiently sensitive to local religious cultures to be useful witnesses to them. This idea of a 'spectrum' is the working assumption adopted here. The reasons for favouring it over binary models are not original, but they perhaps bear rehearsing. First, medieval society was sufficiently complex for many people to escape binary classifications. Where for instance does the parish priest fit in? Is he a subscriber to elite or to popular religion? He certainly falls into the clerical category, but how meaningful is this label? Parish priests were drawn largely from the peasant communities they served. They often seem to have received only rudimentary education (perhaps at cathedral schools or, more likely, through apprenticeship to another priest), and expectations of them in prescriptive sources were often low.⁸ Secondly, there were many beliefs and practices which transcended fixed categor-

⁷ For an attempt to disentangle 'popular' from 'elite' culture in vision literature, see Jacques Le Goff, 'The Learned and the Popular Dimensions of Journeys to the Otherworld in the Middle Ages', in Steven L. Kaplan (ed.), *Understanding Popular Culture* (New York, 1984). See also Aaron J. Gurevich, *Medieval Popular Religion: Problems of Belief and Perception* (Cambridge, 1988), ch. 4.

⁸ On the limited education of parish priests, see M. Brett, *The English Church under Henry I* (Oxford, 1975), 220–2; Henry Mayr-Harting, 'Functions of a Twelfth-Century Recluse', *History*, lx (1970), 347; Mason, 'Role of the English Parishioner', 18–21; Janet E. Burton, 'Monasteries and Parish Churches in Eleventh- and Twelfth-Century Yorkshire', *Northern Hist.*, xxiii (1987), 50. See also nn. 88–9 below.

ies. Here we need look no further than the social complexity of devotion to the saints which embraced people of diverse calling and rank. Hence, although no texts can take us unproblematically into the heart of belief within the parishes, yet, if we imagine religious culture as a spectrum, they can take us into varying proximities of it. With this in mind, and because the context in which a particular vision-narrative appeared shaped its purpose and affects the way in which we can read it, I want to treat each of the texts separately in order to unpick authorial agendas, circumstances of composition and constraints of genre.

I

THE VISION OF WALCHELIN

The first text I want to consider was the product of a monastic pen. Orderic Vitalis, child-oblate and member of the Benedictine house at St Évroul, furnished an account in his *Ecclesiastical History* which stood somewhere between ghost story and other-worldly vision. Orderic described how a parish priest of the village of Bonneval in the diocese of Lisieux, Normandy, encountered a host of tormented souls while visiting a sick parishioner on the night of 1 January 1091. The priest ostensibly told the tale to Orderic, who said he had written it down from memory thirty years later. Whether we accept this transmission history or see it as a textual construction, what I want to argue here is that two distinct ‘voices’ are represented in this story: the voice of the parish priest, Walchelin; and Orderic’s ‘direct’ interjections into the narrative. I want first to examine these representations, and then to think a little more about the gaps between them and what these might be able to tell us.

The vision opens bleakly with Orderic’s exposition of Walchelin’s tale. A great crowd of souls greeted the priest who ‘recognised among them many of his neighbours who had recently died, and heard them bewailing the torments they suffered because of their sins’.⁹ The exact status of these souls was far from clear. There was a band of clergy who begged for intercessory prayers.¹⁰ But there were also women blinded by earthly joys

⁹ Orderic Vitalis, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, VIII. 17, in *The Ecclesiastical History of Orderic Vitalis*, ed. and trans. Marjorie Chibnall, 6 vols. (Oxford, 1969–80), iv, 238–9. Generally, in citations I follow the translations offered by Chibnall.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* (238–9).

who seemed to have died unaware of the need for confession and penance and were now tortured on burning horses.¹¹ Most interestingly, a man named Stephen, who had murdered a local priest, also appeared. He was now tortured 'for he had died without completing his penance for the terrible crime'.¹² This gives us a clue that we are in an early medieval penitential landscape. Implicit here is the idea that rigorous earthly penances could be 'fully satisfactory': if the priest-murderer had performed his in full he would have been spared dreadful *post-mortem* punishments.¹³ Many of these souls, it seems, had eventual hope of salvation, but the fate of others was less clear. Indeed many hellish qualities surround the vision. This should not surprise us: the theology of death in the eleventh and twelfth centuries was inchoate enough to allow the eternally damned and temporally purged to rub shoulders in the fires of hell. Orderic intervenes in the narrative at this point to explain what is going on, noting how after death:

All unseemliness of which base humanity is guilty is burned away in purgatorial fire [*purgatorio igne*] and the soul is purified by every kind of purgation [*purgationibus*] that the eternal judge deems right. And just as a vessel, cleansed from rust and well-polished, is placed in the treasury, so the soul purified from the stain of every sin is led into paradise where it enters into perfect blessedness and the joy that knows no fear or shadow.¹⁴

Orderic made explicit the idea that these sinful souls were suffering for salvific ends. They burned not in the everlasting fires of hell but in *purgatorial fire*, and suffered not so much punishment but *purgation*: terms which Orderic now introduced into his discussion for the first time. There seems to be a disjunction here between the precise purgatorial theology of Orderic's intervention and the confused, inchoate theological ideas of the 'remembered' narrative.

After this aside, the mood darkens again, as we return to the priest's tale. Walchelin was confronted by a tormented soul, Landry, sometime advocate of Orbec, who pleaded with the priest to take a message to his wife so that he might receive aid. But before the priest could reply the petitioner was whirled away in

¹¹ *Ibid.* (240–1).

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ On such developments in penitential theology, see Cowdrey, *Cluniacs and the Gregorian Reform*, 121–8; Le Goff, *Birth of Purgatory*, 213–18.

¹⁴ Orderic Vitalis, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, VIII. 17 (ed. and trans. Chibnall, iv, 240–1).

the crowd, its members jeering that Landry had never given a hearing to the poor in life and would not be heard himself in death. Aid for souls was possible, then, but some in this gathering were explicitly denied that aid.¹⁵ Landry was succeeded by the ghost of William of Glos, son of Barnon and steward of William of Breteuil. He had received a mill as security on a loan and had subsequently disinherited the owner, leaving the mill to his own heirs. As punishment William carried a burning mill-shaft in his mouth, and hence implored the priest to get his wife and son to return the pledge and thus reduce his pains.¹⁶ Here the actions of the living could benefit the dead, but perhaps only in a limited way, to secure a more tolerable damnation for William.¹⁷ What is striking in this case is the attitude of the priest. He said to the petitioner:

William of Glos died long ago and none of the faithful can carry a message of this kind. I do not know who you are, or who are your heirs. If I presume to tell such things to Roger of Glos and his brothers or their mother they will deride me as a madman.¹⁸

Walchelin thought that he 'would never dare to transmit the messages of the accursed reprobate to anyone'.¹⁹ He saw the ghost not as a soul in need of aid but more as a sort of demonic apparition — a soul from hell which conjured up infernal terrors more than the pains of an emerging purgatory. Hence he turned to 'apotropaic' measures effective against demons as protection against the marauding souls, for example uttering the name of the Blessed Virgin Mary to save himself from the burning hands of William of Glos.²⁰

Yet Walchelin's conviction that the host of souls was infernal and its members were beyond the help of earthly deeds and suffrages was shaken towards the end of the tale. A third petitioner approached and claimed to be his own brother Robert, son

¹⁵ *Ibid.* (242–3).

¹⁶ *Ibid.* (244–5).

¹⁷ On restitution, see Le Goff, *Birth of Purgatory*, 315; James A. Brundage, *Medieval Canon Law* (London, 1995), 77–8. For other examples of how prayer could secure more tolerable damnation for the dead, see Megan McLaughlin, *Consorting with Saints: Prayer for the Dead in Early Medieval France* (Ithaca, 1994), 196, 202–5.

¹⁸ Orderic Vitalis, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, VIII. 17 (ed. and trans. Chibnall, iv, 244–5). The sense of the phrase 'and none of the faithful can carry a message of this kind' (*et huiusmodi legatio nulli fidelium acceptabilis est*) is slightly ambiguous and might be translated 'and none of the faithful would accept a message of this kind'.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* (244–5).

²⁰ *Ibid.* (246–7).

of Ralph the Fair. Initially Walchelin denied him, but 'after so many true words had been spoken . . . with tears he admitted his brother's assertions'.²¹ Without mentioning the word, Robert now drew out purgatorial characteristics of the spectral host:

I have now been permitted to show myself to you, and to reveal my wretched condition . . . After I last spoke to you in Normandy I left for England with your blessing; there I reached my life's end . . . and I have endured severe punishment for the great sins with which I am heavily burdened . . . when you were ordained in England and sang your first Mass for the faithful departed your father Ralph escaped from his punishments and my shield, which caused me great pain, fell from me. As you see I still carry this sword, but I look in faith for release from this burden within the year.²²

In this scene, the gloom of sin and punishment was balanced by the hope of escape; torment without obvious end was transfigured into time-limited purgation.

The vision chronicles the conversion of Walchelin from sceptic to believer in the efficacy of acts of restitution and suffrages for the dead. Interestingly, it also presents the priest's scepticism as being shared by his parishioners. We have just heard the priest's reaction when asked to take messages back to the relatives of William of Glos (the unreceptiveness to such suggestions would, one suspects, have been sharpened here by unwillingness to give up property). But the priest also made a more general observation about the crowd of souls:

This is most certainly Herlechin's company. I have heard many who claimed to have seen them, but have ridiculed the tale-tellers and not believed them because I never saw any solid proof of such things. Now I do indeed see the shades of the dead with my own eyes, but no-one will believe me when I describe my vision unless I can show some sure token to living men.²³

Here then we find two voices and an echo: first, a doubting priest converted into a believer by his visionary experience; second (the echo) local people who share their priest's doubts about the returning dead and the possibility of helping them; and third, a chronicler explaining the narrative in terms of the theology of

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.* (246–9).

²³ *Ibid.* (242–3). On the legendary figure 'Herlechin' or Harlequin and his possible origins, see Ferdinand Lot, 'La Mesnie hellequin et le comte Ernequin de Boulogne', *Romania*, xxiii (1903); Jean-Claude Schmitt, *Ghosts in the Middle Ages: The Living and the Dead in Medieval Society*, trans. Teresa Lavender Fagan (London, 1998), 93–121.

purgatorial fire.²⁴ How should we read this account? One possibility is that (as Orderic claims) the composite nature of the narrative reflects a two-stage composition process. The basic narrative of the vision with all its hellish qualities is Walchelin's original tale as recalled by Orderic thirty years later. The glosses and accretions, far crisper in their theology, represent Orderic's own efforts to straighten out and clarify the remembered tale. But even if we reject this view and read the story as a 'sermon' in which the images of priest and parishioners were constructed by Orderic for monastic consumption, Orderic's representations would have needed to be plausible to his monastic audience. If not, the claims of the narrative to historical truthfulness would have been undermined and its message seriously compromised (especially important given that it was incorporated into a chronicle, not a collection of sermons). 'Plausible' is the key word here: if we think monks were cloistered introverts, then Orderic had free rein.²⁵ If, on the other hand, we think there was extensive contact between the cloister and the world, as most twelfth-century chronicles emphatically suggest, then the credibility of Orderic's characters would matter much more.²⁶ Whether one thinks of this text as a mixture of remembered narrative and didactic spin, or as a sermon in purer form, we might develop from it a similar working hypothesis: that in the early years of the twelfth century pessimistic piety gripped the parishes; that hell was thickly populated with souls of the dead; that ideas about purgatorial punishment had made little headway; and that the efficacy of suffrages was not fully accepted.

²⁴ Chibnall has observed that 'in the form he has passed it on to us it [the story] is as much a moral and social tract or sermon, coloured by the penitential teaching of the twelfth century, as a piece of folklore': see Orderic Vitalis, *Historia Ecclesiastica* (ed. and trans. Chibnall, iv, pp. xxxviii–xl). It was partly a warning against the violence of knights and nobles in twelfth-century France, revealing the *post-mortem* consequences for men who lived by profession of arms, and it also enshrined other social values, emphasizing the sanctity of inheritance and warning against the dispossession of rightful heirs.

²⁵ Orderic himself was well informed and quite well travelled in the locality of St Évroul. For example, see *ibid.* (436–8).

²⁶ See Marjorie Chibnall, *The World of Orderic Vitalis* (Oxford, 1984). On Orderic's audience, see R. D. Ray, 'Orderic Vitalis and his Readers', *Studia Monastica*, xiv (1972).

II

THE VISION OF ORM

A second text, the Vision of Orm, has the potential to bring us a little closer to the religion of the parishes, because it was, ostensibly, the work of a parish priest. It describes how in 1125 a thirteen-year-old boy by the name of Orm, from the parish of Howden, had a vision of the next world. This was written up in 1126 by Sigar, priest of the neighbouring parish of Newbald, who dedicated the work to Symeon of Durham.²⁷ Sigar looks like a well-educated and 'interventionist' amanuensis, because the tale is peppered with scriptural quotations and liturgical references. One can only imagine that he was writing with close attention to his monastic dedicatee. Nonetheless, this vision still has much to tell us. First, in the description of Orm, we get a parish priest's idealized impression of child-piety. Unsurprisingly, we are told that he was meek, patient, temperate, generous to the poor, and a regular church-attender. But more striking is that he knew the Lord's Prayer but not the Creed.²⁸ In heaven, Orm glimpsed Christ on the cross, the Blessed Virgin Mary and the Apostles with gold crosses in their hands, all of whom, we are told, he 'knew well'.²⁹ Secondly, and more importantly for our purposes, we hear about the next world. Much of this is commonplace. The other-world comprised four places and four sorts of souls. The damned pass directly into the torments of hell (where demons, worms, rivers of ice and the gaping mouth of hell are all vividly depicted); the blessed go straight to heaven. In between, there were souls in earthly paradise, richly dressed and joyful. Paradise was circumscribed by a wall, and beyond this were further souls who were less richly dressed and rather less joyful. Hugh Farmer, the editor of the vision, comments that its imagery looks as if it were drawn from the same stock as parish church art of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries: images of St Michael from the Doom, Christ on the Cross, the twelve Apostles, Mary pleading for souls, and the maw of hell.

²⁷ It was certainly written before 1130 (the year in which Symeon died). The dedication to Symeon is in part explained by the status of the parish in which Orm lived: Howden was a jurisdictional peculiar of Durham. See 'The Vision of Orm', ed. Hugh Farmer, *Analecta Bollandiana*, lxxv (1957), 72–3.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 77.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 79.

Perhaps the most important feature, though, is what is missing from the vision: there is no mention of purgation or purgatorial fire. Hell (*Gehenna*) contained only the damned — *animas dampnatorum* — and it is quite clear that there was no time-limited punishment there. The middling groups were differentiated, but neither was undergoing any sort of purgatorial torment. In this very 'static' vision, these souls were simply waiting, and it seems clear that they were waiting for the Last Judgement. The latter is not an explicit theme of this vision, but it is a brooding presence and a powerful influence: for example, St Michael, the weigher of souls in 'Judgement' scenes, guides Orm through the next world and is shown holding a book in which two-thirds of the pages are turned (a symbol perhaps of time past and to come); when Orm awakes, the priest questions him about the coming of Antichrist and the end of the world. As the Day of Judgement loomed large, so the idea of particular judgement and purgation during the interval between death and the 'Doom' diminished. If purgatorial fire had any role in this salvific schema — and none is mentioned — it would be kindled at the last to burn away the sins of the middling groups (given how these souls are depicted, the sins were probably quite minor). The piety here, like that of the Vision of Walchelin, is stark. Only limited hope of salvation is extended to the laity. In earthly paradise, Orm meets four groups of joyful souls. Two are clerical — monks and bishops; the other two are children (few in number), and, finally, lay men and women. Justice, rather than mercy, dominates in the portrayal of Christ and the Apostles, each appearing with a sword partly drawn from the scabbard. Indeed, for the laity in this vision, entry into the ranks of the elect demands austerity akin to that of the cloister. In heaven, Orm meets the daughter of a local knight who had long preserved her virginity and preferred to die rather than face its loss through marriage. On being betrothed, her wish was granted and, after making full confession and receiving the Eucharist, she died and went to heaven.³⁰ There are resonances here with early medieval visions. Bede's lay visionary, Drythelm, fled the world for Melrose Abbey in order to lead a life of penitential austerity.³¹ But Bede also had Drythelm talk

³⁰ *Ibid.* Farmer suggests that the knight could be Stephen of Aumale (d. 1127) or Stephen of Richmond.

³¹ For the vision of Drythelm, see Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, v, 12, ed. and trans. Bertram Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford, 1969), 488–99.

about purgatorial fire and suffrages, whereas there is little of either in the *Vision of Orm*. Suffrages appear fleetingly, but the implications of intercessory action are never fully clarified. For instance, the knight offered alms for the soul of his daughter each year, but the girl was already in heaven and had got there on her own merits; the alms seem an irrelevance to her condition.

Such representations of lay visionary experiences are paralleled in miracle collections. Two strikingly similar examples were recorded by Thomas of Monmouth among the miracles of St William of Norwich.³² Thomas described how a man who lived near Ely was vouchsafed a vision of the next world as he lay sick. For him the other-world was sharply divided. He witnessed the joys of heaven (where he saw Christ, the Blessed Virgin Mary and, inevitably, little St William in pride of place among 'thousands' of other saints) and the torments of hell (where he met many dead men and women whom he had once known). Such encounters are commonplace, but the words uttered by these suffering souls to the visionary are curious. They asked not for prayers and masses but simply 'entrusted him with certain familiar signs and tokens, commissioning him to certain of their kindred who were still enjoying the light of life, they assured these that the same torments were prepared for them, unless they should repent and desist from those crimes that they knew of'.³³ Again, we have a vision ascribed to a layman where there is no place for purging fires.

In the *Vision of Walchelin*, we were presented with a lay community who clearly did not comprehend purgatorial pains and the power of suffrages. In the *Vision of Orm* and the narratives presented by Thomas of Monmouth, purgatorial pains did not figure at all, and the theology of suffrages was confused. This picture can be supplemented by some of the findings of recent research into aristocratic strategies of monastic benefaction. Megan McLaughlin has cast doubt on the idea that these families were trying to accumulate 'units' of intercession by calculating the spiritual benefits that they would receive, in the quantitative

³² For a discussion of similar material in an effort to illuminate aristocratic piety on the Continent, see Bull, *Knightly Piety and the Lay Response to the First Crusade*, 191–203.

³³ Thomas of Monmouth, *The Life and Miracles of St William of Norwich*, ed. Augustus Jessopp and M. R. James (Cambridge, 1896), 67–74. There is also a similar vision of a little girl (74–5).

fashion in which late medieval men and women understood the value of suffrages.³⁴ Rather, prayer was perceived to be 'associative', forging bonds between benefactor and prayer community. The monastic liturgy was seen as binding all into the corporate penitential activity of the cloister. These bonds stretched even to the dead, who were suspended in the middle places during the interval between their individual deaths and the Day of Judgement. Here the dead continued to benefit from the commemorative liturgies and penitential austerities of living monks, since these souls were drawn back and made 'present' among them.³⁵ Only at the Last Judgement would this penitential activity cease and the books finally close on the virtues and vices of each of the faithful. So, it might be the case that purgatorial fire and the power of suffrages were less potent than we have imagined, even in the thought of those close to the cloister in the early twelfth century. If this was the case, then Orderic's polemic about purgatorial fire and intercessions for the dead begins to be more intelligible: for him, 'purging' (and hope of speedy release from pains), rather than 'waiting' (for the end of time), was the key characteristic of the middle places. So, too, the limited role ascribed to purgatorial fire and suffrages makes more sense in the Vision of Orm: in the parishes, even further removed from the new thinking emerging in some cloisters, it seems that the 'Doom', painted on wall and screen, was still the most potent eschatological idea.

³⁴ See McLaughlin, *Consorting with Saints*, ch. 5. See also Patrick J. Geary, 'Exchange and Interaction between the Living and the Dead in Early Medieval Society', in his *Living with the Dead in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, 1994); Dominique Iogna-Prat, 'The Dead in Celestial Bookkeeping of the Cluniac Monks around the Year 1000', in Lester K. Little and Barbara H. Rosenwein (eds.), *Debating the Middle Ages: Issues and Readings* (Oxford, 1998); Constance Brittain Bouchard, *Sword, Mitre and Cloister: Nobility and the Church in Burgundy, 980–1198* (Ithaca, 1987); Stephen D. White, *Custom, Kinship and Gifts to Saints: The 'Laudatio Parentum' in Western France, 1050–1150* (Chapel Hill, 1988); Barbara H. Rosenwein, *To Be the Neighbor of St Peter: The Social Meaning of Cluny's Property, 909–1049* (Ithaca, 1989), esp. ch. 5.

³⁵ On meanings of prayer for the dead, see F. Neiske, 'Vision und Totengedenken', *Frühmittelalterliche Studien*, xx (1986); Arnold Angenendt, 'Theologie und Liturgie der mittelalterlichen Toten-Memoria', in Karl Schmid and Joachim Wollasch (eds.), *Memoria: Der geschichtliche Zeugniswert des liturgischen Gedenkens im Mittelalter* (Munich, 1984).

III

THE VISION OF AILSI

How far had things changed in the parishes by 1200? Two further visions might help here, both of which indicate that purgatorial fire had now reached the parishes. The first is from the *Liber Revelationum*, a huge collection of dreams and visions compiled in about 1200 by Peter of Cornwall, prior of Holy Trinity, Aldgate.³⁶ Peter was a collector, not a creator, of knowledge, and this book is an attempt to make vision material available for didactic purposes. Among many more familiar texts is a vision experienced by Peter's grandfather, Ailsī. He was a wealthy burgess of Dunheved, Cornwall, who held lands from Launceston Priory and allegedly had a visionary experience around 1100. Though ostensibly the vision of a layman, it is hard to believe that this text gives unproblematic access to lay beliefs about the next world. Peter of Cornwall had heard this story from his father, Jordan, who 'used to relate it to him in his boyhood', but could remember only 'a small part' of the vision.³⁷ Peter in turn confessed to a fallible memory, often drawing attention to lost details as he talked about his family. At one point he even left a space in the manuscript for a story he had forgotten, hoping to get an account of it from his brother at some future date. Turning to the vision, Peter describes it 'in so far as he can remember it after a lapse of so many years'. But, in fact, Peter's memory serves him suspiciously well here: he relates the vision with an unaffected assurance absent from the preceding discussion. The account also bubbles with familiar motifs: images of souls purged of their sins in boiling rivers; souls turning slowly from black to white as the purgative process takes effect; and a plenitude of torments tailored to specific sins. Peter was, it seems, drawing on all the other visions and theological tracts he had collected in order to tell us not what Ailsī did see, but what he *ought* to have seen.³⁸ Nonetheless, Peter was a well-placed observer of religious

³⁶ On his life and work, see Richard Sharpe, 'Peter of Cornwall', in C. S. Nicholls (ed.), *New Dictionary of National Biography: Missing Persons* (Oxford, 1993), 519–20.

³⁷ 'The Vision of Ailsī', ed. and trans. Richard Sharpe, *Cornish Studies*, xiii (1985), 16–17. See also the discussion in Robert Easting and Richard Sharpe, 'Peter of Cornwall: The Visions of Ailsī and his Sons', *Mediaevistik*, i (1988). In the following citations I follow the translation offered by Sharpe.

³⁸ On Peter's wide reading, including that for his vast theological compendium, the *Pantheologus*, see 'Vision of Ailsī', ed. and trans. Sharpe, 11.

culture beyond the cloister: his formative years were spent in Cornwall in a family whose stories and traditions he still cherished in later life; his order, the Augustinians, was founded not to flee the world but to change it. How does Peter view the wider community of the faithful? One thing is striking: he feels able to portray lay men and women as knowing little about the other-world.

[Ailsa] begins to ponder within himself concerning the nature of the next world. He knew nothing of it as a layman, nor was any man able to inform him and so he remained much in fear and in doubt. And because he knew so little about the punishment of the wicked and the rewards of the good, the more anxious he was to learn.³⁹

Hence God sent Ailsa his vision. There are rhetorical issues at stake here, too: this remark was also a device to frame the vision. But if it was to serve this purpose, Peter must have expected his audience (of fellow canons and laity) to find it credible.

In Ailsa, Peter constructs an image of the pious layman — an image coloured by familial affection and spiritual imperatives. Ailsa was ‘simple, upright and godfearing’: a ‘man of God’ whom we see ‘lying in prayer on the ground’. He ‘kept himself from evil’, and was devoted to St Stephen and the house of canons at St Stephen’s, Launceston, which he served ardently as an overseer and treasurer of building works, and as an advocate in the county court.⁴⁰ Good works and godliness earned him regular visions of the saint.⁴¹ Jordan followed his father as secular patron of the religious at Launceston, and he is described in similar terms. At the end of Jordan’s days, ‘in goodness with a true confession and holy contrition of heart, commending himself to God and St Stephen, he died happily in the arms of the prior of St Stephen’s’. Here, unlike the earlier visions, the lay condition is portrayed in positive terms: salvation is possible by serving God in the world. This is reflected in Peter’s discussion of the next world.⁴² Rigorous earthly penitential activity finds no place. The consequences of sin are expunged after death in purgatorial places (which are a major subject of the vision). Most importantly, Peter portrays a wide spectrum of society as ultimate ‘beneficiaries’ of

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 26–9.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 16–17.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 27.

purgatorial fire.⁴³ Having passed through it, souls arrive in a place of 'refreshment' — earthly paradise — where Ailsa sees separate choirs of virgins, widows, husbands and wives, of prelates and bishops, and also 'choirs of all orders, grades, sexes and ages'.⁴⁴ Peter's portrayal of the Church Militant needed to be grounded in social realities if his vision was to be credible. But moving to the invisible world of Church Suffering and Triumphant, Peter was governed by theological imperatives, not beliefs in the parishes: he discloses what he wanted parishioners to know, not what they already knew.

IV

THE VISION OF THURKILL

Another vision, the Vision of Thurkill, can perhaps take us further. This claims to recount the other-worldly experiences of a peasant from Stisted, Essex, and suggests that the purgatorial ideas described by Peter of Cornwall had indeed been absorbed in the parishes. This is, however, no simple peasant vision either.⁴⁵ Our text reveals that Thurkill had recounted his vision many times before it was written down; he told it to the local priest, his lord and parishioners gathered in the church, even at local monasteries.⁴⁶ There was ample scope for reshaping of any 'original' narrative during these retellings. The vision was eventually recorded in 1206. Its author's identity is not certain, but the most likely candidate is Ralph, abbot of the Cistercian house of Coggeshall. The author, Ralph or whoever, operated self-consciously within the vision-writing tradition, noting how God had often granted glimpses of the other-world, and listing visions from those of Gregory the Great to twelfth-century revelations of the Monk of Eynsham and the Knight Owein.

Aaron Gurevich acknowledged that this is a complex, composite narrative, but argued that the contributions of Thurkill, priest,

⁴³ Peter describes four places: heaven, hell, purgatorial zones (the noun *purgatorium* does not appear) and the earthly paradise.

⁴⁴ 'Vision of Ailsa', ed. and trans. Sharpe, 34–5.

⁴⁵ An interesting comparative case is the Vision of Alberic. Here the visionary later became a monk, read a version of his own vision, and accused the copyist of falsifying passages of it. See Paul G. Schmidt, 'Vision of Thurkill', *Jl Warburg and Courtauld Insts.*, xli (1978).

⁴⁶ *Visio Thurkilli Relatore, ut Videtur, Radulpho de Coggeshall*, ed. Paul G. Schmidt (Leipzig, 1978), 8–9.

and author, could be distinguished by close reading of the text, thereby separating layers of high theology from simple peasant belief.⁴⁷ I am rather more sceptical that any process of distillation can confidently recover the pristine contributions of priest and peasant. The reasons why the vision was recorded give rise to this scepticism. The author made two points here. First, he thought the tale was true: he had heard the story from Thurkill's own lips and thought the peasant a man of 'simplicity and innocence'. But secondly, the author had in mind the didactic value of the account he was producing. He wanted to preserve Thurkill's narrative of the other-world in writing for 'simple men who often benefit more from visions of this kind than obscure and profound theological disputations'.⁴⁸ This is an important phrase; the author's didactic project turns precisely on making the theology of the other-world accessible to a wider audience through simple peasant language. The comment was no idle resort to topoi either, since the narrative is full of parish-pump theology on unpaid tithes, the need for restitution of ill-gotten gains, and so on.⁴⁹ Thurkill may well have supplied the raw material, but, given his agenda, our author might also have put his own thoughts in Thurkill's words, and then in Thurkill's mouth. Separating author from informant becomes an impossible task. Because of this, we need to read the vision more as didactic tract than peasant narrative.

So what was our author trying to teach? Purgatorial places are at the vision's heart. Thurkill sees a church with souls approaching it on all sides — the distant ones are black, those nearer, in a picturesque touch, are spotted black and white, those within its walls gleaming white and pure. Souls are also purged in other places — spiked bridges, icy pools and the like.⁵⁰ On the south side of the church, more souls were enduring moderate torments: weariness rather than agony. Thurkill also saw souls in

⁴⁷ Aaron J. Gurevich, 'Oral and Written Culture of the Middle Ages: Two "Peasant Visions" of the Late Twelfth and Early Thirteenth Centuries', *New Literary Hist.*, xvi (1984).

⁴⁸ *Visio Thurkilli*, ed. Schmidt, 36–7.

⁴⁹ We see burning pits fuelled by the tithings of the unjust; Thurkill is also warned to look to his own unpaid tithes and to seek absolution (the implication is perhaps that he had been excommunicated unnamed under the General Sentence). More interestingly, in places of moderate torments we also see Thurkill's former lord, Roger Picoth, who was prevented from approaching the church of blessed souls because of wages owed to his labourers. *Ibid.*, 10–13.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 10–19.

hell: barons, proud men, priests, knights, justices, robbers of churches, herdsman and millers.⁵¹ Finally, he witnessed (from a distance) others on the Mount of Joy, the eventual destination of souls after they passed through purging fire. In this vision, salvation is possible for all the faithful — all grades and social groups appear scattered through all the different other-worldly zones. The vision also contains messages about strategies for earning salvation at the turn of the thirteenth century. Some of this was far from new, for our author's image of the good death is a familiar one. When Thurkill fell for days into his visionary slumber, there was great fear he might die unshriven:

the deacon of the parish church was there, continually calling him by name, and trying to make him receive the viaticum, lest he should die without it . . . And the following Sunday the priest of the same church exhorted his congregation to pour forth prayers for the safety of the sick man so that divine mercy might grant time for confession.⁵²

If the idea of the good death was little altered, that of the good life, as in the Vision of Ailsi, was much redefined. Gone were the old austerities. The pious laity no longer needed to flee the world and embrace an eremitical existence. Thurkill's religion was of a worldly kind. He was 'industrious at his work', a generous host to travellers, and practised a simple piety (we see him, for example, uttering the Lord's Prayer as he toiled in the fields). His wife was sketched in similar fashion, hurrying off to mass on Saturday morning.

The Vision of Thurkill also shows us why this redefinition has come about, revealing how the laity had recourse to new ways of coping with sin without radically altering their lives. Changes in ideas about penance are important here. These can seldom be measured directly, but in a sort of other-worldly version of Brownian motion, the impact of penitential changes can often be gauged by observing the movements of more visible aspects of belief and practice. We get one clear glimpse of penance. In hell, Ralph takes us to an infernal theatre where the damned are both audience and black-comic turn. In the stalls are vacant seats in varying states of construction. St Dominic explains that 'the seats were daily being formed for living men, by the accumulation of their wicked deeds', but 'those who chose to turn away from

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 19–27.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 17–18. The consequences of not doing this are seen in hell, where a baron who died unconfessed is seen riding a black horse and attended by demons.

their wicked deeds, amending their lives and redeeming the sins they committed through penance and alms, daily broke their seats, but often renewed them again by relapsing into sin'.⁵³ Here Ralph was advertising the value of penances to his simple, unlettered audience, and the vision implies strongly that penances were valuable to all levels of society (all are represented in the infernal theatre). But we have now moved away from those daunting fully satisfactory penances designed to cancel all *post-mortem* punishment. In the Vision of Thurkill, contrition, confession, absolution and (token) penance are primarily about expunging the guilt of sin and saving a soul from hellfire. Satisfaction for one's sins is not achieved through rigorous penitential activity on earth but in the purgatorial places. And these purgatorial places have also evolved: they have a sharper identity and are thickly populated by the souls of ordinary parishioners. Hope as well as fear is to be found here. This is symbolized by saints (rather than demons) presiding over them, but it is explained by the way in which living and dead parishioners are bound in an economy of intercessory prayer. Thurkill told all the parishioners 'about the state of their fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters . . . and whether they were still detained in pains or in rest and explained by how many masses they could be liberated from the penal places'.⁵⁴ He also revealed how suffrages were available to all, irrespective of means: thirty masses were needed to release Thurkill's father, but the saints explain that twenty were remitted on the grounds of poverty.⁵⁵

Peter of Cornwall and the author of the Vision of Thurkill illuminate a shift in church attitudes to, and expectations of, the wider community of the faithful between 1100 and 1200. If we return for a moment to aristocratic piety and monastic benefactions, it is possible to detect signs that such new teachings about pious provision were having some influence. During the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries donations become more specific and there seems to be a greater awareness that particular liturgical acts have the capacity to extinguish measurable consequences of sin. Of these, the new importance attached to the mass was probably the most significant, reflected by an increasingly fre-

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 16–17.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 32. Whenever Thurkill recognized souls in these places, St Michael would tell him how many masses would release them from purgatorial torment.

quent desire for burial near the high altar of conventual churches, requests for masses, and the eventual emergence of the chantry mass.⁵⁶ But in trying to trace these influences more deeply into society, the two later visions tell us depressingly little. For this, evidence is required from another source.

V

GHOSTS

If visits by the living to the dead cannot help us, then perhaps we should turn to visits by the dead to the living. Ghost stories, or rather revenant-stories — ghosts that returned to haunt in the flesh — provide another way into the problem.⁵⁷ The main authority is William of Newburgh, an Augustinian canon of the house of Newburgh in Yorkshire, who wrote his *Historia Rerum Anglicarum* towards the end of the twelfth century.⁵⁸ We are dealing here with a significantly different kind of source from most of the vision-accounts. William described his duties as chronicler in precise terms; he felt obliged to record the ‘facts’ of history and not engage in ‘mystical speculations’. However unstable we may feel such a distinction to be, it nonetheless allowed William the flexibility to report stories that he thought historically truthful but inscrutable, while leaving others to dis-

⁵⁶ Special masses, including masses for the dead, were certainly available in the early Middle Ages but Megan McLaughlin points out that the laity showed only limited interest in them: see McLaughlin, *Consorting with Saints*, 153. On the increased significance attached to the Eucharist in a post-Anselmian world, see Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (Cambridge, 1991), chs. 1–2. On shifting patterns of pious provision, see David Crouch, ‘The Culture of Death in the Anglo-Norman World’, in C. Warren Hollister (ed.), *Anglo-Norman Political Culture and the Twelfth-Century Renaissance: Proceedings of the Borchard Conference on Anglo-Norman History, 1995* (Woodbridge, 1997), 172–7. See also Joan Wardrop, *Fountains Abbey and its Benefactors, 1132–1300* (Kalamazoo, 1987), ch. 6. On the chantry mass, see K. L. Wood-Legh, *Perpetual Chantries in Britain* (London, 1965).

⁵⁷ On ghosts generally, see Schmitt, *Ghosts in the Middle Ages*; Nancy Caciola, ‘Wraiths, Revenants and Ritual in Medieval Culture’, *Past and Present*, no. 152 (Aug. 1996); Claude Lecouteux, *Fantômes et revenants au moyen âge* (Paris, 1986); Paul Barber, *Vampires, Burial, and Death: Folklore and Reality* (New Haven, 1988). Revenants appeared in similar forms to those of the English stories in many Icelandic sagas: see Hilda R. Ellis Davidson, ‘The Restless Dead: Icelandic Ghost Stories’, in Hilda R. Ellis Davidson and W. M. S. Russell (eds.), *The Folklore of Ghosts* (Cambridge, 1981); N. K. Chadwick, *Norse Ghosts: A Study in the Draugr and the Haugbúi* (Cambridge, 1946).

⁵⁸ On William of Newburgh, see Antonia Gransden, *Historical Writing in England, c.550–1307* (London, 1974), 263–8.

cover their meaning. William's tales about revenants fall into this category. The stories had been reported to him from local communities by 'trustworthy men', three coming from the north (Berwick, Melrose and Yorkshire) and one from the south (Buckinghamshire). All were recorded in a passage immediately before entries for the year 1196, and describe how corpses rose from the grave and harried the living. Local people seem to have interpreted the revenants as demonic and turned to exorcistic rituals or else, often with the connivance of local churchmen, put them to the torch.⁵⁹ William himself was more cautious about the stories, maintaining that he was unsure 'by what spirit' revenants walked, and that others said they did so 'by the operation of Satan'.⁶⁰ The Buckinghamshire story is the most interesting.⁶¹ William told how a dead man of that county haunted his village, which prompted local people to appeal to their archdeacon, who in turn put the case to Hugh of Avallon, bishop of Lincoln (1186–1200). William notes:

The bishop being amazed at this [case], held a plain discussion with his companions; and there were some who said that such things had happened before in England, and cited frequent examples to make clear that peace could not be restored to the people unless the body of this most miserable man was dug up and burnt.⁶²

The churchmen around Hugh seem to have taken a similar view to that of the parishioners and priests in the other tales: that this creature was a demon, and should be destroyed by fire. But Hugh took a different line:

This proceeding, however, seemed unseemly and unworthy to the bishop, who shortly afterwards, addressed a letter of absolution, written with his own hand, to the archdeacon, in order that it might be demonstrated by inspection in what state the body of the man really was; and he commanded his tomb to be opened, and the letter having been placed on his breast, to be closed.⁶³

The bishop of Lincoln thought this revenant was walking by divine permission in order to seek aid from the living, specifically

⁵⁹ William of Newburgh, *Historia Rerum Anglicarum*, v. 23, in *Chronicles of the Reigns of Stephen, Henry II and Richard I*, ed. Richard Howlett, 4 vols. (Rolls ser., London, 1884–5), ii, 476–82.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.* (476).

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, v, 22 (474–5).

⁶² *Ibid.* (475).

⁶³ The bishop seems to have ordered the opening of the grave and inspection of the corpse to seek some sign that his interpretation was true; perhaps the thought was that the corpse had not decayed in the accustomed way and was being preserved by divine dispensation so that the soul could wander abroad in order to seek absolution.

for absolution of its sins. This being done, the corpse 'was no longer seen to wander nor permitted to inflict trouble or terror on anyone'.⁶⁴ It is not clear here whether Hugh was absolving from sentence of excommunication or more generally from sin. Later evidence might lead us to argue for the former but the latter was not without precedent either.⁶⁵ In any event, the key point here is the gap between, on the one hand, views of parishioners, priests and diocesan clergy of Lincoln, and on the other, the opinion of Bishop Hugh. To this we shall return.

A case where the theology is clearer-cut appears in Walter Map's *Courtiers' Trifles*. At one point in this cheerfully irreverent work, the wit and raconteur appears in more sober guise to tell us about revenants.⁶⁶ One of Walter's tales is rather similar to that dealt with by Hugh of Avallon. Map recounted how 'a knight of Northumberland was seated alone in his house after dinner in summer about the tenth hour, and lo! his father, who had died long before, approached him clad in a foul and ragged shroud'.⁶⁷ The knight believed that the apparition was a devil and drove it from the threshold, but then the ghost spoke, revealing his identity and entreating his son to fetch the priest. When the priest arrived, the revenant exclaimed, 'I am that wretch whom you long ago excommunicated unnamed, with many more, for unrighteous withholding of tithes; but the common prayers of the church and alms of the faithful have, by God's grace, so helped me that I am permitted to ask for absolution'.⁶⁸ The priest gave this and the ghost walked back to the grave. The tale served as a kind of *exemplum*, but in so doing, the revenant was redefined, walking not through demonic power, but for the benign purpose

⁶⁴ Le Goff, *Birth of Purgatory*, 61–95. Caesarius of Heisterbach suggested that souls could re-enter the body after death and perform some brief act of penance or restitution before dying for a second time, thus saving themselves from hellfire: Caesarius of Heisterbach, *Dialogus Miraculorum*, XII. 23, in *Caesarii Heisterbacensis Monachi Ordinis Cisterciensis Dialogus Miraculorum*, ed. Joseph Strange, 2 vols. (Cologne, 1851), ii, 335.

⁶⁵ For example, at the deathbed of young King Henry, bishops are portrayed signing his absolution shortly after his death: see Crouch, 'Culture of Death', 193–4. Herbert Thurston also noted evidence of inscribed absolution crosses in graves in his 'Broucolaccas: A Study in Medieval Ghost Lore', *Month*, xc (1897).

⁶⁶ Map was perhaps a native of Herefordshire, probably educated at Gloucester, and then in Paris (1154–61). He served as itinerant justice of Henry II on his return, served Gilbert Foliot, and then moved to Lincoln in 1183×5.

⁶⁷ Walter Map, *De Nugis Curialium*, II. 30, in *The Courtiers' Trifles*, ed. M. R. James, revised R. A. B. Mynors and C. N. L. Brooke (Oxford, 1986), 206–7.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

of seeking aid from the living. Interestingly, while Map had no problems elsewhere with stories about demonic revenants, *this* story was a source of surprise, prompting him to comment: 'this new case has introduced a new subject of discussion into the books of divinity'.⁶⁹ Revenant-stories suggest that new penitential and purgatorial teachings were percolating through late twelfth-century England, but that their impact on parishioners, priests and diocesan clergy was patchy and limited.

Returning to Hugh and the Buckingham revenant, it is striking that the bishop's companions (presumably his household or the cathedral chapter) differed from their bishop, especially as we know a little about some of these men, many of whom had been educated in Paris, the crucible of innovative purgatorial and penitential thought. But if we look more closely at the chronology of these developments it is less surprising. As noted earlier, Peter Lombard had put new contritionist thought about penance into more widespread circulation in his *Sentences* during the 1150s, arguing that even serious sins could, after death, be purged in fire, so long as the sinner was penitent and had indicated this through confession. Acceptance of this new contritionist notion of penance, in what would become a standard theological primer, inaugurated an important theological shift. But it was a slow movement. Efforts to apply these insights in a practical fashion in the field of pastoral divinity only really got under way in Paris during the last quarter of the twelfth century.⁷⁰ Most of the Lincoln chapter had passed through the Paris schools by this date. In any case, most of them had been studying canon law, not theology, and, as Jacques Le Goff has noted, canon law was slow to absorb new theological ideas.⁷¹

While Lincoln was known in England as a leading school, its limitations are exposed by Hugh of Avallon's need, on his arrival there as bishop, to import learned men from elsewhere.⁷² Both

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ See Baldwin, *Masters, Princes and Merchants*, i, 43–55.

⁷¹ See D. M. Smith, 'Hugh's Administration of the Diocese of Lincoln', in Henry Mayr-Harting (ed.), *St Hugh of Lincoln: Lectures Delivered at Oxford and Lincoln to Celebrate the Eighth Centenary of St Hugh's Consecration as Bishop of Lincoln* (Oxford, 1987); Le Goff, *Birth of Purgatory*, 146–8.

⁷² His main preoccupation here was to acquire men who could help him administer canon law, but he also introduced William de Montibus (who arrived at Lincoln in 1186 and served as chancellor between 1191 and 1213) in an effort to improve the education of the parish clergy. William was, however, a practical rather than a

(cont. on p. 26)

the surviving twelfth-century books of the library at Lincoln and its twelfth-century book-list also suggest a conservative theological tendency. Peter Lombard's *Sentences* was there, and so was Peter Comestor's *Historia Scholastica* — but there was no copy of his *De Sacramentis*, an influential text of the 1170s in which new purgatorial and penitential thought was expressed in more succinct and practical form.⁷³ The bishop's companions would probably not have encountered much novel theology at Lincoln. Hugh himself, who was known for his learning, must have been well acquainted with the thought of Peter Lombard, but questions still arise over what inspired him to apply such new ideas in practical ways.⁷⁴ It is far from clear that he was motivated by close ties to the Parisian schools. A more economical explanation might be that his attitudes were formed within the Carthusian Order itself. The Rule warned: 'if for whatever reason you lose the will to save one man, no matter whom, you cut off a limb from Christ's body'.⁷⁵ In moving from the role of monk to that of bishop, Hugh carried the Carthusian ethic with him from the cloister into the secular world. This is visible in his energetic preaching, in his ministry of the sacraments to the laity and, most germane to our purpose, in the great care he took to ensure proper burial of the dead.⁷⁶ Hence he taught that

(n. 72 cont.)

speculative theologian whose task was to ground priests in the basics of sacramental theology. See Adam of Eynsham, *The Life of St Hugh of Lincoln*, ed. Decima L. Douie and Hugh Farmer, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1961–2), i, 110–11; Dorothy Owen (ed.), *A History of Lincoln Minster* (Cambridge, 1994), 125–9. On William de Montibus and his writings, see H. MacKinnon, 'William de Montibus: A Medieval Teacher', in T. A. Sandquist and M. R. Powicke (eds.), *Essays in Medieval History Presented to Bertie Wilkinson* (Toronto, 1969).

⁷³ The list reveals a preponderance of older, chiefly patristic, theological texts seasoned with odd copies of Lombard's *Sentences*, Comestor's *Historia Scholastica*, Gratian's *Decretum*, and *Glosses on the Psalms* by Gilbert de la Porrée: see *Giraldi Cambrensis Opera*, ed. J. S. Brewer, James F. Dimock and George F. Warner, 8 vols. (Rolls ser., London, 1861–91), vii, 165–71.

⁷⁴ For Hugh's reputation as a scholar, see *ibid.*, 68, 90; Ralph of Coggeshall, *Radulphi de Coggeshall Chronicon Anglicanum*, ed. Joseph Stevenson (Rolls ser., London, 1875), 111–12.

⁷⁵ *Life of St Hugh of Lincoln*, ed. Douie and Farmer, ii, 46; Mayr-Harting (ed.), *St Hugh of Lincoln*, 13.

⁷⁶ On his pastoral zeal, see *Giraldi Cambrensis Opera*, ed. Brewer, Dimock and Warner, vii, 94–7; on his concern that the dead be properly buried: *ibid.*, 98–9, 102–3; *Life of St Hugh of Lincoln*, ed. Douie and Farmer, ii, 1.

the Kingdom of God is not confined only to monks, hermits and anchorites. When at the last the Lord shall judge each individual, he shall not hold it against him that he was not a monk or a hermit, but will reject each of the damned because he was not a real Christian.⁷⁷

Thus the Buckingham revenant seems to be an extreme instance of Hugh practising what he preached.⁷⁸

Our Augustinian chronicler, William of Newburgh, was also perhaps embracing a similar pastoral ethic to that of Hugh. This would be consistent with the pastoral agenda of at least some Augustinians.⁷⁹ It is also seemingly borne out by the order in which he tells the revenant-stories, and by his reluctance, save in one case, to condemn revenants as demonic. In the first case, William presents us with the Buckingham revenant, which Hugh's actions indicate was among the saved. In the second and third stories William's contritionist inclinations are finely poised against a bleaker vision from the parishes, and he draws no final conclusion. The last story would seem to be the exception that proves the rule: William accepts that this man is damned, but he acknowledges that he died, by his own choice, impenitent and unshriven. If Bishop Hugh and William of Newburgh had absorbed their more innovative pastoral theologies from their orders, Walter Map, who was a canon of the Lincoln chapter from 1183×5, was steeped in older traditions. His *Courtiers' Trifles* was full of mordant sarcasm and iconoclastic satire, but in theological terms he was an arch-conservative. His story of *post-mortem* absolution from a sentence of excommunication suggests a softening of traditionally hard theological lines under the influence of contritionist thought, but such notions came as something of a surprise to Map.⁸⁰ His theological conservatism is also visible

⁷⁷ *Life of St Hugh of Lincoln*, ed. Douie and Farmer, ii, 46–7.

⁷⁸ Hugh also seems to have had a taste for visions of the next world in which purgatorial torments figured large. Edmund, brother of Adam, sub-prior of Eynsham and chaplain of Hugh, allegedly had a vision of the other-world in 1196. This vision was recorded by Adam with the apparent approval of Hugh. The date of the vision is also strikingly near to the likely date of the revenant-stories which William of Newburgh recorded in his chronicle immediately prior to an account of the famines of 1196. On Hugh's connections with Eynsham, see *ibid.*, i, pp. ix–x.

⁷⁹ On the role of pastoral care in Augustinian spirituality, see Caroline Walker Bynum, *Docere Verbo et Exemplo: An Aspect of Twelfth-Century Spirituality* (Missoula, 1979); Burton, 'Monasteries and Parish Churches', 39–50.

⁸⁰ Elisabeth Vodola points out that 'it was evident by the early thirteenth century that major excommunication concerned only the punishment (*poena*) that detained a soul in purgatory and not the guilt (*culpa*) which consigned a soul to hell. Hence Innocent III's decretal *a nobis* logically permitted *post-mortem* absolution from the *poena* of excommunication for those whose contrition guaranteed them divine

(cont. on p. 28)

in a tale of a monk who, *in extremis*, made a deathbed confession to a layman. Here Map used the language of penance, not purgation, to describe how the monk must do penance in hell between death and the Day of Judgement.

The evidence here is necessarily anecdotal, but it is perhaps worth trying to trace a pattern. What emerges is somewhat unexpected. We find new ideas about sin, penance and purgation which would change the religious lives of parishioners, championed by the religious: a Carthusian, Augustinians, and perhaps a Cistercian (if we accept that Ralph of Coggeshall was the author of the Vision of Thurkill). In contrast, Walter Map, the secular, remained wedded to older traditions of penitential and purgatorial thought. Nor was he alone: there is an interesting contrast between two descriptions of St Patrick's Purgatory at Lough Derg which were both composed in the 1180s. One was written in 1185×8 by Gerald of Wales (an archdeacon schooled in canon law at Paris), and the other in 1180×4 by the monk who wrote the Vision of Owein (a Cistercian).⁸¹ Gerald was acquainted with the new penitential theology, an acquaintance visible in his didactic collection *The Jewel of the Church*, which drew on the writings of Peter Lombard and Peter Chanter.⁸² Yet, in practice, his pastoral ethics proved more complex and ambiguous. In Wales and the March, traditional canon law rather than new theology shaped Gerald's agenda as he struggled to improve clerical morals, to end pervasive clerical marriage and to free the Church from lay proprietary interests.⁸³ In this region far from central authority, his preoccupations belonged in many respects to an earlier age of reform; in fact, in such a context, older and more daunting

(n. 80 cont.)

absolution from the *culpa* of their sins': see Elisabeth Vodola, *Excommunication in the Middle Ages* (Berkeley, 1986), 45. There were also earlier precedents, such as a case of *post-mortem* absolution from excommunication in c.1160 in *The Book of the Foundation of Walden Monastery*, ed. and trans. Diana Greenway and Leslie Watkiss (Oxford, 1999), 116–18.

⁸¹ On the Vision of Owein, see Robert Easting, 'Purgatory and the Earthly Paradise in the *Tractatus de Purgatorio Sancti Patricii*', *Cîteaux: Commentarii Cisterciensis*, xxxvii (1986); Robert Easting, 'Owein at St Patrick's Purgatory', *Medium Aevum*, lv (1986); Robert Easting, 'The Date and Dedication of the *Tractatus de Purgatorio Sancti Patricii*', *Speculum*, liii (1978); Carol Zaleski, 'St Patrick's Purgatory: Pilgrimage Motifs in a Medieval Otherworld Vision', *Jl History of Ideas*, xlv (1985).

⁸² For an identification of Gerald's debts in this text, see *The Jewel of the Church: A Translation of 'Gemma Ecclesiastica' by Giraldus Cambrensis*, ed. John J. Hagen (Leiden, 1979), esp. 38–41, 87–9, 294–5, 301.

⁸³ See Robert Bartlett, *Gerald of Wales, 1146–1223* (Oxford, 1982), 29–45.

forms of penitential discipline might still have proved a useful coercive tool.⁸⁴ Gerald's reaction to rites performed at Lough Derg suggest as much. He spoke here not of purgatorial torments, as subsequent commentators did, but of an island filled with evil spirits, and went on to explain that any who chose to enter it and undergo 'these torments because of a penance imposed on him . . . will not have to endure the pains of hell, unless he commits some very serious sin'.⁸⁵ The Cistercian monk who wrote the *Vision of Owein* seems to have encountered similar stories about penitential rites, but he framed his account very differently. Consistent with Gerald's tales, Owein entered the purgatory to perform a kind of 'super-satisfactory' penance for the great many sins he had committed, but once inside he found he was the odd man out: everyone else was already dead and expiating their sins in purgatorial fire, speeded through it by the prayers of the faithful.⁸⁶ The puzzled presiding demons even spelled out the paradox, telling the knight 'the others who serve us do not come to us until after their deaths'.⁸⁷

VI

CONCLUSIONS

So what conclusions might be drawn? It seems that new messages existed, but the will and means to spread them, even in more pastorally 'precocious' dioceses like Lincoln, were limited. The impulse to disseminate ideas about the importance of contrition, the prospect of purgatorial fire and the value of

⁸⁴ Indeed older penitential ideas, such as attaching value to fully satisfactory penances, enjoyed considerable credibility even among some of the more 'progressive' theologians. For example, both Alan of Lille and Robert of Flamborough still advocated harsh, fixed-tariff penances. More flexible penances in which intention was taken more fully into account appear in the next generation of manuals for confessors which appeared largely in the early thirteenth century. See Baldwin, *Masters, Princes and Merchants*, i, 43–55.

⁸⁵ *Giraldi Cambrensis Opera*, ed. Brewer, Dimock and Warner, v, 82–3.

⁸⁶ *Das Buch vom Espurgatoire S. Patrice der Marie de France und seine Quelle*, ed. Karl Warnke (Halle, 1938).

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 62. See also Easting, 'Purgatory and the Earthly Paradise'. Gervase of Tilbury represents a further interesting example of a secular clergyman absorbing new ideas about penance and purgatorial fire. Paolo Cherchi uses Gervase's *Otia Imperialia*, which was written over a space of several decades, to trace Gervase's slow absorption of new ideas about purgatory during the early thirteenth century. See Paolo Cherchi, 'Gervase of Tilbury and the Birth of Purgatory', *Medioevo romanzo*, xiv (1989).

suffrages did not come from the seculars, who as yet were little schooled in the practical pastoral divinity required. Rather, in the late twelfth century, the first impulses came from the place where the new ideas had first been broached: the cloister. If at least some monastic spirits were willing to spread the word, the flesh and bones of pastoral provision were weak. Before 1215 preaching seems to have been a relatively infrequent event; the Latin learning of the parish clergy was limited (witness the visitation returns of Salisbury diocese in the 1220s);⁸⁸ regular lay confession was, as Alexander Murray has shown, probably the exception not the rule before Lateran IV.⁸⁹ A fuller dissemination awaited the fusion of new ideas to an evangelizing agenda in the thirteenth century, and the improvement of the system of pastoral care designed to deliver it. These things might go some way to explaining why the pessimism of the visions of Walchelin and Orm clings to ghost stories from the parishes at the end of the twelfth century.

Yet it would be wrong to end on such a negative note. Given the limitations of pastoral care that we have just observed, many twelfth-century parishioners may have been imperfectly aware of the Church's view of the fate of souls. If this were so, then there was scope for local communities to develop their own 'unofficial' ways of reckoning and handling sin. There is some scattered evidence for this and, although there is not the space here to assemble it in full detail, some possibilities can nonetheless be indicated. Three areas in particular stand out. The first is the role of hermits in local religious practices. The holy man, widespread in twelfth-century England, might have provided one means for the ordinary faithful to receive spiritual counsel, and also to bind themselves through donation to the kind of world-renouncing spirituality which wealthier men and women sought in the cloister. The unusually well-documented case of Godric of Finchale represents the hermit ministering not only to maladies of the body but also to afflictions of the soul. He was a frequent beneficiary of peasant donations and ministered to the sinful as well as the sick, prescribing pilgrim-

⁸⁸ For a succinct discussion of preaching, see Robert Bartlett, *England under the Norman and Angevin Kings* (Oxford, 2000), 451–4. For the Salisbury visitation returns, see *The Register of St Osmund*, ed. W. H. Rich Jones, 2 vols. (Rolls ser., London, 1883–4), i, 304–14.

⁸⁹ Alexander Murray, 'Confession before 1215', *Trans. Roy. Hist. Soc.*, 6th ser., iii (1991). See also the recent dissenting view in Hamilton, *Practice of Penance*, 209.

ages and penances as remedies for sins (which he often diagnosed as the root of physical ills).⁹⁰

Secondly, we can turn our gaze from living holy men to dead ones: the saints. Cultures of donation and devotion to the shrines seem to have served to associate the poor with these 'very special dead', binding them tightly to those whose salvation was assured.⁹¹ Although miracle collections are dominated by the very visible workings of saintly powers such as healings and acts of vengeance, there are also clues in these texts to the importance attached by devotees to the spiritual competences of saints. At St William's shrine in Norwich, Thomas of Monmouth tells us not only that the 'sick were healed' and 'those who came in sorrow went away in joy', but also that 'the bound were loosed'. William of Norwich is, for example, depicted on several occasions shortening punitive penances by shattering chains and breaking fetters.⁹² These showy claims about saintly power, made by an especially polemical hagiographer, promoted the power of this saint over sin in expectation of a receptive audience for such messages. In advertising a saint's powers, healings of the sick and thunderbolts of vengeance were valued highly by men like Thomas because they were 'visible' and hence 'verifiable' on the word of trusted witnesses. In the heaping up of miracles to prove saintly credentials, the salvific role of saints could be curiously effaced precisely because unseen healing of souls seldom met the need for visibility and verifiability. Yet we undervalue this salvific role at our peril, because other indications suggest that the miracle collections were mapping only the tip of a much bigger iceberg. The keenness of many religious houses to secure indulgences for those who visited the shrines of their saints suggests that there may have been significant economic benefits in attracting pilgrims seeking to lighten the burden of their sins. For example,

⁹⁰ See Susan J. Ridyard, 'Functions of a Twelfth-Century Recluse Revisited: Godric of Finchale', in Richard Gameson and Henrietta Leyser (eds.), *Belief and Culture in Medieval Europe: Essays Presented to Henry Mayr-Harting* (Oxford, 2001), 240–1.

⁹¹ The phrase is Peter Brown's: see his *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (London, 1981), 3–20.

⁹² Thomas of Monmouth, *Life of St William*, ed. Jessopp and James, 231–6, 236–41, 279–83. See also accounts of interventions in similar cases by St Edmund in *Memorials of St Edmund's Abbey*, ed. Thomas Arnold, 3 vols. (Rolls ser., London, 1890), i, 187–9, 204–7; also those of St Gilbert in *The Book of St Gilbert*, ed. Raymonde Foreville and Gillian Keir (Oxford, 1987), 277–9. On the issue of donations to shrines, see Emma Cownie, *Religious Patronage in Anglo-Norman England, 1066–1135* (London, 1993), 51, 174–5.

Archbishop Herbert and his suffragans promised 'remission from penance' for those making pilgrimages to St Gilbert at Sempringham, and also 'a share in the prayers and all benefits which exist in all the churches of the whole of the order of Sempringham and in the church of Canterbury'.⁹³

Thirdly and finally, other parts of this complex mosaic of beliefs about the fate of the dead can be uncovered in cartularies. The charter collection *Textus Roffensis* shows in unusual detail for Rochester Cathedral what might be true for other less well-documented institutions: that pious donations, in the form of tiny parcels of land, extended much further down the social hierarchy than one might initially expect.⁹⁴ In some localities at least, sharing in the vicarious penitential benefits of the cloister may not have been as socially exclusive as we have been led to believe by the cases disclosed by less detailed monastic archives.

Through the creation of such connections with cloistered monks, reclusive holy men or local saints, the ordinary faithful forged salvific strategies for themselves. But the late twelfth century was, as we have seen, witnessing the first tentative efforts on the part of the Church to remake this penitential landscape, efforts which would become more vigorous during the thirteenth century. Arguably it is in this evangelical context that purgatory — the sharply defined space — was most important. In the thought of the 'schools', the emergence of a definite middle place was but one aspect of a larger reconceptualization of sin and its remedies, the coining of a name for it perhaps more incidental to these theological shifts than Jacques Le Goff originally suggested. If the invention of the noun *purgatorium* was not fundamental to the formulation of new theological concepts, then it may well have been crucial as a linguistic badge for the new ideas about sin and penance: a vivid means by which these could be disseminated in the wider world. In turning from the twelfth

⁹³ *Book of St Gilbert*, ed. Foreville and Keir, 195. Nor was this house alone: see a similar case at Bury St Edmunds, recorded in *Memorials of St Edmund's Abbey*, ed. Arnold, i, 91; see also *Feudal Documents from the Abbey of Bury St Edmunds*, ed. D. C. Douglas (London, 1932), 153. There were offers of indulgences at Lincoln which were linked to contributions to the fabric fund, and which seem to have evolved later into a guild of St Mary: see Owen (ed.), *History of Lincoln Minster*, 121–2.

⁹⁴ Cownie, *Religious Patronage in Anglo-Norman England*, 168. See also H. Tsurushima, 'The Fraternity of Rochester Cathedral Priory about 1100', *Anglo-Norman Studies*, xiv (1991). But on the problems of identifying peasant benefactors, see Wardrop, *Fountains Abbey and its Benefactors*, 216–32.

to the thirteenth century, purgatory's rise might now best be explored not in 'high' theological speculation, but in the evolving evangelical discourse of the preaching Church.

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