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Article Title: The Reformation of Hell? Protestant and Catholic Infernalisms in England, c. 1560–1640

Year of publication: 2010

Link to published version:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0022046908005964>

Publisher statement: © Cambridge University Press 2010

The Reformation of Hell? Protestant and Catholic Infernalisms in England, c. 1560–1640

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Despite a recent expansion of interest in the social history of death, there has been little scholarly examination of the impact of the Protestant Reformation on perceptions of and discourses about hell. Scholars who have addressed the issue tend to conclude that Protestant and Catholic hells differed little from each other in the Elizabethan and early Stuart periods. This article undertakes a comparative analysis of printed English-language sources, and finds significant disparities on questions such as the location of hell and the nature of hell-fire. It argues that such divergences were polemically driven, but none the less contributed to the so-called ‘decline of hell’.

It seems that historians will never tire of debating the impact of the Protestant Reformations on diverse aspects of the social, cultural and institutional structures of early modern Europe. To appropriate the titles of some recent books, the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries witnessed *The reformation of the parishes*, *The reformation of ritual*, *The reformation of community*, *The reformation of the image* and *The reformation of the keys*.¹ Alongside these transformations of social and community life was a crucial parallel development, one that Craig Koslofsky has dubbed *The reformation of the dead*. Rituals of the deathbed, funeral ceremonies, burial patterns, commemorative practices – all these were comprehensively remodelled across the Protestant world from the middle decades of the sixteenth

¹ A. Pettegree (ed.), *The reformation of the parishes*, Manchester 1993; S. C. Karant-Nunn, *The reformation of ritual*, London 1997; C. H. Parker, *The reformation of community*, Cambridge 1998; J. L. Korner, *The reformation of the image*, London 2004; R. K. Rittgers, *The reformation of the keys*, Cambridge 2005.

century.² Behind the reforms lay what was perhaps the single most audacious act of theological downsizing in the history of western Christianity. The medieval Church had come to recognise five distinct places or states which defined the location and condition of the dead: in addition to heaven and hell, there was a purgatory for the souls of the moderately sinful, a limbo for unbaptised infants, and a second limbo for the righteous patriarchs and prophets who had died, of necessity non-Christians, before the incarnation of Jesus. This latter place was usually thought to be empty, since Christ had liberated its inhabitants in a kind of daring commando raid performed between his death and resurrection – the so-called harrowing of hell.³ But Protestant reformers, Lutheran and Reformed alike, would have no truck with this. Purgatory and the limbos were declared unscriptural and therefore unreal, unhealthy fictions of the clerical imagination. The reformers recognised only two places in the hereafter: heaven and hell. Heaven has its own history.⁴ But is it possible to speak meaningfully of ‘the Reformation of hell’ in this period? And if not, why not?

Despite an explosion of interest in the social history of death among scholars of the early modern period, the immediate and medium-term impact of Protestantism on teachings about and perceptions of hell has not attracted much attention as an object of study. D. P. Walker’s seminal discussion of ‘the decline of hell’ has a firmly later seventeenth- and eighteenth-century focus.⁵ Those who have considered the earlier period tend to conclude that continuity and traditionalism were the order of the day. Writing in the 1920s, the Anglican theologian Darwell Stone remarked that ‘the widespread rejection of any kind of purgatory by members of the English Church in the sixteenth and following centuries was not accompanied by much modification of the corresponding ideas about hell’.⁶ More recently, the literary scholar C. A. Patrides has argued that Protestant writers ‘transcended the bounds of their theological differences from Catholics’ in writing about hell.⁷ A similar argument is made by the French cultural

² C. Koslofsky, *The reformation of the dead*, Basingstoke 2000. For a broad overview see P. Marshall, ‘Leaving the world’, in P. Matheson (ed.), *Reformation Christianity*, Minneapolis 2007, 168–88. For developments in England see P. Marshall, *Beliefs and the dead in Reformation England*, Oxford 2002.

³ See R. V. Turner, ‘Descendit ad inferos: medieval views on Christ’s descent into hell and the salvation of the ancient just’, *Journal of the History of Ideas* xxvii (1966), 173–94.

⁴ C. McDannell and B. Lang, *Heaven: a history*, New Haven–London 1990; J. B. Russell, *A history of heaven: the singing silence*, Princeton, NJ 1997.

⁵ D. P. Walker, *The decline of hell*, London 1964. See also P. C. Almond, *Heaven and hell in Enlightenment England*, Cambridge 1994.

⁶ Darwell Stone, *The faith of an English Catholic*, London 1926. Online at <http://anglicanhistory.org/england/stone/faith/14.html>.

⁷ C. A. Patrides, ‘“A horror beyond our expression”: the dimensions of hell’, in his *Premises and motifs in Renaissance thought and literature*, Princeton 1982, 182–99 at p. 184.

historian Jean Delumeau, in his exhaustive survey of ‘the emergence of a western guilt culture’. Hell features prominently in Delumeau’s chapter on ‘shared aspects of the Protestant and Catholic doctrinal programs’. Indeed, he questions whether historians have yet ‘adequately underlined this penetration of Catholicism and Protestantism during a period of intense religious conflict’. To Delumeau, Catholic and Protestant sermons and treatises on hell and judgement from across Europe seem virtually interchangeable. They all hark on the same regulatory message: change your ways, or face the excruciating consequences. Indeed, he asserts that ‘this pressing and constant plea makes any lengthy study of the Protestant hell unnecessary’.⁸

I am not quite alone in wondering whether matters were really so straightforwardly monochrome. In an enlightening recent essay on ‘the good side of hell’ in early modern Spain, Carlos Eire suggests that ‘more work is ... needed on comparing the relative place of hell among early modern Catholics and Protestants, both literally and figuratively’.⁹ This essay seeks to take up the challenge, representing a tentative foray into the field of what one is tempted to call comparative infernalism. It concerns itself with English sources of the period *c.* 1560–1640, the era and area in which Delumeau perceived a particularly marked convergence between Protestant and Catholic approaches, something he ascribed to a predilection for Augustinian pessimism among English theologians of divergent stripes.¹⁰ The texts I have consulted include sermons, catechisms, instructional tracts, polemical writings and devotional manuals. Some are foreign works in translation, counted as English sources in this context, since my interest is in what was represented to and received by English readers. The sample is weighted towards the serious rather than the truly popular or recreational in vernacular print, and most of my authors are clergymen. Nor have I concerned myself with representations of hell in overtly fictive and literary sources. I have, as it were, stopped before Milton, and swerved around Marlowe and Shakespeare. Yet by examining images and tropes around hell-fire and damnation from a variety of orthodox and rather mundane sources, I hope to focus some significant questions about the dynamics of intellectual consensus and intellectual fragmentation in the later Reformation period.

An initial problem in setting out to study the Catholic–Protestant controversy over hell in later Reformation England is that there doesn’t appear to have been one. Hell was not, formally and prescriptively, an object of religious disputation. Neither the existence nor the essential purpose of hell

⁸ J. Delumeau, *Sin and fear: the emergence of a western guilt culture 13th–18th centuries*, trans. E. Nicholson, New York 1990, 505–22, quotations at pp. 506, 512.

⁹ C. M. N. Eire, ‘The good side of hell: infernal meditations in early modern Spain’, *Historical Reflections/Réflexions historiques* xxvi (2000), 286–310, quotation at p. 307.

¹⁰ Delumeau, *Sin and fear*, 505–6.

was ever at issue between Catholic and Protestant theologians. English Catholics would have had few problems in accepting a definition like that of the Caroline minister Thomas Phillips: ‘A place of infinite and extreame torment, created by God, and appointed for the punishment of the wicked after this life, to the glory and manifestation of his justice.’¹¹ It is not surprising therefore that hell does not appear as a topic in the seminary priest Anthony Champney’s compendious *A manual of controversies* (Paris 1614; *RSTC* 4958), nor in the Jesuit James Gordon’s 1618 *A summary of controversies ... now a dayes in dispute between Catholicks and Protestants* (n.p. 1618; *RSTC* 13998). From the Protestant side, there was no need for any substantial discussion of hell in, for example, William Perkins’s seminal work of quasi-courteous controversy, *A reformed Catholike: a declaration shewing how neere we may come to the present Church of Rome in sundrie points of religion, and wherein we must for euer depart from them* (Cambridge 1597; *RSTC* 18735-8).

In fact, far from aggressively diverging, Catholic and Protestant hells often drew on the same sources of inspiration. Some Protestant writing on the theme, for example, displays a remarkable indebtedness to medieval texts and motifs. Respectful citations of Aquinas pepper Protestant accounts, and a few authors unselfconsciously recycled the lurid descriptions of medieval vision literature, or, like the eleventh-century Cluniac St Odilo, pointed to the roarings and flashings of volcanoes like Vesuvius and Etna as presages of the fate awaiting the damned. Such traditionalism was even more evident in the cheap print and ballad literature of post-Reformation England, where the Dante-esque notion of specific torments tailored to the particular sins of the damned was often wholeheartedly affirmed, and liars might expect to have molten lead poured down their throats. Such notions were decidedly not the preserve of a kind of Catholic survivalism. During his possession by the devil in 1596, according to the pamphlet printed about the case, the Puritan youth Thomas Darling had a vision of the ‘place of torments where drunkards are hanged by the throats, swearers and filthy talkers by their tongues’.¹² In more sober and didactic sources there are frequent reiterations of what was perhaps the most familiar of medieval tropes on hell: both Protestant and Catholic writers in our period regularly repeated St Augustine’s striking suggestion that in comparison to hell-fire, earthly fire was but like a fire painted on a wall.¹³

¹¹ Thomas Phillips, *The booke of lamentations, or Geenologia a treatise of hell*, London 1639 (*RSTC* 19878.5), 10.

¹² D. Oldridge, *The devil in early modern England*, Stroud 2000, 66–8; P. C. Almond, *Demonic possession and exorcism in early modern England*, Cambridge 2004, 181.

¹³ Henry Greenwood, *Tormenting Tophet: or a terrible description of hel*, London 1615 (*RSTC* 12336), 17, 60, 63; [Samuel Rowlands?], *Hells torments, and heavens glorie*, London 1601 (*RSTC* 13048.5), C6v, D3v–5v; Robert Bolton, *The foure last things*, London 1632 (*RSTC* 3242), 100; Arthur Dent, *The plaine mans path-way to heauen*, London 1601 (*RSTC* 6626.5), 390; Phillips, *Booke of lamentations*, 32, 33–5; Luis de la Puente, *Meditations upon the mysteries of our holy faith*, trans. John

Even more remarkably, Catholic texts with substantial amounts of material on hell were sometimes printed or reprinted in Protestant editions. That classic of fifteenth-century devotion, *The imitation of Christ*, appeared in five Protestant translations between 1567 and 1639. Its eucharistic passages were heavily bowdlerised, but Protestants found nothing to object to in the chapter ‘On judgment and the punishment of sinners’, which emphasised how ‘lovers of luxury and pleasure will be drenched in burning pitch and stinking sulphur, and the envious will howl in pain like mad dogs’.¹⁴ An equally notorious case of pious appropriation was the Puritan Edmund Bunny’s 1584 edition of the *Booke of Christian exercise* by the Jesuit Robert Persons. Bunny thoroughly edited and expurgated Persons’s text, cutting, for example, all the material relating to purgatory and prayer for the dead. But he reproduced without any significant amendment all the sections on hell. Not long afterwards, the Lincolnshire gentleman Francis Meres produced a translation of the Spanish Dominican Luis de Granada’s *Guía de pecadores*. This too contained a vivid chapter explaining how ‘hell fire doth bind us to seeke after vertue’.¹⁵ Another example of the process is the 1613 translation of Bernard of Clairvaux’s *Dialogue betwixt the soule and the body of the damned* by the Puritan minister William Crashaw, an intensely physical vision of the yawning prospect of hell, with hideous demons dragging the damned soul off to perdition. Crashaw defended his endeavour on the grounds that his was ‘an age that needs all helps to holiness’. Although the original was ‘made in the mist of popery ... yet it is not tainted with popish corruption, nor scarce smels of any superstition’.¹⁶

Heigham, St Omer 1619 (*RSTC* 20486), i. 143; Robert Persons, *The Christian directory*, St Omer 1607 (*RSTC* 19354.5), 236; cf. J. de Voragine, *The golden legend*, trans. W. Ryan, Princeton 1993, ii. 280; P. Sheingorn, “‘Who can open the doors of his face?’ The iconography of hell mouth’, in C. Davidson and T. Seiler (eds), *The iconography of hell*, Kalamazoo 1992, 2–3; *Lollard sermons*, ed. G. Cigman (EETS ccxciv, 1989), 231. Descriptions of hell in popular ballads and chapbooks could be even more strikingly atavistic: T. Watt, *Cheap print and popular piety, 1550–1640*, Cambridge 1991, 110–12, 171, 238–9, 312; M. Spufford, *Small books and pleasant histories*, London 1981, 200–7; Oldridge, *Devil in early modern England*, 66–7.

¹⁴ Delumeau, *Sin and fear*, 505–6; Thomas à Kempis, *The imitation of Christ*, trans. B. I. Knott, London 1963, 76.

¹⁵ Edmund Bunny, *A booke of Christian exercise appertaining to resolution ... by R. P. perused, and accompanied now with a treatise tending to pacification*, London 1584 (*RSTC* 19355), ch. xi; Luis de Granada, *The sinners guyde*, trans. Francis Meres, London 1598 (*RSTC* 16918), 104; cf. B. Gregory, ‘The “True and Zealouse Service of God”’: Robert Parson, Edmund Bunny, and *The first book of the Christian exercise*’, this *JOURNAL* xlv (1994), 244–68. On Protestant translations of Catholic works in general see H. C. White, *English devotional literature [prose], 1600–1640*, Madison 1931, 98–115.

¹⁶ Bernard of Clairvaux, *Querela, sive, dialogus animae et corporis damnati ... The dialogue betwixt the soule and the body of the damned man*, trans. William Crashaw, London 1613 (*RSTC* 1908.5), epistle dedicatory.

There is little suggestion, therefore, that the sometimes lurid physicality of traditional Catholic descriptions of hell failed to appeal to Protestants' sensibilities. Indeed, it often characterised their own writings. The Jacobean bishop Lewis Bayly, whose *Practise of pietie* was the best-selling home-grown devotional work of the period, unflinchingly enumerated the particular torments that would afflict the damned, stressing how dainty noses 'shall be cloyed with noysome stench of *Sulphur*'.¹⁷ Protestant writers also vied with each other in their attempts to evoke the almost unimaginable horror of *eternal* torment. Arthur Dent invited his readers to imagine all the arithmeticians of the world spending a lifetime writing down the largest numbers they could think of, and then adding them all together: they could still 'never come any thing neere to that length of time wherein the wicked shall be tormented'. John Denison observed that if the damned had as many thousand years to endure as there were grains of sand on the shore, fish in the sea or stars in the firmament, then they could entertain some hope and comfort. But alas it was not so.¹⁸

There was much of the same in contemporary Catholic texts, though despite the impression given by some modern commentators, Counter-Reformation writers were fully capable of approaching the topic with caution and restraint. Cardinal Bellarmine, a favourite of the exiled English Catholic clergy, declared his intention of avoiding 'uncertaine or coniecturall points' in his treatment of hell's torments. He would deal only with what was clearly indicated in Holy Scripture, lest he be suspected of trying to arouse vain fears, and 'force teares from the eyes of the simple and ignorant'. The French Jesuit Nicholas Caussin, in the translation of the recusant gentleman and poet Thomas Hawkins, argued that silence was the only appropriate descriptor for the enormity of hell: 'I let passe this world of punishments figured by vultures, gibbets, tortures, snakes, burning pincers.' His contemporary, Bishop Jean Pierre Camus of Belley, advanced the virtues of brevity, in eschewing 'those vulgar similitudes or conceipts, which give to weaker wits slender ideas of eternitie'. Not for him the sands of the sea, or leaves on the trees, though he could not resist one such metaphor of immeasurable duration: a little immortal bird attempting to empty the ocean

¹⁷ Lewis Bayly, *The practise of pietie directing a Christian how to walke that he may please God*, London 1613 (RSTC 1602), 125–6.

¹⁸ Dent, *Plaine mans path-way*, 392; John Denison, *A three-fold resolution, verie necessarie to saluation: describing earths vanity, hels horror, heauens felicitie*, London 1608 (RSTC 6596), 426. For more of the same see Martin Day, *A monument of mortalitie*, London 1621 (RSTC 6427.5), 68–9; Thomas Tuke, *A discourse of death, bodily, ghostly, and eternall*, London 1613 (RSTC 24307), 99; Samuel Gardiner, *The deuotions of the dying man*, London 1627 (RSTC 11574), 336–7; Delumeau, *Sin and fear*, 519; Almond, *Heaven and hell*, 81–7.

by drawing from it in its beak a drop of water once every hundred thousand years.¹⁹

In neither Protestant nor Catholic texts of the period, however, is there much sense of writers wallowing sadistically in descriptions of hell-fire and torment for its own sake. On both sides of the confessional divide, the intent was much the same: such passages were a wake-up call for sinners, a counterblast against what the Protestant preacher Henry Greenwood called 'the presumptuous security of this our age', and the Catholic Bishop Camus dubbed 'the lethargie of pleasures'.²⁰ Readers were to meditate on hell so that they would never have to go there. A speaker in one moralistic Protestant dialogue even dared his interlocutors to 'suppose there were no hell (as euery good christian doth beleue there is one)'. Yet to think that there was such a place would lead only to good, and 'cause us to shunne that euill, that otherwise we should doe'.²¹ Historians will be tempted to call this social control; contemporaries, however, thought of it as a spur to repentance, a primary concern of pastors on all points of the religious spectrum.

There were, of course, some distinctive dynamics to Catholic and Protestant understandings of repentance, underpinned as they were by radically different soteriologies. Protestant authors were sometimes sensitive to the charge that the abolition of purgatory, along with the abrogation of mandatory auricular confession, had significantly weakened their arsenal of moral deterrence. The Jacobean court preacher George Hakewill, a fierce anti-papist, denied the necessity of lay people having personal confessors: 'yet might and ought inferiors be kept in awe of hell fire by their preachers'. As for purgatory, William Tyndale had made the case years earlier: 'to fear men ... Christ and his apostles thought hell enough'.²² In a sense, then, hell was of necessity more central to the Protestant than to the Catholic scheme of moral regeneration because it was, ultimately, the only sanction available.

¹⁹ Robert Bellarmine, *Of the eternal felicity of the saints*, trans. Thomas Everard, St Omer 1638 (RSTC 1841), 419; Jean Pierre Camus, *A draught of eternitie*, trans. Miles Carr, Douai 1632 (RSTC 4552), 151–2; Nicholas Caussin, *The holy court in three tomes*, trans. Sir T[homas] H[awkins], Rouen 1634 (RSTC 4874), iii. 178–9.

²⁰ Greenwood, *Tormenting Tophet*, 20; Camus, *Draught of eternitie*, 117. For further explicit discussion of the deterrent value of hell see Rowlands, *Hells torments*, B1v; Denison, *A three-fold resolution*, 431; Dent, *Plaine mans path-way*, 393; Richard Greenham, *The workes of the reuerend and faithfull seruant of Iesus Christ M. Richard Greenham*, London 1612 (RSTC 12318), 695; Thomas Wilson, *A commentarie vpon the most diuine Epistle of S. Paul to the Romanes*, London 1614 (RSTC 25791), 559; and Robert Bellarmine, *The art of dying well*, trans. Edward Coffin, St Omer 1622 (RSTC 1839), 210. For a similar linkage of hell to the themes of salvation and redemption in Spanish sources see Eire, 'Good side of hell'.

²¹ Thomas Lupton, *A dreame of the diuell and Diues*, London 1589 (RSTC 16947.5), D6v.

²² George Hakewill, *An answere to a treatise written by Dr Carier*, London 1616 (RSTC 12610), 266; William Tyndale, *An answer to Sir Thomas More's dialogue*, ed. H. Walter, Cambridge 1850, 28.

Though at the same time it is possible, as Alexandra Walsham has intriguingly suggested, that the loss of purgatory may have sharpened Protestant interest in the notion of retributive providences in this world.²³

Moreover, Catholic and Protestant strategies for avoiding hell could hardly be the same. Under the Catholic dispensation of free will and resistible grace, dying outside of mortal sin was the key test. But for the orthodox Calvinist predestinarians who dominated the Elizabethan and early Stuart Church, no individual could presume to alter a divine decree of election or reprobation. A turning away from sin, spurred on by the fear of hell, was of course understood as part of the effectual calling of the elect. But Protestant divines sometimes recognised that more tangible incentives were required for the entire body of humanity, whether saved or not. A partial solution was found in another characteristic of hell that Protestants could agree upon with their Catholic opponents: the notion that different degrees of punishment were to be experienced within it. So, for example, the editors of the Catholic Rheims New Testament of 1582 glossed Christ's words in Matthew x.15 – 'Amen I say to you, it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment, than for that city' – to suggest that it is 'hereby ... evident there bee degrees and differences of damnation in hell fire according to men's deserts'. Here the Presbyterian controversialist Thomas Cartwright, engaged in denouncing the translation, readily conceded that there is 'nothing material in the note to bee suspected'. For Calvinists, this meant that good works had a positive role to play after all, because they might ameliorate the situation of the damned in hell. George Abbot was thus able in 1600 to offer these words of dubious comfort: 'suppose that thou belong not to him ... yet flie from sinne, and do moral vertues, ... that at least shall ease some part of the extremity of those torments, which thou shalt have in hell fire'.²⁴ By contrast, his Catholic opponents could tender a more absolute assurance that if the right steps were followed without deviation or digression, hell could be avoided altogether.

Yet in many ways it is surprising how little the rival theologies of grace seem to have impacted upon Reformed and Counter-Reforming discourses about hell. The question of where on the ecclesiological spectrum hell loomed largest in this period turns out to be unanswerable in any meaningfully statistical way. One of the striking features of the imagined obsession with hell in early modern sources is how relatively little of it there seems to have been about.²⁵ If one uses the subject term 'hell' to search the

²³ A. Walsham, *Providence in early modern England*, Oxford 1999, 16.

²⁴ Emma Disley, 'Degrees of glory: Protestant doctrine and the concept of rewards hereafter', *JTS* xliii (1991), 82–5. See also Tuke, *Discourse of death*, 102, and de la Puente, *Meditations*, i. 143.

²⁵ This contrasts with the impression given by works such as P. Camporesi, *The fear of hell: images of damnation and salvation in early modern Europe*, trans. L. Byatt, Cambridge 1990.

nearly 25,000 volumes now digitalised in Early English Books Online for the period 1560–1640, the exercise produces a mere twenty-seven titles, all but four of which are concerned with the very discrete and rather technical controversy over the meaning of the phrase in the Apostles' Creed that Christ 'descended into hell'. Attention to the topic was of course diffused much more widely than this, and hell featured regularly in the homiletic and devotional writings of both confessions. It never seems, however, to have dominated or unbalanced them. Its treatment in both Catholic and Protestant catechisms of the period appears to have been similarly measured and limited, not usually attracting more than a few lines, and with Christ's descent into hell often once again the main focus of interest.²⁶ It should be noted too how regularly the context for discussion of hell was a parallel evocation of heaven, the descriptions of misery serving to underscore the felicity of the saved in works like Samuel Rowlands's *Hells torments, and heavens glorie* and John Denison's *Three-fold resolution ... Describing earths vanitie. Hells horror. Heavens felicitie*. On the Catholic side, Thomas Everard, translator of Bellarmine's *Of the eternal felicity of the saints*, inserted into it a 'Discourse of the torments of hell' from another of the cardinal's works, on the Ramist grounds that 'the common axiome in philosophy is, that contraries compared one to the other, do afford a greater illustration'.²⁷ For both Catholics and Protestants, then, hell was instrumental; an object of improving meditation, just as much or even more than it was a subject for systematic theology. Bearing this in mind probably helps to explain why some contemporary discussions of hell can seem rather vague on apparently important points – for example, over whether they are describing hell as currently configured, or as it would be after the final judgement and resurrection of the dead.

One stimulus for meditation did change after the Reformation. In late medieval England, most parish churches were furnished with a prominent and striking image of the prospect of hell, part of the last judgement or 'doom' painted on the tympanum above the chancel arch. Protestant iconoclasm removed this visual dimension, and also reduced the options for the mimetic representation of hell, as the traditional cycles of civic mystery plays were wound up in the 1580s. It has been suggested that the Protestant imagination compensated for these losses by developing habits of intense 'inner picturing', a substitutive real presence of the divine, which came into the mind on hearing or reading the Word. Thus, the Puritan Richard

²⁶ On catechisms see I. Green, *The Christian's ABC: catechisms and catechizing in England c. 1530–1740*, Oxford 1996, 316–19, 342–5; Laurence Vaux, *A catechism of Christian doctrine*, ed. T. G. Law (Chetham Society ns iv, 1885), 13; and Eire, 'Good side of hell', 305, 306–7 (on hell's limited place in continental Counter-Reformation preaching). Delumeau concedes (*Sin and fear*, 519), that even among Puritans hell was not the preferred theme for sermons.

²⁷ Bellarmine, *Of the eternal felicity of the saints*, 410.

Bernard's 1610 volume of *Contemplative pictures* offered 'certain pictures, not popish and sensible for superstition, but mental for divine contemplation'. One of the themes of the volume was the contemplation of hell, and readers were left in no doubt that it offered a prospect 'wofull, dolefull, horribly fearefull, insufferably painefull'.²⁸ Could it be then that the impoverishment of visual culture paradoxically made the imagining of hell more real and immediate for devout believers? Perhaps; though care should be taken not to exaggerate the contrasts here. For a start, Catholic writers, and not just Jesuits, were quite as capable of inducing internalised images as Protestants were.²⁹ Nor was the visual quite so thoroughly expunged from post-Reformation religious culture as it was once fashionable to think. Historians like Tessa Watt and Alexandra Walsham have modified Patrick Collinson's influential emphasis on the 'iconophobic' impulse of the later English Reformation by pointing to the survival of graphic material in Protestant literature of various kinds.³⁰ Hell (literally) fits the picture here. Illustrations depicting the flames and demons awaiting the damned accompanied several godly ballads and pamphlets on witchcraft and possession. Samuel Rowlands's *Hels torments, and heavens glorie* of 1601 boasted an illustration of souls being dragged down by demons into a gaping hell mouth. In addition, a whole series of striking woodcuts itemising the torments of hell continued to appear in editions of the popular late medieval work, *The shepherds kalendar*, into the middle decades of the seventeenth century. The story of Lazarus in heaven and Dives in hell was often depicted on domestic wall hangings in the later sixteenth century, and hell, as Dr Faustus and others were to discover, still had a place on the secular stage.³¹

Thus far, I have not made much, if any, progress towards establishing my initial contention: that Catholic and Protestant discourses about hell show some significant and revealing disparities. The broad parameters, the rhetorical strategies, the pastoral objectives; all look pretty much the same. But if we move from the general contours of the landscape to examine some specific features of the terrain, a few interesting fissures start to open up. In particular, we can compare and contrast approaches to the two questions that St Augustine had considered the most uncertain of all matters relating to hell, requiring for their resolution a special revelation from the Holy Spirit. These were the precise nature of hell-fire, and the question of hell's

²⁸ W. A. Dyrness, *Reformed theology and visual culture: the Protestant imagination from Calvin to Edwards*, Cambridge 2004, 138–40; Richard Bernard, *Contemplative pictures with wholesome precepts*, London 1610 (RSTC 1934), epistle dedicatory, 107–29 (quotation at p. 115).

²⁹ See Eire, 'Good side of hell', 292–8, and Camporesi, *Fear of hell*, 56–7.

³⁰ Watt, *Cheap print*, ch. iv; Walsham, *Providence*, 250–66.

³¹ Oldridge, *Devil in early modern England*, 67; Rowlands, *Hels torments*, B1r; post-Reformation editions of the *Shepherds kalendar* (RSTC 22415–23); Watt, *Cheap print*, 194, 202, 205–9; C. W. Cary, "'It circumscribes us here': hell on the Renaissance stage', in C. Davidson and T. H. Seiler (eds), *The iconography of hell*, Kalamazoo 1992, 195.

location.³² Taken together, attempts to address these questions do indicate some clear patterns of divergence along broadly confessional lines.

That hell was a place of fire seemed on the surface easily the most uncontentious of theological commonplaces. The Bible abounded with references to ‘the fire that shall never be quenched’, and to tormenting ‘with fire and brimstone’.³³ The fire of hell belonged, in a distinction well understood by both Protestant and Catholic interpreters, to the torments of the senses, the *poena sensus*, rather than to the spiritual or psychological torment of being deprived of the sight of God, the *poena damni*.³⁴ But the precise nature of this fire had long been a source of puzzlement in Christian thought. Among the Fathers, Origen had argued that the fire spoken of in Scripture was merely figurative, a judgement shared by Ambrose, though many others disagreed.³⁵ In the high Middle Ages Thomas Aquinas had posed the questions of ‘whether the fire of hell will be corporeal’ and of ‘whether the fire of hell is of the same species as ours’. He had answered both cautiously in the affirmative, while conceding that the fire in hell most probably would subsist in a different kind of matter, and would exhibit different properties from earthly fire – such as giving out no light, and not requiring kindling to start it or fuel to keep it alive.³⁶ Similarly, in the period under discussion, it was characteristic of Catholic writers to insist upon the genuinely material nature of the fire to be found in hell, while conceding that the question inevitably threw up some tricky metaphysical issues. The Jesuit Persons ascribed the infinitely greater heat and power of hell-fire over earthly fire to the fact that ‘ours is out of its natural place and situation’, abated by the coldness of the air, whereas ‘that of hell is in the naturall and proper place wherein it was created’.³⁷ Yet more commonly, Catholic authors reversed the emphasis and wondered how it was possible for a real and corporeal fire to rage eternally in hell. Nicholas Caussin admitted that ‘libertines’ would ask how a material fire could burn spiritual souls, a question that had earlier perturbed Aquinas. Caussin’s answer was that the soul retained the same

³² Augustine, *The city of God*, trans. M. Dodds, New York 1950, 735.

³³ Mark ix. 43–8. See also Isaiah lxvi. 24; Luke iii. 17; Jude i. 7; Revelation xiv. 10–11; xxi. 8.

³⁴ For the almost universal adoption and retention of this two-fold scheme see Patrides, ‘Dimensions of hell’, 185–7. Almond’s suggestion (*Heaven and hell*, 93–4), that Protestants applied the *poena sensus* only to the resurrected body after the Last Judgement, while Catholics envisaged both types of punishment for the disembodied soul in its ‘intermediate state’, does not seem to hold up for the pre-Civil War period.

³⁵ W. Addis and T. Arnold, *A Catholic dictionary*, rev. T. B. Scannell and P. E. Hallett, 15th edn, London 1954, 389.

³⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, New York 1947, suppl. q. 97 (online at www.ccel.org/a/aquinas/summa/home.html). Aquinas argued that the property of giving light did not belong to the essential nature of fire, noting, for example, how its brightness could be obscured by thick smoke. See also J. M. Steadman, ‘Milton and patristic tradition: the quality of hell-fire’, *Anglia* lxxvi (1958), 116–28.

³⁷ Persons, *Christian directory*, 236.

sensitive faculties as the body, and hence an ability to perceive pain. It was, he wrote, true that ‘the soule separated from the body hath not a natural antipathy and disagreement from fire, but what this imperious element cannot have remaining within the limits of nature, it obtayneth by a particular ordinance and disposition of God’.³⁸ Cardinal Bellarmine also conceded that the issue of the affliction of spirits by a corporeal fire was ‘a large disputation’. Again, an emphasis on the miraculous sustenance of Almighty God was the appropriate response to those who ‘over curiously should demaund, from whence this continuall fyre doth receive its nourishment and supply’. Yet at the same time Bellarmine was inclined to take rather literally scriptural allusions to brimstone or sulphur as the fuel for the fires of hell.³⁹ Luis de la Puente thought that ‘the eternal breathe of almightie God’ would be sufficient to preserve the fire of hell, but he similarly did not rule out the presence of real brimstone, likewise preserved from depletion by the motion of God.⁴⁰

In Protestant texts, by contrast, we find a much greater willingness to accept that details such as the brimstone should be understood as metaphor or allegory. We need to be clear about what we mean by allegory in this context. It was not that Protestant writers entertained doubts about the literal, physical reality of hell, or the certainty of its intense torments. In fact, its torments were unimaginably real, in the sense that analogies to familiar earthly phenomena were hardly adequate to describe them. The tone here had been set by Calvin, who argued in the *Institutes* that because ‘language cannot describe the severity of the divine vengeance on the reprobate, their pains and torments are figured to us by corporeal things’.⁴¹ The metaphorical nature of the worm that ‘dieth not’ (Mark ix. 46), signifying the torment of conscience, was rarely contested by either Protestant or Catholic authors; this had been the common scholastic interpretation.⁴² But, more controversially, some Protestant writers extended this line of interpretation to the fire of hell itself, as a figure for the literally indescribable torments awaiting the damned in hell. William Perkins gave his readers to understand ‘that by hell fire is not meant any bodily flame, but it signifies the seizing of the fearful and terrible wrath of God’.⁴³ Perkins’s disciple Thomas

³⁸ Caussin, *The holy court*, iii. 175.

³⁹ Bellarmine, *Art of dying well*, 206; *Eternal felicity of the saints*, 424–5, 429–30.

⁴⁰ de la Puente, *Meditations*, i. 136.

⁴¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian religion*, trans. H. Beveridge, Grand Rapids 1989, i. 146–7. See also John Calvin, *Harmony of the Gospels*, ed. T. Torrance, Edinburgh 1972, ii. 275.

⁴² Compare Dent, *Plaine mans path-way*, and Phillips, *Booke of lamentations*, 41, with Camus, *Draught of eternitie*, 136; Philip Howard, *A foure-fould meditation, of the foure last things*, London 1606 (RSTC 13868.7), stanza 67; de la Puente, *Meditations*, i. 137; and Bellarmine, *Eternal felicity of the saints*, 432–3.

⁴³ William Perkins, *An exposition of the symbole or creed of the Apostles*, Cambridge 1595 (RSTC 19703), 392.

Tuke also discounted the possibility of a corporeal fire: 'if the fire of Hell bee corporall, it must bee fed by corporall fuell, which beeing once wasted it also must goe out'. Rather, Tuke suggested, 'it pleaseth the Holy Ghost by these words to point out, and as by similitudes to shew vnto vs the griefes and gripes of the damned'.⁴⁴ The Puritan minister of Dedham in Essex, John Rogers, similarly argued that as 'we cannot conceive nor utter the extremity of these torments yet the Scriptures expresse them by the sharpest and most intolerable punishments we can know or can conceive; as fire, brimstone, darkenesse, weeping, &c'.⁴⁵ As the Canterbury clergyman Thomas Wilson put it in his *Christian dictionarie* of 1612 – the first dictionary of the Bible to be published in English – 'fire being a most terrible element, is fittest to expresse the dreadfull state of such as be in hell'.⁴⁶ The most emphatic statement of this position came from the pen of the semi-separatist Puritan minister, Henry Jacob, who in 1598 dismissed the very notion of a material fire in hell as a 'toyish fable'. One might as well say, he argued, that there was '*materiall brimstone and much wood* which the fire burneth upon'. Until very recently, he suggested, all Protestants had shared his view on this, and only papists had dared contradict it.⁴⁷

That was not quite accurate. A number of Protestant writers had always sat somewhere on a spectrum between Calvin's portrayal of hell-fire as a scriptural allegory for divine retribution, and a perceived Catholic insistence on its being, as Thomas Phillips put it, '*ejusdem speciei*, of the same kind with our fire both elementary and culinary'.⁴⁸ As Henry Greenwood suggested in a sermon published in 1615, 'the most and best of the learned' (including such luminaries as Heinrich Bullinger) held it to be a true and substantial fire, albeit not a material one.⁴⁹ Some Puritan writers of the early seventeenth century made reference to a 'spiritual fire' in hell, emphasising its action on the internal sensation of the soul, while some more conservative or 'conformist' Protestants preferred to speak about a 'true', 'external', or 'sensible' fire.⁵⁰ Catholic observers like the lawyer James Anderton (alias John Brekeley) could thus gleefully point to Protestant divisions over the

⁴⁴ Tuke, *A discourse of death*, 100.

⁴⁵ John Rogers, *A discourse of Christian watchfulnesse*, London 1620 (RSTC 21185), 334.

⁴⁶ Thomas Wilson, *A Christian dictionarie opening the signification of the chiefe words dispersed generally through Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament*, London 1612 (RSTC 25786), 224.

⁴⁷ Henry Jacob, *A treatise of the sufferings and victory of Christ*, London 1598 (RSTC 14340), 81, 87–8.

⁴⁸ Phillips, *Booke of lamentations*, 20.

⁴⁹ Greenwood, *Tormenting Tophet*, 53–62, quotation at p. 54.

⁵⁰ Andrew Willet, *A Catholicon, that is, a generall preservative or remedie against the pseudocatholike religion*, Cambridge 1602 (RSTC 25673), 40; John Smith, *An exposition of the Creed*, London 1632 (RSTC 22801), 467; Thomas Bilson, *The survey of Christs sufferings for mans redemption*, London 1604 (RSTC 3070), 40, 46 (and at p. 47 unusually suggesting the possibility of material brimstone); Phillips, *Booke of lamentations*, 31. See also [Richard Parkes], *A briefe answere unto certain obiections and reasons against the descension of Christ into hell*, Oxford 1604 (RSTC 19296), 8.

issue.⁵¹ But reformers of various stripes often agreed that the precise nature of hell-fire was a ‘curious’ question into which there was no necessity to inquire closely.⁵² The Essex minister John Smith, writing in 1632, lambasted the supercilious certainties of the papists, for ‘it be not a point of faith, for a man to beleve or know what a kinde of fire it is’. At the same time, he made short shrift of the notion that a material fire might miraculously endure in hell without spending fuel, without giving light, or without finally consuming the bodies of the damned: ‘hell’, he sententiously pronounced, ‘is no place for miracles’.⁵³

The uncertainties about the exact nature of hell-fire were linked to another ‘curious’ question exercising both Catholic and Protestant minds in the later Reformation period: that of where in the created universe the fires of hell were to be found. The nature of hell-fire was more easily comprehended, for example, if it were supposed that hell was located in the proper sphere or element of fire. Scripture was decidedly unhelpful on this issue, and no formal pronouncement of the medieval Church had ever sought to resolve it. Such luminaries as Augustine and Gregory had been cautious about any categorical pronouncement on the matter. None the less, a convention had long been established that the place of hell was under the earth, most likely in the very centre of the world. The Latin term for hell – ‘infernus’ – seemed to imply a location below, and the notion fitted with a cosmology in which God inhabited an empyrean beyond the planetary spheres – as far as could be from a subterranean hell. Metaphysically, the medieval association of sin with weight and heaviness reinforced the connection.

There is no doubt, however, that Catholic authors in our period held on to this tradition much more resolutely than Protestants, locating hell in the midst of the earth, as a place, in Bellarmine’s words, ‘furthest remote from the glorie of the blessed’. The cardinal believed that hell was ‘certainly thousands of myles’ under the earth’s surface. Persons cited the authority of the Fathers and of Augustine in favour of the proposition, and Camus, after weighing the patristic and scriptural evidence, pronounced that for anyone ‘to doubt whether hell be in the center of the earth ... seemes to me a thing impossible’. Some continental Catholic authors not translated into English in this period were even more precise in their determinations. The sixteenth-century Spanish priest Alejo Venegas, for example, calculated that hell was exactly 1,193 leagues beneath the surface of the earth. The presentation of the

⁵¹ John Brekeley [James Anderton], *Sainct Austines religion*, n. p. 1620 (RSTC 3608), 161.

⁵² Perkins, *Exposition of the creed*, 392; Tuke, *Discourse of death*, 101; Greenwood, *Tormenting Tophet*, 59; Phillips, *Booke of lamentations*, 31.

⁵³ Smith, *Exposition of the creed*, 467. Though, for examples of more literalist approaches, see Abraham Fleming, *The footpath of faith, leading the highwaie to heauen*, London 1581 (RSTC 11039), 141–2, and John Moore, *A mappe of mans mortalitie*, London 1617 (RSTC 18057), 63.

afterlife by the Jesuit Jerónimo Nadal, so Carlos Eire assures us, was ‘as geologically precise as a *National Geographic* diagram’.⁵⁴

Catholic convictions about the geographical location of hell help to explain a feature of their descriptive writing which seems much less evident in Protestant sources: an emphasis on the ‘straitness’ of hell, on physical overcrowding as an anguish of the damned. According to Luis de la Puente, the number of men descending to hell would be so great that each would barely possess the space of a crowded grave: ‘they shall bee crowded together like brickettes in a fiery furnace’. In Bellarmine’s opinion, the straitness of the place would be such ‘as it shall scarce be able to take the multitude of the damned bodies’.⁵⁵ The Bavarian Jesuit Jeremias Drexel arrived at the conclusion that if hell had the dimensions of a square German mile, it would none the less have capacity for 100,000,000,000 of the damned, forced together ‘like grapes in the press, or like sardines in the barrel’.⁵⁶

Protestant writers, by contrast, were usually markedly reluctant to pronounce definitively on the question of where hell was to be found. In an anti-Catholic work of 1592, the Calvinist theologian Andrew Willet expressed no doubt ‘that there is a locall place of torment’. But he took Bellarmine to task for asserting that ‘the place where damned spirites are tormented ... is about the center of the earth, the lowest of all places’. The scriptural texts Bellarmine cited simply did not prove the case.⁵⁷ ‘As for the situation of hell’, reflected Thomas Tuke, ‘to say precisely where hell is, it is not easie’.⁵⁸ Some Puritan theologians drew attention to the passage in Ephesians ii. 2 which seemed to imply that the devil’s habitation was in the air.⁵⁹ The Hebrew scholar Hugh Broughton even argued that ‘they are much deceived who thinke hell to be in this world, lowe in the earth’.⁶⁰ The majority of Protestant writers probably did think it likely that hell was under the earth, but they often expressed the opinion guardedly, and never reproduced the precise

⁵⁴ Camus, *Draught of eternitie*, 128; Persons, *Christian directory*, 229–3 (though *with* the qualification, ‘whether it be underground or no’); Bellarmine, *Art of dying well*, 205–6, and *Eternal felicity of the saints*, 424 (quotation); de la Puente, *Meditations*, i. 136; Eire, ‘Good side of hell’, 288–9.

⁵⁵ de la Puente, *Meditations*, i. 139; Bellarmine, *Art of dying well*, 207. Persons (*Christian directory*, 238) also emphasises ‘the most severe straitness therof’.

⁵⁶ Camporesi, *Fear of hell*, 62. Camporesi (ch. v at p. 69) regards an emphasis on congestion and restriction as characteristic of the ‘Baroque hell’, which he contrasts with the ‘wide spaces’ of the medieval hell.

⁵⁷ Andrew Willet, *Synopsis papismi*, London 1592 (RSTC 25696), 607–9.

⁵⁸ Tuke, *Discourse of death*, 102.

⁵⁹ Christopher Carlike, *A discourse concerning two divine positions*, London 1582 (RSTC 4654), 105v–107r; Jacob, *Sufferings of Christ*, 146; Andrew Willet, *Loidoromastix*, London 1607 (RSTC 25693), 25–6.

⁶⁰ Hugh Broughton, *Declaration of generall corruption of religion ... wrought by D. Bilson*, London 1603 (RSTC 3855), unpaginated.

topographical calculations of some of their Catholic contemporaries.⁶¹ Since Scripture did not pronounce definitively on the location of hell, ‘curious’ enquiry was best avoided.⁶² In a sermon of 1626, John Donne mocked the Swiss cosmographer Sebastian Münster for pronouncing categorically ‘that hell cannot possibly be above three thousand miles in compasse’.⁶³ The Norwich preacher Samuel Gardiner was similarly contemptuous in 1627 of those who ‘so punctually doe describe unto us the space thereof, as if with a reed or metwand in their hand they had taken the iust measure of it’.⁶⁴

Protestant guardedness about affirming the precise whereabouts or dimensions of hell provided an opening for Catholic opponents to exploit. The Jesuit John Radford claimed in 1605 that some heretics ‘stick not to confesse ... that hell is only in the brest and but a darknes of the minde and conscience, or some biting of the same’. In 1631 the former vicar apostolic of English Catholics, Richard Smith, made the charge that ‘Protestants expressly say, that hell is no place, no corporall place, no prison; that it is nothing but a wicked conscience’.⁶⁵ Such sentiments – imagining hell as a purely internal or psychological punishment – would in time be articulated by radical separatists of the civil war era, but there were few real antecedents of this among the orthodox Calvinist theologians who were Smith’s intended target. It is certainly true that inner, psychological torments had always figured prominently in Protestant enumerations of the pains of hell.⁶⁶ But in fact it was a devotional trope common to both Catholic and Protestant writers that a consciousness of the deprivation of God – the *poena damni* – would be a more intolerable punishment to the reprobate than sensory torments.⁶⁷ Ironically, the idea of a purely internal hell, a hell within

⁶¹ Bilson, *Survey of Christs sufferings*, 619; Adam Hill, *The defence of the article: Christ descended into hell*, London 1592 (RSTC 13466), 10, 62; Richard Parkes, *The second booke containing a reioynder to a reply*, in *An apologie: of three testimonies of holy Scripture*, London 1607 (RSTC 19295), 4; John Higgins, *An answer to Master William Perkins*, Oxford 1602 (RSTC 13442), 19–20, 21–2; Phillips, *Booke of lamentations*, 14–21.

⁶² Carlile, *Two divine positions*, 105v; Pierre Viret, *The Christian disputations*, trans. J. Brooke, London 1579 (RSTC 24776), 28v; Jacob, *Sufferings of Christ*, 153; William Perkins, *A golden chaine*, Cambridge 1600 (RSTC 19646), 373; John Donne, *Essays in divinity*, ed. E. M. Simpson, Oxford 1952, 36; James Ussher, ‘An answer to a challenge by a Jesuit in Ireland’, in *The whole works of the most rev. James Ussher*, Dublin 1829–64, iii. 378.

⁶³ John Donne, *Sermons*, ed. E. M. Simpson and G. R. Potter, Berkeley–Los Angeles 1953–62, vii. 137.

⁶⁴ Gardiner, *Devotions of the dying man*, 332.

⁶⁵ John Radford, *A directorie teaching the way to truth*, England, secret press 1605 (RSTC 20602), 460; Richard Smith, *A conference of the Catholike and Protestante doctrine*, Douai 1631 (RSTC 22810), 510.

⁶⁶ Arguably, Patrides, ‘Dimensions of hell’, 193–9, makes too much of this in asserting the genealogy of the concept of ‘inner hell’.

⁶⁷ Howard, *Four-fold meditation*, stanzas 78–9; Camus, *Draught of eternitie*, 132; de la Puente, *Meditations*, i. 146; Bellarmine, *Eternal felicity of the saints*, 422–3; Bolton, *Four last things*, 95–6; Patrides, ‘Dimensions of hell’, 193–4. George Benson, *A sermon preached at Paules Crosse the*

oneself, in some ways made more sense within a Catholic theological framework. For Protestants, it was simply inconceivable that damned souls might ever come forth out of hell. Yet the Catholic teaching on ghosts allowed for the possibility in some circumstances. In such cases, noted Drexel, 'yet still he should carry an hell about him'.⁶⁸

On the question of the location of hell, and on issues relating to the nature of its punishments, it appears therefore as if English Protestant commentators can be meaningfully distinguished from their English and continental Catholic counterparts. There was a greater reluctance to affirm the unknowable with certainty, a greater openness to the possibility of allegory and metaphor in making sense of the reality of hell. It looks as if we are on the curve of a familiar trajectory, along which Protestantism journeys more naturally and easily towards a concern with empirical verification, and ultimately, towards modernity itself. But caution should be exercised here. For insofar as the position of Protestants might sound more recognisably 'modern' on some of these issues than did that of Catholics, it was determined, not so much by temperamental cousinage to ourselves, as by the tactical demands of theological polemic. Hell, I will suggest by way of conclusion, was never quite so uncontroversially ecumenical a topic as it might at first appear.

To start with, questions about the situation of hell could not easily be separated from speculations about the existence and location of that Protestant *bête noire*, purgatory. In the Catholic topography of the hereafter, the place of eternal punishment was one of a series of 'hells' which were generally understood as being in descending proximity to each other under the ground: *Limbus patrum* or the limbo of the fathers; purgatory; *Limbus infantium*, or the limbo of unbaptised infants; and hell proper. The latter was sometimes glossed in Catholic sources as 'the hell of the damned' to distinguish it from these other subterranean regions.⁶⁹ A professed Protestant agnosticism about the exact location of hell was in large measure intended to disrupt and disparage this eschatological system.⁷⁰ The trend towards the allegorisation of hell-fire, or at least to deny its strictly material nature, could

seauenth of May, M.DC.IX., London 1609 (RSTC 1886), 54, was unusual in suggesting that the *poena sensus* were more to be dreaded than the *poena damni*.

⁶⁸ Jeremias Drexel, *The considerations of Drexelius upon eternitie*, trans. Ralph Winterton, London 1632 (RSTC 7235), 29. See also de la Puente, *Meditations*, i. 139. The 'ubiquitarian' views of the sixteenth-century Swabian Protestant, Johannes Brenz (1499–1570), that the damned roamed around carrying their torment with them, did not catch on in Reformed English circles in this period: L. Paine, *The hierarchy of hell*, London 1972, 21.

⁶⁹ A. C. Southern, *English recusant prose, 1559–1582*, London 1950, 255.

⁷⁰ This is an argument pursued at greater length in detail in P. Marshall, "'The map of God's word': geographies of the afterlife in Tudor and early Stuart England", in B. Gordon and P. Marshall (eds), *The place of the dead: death and remembrance in late medieval and early modern Europe*, Cambridge 2000, 110–30.

similarly serve to unsettle medieval and scholastic speculations, such as the idea that the proximity of hell and purgatory allowed the very same fire to torment souls in both locales.⁷¹ One medieval conjecture about hell, still rehearsed in the sixteenth century by Catholic authorities like Bellarmine, but which seems to be largely absent from Protestant discussions, is the notion that part of the happiness of the souls in heaven derives from their contemplation of the torments of the damned – an idea which in the nineteenth century was christened ‘the abominable fancy’. Noting the absence of this motif from seventeenth-century English sources, D. P. Walker ascribed the development to a changing attitude in society towards the suffering of others.⁷² But it seems equally plausible to invoke a more tactical explanation for this. A key proof-text for the idea was Luke xvi, where the rich man in hell is able to see Lazarus ensconced in the ‘bosom of Abraham’, and begs Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his five brothers of the fate in store if they do not mend their ways. Protestant exegetes were made distinctly uneasy by this passage’s apparent encouragement of the notion of traffic and communication between worlds, and they tended to emphasise its character as a parable and an allegory. Moreover, while Protestants generally regarded ‘Abraham’s bosom’ as a circumlocution for heaven, Catholic tradition saw it as a synonym for *Limbus patrum*, that outer skirt of hell, and thus identified a literal proximity of Dives and Lazarus in the next life. As the Elizabethan Catholic controversialist Gregory Martin put it, not just Dives, but ‘Abraham and Lazarus also were in hell, but in a place of great rest and refreshing.’⁷³

It was in fact controversy about the very meaning of the word ‘hell’ that proved the single most formative influence on late Reformation modifications of thinking about the place of the damned. Specifically, much of the discussion of the location of hell, the character of hell-fire, and other related matters, was driven by debates over the proper interpretation of the clause in the Apostle’s Creed which stated that Christ ‘descended into hell’ between his death and resurrection. The so-called ‘Descensus Controversy’, which ran from the early years of Elizabeth to the middle of the reign of James I, was a spirited three-way quarrel between Catholics, Puritans and those more establishment-minded Protestants best described as ‘conformist’.⁷⁴ Catholics related the credal article to the ‘harrowing of hell’, the belief that during the

⁷¹ Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, appendix II, q. 1, a. 2. ⁷² Walker, *Decline of hell*, 29–30.

⁷³ Gregory Martin, *A discoverie of the manifold corruptions of the Holy Scriptures by the heretikes of our daies*, Rheims 1582 (RSTC 17503), 108–9. For Protestant insistence on the inability of the dead to have any awareness of the circumstances of the living see Marshall, *Beliefs and the dead*, 210–15.

⁷⁴ See D. D. Wallace, ‘Puritan and Anglican: the interpretation of Christ’s descent into hell in Elizabethan theology’, *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* lxix (1978), 248–87, though the interpretation here is coloured by a rather anachronistic attempt to isolate a distinctly ‘Anglican’ theology. For an illuminating discussion of contemporary continental debates see

three days that his body lay in the ground, Christ descended to *Limbus patrum* or Abraham's bosom to free the souls of the patriarchs and carry them triumphantly to heaven. This idea was anathema to Protestants of all stripes – *Limbus patrum* was, perhaps literally, only a short step from purgatory – though reformers were far from united in putting forward an alternative explication. The article was interpreted literally by Jacobean conformists like Thomas Bilson or John Higgins, who insisted that Christ's soul did 'really and locally, actuallie and effectually descend into hell' in order to signify his triumph over the powers of evil.⁷⁵ The consensus of much Reformed theology, by contrast, was that there had been no local or spatial descent. Many English theologians endorsed Calvin's spiritual interpretation that Christ experienced the pains of hell on the cross. The debate took a decidedly philological turn, with Puritans emphasising non-literal uses of 'hell' in the Bible, and arguing that the key Hebrew word 'sheol' should be translated as 'death' or 'the grave'. 'Christ's locall descension', so Andrew Willet argued, 'was but to the grave'.⁷⁶ If it could be established that hell itself was not necessarily or demonstrably 'below', a subterranean abode of corporeal fire, then the proponents of a merely spiritual descent had moved the ground, as it were, from under the feet of their opponents.

The late J. H. Hexter famously observed that historians can be divided into 'lumpers' and 'splitters'.⁷⁷ This essay has undoubtedly been an exercise in splitting; perhaps, one might think, in splitting hairs. It has picked over the unpromising terrain of Catholic and Protestant writings about hell in a search for, if not the tyranny, then at least the existence of small differences. It would be reckless to contend that arguments about such matters as the quality of hell-fire and the geography of hell were more than side issues in the great confessional controversies of the day. None the less, these minor divergences presaged some larger transformations, and paying attention to them adds a suggestive dimension to existing discussions of the 'decline of hell'. Jean Delumeau's 'evangelism of fear' was a collaborative Catholic-Protestant exercise, undergirded by a series of vast collective disasters stretching from the Black Death to the end of the wars of religion. It was, in his view, 'the alleviation of serious threats to daily life' from the end of the seventeenth century onwards which undermined the potency and

D. V. Bagchi, 'Dissent over the descent: Christ's *Descensus ad inferos* in Reformation controversy', *Studies in Church History*, forthcoming.

⁷⁵ Higgins, *Answer to Perkins*, 7. Bilson's *Survey of Christs sufferings*, Aiv, attacks those that 'outrace Christs Descent to Hell with phrases and figures, when it is plainly professed in the Creed'.

⁷⁶ Viret, *Christian disputations*, 290r; Carlile, *Discourse concerning two divine positions*, 137v; Jacob, *Sufferings of Christ*, 122–3; Pierre Du Moulin, *The waters of Siloe*, trans. I. B., Oxford 1612 (RSTC 7343), 32; Andrew Willet, *Limbo-mastix*, London 1604 (RSTC 25692), 55.

⁷⁷ See W. G. Palmer, 'The burden of proof: J. H. Hexter and Christopher Hill', *Journal of British Studies* xix (1979), 122–9.

persuasiveness of traditional threats about the punishments of the next world. D. P. Walker meanwhile attributed the waning of belief in the idea of eternal torment over the same period to inherent weaknesses in the scriptural and functional arguments for hell, and to the gradual advance of rationalist modes of religious thought.⁷⁸ However, a close reading of late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century clerical discourses suggests that – for England at least – the beginnings of a process by which hell could become less emphatically ‘real’ can be detected in the polemical and strategic requirements of Reformation theology, as much as in the changing macro-environment, or in an inevitable triumph of reason.⁷⁹ On the surface, writings about hell were some of the most solidly consensual of all Christian doctrinal productions of the later Reformation period. Yet, almost in spite of themselves, they managed to play a discernible part in processes of group solidarity and identity-formation, and in laying some of the foundations for changed thinking about the essential relationship between this world and the next.

⁷⁸ Delumeau, *Sin and fear*, 556; Walker, *Decline of hell*, passim.

⁷⁹ There is a parallel here with some recent work suggesting that the decline of traditional views of the supernatural and witchcraft in late seventeenth-century England was not so much a consequence of scientific rationalism as polemically-driven, reflecting the desire of Anglican controversialists to discredit the partisan propaganda of sectaries: I. Bostridge, *Witchcraft and its transformations*, c. 1650–c. 1750, Oxford 1997; J. Crawford, *Marvellous Protestantism: monstrous births in Post-Reformation England*, Baltimore–London 2005.