

# An Inquiry into the Christian Development and Cultural Conception of the Place of the Dead

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## Abstract

“Where do I go when I die?” is a question that is part of the human condition and you will find answers to it in every culture. Cultures change and shift depending on the influences and conditions they live through and concepts also are moulded and moved to follow these changes. In the development of those Last Things the Church has had a development of ideas and thoughts that range across the faith. The origin of these thoughts begins in Jewish thinking where descriptive terms such as Sheol, Gehenna and Abraham's Bosom evoke a mixed tapestry that Christianity has taken and run with. There are differences between the cultural Eschatologies around us and the traditional images that Christianity has developed. At times Christianity's attempts to communicate its Eschatological thought to other cultures has been difficult. This has been because the Christian imagery is too linked to the European/Western imagery that does not translate well. But what if it is possible to dialogue with other cultures in such a way as to learn from their images and symbols of their place of the dead. What could be gained by such a dialogue? Could both sides learn that something is missing in their Eschatology? Is it possible that something that is so strongly evoked in the death and resurrection of Jesus from the place of the dead has been misplaced in Christianity? That by focusing so much on the future and our encounter with the divine we have missed our human connections that still dwell in the place of the dead where Jesus stayed.

**Keywords:** Christian Development, Cultural Conception, Place Dead

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

The parable of The Rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31) is set within a sequence of episodes where Jesus is teaching about the opposing concerns of purity and hospitality. This parable focuses on the dangers of greed and the responsibility of the wealthy to use their wealth and power to look after the poor. The Pharisees are described as “lovers of Money” and are the main target within this parable, as their overemphasis on piety is contrasted by Jesus consistent focus on the ethical demands of the law. Luke's narrative characterises the Pharisees as more focused on their place and position in society and having little or no concern for the poor and marginalised.<sup>1</sup>

The parable itself is about an unnamed Rich man and a destitute man named Lazarus. After explaining the rich mans and lavish life in comparison to the impoverished life of Lazarus the story explains that in the afterlife their roles are reversed. The rich man is in torment while Lazarus is safe alongside the great father of the Jewish faith, Abraham. The focus we require is not on the message of the text but the use of the culturally specific eschatological themes and structures. Luke's narrative has Jesus using the culturally understood images of the Jewish conceptions of, what is and what happens after death. It is in Gehenna/Sheol that the person is placed in one of two sections. Obviously, Abraham and Lazarus are in the place for the righteous dead while the Rich Man is in the place of the unrighteous. Abraham's Bosom is close to the place of fire and torment. They are only separated by a distance so small that those on either side are able to communicate with the other.<sup>2</sup>

In discussion and inquiry into those “unsolved riddles of the human condition”<sup>3</sup> Christian tradition has a varied, and, at oft times a tense and conflicted relationship with the variations of what occurs after death<sup>4</sup>. From a Place of the dead, to Purgatorial indulgences, to Atemporalism (an instantaneous leap to the resurrection), the development of images and forms of what happens after death has been a constant development over time.<sup>5</sup> To

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1 Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 1997), 599-601

2 Richard Bauckham, *The Fate of the Dead: Studies on the Jewish and Christian Apocalypses*. (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 58-59

3 Pope Paul Vi, *Nostra Aetate*, Declaration On The Relation Of The Church To Non-Christian Religions, Accessed July 12, 2015. ([http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decl\\_19651028\\_nostra-aetate\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html)), 1

4 Peter.C. Phan, *Contemporary Context and Issues in Eschatology*.(Theological Studies, 1994, 507-36), 508.

5 International Theological Commission, *De quibusdam quaestionibus actualibus circa eschatologiam*, Some Current Questions in Eschatology, (Accessed July 12, 2015. [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti\\_documents/rc\\_cti\\_1990\\_problemi-attuali-eschatologia\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_1990_problemi-attuali-eschatologia_en.html)), 2.2

investigate the eschatological ideals the *De quibusdam quaestionibus actualibus circa eschatologiam*, Some Current Questions

In Eschatology was instituted by Pope Benedict XVI, then Cardinal Ratzinger.<sup>6</sup> Questions In Eschatology is an impressive work covering a range of issues within Eschatological thought. It asserts the Catholic position on Purgatory, Resurrection, and the life to come. Questions In Eschatology also warns of the docetic spiritualist Eschatologies which are contrary to our Christology and the promise of bodily resurrection. Despite being a part of the Catholic Churches continued investigations into those unsolved riddles, it is not without criticism. Peter C. Phan who finds the use of Balthasar over Rahner, if not lacking, then somewhat suspect. His opinion is that perhaps the council is 'trying to have its cake and eat it too' by attempting to keep a redefined Purgatory within traditional Catholic Eschatology.<sup>7</sup> For support Questions in Eschatology calls to the Apostles' Creed, however, the history of Eschatology within the liturgy has been one shaped by the changes in tradition. "He descended in to Hell", or, as in the latin "Descendant et Inferos" was earlier in the history of the creedal language "Descendant et Inferos" as it is in the Athanasian Creed.<sup>8</sup> Inferos (place of the dead) as it is in the earlier creeds is closer to the imagery Luke 16:19-31 than the more recent tradition of Purgatory. There has been a development over time in the history of Christianity one that has brought about different answers to the riddle of what occurs after death.

The tradition of Eschatological thought has developed overtime from that used in the Parable of The Rich Man and Lazarus, however, is there really that much difference between them? When we read both Lazarus and The Rich Man communicating with each other there is a different conception of the destination of the person. Historically, the development of Eschatology had two competing foci. The restoration of all creation as seen by Origen, or, the popular choice, the destination of sinners and saved as asserted by Cyprian, Athanasius, Augustine, and Aquinas. When it comes to the development of Eschatological thought it has drifted from the centre of Christian thought to the outer fringe. For many in the faith it is more about the exclusions other than restoration and resurrection. This is puzzling because the centre of our hope and faith is the resurrection and the promise of restoration. Where just as Jesus Christ was raised bodily from the dead, gives hope not just for humanity, but for all of creation. This was the ideal of the Patristic Fathers. One that is at times confused and obfuscated by the many variants that are louder and more divisive than the message of love and hope that it actually is (Hill 622-628).<sup>9</sup>

## 2.0 LITERATURER REVIEW

If Theology is "Faith seeking Understanding" the predictions and cosmologies that have become the realm of the last things are not Theology proper. It is closer to the representation of an ideal, we need a disambiguation that is able to create a distinction between what is Theological and Eschatological or not. In Phan's critique of Questions in Eschatology he focuses on Rahner's separation between Eschatology and the Apocalyptic, the difference is where the information is coming from. An Eschatology is based on the Christology and Anthropology of the resurrection of Jesus, where, an apocalyptic narrative is sourced as an advance report from the future.<sup>10</sup> Rahner's disambiguation assists us in our understanding of the difference between the Apocalyptic and an Eschatology informed by both Christology and Anthropology.<sup>11</sup> It points to the hope in resurrection and who is in charge of the judgement and restoration to come. Such a hope that is beyond any narrative or tradition that has been imbued with too much certainty. Though what about that which is between death and resurrection? How do we interpret that space?

Jesus dies and is resurrected into that life promised for all who believe and follow Him. Luke 16:19-31 gives us an image of the understanding of this destination as the Jewish people conceived, Gehenna, Sheol,<sup>12</sup> Abraham's Bosom, the place of the dead. It is this image that is used in the early creedal affirmation "Desdant et Inferos". Not a Harrowing of Hell in triumphal procession, but a place where the person rests. Person and not a soul because of the overuse of the soul slides eventually to an Hellenic dualism (Rahner 340).<sup>13</sup> Bodiliness is central to resurrection and

6 Jeannine Hill Fletcher, "Eschatology." In Systematic Theology : Roman Catholic Perspectives, edited by Francis Schussler Fiorenza and John P Galvin, 2nd ed. Lanham, MD: Fortress Press, 2011), 633.

7 Phan, *Contemporary Context and Issues in Eschatology*, 519-520.

8 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale : The Mystery of Easter* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed. USA: Ignatius Press, 2005), 180-81.

9 Hill, *Eschatology*, 622-28.

10 Phan, *Contemporary Context and Issues in Eschatology*, 515.

11 Karl Rahner, *Theological Principles of Hermeneutics Eschatological Statements*. In Theological Investigations. Vol. 4. New York, New York: Crossroad, 1982), 345-46.

12 Bauckhman, *The Fate of the Dead: Studies on the Jewish and Christian Apocalypses*, 58-59.

13 Rahner, *Theological Principles of Hermeneutics Eschatological Statements*, 340.

we cannot veer away from it. Even so, there is still that which is no longer animating the body. After death something is missing. Scientists have weighed the human body before and after death and there is 21 grams absent. We look at the corpse and see an absence, that person is no longer present despite their body. The person is somewhere or nowhere and there are answers to this destination which are found within every culture.

Where has Jesus gone and returned from? By pointing out the Christian development from Sheol to Purgatory, Atemporalism and beyond it is possible that this can be taken as a development within Christian culture. While Protestants have left Holy Saturday behind there are those who seek to bring notice to the pause between Jesus' Death and Resurrection. Hans Urs von Balthasar has detailed his vision of Jesus Dead in the place of the dead<sup>14</sup> and the responses to this was quite dramatic in some places. Maybe there is another way to look at Balthasar's vision of Jesus dead in the place of the dead? Could it be another step in the cultural development of Christian thought on what comes after death?

### 3.0 CONCLUSION

Within Questions in Eschatology more than a Christian understanding of the place of the dead is covered. Eastern and African cultural understandings are mentioned as to their use of the Soul in their conceptions of the place of the dead.<sup>15</sup> This reflects the advocacy within *Gaudium et Spes*<sup>16</sup> and *Nostra Aetate*<sup>17</sup> for dialogue and inspection of those things within other cultures that have the light of Truth in them. A dialogue that requires consideration of the cultural and contextual issues to create forms of relevant transmission of the Gospel. A culture is only able to accept an Eschatology within the limits of the cultures symbols and lifestyle. People struggle when the image of an afterlife is too high or too low.<sup>18</sup> As an example, to talk of mansions to cultures that live in huts or tents is outside of their cultural context. Variety exists, but, to enforce one that is beyond another's reach conceptually or culturally would make it irrelevant. For this reason each culture has its own tales of the place of the dead. These tales are told not just to entertain but to give answers on what lies beyond the vale of death.

The veneration/remembrance of the dead exists in many cultures often along with a place of the dead. The native peoples of what is now Central America had their own visions of Heaven and Hell and these were akin to a Dantean structure with its many levels. Interestingly to gain the favour of the colonial powers the native Eschatology was altered to match the Dantean levels exactly.<sup>19</sup> Similar events do occur in history and Questions in Eschatology does assert dialogue between Catholic Church and other faiths on areas of similarity. Dialogue is the core of the many cultural images and mutual understandings of the place of the dead.<sup>20</sup> Dialogue not just between faiths but relational dialogue between the living and the dead. As the living grasp to understand the loss of one of their own, be it father, mother, sister, brother, husband wife, lover all ties to that person are suspended. There is a break in relationship, though as the Disciples of Jesus came to believe there is a hope that this relationship can be restored. Such a hope of redeemed relationship that, come death our relationship with Jesus is fully realised as we behold Him.<sup>21</sup> Ratzinger and Balthasar both place emphasis on this relationship realised and that is an outworking of the Christology of Death<sup>22</sup>, but where is the Anthropology for those yet to join them?

A focus on the vertical relationship between God and Man is required, though there is also the horizontal human relationship. Especially when the Human trajectory of birth, life death and the place of the dead is one that is followed by Jesus in the fullness of His humanity. Tradition has given All Saints and All Souls Day and these days are part of the Mexican Dia de la Muertos which infuses the Indigenous veneration (Aztec, Olmec, Mayan, Toltec,

14 von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale : The Mystery of Easter*, 148-49

15 *Some Current Questions in Eschatology*, 4.4.

16 Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes*, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, (Accessed July 12, 2015. [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19651207\\_gaudium-et-spes\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html)), 44.

17 *Nostra Aetate*, 2.

18 B.B. Hull and F. Bold. *Hell, Religion, and Cultural Change*. (Journal of Institutional and Theoretical Economics 150, no. 3 (1994): 447-64.), 453-54

19 J. Nielsen & T. Reunert. S. *Dante's heritage: questioning the multi-layered model of the Mesoamerican universe*. (Antiquity, 83 : 320, 399-413, 2009), 410-411.

20 *Some Current Questions in Eschatology*, 2.4.

21 *Some Current Questions in Eschatology*, 8.1.

22 See Joseph Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1988), 160; Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, vol. 5, *The Last Act*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1998), 57.

etc) and concepts of death as “one part in the wider cycle of existence...”<sup>23</sup>. Why the Mexican celebration of the dead? Mexican poet Octavia Paz's writings on the Day of the Dead seem quite familiar to what has been said previously.

“There are two attitudes towards death: one, pointing forward, that conceives of it as creation; the other, pointing backward, that expresses itself as a fascination with nothingness or as a nostalgia for limbo.”<sup>24</sup> Rahner's disambiguation between Eschatology and Apocalypse fits in this same definition. Paz comments on the difference of the Mexican familiarity with Death in contrast to the Western fear of it. “Death were is thy sting!” (1 Cor 15:55) is a rally cry of defiance against the old foe. Where in contrast Paz speaks of familiarity with death, not that there is no fear but an acceptance that Death is as much a part of our human trajectory as Birth and Life is.<sup>25</sup> Where in contrast there are Christian bumper stickers of defiance with Fear Not from Isaiah 41:10.

Our story needs an ending, one that will fit with the Grace and Love found within the Gospels. One that inspires and meets the needs of more than just Christian culture. There is more to Eschatology than the destination of sinners and saved, as the restoration of all Creation is promised. Questions in Eschatology is not first or final word on the place of the dead within Christianity, granted, it may be a while till another such document is approved by the Catholic Church. Church tradition when investigated shows a focus on the destination than the person in whom our Faith, Hope and Love is secured. Our all too familiar addiction to the vertical relationship fostered by the desire to be sheep and not goats creates problems when contextualising this Hope to other cultures. To be able to communicate that Hope to more than just the familiar Christian affiliated symbols and images enables people to grasp within their cultural context the true light of the Gospel. What it may also do is communicate back to those stuck and looking ahead too far. The resurrection of Jesus must not bring woe, as our relational bonds are not severed by death. We need to remember there is a life that involves more than just a heavenly ticket to ride, but a human trajectory. One that has been charted from birth to a place of the dead and is destined in restoration and resurrection for all of creation.

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23 Antonio Weiss, *Why Mexicans Celebrate the Day of the Dead*.(The Guardian, November 3, 2010. Accessed July 24th 2015. <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2010/nov/02/mexican-celebrate-day-of-dead>.)

24 Octavia Paz, *Labyrinth of Solitude*. (New York, 1961.), 61.

25 Paz, *Labyrinth of Solitude*, 56-57.

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