

**Separating the Living from the Dead:
Wessel Gansfort and the Death of Purgatory**

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This paper explores criticism of the Roman church's doctrine of Purgatory from the late fifteenth century through the early years of the German Reformation. Following the writings of the Frisian theologian Wessel Gansfort (c. 1410-1489), the Wittenberg theologians Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt and Martin Luther initially sought to reform Purgatory rather than abolish it entirely. Ultimately, however, their attempts to fashion new doctrines on the last things resulted in the death of Purgatory in the Protestant tradition. The intellectual and cultural history of the death of Purgatory can, like the search for its origins, illustrate the complex intersection of doctrines and practices that made medieval Purgatory.

The most thorough recent attempt to understand the social and intellectual developments that gave rise to the medieval doctrine and cult of Purgatory is the work of Jacques Le Goff on *The Birth of Purgatory*.¹ Le Goff has sought to define the birth of Purgatory as a specific linguistic development (the use of the noun *purgatorium* to denote a fixed place) occurring at a distinct point in time (the late twelfth century) representing a distinct shift in "mental, ideological and religious structures" (from binary to ternary systems). Response to each of these three points in Le Goff's argument has been skeptical.²

Fortunately, the value of Le Goff's study does not rest upon his argument that Purgatory was born in the use of the noun *purgatorium* in the late twelfth century, symbolic of a transition from a binary (heaven-hell) system to a ternary system. Its value derives instead from Le Goff's description of "the formation of the various elements that would finally be assembled in the twelfth century into what we know as Purgatory."³ Le Goff shows how Purgatory developed at the intersection of three separate concepts in the Christian tradition: first, prayer (and other intercession) for the dead; second, postmortem purification

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as part of the process of salvation; and third, the localization of this postmortem purification in a unique eschatological time and place.⁴ These three strands probably did not intersect as precisely as Le Goff argues: instead they combined and separated as the doctrine and practice of Purgatory evolved into place during the twelfth century.

How did the death of Purgatory correspond to its birth? Gansfort, Karlstadt, and Luther tried to reform Purgatory by separating and reweaving the strands identified by Le Goff into new doctrines of Purgatory. As they did with other tenets of the Church, these theologians sought to reform Purgatory by returning to its theological and historical origins, separating the authentic and scriptural from human invention and corruption. In their attempts to reshape the doctrine, they began their own search for the birth of Purgatory.

In early 1523 the Wittenberg reformer Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt (c.1480-1541) published the first Reformation tract on Purgatory, a sermon titled *On the State of the Souls of the Christian Faithful; on the Bosom of Abraham and the Purgatory of Departed Souls (Ein Sermon vom stand der Christglaubigen Seelen von Abrahams schoß und Fegfeür / der abgeschydnen Seelen)*. The pamphlet was very popular, with six editions published in Augsburg, Nuremberg and Strasbourg.⁵ In addition, Karlstadt's brother-in-law Gerhard Westerburg published three editions of his own re-working of Karlstadt's sermon.⁶

The pamphlet does not dispute the existence of Purgatory. In five of the six editions of Karlstadt's sermon, the title

page illustrations show souls being helped up from the fiery depths. These woodcuts point to the message of the tract: Karlstadt affirms the existence of a "spiritual Purgatory" which is essential to salvation. At the same time he attacks the Roman doctrine that connects Purgatory with suffrages for the dead, asserting that the souls of the departed can be purified only by Christ and not through any earthly intercession.

Karlstadt's doctrine of Purgatory is drawn directly from the writings of Wessel Gansfort. A comparison of Karlstadt's 1523 *On the State of the Souls of the Christian Faithful* with sections of Gansfort's writings, first published as a *Farrago* in Wittenberg in 1522, shows that Karlstadt was deeply influenced by Gansfort's notion of a "spiritual Purgatory" cut off from the intercession of the Church.⁷ Although Luther began to develop his views on Purgatory before Gansfort's writings were known, in the period from 1517-28 he also reshaped the doctrine of Purgatory, separating the idea of postmortem purification from the jurisdiction of the Church.

This essay will first outline Wessel Gansfort's doctrine of Purgatory, then trace the discussions of Purgatory by Karlstadt and Luther in the early years of the Reformation. The Wittenberg reformers had no single, consistent doctrine on Purgatory or the state of the soul after death. Following Gansfort, however, they agreed that intercession for the dead was impossible. Their attempts to separate postmortem purification from intercession for the dead provide us with new insight into the rise and fall of the place called Purgatory.

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Wessel Gansfort and the reformation of Purgatory

Relatively little is known of the life of Wessel Gansfort, also mistakenly called John Wessel.⁸ Born around 1410 in Groningen, he was sent to a school founded by the Brothers of the Common Life in nearby Zwolle. In the Mt. St. Agnes monastery of the Canons Regular, the young Gansfort met Thomas à Kempis, whose *Imitatio Christi* first awakened Gansfort's piety. Gansfort began studying theology in Cologne in 1450, where he learned Greek and Hebrew. He continued his studies in Paris, where he became a nominalist, finding this doctrine "considerably purer, or at least more subtle" than the realism of Cologne. Gansfort's extant writings do not show a deep nominalist influence; his self-proclaimed alignment with this school is based on his critical, anti-papal orientation.⁹ Gansfort remained for many years in Paris as a free-lance teacher and theologian; he also taught in Heidelberg and Basel.

Crowned with the title "master of contradictions" (*magister contradictionum*), Gansfort returned in 1479 to his native land. In Groningen, and at the Mt. St. Agnes monastery where he had met Thomas à Kempis fifty years earlier, Gansfort was sought out by prominent scholars such as Rudolf Agricola and Johannes Reuchlin. He corresponded and debated with friends and colleagues on the ecclesiastical issues of the day, including papal authority, indulgences, and Purgatory; his extant works all date from this period. Gansfort's life and thought combined the piety of the *devotio moderna* with a lifetime of scholastic training and the language skills of a humanist.

His works reached publication in an unusual way. None of his writings were printed during his lifetime; upon his death all his manuscripts were "burned through the fury of the mendicant monks and certain others."¹⁰ His writings to friends and colleagues survived, however, and were collected by humanist, reform-oriented followers over the next decades. In response to the first stirrings of the Reformation movement in Saxony and Switzerland, these followers sent copies of Gansfort's writings to Wittenberg and Basel, where they were published as a miscellany or *Farrago* in 1522.¹¹

The extant writings of Gansfort do not contain a systematic presentation of his thought, but we can establish some basic points. The mendicants' suspicion of Gansfort's heresy was entirely correct. In his discussions of the Church and its priesthood, confession, the Eucharist, indulgences and Purgatory, Gansfort left the orthodoxy of the Roman church far behind.¹²

Gansfort's attacks on Purgatory were directed at a doctrine and practice firmly embedded in the economy of salvation of the Roman church. James of Vitry, a renowned thirteenth century preacher, provided a striking summary of the relationships between sin, death, and Purgatory in his sermon *To spouses (Ad conjugatos)*:

Contrition changes the punishment of Hell into the punishment of Purgatory, confession [changes it] into temporal punishment, appropriate satisfaction [changes it] into nothingness. In contrition sin dies, in confession it is removed from the house, in satisfaction, it is buried.¹³

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From the twelfth century on, Purgatory was the location in which the satisfaction integral to the penitential cycle could be performed after death. Suffrages for the dead (including masses, vigils, prayer, and indulgences), provided through the Church, assisted a soul in Purgatory as it suffered in giving satisfaction for its earthly sins. In the orthodox doctrine Purgatory does not purify: it is merely a place where satisfaction incomplete upon death can be completed. As James of Vitry points out, the intercession of the living can lighten the burden of satisfaction and reduce the duration of the purgation.

By the early fifteenth century even the devils assigned to torment souls in Purgatory had a firm grasp of the doctrine. An anonymous nun of Winchester described her vision of Purgatory to a confessor in 1422:

Then the devils said to them [i.e. the souls in Purgatory], "Take these pains because you abused yourselves in the foul lust of lechery and in all other sins. . . . For know well that this is not hell - this is an instrument of God's righteousness to purge you of your sin in purgatory. And take these pains because you would not do penance in your lives before you came here."¹⁴

This fifteenth century revelation of Purgatory emphasizes strongly the efficacy of intercession for the dead: the purgatorial spirit Margaret asks the anonymous nun to have masses said on Margaret's behalf by specific priests of Winchester and requests that the nun make a pilgrimage which Margaret had failed to carry out. On the next night Margaret reappears to the nun to show how the intercession of the living had lessened her purgatorial suffering.¹⁵

Although he retained the outer shell of the doctrine, Gansfort reshaped every aspect of the orthodox cult of Purgatory. He first denied any power of the Church to free persons from punishment in Purgatory: "Neither the authority of the prelates nor the validity of the sacraments renders a man in this life devoid of sin. Unless one can declare a man devoid of sin, he cannot decree that he is exempt from punishment."¹⁶

He then argues that the fire of Purgatory "does not torment, but rather cleanses the inward man of the impurity which accompanies him even when released from the flesh."¹⁷ This fire is "the zeal of burning love" of the soul for God, "a fire of intellectual discipline."¹⁸ Gansfort bases his interpretation on 1 Corinthians 3.11-13, "the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. . . . If any man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire." This passage, argues Gansfort, clearly rules out any corporeal fire, referring instead to "fiery torrents of intellectual discipline."¹⁹

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Only this spiritual fire of reason can truly purify. Material or corporeal fire can torment: but as Gansfort points out, the Christian tradition does not hold that suffering per se purifies: "The most blessed and holy Lord Jesus endured a thousand torments and yet was in no way purified. Lucifer will endure eternal torment, but he will in no way be purified."²⁰ This was an original and powerful argument against an infernal Purgatory of fire and suffering.

If the living understood "the happy state of souls in Purgatory,"²¹ Gansfort argues, they would not want to pray for their release. To clarify his eschatology Gansfort develops an elegant metaphor of darkness, dawn and daylight. In this life "everything is done as by lamplight." After death "the saints are freed from all their infirmities here, and. . . as happy wayfarers they shall pass into the dawn of the approaching day, until the sun shall rise clearly before them."²² The state of dawn is a spiritual Purgatory, in which the souls of the faithful are gradually enlightened until they reach the full light of God's presence. This point leads to Gansfort's central argument: intercession for the souls in Purgatory is both undesirable and impossible. No one should want to free souls from this Purgatory of enlightenment, and the

intercession of the Church is, in any case, useless.

To support his "celestialization" of Purgatory, Gansfort uses several rhetorical strategies. Because the fires of Purgatory are not entirely without scriptural basis, as 1 Corinthians 3 shows, Gansfort attempts to rework this text and the imagery of physical, punitive fire in his writings on Purgatory. Gansfort first argues that the Fathers and the tradition of the Church spoke only *metaphorically* of purgatorial fire: "the examples of all the dialogues and visions of illustrious men [regarding Purgatory] must be interpreted and accepted metaphorically rather than historically."²³ Gansfort then elides the fire of Purgatory into two other positive metaphors, comparing it with enlightenment, as seen in the image of dawn and daylight, and with "burning desire" for the Kingdom of Heaven, using marriage imagery from the Song of Songs.²⁴

Gansfort's theses on Purgatory, as seen in the *Farrago* and several of his letters, present a detailed solution to a basic problem of mystical theology: how can the human soul, stained by sin, unite with God? For theologians influenced by late-medieval mysticism such as Karlstadt, Gansfort's arguments were convincing and useful.

Purgatory in the Outbreak of the Reformation: Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt

Andreas Bodenstein was born c. 1480 in the Franconian town of Karlstadt. He completed his B. A. at the University of Erfurt, a center of German nominalism and early humanism, in 1502. In 1510 he received his doctorate in theology from the newly-founded University of Wittenberg. As the leading member of the theology faculty at Wittenberg, he promoted Martin Luther to doctor in 1512. In the following decades Karlstadt was Luther's ally, then

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bitter foe, as the two Wittenberg theologians initiated a Reformation that Karlstadt wanted to take much further than Luther.

Research on Karlstadt has, in the last two decades, begun to bear out the reevaluation of his role in the Reformation first proposed by Hermann Barge at the beginning of the century.²⁵ The importance of Karlstadt's theology to the Lutheran Reformation, the Swiss Reformation and the Anabaptist movements is now becoming clear.²⁶ Recent research on Karlstadt as a popular pamphlet author has revealed his importance in the early years of the Reformation: he published more German pamphlets between 1517 and 1525 than anyone except Luther.²⁷ One of the most popular of Karlstadt's sixty-three publications in the period from 1517-1525 was the sermon on Purgatory, *On the State of the Souls of the Christian Faithful*.

This work represents a shift from Karlstadt's first discussion of Purgatory, found in an anonymous collection of theological theses published in Basel in 1522: *Lutheri Melanch. Carolostadii etc. propositiones, Wittembergae viva voce tractatae... Sunt autem id genus, De missa & celebratione eius, Sacramento panis & vini... coniuratione spirituum... etc.*²⁸ Among the various topics outlined in the collection, a set of forty-eight theses titled "Articuli de Coniuratione Mortuorum migrantium" has been attributed with certainty to Karlstadt. Karlstadt discusses several of the questions raised in the sermon on Purgatory, but he reaches different conclusions in the two works.

In the forty-eight theses Karlstadt denies the possibility of any "middle state" for souls after death: "Upon leaving the body the soul immediately enters heaven or hell" ("Anima a corpore egressa confestim coelum ingreditur aut infernum"). The theses seek to eliminate any argument which would allow the existence of Purgatory "between the place of solace and of fire" ("Inter locum solacii et cruciatus"), and conclude by stating that those who believe in the immortality of the soul based on the Purgatory of St. Patrick are already [for this reason] unbelievers ("Qui animarum immortalitatem propter beati Patricii purgatorium credunt, iam infideles sunt").²⁹ In these theses Karlstadt rejects the Roman doctrine of Purgatory without proposing any other purgatorial state after death.

In the context of the general development of his theology, two immediate factors explain Karlstadt's shift from this denial of any intermediate state after death to his affirmation of a "spiritual Purgatory" in *On the State of the Souls of the Christian Faithful* of 1523. First, the writings of Wessel Gansfort decisively influenced Karlstadt's theology, in particular his eschatology and understanding of the eucharist. Karlstadt may have been instrumental in bringing Gansfort's writings to press in Wittenberg in 1522. Second, the shift from a collection of Latin academic theses to a

vernacular sermon called for a message that would edify Karlstadt's parishioners. Gansfort's spiritual Purgatory could provide such a message of hope, enabling Karlstadt to go beyond an attack on the Roman doctrine of Purgatory and give his listeners a positive description of the state of souls after this life.[30](#)

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The text of the pamphlet indicates that it is based on an actual sermon given by Ka

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1. Jacques Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago, 1984).
2. R. W. Southern's review of *La Naissance du Purgatoire* (Paris, 1981) in *The Times Literary Supplement*, 18 June 1982, pp. 651-52, challenges Le Goff's linguistic and "structural" arguments. Southern provides an alternative thesis on the social origins of Purgatory, as does John Boswell in his review of the *The Birth of Purgatory* in *The New Republic*, 18 March 1985, pp. 38-42. See also Graham Robert Edwards, "Purgatory: 'Birth' or evolution?" *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 36 (1985), 634-46.
3. Le Goff, *Birth of Purgatory*, p. 5.
4. Le Goff, *Birth of Purgatory*, pp. 52-95, 154-76. See also R. R. Atwell, "From Augustine to Gregory the Great: An Evaluation of the Emergence of Purgatory," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 38 (1987), 173-86.
5. Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt, *Ein Sermon vom stand der Christglaubigen Seelen von Abrahams schoß und Fegfeür / der abgeschydnen Seelen* (Augsburg, n.d.), in *Flugschriften des frühen 16. Jahrhunderts*, ed. Hans-Joachim Köhler et al. (Zug, Switzerland, 1978-), Fiche 332, Nr. 937. See Alejandro Zorzin, *Karlstadt als Flugschriftenautor* (Göttingen, 1990), pp. 97-100, 234-40, 273-308, and Ernst Koch, "Fegefeuer," in

Theologische Realenzyklopädie (Berlin, 1976-), 5: 74.

6. See Zorzin, *Karlstadt als Flugschriftenautor*, pp. 234-40.

7. The dependence of Karlstadt's eschatology on Gansfort was first suggested by George H. Williams, *The Radical Reformation* (Philadelphia, 1963), p. 104, and was demonstrated by John W. Kleiner, "Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt's Eschatology as Illustrated by two Major Writings of 1523 and 1539" (Th.M. thesis, Harvard University, 1966), pp. 1-6.

8. On Gansfort's life and writings see S.D. van Veen, "Wessel, Johann," in the *Realencyclopädie für protestantische Theologie und Kirchen*, 3rd ed. (Leipzig, 1907), 21: 131-34; Ödön Fizeley, *Wessel Gansfort, eine dogmengeschichtliche Untersuchung* (Léva, 1911); Maartin Van Rhijn, *Wessel Gansfort* (S'Gravenhage, 1917), Idem, *Studien over Wessel Gansfort en zijn tijd* (Utrecht, 1933); and R. R. Post, *The Modern Devotion: Confrontation with Reformation and Humanism* (Leiden, 1968), pp. 476-80.

9. On Gansfort's relation to nominalism see Heiko A. Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology: Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval Nominalism* (Cambridge, MA, 1963), pp. 408-12.

10. Albert Hardenberg, "Life of Wessel of Groningen," trans. Jared W. Scudder, in *Wessel Gansfort, Life and Writings, Principal Works*, ed. Edward W. Miller, trans. Jared W. Scudder, 2 vols. (New York, 1917), 2: 335; cf. 1: 156-57.

11. Otto Clemen, "Hinne Rode in Wittenberg, Basel, Zürich und die frühesten Ausgaben Wesselscher Schriften," *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 18 (1897), 346-72.

12. See the relevant sections of the *Farrago* in Wessel Gansfort, *Opera, Facsimile of the Edition Groningen 1614* (Niekoop, 1966), pp. 709-854. See also Gerhard Ritter, "Romantic and Revolutionary Elements in German Theology on the Eve of the Reformation," in *The Reformation in Medieval Perspective*, ed. Steven Ozment (Chicago, 1971), pp. 15-49 and Margaret H. Ogilvie, "Wessel Gansfort's Theology of Church Government," *Nederlands Archief voor Kerkgeschiedenis* 55 (1974-75), 125-50.

13. Le Goff, *Birth of Purgatory*, pp. 298-99, quoting from James of Vitry, *Sermones vulgares*, sermon 68 *Ad conjugatos*. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, MS lat. 17509.

14. Anon., *A Revelation of Purgatory*, ed. and trans. Marta Powell Harley, *Studies in Women and Religion* 18 (Lewiston, NY, 1985), pp. 129-30; Middle English text p. 76.

15. *Ibid.*, pp. 132-38.

16. Gansfort, *Opera*, p. 829: "25. Neque Praelatorum auctoritas, neque sacramentorum veritas in hac vita immunem constituunt à peccato. 26. Qui non potest immunem à peccato reperire, non potest impunem decernere." Miller and Scudder, *Principal Works*, 2: 280.

17. Gansfort, *Opera*, p. 829: "Purgatoris ignis est, qui interioris hominis sordes etiam carne soluti comitantes purgat potius, quam torquet." Miller and Scudder, *Principal Works*, 2: 281.

18. Gansfort, *Opera*, pp. 829-30; Miller and Scudder, *Principal Works*, 2: 281-82.

19. Gansfort, *Opera*, pp. 833-37; Miller and Scudder, *Principal Works*, 2: 288-93.

20. Gansfort, *Opera*, p. 838: "Omnium optimus, omnium piissimus Dominus Jesus, mille cruciatus pertulit, nullatenus tamen purgatus. Lucifer aeternos cruciatus perferet, nullatenus purgabitur." Miller and Scudder, *Principal Works*, 2: 294.

21. Gansfort, *Opera*, p. 837; Miller and Scudder, *Principal Works*, 2: 293.

22. Gansfort, *Opera*, pp. 855-56: "Nimirum hic pretiosa in conspectu Domini morte, solvente ab omnibus infirmitatibus, et in illam sanctam vitam vivificante et confirmante, transeunt in illucescentem et adspirantem diem felices viatores, donec eis conspicuus oriatur sol . . ." Miller and Scudder, *Principal Works*, 1: 247.

23. Gansfort, *Opera*, p. 833; Miller and Scudder, *Principal Works*, 2: 287.

24. Gansfort, *Opera*, pp. 832-33, 837, 845-47; Miller and Scudder, *Principal Works*, 2: 286-87, 293, 304-07.

25. Hermann Barge