

The Journey after Death and the Toll-house Myth: A Comparative Study of the Theology of After-life in East and West

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Abstract

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In the spirit of *Unitatis Redintegratio*, the author suggests that the differences in Eastern and Western concepts of what happens after death need to be more fully explored, but that such exploration already reveals three points of commonality: an intermediate state between death and resurrection, the need for many to experience purification or ongoing growth during this period, and the belief that prayers and liturgical celebrations can somehow aid these souls. In addition to the similarities there are also of course areas of difference in the method of purification, the degree of attention given to the final judgment and to the resurrection of the body, and the willingness to acknowledge the reality of death. After reviewing the Latin tradition's emphasis on "purgatory" and the Orthodox *theologumena* about "toll-houses" and "soul slumber," the author concludes that in a death-denying culture such as ours today, both theologies offer much that is worthwhile to the Churches to ponder and offer to their faithful for consideration and consolation.



Introduction

The *Decree on Ecumenism* of Vatican II teaches that “from their very origins, the Churches of the East have had a treasury from which the Church of the West has drawn largely for its liturgy, spiritual tradition and jurisprudence.”¹ The Second Vatican Council therefore encourages us to explore our doctrinal differences because “sometimes one tradition has come nearer to a full appreciation of aspects of a mystery of revelation than the other, or has expressed them better.”²

In this spirit of exploring other traditions to gain a fuller appreciation of the truth, this paper considers Orthodox theology of the after-life, particularly the idea “toll-houses,” as a possible understanding of the fate of the soul after death. This contrasts with the Roman Catholic understanding of immediate particular judgment leading one’s soul to heaven, hell, or purgatory. While both models agree that there is an in-between phase between death and the resurrection of the body, and that souls can benefit from the prayers and the liturgies of the living, there are significant differences between the theologies of East and West. The richness of the theology of the after-life according to the Eastern Churches has much to offer the West. After comparing and contrasting the theologies of the after-life in both East and West, this paper will enumerate three benefits of the Eastern perspective, which offer thought-provoking questions for the West.

Given its importance in the specification of the theology of purgatory, we will begin with some background about the Council of Florence of 1438–39, and the Latin understanding

¹ *Unitatis Redintegratio*, ¶14 in *The Basic Sixteen Documents: Vatican Council II Constitutions, Decrees, Declarations*, ed. Austin Flannery (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing, 1996).

² *Ibid.*, ¶17. Yves Congar made a similar plea for the value of ecumenical reflection and dialogue, specifically on the doctrine of purgatory. Noting that purgatory is a concept that separates Roman Catholics both from Protestants and from the Orthodox, Congar encouraged an attitude of respectful examination of the doctrine, allowing it to be scrutinized in order to perhaps arrive at new insights. See Yves Congar, “Le purgatoire,” in *Le Mystère de la mort et sa célébration, Vanves, 27–29 avril 1949*, ed. Centre National de Pastorale Liturgique (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1951), 279–80.

of purgatory that was described and debated at that council. Second, the reasons for the “Greek” disapproval of purgatory will be reviewed, along with a description of the “Greek” understanding of the after-life. We will then review the idea of toll-houses in more depth, including some of its variants. For completeness, “soul-slumber” will be addressed briefly; this forms a minority competing understanding among some theologians in the East. Finally, after reviewing modern views of purgatory, we will extract certain lessons for a contemporary understanding of the after-life. The review of each tradition will naturally lead to some vital questions which need further consideration.

Council of Florence

At the Council of Florence of 1438–39, for the first time in an ecumenical council, the doctrine of purgatory was fervently debated.³ Florence was the first and the last substantial effort to reunite the Churches of East and West following the schism of 1054 and the sacking of Constantinople in 1204.⁴ It was the first time in almost four centuries that East and West entered into “formal debate ... over ecclesiastical differences.”⁵ In fact, it was the last significant attempt at unity until the ecumenical movement of the twentieth century.

³ The topic of purgatory arose in East-West polemics around 1230 and was discussed at the Second Council of Lyons in 1274, but only superficially. See Aidan Nichols, *Rome and the Eastern Churches: A Study in Schism* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1992), 252–53. For the discussions at Florence, see James Jorgenson, “The Debate over the Patristic Texts on Purgatory at the Council of Ferrara-Florence, 1438,” *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 30 (1986): 309–34.

⁴ The Council began in Ferrara in 1438 and was relocated to Florence because of the plague. While the term “Council of Ferrara-Florence” appears occasionally, it is more commonly known simply as the Council of Florence. For general reflections on the council, see, inter alia, James Gill, *The Council of Florence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961); Deno J. Geanakoplos, *Byzantine East and Latin West: Two Worlds of Christendom in Middle Ages and Renaissance; Studies in Ecclesiastical and Cultural History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1966), 84–111.

⁵ Deno Geanakoplos, *Byzantine East and Latin West*, 84.