

Hell Disarmed? The Function of Hell in Reformation Spirituality

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Abstract

In Late Medieval Christianity, the concept of hell was closely connected to the sacrament of penance. Hell could be avoided through the right use of penance. And the cleansing sufferings in purgatory could to a certain extent replace the eternal sufferings in hell. The Protestant Reformation rejected purgatory, and returned to a traditional dualistic view of the relationship between heaven and hell. At the same time, hell seems to lose some of its religious importance in early Protestant spirituality. This change is illustrated through a comparison of two central texts belonging more or less to the same genre: on the one hand the famous Late Medieval illustrated *Ars moriendi* and on the other Luther's *Sermon von der Bereitung zum Sterben* from 1519.

Keywords

Lutheran hell, Protestant spirituality, *Ars moriendi*

Hell is not an important theme in Reformation theology; at least it is not a first line topic of theological debate during the Reformation. The existence of hell as part of the topography of the other world was hardly questioned by anyone, and at a first glance, the reformers of the sixteenth century did not seem to change very much in this part of theology. Particularly in more popular theological contexts, for instance in sermons, hell was as natural a part of theological discourse among Friars of the fifteenth century as it was among Lutherans of the sixteenth century. It was presupposed by all parties as a topic founded in New Testament discourse.

At a closer look, though, hell was by no means unaffected by the religious changes of the Reformation. Though the topic remains, the *function* of hell changes considerably — not to say dramatically. These changes can be traced on different levels of religious discourse. In this contribution, I will comment on the general change in theology and presumably also in religious mentality caused by the Reformation protest against purgatory and against the penitential system of the Late Middle Ages, resulting in a new way of thinking both about punishment and about the afterlife. This general change does not apply only to the Lutheran Reformation. Rather, it is part of common Protestant theology, and therefore is relevant also to Calvinist theology and to the theology of the radical Reformation. Hence, one could probably say that it is part of a new religious mentality with regard to life and death, where the topic of hell gains a very different function from the one it had in Late Medieval religion, and also from what it continues to have in modern Roman Catholic Christianity.¹

There are, though, good reasons to concentrate specifically on Luther in discussing this change. Not only was he the first advocate of the new way of relating to the other world, he also went deeper into the questions of sin and punishment than any other Reformation theologian. It should be added specifically, though, that there is also — in spite of some common presuppositions and in spite of the common protest against purgatory and against the penitential system of the Roman Church — considerable variety within Reformation theology as to the more specific religious and theological functions of hell. In spite of this, Luther deserves to be treated as the main exponent of a new Protestant attitude to hell.

Penance in Progress

A main focus of Late Medieval Christianity was the sacrament of penance. Both in church law, in daily religious practice and in theological discourse the occupation with individual sin and forgiveness had

¹) See Camporesi 1990. This book concentrates on developments in Catholic Europe.

evidently increased since the twelfth century, and the sacrament of penance was the primary place to deal with these matters. Since 1215, every adult Christian was obliged by church law to go to penance at least once a year. And from this time on, the business of penance attracted more and more attention throughout the Late Middle Ages. This was the case both among lay people and among monks, priests and the church leadership.²

Along with an increased occupation with penance goes an increased occupation with hell. Hell is a significant theme in the Gospels of the New Testament, especially in Matthew. Even though it is not a theme in the early Christian confessions summarizing the *credo* of the Christian communities, and neither a theme nor a motif in early Christian art, the importance of hell gradually increases during the Middle Ages. And it is reasonable to assume that this development is closely linked to the development of the system of penance: the motor of the increasing importance of hell is the increasing importance of the sacrament of penance. The rhetoric of hell, based on biblical traditions in the Gospels, becomes a more important part of the ideology of the penitential system of the church. And due to this, throughout the Middle Ages hell becomes a more and more significant theme in Christian art and in Christian preaching, and to a certain extent also in Christian theology.

The key passage in the New Testament in this connection was Matthew 25:41–43:

Then he will say to those on his left, “Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.”

No New Testament passage was more frequently used as a point of departure for sermons about hell during the Middle Ages, and no New

²⁾ An expression of this intensive occupation with the sacrament of penance is to be found in the *Sentence Commentary* (a kind of a systematic theological handbook) written by the influential nominalist theologian Gabriel Biel in Tübingen: the fourth book of his work is devoted to the sacraments, and in this book more than 600 pages are devoted to the sacrament of penance alone in part II, whereas 500 pages are devoted to all the other sacraments in part I. See Biel 1975–77.

Testament passage was more often drawn upon as a textual background for medieval illustrations of hell and its tortures. The text had a specific authority because it came from the Gospels, and even more than that, it was a quotation from Jesus himself. Although the word “hell” does not occur in the passage, the context given by other Jesus-sayings in the same Gospel — where the word hell is used several times — left no doubt in the minds of medieval Christians that Jesus was here talking about hell.

What did a medieval Christian have to do in order to avoid going to hell? In medieval penitential theology, the teaching about sin and punishment was considerably more complicated than in the words of Jesus just quoted. There were different kinds of sin and, correspondingly, different kinds of punishment. Sin was divided into three kinds: (a) original sin (*peccatum originale*), (b) deadly sins (*peccata mortalia*) and (c) forgivable sins (*peccata venialia*). The first two of these categories, original sin and the deadly sins, qualified for hell as punishment.

To avoid this punishment, the sacraments of the church were necessary. It was a common teaching in medieval theology that the power of original sin was taken away in baptism, so that baptized people did not have to fear the punishment of hell resulting from original sin. The two other kinds of sin, the deadly and the forgivable sins, were dealt with by the sacrament of penance. In the tradition from Gregory the Great, the seven deadly sins were commonly listed as *luxuria* (extravagance, later lust), *gula* (gluttony), *avaritia* (greed), *acedia* (sloth), *ira* (vengeance, more commonly known as anger), *invidia* (envy), and *superbia* (pride). These sins were so grave that a person who had committed one of them fell out of the state of grace. This in turn meant that on the day of the Last Judgment he or she would be placed on the left side of Christ, among the damned. But through the sacrament of penance, that is, through *contritio* (regret), *confessio* and *satisfactio*, the fatal consequence of deadly sin could be avoided. This was also the politics of the church: to call all Christians to penance at least once a year and relieve them first of all from deadly sins.

The consequence of all this was that the great majority of Christians in the Late Middle Ages would after all have no reason to fear hell. Most people had been baptized, and were thereby saved from the punishment resulting from original sin. And we can also presume that a majority of the European population in the Late Middle Ages went to

penance once a year, as prescribed by the pope. In this way, there existed a regular procedure for freeing oneself from the punishment in hell caused by unforgiven, deadly sin. This was the intention of the church and probably also the normal practice of the population during the Late Middle Ages.

Purgatory Prevails over Hell

The result of all this was that, for the great majority of Christians, the most relevant punishment for sin was to take place in a place other than hell: in purgatory. Purgatory was the *tertius locus*, the third place, in the other world, and for most practical purposes it was here that the account of sin and punishment for ordinary Christians was to be settled.³ Like hell, purgatory too was a fire. But it was not a fire inflicting eternal punishment, like that of hell according to normal church teaching. Instead, it was a fire for cleansing from sin. The logic was quite simple: either a sin was so grave that it could not be removed by cleansing; such a sin belonged in the eternal fire of hell. Or a sin was lighter, so that it could be removed through cleansing. These lighter sins belonged in purgatory. And once arrived in purgatory, a sinner could be sure that she or he was on the way to heaven, after a shorter or longer process of cleansing. After the condemnation in 543 of the Origenist teaching that the fire of hell provided cleansing for all sinners, with the so-called *apokatastatis* as the result, the dual view of hell as a place of eternal damnation and purgatory as one for temporary cleansing gradually gained predominance.

The sins that were to be cleansed in purgatory, were, first of all, the forgivable sins,⁴ but secondly also the unfinished punishments decreed by the priest as part of the sacrament of penance; the so called *satisfactio*. The books of penance, a popular genre in later medieval theology, prescribed what would be the appropriate *satisfactio* for different kinds of sins. Since the *absolutio* was bestowed on the sinner prior to the

³) For a more detailed discussion of the emergence of Purgatory as a third place in the other world, see Le Goff 1981. For critical comments to Le Goff, see Marshall 2002:7 n.5.

⁴) Le Goff 1981, especially 284–316, in the chapter “La Logique du Purgatoire.”

fulfillment of the works of *satisfactio*, the punishment for the forgiven deadly sins might remain with the believer for many years. And if the works of satisfaction had not been fulfilled by the time of a person's death, they had to be compensated by cleansing in purgatory before admittance to heaven.

Consequently, purgatory, and not hell, was the normal place to go to after death for the average Christian. There, he or she would complete a shorter or longer stay of cleansing to settle the account of sin and forgiveness before entering the company of God and the saints in heaven. Church propaganda also had good reason for concentrating more on purgatory than on hell, since purgatory, in contrast to hell, was a place where the procedures could be influenced by the church itself. This church influence on purgatory was most of all evident through the teaching and practice of indulgence, which became prevalent in the Late Middle Ages and has been maintained as part of the teaching of the Catholic Church until this day. A letter of indulgence was a certificate that qualified for the relief of a certain amount of punishment in purgatory. It was issued by the church, and its value was guaranteed by the so-called *thesaurus ecclesiae*, the treasure of good works (primarily performed by monks and priests) exceeding the measure of a settled account for salvation. This treasure had been entrusted to the church and could be converted into shares for sale for the benefit of those who were in need of them, both living and dead.

By means of this extension of the system of penance into the afterlife and the world beyond, the church and the clergy also increased their own symbolic power. They possessed direct influence not only on what happened in this world, but also on the next. Heaven and hell were beyond their reach, but purgatory was an arena where the church had been granted a major role, and thus there was good reason for constructing a system of penance where purgatory for all practical purposes was more important than hell.

New Focus on Hell

If the preceding account is an adequate description of the normal function of hell in relationship to purgatory in Late Medieval Christianity in the West, it could be added that hell played a more prominent role

in certain parts of Late Medieval theology. One important example of this is Nominalist theology, also called the *via moderna*, a school which also deeply influenced the theology of Martin Luther. Here, the role of free will and the contribution of each individual Christian were underlined as preconditions for receiving the grace of God. The alternative to this was hell. This way of thinking was supported by a general development in Late Medieval penitential theology, where the requirements of the *contritio* — the prescribed remorse and regret which was the first step in the process of penance — were increased and intensified in a way that made it very difficult for a religious person to be sure that he or she was really capable of meeting them.⁵

Seen together, these two developments, Nominalist theology and the psychological requirements posed by the books of penance, could easily contribute to the kind of crisis which Martin Luther is reported to have gone through (see Brecht 1981:82–88). He put all his power into the task of a thorough and right penance, but the more he invested, the more insecure he felt, and the more the threat of hell appeared to him as the deserved outcome of his insufficient struggles. In this religious context, the sacrament of penance is no longer the reliable defense it was supposed to be against the deadly sins and their fitting punishment: hell.

Luther and the Reformation

There are very good reasons to maintain that Luther contributed in a radical way to changing the function of hell in the northern parts of Western Christianity. In Luther's own theology, and in most of subsequent Protestant religion, hell came to play a role very different from that outlined above. In brief, the changes can be characterized as follows:

As a consequence of Luther's critique of indulgence and of the use of the sacrament of penance, purgatory was removed from the theology and the religious life of the Protestants. The dualism of heaven and hell of the Gospels was restored, and the involvement of the church with

⁵ For the general changes in the conceptions of hell in the Middle Ages, see Rasmussen 1986.

the details of the afterlife was abolished. Through this rearrangement of the topography of life after death, hell gained a new importance — though not in the sense that it became a central topic in Reformation theology and preaching. Sin is a much more fundamental concept than hell as a possible consequence of sin, and the main focus is on salvation from sin, not on the threats of hell. So, it is rather the *function of hell* within the discourse about sin, salvation and damnation that changes fundamentally with the Reformation, and not so much the rhetoric of hell as a theological topic in general. These changes in the function of hell are deeply rooted in Reformation theology and its new views of sin and salvation.

To Luther, the medieval differentiations between original sin, deadly sin and forgivable sin were of little or no importance. He also rejected theological reasoning about how different sacraments could relieve Christians from different kinds of sin. Already in his early theology, he protested against the traditional view that original sin was taken away by baptism. Rather, he maintained that original sin is part of the conditions of life in this world for every Christian, and that one can get rid of it only in the next life. Similarly, he argued that the distinction between deadly and forgivable sin was irrelevant: every sin has the potential to be deadly, and at the same time, every sin has the potential to be forgiven.⁶ Even though he did not reject the sacrament of penance, he gave it quite a new function: it is an institute for coping with sin in general, and its main elements are *confessio* (of sin) and *absolutio* (by the priest on behalf of God).⁷

Especially, Luther rejected the element of *satisfactio*, which had been of central importance in medieval teaching on penance, and which was fundamental to the system of indulgence and to the theology of purgatory. His main argument for this rejection was his teaching about salvation as a consequence of grace alone, unaffected by good deeds accomplished by man. This teaching also implied a very critical attitude to the element of *contritio* in medieval penitential theology: as Luther

⁶ See Luther 1979–99, 1:201–6 (*Disputatio Heidelbergae habita* [1518]: *Probationes conclusionum* to the theses III–XVI).

⁷ For a radical critique of Late Medieval views and practices regarding the sacrament of penance, see Luther 1979–99, 2:227–234 (*De captivitate Babylonica* [1520]: *De sacramento poenitentiae*).

himself knew, this *contritio* — described in detail in Late Medieval Nominalist theology as a precondition for receiving the *absolutio* of the priest — could be very difficult to accomplish, and could easily be experienced as a big achievement in itself.

In this way, both the teaching about sin and the theology of the sacraments relevant for coping with the impending punishment of hell were quite radically changed already in Luther's early theology, and all these changes became fundamental to subsequent protestant theology. Original sin accompanies man constantly through this life; every sin is potentially deadly, and neither baptism nor penance can give any kind of safety against the gravest kinds of sin and their consequences. In Luther's view, radical sin accompanies man throughout this life, and therefore, hell also threatens man throughout life. Behind this view lies his definition of the Christian person as being fundamentally double. From the beginning to the end man has a double qualification: on the one hand, he is a sinner who has part in original sin and who, on one level or another (through thoughts, will or actions), also commits sin; on the other hand, man is beyond the reach of sin by hearing and accepting the gospel of the forgiveness of sin, and here he has nothing to fear.⁸ This double definition of man is often expressed by the Latin phrase *Simul iustus and peccator*, and plays a key role in protestant anthropology, at least up to the period of pietism in Germany and Scandinavia.

Within this context, hell together with sin accompanies man through his whole life, as a threat and danger to avoid. And the only way to avoid it is by holding on to external powers: to the Gospel and to the sacraments. Throughout life forgiveness is needed continuously, because sin is present all the time. But the means to avoid hell are not defined in terms of the *contritio* and *satisfactio* left to the individual believer to accomplish, but rather in terms of holding on to something which is external to the individual. In this way, the fear of hell can be diminished or abolished. Salvation from hell is certain because the Gospel of God is certain, in contrast to the ability of man to accomplish the prescribed *contritio* and *satisfactio*, which is not at all certain. Thus, even

⁸) The double nature of the Christian is described in Luther 1979–99, 2:264–309 (*De libertate Christiana* [1520]).

though hell is still present as a topic in the theological discourse of Reformation theology, it is supposed to be a reality to be feared less than before, because the teaching about salvation from without provides better protection against hell and more comfort against the fear of hell.

Whether or not this theological view was also worked out according to its intentions in practical religious life in the early Protestant communities is difficult to say. Evidently, the new dualism of the afterlife reintroduced by Luther had important practical consequences for the individual Christian in his or her relationship to death. Purgatory, as the normal place to go to after death, had been removed. And with purgatory, the possibility for the church to extend its power into the afterlife had also been removed. In the protestant view, no human being, whether priest or layperson, could do anything to influence the fate of a dead person. Purgatory did not exist, and hell was not a place of cleansing for the improvement of sinners (the Origenist view); it was only, and nothing more than, a place of eternal torment, parallel to heaven as a place of eternal joy. In both cases, God alone makes the decision about who will go there, and human beings should not try to find out too much about such things. They do not belong to the revelation of the Bible, but are rather questions to which the old saying applies: *Quae supra nos, nihil ad nos* — “What lies above us is none of our business” (see Jüngel 1980).

The Dualism of *temptatio* and *consolatio* in the Late Medieval Illustrated *Ars moriendi*

The new function of hell in Protestant theology and religious life is a vast topic, and apart from general overviews, little research has so far specifically addressed this topic. The following comments will be restricted to one short, but important text, where the function of hell in Luther’s religious thought is expressed in a very typical way. The text is the “Sermon von der Bereitung zum Sterben,” written in October 1519 and printed in Wittenberg the same month. This text can be characterized as a typical Protestant text, not only because it was very often reprinted and also translated into several languages during Luther’s lifetime, but also because of its extended use in wide circles of

Lutherans throughout several generations after Luther's death.⁹ The text undoubtedly emerges from the Late Medieval tradition of *Ars moriendi*, and in many ways it also confirms this tradition: it is addressed to a person facing death, and its aim is to offer the necessary comfort in this situation. The situation is defined as an intensified struggle between God and the Devil, and the aim of the pamphlet is to help the dying person to identify with and to hold on to the good forces in order to die in peace.

The Late Medieval *Ars moriendi* was transmitted in two different versions, one longer treatise and one short illustrated pamphlet. The shorter version was widely spread during the late 15th and early 16th centuries because it was printed several times as a blockbook. This short illustrated *Ars moriendi* is indebted to Jean Gerson, but also to other Late Medieval authors who had contributed to developing the genre.¹⁰ This Pre-Reformation text is well suited for a comparison with Luther's text from 1519. The two pamphlets provide typical examples of the old and the new ages within the same genre of religious literature related to death and dying. What can be said about the changing function of hell from the one text to the other?

The illustrated *Ars moriendi* from the 15th century consists of texts and woodcuts, quite equally distributed throughout the 26 pages.¹¹ It is evidently a text conceived for practical use: text and pictures are closely connected, and together they provide very concrete guidance on what to think, what to feel, what to say and what to do when death approaches. The central part of the illustrated *Ars moriendi* deals with five contrasting impulses arranged around the concepts of *faith*, *desperation*, *impatience*, *vainglory* and *avarice*. On the one hand, the devil tempts the dying person in all these areas, trying to convince the poor soul that his or her *faith* is worth nothing and unable to help him or her to salvation.

⁹ 25 reprints in German are documented before 1525. For a detailed list of translations until 1543, see Reinis 2007:48.

¹⁰ At the Council of Constance (1414–1418), Jean Gerson had presented a text *De arte moriendi*, and the anonymous *Ars moriendi* versions are indebted to Gerson's treatise. See Reinis 2007:17–18; and O'Connor 1942:11–17.

¹¹ *Ars moriendi, ex variis sententiis collecta cum figuris ad resistendum in mortis agone dyabolice suggestioni valens cuilibet Christifideli utilis ac multum necessaria*, Landshutum 1514.

He also tempts the dying person through *desperatio* — *quae est contra spem et confidentiam quam homo debet habere in deum* — and produces further temptations related to the mental situations described by the three remaining concepts. On the other hand, the angels come to the dying person's assistance in all the different temptations — the *Bona inspiratio angeli de fide, contra desperationem* and so on. The consolation with regard to faith consists in words like, “O man, do not believe in the sick suggestions of the devil. He is a liar . . .” (*O Homo ne credas pestiferas suggestionibus Dyaboli, cum ipse sit mendax*).

In a regular order, one full-page woodcut and one page of text are devoted both to each temptation and to each consolation. The dying person is supposed to first confront the dangers and temptations most relevant to his or her situation, and then to be as open as possible to the help available. At the end of this mental process, the good death is envisaged as the prescribed outcome. The final text page quotes prayers recommended for the hour of death. With Christ, Mary, Saints, family members and other good people present, the main person of the illustrated *Ars moriendi* can commit his soul to God: *In manus tuas Domine commendo spiritum meum*.

Little is said about heaven and even less about hell in the illustrated *Ars moriendi*.¹² Nevertheless, there is no doubt that the sacrament of penance and the alternative prospects of going to hell, heaven or purgatory after death must be taken into account as the mental and practical religious context for the *Ars moriendi*. “This interpretative framework is necessary for understanding the illustrated *Ars moriendi*. The *Ars moriendi* teaches that the dying person by means of patient suffering may merit a lessening of punishment that awaits him in purgatory.”¹³ But it is important to add that the outcome of spiritual preparation for death according to the illustrated *Ars moriendi* is and has to be uncertain. “Uncertainty of salvation” is a theological principle presupposed

¹² Hell is addressed in the text in connection with the devil's temptation pertaining to faith, where he is trying to convince the dying person that he or she belongs in hell: *Inferno fractus est*.

¹³ Reinis 2007:20. She continues: “However, according to Gerson's *Ars moriendi*, with true contrition he may merit not only a reduction of time in purgatory but also forgiveness of guilt and therefore admission into paradise.”



Figure 1. The final page of the 1514 Landshut edition of the illustrated *Ars moriendi*.

in the spirituality of the illustrated *Ars moriendi*.¹⁴ At the end of the Landshut edition quoted here, this final uncertainty of salvation is strikingly expressed through the final woodcut, placed after the instructions for prayers to be spoken in the final hour of the process of dying. Here we find an image of the Last Judgment, where the Archangel Michael is standing with his scales and his sword. The weighing is to take place after death, and no one can know its outcome.

The Dualism of Heaven and Hell in Luther’s “Sermon von der Bereitung zum Sterben”

Luther’s sermon from 1519 is also written with a very practical religious purpose in mind. Like the illustrated *Ars moriendi*, it is designed as a manual for persons confronting death. Unlike the illustrated *Ars moriendi*, Luther’s text is not illustrated. Instead, the woodcuts are replaced by frequent references to mental images. But the religious function of these mental images seems to be similar to that of the woodcuts in the illustrated *Ars moriendi*. Luther’s text is also very short, not much longer than the textual part of the illustrated *Ars moriendi*. And like the illustrated *Ars moriendi*, Luther’s text too is organized around the dualism of a few central concepts, which are also conceived as mental images. Nevertheless, in spite of all these similarities, which demonstrate that the two texts belong to a common literary genre and to a common religious tradition, there are some very striking differences between the texts. Whereas Luther’s text on the one hand is firmly rooted in the mental world of Late Medieval religion, it is also, at the same time, a typical expression of the new mental world of Protestant religiosity. In Luther’s text, hell is a significant topic. And the religious function of hell in Luther’s text definitely has to be understood as an expression of and within the context of this new, Protestant religiosity.

Whereas the dualistic structure of the illustrated *Ars moriendi* is dominated by the contrast between the temptations of the devil on the one hand and the consolation of the angels of God on the other, located within the religious context of penance and purgatory and surrounded

¹⁴) Ibid. 17–46, in the Chapter “Between Fear and Hope: Uncertainty of Salvation in the Late Medieval *Ars moriendi*.”

by the fundamental presuppositions of the uncertainty of salvation, the dualistic structure of Luther's *Sermo* is dominated by the contrast between heaven and hell, or more precisely: by the dualism between the images of "sin, death and hell" on the one hand, and the images of "life, grace and salvation" on the other. Luther's *Sermo* is divided into 20 small chapters, and all the way from chapter 5 (on the second page) to the end in chapter 20 on the last page this dualism dominates the argument. What is the function of hell within the framework of this dualism?

In Luther's text, the dualistic structure of the argument is closely related to the use of the sacraments:

Sixth, to recognize the virtues of the sacraments, we must know the evils which they contend with and which we face. There are three such evils: first, the terrifying image of death; second, the awesomely manifold image of sin; third, the unbearable and unavoidable image of hell and eternal damnation. Every other evil issues from these three and grows large and strong as a result of such mingling. (Luther 1969:101)¹⁵

The most important characteristic of the sacraments is, according to Luther, that they can be trusted:

I show them (= the Sacraments) due honor when I believe that I truly receive what the sacraments signify and all that God declares and indicates in them. . . . Since God himself here speaks and acts through the priest, we would do him in his Word and work no greater dishonor than to doubt whether it is true. And we can do him no greater honor than to believe that his Word and work are true and firmly rely on them. (Ibid.)¹⁶

¹⁵ The original German text: "Zum Sechsten / Die tugend der sacrament zu erkennen / muss man vorwissen / die untugend / da widder sie fechten und uns geben seyend / Der seyn drey / die erste / das erschrockliche bild des todtis / die ander / das graulich manigfeltig bilde der sund / die dritte / das untreglich und unvormeydliche bild / der hellen und ewiges vordamnuess. Nu wechst ein yglichs auss dissen dreyen / und wird gross und starck / auss seinen zusatzen" (Luther 1979–99, 1:233, lines 23–28).

¹⁶ "Die eehre ist / das ich glaub / es sey war und geschech mir / was die sacrament bedeuten / und alls was gott / darynnen sagt und anzeygt / . . . / Dan die weyl da selbst got durch den priester redt / und zeychnet / mocht man gott kein grosser uneehr / yn synem wort und werck thun / dan zweyfelden / ab es war sey / und kein grosser eehre thun / den glauben es war sey / und sich frey drauf vorlassen" (Luther 1979–99, 1:233, lines 16–21). See also in chapter 17, where Luther again speaks about the sacrament handed over by the priest: "... it will and must therefore be true that the divine sign

If, then, “uncertainty of salvation” is a main characteristic of the religiosity of the Late Medieval *Ars moriendi*,¹⁷ Luther’s starting point is quite the opposite. God’s promise and signs as expressed in the sacraments have to be trusted. There is no room for any “uncertainty of salvation,” which would be the same as unbelief.¹⁸ This theological presupposition is again decisive for understanding the function of hell in Luther’s text.

Luther expounds the image of hell quite extensively in chapter 8. The power of this image is due to the Devil’s efforts: “... the devil is determined to blast God’s love from a man’s mind and to arouse thoughts of God’s wrath. . . . When man is being assailed with thoughts regarding his election, he is being assailed by hell.”¹⁹ Hell is not described in topographical terms, but as a state of mind, as an assault on man’s soul. What is Luther’s advice in this situation? His advice is to fight the images of sin, death and hell: “... to drop them and have nothing to do with them. . . . You must look at death while you are alive and see sin in the light of grace and hell in the light of heaven, permitting nothing to divert you from that view.”²⁰

Conclusions

In the illustrated *Ars moriendi*, the final page with the woodcut of the Last Judgment and hell reminds the dying person of hell as a possible

does not deceive me. I will not let anyone rob me of it. I would rather deny all the world and myself than doubt my God’s trustworthiness and truthfulness in his signs and promises” (Luther 1969:111; Luther 1979–99, 1:241, lines 5–8).

¹⁷ See n.14.

¹⁸ Luther’s strong insistence on this point in 1519 could be seen in connection with his theological discussions with the Roman Curia the previous year. In October 1518, Luther met Cardinal Cajetan (OP) in Augsburg, and the Cardinal interviewed Luther about his theology in order to decide whether he should be charged as a heretic. The most important point in this interview, where Luther had no concessions to give, was the question of the certainty of faith and salvation. See Selge 1968; and Brecht 1981:237–55.

¹⁹ Luther 1969:103; cf. Luther 1979–99, 1:235, 5–6 and 13–15.

²⁰ Luther 1969:103; cf. Luther 1979–99, 1:235, lines 27–30 (“... sie fallen lassen / unnd nichts mit yhn handeln. . . . Du must den tod / yn dem leben / die sund / yn der gnadenn / die hell / ym hymell ansehen / und dich von dem ansehen odder blick / nit lassen treyben.”) Similar sentences are to be found in chapter 12 and chapter 20.

and in fact impending outcome of an unsuccessful preparation for death. This picture confirms the Late Medieval system of penitence as the immediate interpretative context of the illustrated *Ars moriendi*. The final preparation for death has to be seen in connection with the prescribed use of the sacraments of the Church, and most of all in connection with the sacrament of penance. The dying person has to follow the penitential procedures to avoid hell, and the illustrated *Ars moriendi* adds some final instructions to the ordinary penitential requirements of the Church. In these final instructions, the use of the sacraments plays no central role (Reinis 2007:30–35). The decisive matter is for the dying person to do his or her utmost to fight the temptations of the devil in order to avoid hell.

In Luther's *Sermo* hell is more directly present as a mental image throughout the text. But in spite of this increased argumentative presence, the religious function of hell is evidently reduced. In Luther's rhetoric, hell is granted no status on its own in his spiritual advice to the dying person. Hell has to be envisaged not as a danger or power or threat in itself, but only through the present reality or power of heaven. And the reality of heaven is present and powerful because it is, according to Luther, to be regarded as certain. The Late Medieval uncertainty of salvation is replaced by the Reformation certainty of salvation. This certainty is granted through the words and signs of God, present to the dying person in the sacraments.²¹ In this perspective, hell becomes less important and less relevant as a religious topic.

If Luther's *Sermo* expresses a fundamental Protestant position with regard to the religious function of hell, several questions remain unanswered. To mention just a few: to what extent did this kind of thinking, feeling and acting have an impact on ordinary Christians in Protestant societies? Did hell really lose in significance in early Protestantism?²² And on a broader Protestant basis: what was the develop-

²¹ This is a way of thinking deeply rooted in Nominalist theology, for instance in the works of Gabriel Biel, which were studied carefully by the young Luther during his years as a student in Erfurt. On Biel, see n.2.

²² The reduced importance of hell in early Protestant religion is indicated in Marshall 2002, especially chapter 5: "The Estate of the Dead: Afterlife in Protestant Imagination" (188–231). Hell seems to play no important role in the sources analyzed by Marshall, and on p. 201 he states: "... there seems to have been a broad cultural presumption in

ment in Calvinist Protestantism, where the question of the certainty and uncertainty of salvation was treated in a way different from Luther? In spite of open questions like these, the fundamental change with regard to the function of hell that can be recognized in Luther's *Sermo* is noteworthy, not least due to the broad distribution of the text.²³ The text was written not for academic, but for general use, and it can also be presumed that it contributed significantly to transforming Protestant attitudes to hell.

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later Reformation England that salvation was widely accessible." It is important to underline that this description is concerned with the situation in the late 16th and the early 17th centuries. Later on, in Pietist and Puritan Protestantism, the picture is quite different.

²³) See n.1.

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