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Seeing what Dante saw Reading the *Commedia* in South Africa at this *kairos* moment

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Abstract

Dante is not well known in South Africa largely because of our historical Protestant milieux, as a comparison with John Bunyan's Puritan *Pilgrim's Progress* demonstrates. But Dante's *Commedia* has aroused considerable global interest in recent times, and this reading from a South African contextual Christian theological perspective demonstrates that the *Commedia* also speaks to us if we read it in terms of Dante's primary intent. Dante wants his readers to see what he saw on his journey from dark personal and political despair to spiritual transformation and hope. In accepting his invitation, we discover that Dante is both an autobiographical and a poetic-theologian, and that his *Commedia* is a Christian humanist treatise, a theodicy, and a spiritual journal of the transforming journey into the mystery of the unending love of God. We urgently need to see what he saw, but we also need to see reality more clearly "from below", from the perspective of God's solidarity with those who suffer, if the church is to witness to Christ at this *kairos* moment.

Keywords

Dante; Bunya; Bonhoeffer; Merton; Baptismal Theo-Drama; kairos

> *Grant me the power to speak forth what I saw!*
> Dante[1]

1 Dante, *Paradiso*, XXX:99. Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations from the *Commedia* are from *The Divine Comedy* translated by John Ciardi (New York: Penguin

Dante is not asking us to believe what he believed, but to see what he saw.
T.S. Eliot[2]

The journey to God is the journey into reality.
Barbara Reynolds[3]

Theologians should allow Dante into their conversation as a compelling voice … addressing agendas of our own times.
Denys Turner[4]

"Lord, when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing?"
Jesus[5]

Reading Dante in a Protestant milieu

Why read Dante's *Commedia* or *Divine Comedy* today in South Africa? Dante (1265–1321), a Medieval Florentine soldier, politician and poet who wrote in the Tuscan vernacular, seems remote from doing theology in post-apartheid, post-millennium South Africa. Indeed, as Rozelle Bosch, a South African theologian, observes, placing "the words *Comedy* and Africa in the same sentence is like laying claim to two expansive and complex entities which do not immediately bear relation to one another." [6] Moreover, the *Commedia* is a massive text that took thirteen years to complete. Written in *terza rima* (a threeline rhyme scheme), its allegorical character, allusions to classical mythology, and Medieval cosmology and theological framework put it beyond the reach of most potential readers.

Random House, 2003).

2 T.S. Eliot, "Dante", in Frank Kermode, *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot* (London: Faber, 1975), 210.

3 Barbara Reynolds, "Introduction" to Dante, *The Divine Comedy: Paradiso* (London: Penguin, 1962), 16.

4 Denys Turner, *Dante the Theologian* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 2.

5 Matthew 25:38

6 Rozelle Robson Bosch, "Bodies, theology and Dante's *Divine Comedy*: Engaging Dante and Aïda Muluneh". *Stellenbosch Theological Journal*, 6(4)2020:159–182.

Of course, the *Commedia* has been widely read, studied, and influential within the Catholic world virtually from the time it was first published in the fourteenth century, and it has made a remarkable impact on English-speaking culture from the time of Geoffrey Chaucer to the present day.[7] It is also available in many excellent English translations with copious notes to help us understand it. But given the fact that South Africa has been a predominantly Protestant country and wary of the *Roomse gevaar* ("Roman danger") from colonial times to the present, it is not surprising that the Commedia is relatively unknown in South Africa. Yet Bosch, a Protestant theologian, and a handful of younger South African literary scholars have demonstrated that the *Commedia* is relevant for us today.[8] And John Took, a Dantean scholar rather than a theologian, tells us that Dante matters in doing theology because it engages faith within "the agony and ecstasy of spiritual journeying."[9] What follows in this essay is an attempt to connect these reasons for reading Dante in South Africa at this *kairos* moment in history with specific reference to Christian faith and the life of the church.

At the time of the Protestant Reformation, Dante was celebrated alongside Martin Luther because of his antipapal rhetoric, and the great Puritan poet John Milton, who read Italian and spent time in Tuscany, read Dante's works assiduously and was influenced by the *Commedia* when writing *Paradise Lost*.[10] But Dante was a devout, intelligent and theologically well-informed Catholic, and to the later conservative popular Protestant mind, his *Commedia* has generally been regarded as Catholic apologetics. So it is reasonable to surmise that the *Commedia* has not been widely read in South Africa because of the strong anti-Catholic bias in the country from colonial times to the apartheid era.[11] This hunch is strengthened by comparing it with the remarkable reception of John Bunyan's (1628–1688) Puritan classic, *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678), to which the *Commedia* is often likened,

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7 Ian Thomson, *Dante's Divine Comedy: A Journey without End* (London: Apollo, 2018).

8 See David Thurman, "Dante, Can I Lead You?" in *A South African Convivio with Dante: Born Frees Interpretation of the Convivio, ed*. Thurman (Firenze University Press: Florence, 2021);

9 John Took, *Why Dante Matters: An Intelligent Person's Guide* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), 1.

10 Anna Beer, *Milton: Poet, Pamphleteer and Patriot* (London: Bloomsbury, 2008), 75.

11 See Andrew Prior, ed. *Catholics in Apartheid Society* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1982).

though Bunyan probably had no knowledge of Dante.[12] But translated into many vernaculars, beginning with Tiyo Soga's isiXhosa version in 1866, followed shortly after by Bishop John Colenso's translation into IsiZulu, Bunyan's work served the Protestant missionary enterprise in sub-Saharan Africa for well over a century.

Both Dante and Bunyan had been soldiers. In contrast, Dante was a scholar of note and politician in relative comfort in exile from his beloved Florence when he wrote the *Commedia*; Bunyan was a Baptist preacher imprisoned by Charles II for preaching without the authorisation of the Church of England, in a dank and dark prison in Bedford when he wrote his classic. But the main difference is their theological style: Bunyan's classic, despite its vivid images, is a homiletic or "word event" that seeks to be faithful to the Biblical text.[13] By contrast, the *Commedia* is sacramental poetry, an "image-event"[14] which draws on Scripture but is read through the lens of popular piety and the theological tradition that reached its peak in the *Summa* of St Thomas Aquinas. This is an important qualification, for the Commedia is not an exposition of biblical apocalyptic teaching, but a theological allegory reflecting Catholic belief in the late Middle Ages.[15]

The Trek of Life

At the time he wrote the *Commedia,* Dante was in exile in Ravenna, politically bruised and still mourning the loss of Beatrice, his adolescent

12 John Bunyan, *Pilgrim's Progress*, ed, W.R. Owens (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

13 The difficulty of developing a consistent eschatology on the Bible alone, given the many cultural contexts in which it developed, is demonstrated by Bart D. Ehrman in *Heaven and Hell: A History of the Afterlife* (London: One World, 2020). Ehrman's historical-critical approach, which demolishes simplistic popular and fundamentalist understandings, leaves open, as he acknowledges, the questions that Christian theology addresses, including Dante's allegorical approach largely based on Thomas' *Summa*.

14 See Tracy, *Analogical Imagination,* 222, n. 27; de Gruchy, *Christianity, Art and Transformation*, 43–45.

15 Belief in Purgatory had its roots in the Patristic period and while part of Catholic piety and assumed by Aquinas in the Middle Ages, it was only formally adopted as Catholic dogma at the Council of Florence in 1439. See Elmar Klinger, "Purgatory", *Encyclopaedia of Theology: A Concise Sacramentum Mundi,* ed. Karl Rahner, (London: Burns & Oates, 1975), 1317–1320. For a Reformed perspective, see Moltmann, *The Coming of God*, 99–101.

idol who had died more than ten years previously but remained vividly alive in his heart and imagination. However, refusing to abandon hope, Dante had turned a corner and was embarking on a journey of faith. So, the *Commedia* begins with words familiar to all Dante readers.

> "Midway in our life's journey, I went astray
> From the straight road and woke to find myself
> Alone in a dark wood."[16]

"Journey" is a translation of the Italian *cammin*, which in Spanish is *camino*, hence the Camino de Santiago de Compostela, or pilgrimage to the shrine of St James. That immediately tells us that the *Commedia* is a guidebook for pilgrims, and Dante's words "finding himself" refer not only to where he was located, but to his quest to find his "self". And Steve Ellis' translation of *cammin* as "trek" suggests to South Africans that the *Commedia* is a resource for negotiating our tortured past from colonialism through apartheid to the present.

Even though "trek" is now widely used, since the mid-nineteenth century it referred specifically to the Great Trek of Dutch settlers at the Cape who, in 1838, rejected both British rule and the emancipation of slaves, and trekked into the interior in search of freedom. A century later, Afrikaner nationalists interpreted that trek in terms of the exodus of the Hebrew slaves from bondage in Egypt. They also compared it to the voyage of English Nonconforming Puritans who fled persecution in search of freedom in New England in 1620, eight years before the birth of Bunyan.[17] It is a familiar story. One that begins as a search for freedom and the preservation of identity and ends by displacing and oppressing indigenous peoples, invariably provoking resistance and a liberation struggle.[18] And when these narratives are understood in terms of God's providential activity in history, they take on a significance that is not only theologically potent but potentially politically dangerous and soul-destroying for its participants. The further "trek" today by a handful of Afrikaners to find

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16 *Inferno*, I, 1–3.

17 W.A de Klerk, *The Puritans in Africa a Story of Afrikanerdom*, (London: Collins, 1975); see John W. de Gruchy, *Going Against the Stream* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2025), 5–7.

18 See William J. Everett, "Journey Images and the Search for Reconciliation," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics,* 22, 2002, 71–73.

refuge in President Trump's mythical Christian nationalist land of hope and glory is a bizarre if understandable addendum to that saga of fear and unfulfilled dreams.

Among the European colonists who settled in South Africa after the British occupation began in 1806 were many Protestant missionaries, who soon spread across the subcontinent. Many knew Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, and all were mindful that human beings are "sojourners and pilgrims" on earth. Or, as Reinhold Niebuhr later put it, "the self has a dimension which does not fit into any correlations." We are always travelling in search of utopia, restless and unable fully to settle because "the frame of meaning" within which these "facts and sequences are discerned" can only be "apprehended by faith," since they touch "the realm of mystery." This key, which clarifies the "variegate dramas of history," also unlocks the *Commedia*. For, as Barbara Reynolds, one of the finest English Dante scholars, tells us, "the journey to God" is inseparable from "the journey into reality." This means, among other things, that South Africans cannot join Dante on his pilgrimage unless they do so through the tortuous history that has shaped them.

The *Commedia* as a means of grace

Thomas Merton read the *Commedia* as a footloose agnostic student aesthete at Cambridge University in 1933.[19] This, he tells us, was a "kind of grace" that led to his conversion to Christ, to his baptism shortly after, and then to his decision to become a Cistercian monk. Merton's baptism brought him peace and joy, but it also made him aware of an "awful responsibility" for the well-being of the world.[20] Relatively soon after entering the cloister, his rhythm of prayer, teaching and writing was unsettled by an inner struggle against *acedia*, that deep despair well-known to monks, and even more so as he sought to integrate his life of contemplation and desire for God with his passion for justice and peace in the world. Even though he was neither in

19 Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday/Image 1970), 153–5.

20 Thomas Merton, The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns (London: Collins, 1985), 153–5.

exile nor in prison but ensconced in his hermitage on the splendid grounds of Gethsemani monastery, he regularly found himself at odds with his superiors, and during the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights Movement, he felt like a "guilty bystander".[21] His desire for God could not be separated from the realities that disturbed his solitude and his soul. As he wrote in his journal in August 1961: "Inexorably life moves on towards crisis and mystery."[22]

Merton had entered the realm of what Marilynne Robinson calls "great theology"; theology understood as "an aesthetic rather than a dogmatic revelation."[23] That is theology not as a set of propositions but, if aesthetic is correctly understood, as a way of perceiving reality differently. Readers of the *Commedia* need not be theologically trained, live in a monastery, or even be Christian by conviction to appreciate what Dante describes. For the journey is the journey of everyone who, unsettled by the realities of the world and of their place within it, embarks on it to "save their souls". And, contrary to what the literary critic Harold Bloom once suggested, the *Commedia* does this by reference to Christian faith, despite the failures of the church and dogmas that confuse.[24] Dante does stand alongside Shakespeare in the Western literary canon where Bloom places him, but unlike the Bard, he is a poet-theologian, and his *Commedia* is about how we should live *sub specie aeternitatis*.

In this respect, Dante is more comparable to William Blake, who illustrated the *Commedia* in the nineteenth century when the fires of the Industrial Revolution spewed clouds of dirty smoke over the British countryside.[25] Nothing could be more Dantesque than the hell holes, or *Malebolge*, Dante describes in Inferno, which we humans have constructed more recently, from Auschwitz and Hiroshima to the gulags of Soviet Russia, the ghettoes of apartheid and the genocide in Gaza. Indeed, all around us today, as

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21 See Merton, Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966).

22 Thomas Merton, Turning Towards the World: The Journals of Thomas Merton, vol 4, edited by Victor A. Kramer (San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins, 1996),152

23 Marilynne Robinson, on "Theology" in The Death of Adam: Essays on Modern Thought (New York: Picador, 2005), 28.

24 Harold Bloom, The Western Canon (London: Macmillan, 1975), 76. My italics.

25 See Mark Vernon, Awake! William Blake and the Power of the Imagination (London: Hurst 2025), 211–220.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer observed in Nazi Germany, "reality is laid bare", in which we see "villains and saints again … Shakespeare's characters are among us."[26] That is what Dante saw when he fictionally located the *Commedia* in 1300, the first Year of Jubilee celebrated in Catholic Rome.

Shakespeare's characters are among us. The villain and the saint have little or nothing to do with ethical programs. They arise from primaeval depths, and with their appearance tear open the demonic and divine abyss [Abgrund] out of which they come, allowing us brief glimpses into their suspected secrets. It is worse to be evil than to do evil. It is worse when a liar tells the truth than when a lover of truth lies, worse when a person who hates humanity practices neighbourly love [Bruderliebe] than when a loving person once falls victim to hatred. The lie is better than truth in the mouth of a liar, as hatred is better than acts of neighbourly love by a misanthrope. One sin is not like another. They have different weights. There are heavier and lighter sins. Falling away [Abfall] is far more serious than falling [Fall]. The most brilliant virtues of the apostates are as dark as night compared with the darkest weaknesses of the faithful.[27]

But not all Christians are truly pilgrims, intent on travelling the path of spiritual rebirth; many are simply there for their own interests, as Chaucer so colourfully describes in his tales[28]. Indeed, Dante saw many "naked sinners" who, like the fraudulent, malicious seducers and flatterers he describes

> …divide the bridge
> so that the crowds may pass along
> on the way to St Peter's basilica and, as they go
> everywhere along that hideous track …
> hideous demons scourge them on the back.[29]

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26 Bonhoeffer, Ethics, 76.

27 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics,* ed. Ilse Tödt et al., trans. Reinhard Krauss, Charles C. West, and Douglas W. Stott, vol. 6, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005), 76–77.

28 In *The Monk's Tale,* Chaucer refers to Dante as a great poet from Italy, and specifically mentions the story of Count Ugolino, which Dante recounts in *Inferno* Canto XXXIII, 13.

29 *Inferno*, XVIII, 28–33.

Indeed, the denizens we meet in Dante's *Inferno* and the pilgrims who populate his Purgatorio, from bankers, politicians and philosophers, to priests, prelates and literati, are characters, both sinners and saints, well-known to the author and to his readers. And we can easily identify them in our own world today if we see reality through Dante's poetic eyes.

Politician turned poet theologian

Dante's life began promisingly and comfortably within the merchant class of Florence, the commercial capital of the Holy Roman Empire and birthplace of the Renaissance. In due course, young Dante became a besotted adolescent lover, a part-time soldier, and a leading politician in a thriving city that was marred by family feuds. Political strife and war raged between factions loyal to the emperor and those devoted to the Papacy. As a leading citizen, Dante was deeply involved in these conflicts. This led to his taking sides for what he thought was right, to his growing disenchantment with vain, power-hungry despots, and eventually to his exile.[30] So it was in Verona and Bologna in 1302 that he wrote the *Convivio* (*The Banquet*), a scholarly Latin treatise on philosophy, ethics, politics and science. This lay unfinished when, in 1304, he continued his exile in Ravenna, the former eastern capital of the Empire, under the shadow of the ancient Neonian Baptistry and nearby Basilica of San Vitale, where he wrote his epic, which he completed shortly before he died in 1321.

The *Commedia* was the first major Christian theodicy since Augustine wrote *The City of God* in response to the Fall of Rome in 410; it was also a spiritual journal very different from but comparable to Augustine's *Confessions*.[31] In it we learn of Dante's "change of heart", which set him free to become a poet who represents "the human with a subtle many-sided realism that had no parallel in his time".[32] In following this path, Dante was influenced by many voices, primarily St Francis of Assisi's espousal of

30 *Inferno* XIX; *Purgatorio* XVI.

31 See the comparison of the *Commedia* and the *Confessions* in Denys Turner, *Dante the Theologian* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 127–129.

32 Francis Ferguson, *Dante* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1966), quoted in R.W.B. Lewis, *Dante: A Life* London: Phoenix, 2002), 96.

poverty, St Dominic's zeal for truth,[33] St Bernhard's monastic passion, Denys the Areopagite, whose apophatic mysticism had reached their ascendency by Dante's time, and the prestigiously learned Dominican friar, Thomas Aquinas, who had died shortly before Dante's birth.[34] Thomas' *Summa Theologiae* provided the intellectual resources Dante needed to integrate Scripture and the neo-Platonic Augustinian tradition to his own historical context and so connect the reality we experience and the Ultimate Reality which makes it all possible. But Dante has Thomas affirming the greatness of all his favourite mentors as co-workers, and assuring Dante of his salvation for

> Since the ray of grace from which true love is kindled –
> and then by loving, in the loving heart
> grows and multiplies – among all men
> so shines on you to lead you up these stairs
> that none descend except to climb again.[35]

Under the influence of Thomas Dante weaves into the fabric of the *Commedia* an ongoing discussion of the theological and moral issues that perplexed him and his intellectual contemporaries, most of which continue to bother us: the relationship between reason and revelation in our knowledge of God; the connection between the cosmos, wisdom and scientific knowledge, as well as between carnal and divine love, predestination and free will, and the exercise of power and authority both in secular government and the church, a subject which Dante would later discuss more explicitly in *De Monarchia*, his final work.[36] But in the *Commedia*, where he decries intellectual vanity as sin,[37] Dante was not motivated by academic interest; his desire was to convert nominal Christians, such as he had been, to authentic faith and ethical politics.[38] Like Thomas, who stopped writing his *Summa* after a mystical moment at Mass when he felt that everything

33 *Paradiso* XI, XII.

34 Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition* (London: Clarendon Press, 1982),160. *See Paradiso*, XXVIII, 130–133.

35 *Paradiso* X, 83–86.

36 See also Dante, *De Monarchia,* trans. Richard Kay (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 1998)

37 Inferno, XV, 25–45.

38 See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), vol. 5, 543–550.

he had written was like straw, Dante's work took his readers on a journey deeper "into the *reality* of God than scientific theology can take us." That is why, as Denys Turner says, Dante's "compelling voice" continues to lead us at this kairos moment in our history.[39]

The courage to be at this *Kairos* moment

The Christian understanding of the struggle for justice and peace in the world, which is embodied, as Pope Francis said on the 700th anniversary of Dante's death in 2021, in the "mystery of the Incarnation … is the true heart and inspiration of the entire poem."[40] In other words, the prophetic witness of the church is exercised from within its life in solidarity with those who suffer. So it was that Christians, alongside others, were engaged in the struggle against apartheid on the streets as well as other platforms. But we understood the struggle with St Paul as being more than against "flesh and blood". It was, as the apostle said, "against principalities and powers", "rulers of darkness", "cosmic powers of this present darkness", and "spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places."[41] Dante saw this when he drew on the Apocalypse of St John for images to help his readers understand what was going on "behind the scenes". He not only saw the injustices and suffering that plague the world, but what was going on in the "spiritual underworld" or what St Paul called "the mystery of lawlessness."[42] So the *Kairos Document* named apartheid as sinful because the struggle was not only political but deeply theological.[43]

For this reason, John turned to Paul Tillich's *The Courage to Be* to help us understand with Dante "the deepest places of human self-destruction and

39 *Turner, Dante the Theologian*, 3–20.

40 Pope Francis, *Candour lucis Aeterna (Splendour of Light Eternal),* Apostolic Letter, March 25, 2021, paras. 1–2.

41 Ephesians 6:12.

42 George Caird, *Principalities and Powers: A Study in Pauline Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956), viii; 2 Thessalonians 2:7.

43 *The Kairos Document: A Theological Comment on the Political Crisis in South Africa* (Soweto: Institute for Contextual Theology, 1986), paras. 5–7.

despair as well as the highest places of courage and salvation."[44] Tillich wrote out of his experience of the rise of the Third Reich in Germany, and he chose the New Testament word *kairos*, a time of judgment and opportunity,[45] to describe those years when everything that had previously provided security "seemed to be lost", and a "catastrophic breakdown was expected every moment." [46] In such *kairos* times, Tillich said, we must distinguish between the existential "fear" of a cultural "other" and the ontological anxiety we all share about death irrespective of any immediate or obvious threat.[47] Fears which may normally be dealt with as groundless are now experienced as a threat to our existence. [48] The "other" is no longer a specific individual, but a conglomerate of stereotypes embedded in our consciousness which embody everything that "outsiders" we demonise represent. Even though there may be little to be feared, our anxiety becomes pathological and our actions irrational, dehumanising and self-destructive. [49] This leads to an upsurge in racism, xenophobia, and violent crimes because in such times, such as the present, many people become compulsive and fanatical defenders of the established order, rejecting hard-won human rights and abandoning their own humanity through dehumanising others.[50]

Bonhoeffer spoke to such times in his New Year's gift to his fellow conspirators in 1942, "After Ten Years", written shortly before his arrest and imprisonment. Have there "ever been people in history", he wrote, "who in their time, like us, had so little ground under their feet, people to whom every possible alternative open to them at the time appeared equally unbearable, senseless, and contrary to life?" That is how Dante felt, for he too recognised, with Bonhoeffer, that a "huge masquerade of evil"

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44 John Took, *Why Dante Matters: An Intelligent Person's Guide* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020).

45 Tillich, *The Courage to Be,* 171; see John W. de Gruchy, Kairos moments and prophetic witness: Towards a prophetic ecclesiology, published in *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies,* Volume 72, Issue 4, 2016, 1–7.

46 Tillich, *The Protestant Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957),4. John W. de Gruchy, Kairos moments and prophetic witness: Towards a prophetic ecclesiology, published in *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies,* Volume 72, Issue 4, 2016, 1–7.

47 Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, (London: Nisbet, 1955), 212ff. *Courage to Be*, 35

48 Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be*, 57ff.

49 Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, 213

50 Tillich, *The Courage to Be*, 70

had "thrown all ethical concepts into confusion." Or, as Bonhoeffer said, "evil appeared in the form of light", something "absolutely bewildering for one coming from the world of ethical concepts." But confirming, with the Bible, its "abysmal wickedness". [51]

It might come as a surprise that as the war in Europe entered what would become its final stages, Bonhoeffer sought to reconnect with the Middle Ages, to find the resources that, as Alasdair MacIntyre tells us, we need "to survive evils on our historical journey."[52] And Dante, still Medieval in his philosophy yet Renaissance in his literary style, helps us do that because, as Hans von Balthasar says, his "sense of nobility stands in a unique place between the Middle Ages and modern times at a moment of truth, a *kairos*, completely fulfilled in itself and seemingly unrepeatable." [53] By this he did not mean that *kairos* moments would not recur, but that Dante's moral vision was shaped by the Incarnation – that is, secular reality could not exist, be understood or be fulfilled apart from ultimate reality. [54] In fact, when we "think in two spheres", as Bonhoeffer said, we open the door to human exploitation which robs humans of their bodily strength and destroys their freedom.[55]

Bonhoeffer's reconnection with the Middle Ages did not mean adopting an outdated pre-scientific worldview, nor was it a "counsel of despair"; it had to do with salvaging our humanity.[56] The cosmology that informs the *Commedia* is antiquated – for Dante, the earth, not the sun, was the centre of the universe, not the sun, as the Bible, Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas also assumed – Copernicus and Galileo had yet to be born, and the modern notion of an expanding universe would have boggled Dante's mind. Yet, as Martin Rees tells us, when it comes to explanations, we are no wiser than Aristotle despite the enormous advances in science. Indeed, the "first

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51 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison,* ed. John W. de Gruchy (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010), 38–40.

52 Alastair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: University Press, 1981); Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison,* 268, 319–321.

53 Hans Urs von Balthsasar, *The Glory of the Lord*, Part 2, *Theo-Drama*, vol. 5, (Ignatius Press, 2013), 409.

54 *Paradiso*, II:37–42.

55 Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 216.

56 Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 651.

microsecond" remains "shrouded in mystery" and our "cosmic horizons are still expanding."[57]

This was on Bonhoeffer's mind when, in prison, he thought about Christian faith in a "world come of age" and yet rejected the attempt by Rudolf Bultmann to demythologise the biblical message. As he said, "the New Testament is not a mythological dressing up of a universal truth"; on the contrary, its "mythology (resurrection and so forth) is the thing itself!"[58] Likewise, we do not have to deconstruct the *Commedia* to discover its truth, that is, "see what Dante saw", in fact, the more we try to do that, the more we miss the point. To discern the truth as expressed by myth, ritual, drama, and poetry does not imply or require a rejection of scientific advance, but an awareness that technology cannot provide answers for the moral dilemmas we face or the spiritual emptiness and nihilism that pervade much of the modern world. [59] In fact, Bonhoeffer's turn to writing poetry in prison occurred at the same time that he expressed increasing interest in modern science.

Bonhoeffer might have felt "like a silly kid" in turning to poetry, but he had long known that only children really appreciate mystery.[60] As he said in a sermon on Trinity Sunday 1934, the "lack of mystery in our modern life means decay and impoverishment for us," because a "human life is of worth to the extent that it keeps its respect for mystery" as it forces us to recognise "the limits of our existence". Anything "*mysterious* is *uncanny* for us … We are not *at home* with it; it points toward another kind of "being at home." [61] And that is what Dante is doing in the *Commedia*; he is pointing to and helping us find our way on the journey into the mystery of God as the goal of life.

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57 Martin Rees, "The Next Fifty Years", in *Seeing Further: The Story of Science and the Royal Society,* ed. Bill Bryson (London: Harper Press, 2010), 469–470.

58 Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison,* 430.

59 See John W. de Gruchy, *Going Against the Stream* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2025), 57–82.

60 Undated note to Eberhard Bethge, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 416.

61 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *London: 1933–1935,* DBWE 13, ed. Keith Clements (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007), 360. See John W. de Gruchy, *Led into Mystery* (London: SCM, 2013), 131–132.

In 1348, just a few decades after Dante died, his beloved Florence was devastated by the Black Death, which killed almost half of its population. In response, Giovanni Boccaccio wrote the *Decameron* in which he documented the courage and resilience of people during that awful *kairos* moment. Shortly after, he wrote the first biography of Dante, which helped establish Dante's reputation as a poet. Boccaccio also famously said that theology is the "poetry of God."[62]Something he probably learnt from Dante, and something much later repeated by Dorothy Sayers, the mystery writer and translator of the *Commedia*.[63] This explains why, late in prison, as he was thinking about Christian faith in a "world come of age", Bonhoeffer turned to writing poetry. Not only, as Bernd Wannenwetsch says, was Bonhoeffer's recourse to poetry necessary to express "the complexity of his apophatic theology," but it was necessary to express what it meant to be human in *kairos* times.[64] And as Christian baptism is in large measure the acknowledgement of our humanity as a gift of God, that is, more than "flesh and blood", I propose that the *Commedia* be understood as a baptismal theo-drama. Indeed, as Bonhoeffer dramatically describes it, in baptism "Christ invades the realm of Satan and lays hold of those who belong to him, thereby creating his church-community [*Gemeinde*]."[65]

The *Commedia* as Theo-Drama

Even though *Inferno, Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso* are often published and considered separately, they are not self-standing poems. Indeed, if we understand them as did Julian of Norwich, then hell, purgatory and heaven "define our spiritual alternatives and continual mental oscillations" in this

62 Giovanni Boccaccio, *Gealogia Deorum Gentitium*, Bk. XV, chap. 6.

63 Dorothy Sayers, The Divine Poet and the Angelic Doctor, in Sayers, *Further Papers on Dante"*, edited by Barbara Reynolds (London: Methuen, 1957), 29–59. Sayers, *The Mind of the Maker*, 55.

64 Bernd Wannenwetsch, "Introduction", Wannenwetsch ed., *Who am I? Bonhoeffer's Theology through his Poetry* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2009), 4. See also Jürgen Henkys, *Geheimnis der Freiheit: die Gedichte Dietrich Bonhoeffers aus der Haft,* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2005);

65 Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, DBWE 4, eds. Geoffrey B. Kelly and John D. Godsey (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003), 207.

life, whatever their reality in the next.[66] That is, they help us connect the journey of our "self" to the "dramas of history" and to the Christian faith-narrative; that is, they reenact the Easter Tridium as a baptismal "theo-drama", to use von Balthasar's term.[67] So, on Good Friday, 1300, as dawn was breaking and, for pagans, when the sun was in Aries as at the creation,[68] Dante begins his descent into *Inferno,* recalling that in baptism he had been "buried with Christ into his death" to be reborn with Christ on Easter Day into the "newness of life."[69]

Dante was baptised as an infant in the baptistry of San Giovanni in Florence in 1265. The significance of the event was etched into his consciousness when, every year of his childhood, his father took him to the baptistry on the Feast of St John the Baptist to celebrate the event. Dante refers to "the font of my beautiful San Giovanni" early in his travels through *Inferno*, recalling how he once rescued a boy from drowning in the font on Holy Saturday when mass baptisms occurred.[70] Then, as the *Commedia* reaches its climax in *Paradiso*, Dante exclaims that if the writing of his epic ends the cruelty of his exile, he will return fully matured as a poet to his baptismal font to "assume the laurel crown"

> for there I entered the faith that lets us grow
> into God's recognition …[71]

Being baptised, Dante enters *Inferno* knowing that he is not condemned to remain there. But he does need the help of the unbaptized Virgil to understand what he sees. After all, Virgil had already explored Hades and the Underworld in his *Aeneid*, so who better could provide Dante's with the guidance he now needed, even if he was a pagan.[72] As Jesus told his disciples, "the children of this world" are often wiser than the "children of

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66 Veronica Mary Rolf, *Julian's Gospel* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis 2013). 410. See also Grace Jantzen, *Julian of Norwich* (London: SPCK, 1987),113–114.

67 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1989).

68 See *Inferno*, I:38–39, and accompanying note p. 21.

69 Romans 6:4, 11:33–36; I Corinthians 2:7–10; Colossians 2:12.

70 See *Inferno*, Canto XIX, 17–18 and note attached.

71 *Paradiso* XXV: 9–10.

72 Virgil, *Aeneid*, bk. 6.

light."[73] Virgil is "not far from the kingdom of God"[74] closer in fact than many nominal Christians, much like Bonhoeffer's secular compatriots in the Resistance who stood "in very close proximity to the Christian domain."[75] In embracing such outsiders, Dante implicitly passes judgment on the failures of the church throughout the *Commedia*, because it alienates people from the church whether baptised or not.[76] Such failures stand in contrast to Virgil's pagan wisdom which, says Dante, makes plain to all "who heed her teachings, how all of Nature…springs from the Ultimate and its art" which is the "Grandchild of Creation," that declares its Maker's glory.[77] Truly, as all great philosophers and theologians affirm, "the heavens declare the glory of God, as Dante confirms in *Paradiso*.[78] So at the outset Dante says to Virgil:

> Poet, by that God to you unknown,
> lead me this way. Beyond the present ill
> and worse to dread, lead me to Peter's gate
> and be my guide through the sad halls of Hell."
> And he then: "follow," and he moved ahead
> in silence, and I followed where he led.[79]

Limbo, the first circle of *Inferno*, resembles classical *Hades* and biblical *Sheol* as well as the abode of the ancestors in African culture.[80] Dante starts his journey by paying his respects to all who, unlike him, did not have the opportunity to be baptised because they had died in infancy or before the advent of Christ. The grace of God reaches even the banks of the Indus River "where there is none … to speak of Christ, and none to read or write."[81] It would be a gross miscarriage of God's justice and a denial of God's love

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73 Luke 16:8.

74 cf. Mark 13:34

75 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, DBWE 6, 339–340.

76 *Purgatorio*, XVI: 94–129.

77 See *Inferno*, Canto XI, 97–105 and *Paradiso Canto* I, 1–3.

78 Psalm 19:1; *Paradiso* X:1–6.

79 *Inferno*, I: 123–128.

80 See Bart D. Ehrman, *Heaven and Hell: A History of the Afterlife* (London: One World 2020), 86–88; Klaus Nürnberger, *The Living Dead and the Living God: Christ and the Ancestors in a Changing Africa* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster, 2007).

81 *Paradiso* XIX, 70–78.

if people were damned because they did not believe something they knew nothing about, while many of the baptised are saved despite the way they lived. But, thankfully, no one in *Limbo* is without hope of salvation; they must simply wait patiently to hear the good news proclaimed by Christ who, on Holy Saturday, descended into Hades for this very purpose.[82]

Soon Dante and Virgil leave *Limbo* and descend deeper into the darkness. On the way, they meet the occupants of each circle, many notorious political and clerical figures whose crimes range in seriousness from lust, gluttony, seduction and greed, to simony, sorcery, heresy, violence, and finally treason – the betrayal of family, friends, country and Christ himself. Their punishment is justly appropriate because it fits the crime and everyone gets his or her due. Jean-Paul Sartre's description of hell as "other people" captures well the fate of informers who betrayed their compatriots and therefore had to endure the accusing gaze of their former comrades for eternity.[83] But there is no reason, Virgil tells Dante, why he should show pity and compassion for any of them. That evil deeds have serious consequences is a truism built into creation or, as Immanuel Kant would in 1788 conclude in his *Critique of Practical Reason,* it is a moral law within us as certain as the starry skies above. Further, Virgil's understanding of justice, much like that of Kant and the philosophers of the Enlightenment, was based on Roman law and summed up in the phrase *sum cuique* ("to each his own"), which Dante assumes without quoting. The fact that this was written on the gate of Buchenwald (*Jedem das Seine*) in the Third Reich is a reminder that justice can be abused and rationalised by the powerful to protect their interests, as happened in Nazi Germany, apartheid South Africa and current crimes against humanity.[84] And so, in the eighth circle, or "evil ditch" (*Malebolge*), Dante places those who abuse power and commit crimes against the weak and vulnerable in the "Hell holes" they create for their victims.

Finally, Dante and Virgil reach the ninth circle, *Cocytus* (Lamentation), which in Greek mythology is a river in the underworld, but in Dante it becomes a frozen lake created by Satan furiously beating his wings to

82 See I Peter 3:18–20; Ephesians 4:8–10; Acts 2:27.

83 Jean Paul Sartre, *No Exit* (New York: Vintage, 1989), 45.

84 Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 181–185, esp. no. 35.

make an icy wind. There we find Judas, the betrayer of Jesus, and Brutus, that of Caesar, eternally trapped, and grotesquely below them is Satan, "a gross Fiend and Image of all Evil who made a stairway for us with his hide is pinched and prisoned in the icepack still."[85] Fortunately, with Virgil's help, Dante soon turns his back on hell and crosses over "a little stream", the mythical river Lethe or river of forgetfulness, which washes away the memory of sin and confines it to Hell.[86]

All who are familiar with the *Commedia* have his images of Hell fixed in their minds, often reinforced by the etchings of William Blake. But did Dante see everything we need to see, and does he answer all our questions, among them those asked by many, such as "will Judas ever be forgiven"? But Dante has seen what he needed to see before ascending "into the shining world" as Easter Sunday dawned.[87] He had learnt from Virgil that there are serious consequences for the perpetrators of crimes against humanity, and maybe that is all we could expect because, as Dante tells us, there are questions that defy "the power of mortal reasoning"[88] for

> The truth of this is hidden so far down
> In the abyss of the Eternal Law,
> It is cut off from all created vision.[89]

Maybe we must simply accept with Tillich that "the creation of finite freedom is the risk which the divine creativity accepts."[90]

Dante's journey through hell may be an imaginative construction, but Dante as a soldier knew from his own experience what Hell was like, as do we who watch the images of war and other hellish scenes on our TV screens. The question is not whether hell is real, but whether God has created it to punish sinners, or whether we create it by our own actions which defy both reason (Virgil's wisdom), and the revelation of God's love for the world in Jesus Christ. Dante's Hell may be understood as a place, but

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85 *Inferno,* Canto XXXIV, 121–123.

86 See *Inferno*, XXIV, 133, note 270,

87 *Purgatorio*, XXXIV, 133–143.

88 *Paradiso*, XXIX, 99.

89 *Paradiso*, Canto 21, 97.

90 Tillich, *Systematic Theology,* Vol. 1, 299.

it is one from which God has been expunged, not created. In fact, it is less a place and more, as Charles Williams says, the condition of all those who are "changed through all degrees of imbecile decay …" into nothingness.[91] In other words, in dehumanising others lose their own humanity and therefore any desire for redemption. They have abandoned hope.

But what about their victims, those they have dehumanised? Does not God hold the perpetrators of crimes against humanity accountable and require from them due reparation for the victims?[92] This is not just the problem that Plato considered in his *Republic* or Virgil in the *Aeneid* in terms of rewards for the righteous and punishment for evil doers in the afterlife;[93] it is the much more perplexing problem of theodicy, that is, as John Milton put it in *Paradise Lost*, how can we justify the ways of a God who is almighty and all-loving in a world of so much innocent suffering?[94] The problem took centre stage for many theologians during the First World War, as it did in response to the Holocaust after the Second World War, and it remains so at this time of genocide and a potential Third World War, as we witness innocent suffering on a massive scale.[95] This is the context in which we now read Dante's *Commedia*.

All of this sounds familiar when we recall the Nuremberg trials in Germany after the Second World War, as it does to those of us who participated in the heated debates following the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in South Africa about the punishment of the perpetrators and benefactors of apartheid, and the reparations needed to satisfy their victims.[96] What

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91 Charles Williams, *Descent into Hell* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1937), 216. Williams published a study of the *Commedia* entitled *The Figure of Beatrice: A Study in Dante* (London: Faber & Faber, 1943); see also Jean Paul Sartre, *No Exit* (New York: Vintage, 1989), 45.

92 See Karl Barh, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1960), 302–368.

93 *The Republic of Plato,* trans. Francis M. Cornford (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955), 340–343. See Ehrman, *Heaven and Hell,* 57–59.

94 *Paradise Lost,* Bk. 1, 24–26.

95 See P.T. Forsyth, *The Justification of God* (London: Independent Press, 1917); Jürgen Moltmann, *A Theology of Hope,* (London: SCM, 1967).

96 See John W. de Gruchy, "Guilt, Amnesty, and National Reconstruction: Karl Jaspers' *Die Schuldfrage* and the South African Debate," The Karl Jaspers' Lecture, Oxford, February 1991, published in the Journal of Theology for Southern Africa, no. 83, June 1993; Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, *A Human Being Died That Night,* (Boston, MA:

also bothers us is the pious strategy well known to victims who are told by priests, pastors and preachers that they will have a "heavenly reward" even if not earthly satisfaction. How can it be that the God who is almighty and all-loving has created a world in which there is so much innocent suffering, and little if any reparation for the victims of injustice? It is the cry of the biblical book of *Lamentations,* of many *Psalms*, and of dereliction from the cross.[97]

Dante was clearly horrified by the suffering of the grandchildren of Count Ugolino, who were dying of starvation because of his treason,[98] and he writes about the unbridgeable gulf which, in the end, if not in this life, separates the filthy rich Dives in *Gehenna* from the abused and leprous Lazarus in heaven."[99] Dante's *Hades* is rooted in pagan and classical mythology as adopted by Medieval theology; it is not the *Gehenna* of the Bible to which Jesus referred, and which, for him, was no longer the rubbish dump outside Jerusalem where innocent children were sacrificed but the fate of Dives and their oppressors.[100] Virgil's guidance in handling suffering was not Christian but Stoic: provide help but avoid pity, encourage virtue and strengthen courage, but avoid emotion.

Thomas, in a similar vein, had argued that God was incapable of suffering because that would imply that God could change. But as Bonhoeffer reminds us, it was people of reason and principle, conscience, and obedience to duty, who failed to prevent the triumph of evil in Nazi Germany, [101] and, ironically, it was precisely those who did resist who were truly happy![102] That is why, Bonhoeffer says, we must learn to "see things from below", not through the eyes of Virgil's reason but through the eyes of Jesus' solidarity with "the outcasts, the suspects, the maltreated, the powerless,

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Mariner Books Classic Edition, 2023) John W. de Gruchy, *Reconciliation Restoring Justice,* (London: SCM, 2002).

97 See de Gruchy, Led into Mystery, 124–126,

98 *Inferno*, XXXIII, 51–71.

99 *Paradiso*, XI, 50.

100 See Tom Wright, *Surprised by Hope* (London: SPCK, 2007), 188–189.

101 Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 38–40

102 See de Gruchy, *Going Against the Stream*, 37–56.

the oppressed and reviled, in short, from the perspective of the suffering."[103] Indeed, "the God revealed in Jesus Christ" gains ground and power in the world by being powerless.[104] Virgil could not have said that, and Dante will only begin to understand this in *Paradiso*.

At issue here is the root cause of what Martin Luther called "theologies of glory", which led to a triumphalist church, and the "theology of the cross" which led St Francis to identify with the poor.[105] This, in turn, results from a defective understanding of the Trinity which, under the influence of Aristotelian metaphysics, cannot allow God to suffer for the sake of the world. But from the perspective of the cross, God's wisdom, power, and perfect love, though hidden from the sight of reason, is precisely the mystery of God which is revealed to faith.[106] And it is this which, as Catherine LaCugna says, helps us to understand the significance of lamentation in the biblical narrative. "Even in our protest against God for all the suffering around us", or our reproach for God's apparent forgetfulness, we turn over our anxieties and concerns to God.[107] Or, as Eberhard Jüngel puts it: "Faith cannot speak of God's presence without conceiving at the same time of God's absence, just as it has never been certain of God's presence without experiencing his hiddenness."[108] Hence Bonhoeffer's comment that the "Bible directs people toward the powerlessness and the suffering of God", and it does so because "only the suffering God can help."[109] Something Bonhoeffer expressed in his poem "Christians and Heathens". It is not only we who go to God in our need, or God who comes to us, but

> people go to God when God's in need,
> find God poor, reviled, without shelter or bread,

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103 Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 52.

104 Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison,* 478–480.

105 See Walther von Loewenich, *Luther's Theology of the Cross* (Belfast, UK: Christian Journals, 1976), 134–137.

106 See *I Corinthians*, 1:18–25.

107 Catherin Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity & Christian Life* (New York: Harper/Collins, 1991), 341.

108 Eberhard Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World* (Grand Rapids, IN: Eerdmans, 1983) 55.

109 Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison,* 478–479.

see God devoured by sin, weakness, and death.
Christians stand by God in God's own pain.[110]

A great awakening

As Easter dawned, Dante entered the threshold of *Purgatorio*. He had been "raised with Christ through baptism,"

crossed the river and been
remade, reborn, like a sun-wakened tree
that spreads new foliage to the Spring dew…[111]

He could not forget what he had seen in *Inferno*, and he knew that there was still a journey ahead before he reached the outskirts of *Paradiso*. He was in what Bunyan called "Beaulah Land", and after catching his breath, he and Virgil began to climb up the seven stages of the mountain ahead. But the road is rocky, the slope steep, the temptation to turn back persistent, and at each stage Dante needs time to sleep and recover his strength before awakening to the challenges of the next stage.

Purgatorio is not a minor hell, a place of temporary rather than eternal punishment, neither is it a journey without fear, doubt, suffering, or failure; it is a site of struggle on which light and darkness, secular and spiritual wisdom, compete for control. As such it is a path of soul-searching, painful penance, and formation in Christ along which all pilgrims must go and, step by step, be transformed by grace. And while Virgil can still guide him, Dante must now learn to see the world through Christian rather than classical eyes. To help him do this, the duo is joined by Statius, a fellow poet who, it transpires, had been inspired by Virgil to become a Christian. So, Statius can now help Dante bridge the classical and the Christian worlds,[112]and so learn that the path to happiness, which was clearly not that of self-centred Epicurean fulfilment, was also not that of Stoic virtue alone – prudence, courage, moderation, justice – but the path of discipleship as informed by Jesus' Beatitudes.

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110 Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison,* 460–461.

111 *Purgatorio*, XXXIII, 142–145.

112 *Purgatorio*, XXI.

Reading *Purgatorio* in South Africa, we cannot but comment that just as Dante needed Statius to integrate faith with culture honestly and without compromise, so Christians have had to listen carefully to those voices that help us relate Christian faith to both the multi-cultural and the socio-political context within which we live. This is not something that we find in *Pilgrim's Progress* simply because that is by design a counter-cultural Nonconformist narrative, but it is germane to the *Commedia*, which is embedded in Dante's culture. And, of course, based on Thomas, for whom, just as grace perfects nature, so Christ transforms culture.

If Dante sees that in *Inferno* every evil act has consequences and is punished according to its character, in *Purgatorio* he discerns that every sin is overcome by practising its opposite: learning humility, we overcome pride; rejoicing in the achievements of others, we prevent envy; apathy is defeated by commitment to service, greed by sharing, gluttony by moderation, and lust by rechannelling desire. Rowan Williams describes this process as learning to see "the whole vision of the life of freedom, discernment, clarity" as the work of the Spirit who prevents "liberty from enslaved and enslaving instinct" by transforming our minds (*nous*).[113] *Purgatorio*, then, is about *metanoia*, repentance as a life-long process which changes our consciousness so that we can "see" or "discern" the will of God not just through Dante's eyes, but through our own, and in our own *kairos* moment.[114] Or, as Jürgen Moltmann says in reflecting on Dante's *Commedia*, while "hell and heaven are conceived of as closed and final stages, the one being without hope, the others without desire, the idea of purgatory throws open a prospect of a desirable future and a hopeful way forward after death." [115]

With *Pilgrim's Progress* in mind, Barth refers to what we find in *Purgatorio* as a "structured model of sanctification,"[116] comparable to the "ladder of perfection" used to describe the Christian journey in both the Eastern

113 Rowans Williams, *Passions of the Soul* (London: Bloomsbury, 2024), 18–19. See Romans 12:1–2.

114 Romans 12:1–2; See Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison,* 503–504; de Gruchy, *Going Against the Stream,* 72–78.

115 Jürgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology* (London: SCM, 1996), 98.

116 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/3, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1976), 506.

and Western Churches.[117] As such it becomes an allegory, "a project of the present on to the future." [118]Luther and Calvin also used the "ladder" metaphor, but in a more Christological way, emphasising that Christ is our sanctification.[119] Understood in this way, purgatory is not about life after death, but about the cost of discipleship in this life and what Kierkegaard meant by "living poetically" or seeing life in "relationship with God as an original love relationship."[120]

These divergent views on sanctification have divided Orthodox. Catholic, and Protestant Christians, but also Protestants themselves, most markedly between the Reformed and Wesleyan/Holiness traditions. But it was a South African Dutch Reformed leader, Andrew Murray Jnr., who most notably bridged the gap and unintentionally inspired the rise of the Pentecostal and Indigenous African movements.[121] Barth expresses an openness to these charismatic movements that throughout history have awakened new life in the church through enabling people to "see the light".[122] This aptly describes the central theme of *Purgatorio*, for on this journey the pilgrim's eyes are opened step by step to what it means to follow Jesus Christ in the world.

While Dante's focus is clearly on the journey of the soul or the self, what he says also relates to his concern for the well-being and renewal of the church. The transformation of individuals on their journey through purgatory has a ripple effect; it begins to change society as well. Thus as "infinite and inexpressible Grace … gives itself to Love…" so "the blaze of love is spread more widely" and "the Eternal Glory grows."[123] But often the church is a stumbling-block. The church provides the resources needed for the journey, but too often it hinders rather than helps the pilgrim. Hence

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117 E.g. St John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* (Paulist Press); Walter Hilton, The Scale of Perfection

118 See Tom Wright, *Surprised by Hope* (London: SPCK, 2011), 183.

119 I Corinthians 1:30.

120 See de Gruchy, *Faith Facing Reality*, 56–78.

121 J. du Plessis, *The Life of Andrew Murray of South Africa* (London: Marshall Bros, 1920), chap. 28; see also John W. de Gruchy with Steve de Gruchy, *The Church Struggle in South Africa*, 25th Anniversary Edition, (London: SCM, 2004), 4–5.

122 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/3, 509–514.

123 *Purgatorio* XV: 67–73.

Dante's scathing condemnation of the abuses in the church throughout the *Commedia*. In a different context, but similar to Dante's and South Africa's, this paradox led Bonhoeffer to say that if the church is to serve the world, it will have to become a pilgrim church and "confront the vices of hubris, the worship of power, envy, and illusionism as the roots of all evil. It will have to speak of moderation, authenticity, trust, faithfulness, steadfastness, patience, discipline, humility, modesty, contentment."[124]

By the time the travellers reach the end of *Purgatorio*, it has become obvious that Virgil's wisdom cannot lead Dante beyond the virtues that should inform all of humanity to the insight required to lead him into the mystery of God's grace. So, Virgil, "the gentle Father to whom I gave my soul for its salvation"[125] vanishes, and Statius having already departed, it is now Beatrice, Dante's first love and all-consuming passion, who arrives to guide Dante to receive the abundant love that would never be requited but will endure through eternity.

> My soul – such years had passed since last it saw
> that lady and stood trembling in her presence
> stupefied by the power of holy awe –
> now, by some power that shone from her above
> the reach and witness of my mortal eyes,
> felt the full mastery of enduring love.[126]

Overwhelmed by infinite love

There is a brief pause before crossing over into *Paradiso* when Beatrice cries out impatiently, "Speak up, for the waters have yet to purge sin from your memory." Dante is shattered; he cannot speak; he can only shed "floods of tears" as his guilt is purged from his memory.[127] Without tears, his eyes would not be washed so that he could see the kingdom of God. But *Paradiso* awaits, and Bernard of Clairvaux, "sent by prayer and sacred love to help"

124 Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 503.

125 *Purgatorio* XXX: 50–1.

126 *Purgatorio*, XXX: 34–39.

127 *Purgatorio*, XXXI: 31–39.

him "reach the perfect consummation" with the help of Mary, the Queen of Heaven" leads him on his final ascent. [128]

> For God, in giving Himself, that man might be
> able to raise himself, gave even more
> than if he had forgiven him in mercy.
> All other means would have been short, I say,
> of perfect justice, but that God's own Son
> humbled himself to take on mortal clay.[129]

At least from the time of Plato and Aristotle, desire has been recognised as the driving passion that shapes the way we live for both good and ill. It has also been regarded as something shaped and determined by the culture in which we live, something that is fundamental to the advertising industry, which could not function without telling us what we want and then offering goods and services to satisfy our appetites.[130] If *Inferno* is about the evil desires that destroy our personal and social lives, *Purgatorio* is about educating our desires into alignment with God's will, but in *Paradiso* Dante is overwhelmed by a yearning he has never experienced before as he discovers that God's

> … will is our peace. It is that sea
> To which all moves, all that Itself creates
> And Nature bears through Eternity.[131]

Before Bernard's arrival to guide Dante on the final stage of his journey, Beatrice had warned him not to jump to conclusions based on earthly knowledge and experience for "the wings of reason often do not fly true."[132] And, indeed, nothing has adequately prepared him to see what he will now see:

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128 *Purgatorio*, XXXI, 94–1003.

129 *Paradiso*, VII:115–120.

130 *Purgatorio*, XXII; See Timothy Gorringe, *The Education of Desire* (London: SCM, 2001), 81–82.

131 *Paradiso*, III, 85–90.

132 *Paradiso*, III:57.

> You dull your own perceptions
> with false imaginings and do not grasp
> what would be clear but for your preconceptions.[133]

While Dante assures Beatrice that he takes her advice seriously, he discovers that each marvel or mystery which amazes him and which he thinks he has grasped is then soon replaced by another, for the divine mystery remains mystery the deeper he is drawn into its orbit as if into the Sun. But, as Beatrice warns, while it is marvellous that Dante is now ready to see what he sees, the casual reader should be careful and not proceed unguided, for only those who have earnestly desired the knowledge of God and honestly believe will be able to join Dante and benefit from the journey.

But paradise is not the same for everyone, for "Perfect Grace does not rain down alike on all souls there";[134] paradise is the fulfilment of those desires which make us complete within God's cosmic purpose. So, as

> our intellect draws near its goal
> it opens to such depths of understanding
> as memory cannot plumb within the soul.[135]

And yet, such understanding is not of the mind alone; it is an understanding of the heart, because the goal is the unlimited love of God which embraces us. And the vision of God, the "beatific vision", is not chiefly that of blinding light, but the enlightening of the soul to recognise God in those in need whom we meet each day, those who love us and those who call forth God's love from us. That is the Last Judgment as Jesus taught us: you saw God in the faces of those in need of love.[136]

We who have travelled with Dante can only marvel "how an apparently chance encounter of a boy and girl in Medieval Florence on an exactly specified day could at the same time contain within it the pattern of universal salvation, without any surrender of historicity to a vague realm of ideas."[137] But if we do proceed with the right intent, Dante assures us,

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133 *Paradiso*. II:49–51.

134 *Paradiso*, III: 89–90.

135 *Paradiso*, I:7–9.

136 Matthew 25:31–46.

137 Introduction to *Paradiso*, in Dante, *Commedia*, 593

we will be led into the divine mystery within which is hidden the key to understanding the drama of the cosmos and our humble place within the drama of our history and providence of God. Indeed.

> The power of love, which is our bliss,
> Calms all our will. What we desire, we have.
> There is in us no other thirst than this.[138]

138 *Paradiso*, II: 69–72.