

I am interested in the question of where the idea of purgatory came from. Roughly speaking purgatory is a kind of third place, between heaven and hell. The abject sinners (or those who reject Christ, or whoever you think is destined for punishment) go to hell; the righteous saints go to heaven. But what about those who will ultimately be saved but who have not lived a good (enough) life? They go to purgatory. This has been the standard teaching of the Catholic church since the 12th or 13th century.

The classic study of the phenomenon is Jacques Le Goff, [The Birth of Purgatory](#) (1984; an English translation of the 1981 French original). Le Goff was a medieval historian who was interested in the question from a purely historical, rather than theological, perspective (he was not a believer himself). He shows that the term *purgatorium* was minted only in the 12th century. It referred not to a state of being in the afterlife but to an actual place that people went - most people - in order to be “purged” of their sins before being allowed into paradise.

This doctrine came to be ...

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