

# The Origin of Hell-Fire in Christian Teaching

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The concept of a soul within us that cannot die first became a 'Christian' doctrine at the end of the second century AD. Hell had been taught in Greek philosophy long before the time of Jesus, with Plato (427-347 BC) as the important leader in this thinking.

The teaching of an everlasting place of punishment for the wicked is the natural consequence of a belief in an immortal soul. By the year AD 187, it was understood that life, once we have it, is compulsory; there is no end to it, either now or in a world to come. We have no choice as to its continuance, even if we were

to commit suicide to end it.

At the end of the 2nd century Christianity had begun to blend Greek philosophy —human speculative reasoning, with the teachings of God's Word. Such words and phrases as 'continuance of being', 'perpetual existence', 'incapable of dissolution' and 'incorruptible' began to appear in so-called Christian writings. These had come straight from Plato, the Greek philosopher, all those years before Jesus. Other phrases used were 'the soul to remain by itself immortal', and 'an immortal nature'. It was taught that this is how God made us. But this idea derives from philosophy, not divine inspiration. There are no such words in the Bible. It was Athenagorus, a Christian, but whose teachings, according to the Encyclopaedia Britannica, were strongly tinged with Platonism, who had introduced the teaching of an immortal soul into Christianity. In this way, he paved the way for the logical introduction of eternal torment for immortal, but sinful, souls. This was a hundred years and more after the time of the apostles, and came straight from popular philosophy. The apostles had consistently taught that death is a sleep, to be followed by resurrection. The early church leaders – Clement, Ignatius, Hermas, Polycarp, and others who also believed that death is a sleep, taught that the wicked are destroyed forever by fire – their punishment was to be annihilation. These leaders did not teach of an immortal soul to be tortured by fire in hell for eternity.

About AD 240 Tertullian of Carthage took up the teaching of an immortal soul. It was he who added the further, but logical dimension. He taught the endless torment of the immortal soul of the wicked was parallel to the eternal blessedness of the saved, with no sleep of death after this life.

This came at a time when many Christians were being burned for their faith and it was natural for them to accept that their persecutors would at death be consigned to an ever-burning hell for the persecution they had inflicted on others while they went straight to eternal bliss.

From the third century the darkness of the infiltration of man-made beliefs into Christianity deepened until the Dark Ages had smothered almost all the light of God's Word. At the beginning of this time, the first attempts were made to create a systematic set of beliefs. It is not surprising that an ever-burning hell and the immortality of the soul were prominently included.

It is at this time that such beliefs, held by most Christians today, had their origin. An ever-burning hell has remained a commonly taught doctrine of the Christian religion to this day. It was not based on the Bible but on philosophy. Bible verses were later sought to uphold the ancient philosophies of the Greeks, and added to the teaching.

Eventually under the influence of Augustine, AD 430, the concept of endless conscious torment was brought into general acceptance by the Catholic Church in the Western world. He taught that all souls were deathless and consequently the lost would experience endless fires of punishment, immediately upon the end of this life.

### **Purgatory and places of purification.**

Other pagan philosophers, along with some of the poets of the day, were repulsed by the immorality of this teaching, and developed the idea of a place where the fleshly body was purified by fire but, at the completion of purification, would find release. It was a middle way between heaven and hell. This concept had its origin in Persian teaching. From there it passed to certain Jewish groups, and later was taken into Christian thought and teaching.

It arose out of the Gnostic idea that the body, flesh and matter, is inherently evil and must be purified and purged by fire elsewhere. But we know bodies can be exhumed for examination, so it cannot be true that the flesh goes elsewhere.

A similar view was held in Egypt, with prayers and services for the dead and payments made to priests for them to intercede for the dead. The idea of a place like purgatory did not have its beginnings in the Christian church, but in ancient pagan religions. The foundations had been established by Augustine's teaching of eternal hell. Purgatory was added, and later fully confirmed by Pope Gregory the Great, about 582. Purgatory could not be supported by the standard canon of the Bible and it was the books of the Apocrypha that were used to justify this new idea.

A similar teaching appeared in Moslem and Jewish belief. The inhabitants of the world were seen as good, bad and 'middling'. It was believed that, if one died with curable offences, these would be purified by pain and torment as a preparation for heavenly bliss. By 1439 the teaching of purgatory, with services and prayers for the dead, to spare them years of this pain, was fully accepted in the Western Catholic world – Italy, Spain, England, France, and was ratified by Pope Eugenius IV. It was not known or taught in Eastern Christianity, which was not influenced by Rome.

It is sometimes taught that even the righteous go to such a place for a lesser time so that the stains of sin can be burned from them, and this can be greatly hastened if certain exercises are

undertaken. At the end of this time any that are incorrigible are sent to hell forever and the righteous go to a place of eternal blessedness.

Heaven and hell are seen to be existing together side by side forever and ever. This means that Jesus the Saviour can never see an end of the sin and misery He came to die for. Any teaching of the eternal co-existence of evil and good is not in the Bible, but is a teaching from Greek philosophy.

The Waldenses who had fled to the mountains to remain free from the heresies that were developing in the Catholic Church and also to escape persecution, taught the sleep of death and instant destruction by fire at the resurrection of the wicked. Their persecuting inquisitors reported that they entirely rejected the teaching of purgatory. The Cathari and the Hussites also rejected hell, thus leading the way for the teachings of the later Reformers.

### **The Reformers**

The Reformers strongly rejected hell and purgatory, because by this time the teaching had become heavily corrupted by the sale of indulgences. These were the payments made to the priests to reduce the years of purification spent in purgatory.

Wycliffe taught that death was an unconscious sleep, as did Tyndale and Luther, (although it has to be said that Luther was not always consistent in his beliefs.) They taught neither hell or purgatory. They taught that 'men are breath in bodies' and not 'souls in bodies'.

Calvin, however, taught that those who were sinners went to the eternal pains of hell at the time of their death and even denied a middle place or purgatory. The Reformed churches, like Calvin, have generally maintained a belief in an immortal soul and hell-fire, but do not teach purgatory

### **The Resurrection and Hell.**

How do the concept of an ever-burning hell and the Bible teaching of resurrection fit together? Over the centuries there has been a blending of Bible teachings with the teachings of men. It was known that the Bible speaks of resurrection, and also of death by fire. The compromise view sees the body being resurrected and rejoining its soul again and then both being tormented together by fire.

Athenagorus taught that a person can never die or come to an end; life is ours for always. He taught that we have been made intelligent just for the purpose of continuing life - even if it be in Hell. He also taught that a body is given to the soul, and we are born into this world to pass through this life as two entities. These two are separated at death but, at the resurrection, the body rejoins the soul. He taught that punishment must be given for sins committed in this body and so the body needs to suffer punishment also. During the period of separation from its soul it is said, the body is in the grave. He argued consistently that God made us to live, and therefore we live eternally even though it is a living death in torment.

### **What is the fate of the wicked?**

The theologian Origen of Alexandria developed another, different view of the fate of the wicked. He postulated that the wicked would be forgiven and restored by God and so in the end all would be saved. There would be universal salvation. Some of his followers believe that even Satan will be saved.

But there was yet another view, that of Irenaeus, who taught that the wicked would be destroyed. All trace of wickedness would be removed from the earth by a devouring fire.

### **No second chance.**

The Bible is clear that our choice, for Him or against Him, is made in this world, here and now. There is no mention of a second chance in the Bible, or a time when all people will be changed and restored to the Lord. This view of universal salvation is also mythology that has crept into the Christian world. It gives a more comfortable picture than judgement and death, but a second chance is false hope. Its origin is in the thinking of Greek philosophy.

### **In Summary**

- \* There is no ever-burning hell with an eternity of torture.
- \* There is no such place as purgatory.
- \* There is no universal restoration of all sinners.