

**the materiality of hell:
the christian hell in a
world religion context
terje oestigaard**

ABSTRACT

Hell is traditionally understood as a theological and eschatological matter concerned with the destiny of the dead in an otherworld even until eternity. Although the beliefs and characteristics of the various hells in the world religions share many similarities, there are nevertheless some striking differences. In a comparative perspective the Christian hell is the worst, but the belief that hell is solely an eternal abyss of fire torturing the damned is a late construct. Apart from theological explanations, in order to understand how these beliefs have developed a perspective emphasizing historical processes and the role of materiality in religion may add new knowledge to why the different hells have various characteristics. With regards to the Christian hell, it became physically manifest on earth in several ways. The burning of witches alive on pyres illuminated the gruesome pains the sinners faced and thus visualized the suffering in hell. Various places were also ascribed the characteristics of hell and purgatory creating a "topography of hell" in this world. Hence, as will be argued, these visualizations and materializations of hell on earth had an important role in the process of developing ideas of hell as an eternal and torturing abyss of fire.

Keywords: Christianity, Buddhism, evil, Hinduism, hell, Islam, Judaism, materiality, pain, sin

Introduction

Hell is the most extreme idea and place ever created in history, and it is both the embodiment of evil and the devil(s) and a separate locale where sinners are penalized. Although analyses of hell normally belong to theology or philosophy, it is also possible to analyze hell through a material religion perspective. Evil and sin are not only perceived as ideas, but also as physically embodied and the locales for suffering as real and material. Doctrinal beliefs about hell refer to otherworldly places, but the reason why these locales have had such a pervasive impact in society and religion is because of their ontological status as physical and material. Hence, an analysis of the materiality of hell has to emphasize why and how eschatological beliefs have been embodied and materialized in expressing the reality of hell.

In Western world religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), as well as in Eastern world religions (Hinduism and Buddhism), ideas of the materiality of hell have had fundamental roles, but in various ways and with different eschatological beliefs and consequences for eternity. Still, there are some shared features with regards to evil and sin, which are the point of departure for understanding hell, and that is the belief that evil and sin are embodied and materialized. Thus, in order to analyze the materiality of hell, it is necessary to address what characterizes evil and sin. Christianity will have a particular emphasis in this analysis, because as I will argue, the Christian hell has been the most extreme due to its material foundation, and it may therefore enable a discussion of why Christianity's hell has developed this peculiar position among the world religions, and it will also shed light on the particular characteristics of the other world religions' hells. Hence, I will

1. discuss the function of hell as a place of suffering;
2. analyze the materiality of evil and sin;
3. give a short presentation of the different hells in world religions; and
4. analyze the role of materiality in the constitution and the beliefs of the Christian hell and why it, as it is possible to understand it, became worse than the other world religions' hell.

The Role of Hell in Religions

In general, humans are not only "less than God," but they are also "guilty before God." In its simplest definition, to "sin" is the possibility to act against God, and this possibility of committing sins, which deviates from God's will, is a sign of free will (Hertz 1996). Acting against God necessitates a divine penalty. In the words of Paul Ricoeur, "The cosmos is a machine for damnation and salvation. Soteriology is cosmology" (2004: 268), and hence, the rewards and punishments may take different forms.

There are two main ways of solving the problem of mitigation of sins: divine mercy and human repentance. The traditional view of the Christian hell is retributive. The

doors of hell are locked from the inside rather than from the outside, and the penalty suffered in hell is in accordance with the nature of the sins committed. The justification and purpose of hell are retributive by its very essence (Kvanvig 1993: 19). However, in the history of Christianity there have been other understandings of the character and length of damnation. The doctrine of *apokatastasis* holds that even sinners and the damned will in the end be saved, and this doctrine is commonly attributed to Origen (c. AD 185–251), who philosophized about which was greater, human freedom (including the possibility of rejecting God) or God's love for sinners (Sachs 1991: 230). This position denies the existence of an eternal hell, and even God's enemies (including Satan and the demons) will find salvation in Christ. From the Middle Ages, however, eternal punishment has played a more important role in Christianity than belief in the world's salvation in Christ for those who were destined to hell (Sachs 1991, 1993).

Whereas Christianity traditionally has emphasized human repentance to eternity, Islam has put much more emphasis on divine mercy since Allah is good and merciful. In Christianity the judgment is rather static and mechanical without any interference by God—what humans have done is irreversible and they have to suffer for their sinful misbehaviors—whereas in Muslim eschatology it seems that Allah plays a more active role, executing his almighty powers to save even the wicked ones who suffer in the lower realms. In karmic traditions such as Hinduism and Buddhism, the penalty is incarnation in lower realms whereas rewards materialize as incarnation in higher realms, which culminates in liberation from the cycle of birth and death whereby one attains divine presence.

In Christianity, it is said that “If Heaven is spiritual, Hell is oddly fleshly” (Turner 1995: 3), and this characterization of the physical and material dimension of hell is not restricted to Christianity, but found in all the other world religions. As will be argued, there is nothing odd about the fleshly character of hell—the material basis is a premise for the existence of hell. Hell is a place that has certain characteristics and properties that define it: the eternal pain and suffering caused by burning or torturing the flesh, or the worst penalty a human can imagine in their many facets.

The Materiality of Evil and Sin

From the anthropology of religion, one may separate several types of evil:

1. *Moral evil*, which may be defined as suffering inflicted by one person on another, particularly when the perpetrator enjoys causing pain. This type of malice is called moral evil because fellow humans morally judge it.
2. *Metaphysical evil*, which is harm brought about by nonhuman or divine forces such as poverty, famines, plagues, diseases, etc. due to human ignorance.
3. *Descriptive evil*, which refers to more sinister places and atmospheres characterized by fear and ghosts (Parkin

2005: 171). Cemeteries may in some cases be such locales.

4. *Diabolic evil*, which may also be seen as an independent, dark force bent for destruction threatening cosmos and the divine order, where evil is a material substance (Evans 1982: 8) like a cosmic black hole destroying and annihilating everything.

The most general characteristic of evil is suffering and pain. A common approach has been to see pleasure and good as opposite to pain and evil (Kemp 1954: 13). It has been argued that "pain is in itself an evil; and indeed, without exception, the only evil" (Bentham 1948: 21), but not all types of pain can be characterized as evil. Immanuel Kant argues that one has separate evil in action and well-being. The lack of well-being as pain refer to our senses, "but good or evil always signifies a reference to will . . . hence good or evil is in fact referred to actions rather than to the person's state of sensation, and if something is to be good or evil absolutely" (Kant 2002: 81–2). Moral evil is different from any kind of pain, and to say that the suffering of pain is evil must necessitate something more than just being unpleasant or painful; it is necessary to show "that the tendency to produce pain is both a necessary and a sufficient condition of the evil character of anything and, moreover, that there is a direct correlation between degrees of evil and amount of pain" (Kemp 1954: 20). Hence, one may also distinguish between physical and moral evil where the former is human suffering or pain and the latter is immorality (McCloskey 1960).

In the Judeo-Christian tradition sin is moral evil and the deliberate and purposeful violation of God's will, and one may identify three distinct outbreaks of sin: (1) "Satanic evil," which erupted in a vacuum in heaven when sin was born instantly in Lucifer who was expelled from heaven to hell; (2) "Adamic evil," which was an active process of seduction assaulting the sinners from outside leading to an inner, moral collapse; "by consenting temptation, both chooses evil as they are chosen by it," leading to humankind's expulsion from paradise, and (3) "historic evil," which was transmitted by Adam and Eve to their descendants and seems to be biologically determined before it can be chosen (Tanner 1988: 45). Following this, "evil makes us human [and] not only ourselves but our world is a consequence of evil" (Kahn 2007: 1). Hence evil gave meaning to life and death and evil is intimately linked to materiality.

Muslims also believe that humanity descended from Adam and Eve, but even though Adam ate the apple and committed sin in paradise, from where Adam and Eve then were expelled, in Islam Allah has forgiven their sins after they repented. It is believed that the expulsion was a result of satanic deception rather than a deliberate disobedience of God's laws. In Islam God created humans within a divine and perfect world, and they are his viceroys on earth. Humans are therefore not born with sin, but as humans they have the possibility of committing sins. Hence, as creatures of

Allah, humans have a moral duty to serve their God. This is imperative, and disobeying this obligation is a heinous sin, which has severe consequences in the otherworld. Nevertheless, there is no original sin in Islam, and descending from Adam and Eve is an honor and grace, and not a fall as within Christianity (Smith and Haddad 1981: 14).

According to orthodox and scriptural Hinduism and Buddhism, an individual soul may take 8.4 million materialized bodies (according to some texts and sages there are 840,000 incarnations) before it eventually may attain liberation — Nirvana. In Hindu and Buddhist theodicy, one's evil actions is a result of karma and may stem from previous actions, and it is therefore difficult to distinguish between moral (human intentional) and metaphysical evil because evil effects (from former actions) can only be reduced by good deeds (Obeyesekere 1968, 2002). There are six broad categories or realms of incarnations: (1) the divine sphere where one becomes God; (2) a semi-divine sphere where one becomes a semi-god; (3) the human sphere on earth; (4) the earthly sphere of animals; (5) the spiritual realm of being ghosts; and, finally, (6) hell. To each of these categories there are various modes of flesh culminating with divine beings without bodies because the celestial state is characterized by spiritual victory over materiality (Oestigaard 2004, 2005). Importantly, since everybody has done something good in his or her lifetime, the stay in hell is not eternal because sooner or later the doomed will be rewarded with a better incarnation.

Although there are different approaches to evil and sin, a common feature is that the Cartesian dualism between mind and matter cannot be upheld because evil and sin materialize in the body in two ways; on the one hand, evil and sin is felt when inflicted by others as pain in one's own body and, on the other hand, moral evil is embodied in various ways in the perpetrator. Evil may be transferred as a personal property (cf. Evans-Pritchard 1976: 236). This has consequences for an understanding of sin because the traditional separation between mind and matter does not exist clearly in the eschatology of the lower realms. God-consciousness involves "righteousness of the flesh" (Wyman 1994: 295). The flesh of the body is a bio-moral substance which encompasses morality and materiality, sin and immorality. Sin is therefore also a bio-moral phenomenon, which manifests itself in tangible and material ways (Parry 1994: 127). Sin becomes manifested in the flesh. Flesh and the body are thus the matter for understanding eschatological concepts of hell, which for Christianity also includes purgatory, because without sin being embodied, hell would not have materialized as ideas and these ideas would not have materialized into the worst places of suffering ever.

Hell in the Judeo-Christian Tradition

The history and development of hell in the Judeo-Christian tradition has gone through at least five phases: (1) humanity is penalized by God with the Deluge; (2) Sheol; (3) Gehenna; (4) the medieval fiery torture chamber lasting to eternity;

and, finally, (5) hell as the absence of God. The belief in an individual life after death had almost no religious importance during The First Commonwealth (until c.539 BC). In the earlier understandings of hell, God punished human disobedience collectively. These punishments were not eternal wrath and individual repentance, but plagues, fevers, conquests, famine, and, for the Jews, exile. The punishment was not directed upon the individual, but harmed his family and society, and a collective system of rewards and punishments in this life rather than in an otherworldly realm cannot imply a heaven or hell (Hachlili 2001; Segal 1997). The Deluge has to be seen in this light, and the importance is that God's wrath was solely upon this world (Allen 1963; Cohn 1996; Dundes 1988). Importantly, after the Flood, there were no otherworldly penalties (Figure 1). Moreover, this system of punishment was not ideal and God repented, following the Scripture, and if humans became wicked in the future, God would only annihilate the sinner. Hence, here one may have the origin of heaven and hell since the eschatology of punishment turned from this world to an otherworld, and it became personal rather than collective (Oestigaard 2004).

In the Old Testament Sheol is used to designate hell. Nevertheless, the commonest understanding and interpretation of Sheol is "grave," implying that there was some kind of judgment after death, but the character of the punishment is more uncertain (Walvoord 1992: 16–17), and it has also been stated that "the realm of the dead, the rites

FIG 1
The Deluge (from Doré 1880).



connected with death and burial, as well as the destiny of the soul in the other world, play no part in the religion of YHWH" (Kaufmann 1960: 311). There are more illuminating, or more correctly, burning images of the place for the doomed in the New Testament. Gehenna, presented as a fiery furnace, was the destined place, which referred to a garbage dump outside Jerusalem where bodies of criminals had been burnt (Forsyth 2003: 201). In Gehenna people will "weep and gnash their teeth" (Matt. 13:42; cf. 25:30, 41) or be thrown in an "unquenchable fire" (Mark 9:43). In The Book of Revelation it is described a "pool of fire" (Rev. 20:13f.) where the doomed will suffer "in the fiery lake of burning sulphur" (Rev. 21:7–8). Nevertheless, although these images of hell's existence had a scriptural basis, they were seen more as metaphors than a real three-dimensional and eternal crematorium (Le Goff 1984).

Hell and purgatory played a minor role in Christianity until the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, but then eschatology turned into the most dogmatic and gruesome system of eternal suffering and damnation through fire. Purgatory is a hell of limited time and suffering. In 1253, the Church made the formal promulgation of the doctrine of purgatory in a papal letter (Turner 1995: 89, 127). In the process of understanding and developing hell, the nature and character of the fire in hell had to be figured out. If hellfire consumed like ordinary fire, then hell would not be eternal because everything would burn up. William of Auvergne (1228–49), a thirteenth-century bishop of Paris, solved this theological problem. Hellfire was seen as different from the fire we are familiar with on Earth. Hellfire burned without consuming since the damned should be tortured to eternity. Thus, fire is designated to expiatory and purification processes in purgatory (Bernstein 1982, 1983; Le Goff 1984: 245), but not in hell, and this hellfire came to occupy the prominent place in hell for centuries.

In recent years this fiery image of hell has changed. In 1995 the Church of England through its Doctrinal Commission abolished hell and replaced it with "total non-being" where annihilation is a truer picture than damnation representing the ultimate result of the desire to live independently from God (Cheetham 1995; Moltmann 1995). Moreover, God never shuts people out—it is they who refuse to open the door, and hence, hell is potentially temporary (Cheetham 1995: 263). Pope John Paul II officially redefined hell On July 28, 1999. According to this redefinition, hell is the "absence of God," and the images of physical pain and fiery torture should be understood as metaphors of the psychological pain it is to live apart from God's love (Pope John Paul II, July 28, 1999):

The images of hell that Sacred Scripture presents to us must be correctly interpreted. They show the complete frustration and emptiness of life without God. Rather than a place, hell indicates the state of those who freely and definitively separate themselves from God, the source of all life and joy. This is how the Catechism of the Catholic Church summarizes the truths of faith on this subject: "To die in mortal sin without repenting and accepting

God's merciful love means remaining separated from him for ever by our own free choice. This state of definitive self-exclusion from communion with God and the blessed is called 'hell.'

Hell in Islam

The Islamic hell bears resemblances to the Christian one, but Islamic conceptions have certain particular characteristics. Hell consists of seven different layers or realms where there is a kind of calibration of the different sins. The uppermost level is the least torturous, and then there is an increasing degree of torment the further down in hell the wicked descend. There are also different types of fires with specific qualities to designate the realms of torture: the purgatorial fire for Muslims; the flaming fire for Christians; the raging fire for Jews; the blazing fire for Sabaeans, the scorching fire for the Magi; the fierce fire for idolaters; and the abyss for hypocrites. The most intriguing aspect of the Muslim hell compared to the Christian hell is that the degree of punishment is meticulously adapted to the heinousness of the sins. Moreover, there are uncertainties regarding the eternity of the punishment in hell.

Some of the lower realms in the otherworld are characterized by scorpions as big as mules and snakes the size of camels, which torture the damned, and all suffer by fire. The different torments are represented by different material beings and means in separate and physical layers of hell. The worse the sins committed, the more evil materiality is employed in the penalizing process (Smith and Haddad 1981: 85–6). Thus, there is an elaborate system of relative punishments relating to the seven layers, which are named *hāwiya*, *jaḥīm*, *sa'īr*, *jahammam*, *laḏā*, *saqar*, and *ḥuṭama* (O'Shaughnessy 1961: 445), and the stay in hell varies from Muhammad's own brief term of "the twinkling of an eye" to a duration of 70,000 years (Ragg 1908: 162). It is commonly believed that particularly Muslims, who have testified to God but have committed sins and evil during their lifetime, will not be punished for eternity. The merciful Allah will not punish the faithful ones forever, and consequently the stay in hell is only temporary. The torments are expressions of God's mercy, which will enable the departed a place in heaven afterwards. Still, there are lingering doubts regarding those who have denied faith in Allah and even the existence of Allah, and the lowest hell may persist whereas the other wicked ones are annihilated and admitted to a place in paradise (Smith and Haddad 1981: 93–4).

Hell in Hinduism and Buddhism

In Hinduism, hell is seen in two ways. First, it is the lowest realm where a soul can be reborn due to misconduct in this life. All cemeteries are particularly dangerous because malignant spirits from the lower realms live there, and thus, although invisible to humans, spirits from hell may haunt people at cemeteries. Second, hell is also seen as the materiality of being, first and foremost as a fetus covered in bodily fluids, urine, blood, and feces, and it comes out from the womb with the greatest pain. Being born from a womb

is not a desirable birth, and the materiality of the body as a prison is best illustrated by the fetus in the mother's womb, an allegory of the way we are living in the world today; in Maya—the illusion. The description of life in the womb is very similar that of staying in hell. The life in the womb is described like this: “Just as a person is cooked and boiled in an iron cauldron by means of fire, so also the child hurled into the pot womb is cooked by the gastric fire. For him staying inside the womb the misery is equal to, nay, more than the misery of a person incessantly pierced by means of red-hot needles. There is nowhere a greater misery than staying within the womb. To all embodied souls it is full of misery, very terrible and grievous” (*Siva-Purana* III, 22.31–4, p. 1543). The filthiness and the state of pollution equals staying in hell, and Yama's hell is fierce and painful. Descriptions of the deceased's destiny as suffering the worst pains thinkable include the following:

The tips of the hands and the legs of some are cut off. The ears, noses, and lips of others are cut. The penis and the scrotum of some are cut. A few others have all their limbs and joints cut. Pushed, pierced and thrust by spears and arrows some run helplessly here and there shrieking and squealing. Hit and trashed by iron clubs and rods, bruised by terrible thorns of various sorts, luminous like fire and sun and pierced through by javelins, some men shed putrid blood or evacuate faeces infested with worms. (*Siva-Purana* III, 7.37–40, pp. 1182–3)

Due to their sinful actions men are pierced through with sharp spears. They are put in oil extracting machines called Cakra and crushed like gingerly seeds and beaten into pulp. They are fried in iron cauldrons red hot in the blazing sunlight. They are fried in boiling oil in cauldrons again and again. Their tongues, chests, and feet are struck in many ways. (*Siva-Purana* III, 9.13–15, pp. 1488–9)

In Buddhism there is no hell as such, but human existence in itself is characterized by pain and suffering, and Nirvana is the release from these misfortunes. The materiality of the body separates the soul from Nirvana, and being born as a human or in other material bodies is due to imperfection and sin, which are material qualities. Hell is part of the transitory existence, and there is no complete account of the various types of hells, but some scriptures mention eight “hot” hells below the earth where bad karma is consumed (Tober and Lusby 1987: 241). The *bardo* in the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* (Thurman 1994) is the intermediate period during which the soul is guided through the *liminal* phase after death, where it may be led astray unless it is supervised by lamas. One of the main functions of this spiritual guidance is to tell the dying how to interpret the visions that he or she will see. Even though one has been reincarnated before, one has essentially forgotten everything from the past lives and consequently the former experiences; therefore, the soul perceives the intermediary state as dangerous and hostile. All the visions are scaring, terrifying, or tempting, and therefore

the lama will guide and instruct the soul on its way through the various realms in the intermediary state. The soul still thinks like a human, but it has no body, and that is one of the things which the soul will start searching for. In short, all these visions are facets of the human world, and indeed, possible reincarnations one may become. If one is seduced or frightened by them, one has not achieved the pure state of enlightenment, which is a prerequisite for Nirvana. The intermediate period is a process in which the soul should not react with anger, hate, lust, joy, greed, or grief to the visions presented. Becoming horrified or passionate in response to these visions is a sign that the soul is still attached to the material world, which is Maya—illusion.

Experiencing the Flames of Hell

Following Lakoff and Johnson (1999: 555), “we can only form concepts through the body. Therefore, every understanding that we can have of the world, ourselves, and others can only be framed in terms of concepts shaped by our bodies.” Hence, the materiality of the body must be emphasized because “the body is both the Same and the Other, an object and a subject of practices and knowledges, a tool and a raw material to be worked upon” (Tilley 1999: 37). The very constitution of hell and the beliefs in its existence and association with extreme pain are based on our bodies and physical experiences of pain in the real world. Therefore, I will propose two explanations with regard to how the Christian hell was constructed; first I will put emphasis on the actual experiences of being burnt alive and then how other material expressions also formed and strengthened these beliefs and perceptions, or in other words, how hell was materialized on earth.

During the medieval period in Europe the witch gradually became incorporated into mainstream religion. Witches opposed the social and moral order, and they opposed all the basic moral imperatives. They were the major threat to the current social and religious order in any given society. When the Christian witch became associated with the Christian Devil, she was transformed into a servant of Satan (Sanders 1995: 149). Belief in witches is common in many societies, but in Europe there were approximately 90,000 witchcraft prosecutions and around 45,000 executions in the medieval period (Levack 2006: 23; Behringer 2004). It will be argued that the practice of witch burning created the materiality of both hell and purgatory, and once created, they gave rise to the witch craze. This was a dialectical process. The witch-hunt was dependent upon the development of purgatory, a concept of a minor hell that became rational only because of the practice of witch burning. Thus, in order to understand and to legitimize the witch craze, the development of Satan as a concept was necessary, and the construction of hell became his place. Evil needed to be conceptualized, personalized and materialized (Figure 2).

Le Goff (1984: 3–10) argues that there are two main characteristics regarding the development of purgation.

FIG 2

The burning of 18 persons, Salzburg, 1528. Illustration by Jan Luiken (1685) in *Martyrs' Mirror*, Book 2, p. 17.



Firstly, the idea of purgation started at a level of popular piety and moved eventually into theological elaboration and became officially recognized. Secondly, it was a movement from the symbolism of purgation to the concrete idea of a physical place where the purging took place. This new belief gradually matured until in the twelfth century it became the belief in purgatory. It was a question of logic; a new logic was created by which people could believe and experience God's presence and fairness. In order for purgatory to be born, the notion of a place of "intermediacy" had to take on some substance. An "in-between-place" became "good to think" with for the man of the Middle Ages. A few passages in the Bible gave references to fire and hell, which for medieval man constituted a necessary but sufficient guarantee of the authenticity of this sacred tradition. Thomas Aquinas (c. AD 1227–74) formulated the doctrine of the "implicit pact." This doctrine argued that all heretics, witches included, were implicitly in league with the Devil. The dictum was used later with great effect against suspected witches, and combined with extensive use of juridical torture, which was indeed recommended in the *Malleus Maleficarum* (Kramer and Sprenger [1484] 1971), the witches confessed.

The witches adored the Devil by kissing his anus—the notorious *osculum infame* (Figure 3)—followed by a revolting sexual orgy that involved incest and sodomy, while the Devil copulated with everyone in turn. This pact between witches and Satan in personalized form gave the religious explanation and legitimacy for tracing and burning witches. The image of the diabolic witch was almost complete by the middle of the fifteenth century, created by churchmen, magistrates, and lawyers, and, once formed, the concept remained almost unchanged in Europe for almost 300 years. It was the perfect picture of a sinner. The height of the witch-hunt occurred between 1560 and 1660, and was to a great extent caused by the religious conflicts that eventually culminated in the



FIG 3

The *osculum infame* (from Guazzo 1608 in Rodker 1929: 35).

Thirty Years' War, and the Protestant clergy had a dominant role in the revival of the witch craze in the mid sixteenth century (Trevor-Roper 1984: 64–5).

Seeing witches suffering by being burnt alive on the pyre was one way hell became visualized and materialized; wars were another incarnation and manifestation of hell. Witch burning triggered off a fear of hell with real impact on people's beliefs, and thus it became a theological issue that the Church had to solve and incorporate into eschatology. This is evident in the chronological order of when witch burning started and when the concepts of hell and purgatory were developed and seen as material and real (Oestigaard 2003). The European witch-image was largely formed between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries, and the idea of organized Devil-worship appears in a trial in Orleans in 1022. Heretics were charged with cannibalism, infanticide, and holding sexual orgies from the eleventh century (Sanders 1995: 151–3). Hence, since witchcraft existed centuries before the torturing hell attained all its characteristics, it is possible to argue that the materiality and visualization of evil was an active part in the construction of the fiery hell.

As already noted, there were only minor references to hell, the Devil, and purgatory in the Bible. Humans created these concepts based on their own experiences. They had seen the worst pain imaginable. The witch burning illuminated the most gruesome horrors and destiny for humans—to die on the pyre alive. To legitimize this practice it was necessary to connect it to sin or the forces that opposed God and his divine plans for humanity. The uttermost suffering that existed could not be a part of God. When the witch burnings started, these cremations triggered off a need for theological clarification of the pains and evil that were materialized. In consequence, the eternal hell, purgatory, and the Devil materialized in a new way where eternal damnation by fire was the crucial axiom. Thus, the creation of the fiery hell may be seen as a non-intentional consequence of witch burning. Everyone could fear the pain of being burnt alive on the pyre since everyone has an experience of the pain caused by fire and flames. Burning oneself on a candle triggers off an idea of how intense the pain must be if one is being burnt alive. When medieval man saw these pains or heard about these executions the concepts were elaborated and became real and material (Figure 4). When these conceptions became materialized and were incorporated into the religion, it legitimized the practice of the witch-hunt and the witch burning. Without the manifestation of these pains and the worst sins, hell could not have originated and developed in the way it did (Oestigaard 2003), which may also explain why Christianity has created a worse hell than other religions. However, the gruesome and eternal destinies in hell were not only shaped by personal imaginations based on actual experiences with fire, but material culture also played an active role in developing and cementing these beliefs.

FIG 4

The burning of Anneken Hendriks, Amsterdam, 1571.
Illustration by Jan Luiken (1685) in *Martyrs' Mirror*,
Book 2, p. 528.



The Gates to Hell

Theologically, purgatory can either be seen as an antechamber of heaven or a department of hell, and the pains in purgatory differ ideally from those in hell since the former were characterized by good hope and grace and the latter by despair (Duffy 1992: 344–5). As discussed, the development of hell was a long process, and likewise, the belief that the main role of the Devil is to torture the damned in a fiery hell is also a late construct, and Satan has been perceived as a complex and multi-faced character (Russell 1977, 1981, 1988). Thus the Devil has been,

the personification of evil, he did physical harm to people by attacking their bodies or possessing them, he tested people, tempting them to sin in order to destroy them or recruit him in his struggle against the Lord; he accused and punished sinners, he was the head of a host of evil spirits, fallen angels or demons; he had assimilated most of the evil qualities of ancient destructive nature spirits or ghosts; he was the ruler of this world of matter and bodies until such time as the Lord's own kingdom would come, until that final time he would be in constant warfare against the good Lord; he would be defeated by the good Lord at the end of the world. (Nugent 1983: 256)

The different ideas of the Devil and his main tasks had implications for beliefs of what and where hell was. The old Church fathers such as Origen, Jerome, and Chrysostom believed that nature and all external materialities were diabolic and had to be combated. In the words of Chrysostom, one had to bring “the beast under control” by “banishing the flood of unworthy passions” (Harrison 1999: 91). In the Middle Ages, the sea was seen as the most frightful sight that nature could offer, and the seashore was nothing but the ruins of the world. The ocean was an abyss full of debris, and the demonic nature of the sea justified exorcism. Thus, during the sixteenth century sailors immersed relics in the waves (Corbin 1994: 2–7).

However, after the Reformation and with the development of natural theology from the end of the seventeenth and early

nineteenth centuries, nature came to be seen as the wisdom of God and not the work of the Devil. Natural theology was therefore crucial in the process of erasing repulsive images in nature (Corbin 1994: 25). This had severe consequences for the domination of the world, and the religious rationale was to reconstruct paradise on earth, in other words, to perfect nature. The Protestant work ethic in particular highlighted that the Garden of Eden had to be seen as an actual garden where Adam had carried out agricultural work. Thus, as pious devotees humans had to work, and the paradise God created was by its very nature a paradise that had to be worked. The world Adam and his descendants inherited was not the earth in a natural state, but a suffering and cursed earth. "The infertility of the ground, the ferocity of savage beasts, the existence of weeds, thorns, and thistles, of ugly toads and venomous serpents, all of these were painful reminders of the irretrievable loss of the paradisaal earth," Harrison argues and consequently, human "dominion is held out as the means by which the earth can be restored to its prelapsarian order of perfection" (Harrison 1999: 99–103).

Apart from nature as believed to be diabolic, specific places have been associated with hell and purgatory; St. Patrick's Purgatory, located in Lough Derg in northwestern Ireland, is one of the most famous of these places. According to medieval sources, the actual purgatory was located here. "The not inconsiderable number of pilgrims from mainland Europe in the Middle Ages tended to regard Ireland as a stage on the soul's journey after death to its ultimate destination in the farthest west—in Christian terms, as an entry to purgatory—and the island cave Lough Derg as the very gate to that western netherworld" (Turner and Turner 1978: 112). The pilgrimage to Lough Derg has been considered to be one of the most difficult in Christianity, and even today Catholic pilgrims believe that they can shorten or terminate the time in purgatory for their dead friends and relatives (Turner and Turner 1978: 121).

In the Middle Ages, St. Patrick's Purgatory was seen as real, and those who survived the ordeal were relieved from the fiery pains of purgatory after death. In *Tractatus de Purgatorio Sancti Patricii*, which was written in the late twelfth century, the mythical hero Knight Owen visited four places of punishment and he was thrown into the mouth of hell before he traveled "to a river of fire and sulphur, spanned by the bridge which [he had to] cross. If he falls off the bridge, he will land in the clutches of demons who will drag him down to hell" (Zaleski 1985: 475). After Owen successfully completed the ordeal, he got a glimpse of heaven before he returned back, and when he died, he passed immediately through purgatory to heaven, or at least so the story goes. Interestingly, in St. Patrick's Purgatory we have the more generally believed hell, which is characterized by fire, but this was, as indicated earlier, a late invention in the history of hell. In Dante Alighieri's *Divina Commedia* (Dante 1990), written early in the fourteenth century, purgatory and hell were characterized by various types of freezing, boiling, burning,

FIG 5

Suffering in Dante's Hell without fire (from Doré 1876).



and torturing (Figure 5), and in the lowest circle of hell the damned were not burnt, but they were totally encapsulated in ice.

There was a close association between the believed destiny in the afterlife and the material culture used for guiding the dead to the otherworldly realms, and the gate to paradise was different from the gates to hell. The gates of hell are the gates of death (Katzenellenbogen 1947: 256) unlike the gate to paradise, which goes through the Church and its main door symbolizes the door to eternal life (Frazer 1973). Wicked criminals and murderers who were executed were normally believed to be doomed to hell, and consequently they could not be buried in Christian cemeteries. In England there is evidence of burials of executed criminals in pagan and pre-Christian burial grounds. These "hell" places or "execution-cemeteries" were far away from the communal and Christian grounds (Reynolds 1999; Semple 1998), thus creating a spatial topography of heaven and hell.

This topography of heaven and hell lies at the bottom of the very development and institutionalization of Christianity. St. Peter's Church in Rome is the holiest church in Christianity and the Pope is for Roman Catholics God's representative on earth. Jesus said to Peter: "And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not overcome it" (Matt. 16:18). Rome was the centre of Christianity and the holiest place on earth. It was the gate to paradise. The further north, the more it was believed that the Devil reigned, and evil was generally seen as coming from desolate places far away. St. Patrick's Purgatory was seen as being situated at the very edge of the world, but there were other places as well. In particular, northern parts of Norway were seen as highly infected by diabolic activities and presence, and Finnmark county, which is the northernmost area in Norway, had one of the most intensive witch-hunts (and subsequent executions) in Europe, taking the overall population into account (Hagen 2007).

Conclusion

The presence of hell in world religions has not only to do with theological and eschatological differences, but is dependent upon real and visual experiences in this world. It is the materiality of hell which guarantees its reality, which is inevitably bound up in the body and experiences of pain and suffering as evil, together with descriptions and visualizations of hell found in literature, art, architecture, monuments, and in natural places. The different types of materializations shape and construct the beliefs of hell and the role of the various demonic powers. Hence, the specific development and construction of hell in the various world religions are not only a theological or eschatological matter, but deeply influenced by the materiality which expresses these beliefs. As I have argued for Christianity, actual historical processes and not only theological explanations may give answers to why the Christian hell developed into an abyss of a fire where the damned burn for eternity. Such notions exist in other religions' hells, but are not as strong and dominant as in Christianity. Therefore, the witch craze and the materialization of the pains in hell by burning alive, which happened chronologically earlier and in parallel to the development of this notion of hell, can be seen as historical processes giving flesh to the ideas of a burning hell.

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