

## 10. The Theology of the Afterlife in the Early Middle Ages, c. 600 – c. 1100

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But now, what shall I say of the nature of that future life, which one ought rather to believe in than to speak of? And yet, so far as I can speak, I should not remain silent merely because I cannot say as much as I wish.

- Julian Pomerius (late 5<sup>th</sup> century), *The Contemplative Life*<sup>1</sup>

### *Introduction*

The afterlife was a topic of constant interest between the early years of Christianity and the twelfth century. Even if, as Julian Pomerius suggests, full and firm knowledge about the afterlife was difficult to come by, the nature of the future life was so important to Christianity that much discussion was devoted to it, gradually transforming ideas about the afterlife in both subtle and substantial ways. Early Christians built up their picture of the afterlife based on the inheritance of Jewish (and other traditions) combined with the teachings of Jesus in the Gospels and other statements in the Old and New Testaments.<sup>2</sup> In subsequent centuries, through late antiquity and into the early middle ages, theologians dealt with a range of questions – often in relation to contemporary events and changing situations – which led them to examine and reconsider their ideas about the world to come and how it might relate to the present world. Developments both in the theology of the afterlife in itself, and in related theological concepts, formed the basis for the scholastic discussions of the twelfth century, when some scholars began to examine their material with different methodological approaches. High and late medieval scholastics have rather overshadowed the early middle ages in theological scholarship: modern scholars, particularly those writing before the late twentieth century, have often perceived the early medieval period as having little theological writing, or suggested that what was produced was derivative, uninteresting and unoriginal.<sup>3</sup> More recent scholarship has re-evaluated ideas about originality in early medieval writing, and suggests instead that there was discussion of, and development within, ideas about the afterlife in the early middle ages. This chapter outlines broad trends in thought about the afterlife in the period c.400-c.1100 within the Latin West, and examines some of the key ideas about the fate of the soul after death and the changes in thinking which are visible from late antiquity and through the early middle ages.

### *The Immediate Fate of the Soul after Death*

One of the earliest additions to the picture of the afterlife outlined in the Bible (see the summary in the introduction) was the idea that some souls would go to specific parts of the afterlife immediately following death, rather than only after all souls had been judged. Initially this idea

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<sup>1</sup> Julian Pomerius, *DVC* 1.2, trans. Suelzer, 19.

<sup>2</sup> On this, see also this volume's introduction.

<sup>3</sup> Le Goff, *Birth*, 96.

applied primarily to the martyrs, who were believed to go directly to heaven. Tertullian (d. after 212) and Cyprian of Carthage (d.258), for example, believed that the sufferings of the martyrs cleansed their souls so that they could reach heaven immediately, though other souls seem to have been understood to sleep until the final judgement.<sup>4</sup> But this idea implies, or presupposes, some kind of judgement immediately after death – almost like a triage system – which does not negate the importance of the universal judgement of souls at the end of time. Some early Christian authors rejected this notion,<sup>5</sup> but by the fifth century, Augustine could be much more confident about this individual or particular judgement. In his treatise *On the Nature and Origin of the Soul*, Augustine stated that ‘souls are judged when they depart from the body, before they come to that judgement which must be passed on them when reunited to the body and are tormented or glorified in that same flesh which they here inhabited’.<sup>6</sup> He even goes so far as to ask Peter ‘were you really unaware of this?’, suggesting that by this time the individual judgement was widely accepted in the Latin theological tradition.<sup>7</sup> At around the same time, Sulpicius Severus (d.c.420) recorded that Martin of Tours (d.397) raised from death a catechumen who died shortly before his baptism, who reported that in the other world he had heard the sentence of ‘the judge’ (i.e. God) passed upon him, and he was sent to a place of gloom, before two angels had reported to God that Martin was praying for this soul; these angels were then ordered to return the man to be restored to life. This too indicates the widespread acceptance of the individual judgement by this time.

The idea of the individual judgement enabled the notion that souls had an active existence immediately after the death of the body, an idea which played an important role in the development through late antiquity and into the early middle ages of two different phenomena, both involving the relationship between the living and the dead. One, to which we will return in due course, was the growing culture of prayers and offerings for the dead – specifically, for the dead who needed (and sometimes asked for) the help of the living to affect their situation in the afterlife. The other was the cult of saints, the dead who came to the aid of the living in response to prayers and devotion to their cults and to their relics, performing miracles and appearing in dreams and visions. The saints’ deeds and their power after death was dependent on the idea that they were already in heaven, and thus that some kind of individual judgement had occurred as soon as they had died; moreover their activities also required that their souls had some kind of *post-mortem* existence which was more active than sleep. However, despite the wide acceptance of the individual judgement among many authors, there are hints that even into the sixth and seventh centuries there was some uncertainty and debate over this concept.<sup>8</sup> Works of the seventh century and later more often discuss the afterlife in terms which indicate belief in the immediate judgement of souls at death, and the souls’ continuing active post-mortem existence.

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<sup>4</sup> Tertullian, *DA* 55, ed. Waszink, 861–63; Cyprian, *AF* 13, ed. Weber, 211–16; Daley, *Hope*, 36–37, 42. See the introduction to this volume, @ n. 53.

<sup>5</sup> See Irenaeus, *AH* 5.31, ed. Rousseau et al., vol. 2, 388–96.

<sup>6</sup> Augustine, *NOA* 2.4.8, ed. Urba and Zycha, 341.

<sup>7</sup> Augustine, *NOA* 2.4.8, ed. Urba and Zycha, 341. There is some evidence that in the Greek tradition debate continued through the seventh century and perhaps later: see Dal Santo, *Debating*, 149–336.

<sup>8</sup> See Dal Santo, *Debating*.

Thought on the relationship between the individual and universal judgements developed in various ways across the period. One example is the idea of the ‘fourfold judgement’, which assumed the existence of four distinct groups of souls at the universal judgement: the saints, already in heaven and sitting with Christ as judges; the most wicked sinners, already condemned to hell, who will not be summoned before Christ as judge; and then two intermediate groups of more ‘ordinary’ people, the good who hear Christ inviting them into heaven, and the wicked who hear Christ casting them into hell.<sup>9</sup> This scheme appears first in Gregory I’s *Moralia*, from where it was borrowed by the Iberian scholars Isidore of Seville (d.636) and Julian of Toledo (d.690); in the eighth century the Anglo-Saxon monk Bede (d.735) presented a version which was borrowed by a number of Carolingian writers, and the scheme appears also in Irish Latin and vernacular homilies.<sup>10</sup> In addition, it appears in Old English poetry and prose of the tenth and eleventh centuries, including the works of the prolific homilist, Ælfric, abbot of Eynsham (d. 1009/1010); and there is an allusion to the fourfold judgement in the writings of Goscelin of St-Bertin, a Flemish cleric who worked in England in the latter years of the eleventh century.<sup>11</sup> Although focused on the universal judgement, this fourfold scheme depends on the idea that souls are judged as soon as they leave the body. Importantly, therefore, this and other discussions of the universal judgement also brought to the foreground the question of what happened to souls in the space of time between death and the final judgement.

A major question was what happened to those souls who were neither extremely good nor especially wicked. This issue appears slowly and sporadically but was clearly a matter of interest for several scholars, including Augustine, who discussed these souls’ fates in some detail. Augustine’s writings were extremely influential and, although his statements were often hesitant, they could be read alongside the works of later authors to present something much more certain. One example of this occurs in Julian of Toledo’s *Prognosticum futuri saeculi*, an eschatological treatise probably written in 688–9 which was extremely influential throughout the Middle Ages.<sup>12</sup> Julian examines purgatorial fire, about which there were various opinions and about which some previous authors had been rather circumspect. In a chapter headed ‘That there is believed to be purgatorial fire after death’, Julian begins by noting that this topic was treated in several texts; he then states Augustine’s opinion that some small faults could be removed after death, and Gregory’s opinion that it should be believed that there was a purgatorial fire for small faults before the judgement. In fact, Augustine was actually much more reticent about the interim than Julian makes him seem, and concluded in one of his works that he did not deny that there might be some kind of purgation in the interim, because it was ‘possibly true’;<sup>13</sup> elsewhere he states that it is ‘not unbelievable’ that something like trying by fire might occur after death.<sup>14</sup> Gregory’s discussion is more detailed but it is still possible that his comments on purgatorial fire relate to the final

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<sup>9</sup> Foxhall Forbes, ‘Diuiduntur’.

<sup>10</sup> Biggs, ‘Fourfold’.

<sup>11</sup> Foxhall Forbes, ‘Diuiduntur’, 675–83.

<sup>12</sup> Carozzi, *Voyage*, 90–95; Hillgarth (ed.), *PFS*, xxv–xxxvii, xl.

<sup>13</sup> Augustine, *DCD*, 21.26.103–23, ed. Dombert and Kalb, vol. 2, 798–99: ‘non reduarguo, quia forsitan uerum est’.

<sup>14</sup> Augustine, *E* 69.74–78, ed. Evans, 87: ‘[...] non incredibile est’.

judgement and not to the interim, although some of the visions and miracles he recounts imply the possibility of immediate post-mortem purgation.<sup>15</sup> But, by bringing together the authority of Augustine with the authority of Gregory, and by combining their authoritative statements with passages from Scripture, Julian presented a firm and convincing argument for a purgatorial fire which cleansed souls in the interim between death and the final judgement.

Julian's *Prognosticum* was widely read: the text was known, annotated and used by Carolingian scholars, and in the late tenth century Ælfric acquired a copy from which he made detailed excerpts for use in his own study and writings.<sup>16</sup> The kind of formal theological discussion that Julian composed continued to be produced throughout the early middle ages, and appeared within multiple genres: sometimes theological ideas were examined in treatises, like Julian's, but they were also frequently discussed in letters; theological discussion appears in homilies and sermons, usually presented in a more straightforward and didactic fashion, and without the questioning that may be found in treatises and letters; other genres like poetry may also reveal evidence of complex theological ideas though they tend to involve debate and questioning less often. Alongside these kinds of writings vision literature was also extremely popular: late antique texts such as the *Vision of St Paul* continued to be copied and read in the early middle ages, and were translated into European vernaculars; while new accounts of visions also appeared which presented a vivid and dramatic otherworld.<sup>17</sup> In contrast to more formal theological discussion, the visionary accounts of the afterlife which proliferated throughout late antiquity and into the early middle ages are rather a different genre and, as such, their approaches, interests and emphases are often strikingly and significantly distinct. This is not to say that there is no overlap at all between the two kinds of writing, since visionary accounts also feature in letters, homiletic texts and poetry, and sometimes evidence from visions could be adduced in support of theological discussion. Moreover, theologians sometimes noted that one way of learning about the fates of souls after death was through such visionary accounts: Hugh of St Victor, probably writing in about 1134, noted that through the reports of visionaries are known some of the fates of souls after death, and included a story told by a pilgrim in his *De sacramentis christiani fidei (On the Sacraments of the Christian Faith)*.<sup>18</sup> Even if the distinction is not always hard and fast, however, it remains significant because authorial approaches could vary significantly depending on genre. Where theological writing often sought to address and deal with particular questions, and might sometimes present a coherent and systematised view of the afterlife and the states of souls, often in a rather abstract way, visionary texts tended to present a dramatic landscape with a geography inhabited by real people who called out to their audiences, both within and outwith the textually constructed vision.

In general, visionary accounts present the afterlife from the 'bottom-up' perspective of a living or dead person, while theological discussion approaches the world to come in a more analytical 'top-down' perspective which relates directly to the divinity and to created moral order.

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<sup>15</sup> Gregory the Great, *D*, 4.41–42, trans. Zimmermann, 247–50; Gatch, 'Fourth', 81–82.

<sup>16</sup> Gatch, *Preaching*, 101.

<sup>17</sup> See for example *VSP*, ed. Silverstein; *OEVI*, ed. diPaolo Healey; *DVP*, ed. Jiroušková.

<sup>18</sup> Hugh of St Victor, *DS* 2.16.2, *PL* 176: 580–84; for further discussion of Hugh's approach to theology see Harkins, *Reading*.

In some cases, there is a clear and significant relationship between the two genres, so that visions relate closely to the carefully worked-out interpretations of theologians, sometimes when the visionary is given an authoritative guide who explains the meaning of the vision. For example, Bede describes the visionary experience of a seventh-century Northumbrian man named Drythelm in his *Historia ecclesiastica gentis anglorum*, completed in c.731, but the schematic organisation of the afterlife in the vision and the interpretation offered to Drythelm by an angelic guide accords so closely with one of Bede's homilies that it is impossible that they are independent.<sup>19</sup> More usually the differences between visionary and theological texts mean that it can be difficult to work out a clear theological scheme or systematisation from visionary texts, or the precise theological functions of different parts of the afterlife. Often the authors themselves may have not intended a theologically systematic presentation, particularly if their purposes related more to inspiring fear in their audiences, or to making political points by describing known and named individuals suffering in the otherworld, than presenting a clear and consistent theological statement.<sup>20</sup> What the visions did offer was vivid images which dramatised the world to come, drawing on a common stock of images and motifs to present the torment of the wicked and the delights of the just which expanded on ideas and images from Scripture, apocryphal texts and earlier traditions.

Visionary and theological accounts often accord in presenting hell as unimaginably awful, usually involving fire, in contrast to heaven as a place of quiet and calm, rest and rejoicing. The permanence of heaven and hell are usually emphasised, and the inescapability of hell stressed, particularly in homiletic texts which sought to instil fear into their audiences. Some texts muddied the water by describing temporary rest which sinners in hell might sometimes receive. One example of this is the 'Sunday respite' which appears in a several early medieval texts, usually connected with the idea that Christ granted a temporary relief on Sundays to souls suffering in the afterlife. There is some variation though: sometimes these souls are in hell and sometimes in 'places of punishment'; sometimes the souls who receive relief are only those who had been baptised.<sup>21</sup> It is often difficult to work out whether the authors of such texts had a clear sense of how the punishments of hell and other kinds of temporary sufferings related to each other; in many cases, it seems likely that they did not and that purposes other than a clear and systematic schematisation of the afterlife drove their representations of what the afterlife. The idea of a 'temporary hell' sits uncomfortably alongside the statements of other authors that hell was permanent and inescapable, and suggests that some of these texts were intended more by their authors to shock or to inspire fear than to provide a clear and cogent theological account.

Journeys, battles and other struggles are significant aspects in many accounts of the soul's post-mortem existence. Sometimes souls are presented as moving between different parts of the afterlife, often via bridges or rivers that involve purification or cleansing; there are also battles for souls between angels and demons, usually to determine where the souls should be taken. These are

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<sup>19</sup> Bede, *HE* 5.12, ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 488–98; *H.* 1.2, trans. Martin and Hurst, 16–17; Foxhall Forbes, 'Diuiduntur', 667–73.

<sup>20</sup> See for example the discussions in Dutton, *Politics*; Moreira, *Dreams*.

<sup>21</sup> Whitelock, 'Bishop'; Moffat, *Soul*, 32–34; Haines, *Sunday*, 194, n. 40; and see Augustine, *E* 112, trans. Peebles, 463–64.

normally portrayed as happening immediately after death, and illustrate the concept of the individual judgement as a dramatic struggle between good and evil invisible spirits. Such descriptions may be found in visionary texts, in Latin and vernacular sermons (often those based on visions such as the popular *Visio. S. Pauli*);<sup>22</sup> they appear too in eschatological poetry, such as the late ninth-century Old (High) German poem, *Muspilli*, which describes angels and devils fighting over the soul immediately after death before going on to outline the Last Judgement, the delights of heaven and the pains of hell.<sup>23</sup> Another important motif is that of stations or toll gates (*telonia*, *τελωνία*) where the soul would be stopped on its journey through the next world, and its deeds examined. This idea seems to have originated in the Byzantine world and appears (for example) in a sermon by the fifth-century preacher, Cyril of Alexandria, but it is subsequently found in Latin and Greek discussions of the next world, and in vernacular (e.g. Irish and Anglo-Saxon) texts.<sup>24</sup> The soul's journey through the toll gates sometimes seems to relate to post-mortem cleansing of the soul's sins, and is thus connected with ideas about purification of souls which were not entirely wicked. In eleventh-century England, a homily including a similar theme was copied into the margins of a book containing the Old English translation of Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica*.<sup>25</sup> This homily relates an apocryphal narrative which survives in several versions, and which in the west probably circulated mainly in the Insular world and within Insular centres in mainland Europe; it describes the seven heavens through which the soul will be brought after death, receiving purgation as it experiences each one.<sup>26</sup> In some of the heavens, attendant spirits will punish the journeying soul in order to purify it; in others, sinners are purged by fire or ice while the righteous may pass through immediately. Each soul is ultimately presented by the archangel Michael before God for his judgement, but the details of each soul's journey depend very much on the righteousness or sinfulness of the soul.<sup>27</sup> Journeys of this sort in the afterlife were not always positive, however: while all souls, the saved and the sinner alike, journey through the heavens in this homily, the sinners are then dispatched to hell through (literally) twelve dragons in a way which parallels the journey through the seven heavens. In these accounts the sinful soul, after judgement by God, is swallowed by seven dragons in turn, each of whom spit him out for swallowing by the next dragon, until he is ultimately swallowed by the devil and plunged into the depths of hell.<sup>28</sup> Other early medieval homilies relate the experiences of those dwelling in hell (and, occasionally, heaven), sometimes from the perspectives of souls now dwelling there, and sometimes in their voices or even in the voice of the devil.<sup>29</sup> It is sometimes possible to see close relationships between motifs and the development of theological ideas, but frequently the main

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<sup>22</sup> See for example Ritari, 'Irish', or the Old English Homily 40, ed. Napier, in *W*, 182–90.

<sup>23</sup> Wells, 'Shorter', 161, 164–67; Hintz, *Learning*, 43–78.

<sup>24</sup> Stevenson, 'Ascent'.

<sup>25</sup> The manuscript is now Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, 41; the homily is found on 287–95. See Willard, *Two*, 4–6; see also Förster, 'New'.

<sup>26</sup> For discussion see Willard, *Two*, 2–30; Stevenson, 'Ascent'; Wright, *Irish*, 218; Bauckham, 'Apocalypse'; Johnson, 'Archangel', 75–77.

<sup>27</sup> See also Johnson, *St Michael*, 89–91; Johnson, 'Archangel'. See also *Three*, ed. Grant, 56–65.

<sup>28</sup> Willard, *Two*, 6, 25–28.

<sup>29</sup> See for example Robinson, 'Devil'.

aims of these texts were to encourage devout reflection and a change of life, rather than to communicate a clear and systematised picture of the world to come.

Many important theological issues arose in this period and in the sorts of texts briefly outlined here, with the result that certain topics are repeatedly touched on by contemporary writers, even if only tangentially. One major question is whether or not pains experienced in the afterlife are for punishment of sin alone, or whether they are intended (as well or instead) to purge and purify the soul. This relates to the individual judgement and to the distinctions between souls, whether they would ultimately go to heaven or to hell. While passages from Scripture refer to the purging of the soul at the universal judgement, and allow that even imperfect souls will reach heaven following this final purification, it is clear that authors often assumed that some souls needed more than this, so that their post-mortem purification would happen simultaneously with earthly time, rather than only at the end of time. In theological writing in particular there is also increasing attention paid to some concepts, such as sin and penance, which relate ultimately to distinctions between souls and their fates; alongside this, funerary texts show an increasing urgency and a perceived greater need to help the soul in the afterlife and to try to keep it from harm. In relation to both of these, some practices also become more prominent, such as the offering of prayers and masses for departed souls. These too demonstrate many different ideas, and serve to emphasise the ongoing nature of debates about the afterlife which continued throughout the early middle ages and beyond.

### *Theological Concepts and Religious Practices*

During the early Middle Ages, ideas about sin, penance, prayer for the dead and the ongoing relationship between the body and the soul after death developed in various ways, and the treatment of these topics by early medieval writers reveals sophisticated discussion and debate in response to contemporary concerns. One of the effects of the increasing importance of the individual judgement, coupled with greater emphasis on the assumption that only the saints were holy enough to reach heaven immediately, was that heaven seems to have been perceived as somewhat unreachable for many people in the early middle ages. While early Christian funerals were presented as joyful occasions celebrating the certainty of the arrival of the departed soul in heaven, uncertainty over the fate of the soul seems to have grown during the fourth to sixth centuries.<sup>30</sup> Developing ideas about sin and penance, and the changing social contexts of Christian communities, meant that by the sixth century, funeral liturgies expressed concern for the sinful nature of humanity and fear for the state of the soul, though expressions of optimism are still present.<sup>31</sup> For the saints, death meant the release of the soul into the presence of God, and so, at least in hagiographical presentations, the deaths of saints could be joyous: writing in the late tenth century, Byrhtferth of Ramsey stated that the funeral of Ecgwine (who was a bishop of London in the seventh century and about whom Byrhtferth had minimal genuine information) was more like

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<sup>30</sup>McLaughlin, *Consorting*, 27–28; Rouillard, *Histoire*, 33, 35–36; Wollasch, ‘Toten’, 11–12, 14. See also Brown, *Ransom*.

<sup>31</sup> Le Goff, *Birth*, 222–23; McLaughlin, *Consorting*, 34–35.

a celebration, not like a normal funeral.<sup>32</sup> As the cult of the saints became progressively more important this brought into contrast the fates of those who were not saintly. Surviving homilies and sermons often (though not always) give the impression that congregations were presented with a stark choice between heaven or hell, with preachers warning that even small sins could terminally endanger the soul.<sup>33</sup> And, in connection with this, congregations were warned that no one can know in advance what the fate of the soul will be after death. The only possible response advocated was to live as perfect a life as possible, and yet there was widespread recognition that many people fell short.

In the ninth century, the theologian and liturgist, Amalarius of Metz (d.c.850), considered how responses to departed souls – and particularly the remembrance of the anniversary of death – differed depending on whether they were saints or ‘ordinary’ people. He noted that:

anniversary days are kept for the dead because we do not know what their situation is in the other life: just as anniversary days in honour of the saints are brought to memory for our benefit, so those of the dead are performed for their benefit and for our devotion, and we believe that they will come to the company of saints at some future time.<sup>34</sup>

As inhabitants of heaven, saints were not generally considered to be in need of help, but remembrance of the anniversaries of departed souls, and prayer for them, could help those whose situation in the afterlife was uncertain. In earlier writings this sharp distinction between the holy and the ordinary dead, and the ways in which they were remembered and celebrated, is not always so clear. Gregory of Tours (d.594) mentions a king who performed penance after he repented of killing his son; he offered gifts to the church at Saint-Maurice-d’Agaune, where he also instituted the daily recitation of psalms.<sup>35</sup> After he was captured and killed by King Chlodomer, his body was buried in this church, where people who suffered from chills used to have masses said in his honour and to make offerings for his repose: Gregory reports that since they were cured, the king must have been received into the company of saints. This shows the perceived effectiveness of penance but also juxtaposes offerings made for the king’s rest, as if he were one of the ordinary dead who could be helped by prayers, simultaneously with masses offered in his honour, as if he were one of the saints who did not need help – a fact confirmed by the curing of those who came to his tomb. In contrast, although Amalarius suggests that the anniversaries of saints and of the ordinary dead are remembered in much the same way, he distinguishes clearly between the effects of those celebrations for different souls. While Amalarius refers specifically to anniversaries, there were numerous ways of helping the dead; the crucial point is that this was considered to be important and, in many cases, absolutely necessary to prevent ongoing suffering of souls in the next world.

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<sup>32</sup> *VE* 4.6, ed. Lapidge, 280–82.

<sup>33</sup> For alternative dimensions see Sowerby, *Angels*, 110–45.

<sup>34</sup> Amalarius, *LO*, 3.44.16, ed. Hanssens, vol. 2, 386.

<sup>35</sup> Gregory of Tours, *LGM* 74, ed. Krusch, 87. On more ‘ordinary’ dead becoming intercessors in Merovingian Francia, see Moreira’s chapter in this volume.

## *Sin*

Theologians considered many significant questions about sin, such as how sin was understood to relate to the state of the soul, and what kind of satisfaction needed to be paid for sins committed. Following Augustine, early medieval Latin Christianity generally accepted that all souls inherited the burden of original sin from Adam.<sup>36</sup> The soul could be cleansed of this original sin by baptism, which would also wash away all other sins committed before this. In the early Church baptism was frequently postponed until late in life, or shortly before death: Constantine, the first Christian Roman emperor, converted in the early 310s but was not baptised until very soon before his death in 337; Ambrose of Milan was not baptised until he was elected bishop at the age of 34, although (obviously, perhaps) he had been a Christian beforehand.<sup>37</sup> Sins affected the soul and severed the relationship between God and the individual; they stained the soul (in visions, sometimes literally turning the soul black), and those who died in sin were often stated to be unable to enter heaven. In the early middle ages there was increasingly a distinction between greater sins which could (if not repented and confessed before death) send the souls of the dying immediately to hell, and lighter sins from which the soul could be purified even after death.<sup>38</sup> Even the holy dead were not always free from these smaller sins: Gregory of Tours records that when St Martin visited the tomb of a virgin named Vitalina, she asked him (from beyond the grave) to pray for her, so that she would be cleansed of a small sin which was delaying her entry into heaven; Martin did so, promising that she would enter heaven after three days.<sup>39</sup> In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries the different kinds of sins were more fully clarified into a division between mortal sins and venial sins, along with more considered discussion of the conditions which had to be met to make a particular sin mortal or venial.<sup>40</sup> Before this the distinction was not always so clearly expressed, but it is articulated clearly enough in early medieval texts that we can assume with confidence that many early medieval writers understood exactly this sort of division in a broad sense, even if it was not systematised, or refined in the detail that it would be later.

In fact, something like this concept was formulated even in the fifth century by Augustine, who noted the possibility of post-mortem remission of sin (based on Jesus's statement about the unforgiveability of blasphemy against the Holy Ghost, in this world or the next).<sup>41</sup> Later authors of both theological and visionary works distinguished between major sins which would ultimately condemn the soul eternally, and others which could be remitted in the next world. The *Dialogues* of Gregory I outline this distinction in relation to a passage from I Corinthians about salvation through fire, noting that the greater and more enduring sins are less easily remitted, while smaller

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<sup>36</sup> Eastern Christianity understood the effects of Adam's sin and the fallen state of the human race significantly differently. See Meyendorff, *Byzantine*, 143–46.

<sup>37</sup> Jungmann, *Early*, 248.

<sup>38</sup> For another perspective on this see the discussion in Brown, 'Gloriosus'; Brown, 'Decline', 41–45; Brown, 'Vers'; and Brown, *Ransom*, though he rather overstates the case for dramatic change at the end of the sixth century.

<sup>39</sup> Gregory of Tours, *LGC* 5, ed. Krusch, 751–52.

<sup>40</sup> E.g. Aquinas, *ST* 1a-2ae, q. 72, a. 5, ed. and trans. Fearon, vol. 25, 41–45.

<sup>41</sup> Augustine, *E*, 78–80, 110.9–13, ed. Evans, *E*, 92–94, 108; *DCD* 20.25–26, ed. Dombert and Kalb, vol. 2, 747–51; Mt 12:31–32.

and lighter sins are easily burned away by fire.<sup>42</sup> Gregory's statement was repeated by Julian of Toledo, Bede, Hrabanus Maurus (archbishop of Mainz; d.856) and Peter Lombard (bishop of Paris, d.1160), amongst others; similar statements are found also in early medieval texts, such as the seventh-century Irish *De ordine creaturarum* (attributed in the middle ages to Isidore of Seville), which distinguishes between sins that can be purged after death (though at the fire of judgement, rather than in the interim), and those which must be punished in eternal hell.<sup>43</sup> The late seventh-century *Life* of the Irish monk, Fursey, records his experience of the otherworld, where he was caught between angels and devils: in one altercation, devils attempting to condemn Fursey because of his sins are warned by angels that unless they can find major sins with which to accuse him, he will be saved, because he will not perish for minor sins.<sup>44</sup> This was a popular account which circulated widely, but other visions present similar kinds of distinctions. Sometimes major sins were identified with the seven or eight capital (or chief or, in later terminology, 'deadly') sins, but often they are not pinned down so specifically and the distinction seems rather to be qualitative. In the late eighth century Alcuin distinguished clearly between greater sins which led to eternal punishment, and smaller sins which did not;<sup>45</sup> Ælfric of Eynsham, drawing on Julian of Toledo, likewise distinguished between 'light' sins which could be purged after death and 'great' sins which could not be.<sup>46</sup> Many authors either alluded to or explicitly referred to the concept of greater sins in identifying people who should not receive communion, such as Paschasius Radbertus (d.865), Abbot of Corbie, in his treatise on the Eucharist, written c.831.<sup>47</sup> Even if the later terms 'mortal' and 'venial' were not used, early medieval authors clearly understood a qualitative distinction between sins which was essential in relating to the way that sin would affect the soul after death.

### *Penance*

This distinction was significant too in relation to the concept of penance, the solution to post-baptismal sin. Jesus warned in the Gospels that the end of the world would come soon; but, when the end did not materialise, early Christians were left with the problem of dealing with those who sinned after baptism. Christians who committed major sins which caused public scandal were supposed to undertake a form of penance involving excommunication and requiring the penitent to adopt an ascetic way of life even after completion of the penance (as in the case of the penitent king mentioned by Gregory of Tours, discussed above).<sup>48</sup> At least initially, this kind of penance was theoretically non-repeatable, and sometimes this led to the postponement of penance until near the end of life.<sup>49</sup> However, less formal ways of atoning for sin (such as performing virtuous Christian deeds) were also possible, although how exactly this worked in practice changed over the

<sup>42</sup> Gregory the Great, *D* 41, trans. Zimmermann, 247–49; I Corinthians 3:11–15.

<sup>43</sup> *DOC* 13–14, ed. Díaz y Díaz, 178–92. Pollard's chapter (@ n. 95) notes some possible alternative Carolingian views.

<sup>44</sup> *VF* 16, ed. Ciccarese, *Visioni*, 220–22. On this text, see Wieland's chapter.

<sup>45</sup> Alcuin, *Ep.* 110, ed. Dümmler, 158–59.

<sup>46</sup> Ælfric of Eynsham, *SH* 11, ll. 220–35, ed. Pope, 426–27.

<sup>47</sup> Paschasius Radbertus, *CSD* 6, ed. Paulus, 34–36.

<sup>48</sup> Paxton, *Christianizing*, 35–37; Meens, *Penance*, 15–30.

<sup>49</sup> Meens, *Penance*, 26–28.

course of late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages. From the late sixth century and into the seventh there seems to have been a growing interest in defining set ‘tariffs’ of penance for particular sins, probably linked to the performance of penance in monastic houses for daily sins, and subsequently extended to laity who were connected with monastic houses.<sup>50</sup> In the ninth century, Carolingian reformers attempted to outline a distinction between ‘public’ and ‘private’ penance, although these modern terms are rather misleading and it is clear in any case that the theoretical distinction did not always work in practice.<sup>51</sup> It is clear, however, that throughout this period Christians were encouraged to confess their sins at least once a year, if not more often, and that individual confession before death was becoming increasingly important. When, in 1215, the Fourth Lateran Council imposed an obligation of annual confession on all believers, it confirmed what had been ideal practice for several centuries.<sup>52</sup>

Penance could wipe away both greater and lesser sins, leaving the soul pure and clean, ready for salvation. The distinctions between greater and lesser sins were particularly important in terms of what happened to those who died without having confessed and performed penance. To be saved, the soul needed ultimately to be cleansed of all sins. Unconfessed and unatoned for lesser sins could still be forgiven after death; while greater sins, if unconfessed at the moment of death, would send the soul to hell. If a dying person confessed his or her sins, then they might be atoned for and cleansed after death even if there was no time to perform penance, and so the soul would still ultimately reach heaven. Precisely how and – perhaps more importantly – *when* sins were forgiven in the course of penance is not always clear in early medieval texts, but this came under scrutiny particularly during the the course of the eleventh century and into the twelfth.<sup>53</sup> The development of related theological ideas was also significant here, especially the concept of contrition, the emotion that moved the sinner to confess. Ninth-century scholars such as Alcuin and Hrabanus Maurus discussed the importance of contrition in the process of penance, but in later centuries there appeared the idea – although it was not universally held – that confession and contrition themselves could result in forgiveness. An eleventh- or twelfth-century pseudo-Augustinian treatise (*De vera et falsa penitentia*) holds that in the shame and contrition that it produces, confession can effect the remission of sin and thus directly result in forgiveness.<sup>54</sup> The moment of forgiveness is not always clear in earlier writings, though some texts seem to suggest that forgiveness is affected only after absolution, which itself is granted only once an assigned penance is completed.<sup>55</sup> It is important to note, however, that formal confession and penance were not the only way of cleansing smaller sins, since penitential acts performed outside the formal arrangements of penance could also have this effect. Many saints are recorded as performing frequent penitential deeds such as fasting, giving alms, or living in an ascetic manner, and this is

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<sup>50</sup> For full discussion see de Jong, ‘Transformations’; Meens, *Penance*, 30–100.

<sup>51</sup> de Jong, ‘What’; Meens, *Penance*, 100–39.

<sup>52</sup> *IV Lateran* 21, ed. and trans. Tanner, vol. 1, 245; Poschmann, *Penance*, 138–46; Murray, ‘Confession’; Meens, ‘Frequency’, 35–36; Meens, *Penance*, 138–39, 214–15.

<sup>53</sup> See for example Foxhall Forbes, ‘Affective’.

<sup>54</sup> *VFP*, ed. Wagner, 17, 35, 247–49.

<sup>55</sup> E.g. the *ordo* in Oxford, Bodleian Library, Bodley 718, f. 15r-v. See discussion in Foxhall Forbes, ‘Affective’, 336–38.

one reason that they were able to enter heaven immediately, since, in addition to avoiding sin as far as humanly possible, their penitential lifestyles ensured that any small sins were cleansed from the soul. Involuntary suffering could also act as a form of penitential cleansing. Bede relates that when Hereberht was informed by St Cuthbert that he expected his own death soon, Hereberht asked Cuthbert to pray that they would both enter heaven together. Hereberht then became ill and suffered a sickness which, Bede explains, cleansed him before he died, so that he and Cuthbert could enter heaven at the same moment. Cuthbert's saintly life meant that he was already prepared for heaven, while Hereberht evidently required cleansing of his sins in his last days so that he would merit immediate entry to heaven along with Cuthbert.<sup>56</sup>

### *Religious Practices: Offerings, Burials and 'Popular' Belief*

Both visionary texts and theological writings warn that only actions undertaken before death would aid the salvation of souls. as practices such as offering masses for the dead became more frequent, however, particularly from the seventh century (see the introduction), the precise significance of these warnings changed. By the early seventh century, Isidore could say that it was universally held that masses or prayers could be offered for the forgiveness of the sins.<sup>57</sup> From at least the late seventh century, monastic communities kept names of the living and the dead in special commemorative books. Offerings were made for all the faithful departed, both the 'ordinary', needing help in the afterlife, and the holy dead, assumed to be in heaven already. In contrast, wicked souls were not considered to benefit from such offerings. the powerful effects of post-mortem masses were recorded in visions: an eighth-century letter associated with the Bonifatian mission in Germania recounts a vision of a soul released from a pit in the afterlife when a mass was offered; and the *Life* of Abbot Odilo of Cluny (c.962–1049), written shortly after Odilo's death by the monk Jotsuald, reports a vision of souls released from torment in the afterlife through masses.<sup>58</sup> Jotsuald relates that Odilo's response to this vision was to increase offerings for the dead and to introduce an annual feast for Cluniac monasteries: communities were to commemorate All Souls on November 2<sup>nd</sup> by offering masses and prayers for all the faithful departed.<sup>59</sup> While offerings for the dead were not themselves an early medieval innovation, the early Middle Ages saw a significant increase in the scale and importance of such offerings by monastic foundations.

Concern for the fate of the soul immediately after death, and the desire for the performance of religious practices to benefit departed souls, were not exclusively monastic. Documentary evidence for lay donations to religious houses shows a rise in requests for prayers, masses and other liturgical services or offerings, and other concerns are visible too, for example in connection with burial. The question of how burial affected the fate of the soul after death was raised in the fifth

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<sup>56</sup> Bede, *HE* 4.29, ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 440–42.

<sup>57</sup> Isidore, *DEO*, 1.18.11, ed. Lawson, 22.

<sup>58</sup> Boniface, Lull, et al., *Ep.* 115, ed. Tangl, 248, ll. 5–7; *VO*, 2.13, *PL* 142, 926B–927C. On the hermit's vision and its afterlife, see Iogna-Prat, 'Morts'.

<sup>59</sup> Jotsuald, *VO*, 2.13, *PL* 142, 927B–927C. See also *LTO* 138, ed. Dinter, 199; Iogna-Prat, 'Dead'.

century by Paulinus of Nola, who asked Augustine's advice.<sup>60</sup> Augustine's response was, essentially, that the body's fate had no bearing on that of the soul, but that this did not mean that bodies should not be treated with respect; he also noted that burying someone where he/she would be remembered by the living was beneficial because it would encourage prayer for the soul. Although support for Augustine's view can be found in later theological writing, both textual and archaeological evidence suggests that burial was something that concerned people deeply. Here too we see the juxtaposition of saints and 'ordinary people' and the different treatments offered to each. Burial next to saints' bodies was a sign of prestige but seems also to have been thought to be beneficial to the soul after death: archaeological evidence in some cemeteries, particularly from the ninth century and later, demonstrates the clustering of graves around certain high-status tombs, often assumed to be saints, while textual evidence reveals the care that people took when arranging their places of burial and their desire to be buried near saints. Saints were often buried in churches, sometimes immediately but particularly once they had been translated from an earlier burial place. In one case, a saint apparently requested a grander and more appropriate place of burial within the church: St Eadburh, a tenth-century princess buried at the Nunnaminster in Winchester, was translated from the Nunnaminster's cemetery into its church, but was said by her twelfth-century biographer to have appeared in a vision to one of the nuns, demanding to be reburied closer to the altar.<sup>61</sup> The final resting place of the body was clearly perceived to be important for both social and spiritual reasons, and for both the holy and the ordinary dead alike.

One reason for this is speculation over the fate of the body and how this might relate to the fate of the soul. Some texts suggest that there was an ongoing link between the body and soul after death which meant that the fate of the soul might be 'read' in the body, at the tomb. A rather ambiguous example is the 'Soul and Body' poems in Old English (probably late ninth or early tenth century) and in early Middle English (probably late twelfth or early thirteenth century) which describe how two souls return to their bodies after death, the good soul praising and the wicked soul chastizing their bodies. The poems present the wicked soul berating the body and bemoaning the punishment that they will both receive at the end of time, while the narrator offers a graphic description of the body's destruction in the grave, munched up by maggots and rotting away. The rotting of the body is not in itself indicative of a terrible fate for the soul, or of moral corruption, since the good soul's body also rots, but the good body is consoled by the soul, who promises future reward after the final judgement despite the body's decay.<sup>62</sup> More striking are cases which indicated definitively through bodily signs how the soul fared in the afterlife: for example, the incorrupt preservation of some saints' bodies did signify their moral purity, even if not all saints' bodies remained whole. The miracle-working relics of saints demonstrated not only their active existence in the next world, as discussed above, but – more importantly – their holiness and closeness to God. Marvellous events of other sorts at graves show that the fates of those who were not saints, particularly those who were being punished in the afterlife, could also become visible

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<sup>60</sup> Augustine, *CMG*, ed. Zycha.

<sup>61</sup> Osbert of Clare, *VE* 15–20, ed. Ridyard, 286–94.

<sup>62</sup> Moffat, *Address*, 16–25, 62–81; Moffat, *Soul*, 15–16, 48–61, 62–64.

in this world. The *Life* of Leoba, written by a ninth-century monk of Fulda named Rudolf, records the sinking of the grave of a nun who had died in Wimborne in the eighth century. This was interpreted by Tetta, then Wimborne's abbess, as showing that she was suffering in the afterlife. (Since Rudolf notes that this particular nun had been quite sharp with the younger nuns, who had then all jumped on her grave after her death, we might suspect non-supernatural reasons also played a part in the sinking of the earth.) However, after the community prayed for her, the grave rose back up to its former level: this, according to Tetta, indicated that she had been released from her suffering.<sup>63</sup>

### *Theological Questioning in the Early Middle Ages*

Many of the questions about the afterlife examined by scholars in the early middle ages related to topics such as sin or penance and the efficacy of the mass for souls, both living and departed, but early medieval scholars were also concerned by various abstract and conceptual questions, many of which had concrete effects and practical consequences. One important issue was the nature of original sin and how exactly it affected souls, for example in the case of newborn babies who died before baptism (since, in this period, the concept of limbo as it was understood in the later middle ages was not generally held). Gregory I took an Augustinian line in assuming that 'the infant who had done nothing' is still not pure in the sight of God, but this seems to have bothered him when he wrote about it in a letter to the monk Secundinus.<sup>64</sup> Carolingian theologians, drawing on Augustine, suggested that infants required baptism to be saved since they were 'guilty by the sins of others, that is, they were stained with original sin'.<sup>65</sup> Early medieval secular and ecclesiastical legislation also adverted to this by prescribing penalties for those who failed to present their children for baptism quickly enough, sometimes within 30 days of birth, sometimes within a year.<sup>66</sup> Some ecclesiastical authorities were concerned enough about the possibility of infants dying without baptism that they outlined shortened versions of the baptismal liturgy to be said over children who were near death; lay people too were considered able to baptise in case of emergency. It may be, however, that what was believed to happen to unbaptised children after death was not so clear-cut as some of this evidence suggests. The letter of 757 associated with the Bonifatian mission and relating an account of a vision, already mentioned above, records that the visionary saw the souls of many sad and lamenting children who died without baptism during the time of Bishop Daniel. These children's souls seem to have been in torment alongside two named individuals (Count Ceolla Snoding and Æthelbald, a royal tyrant) and the abbot of the letter's recipient. This passage is not unproblematic given the political points that it makes, and so it is difficult to know how exactly the fates of these children should be interpreted. It is not absolutely clear from the letter whether it was believed that these children would ever reach heaven,

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<sup>63</sup> Rudolf, *VL* 4, ed. Waitz, 123–24.

<sup>64</sup> Cramer, *Baptism*, 133; Gregory, *R. Ep.* 9.148.126–59, ed. Norberg, vol. 2, 703–4: 'Cur infans, qui nihil egit, in conspectu omnipotentis Dei esse non ualet mundus?' (ll. 147–8, 703).

<sup>65</sup> See for example Alcuin, *Ep.* 110, 158, ed. Dümmler, 158, ll. 31–33: 'aliorum peccatis obnoxii'.

<sup>66</sup> Ine, 2–2.1, ed. F. Liebermann, *Gesetze*, vol. 1, 90–91; cf. *CPS* 19, ed. Boretius, 69; see also Cramer, *Baptism*, 13; Phelan, *Formation*, 43–44.

though they seem to have been in pits from which souls could escape, and the way that they were described – with ‘their faces shining with the brightness of the sun, moon, or stars’ – may suggest that in the end they were believed to be not utterly damned.<sup>67</sup> In the closing years of the eleventh century (1099–1100), an examination of original sin by Anselm of Canterbury concluded with discussion of infants and original sin: Anselm states that there are some who reject the idea that infants who die unbaptised must be condemned, mainly because humans do not judge children in the same way that they judge adults.<sup>68</sup> Although he argues against this, saying that God demands from human nature what was bestowed upon it and what was owed to him, he reveals here the existence of alternative views about the fate of unbaptised children in the afterlife. By the mid 1130s, when Abelard was writing about original sin in his commentary on St Paul’s letter to the Romans, he expressed a more complex position which looks towards the later idea of limbo, suggesting instead that while children who died unbaptised might be isolated from the beatific vision of God, they would not otherwise experience torment.<sup>69</sup>

Theologians also considered numerous other issues: when and how the souls and bodies of the dead would be reunited, what was the nature of the soul and what would be the nature of the post-resurrection body; the nature of the relationship between heaven and hell, and the souls contained within them, or in other parts of the afterlife; whether paradise was separate from heaven, or part of it, or simply another name for heaven. Questions about the nature of heaven and hell also extended to speculation on their sizes, how many souls might be contained therein, and whether the souls in each part of the afterlife would see and recognise each other. There was not always consistency in the answers, but what is important is that people continued to ask questions to try to understand Christian eschatology. In relation to the reuniting of bodies and souls, for example, it was generally understood that the bodies which had once in mortal form been attached to souls would be resurrected in an incorruptible form so that souls and bodies would be united immediately prior to the final judgement (though there were differences of opinion on some details).<sup>70</sup> Bede notes, for example, that the joy of the elect is lacking only in that they do not yet have their bodies and will not until the end of time.<sup>71</sup> This position led to other questions too, so that scholars considered how, if souls in the afterlife were disembodied, they could be punished in fire, and whether this fire would be corporeal or incorporeal.<sup>72</sup> As with many other topics relating to the afterlife, some of these questions were addressed in the *Dialogues*, from where Gregorian teachings spread either directly, or indirectly via their incorporation into works by later writers such as Julian of Toledo or Bede. Comments and annotations on manuscripts of the *Dialogues* and Julian’s *Prognosticum* in later centuries reveal continued interest in these questions,<sup>73</sup> but other writers also took up some of these issues themselves in different ways, though often drawing on

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<sup>67</sup> Boniface, Lull, et al., *Ep.* 115, ed. Tangl, 249, ll. 3–12.

<sup>68</sup> Anselm, *DCV* 28, ed. Schmitt, vol. 2, 170–71.

<sup>69</sup> Peter Abelard, *CEP* 2.5.336–732, ed. Buytaert, 163–75; see also Sullivan, ‘Development’, 3–4.

<sup>70</sup> As stated (briefly) in the Apostles Creed and the Nicene Creed, for example; for detailed discussion see Bynum, *Resurrection*.

<sup>71</sup> Bede, *H.* 1.10, ll. 127–37; 2.7, ll. 19–26, ed. Hurst, 71–72, 225–26.

<sup>72</sup> Barbezat, ‘Corporeal’.

<sup>73</sup> For discussion of some of these see Johnson and Rudolf, ‘More’; Keskiaho, *Dreams*.

Gregory and Augustine. The author of the seventh-century Irish *De ordine creaturarum* drew on Augustine's *City of God* to note that many people said that the eternal fire of punishment was a corporeal place where the bodies of sinners were tormented, pointing out that if the fire and the place where it burned were not corporeal, it would not be able to torture the resurrected bodies which were tormented there.<sup>74</sup> However, the author puzzled over how this could be reconciled with the idea that the fire would also punish the incorporeal devil and his angels (i.e. lesser devils), and that it was said in Luke's Gospel to have burned a rich man's soul after death: he concludes in the end that perhaps the fire (and the place) were able to torment both incorporeal spirits (such as devils and souls) and corporeal bodies. Issues such as these had perplexed earlier writers and continued to be discussed throughout the middle ages, often without clear resolution. In the 1230s, for example, William of Auvergne attempted to explain in his *De universo* ('On the universe') how hell-fire did not consume the bodies that it burned, and how purgatorial fire burned souls that were separated from their bodies.<sup>75</sup> Such questions continued to attract interest in the later middle ages and frequently multiple solutions were proposed, since firm and certain answers were not easy to find.

### *Conclusion*

Early medieval theology on the afterlife needs to be understood in the context of the much longer tradition of theology which extends both before it and afterwards. As the centuries passed, heaven was gradually perceived as less attainable for 'ordinary' souls, while the interim between death and the final judgement increased in importance, especially in relation to offerings made by the living for the dead. Scholars often place these developments in the late Middle Ages, but in fact they are evident much earlier and emerged slowly over several centuries during which there was a gradual shift in which aspects of the afterlife were certain, and which less so. Most early Christian writers assumed a positive fate for almost all Christians at some point after death, but there was great variety in beliefs about when this happened and what it involved. In contrast, late antique writers held that each soul would account for its deeds after death and that 'bad Christians' would be denied a place in heaven; some scholars suggested that there were different fates for souls according to their virtues, but these were discussed (at least initially) with circumspection and ambivalence. By the end of the early Middle Ages, authors were much more certain that entry to heaven was difficult, and the fate of the soul after death was uncertain; but authors were prepared not to pass judgement on fates of those who, for example, lived a good life but were unable to make confession before death.

Perhaps most striking in early medieval discussions of the afterlife is the repeated emphasis on the mercy of God and the unknowability of the ultimate destination of each individual soul. Each individual brought before God would have to account for his or her own deeds, but ultimately the reckoning was between God and each soul, and the full account known to no one else. This is not

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<sup>74</sup> *DOC* 13.5, ed. Díaz y Díaz, 178–79.

<sup>75</sup> Bernstein, 'Esoteric', 511–15; see also Bernstein, 'Theology'.

‘the discovery of the individual’ (a development attributed erroneously to the late eleventh and twelfth centuries),<sup>76</sup> such ideas are visible far earlier and underpin the theology of penance and the cults of saints. Concern over the fate of the soul reached also into lay culture, with the result that the efforts of the laity to arrange offerings for their loved ones, and for themselves after their own deaths, increased throughout the early Middle Ages. The expansion of mortuary culture into the late Middle Ages was the culmination of this longer trend, but there is evidence for considerable early medieval lay interest in, and concern to provide, perpetual prayers and individual liturgical commemoration for the soul after death: institutions of prayer such as chantries which emerged in the late eleventh and twelfth centuries grew out of established customs of offerings for the dead, rather than appearing from nowhere.<sup>77</sup> Interestingly, while preaching and pastoral texts place most emphasis on the final judgement, discussions about the interim remained far more circumspect, and were often discussed in theological texts whose intended audience was monastic or scholarly. It is clear nonetheless that, like those in religious life, lay people were increasingly certain that they needed to make provision for the soul after death, and relied on God’s mercy to ensure their place in heaven in due course.

The redefining of the relationship between what was certainly and less certainly knowable about the afterlife occurred both incrementally and constantly, without clear moments of dramatic change. Ultimately, however, developments in the theology of the afterlife from late antiquity and through the early Middle Ages were both substantial and significant, and led to earlier texts being read and re-read in different ways. Many late medieval authors, like their early medieval counterparts, sought to refine their knowledge of the afterlife by considering questions and bringing together different authorities. Aelred of Rievaulx (d.1167), a northern English Cistercian, explored the conflicting statements of earlier writers on different kinds of fates for souls after death, including the issue of whether post-mortem fire was corporeal or incorporeal, and continuing the discussion of a tradition which had a long heritage.<sup>78</sup> Eschatological discussions were (usually) undertaken in relation to the greater soteriological framework of Christianity, and even questions which may seem bizarre now must be understood as genuine attempts to synthesise inherited learning, to advance knowledge and to find information that was previously unknown, even if this was not always successful. In addition, scholars were clearly concerned with the care of souls and to direct people to live in such a way that they would ultimately merit salvation, and thus dealt with issues of practical significance as well as theological interest. Visionary accounts too were collected and compiled, and sometimes translated, so that texts composed over multiple centuries were brought together in volumes whose whole focus pointed towards the afterlife; annotations in these books attest to readers’ interest in them and their subject-matter.<sup>79</sup> Changes in theological method from the late eleventh century did lead to a greater interest in speculative and other kinds

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<sup>76</sup> See for example Morris, *Discovery*; Bynum, *Jesus*, 82–109, neither of which effectively examines the early Middle Ages or demonstrates the supposed absence of the individual before the late eleventh century.

<sup>77</sup> Colvin, ‘Origin’, 163–67; Crouch, ‘Origin’.

<sup>78</sup> Aelred of Rievaulx, *DA* 3.35, ll. 569–584, ed. Hoste and Talbot, 746.

<sup>79</sup> See London, British Library, Cotton Otho C.i, vol. 2. See Sisam, ‘Old’; Johnson and Rudolf, ‘More’, 5–10.

of theology which moved away from the pastoral contexts of much early medieval theological writing, but the differences in early and later medieval theology (both content and method) should not be over-emphasised. When later medieval writers looked to Augustine and to Gregory – and particularly to the passages selected in Julian’s *Prognosticum* – their interpretations and thinking would surely have been considerably different if they had not viewed those texts through the landscape of belief and practice created by successive generations of Christians, whether theologians or not, in the early Middle Ages.