

# Alan E. Bernstein

## HISTORY OF BELIEF IN HELL

In my research, I explore the origins of belief in hell and especially how postmortem retribution emerged from among competing conceptions of death where punishment was absent. Far from the limitations of the history of doctrine (the elucidation of one belief within a single creed), my work retraces competing currents within and among religions. I examine the debates within individual faiths between proponents and opponents of punishment after death. Embracing many different belief systems, my multidisciplinary approach integrates Scripture, theology, and preaching with art, literature, mythology, and folklore.

My publications analyze the interlaced “levels of discourse” that express different ideas differently for different audiences. This work integrates sources from ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt, Israel, Greece and Rome and, moving into the Middle Ages, Islam, Celtic and Germanic religion. The history of hell involves issues pertinent not only to history and religion, but also to criminal law, ethics, and psychology. Given the worldwide tension over religious differences today (as, indeed, at almost all other times), hell belief takes on a new importance for understanding the stigmatization of “the Other,” the culture wars in the U. S., and some animosities that underlie terrorism.

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My two monographs on the history of belief in hell probe all these questions. *The Formation of Hell* (1993) traces belief in punishment after death from its origins to its articulation in early Christian writing. *Hell and Its Rivals* (2017) shows that patristic Christianity, rabbinic Judaism, and early Islam each taught eternal suffering for the wicked. Each faith also rejected parallel challenges from three rival notions: the idea that punishments can be modified, that victims can leave, and hell can end. A third volume, in the works, will show the appearance of hell in art, the establishment of financial incentives to help those in “the punishments,” and the use of hell to stigmatize, persecute, and murder opponents believed destined to its confines. In the process of articulating these full-length studies, I have published articles setting forth some preliminary results. In addition to the bibliographical references below, I offer sketches of their import.

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N. B. I have recently founded a website exploring altruism and its implications for public policy:  
[www.tempoandhup.com](http://www.tempoandhup.com)

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*Hell and Its Rivals: Death and Retribution among Christians, Jews, and Muslims in the Early Middle Ages.* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017.

*The Formation of Hell: Death and Retribution in the Ancient and Early Christian Worlds.* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993. Paperback edition 1996. Polish Translation as *Jak Powstało Piekło* by Agnieszka Piskozub-Piwosz (Kraków: Libron, 2006).

“Named Others and Named Places: Stigmatization in the Early Medieval Afterlife.” In Isabel Moreira and Margaret Toscano, eds. *Hell and its Afterlife: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (Farnham, Surrey, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010), 53-71. •How hell belief encourages the stigmatization and persecution of those believed destined for hell.

“The Rise of Postmortem Retribution in China and the West” (with Paul Katz, Academia Sinica, Taipei) *Medieval History Journal* (New Delhi), 13, 2 (October 2010), 199-257. •This comparative study shows parallels in the belief that cosmic forces punish the wicked dead. Katz and I put special emphasis on beliefs about how the living can improve conditions for those suffering in the otherworld.

“The Ghostly Troop and the Battle Over Death: William of Auvergne (d. 1249) connects Christian, Old Norse, and Irish Views,” in Mu-chou Poo, ed. *Rethinking Ghosts in World Religions.* Numen Book Series 123 (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2009), 115-162. •Pre-Christian, Irish sources show the role of ancestral ghosts marching as a troop to exact vengeance, a sanction against wrongful death that is independent of belief in hell. Preachers assimilated this pre-Christian troop of the dead to infernal and purgatorial hordes appearing to confirm their own doctrines.

“Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory: 1100-1500.” In *The Cambridge History of Christianity.* Volume IV: Christianity in Western Europe, c. 1100-c.1500, ed. Miri Rubin and Walter Simons (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 200-216. •Eschatology in Western Europe during the central and late Middle Ages, from the rise of scholastic reflection, through Dante, to the questions raised by nominalism and the attack on indulgences prior to the Reformation.

“Heaven and Hell,” *New Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, edited by Maryanne Cline Horowitz (New York: Thomson/Gale, 2005) Vol. 3, 969-973. •A comparative study of these beliefs in the five major world religions.

“William of Auvergne and the Cathars,” in Franco Morenzoni et Jean-Yves Tilliette (eds.), *Autour de Guillaume d’Auvergne (†1249)* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2005), 271-292. Acts of Conference held at the University of Geneva, Geneva, Switzerland, May 17-19, 2001. •William was Bishop of Paris from 1228 to 1249. Even though he was one of the Cathars’ greatest opponents, he shared with those he persecuted some key archetypal premises, especially concerning the dualistic opposition of good to evil, light to darkness, Christ to Satan, and angels to demons.

“Tristitia and the Fear of Hell in Monastic Reflection from John Cassian to Hildemar of Corbie.” In *Continuity and Change, The Harvest of Late-Medieval and Reformation History: Essays*

presented to Heiko A. Oberman on his 70th Birthday, Robert J. Bast and Andrew C. Gow, eds. (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 183-205. •European contemplatives believed their guilt attracts hell's torments into the conscience even while they are alive.

“Teaching and Preaching Confession in Thirteenth-Century Paris” in *The Devil, Heresy & Witchcraft in the Middle Ages: Essays in Honor of Jeffrey B. Russell*, ed. by Alberto Ferreiro (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1998), 111-130. •Theologians and preachers modified how they spoke about confession according to the nature of their audience. They applied one emphasis to their sophisticated theology students and another to their lay hearers in church or in the public square.

“The Invocation of Hell in Thirteenth-Century Paris” in *Supplementum Festivum: Studies in Honor of Paul Oskar Kristeller*. J. Hankins, J. Monfasani, & F. Purnell, Jr., eds. Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies, 49. (Binghamton, NY, 1987), 13-54. •Another examination of “levels of discourse,” comparing how theologians spoke to their students and how preachers addressed the laity on the subject of hell.

“Thinking About Hell,” *The Wilson Quarterly*, 10 (Summer, 1986), pp. 78-89. •An overview from antiquity to the present.

“Esoteric Theology: William of Auvergne on the Fires of Hell and Purgatory,” *Speculum*, 57 (1982), 509-531. •An exploration of how one particular thinker worked within the different levels of discourse, with particular attention to the use of metaphor.

“Theology between Heresy and Folklore: William of Auvergne on Punishment after Death,” *Studies in Medieval & Renaissance History*, 5 (1982), 5-44. •William used edifying sermon-tales called “exempla,” similar to the New Testament’s parables, to oppose the eschatological ideas of heretics he accused of denying hell and purgatory.

“The *Exemplum* as ‘Incorporation’ of Abstract Truth in the Thought of Humbert of Romans and Stephen of Bourbon” in *The Two Laws: Studies in Medieval Legal History Dedicated to Stephan Kuttner*. L. Mayali & S. Jefferis-Tibbetts, eds. (Washington, D. C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1990), pp. 82-96. •The place of exempla in theology.