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Catholic Eschatological Imagination and the Mystics of Fire: Possible Perspectives for a Muslim–Christian Dialogue

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Abstract: During the twentieth century, Catholic theology moved to reject the misuse of imaginaries of the afterlife. By insisting on a de-cosmologization of the “last things”, theologians endorsed a Christocentric eschatology. However, a physical material view remains dominant in the popular perception of the afterworld. Recently, some authors have engaged in a reevaluation of the role of imagination. In eschatology as well, several theologians assert the need for a more affective and effective Christian imaginary of the hereafter. In this essay, the image of fire serves as a case study. References to fire are frequent in the Bible, and many mystics also describe their encounter with God in terms of burning. For instance, Catherine of Genoa’s experience of purification through Christ’s fire of love led to a commitment to social justice. Appreciating the contribution of mystics of fire, theologians might fashion a revised imaginary of fire to address certain eschatological issues such as Purgatory. Despite the fact that in Islam “the Fire” is a synonym for Hell, Christian theologians could enter into dialogue with certain Shi’i authors and Sufi experiences regarding the ontology of imagination, the importance of unity with God, and the fiery imaginary of God’s love.

Keywords: eschatology; imaginary; mystics; fire; Purgatory; Sufism



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1. Introduction

The contemporary Catholic imaginary seems to be a “confused heap of elements” mainly forged by the eclectic taste of the late eighteenth century—often “pop” religious representations tend towards the kitsch and, above all, “may even be an obstacle to the real reception of an updated theological vision” (Zanchi 2020). On the topic of eschatology, such heterogeneous and tawdry images coexist with an increasing uncertainty about and difficulty in imaging the hereafter, now considered as “nebulous” by a significant share of Italians (Garelli 2019). During the last millennium, an impressive Catholic imaginary about Purgatory developed beyond the evangelical vision and the dictates of the Council of Trent, which in its XXV session (3 December 1536) approved both a *Decree Concerning Purgatory* and *On the Invocation, Veneration, and Relics, of Saints, and on Sacred Images* (Waterworth 1848). Indeed, this Council maintained an “extreme sobriety” (Biffi 2007, p. 92) in prescribing a “doctrine in images” suitable for “dogmatic illustration and sentimental incitement” (Zanchi 2020). However, certain medieval representations have continued to shape a popular conception of Purgatory as a place of torture (Jezler 1994).

As a reaction against the widespread misuse of these images, in the past century, Catholic theologians insisted on a de-cosmologization¹ of eschatology, to focus on its ultimate Christocentric reality (*eschaton*, or Christ as *Eschatos*) rather than on “last things” (*eschata*). Among the consequences of this trend, Stoddart and Pryce (2005) found a positive correlation between aversion to raising the topic of Hell in pastoral care and the inclusivity of the clergy of Christian denominations in Scotland. In Italy, as well as in other secularized contexts, a gloomy imaginary of the last things is now residual (Girardi 2019); yet, in

the absence of alternatives, even many Catholic believers see eschatology as fanciful superstition or, conversely, as abstract and meaningless speculation.

According to the Christian theological consensus,² judgment is essentially the encounter with Christ, but there is not a widespread awareness of this in the Catholic common view, which continues to conceive it as a place of punishment (Ancona 2019). Moreover, representations of non-Christian paths to salvation (e.g., “esotericism, occultism, reincarnation, New Age”) are becoming increasingly popular in Western societies, where they are sold in a curious “afterworld market”, as Uríbarri (2001) puts it, who is not alone in claiming the “necessity of a Christian imaginary of the hereafter”. Indeed, recently, this call has been taken up by a variety of authors who converge on two points: on the one hand, the reevaluation of the category of imagination in epistemology and in Christian theology; on the other hand, the warning that a future (*eschaton*) without its peculiar eschatological realities (*eschata*) will prove to be an empty hope (Brancato 2013, p. 14).

Thiel (2006) approached what he calls a “thin’ eschatology” by proposing a “thick’ eschatology”, starting from re-imagining the blessed dead. We will turn to the rich imaginaries of fire, instead. Such conceptions have obscure origins and conflicting meanings which have already been explored in the realm of psychoanalysis. Within the Bible and the Christian tradition, fire metaphors are quite common and often reference eschatology as well. In order to broaden the perspective, my research also includes the analysis of unusual physical phenomena found in hagiographical writing. Many mystics have felt God’s fiery presence in their life, and often in their bodies: heat is the effect of His love, usually described as fire, and perceived as warming, purifying, or melting, depending on the mystics’ state. Sometimes, God’s loving flame is described as leaving physical traces. It always has tangible consequences, as the eschatological imagination inevitably does by reshaping the world in which we act. Catherine of Genoa’s experience of purgatorial fire accompanied her earthly commitment to cure the sick. The direct contact with God—that is, with the love that cannot be surpassed—is perceived as a fire that purifies and illuminates. For this reason, some experiences that mystics recount as fire are the implicit consequences of this divine encounter.

Some Catholic theologians today are in search of a more passionate way to portray their eschatological hope while maintaining certain hermeneutical principles premised on a Christological center. Could they reconsider the image of fire as a purified understanding of the hereafter, based more on the desired encounter with God’s warmth than on the fear of punishment? After all, theologians continue to use fire-related metaphors, and a greater appreciation of the contribution of the mystics of fire—that is, those who have had mystical experiences involving fire—and their eschatological implications could contribute to controversial debates such as those regarding the conditions of Purgatory and thus enrich the broader ecumenical dispute with mystical elements. Finally, a quick glance at Islamic tradition—in which (purgatorial) Hell is habitually called “the Fire” (*al-nār*)—will identify parallel perspectives which could be worthy of future attention for a Muslim–Christian dialogue on eschatological themes.

2. The Need for a Catholic Eschatological Imagination

2.1. *The Abuse of Eschatological Imagery and Contemporary Catholic Caution*

Many theological writings on Catholic eschatology published after the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) have warned against the abuse of eschatological images. They often³ quote Congar’s (1949) criticism of “a sort of physics of the last things” (*une sorte de physique des choses dernières*), a jab aimed at pre-conciliar *De Novissimis* treatises that took a neo-scholastic approach with a neo-positivistic bent. In reaction, Catholic theologians started to insist on de-cosmologizing and deconstructing traditional notions of the hereafter, taking for granted that such imaginaries could not be “reports” of the world to come.⁴ Furthermore, the dogmatic constitution *Lumen Gentium* (1964) urged readers, “if any abuses, excesses or defects have crept in here or there [about the afterlife], to do what is in their power to remove or correct them, and to restore all things to a fuller praise of Christ and of God”

(n. 51). Soon after, [González-Ruiz \(1969\)](#) argued for a more radical demythologization; he believed it dangerous to search in the theological imagination for a scientific response to rational questions and pushed for an end to imagining how God actually acts in the moment of human death.⁵

In 1979, the [Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith \(1979\)](#), while upholding the traditional teachings, seemed to timidly support a certain deconstruction: “When dealing with man’s situation after death, one must especially beware of arbitrary imaginative representations: excess of this kind is a major cause of the difficulties that the Christian faith often encounters”. Among these misleading objectifications, often labeled as unacceptable perversions, theologians have referred to the restoration of every single anatomical part of the human body in the event of resurrection ([Greshake 2009](#), pp. 94–95), and the stereotype of a “gigantic torture chamber, a cosmic concentration camp” used to describe both Purgatory ([Boros 1962](#), p. 130) and Hell ([Bordoni and Ciola 2000](#), p. 68). Another aberration condemned by [Biffi \(2007, p. 93\)](#) is the conflation of the state of purification and damnation, thus treating Purgatory like a temporary Hell. As an example of gratuitous speculation, [Congar \(1949\)](#) mentioned the question of the nature of purgatorial fire: “*Quid sit ignis?*”, portrayed as if it were a chemical reaction; the reference was made explicit by [Greshake \(2009, p. 20\)](#), who ridiculed [Bautz’s \(1882\)](#) attempt to measure the temperature of hellfire through the study of biblical texts.

2.2. Contemporary Hermeneutics of Christian Eschatology

The Swiss theologian [Balthasar \(1960\)](#) considered eschatology a “sign of the times of contemporary theology” and signaled the need for a renewed systematic approach to the topic, adopting suggestions scattered in various publications. He foresaw that a reinterpretation of eschatology would have ecumenical consequences, since Reformation traditions had rejected the Catholic doctrine of Purgatory, for example. Given the difference between ancient and modern cosmologies, Balthasar endorsed a de-cosmologization of the eschatology but avoided advocating for a complete demythologization. For this reason, he outlined the benefits of removing the “ultimate ends” from the figurative realm in favor of a strong Christocentric perspective in which Christ itself is the *eschaton*, the “compendium of the last things” (echoing Daniélou), even though figurative language is the sole instrument available to us ([Balthasar 2005](#)).

Between 1960 and 1980, much was written on the hermeneutics of eschatological propositions. First, [Rahner \(\[1960\] 2005\)](#) proposed the following seven theses, which can be summed up as follows: eschatology concerns a future reality in which the mystery of God is sovereign, so we cannot fully elucidate it via existential demythologization, or through prediction; we cannot restrict God’s freedom to reveal something to us about what is not yet in existence; Scripture inconsistently uses figurative terminology and a range of disparate allegories, so there are no phenomenological descriptions of future reality; the perception of the future is an intrinsic element of the human understanding of the present and it is oriented towards Christ; the knowledge of *eschata* is the reinterpretation of anthropology and Christology from the perspective of fulfillment, starting from the actual experience of God’s salvific action for us in Christ. Consequently, eschatology is about the flourishing of all aspects of the humanity in God’s freedom: it is intrinsic to human openness to a future which is not at our disposition but nevertheless pervades our present life. In addition, Rahner distinguished a fantastic apocalypticism/divination from a true eschatology: the former is from the anticipated future to present times; the latter is from the present projected to the future. In this way, he suggested how to discern the essential content of eschatology from its modes of derivation. Nevertheless, we cannot do without images, because the process of thinking requires them: it is impossible to dispense with figurative language.

On the protestant side, taking into account [Berkhof’s \(1967\)](#) ideas on extrapolation as the method of eschatology, [Moltmann \(1977\)](#) responded with four synthetic points. For this author, eschatology can be neither a report nor an extrapolation, but rather the anticipation

(*prolepsis*) of the future of history, within history; the eschatological history of Jesus Christ allows and requires a historical eschatology.

Next, the Spanish theologian [Alfaro \(1980\)](#) proposed eight principles, in which three hermeneutical bases of Christian eschatology (Christological, anthropological, historic-salvific) are mutually connected, starting from the salvific event of Christ experienced in the human attitude of belief and hope. Like Rahner, Alfaro refused Bultmann's existential de-eschatologization and, like Moltmann, preferred to use the category of *anticipation* regarding the coming fullness of salvation. Alfaro contested that statements about future earthly events or representations from the physical order could belong to eschatology. More radically, he wrote: "Such language would be formally contradictory, because it would try to attribute intra-historic phenomena to a supra-historical reality: it would create the illusion of transcending history, when in reality it would only say something inherent to it" (p. 243). Ultimately, Christian eschatology and hope should be manifested "in the praxis of the love of one's neighbor and the commitment to justice in the world": the human transformation of the world prepares the coming of the Kingdom of God, a wider horizon that motivates believers to act rightfully.

Lastly, [Küng \(1982\)](#) warned against the risk of illusions and psychological projections about life beyond death, whether this hypothesis be accepted or rejected. At the end of his ninth lesson, Küng said that markedly earthly images used by the Bible to describe the final fulfillment should not be used reductively. Indeed, Jesus also opted to use images and parables. Between the extremes of an excessively tangible depiction and an excessively rational abstraction, a discourse about the final destination has to stay "on the border between the image and the concept": our experience is necessarily related to images, but they should not be mere projections of our desires. The Bible offers dynamic image concepts such as life, justice, freedom, love and salvation; Jesus radicalizes them.

The [Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith \(1979\)](#) had already said that images employed in the Scriptures deserve respect: "Their profound meaning must be discerned, while avoiding the risk of over-attenuating them, since this often empties of substance the realities designated by the images", and "our imagination may be incapable of reaching these heights, but our heart does so instinctively and completely", so it is essential to firmly hold both "fundamental continuity" as well as a "radical break" between the present life and the future one. The [International Theological Commission \(1992\)](#) briefly intervened in the field of hermeneutics of eschatology, but it said almost nothing about eschatological representation, instead using the expression "image of Christ" and otherwise referring to its earlier document *The Interpretation of Dogma* ([International Theological Commission 1990](#)) about theological language.

Similarly, [Ladaria \(1997\)](#) remarks that the relationship between dogmatic eschatological assertions and representations is a specific hermeneutical problem, both for protology and eschatology. Theology has, at times, reified these images and treated them as sources of information while overlooking their deeper significance, although dogmatic definitions are somewhat clear on this matter. Ladaria writes, for instance, that "the notion of Purgatory remains distinct from spatial representations and is free from the mythological idea of a 'fire': it returns to its original signification, which is that of the purification of man which is necessary in order to see God".

Notwithstanding their intentions, past several generations of theologians did not manage to effectively de-reify the popular perception of the afterworld ([Ancona 2019](#)), nor did they bridge the widening gap between current theological debates and enduring traditional imaginaries. In the long run, "eschatological images have fallen in disrepute" owing to their "abuses by ecclesial and political powers"⁶ ([Rahner 2016](#), pp. 66–67) and the spread of skepticism towards what cannot be verified by the experimental scientific method ([Ravanello 2019](#)).

2.3. Revising the Role of Imagination

Many philosophers continue to study the function of imagination, including in the so-called “post-modern” context. Steeves (2016) considers this context to be a “civilization of the image” which does not place trust in any real referent; this author recalls Jean-Jacques Wunenburger and Fleury (2006), but mainly Kearney’s (1991) contribution, outlining a sort of struggle between opposers (Jacques Lacan, Louis Althusser, Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida) and defenders (Gianni Vattimo, Julia Kristeva, Jean-François Lyotard) of a new type of post-modern imagination. Kearney, in turn, takes inspiration from Jean-Paul Sartre, but also Edmund Husserl, Gaston Bachelard, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Paul Ricoeur. Kearney affirms that imagination remains crucial in post-modernity because of its ethical powers in three realms: “the *utopian*; the *testimonial*; and the *empathic*” (Kearney 1991, p. 218).

Psychoanalysis, hermeneutics, and Husserlian phenomenology seem to converge in Sartre’s ([1940] 2004, p. 138) conclusion that “the imaginary represents at each moment the implicit sense of the real. [. . .] The imaginary appears ‘on the ground of the world’, but reciprocally all apprehension of the real as world implies a hidden surpassing towards the imaginary”. Moreover, “it is not something heterogeneous with thought. An imaging consciousness includes knowledge, intentions, and can include words and judgements” (p. 97), but it represents the unreflective thought, “constituted in and by its object” (p. 112). Therefore, “to posit an image is to constitute an object in the margin of the totality of the real, it is therefore to hold the real at a distance, to be freed from it, in a word, to deny it. Or, if one prefers, to deny that an object belongs to the real is to deny the real in positing the object” (p. 183).

The feminist philosopher Lennon (2015), quite critical towards Sartre’s bifurcation between real perceptions and imagination, offers another post-modern contribution on this theme.

The imaginary is the affectively laden patterns/images/forms, by means of which we experience the world, other people and ourselves. This contemporary usage is distinguished most importantly by its constitutive linkage of imagery with *affect*, the emotions, feelings and desires which mark our engagement with the world. The images are the vehicles for such affect, the way in which it is given form. By means of these images the emotional contours of the subject’s world are revealed. They are the way in which we not only think, but also feel our way around. [. . .] Although we can criticise false and debilitating imaginaries, we cannot draw a sharp distinction between the imaginary and the symbolic, cognition and affect, between what is known and what is imagined. (Lennon 2015, p. 1)

Extending a Kantian implication about the *poietic* function of imagination, Lennon says that the imaginary is not the realm of illusions. Quite on the contrary, it is the condition of possibility of the real—the transcendental means that makes it available to us—but also of the fanciful. Imagination, which is always at work, allows one to creatively experience the world in the form of images and enables the understanding of otherness. Then, Lennon proposes following a fundamental intuition by Spinoza ([1677] 1925, pars IV, propositio 9, demonstratio): “Imaginatio est idea qua mens rem ut præsentem contemplator quæ tamen *magis corporis humani constitutionem* quam rei externæ naturam indicat”.⁷ In this perspective, reality, body, and imagination are deeply related. Additionally, according to Merleau-Ponty, the world has an impact on our bodies, and the imagination captures this impact, producing images that are the very “texture of the real” (p. 32); in a hermeneutic circularity, the inherently imaginary dimension of all experience shapes the world we encounter “*as offering possibilities* to our bodies” (p. 43). Social bodies and the social context are likewise involved, both because our imaginaries are affected by our location and because we can find the same structure of the imaginary within individuals at the institutional level.⁸ Yet, we must talk about multiple, dynamic, shared social imaginaries that affect, call, and modify our presence in the world: the same context or the same social practice is not necessarily

related to the same social imaginary, which can change or make room for new imaginaries. Additionally, in this case, both social practice and the social imaginary are simultaneously created and encountered, instituted and instituting, cognitive and affective, conscious and unconscious. Luce Irigaray inspires Lennon's remarks: "Transformation of the imaginary cannot come solely from correcting misrepresentations. Damaging imaginaries can be countered only with alternative imaginaries" (p. 113) which involve inter-subjectivity, emotions, and creativity, because they require an engagement from the affective point of view as well.

2.4. *The Contemporary Theological Need for Imagination, including in Catholic Eschatology*

Already in Spinoza, imagination is more effective than philosophical, logical, and mathematical argumentations; he glossed Exodus 20:18–20, where God dealt with Jews "non rationibus, sed tubarum strepitu, tonitru, et fulminibus"⁹ (Spinoza 1670, chp. 14). In spite of *apophatic* tendencies, theologians cannot avoid images, in the same way they cannot completely give up referring to *lógos*, which implies imagining, thinking, and communicating faculties. There are at least two contemporary branches of research that argue for the importance of imagination in theology. The first is more focused on fundamental theology. I have already mentioned Steeves (2016), who clarifies that images are not the truth itself but could be vectors of truth if they are made to conform to it. Sometimes, it is not their details, but rather their fuzzy, flexible contours that enhance the faith, and even the Bible tackles idolatry with inspired images and puts pre-existing images in different imaginaries. Thus, if a Christian theologian does not want to capitulate to the dominant widespread imaginary, she or he cannot abandon the task of imagining an alternative. Steeves continues Michael P. Gallagher's studies on imagination, starting from John Henry Newman's "sincere wish that, for their own good and the good of others, they would 'enlarge their mind'". However, in Newman, an ambiguity remains. The saint cardinal wrote that imagination would be the greatest enemy to faith were it not for its power to convince, and that it was immune to effects of rational logic; elsewhere, he distinguished between "to imagine" and "to fancy" (Steeves 2019). In the drafts of the well-known *Grammar of Assent*, Newman primarily wrote about "imaginative assent", before replacing the adjective "imaginative" with "real" (Gallagher 2010). For him, a true, personal, warm adhesion of faith requires the ignition of the heart, which means the imagination, too. Being a Jesuit, Gallagher was familiar with the *contemplatio loci* proposed by Ignatius of Loyola in his *Spiritual Exercises* and thus interpreted Newman's epitaph "ex umbris et imaginibus in veritatem" as the need to move from the shadows to the powerful, profound level of imagination to reach the truth (Gallagher 2011). In a certain sense, the enlarging process of imagining is the research of the Ignatian *magis*: an "invitation to imagine a world of new possibilities", in Brancato (2017) words. In Newman's case, he "had always carried out this investigation from an eschatological perspective" (Steeves 2019); his poem *The Dream of Gerontius* (Newman [1865] 1910) attested to this attitude and anticipated the theological concept of a final self-judgment before God.

Another reference point for imagination in eschatology is the Episcopalian theologian Trevor Hart, who founded the Institute for Theology, Imagination and the Arts in St. Andrews with Jeremy Begbie and collaborated with Richard Bauckham, an author also quoted by Steeves (2016) regarding the *Book of Revelation*. Hart, inspired by Ernst Bloch and Moltmann, insists that "imagination is thus a vital category in eschatology as in theology more generally" (Hart 1999, p. 75). In *Hope against Hope*, Bauckham and Hart (1999) suggest that Christian hope "is not imaginary, but it is irreducibly imaginative" (preface, p. XII), and "specifically, it is the capacity to imagine otherwise, to transcend the boundaries of the present in a quest for something more, something better, than the present affords. Christianity is above all a tradition characterized by hope" (p. 72). For this reason, in this book of eschatology in ten images—recalling an analogous attempt by Simon (1964)—they try to "do justice to the primacy of imagination in eschatological thought. This is not a way of evading the need for conceptual clarity or taking a short cut through the debatable issues.

In each case the image will be seen to raise significant theological issues" (Bauckham and Hart 1999, p. 110). Imaginative function is a necessary form of human knowledge and not only its useful representation; it demonstrates the "otherwise absent" in our actuality; it bridges the discontinuity between present times and possible future realities; it enables us to interpret "things within wider patterns or networks of relationships which are not given, but which we appeal to tacitly in making sense of things"; it draws us forward, in a "transformative reflexive" process across the present which turns hope into reality (Bauckham and Hart 1999, p. 85; Hart 1999, pp. 54, 56, 61).

We can talk about Heaven—and eschatological realities in general, I maintain—"only by images" (Canobbio 2019). Wohlmuth (2005) wrote a chapter about three dimensions of eschatology, in which *Eschato-Ästhetik* is as fundamental as *Eschato-Logik* and *Eschato-Praxie*. Going beyond Pannenberg (1988), Wohlmuth emphasizes the role of eschatological metaphors in dialogue with contemporary esthetics, since a radical reduction of the biblical imaginary to mere existential or logical structures is impossible (p. 95). On this theme, he mentions Nitrola (2001, chp. 3), who studies the functions of symbols that simply point to something other, analogies that set static relationships, and dynamic metaphors. Nitrola explains that metaphors are more appropriate than images in serving as the linguistic translation of the theological opening towards *eschaton*; as a case study, Nitrola takes the metaphor of Judgment. However, he believes it legitimate to speak in terms of eschatological *images*. In this way, Thiel (2006), in challenging Rahner, takes into account the life of the blessed dead: "In spite of the modern dismissal of such activity as pious caprice, imagining eschatologically can be a serious measure of faith and hope". Theology should not despise it as vulgar. In fact, a wider recourse to the imaginary, conscious of the limitations and abuses displayed by the modern trend of de-mythologization, could be enlightening, by manifesting something real and expressing human experiences in terms of desired fulfillment (Ravanello 2019).

3. Eschatological Fire: Christian Imaginaries and Mystical Contributions

3.1. Imaginaries of Fire and Their Ambivalence

Fire was directly linked to a supernatural sphere in many cultures, because of its importance as a tool for heat, light, cooking, and social purposes (Bentsen 2020). In polytheistic and nature-based religions, fire divinities are common, sometimes associated with sun and light, to which the most primitive forms of worship may be related (Argyle 2000). Fire seems to be "endemic within people's notion of religion", as Winder (2009) writes; she highlights its possible meanings: ritual, healing, blessing, protection, celebration, destruction, purification, empowering, inner strength, dynamic energy, perpetual dedication, or a springboard to activate the unconscious.

Since the birth of psychoanalysis, this approach was applied in studying how the unconscious is affected by fire, too. The myths of Prometheus, who stole fire from Greek deities, and of Empedocles' suicide in the flames of the volcanic Mount Etna, or other hypotheses about the acquisition of fire, caught the attention of leading psychoanalysts. Jung (1912) underlined the interpretative tendency to associate the production of fire with sexuality, both by rubbing. Freud connected the inextinguishable fire concealed in Prometheus' stalk with urination from the penis through a process of reversal: from phallic water to phallic fire. Fire is a symbol for civilization which has cheated the instinctual life represented as divine by mythology, but it is also "a symbol of the libido. The warmth irradiating from a fire provokes the same sensation as that which accompanies sexual excitement; in form and motion the flame suggests the active phallus. [We still continue to] speak of the consuming fire of passion, and of licking flames, comparing the flames with the tongue" (Freud 1932). Bachelard ([1938] 1964) proposed a *psychoanalysis of fire*, "more a social reality than a natural reality" (p. 10), on the grounds that it reveals "the desire to change, to speed up the passage of time, to bring all of life to its conclusion, to its hereafter" (p. 16). Given the interdiction to touch it, fire expresses the desire of love and, before all else, of knowledge: it is the first phenomenon on which people reflect with admiration.

Sexualized for its mystery, studied in material terms by early physicians and alchemists, and idealized by poets, fire is subjected to a dialectical sublimation, according to Bachelard. It became a sign of demonic impurity and, at the same time, of celestial purity, because of its capacity to eliminate smells, destroy impurities in substances, and fertilize the soil. That is why fire, the “ultra-living element”, is both intimate and universal; it lives both in our heart and in the sky and goes back and forth between substances (e.g., blood, alcohol, acids) and conflicting passions, from love to anger, manifest or repressed. Bachelard wrote:

Among all phenomena, it is really the only one to which there can be so definitely attributed the opposing values of good and evil. It shines in Paradise. It burns in Hell. It is gentleness and torture. It is cookery and it is apocalypse. It is a pleasure for the *good* child sitting prudently by the hearth; yet it punishes any disobedience when the child wishes to play too close to its flames. [. . .] It can contradict itself; thus it is one of the principles of universal explanation (p. 7).

Limiting the research to Judeo-Christian imaginaries, we can start from its biblical sources. In spite of their refusal to consider fire a deity, this element often accompanies God’s theophanies. In the First Testament, fire is expressed by the root עֶשׂ(esh), with 377 occurrences; only the Book of Daniel prefers the Aramaic נִיר(nur), as a source for a lamp, נִירָא(ner). It was translated in Greek with πῦρ (pyr), which has 421 occurrences in the LXX and 74 in the New Testament’s *Textus Receptus*. In its literal sense, it indicates fire as a tool, as a ritual element, or as a weather event, sometimes devastating; in a wider sense, it can assume innumerable meanings, from strong passions to God’s judgment and human purification or consecration (De Virgilio 2003). To mention some relevant examples, in Dt 4:24, God is described by the metaphor of a devouring/consuming fire, while in Ex 3:2, God reveals himself to Moses through a fire that does not consume a bush. In Ex 13:21–22, God is in a bright pillar of fire to guide and defend the Israelites during their nighttime escape from the Egyptians; according to the *Zohar* of the Jewish mystical *kabbalah*, the Messiah will be hidden in a pillar of fire, which represents a continuum between the lower Paradise to other levels of reality (Idel 1998; Wieder 1962, pp. 39–43). We can discern an eschatological meaning in many instances: in prophetic texts such as Is 66:14–17.24, God will come with fire to judge all men, and the fire that burns his enemies will not be quenched; verse 17 suggests that these adversaries had “purified” and “consecrated” themselves during pagan (fire?) rituals, avoiding true consecration and purification by God’s fire. In 2 Kings 16:3, a child sacrifice by fire is mentioned, but allusions to such rites are “surprisingly common in the Old Testament”, habitually located in Tophet, probably the “Dung-gate” which led from Jerusalem to the Valley of the son(s) of Hinnom, entered with the term γέεννα (*Geenna*) in the Gospels (Wyatt 2009). God’s Spirit/breath is fire in Is 33:11–14, but also in At 2:3, dividing into tongues of fire during the Pentecost. James 3:6 uses the representation of fire combined with (human) tongues and their sins to depict the spreading of the “hellfire” within the Christian community. Mt 3:10–12 and Lk 3:7–17 qualify John the Baptist as a fire prophet, just like Elijah, who was taken up to Heaven in a chariot of fire. According to 1Cor 3:12–15, God will test the quality of each person’s work ὡς διὰ πυρός (*hōsdia pyros*), “as through fire”; the First Testament already imagined the human purification as a refining process for precious metals via fire: silver in Psalms 66(65):10 and gold in Sirach 2:5.

Revelation 1:14–15 describes Jesus Christ’s eyes like a flame of fire and his feet like burnished bronze, as if refined in a furnace; then, Rev 20:14 uses the expression “lake of fire and sulfur” to indicate the “second death”. As an aside, a “lake of fire” is also present in Zoroastrian imaginaries. However, the Iranian origin of this biblical usage is not strongly corroborated; in fact, in Mazdean eschatology, the “Lake of Fire was strictly part of a judgmental process rather than a destination for the damned, whose abode was rather icy coldness” and stinking darkness (Wyatt 2009). In a Hell “that corresponds not so much to the Christian Hell as to Purgatory”, the wicked are waiting for the cosmic restoration called *Frashkart*, accomplishing their repentance through a final purifying stream of molten metal (Zaehner 1961, pp. 306–8). Despite the fact that the later Pahlavi *Mēnōg-ī Khrad* recounted an atoning ritual for sins performed before a fire and developed a topography

of “Hell” containing zones of both the hottest fire and coldest snow (Akbar 2020), the idea of punishment by means of fire is a common misconception about Zoroastrianism (Stausberg 2009). Nevertheless, the cult of an unquenchable fire is the most evident manifestation of Mazdaic religiosity (Panaino 2013). Fire (*al-nar*), which in the Qur’an and in Islamic traditions became the pervasive synonym for Hell (*jahannam*)¹⁰ (Thomassen 2009), was previously the Zoroastrian “symbol of Truth itself whose brilliance too destroys the darkness of error” (Zaehner 1961, p. 48). During trials by ordeal, which involved the use of fire as a judicial means, fire—belonging to Ahura Mazda—could be both a blessing for his followers and a curse upon his enemies (Panaino 2013).

In late antiquity, fire was an instrument of Roman penal rites, and some Christian martyrs were condemned to the stake, or their dead bodies were burned to prevent the commemoration of their relics. However, between the fourth and sixth centuries, many pagan temples, idols, and books were intentionally burned as well. Almost a century after the end of these persecutions, Christian hagiographies indulged in describing hundreds of different fire-related cruelties, from the gridiron with hot coals that would be prepared for Saint Lawrence, to Saint Reparata tortured with red-hot irons, to many legends about torches and a cauldron of molten lead for the torture of Saint Pantaleon. In Canetti’s (2013) opinion, “the hagiographic stake is above all a semantic marker, a metaphor for the sacrificial forge that transforms the ashes of the martyr in perfect holocaust destined for the heavenly altar”, anticipating the otherworldly *purgatio*.

Thus far, fire is more a dynamic multifaceted metaphor than a static image.¹¹ As we have seen, it maintains its natural ambivalence both in the Bible and in early Christian traditions—the “pharmakon-like, dual nature of fire moves it ‘beyond good and evil’”, it is like “a ‘immobile motor’ of all mobility”—registered even in Melville’s *Moby Dick* (Diken 2010).

3.2. Christian Mystics of Fire

In Dt 4:24, the biblical imaginary of fire is linked to transcendence and, as in Rev 1:14–15, probably referring to Psalm 19(18):6 (“nothing is hid from its heat”), indicates God’s burning love (Vanni 1998); here, love (of woman’s beauty) is kindled like fire (Sirach 9:8). During the Middle Ages, fire was habitually associated with the sublunary sphere, between the moon and the earth (Mühling 2015, p. 153).

Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite noted the close resemblance between angelical hierarchies, depicted as fiery by Holy Scriptures, and God’s “superessential and shapeless essence”, frequently described by early theologians through the image of fire, which could visibly reflect many aspects of the invisible *θεαρχία* (*thearchia*) through its “divine divinizing nature”. Pseudo-Dionysius describes fire as follows:

Visible fire, after all, is, so to speak, in everything. It passes undiluted through everything and yet continues to be completely beyond them. It lights up everything and remains hidden at the same time. In itself it is undetectable and becomes evident only through its own workings on matter. It is unstoppable. It cannot be looked upon. Yet it is master of everything. Wherever it is, it changes things toward its own activity. It bestows itself upon all who draw near. With kindling warmth it causes renewal. With unveiled enlightenments it grants illumination, yet continues to be pure and undiluted. It makes distinctions and is nevertheless unchanging. It rises up and penetrates deeply. It is exalted and is never brought low. It is ever on the move, moving itself and others. It extends in all directions and is hemmed in nowhere. It needs no one. It grows unseen and it manifests its greatness wherever it is received. It is dynamic, powerful, invisibly present in everything. If ignored it does not seem to be there, but when friction occurs, it will seek out something; it appears suddenly, naturally and of itself, and soon it rises up irresistibly and, losing nothing of itself, it communes joyfully with everything. (Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita 1987, p. 184)¹²

In summary, divinity and fire share the same attributes of “ubiquity, transcendence, hiddenness, illumination, power, warmth, penetration, elevation, independence, and greatness” (Rorem 1993, p. 72). Even an apophatic Christian theologian such as Pseudo-Dionysius, from his Neoplatonic perspective, opts for the metaphor of fire, the most ambiguous of the primordial elements, to stutter something about the unspeakable Deity. In any case, this mystical phenomenology of fire does not emphasize its eschatological role, nor does it explicitly concern the author’s personal experience.

Augustine of Hippo ([401?] 2012, p. 187) compared God’s love to a good fire that ignites us and causes our ascent. However, this author¹³ was the progenitor of a tradition about the *ignis purgatorius*, the purgatorial fire, which was interpreted very literally by Gregory the Great¹⁴ and, from him, by Thomas Aquinas.¹⁵ Belonging to the Eastern Fathers, Climacus ([600?] 1982, pp. 260–91) frequently resorted to a fiery imaginary, especially in the last steps of his *Ladder*, at the end of which a fountain of the fire of incorruption is available; Climacus influenced, among others, Simeon the New Theologian’s mystical poetry: “O what intoxication of light, O what movements of fire!” (Simeon the New Theologian [1015?] 1975, Hymn 25, pp. 135–36).

Autpert Ambrose proposed the biblical image of the *ignitus carbunculus* (a burning coal, already commented on in other allegorical ways, e.g., by Ambrose, Augustine, Jerome, Beda, and, more similarly, Apponius) to indicate precisely Jesus Christ as a mediator, having both a human (mineral) and a divine (flaming) nature; a comparable tradition for representing the hypostatic union of the two natures in the mystery of Incarnation developed around the *ferrum ignitum*—i.e., a burning sword—from Maximus the Confessor and John of Damascus to the Victorine and Carthusian spirituality of *unio mystica* (Dell’Acqua 2013). For example, Hugh of Saint Victor ([1140?] 1854) illustrated three mystical stages: firstly, the *meditatio* is like green wood in a fire, with smoke, flames, and worries; then, in the fire of *speculatio*, there is a novelty, as flames remain, without smoke; finally, the *contemplatio* is the sweetness of the pure fire of love. Then, in the sixteenth century, John Baptist of the Conception chose the image of wood in the embers to describe the souls kept “lit, ardent and ecstatic” by divine fiery love (Pujana 1998); we find the similitude of the wood kindled by a *Llama de amor viva* in John of the Cross, too (King 2004, p. 76).

Sometimes the Eucharist was portrayed simultaneously as hot like fire and pure white like snow, as Frances of Rome saw in her *Visio XIII*, 4 (Bartolomei Romagnoli 1998), or like a burning coal that inflames and transforms the mystic in Christ (Oberto 1998).

However, the notion of *fervor* goes back to Greco-Roman culture: in the Latin language, it conveyed the idea of heat and ardor, for both physical and psychological-bodily sensations such as boiling passions. For instance, a Christian prayer to the Holy Spirit expresses the Church Fathers’ warm demand to kindle their hearts with the fire of His love (Girardello 1998). A boiling fervor pervades John Cassian’s pure prayer, described by the author in terms of fire, flame, igneous prayer, and blazing heart; Colombás (2004) considers it a “true ecstasy” that clearly manifests charity. In this way, before describing Francis of Assisi’s experience of *stigmata* through the permanent, physical marking by the fire of love (Harmless 2008, p. 86), Bonaventure concluded his *Itinerarius mentis in Deum* (Bonaventure [1259] 2002, chp. 7,4.6, pp. 138–39) by associating the Holy Spirit with the fire that Jesus had to send to the earth: a transcending fire that both is God and also totally inflames and enters God with the most burning affection. In the same century, Jordan of Saxony ([1233?] 1935), the hagiographer of Dominic of Guzmán, described a vision had by the mother of the founder of the Order of Preachers, now invoked in a litany as “fire of love”: when she was pregnant, Joan of Aza dreamed of a black and white dog holding a burning torch in its mouth to set the world aflame with the fire that was brought by Jesus; it became the symbol of Domini-canines, the “Lord’s watchdogs”, with the fervor of preaching in their mouths. In this vein, Catherine of Siena identified her nature precisely within fire: God’s fire of love gave his own fiery nature to human beings and continues to transform everything into itself (Murray 2020). Three and half centuries after Bonaventura, another Franciscan friar, the capuchin Thomas Acerbis of Bergamo, described his mystical experiences in a volume

published posthumously with the title *Fire of Love, Sent by Christ to Earth, to Be Kindled: Or Loving Compositions* (Thomas of Bergamo [1620?] 1986).

The phenomenon defined as the “fire of love” is quite common across the Christian tradition. Passions and emotions, even the most ordinary ones, physiologically raise the body temperature, but in this specific mystical experience, extraordinarily high heats of above 43 °C can be reached which our bodies cannot usually withstand, as Giungato (1998) asserts. She reports three possible manifestations of the “fire of love”: interior warmth spreading throughout the organism from the heart, permeated by divine fire; very intense emotional ardors which accelerate the blood flow of the mystic when he or she gets closer to God’s love; and material burn, or fire in the strict sense, which burns objects or the skin. She mentions Bridget of Sweden, the founder of the Passionists Paul of the Cross, and Gemma Galgani as examples of those who have had true mystical experiences of this type. Fanning (2001) spoke of the fourteenth-century English hermit Richard Rolle of Hampol, who is most associated with a sensorial “fire of love mysticism”—although Fanning included two subsequent stages after the first level of burning: great joy and great sweetness. For this reason, he was very soon criticized by another fourteenth-century English mystic, Walter Hilton, an Augustinian canon regular who advocated a more ordinary approach to holiness (Fanning 2001, pp. 119–24; King 2004, pp. 62–64). Fanning lists further authors that affirmed this phenomenon: Macarius, Theophan the Recluse, John of Kronstadt, Bernard of Clairvaux, Hildegard of Bingen, the beguines Marie of Oignies, Margaret of Ypres, and Mechthild of Magdeburg, Tauler, Angela of Foligno, Margery Kempe, Catherine of Genoa, Francisco de Osuna, Marie of the Incarnation, Madame Guyon, George Fox, William Law, Faustina Kowalska, and Blaise Pascal. Pascal synthesized his “second conversion” (23 November 1654) with the concise exclamation “Fire!” (p. 218).

Among the mystics of fire, other scholars include the “harlots of the desert”, Gregory of Sinai, Beatrice of Nazareth, and the twentieth-century authors Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (King 2004) and the “fire watcher” Thomas Merton (Harmless 2008, pp. 19–40). Lastly, Chiara Lubich insistently used the metaphor of fire, and the word *focolare* (literally: “fire-place hearth”) acquired a broad new meaning thanks to the movement she founded with her companions: “Are we *focolarini*? We must be fire” (Lubich 1988, p. 10). She describes her experience as a contact with a stream of fire that ignites everyone who has contact with it: it lights her dead eyes, pervades all of her humanity, and “con-fuses” it with the divine, thus transforming her into “another-Christ” among the people whose vision bears the power of resurrection. This fire is a metaphor for the Trinitarian, eternal, and unitive love that ought to live in the midst of us (Atzori 2002).

Catherine of Genoa

Caterina Fieschi (1447–1510), also known as Catherine of Genoa, deserves special attention for the fiery experience of God and eschatological horizon which we find in her biography and which she interiorized in her extraordinary work as Rectress of Pammatone Hospital for many years. She brought together a steadfast commitment to her managerial job with an intense spiritual knowledge which pushed her to the limits of physical endurance. “The breadth and the fulness, the self-oblivion and the dignity, the claimlessness and the spiritual power” coexisted in her character (Hügel 1909a, p. 141). She was born into one of the noblest families of the Republic of Genoa and, despite her desire to become a nun like her sisters, was arranged at age sixteen to marry Giuliano Adorno, a Genoese nobleman who soon revealed his violent, squandering, and unfaithful temperament (p. 102). After ten difficult years, Caterina wished to die. However, on 22 March 1473, she had a decisive mystical experience while beginning her confession. It was described as the feeling of both a flame of fiery love and extreme inner suffering of her misery. Kindled and purified by this fire, which materialized in her gasps, Caterina immediately reached the purgative, illuminative, and unitive states, according to her hagiography. From that day, Catherine went into frequent ecstasies: Jesus’s flaming heart often appeared to her, “liquefying” her soul, her will, her heart, and her bodily senses. At the same time, she devoted her life to

care for the infirm; after her husband's bankruptcy and conversion, he became a Franciscan Tertiary, and they went to live next to Pammatone Hospital, and then within it at their own expense. She served as a nurse and, in 1490, was appointed rectress: general manager and treasurer of the entire structure, in which her husband and she eventually died. Saint Catherine of Genoa is also known by the title *Doctor of Purgatory*, chiefly for her *Treatise on Purgatory*. Together with biblical quotes and Jacopone da Todi's *Lode*, Pseudo-Dionysius seems to have influenced her theological vision (Hügel 1909a, p. 258). In her essay on Purgatory, she outlined the "happy" situation of people in Purgatory, an increasing joy slightly less than that of the Blessed. In spite of their suffering, souls are attracted by God's fire, which burns them with imperfections—the "rust of sin"—which would otherwise embarrass them in front of Him (Catherine of Genoa 1979, p. 72). This fiery pulling force purifies and annihilates the body and the soul in itself, until "our being is then God" (p. 80). Although conditioned by a certain anti-corporeal Neoplatonic philosophy, Catherine concluded her treatise by applying this eschatological purification to what she was feeling in her inner self, likening it to the "true Purgatory" she described as a direct projection of her own fiery experience (Hügel 1909b, p. 246).

3.3. Fire as an Eschatological Encounter

Because of its sexualized aspects, it is easier to imagine fire in Hell than in Heaven, said Bachelard (Bachelard [1938] 1964), who acknowledged that there is no consensus that eschatological fire constitutes the same physical phenomenon as terrestrial fire. To be clear, I reject a purely literal approach and, consequently, the idea of a material fire. Indeed, theologians continue to debate the nature and purpose of Hell,¹⁶ in particular in Reformed Churches, which reject the doctrine of Purgatory and thus render more definitive the crossroads between bliss and damnation. Over the last two centuries in Christian theology, there has been a clear trend toward hope for universal salvation for all human beings, but it cannot be considered *de fide*, and there was strong theological resistance to extend this principle to the devil, as in the early doctrine of *apokatastasis* proposed by Origen (a similar view was also shared by Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory of Nazianzus), which was condemned by the Second Council of Constantinople in 553 (Korb 2021). Regarding Hell, Christian theologians have four main positions which seek to reconcile God's justice and mercy (Crockett et al. 1996): the literal interpretation of an everlasting punishment with "material" fire and both *poena sensus* (physical pain) and *poena damni* (the loss of God); the metaphorical punishment of an affliction definitively chosen by people during their earthly journey; conditional immortality, implying the complete annihilation of the wicked and resurrection only for the righteous (Fudge 2012); the Catholic concept of Purgatory, a *locus* of cleansing which precedes entrance into the brighter realm of Heaven. Purgatory is for those who do not immediately deserve hellfire and is described by Scripture as *aionios*, which should be translated as "of the Eternal [God]" rather than "eternal". We may add Manni's (2020) considerations that the worst disgrace is not to suffer for one's errors—that would be a sign of repentance which ultimately leads to God—or to simply endure punishment, but to remain in one's sin without feeling anything. Alternatively, with Newman's ironic eschatological imagination, "if we wished to imagine a punishment for an unholy, reprobate soul, we perhaps could not fancy a greater than to *summon it to Heaven*" (Newman 1843, p. 7). Moreover, conceiving a punishment for the damned only to increase the happiness of those who have escaped the punishment seems absurdly sadistic to our contemporary liberal sensitivity (Greshake 2009, p. 162).

Etymologically speaking, the Greek πῦρ (*pýr*, fire) "may or may not be related" to the Latin *pūrus* (clean, pure) (Beekes and Beek 2010). The former comes from the proto-Indo-European root *peh₂-ur, with *peh₂- (striking [of sparks?]); the latter comes from *ph₂-úr-o, perhaps connected to πῦρός (*pūrós*), whose origins could be found in *puHro (wheat). However, the verb *pūr(i)gō* (to clean, clear) very likely derives from the word for fire (*pūr-)—thus, "to lead the fire about"—rather than from *pūro-ago- (to make clean) (Vaan 2008b). In German, the term for "Purgatory" is *Fegefeuer*, literally "sweeping fire",

a calque of Latin *ignis purgatorius*. *Ignis*, instead, has its roots in *h₁ng^w-ni-, perhaps connected to Agni, the Vedic fire deity (Vaan 2008a; Panaino 2013).

We must also note that Purgatory is not one of the four *Novissima* (Death, Judgment, Heaven, and Hell) of traditional Catholic eschatology, but it might be associated with the (particular) Judgment given immediately after Death, according to the bull *Benedictus Deus* (1336) by pope Benedict XII. It may also be according to the medieval Peter Lombard's retrospective conception of the remission not of *reatus culpae* (liability to guilt) but only of *reatus poenae* (punishments as consequences of the sins already remitted before death), and thus it may be considered a *purgation* that is *satispassio* (suffering caused by previous sins) and not *satisfactio* (the opportunity to perform worthy actions) (Bordoni and Ciola 2000, p. 129; Biffi 2007, pp. 92–93). Taking a look at the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1993), we find a description of the “final purification of the elect”, or Purgatory, in terms of *ignis purgatorius*, which is “entirely different from the punishment of the damned” (n. 1030). Indeed, the wicked “descend” into an “eternal fire”: *ignis aeternum* (n. 1035), Hell, a term that denotes “a state of definitive self-exclusion from communion with God and the blessed” (n. 1033).

Purgatory was conceived as an occasion of mercy for the souls who were not yet ready to fully enjoy God but could benefit from the prayer of the living, thanks to the ecclesial communion embracing both. On this basis, associated with the tendency to quantify the “stay” in Purgatory in terms of penal duration, the doctrine of indulgences spread. During the sixteenth century, the scandalous buying and selling of them was encouraged by the papacy as a fundraising strategy, arousing the protests of Martin Luther and subsequently launching the Reformation. In a Reformed perspective, indulgences contradict *Sola Scriptura*, *Sola Gratia*, and *Solus Christus* principles: such a teaching is not found in the Bible and presupposes a certain human participation in the fulfillment of salvation, as if the sole sacrifice of Christ were not enough (Bordoni and Ciola 2000, p. 211). Nevertheless, in his preaching, Luther used the image of the *ignis purgatorius* kindled by the Holy Spirit, instilling in us a desire to love from now until the day of Judgment, when we will be spotless, bright as the sun, and “full of love”.¹⁷

In the past century, contemporary Catholic theologians have also taken traditions of Eastern Christianity into serious consideration, which are less juridical in their views of the hereafter than those of the Western Church. In particular, they have embraced the idea of a prospective and progressive purification in a divinizing process which continues from the present until the definitive state, towards God. “The earthly life is the first Purgatory, but since this purification is rarely perfect, there must be a [later] moment in which the work of purification can continue without the continual contamination of the soul”, as Biffi (2007, p. 95) explained. For this cardinal, punishment is not manifested in the lack of God, but in the clearest consciousness (and shame) of our earthly shortcomings, as well as a delay in the anticipated fullness of divine glory (that is, in terms of perceived intensity and not of time, because God's mercy is ever present for both the dying and the living). This “creative waiting” is properly an ascendant path guided by the Holy Spirit which cures and strengthens wounded human harmony and restores its unity (Bordoni and Ciola 2000, pp. 130–34).

Consequently, Judgment cannot consist of wanton violence against a human being at the mercy of an incomprehensible and arbitrary power, or an individualistic self-judgment without external references,¹⁸ but one that involves the relationship between God, who in His arrival expands every possible residual resistance to his openness. His beloved creatures, and also the relationship among them, are transformed by his burning love. Greshake's (2009, pp. 154–55) proposal is “to avoid, as far as possible, even the expression “Purgatory” and in its place speak of refinement, reconciliation and purification, and healing and maturation after death”. Nonetheless, as we have seen, *ignis purgatorius* literally means “the fire that makes pure/clean” and *purificatio* “cleaning/clearing by fire”, so they are nearly synonymous and considered as such also in *Lumen Gentium* (1964, n. 49), in which the term *purificantur* is preferred instead of the traditional *purgantur*, an expression excessively

burdened by terrible “imagination and beliefs on fire punishments”, sometimes endorsed by “a pseudo-religious literature” (Bordoni and Ciola 2000, pp. 67, 211). However, the problem, from an orthodox perspective, may lie in the *ignis*, if it is considered a penalty or a reformulation of the universal *apokatastasis*. Of course, it is possible to make dogmatic assertions about purification without images of fire (Biffi 2007, p. 94), and yet this would undermine the prophetic realism of Christian eschatology. To be clear, contemporary Catholic theologians agree on several points: Christ is God’s judgment which invites all to freely respond to his love in order to accomplish his salvific mission (Bordoni and Ciola 2000, p. 71); death is the ultimate meeting with God in Christ, who judges, liberates, saves, enlightens, and perfects human beings (Bordoni and Ciola 2000, p. 217; Kasper and Augustin 2018, p. 29); thus, Purgatory is God itself, and the *purificatio* is the encounter with God (Küng 1982), who is “Heaven for those who gain Him, Hell for those who lose Him, Judgment for those who are examined by Him, Purgatory for those who are purified by Him” (Balthasar 1960).

More than human encounters, the anxiety or desire of which might increase our heart rate, blood pressure, and body temperature, the encounter with God, especially in death, may be described as a clarifying fire of love and is precisely the transformational moment of Purgatory (Boros 1965, p. 98; Greshake 2009, pp. 152–57; Rahner 2016, p. 265; Kasper and Augustin 2018, p. 29). This is not solely because God Himself is biblically depicted as purifying fire, but also because His loving gaze provokes a fiery reaction of the type we experience throughout our earthly journey. The mystics we have examined described it through a bodily filter which situates eschatology in everyday life. “Fire’s metaphorical caresses—the heat of the lover’s hands and lips—are the medium in which all the dead live” (Griffiths 2007). The flames are, in Heideggerian terms, the *existentiell* aspect of judgment which is already accessible to those who desire to authentically love by exposing themselves to God’s fire, although ultimately the cognizance of Christ, God, and the communion of saints will be unavoidable (Ratzinger 1988, pp. 228–33; Balthasar 2005).

Mystics may be seen as the “spiritual experience of God in action” (Sequeri 2005, p. 131). Mystical people feel in their body a concrete call for action in this world. They usually live a *prolepsis*, or anticipated version of the eschatological encounter in their flesh. Mystics of fire, Catherine of Genoa teaches us, did not limit themselves to begging for prayers for the dead but were committed to fighting against the present hells of selfishness and injustice, and to curing their victims. During the Middle Ages as well, Purgatory was the most common motive for active “works of piety” (*Werkfrömmigkeit*), as Rahner (2016, p. 263) noted.

4. Possible Implications of a Revised Approach to Fire in the Eschatological Imagination

4.1. Transformative Impact of Eschatological Imagination

The critical rhetorician Brueggemann (1993, p. 13), recalling Kearney, defined imagination as “the human capacity to picture, portray, receive, and practice the world in ways other than it appears to be at first glance when seen through a dominant, habitual, unexamined lens”. Commenting on this quote’s utopian ethical power, the theologian Johnson (2012) highlights “the potentially subversive function of imagination, the ways in which imagination can challenge the givens of a particular cultural norm or situation by picturing an alternative norm or situation”. In particular, she pieces together the political impact of different eschatological imaginations of the Kingdom of God in the USA between the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century, concluding that political practice was influenced by theological hopes for the future. When “pre-millennialistic” tendencies prevailed—i.e., the vision of our world as ruled by Satan, and the expectation of an imminent intervention by God that would change all—working for the social good was viewed with suspicion, and there was a greater focus on individual salvation; correspondingly, in the “post-millennialistic” interpretations of our world as the Kingdom of God under construction, there was a driving force for active socio-political engagement.

Recently, a researcher from the University of Bucharest, [Petrache \(2019\)](#), studied three theologians from different Christian denominations (Gaston Fessard, John Zizioulas, and the already mentioned Moltmann) to offer a similar conclusion: “The eschatological framework models our relationship with the future. [. . .] Eschatology provides a rich set of resources for imagining a better world and therefore influences behaviour in the present one”. Hence, the act of imagining the future has practical consequences. It confers an intense awareness to our decision-making process in a broader context where the true meaning of things comes to light, but also instills in us a constant openness to “something else than the present” and “new possibilities for action” in it. Another approach comes from David Tracy and his notion of the “revisionist” eschatological imagination as a “rhetoric of virtue”, starting from the plurality and ambiguity of our postmodern situation. Tracy argues that Christian hope persuades us to act out of the final power of love to put an end to present injustices and mold a better future ([Shields 2008](#)).

4.2. Implications in Christian Systematic Theology

We have seen that Christian mystics could be more effective than rational theologians. Mystics perceive God’s burning fire on their skin, and given the weight of their responsibility—which can lead to the promised blossoming of human life or to the real possibility of its definitive failure—they craft an eschatological imagination. This act must not be reduced to mere wordplay, for then it would lose all strength of conviction ([Greshake 2009](#), p. 167). Nor must it wander in fanciful human projections, because it requires sound foundations in a process which is already coming to pass and which has already been inaugurated by the *Eschatos*, the Coming One, who is Jesus Christ in Christian theology. To use [Cullmann’s \(1946\)](#) expression, Christ “already but not yet” came to set our world on fire and to definitively annihilate the darkest power of death which had already been defeated by his resurrection. Christian mystics feel the warmth of His *parousia*, compelling them to act prophetically within this unique existence without wasting a single heartbeat to spread the Risen One’s fire which purifies, cures, and transfigures *this* world in its future reality ([Biffi 2007](#), pp. 44–45).

In this regard, a “purified” eschatological imagination of fire requires the hermeneutical principles on which Catholic theologians agree: it must have a strong biblical basis, it must be Christological, and it must depart from the present human experience which is progressively purified by God’s Spirit. It must also be perceived as a fire that pushes for and incites an expanded commitment to justice and love within the world to presage the Kingdom of God. For these reasons, the majority of contemporary theologians do not dismiss the metaphor of an eschatological fire, although the image by itself may cause ambiguities owing to its distorted past representations.

However, we can only do away with faulty imaginaries by creating alternative ones which correspond to our bodily affective experiences, as the mystics of fire revealed. Despite the way in which John of the Cross invited us to ultimately go beyond images to grasp the full unity with God, including the image of fire, which is useful in the early stages of mysticism, His reality can only be perceived within our current reality, “in bodily form”, *σωματικῶ ἔϊδει* (*sōmatikō eidei*), as Lk 3:22 depicted the Holy Spirit in Jesus’s baptism. All things considered, a strict *apophatism* impedes any positive knowledge about God, but also any communication from God, who in Christian theology chose to convey Himself not only by metaphor but also in person as a human being limited in his historically conditioned communicative and imaginative faculties. New Testament authors unreservedly recount Jesus’s feelings and human reactions, writing, for example, about his tears (Lk 19:41; Jn 11:35; Heb 5:7). We can deduce that his body could not have avoided the sensations of heat and cold, and even of fever when he inevitably fell ill. As a man of his time, he knew of the daily uses of fire and perhaps himself suffered burns; the discovery of the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* of fire is ubiquitous among human beings. Moreover, also speaking of fire in the Lukan parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Lk 16:19–31), Jesus evoked the rich imaginary of the First Testament and various apocalyptic tendencies of

Second Temple Judaism, such as that of John the Baptist's fiery apocalypticism together with its metaphorical ambivalence.

These fundamental experiences should also be taken into consideration by those pursuing transcendental theological approaches, which focus on human conditions for the knowledge of God. Likewise, many mystics of fire we have mentioned plunged into God's fire of love with inevitable personal and social consequences, having experienced the eschatological imagination in the strongest affective sense and opened their minds to new theological perspectives. Eschatology should favor a type of imaginary of fire that exhibits ambivalence and contains intrinsic limits to its figurative language; at the same time, it should have a significant personal and communitarian impact. This should not be due only to the fact that unjust behaviors lead to unhappiness in the hereafter, thus motivating people to seek a shorter or milder "punishment". Above all, an authentic Christian imaginary of fire that adheres to the fundamental hermeneutical criteria in eschatology cannot be a vehicle of sadistic revenge but rather should prepare one for the ultimate encounter, which has already been set in motion since the good news of Jesus's baptism of fire: Christ's death and resurrection which culminated at Pentecost, in the Lukan perspective (Macchia 2018). Every imaginary must pass this "test of fire". Certainly, the fervent passion that moves many "works of piety" is frequently identified by Christians with God's urging love (2 Cor 5:14) totally given by Jesus to those who welcome Him: His own creative Spirit burns and needs to be shared. The Christian *lex orandi, lex credendi* speaks of "unitas Spiritus Sancti" (unity of the Holy Spirit) and "in aestu temperies [. . .] fove quod est frigidum" (in heat, temperateness [. . .] warms that which is cold). The Holy Spirit, like the image of fire, has a dialectical dimension because of its power to change the plights of humans and to preserve differences among them. According to many Christian theologians, the role of the Spirit is to creatively unite Father and Son, and everything in God.

4.3. Consequences for Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Dialogue

Balthasar (1960) concluded that thinking about Purgatory as a dimension of judgment and characterizing it as the good news of the encounter between the sinner and the flaming gaze of Christ would make it possible to improve ecumenical dialogue. This intermediate state is usually considered the main point of divergence between Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox eschatologies, but nowadays, each Christian confession seems to have greater internal differences (Bordoni and Ciola 2000). Our reconsideration of the fire imaginary may offer a dynamic tension of continuity and discontinuity between the present life and the future promised by the Coming One, owing to the cosmic role of the Holy Spirit in healing, purifying, and divinizing all those who anticipate, prepare for, or are currently undergoing this intermediate *purgatorial* process which has already begun. Therefore, it was perceived in the bodily experience of the mystics of fire, seized by an extraordinary source of power which they identified with God's burning love. By avoiding horrific punitive representations which are rejected as misconceptions in any case by contemporary eschatological hermeneutics, the universal experience of fire is one of the preferred ways to communicate the intimate relation between the mystics and the advent of their ineffable source of love. As the cause and effect of their affective personal and communitarian engagement which arises from passion rather than fear, fire characterizes the entire purification process which is already within the world and is intrinsically eschatological from the Christian point of view.

Mystical experiences are irreducible to a dogmatic definition, but they can contribute to the development of collective imaginaries and the strengthening of personal dedication. They are more effective than abstract statements of principle which often give rise to conflicts in ecumenical and inter-religious contexts. Furthermore, temperature perception is a matter of habit: one can train, for example, to eat extremely hot peppers or to become a fire eater. Using the same metaphor, a warming up of the spirit can accustom the mystic to God's fire. Out of this experience, different perceptions of the same (eschatological) reality can be described: complete consummation, purification, pleasant warmth, etc. If dogma

may prefer to prudently describe the Trinity as non-consuming because this allows for the Three Persons (and for the people participating in God's Trinitarian life) to remain distinct, mystical enthusiasm generally emphasizes a fire that is all-consuming, since the difference between the Creator and His creatures is the point of departure which is taken for granted. In the pivotal moment of encounter, it is impossible to remain cold: intense emotions and sensations blaze, although in an ambiguous and sometimes conflicting manner.

4.4. Exploring Islamic Perspectives

Catholic theology could also enrich its reconsideration of the eschatological role of the fire by dialoguing with Islamic perspectives. This final section will be limited to exploring some ideas which scholars of the field may pursue in the future. Muslim eschatological traditions are as complex and variegated as Christian ones. Fundamentally, the Islamic *afterlife*, which follows the (controversial) intermediate state of *barzakh* and the judgment that accompanies the resurrection of the dead, splits into two opposite afterworlds: "the Garden" (*al-janna*) and "the Fire" (*al-nār*). Like Talmudic and New Testament apophatic verses, the Holy Qur'an says that "no soul knows what has been hidden for them of comfort for eyes as reward for what they used to do" (32:17); however, vivid, material, and detailed descriptions of these two separated realms—in particular of the Garden—are pervasive within its *ṣuwar* (chapters). Narratives of Prophet Muhammad's Night Journey (*al-isrā'*) and Ascension to Heavens (*al-mi'rāj*) may have influenced Dante's *Divine Comedy* (Asín Palacios 1919), and perhaps even Western Christian eschatological topography. In addition, these narratives evoke images which contain complex material aspects and varying levels of the hereafter (*al-ākhirā*), although they are described from the limited perspective of this world (*al-dunyā*). Despite the traditional scholarly separation between *al-dunyā* and *al-ākhirā*, the possibility to mystically visit the latter reveals a level of permeability between this world and its closer *otherworld*, which develops in a veiled level of reality. Lange (2016, p. 11) argued that "Paradise and Hell, according to a certain (and as I argue, widespread) view in Islam, cannot be fixed in time; they are everywhen", in a synchronic continuum.

The eschatological imagination satisfied the interest of Muslims and materialized in a concrete way the object of belief, providing a meaningful framework for their earthly journey and a small taste of what is to come for those who submit and offer themselves to God (Rustomji 2008). Since the early Meccans' opposition to the Prophet Muhammad's preaching, the Garden for believers and the Fire for unbelievers serve as powerful identity markers for the Islamic faith and an ethical framework which instills both moral and spiritual discipline and an emphasis on the importance of exemplary human companions. "Theatres of and for the imagination", these two realms express, by words, images, and allegories, Muslims' hopes of fulfillment and fears of failure, as well as the vices and virtues that lead to them (Lange 2016, p. 13). Additionally, they offer a space for reflection on earthly projects, political utopias and dystopias included.

According to Rustomji (2008), the ethics, topography, and architecture of these twin eschatological realities were conceived in antithesis: "All the elements that exist in the Fire provide the reverse effects of the elements in the Garden. If there is water, it does not quench thirst; rather, it boils over and burns the inside of the person like a hot boiling spring (88:7). If there is food, it is the bitterest fruit called *dari'* that one eats only to regurgitate and then eat again (88:6). If there is respite, it is met by another lash". The Fire is a Hell of emptiness, solitude, and extreme sensitivity to both mental and physical pain which is also inflicted by the body against itself. However, God's merciful disposition and intercessions can rescue people from the Fire, or at least end their pain. Expanding Qur'anic metaphors of the ultimate consequences of human behaviors, the Garden and the Fire became objectified future places in *hadiths*, then increasingly exaggerated by storytellers and dramatized in the succession of eschatological events—sometimes, as al-Ghazālī did, by personifying the Fire itself—and finally analyzed topic by topic with specific questions and disputes. Such discussions covered cosmology (when and where are they located), soteriology

(the conditions of salvation and damnation), and ontology (the material, spiritual, and imaginative “reality” of the otherworld), as Lange (2016, p. 165) classified them.

This author offers a panoramic overview on Islamic eschatology which takes into account not only the Sunni traditionalist scholastic, but also Shi’i perspectives and Sufi mystical experiences. These perspectives can be grouped into four main attitudes, sometimes weaved together in the work of the same author: “Fear of the otherworld; hope and longing for the otherworld; and dismissal of the otherworld, of which there is a cold (or ‘sober’) and a hot (or ‘intoxicated’)” (Lange 2016, pp. 219–20). Sufi mystics sometimes speak about unity (*ittihād*) or even inhabitation (*hulūl*) of *al-ākhirā* within *al-dunyā*, or about a voluntary return (*al-rujū’ al-ikhtiyārī*) that interiorized both *al-janna* and *al-nar*, developing a type of “realized eschatology” not alien to the Holy Qur’an.

Starting from Lange’s comprehensive account, I point out three starting points which Catholic theology could consider for a dialogue on fire in the eschatological imagination: the ontology of the realm of imagination, the “hot” mode of *contemptusultramundi*, and the fiery experience of God’s love.

As for the first, the category of imagination is also crucial in Shi’i traditional eschatology. Its bases can be traced to Avicenna’s (eleventh century CE) notion of the imaginative faculty and its role in shaping representations that could be experienced by simple-minded people, in the same way we can feel our dreams, but permanently. Meanwhile, philosophers have access to a higher experience of intellectual fulfillment (Lange 2016, p. 185). The “world of image and imagination” (*‘ālam al-mithālwa-l-khayāl*) acquired its own autonomy two centuries later, with al-Suhrawardī’s Neoplatonism (twelfth century) and the subsequent Illuminationist school of thought. Al-Shahrazūrī (thirteenth century) located it “as a third world between the sensible and the intelligible world” (p. 191); Ibn al-‘Arabī conceived this “interstitial” field as a mirror that represents the truths hidden behind earthly things (p. 237). Then, according to MullāṢadrā of Shiraz (seventeenth century), the strength of the soul’s imagination determines its otherworldly experiences (p. 193). These intuitions can enrich the Christian theological renewed valorization of the imaginative faculty and the consequent eschatological search for an affective, and effective, imaginary for the people.

The second aspect instead tends to relativize the Garden and the Fire, because unity with God—who is not in the Heaven, but above it—is considered far more important by certain Sufis. We have seen a similar attitude in John of the Cross. Among Islamic mystics, one the leading figures is Rābi’a al-‘Adawiyya of Basra (eighth century), who “proclaimed that she wished that the Garden and the Fire did not exist because they were becoming objects of people’s desires and replacing the sole and necessary preoccupation with Allah” (Rustomji 2008). Other Sufis displayed an analogous *contemptus ultramundi*: God should not be served out of fear of punishment or the desire for the wealth of paradise, but for His own sake.

This leads directly to our third point: the fiery experience of God’s love. In the ninth century, Bāyazīd al-Bistāmī labeled Heaven the “supreme evil” but dismissed Hell in equal terms. “God’s fire of love burns a thousand times more intensely than the fire of hell; in fact, God’s love fire has the oxymoronic power to burn hell [. . .] and hellfire will then be consumed and obliterated”, according to al-Bistāmī (Lange 2016, p. 238). Though blamed by those who feared deleterious repercussions to common believers, three other ecstatic tenth-century mystics should be mentioned. One is Abū Bakr al-Shiblī, who is depicted in a tradition carrying two torches, intending to burn both the Garden and the Fire, which are nothing in comparison with God. Then, there is ‘Abd al-Jabbār al-Niffarī, who invited Sufis to enter the Fire, saying that it would then be extinguished because God’s fire of love burns everything (p. 239). Last and the most prominent of the three is al-Hallaj, made known to the Western world by Massignon ([1922] 2019, p. 229), who reported a quote from the tradition that transmitted the mystic’s life and words: “For *seventy* years the incandescent fire of God has filled us within to the point of consuming us entirely. Suddenly a spark struck from a flint ‘I am the Truth’ (*Anā’l-Haqq*) has fallen on our lifeless ashes (to revive

them). And now may he come, the one who is burned, to tell us what our burning is!" Thus, despite the fact that the fiery imaginary of the Qur'an is strictly confined to *al-nār*, many thinkers and mystics considered fire outside of the realm of Hell and beyond the bounds of the Garden and the Fire, in God's own burning nature:

O Torch, come, that you and I may moan together.

For the states of a burned heart, which he who burns from the same fire knows!¹⁹

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Notes

- ¹ This term does not allude to Theillard de Chardin's "Cosmic Christ", or to the physical destruction of the universe theorized by the astrophysical-cosmological sciences (Brancato 2017, in particular pp. 70–100), but simply to the traditional "topography" of eschatologic realms, such as Hell's circles underneath the earth's crust.
- ² See also the encyclical letter of pope Benedict XVI (2007) *Spe Salvi*.
- ³ Essen (2016, p. 20) describes it as an "oft-quoted expression" (*vielzitierten Wort*). See, e.g., Balthasar (1960); Canobbio and Fini (1995); Bordoni and Ciola (2000, pp. 36–37); Nitrola (2001); Gozzelino (2001); Colzani (2001); Torres Queiruga (2003, p. 276); Tappen (2021, p. 25).
- ⁴ Another oft-quoted word, by Rahner ([1960] 2005, p. 144): "die antizipierte Reportage des Zuschauersbeimkünftigen Ereignis".
- ⁵ See also Bordoni and Ciola (2000, p. 154).
- ⁶ "Kirchen- und machtpolitischen Missbrauchs", she writes, citing Köhler (1996).
- ⁷ This is the translation proposed by Lennon (2015, p. 73): "An imagining [*imaginatio*] is an idea whereby the mind regards a thing as present ... which indicates the disposition of the human body rather than [perhaps this should be as well as] the nature of the external thing".
- ⁸ See the work of Castoriadis (1987).
- ⁹ "Not with reasons, but with the roar of trumpets, with thunder and withlightnings".
- ¹⁰ Thomassen (2009) examines the existing tention between conceiving *al-nar* as a place of punishment for sins and as a place reserved for disbelievers.
- ¹¹ Canetti (2013) uses Hans Blumemberg's concept of "metaphorology".
- ¹² Pseudo-Dionysius Aeropagita (2012, pp. 51–52). *De Coelestis Hierarchia* 15, 2, 328C–329C. See the Greek critical edition by Ritter and Heil.
- ¹³ Augustine of Hippo ([426?] 1841) *De Civitate Dei*; in particular book 21; PL 41:709–752.
- ¹⁴ Gregory the Great ([593?] 1896) *Dialogi*; in particular chp. 30, 41, 45–47; PL 77.
- ¹⁵ Aquinas ([1273] 1906, pp. 147–51) *Supplementum*; q. 70. It is interesting to highlight that, according to Aquinas, fire by its nature has the power to unite.
- ¹⁶ For a historical approach, see Vorgrimler (1993).
- ¹⁷ "Wird uns auch gegeben der heilige Geist, welcher jnn uns ein neue flamme und feur anzundet, nemlich liebe und lust zu Gottes Geboten, Das sol jnn dem Gnaden Reich anfahen und jmer fort gehen, bis [zum] feur am Jungsten tag [. . .] werden aller dinge sein, wie die liebe Sonne leucht, on alle makel und gebrechen, voller liebe" (Luther [1537] 1911, p. 150).
- ¹⁸ See, e.g., Guardini (1949). *Contra*: Beaudouin (1951).
- ¹⁹ Kāshifī, quoted by Massignon ([1922] 2019, p. 229).

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