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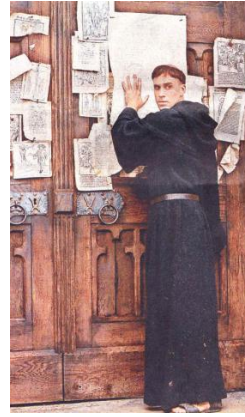
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This artist's interpretation depicts Martin Luther, as a young monk, nailing his "95 Theses" to the door of the Wittenberg Church. Image online via St. Paul's College (in Dublin, Ireland).

When Martin Luther (a German monk) nailed his 95 Theses on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, in 1517, he simultaneously placed Purgatory in a coffin and nailed it shut. Or... at least ... that was one of his objectives.

Incensed about perceived Church abuses, Luther was especially upset with the sale of Indulgences. Church doctrine at the time suggested that if someone paid money for a slip of paper, called an Indulgence, the soul of a dead person could escape Purgatory and fly into heaven as soon as the money was placed into the Church's coffers. Luther thought the Church was deceiving people, especially since the Pope was using money paid for Indulgences to fund Church projects (like St. Peter's Basilica in Rome).

Luther's writings and actions led to a tumultuous time in church history. The net result was a Protestant Reformation where many Church teachings (like the sale of Indulgences and the concept of Purgatory) were tossed away. To be saved, Luther and other Protestant reformers insisted, one needed *Sola Scriptura* (the Bible alone)—not teachings and traditions of the Catholic Church which, they asserted, did not have roots in the Bible.

In the 16th century, Purgatory sustained a violent attack in England (still a Catholic country when Henry VIII took the throne). The secular head of the country (Henry) clashed with the spiritual head of the country (Pope Clement VII) over the issue of divorce. Henry wanted to end the marriage with his first wife, Catherine of Aragon (who had produced no male heir), so he could marry Anne Boleyn (a younger woman).

Pope Clement VII (born Giulio de Medici, great-grandson of Cosimo de Medici, the towering fourteenth-century figure now remembered as a "Godfather of the Renaissance"), refused to grant a divorce. Henry was furious. Retaliating against the Church, he closed all the monasteries in his realm, forbade pilgrimages to "holy places," banned relics and images and suppressed Catholic-based devotions on which English culture had depended.

With those actions, Henry VIII turned his realm into a Protestant country. Years of upheaval followed. His daughter Mary, a Catholic, tried to undo the effects of her father's cataclysmic changes. Persecuting Protestants, Mary died after just a few years on the throne.

Her half-sister, Elizabeth I, whose Luther-influenced mother (Anne Boleyn) was at the center of the divorce controversy, was Protestant. When Elizabeth died, and was succeeded by James (the Protestant son of the executed Catholic, Mary Queen of Scots), the Gunpowder Plot was concocted. Its purpose—if successful—was to place a Catholic-influenced monarch on the British throne.

But even a king cannot completely erase that which his people have known, and believed, for so long. As Stephen Greenblatt observes in Hamlet in Purgatory:

When in 1545 and 1547, with zealous Protestantism in the ascendant, the English Parliament acted to dissolve the whole system of intercessory foundations created to offer prayers for souls in Purgatory, the lawmakers and bureaucrats found themselves faced with an immense task. They had to strike at colleges, free chapels, chantries, hospitals, fraternities, brotherhoods, guilds, stipendiary priests, and priests for terms of years, as well as at many smaller funds left to pay for trentals (the cycle of thirty requiem masses), obits (the yearly memorial service), flowers, bells, and candles...It would have been a social catastrophe simply to shut down all institutions that had been created in the attempt to provide prayers for the dead. (Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory*, page 39.)

Through all the controversy, Purgatory survived as a concept even in the Church of England. C.S. Lewis, perhaps the most-quoted Christian writer of the 20th Century (and brilliantly portrayed by Anthony Hopkins in the movie *Shadowlands*), was an Anglican who believed in Purgatory:

*My favourite image on this matter comes from the dentist's chair. I hope that when the tooth of life is drawn and I am 'coming round,' a voice will say, 'Rinse your mouth out with this.' This will be Purgatory. The rinsing may take longer than I can now imagine. The taste of this may be more fiery and astringent than my present sensibility could endure. (C.S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer*, page 107.)*

Today, the Catholic Church still holds that Purgatory is a place where a person's soul goes after death. Let's take a look at the Church's actual teaching.

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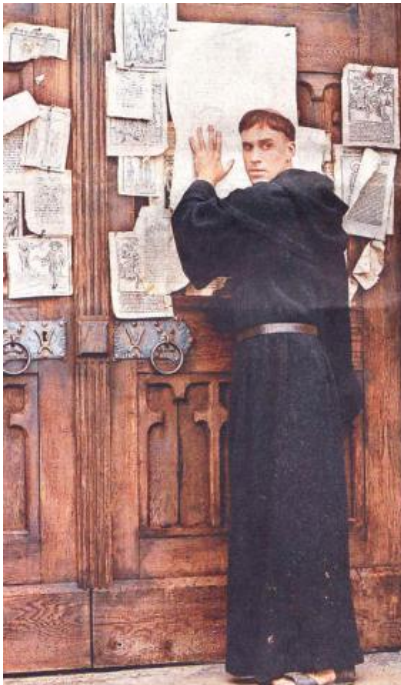
Media Stream



Martin Luther

Image online, courtesy the Statens Museum for Kunst, a Danish-Language website.

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Castle Church in Wittenberg

Image online, via St. Paul's College (in Dublin, Ireland).

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Castle Church in Wittenberg

Image online, via [St. Paul's College](#) (in Dublin, Ireland).

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St. Peter's Basilica

Image online, courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

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Henry VIII

Image of a portrait of Henry VIII - by a follower of Hans Holbein (the King's painter) - online, courtesy Wikimedia Commons. It is believed this copy of an original painting, by Holbein, was created by Holbein's workshop circa 1536-7.

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Pope Clement VII

Image online, courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

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Catherine of Aragon

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Anne Boleyn

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Clement VII

Portrait of Pope Clement VII, an oil-on-slate created by Sebastiano del Piombo around 1531, online courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

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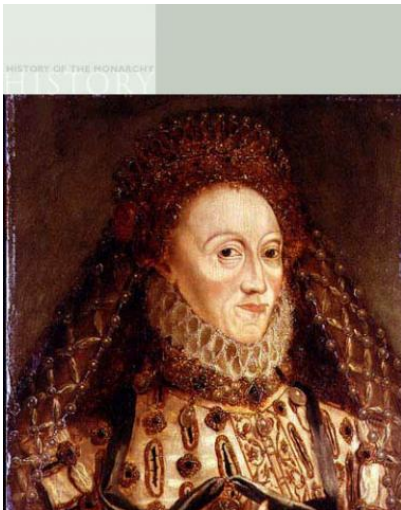


Mary - Daughter of Henry VIII

Image online, courtesy Royal Monarchy.gov website.

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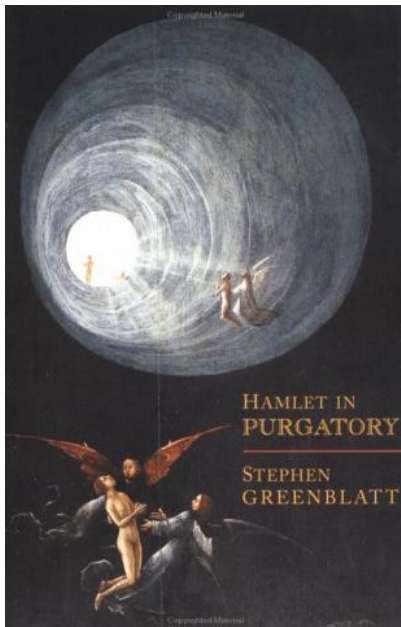
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Queen Elizabeth I

Image online, via the National Portrait Gallery website.

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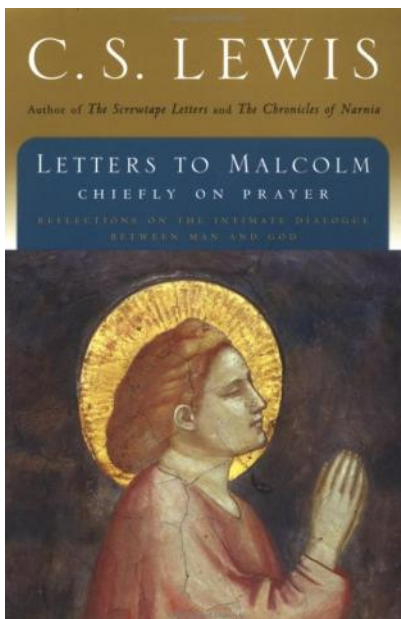


Greenblatt - Hamlet in Purgatory

Image online, courtesy the amazon.com website.

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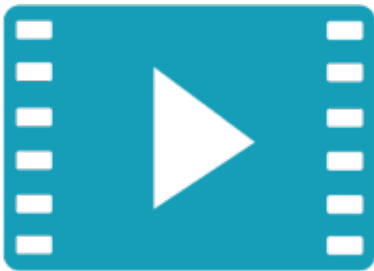


Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer

Image online via Amazon.

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Renaissance - Birth of a Dynasty, Part 2

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Renaissance - Birth of a Dynasty, Part 6

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