

Speedy retribution

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [February 7, 2001](#) issue

In this ecumenical era not only churches but cultures are melding, merging, learning from one another and even transposing and trading their distinctive characteristics. For example, Finland, historically Lutheran, has come to exemplify old Catholic understandings and uses of purgatory at a time when the Catholics themselves think and talk less and less about purgatory.

Purgatory was about measurement. “How long?” “How hot?” “How punishing?” people asked about the process of purging the soul and preparing it for heaven. And they measured sin, which got you into purgatory, and grace, which did not quite exempt you from it.

In a review of Anthony Gottlieb’s *The Dream of Reason: A History of Philosophy from the Greeks to the Renaissance* (*Times Literary Supplement*, November 24) Frederic Raphael tells us that in the 14th century some philosophers at Merton College became so engrossed in mathematical analysis and measurement that they came to be known as “the Oxford calculators.” Says Raphael, “After laying the groundwork for the modern concept of velocity, they tried to arrive at precise measurements of such imponderables as sin and grace.”

The confessors and indulgence-sellers whom we might call “the Vatican calculators” for centuries measured how long one would be purged for having sinned so and so much and been short of grace by such and such.

Now the Finns have taken over the project. Finland is about 98 percent Lutheran but only about 2 percent churchgoing, so Lutheran notions of sin and grace are long forgotten by most Finns. In Finland, according to the *Wall Street Journal*, people are fined for speeding (usually more than 12 mph over the limit) on a scale graded not only according to speed but according to income. Jaako Rytsola, a 27-year-old Internet entrepreneur, who sped in his BMW, was fined \$71,400. Kejo Kopra, a corporate director pulled over, was fined \$14,500. The poor—if there are any poor in Nokia-land—can get by with as low a fine as \$63 to \$110. (The price of sinning at even the slowest speed and the lowest income level is high in Finland.)

How do these “Helsinki calculators” do their work? Everyone in Finland has a cell phone. Everyone’s net monthly income can be known by all who own a computer. The formulas for assessing traffic fines are more precise than the old purgatorial ones ever were: Take your monthly income. Reduce it by 1,500 Finnish marks, and divide the total by 60. Then for each dependent deduct 15 marks (though owning real estate might add 20 marks). This final figure, called a day fine, is multiplied by a number from one to 120, depending on how severe the traffic officer—by analogy, the local priest-confessor—considers your violation. And the computer conveys all the results instantly to the traffic cop.

This would never go in America, where the wealthy with good lawyers, if they pay at all, are assessed the same amount as the poor, who can hardly pay at all.

If you are a celebrator of grace, Finland is no more your location of choice than purgatory would be. If you focus only on sin, resent the wealthy and want them to have their comeuppance, you might consider it heaven.