IV

The Theology of Death

1. POSING THE QUESTION

At first glance, our society's attitude to death seems remarkably contradictory. On the one hand death is placed under a taboo. It is unseemly. So far as possible, it must be hidden away, the thought of it repressed in waking consciousness. On the other hand, one is also aware of a tendency to put death on show, which corresponds to the general pulling down of shame-barriers everywhere. How can this contradiction be accounted for? On closer inspection, we seem to find a two-fold development whose phases affect each other in various ways yet remain in themselves distinct.

Bourgeois society hides death away. Josef Pieper has made a collection of a number of significant variations on this theme. Thus, for instance, a distinguished American newspaper does not allow the word "death" to be printed.[1] In the United States, even funeral homes themselves devise special arrangements so as to avoid mentioning the fact of death. Something similar happens in our hospitals, where death is carefully concealed so far as may be possible. This tendency to hide death away receives effective support from the very structure of modern society in which the corporate life of the family is increasingly displaced by the logic of production and the specializations which it

has developed. As a result, the family home frequently seems no more than a sleeping-bag. In the daytime it effectively dematerializes. No more can it be that sheltering space which brings human beings together in birth and living, in sickness and dying. Indeed, sickness and death are becoming purely technological problems to be handled by the appropriate institution. These basic human things are thus pushed to the margins, not just so far as our deliberate thoughts about them are concerned, but socially, structurally. They cease to be physical and metaphysical problems which must be suffered and borne in a communion of life, and become instead technical tasks technically handled by technical people.

And so the taboo of death is at first strengthened by the outer structure of society. Yet other processes are coming more and more into prominence where a rather different evolution seems to be taking place. I am not thinking here of that Nihilist defiance of death also mentioned by Pieper. Such an attitude is for the chosen few who, refusing to play the game of hide-the-slipper with death, attempt to bear the meaningless by looking straight into its eyes. The growing phenomenon I have in mind is in fact a third attitude which Pieper, once again, has aptly called the "materialistic trivialisation of death." On television, death is presented as a thrilling spectacle tailor-made for alleviating the general boredom of life. In the last analysis, of course, the covert aim of this reduction of death to the status of an object is just the same as with the bourgeois taboo on the subject. Death is to be deprived of its character as a place where the metaphysical breaks through. Death is rendered banal, so as to quell the unsettling question which arises from it. Schleiermacher once spoke of birth and death as "hewed out perspectives" through which man peers into the infinite. But the infinite calls

his ordinary life-style into question. And therefore, understandably, humankind puts it to the ban. The repression of death is so much easier when death has been naturalized. Death must become so object-like, so ordinary, so public that no remnant of the metaphysical question is left within it.

All of this has momentous consequences for man's relation to himself and to reality in general. The Litany of the Saints expresses the attitude of Christian faith vis-à-vis death in the petition: *A subitanea morte, libera nos, Domine*, "from a death that is sudden and unprepared for, deliver us, o Lord." To be taken away suddenly, without being able to make oneself ready, without having had time to prepare—this is the supreme danger from which man wants to be saved. He wants to be alert as he sets out on that final journey. He wants dying to be his own action. If one were to formulate today a Litany of the Unbelievers the petition would, no doubt, be just the opposite: a sudden and unprovided death grant to us, o Lord. Death really ought to happen at a stroke, and leave no time for reflection or suffering.

Yet it is apparent that the total ban on metaphysical fear did not succeed. It had to be followed up by actually turning death into an object of production. By becoming a product, death is supposed to vanish as a question mark about the nature of being human, a more-than-technological enquiry. The issue of euthanasia is becoming increasingly important because people wish to avoid death as something which happens *to me*, and replace it with a technical cessation of function which I do not need to carry out myself. The purpose is to slam the door on metaphysics before it has a chance to come in.

But the price for this ban on fear is very high. The dehumanizing of death necessarily brings with it the de-

humanizing of life as well. When human sickness and dying are reduced to the level of technological activity, so is man himself. Where it becomes too dangerous to accept death in a human way, being human has itself become too dangerous. Oddly enough, it is in this attempt to renege on being human that the most contrary present-day positions find their common ground. For on the one hand we find people moving towards a positivistic, technocratic world view, and on the other they are equally attracted by a nostalgic yearning for some unspoiled state of nature. In this latter tendency, rational self-consciousness is regarded as the culprit that breached the peace of paradise, and man as the one animal that took a wrong turning. Attitudes to dying determine attitudes to living. Death becomes the key to the question: What really *is* man? The mounting callousness towards human life which we are experiencing today is intimately bound up with the refusal to confront the question of death. Repression and trivilization can only "solve" the riddle by dissolving humanity itself.

2. THE HISTORICAL ROOTS OF THE QUESTION

(a) The Prevailing View

Since positivist and materialist answers leave us finally perplexed at this crucial juncture, it should be clear that the issues of life and death are not among those which progress in the exact sciences can clarify. There is a set of questions—the really human questions—where other approaches towards an answer must be brought in. In this respect, the experience comprised in the wisdom of the tradition remains of central importance. And yet, if one seeks counsel here from the theologians, who are the professional guardians of tradition in Christianity, one discovers, by and large, a somewhat depressing state of affairs.

In recent discussion, one can identify two phases which are distinct though they cannot be separated chronologically in any watertight fashion. The first tendency is particularly well represented by the works of P. Althaus and E. Jüngel.[2] It is based on that antithesis between biblical and Greek thought which since the sixteenth century has increasingly stamped itself on theological work. So far as our question is concerned, the application of this rather schematic contrast has it that the Greek understanding of death, decisively shaped by Plato, was idealistic and dualistic. Matter was looked upon as in itself a bad thing. Only spirit and idea count as genuinely positive, God-like, the really real. On this view, man is a strange creature in which the two contrary realities of matter and spirit have come to coincide. The being thus moulded is self-contradictory, fatal. The divine flame of the spirit is imprisoned in the dungeon of the body. The way of the wise man, accordingly, is to treat the body as the tomb of the soul and to prepare himself for immortality through such enmity to the prison house. Death, then, is the great moment when the gates of that prison house are flung wide open and the soul steps forth into that freedom and immortality which are its by right. Death is man's true friend, his liberator from the unnatural chains of matter. Socrates, as presented by Plato, is an exponent of this idealist interpretation of death. He celebrates his own dying as a festal journey from the sickness of bodily life to the health of true living. At the moment of death, he asks that a cock be sacrificed to Aesculapius, the customary sacrifice offered in gratitude for a recovery. Death here is interpreted as emergence from the diseased semblance of life which is this world into real and lasting health.

At this point we get our first glimpse of a conclusion which in recent years has become of great importance for Christian faith and preaching. Some people are saying that

belief in immortality belongs to this dualistic, body-hating Platonist thinking, and has nothing whatever to do with the ideas of Scripture. In biblical thought, by contrast, man is seen in his undivided wholeness and unity as God's creature and cannot be sliced down the middle into body and soul. This is why the biblical authors do not submit death to an idealistic transfiguration in their descriptions of it, but present it, rather, in its full, unvarnished reality as the destroying enemy of life. Only Jesus' resurrection brings new hope. However, this hope in no way softens the stark reality of death in which not the body alone but the entire human being dies. Language itself indicates this truth, for we say "I will die," not "My body will die." You can't get away from the totality of death: it devours you, leaving nothing behind. True, the risen Christ gives us the hope that, by God's grace, the entire person will be raised again into newness of life. This biblical hope, expressed only in the term "resurrection," presupposes the finality of death. The immortality of the soul must be firmly rejected as an idea which goes against the grain of biblical thought. We shall return in some detail to the question of immortality in a moment. The prior question facing us now is how death itself is to be interpreted.

In certain segments of contemporary theological literature the thesis of "total death" has undergone such a radicalization that its biblical aspect is visibly stripped away.[3] In a thorough-going fashion writers take over that archaizing view of the Old Testament once found among the Sadducees, and claim that the Jewish Scriptures in themselves know nothing of either immortality or resurrection. These ideas, it is insinuated, are invoked only in a marginal way, on loan from Iranian thought. Congruently with this, some authors insist on isolating "Q," the reconstructed sayings-source lying behind Matthew and Luke,

as the original form of a "Christianity before Christ." Here not only the theme of the Church, but also that of death and resurrection, sacrifice and atonement, are conspicuous by their absence. Only on such an approach, it is said, can the total death of each human being retain that irrevocable finality which is proper to it. Resurrection becomes a mere cipher whose content mutates according to the philosophical convictions of the writers concerned. Such views are not without a certain inner consistency. A resurrection juxtaposed with total death in an immediate and unconnected manner *does* become a fantastic sort of miracle, unsupported by any coherent anthropological vision. The suggestive power of this new view of things derives from the perfect correspondence between the most advanced demands of the spirit of the age on the one hand and, on the other, the biblical message as suitably doctored by source-critical manipulation. However, this also means that faith abdicates its responsibility of offering an authoritative response to man's ultimate questions. Faith here simply points to the general experience of absence of meaning as to its own final comment on the human situation. But for such an office faith is superfluous anyhow.

(b) An Attempt at Revisionism

If, for the sake of scientific objectivity, one tries to take a closer look at the historical data, the following picture emerges. First of all, the contrasting of cultures and thought forms as though these were fixed quantities—in this case Greek versus biblical—makes no historical sense. Great cultures, and the thinking which grows up on their soil, are not static formations with settled boundaries. The grandeur of a culture is manifested in its capacity for reception, for permitting itself to be enriched and transformed. A truly great culture does not enclose itself hermetically in

its own sphere, like a capsule. Rather does it carry within itself a dynamic capacity to grow, for which the interplay of giving and receiving is an essential condition.

With respect to our theme, this means that in the face of the question of death all cultures and milieux of intellectual reflection have been subject to change. The individual phases of this process show certain marked similarities. Originally, all cultures found shelter in the very structure of the cycle of life and death, a shelter which myth built for their repose. They knew a contented this-worldliness, a desire for fulfilment in the richness of long life and continued existence in one's children and their posterity. This is not just how things were seen in the Old Testament world in early times. It is just as much true of the early Hellenes. Achilles, after all, preferred the life of a beggar in this world to being sovereign of the shades whose life is hardly a life at all. And this description also applies to the early period of that most spiritual of all cultures, India.[4] I should add that nowhere is death conceived as being absolutely the end. Everywhere some kind of subsequent existence is assumed. Complete nothingness was not even thinkable. This afterlife, which is not life but a curious mixture of being and nothingness, on the one hand was rendered possible by rites of passage with their provision of food for the dead, and on the other was in itself an object of great fear. The dead, and the nothingness they carry, might break through into the sphere of life. Thus rites on behalf of the dead are also apotropaic rites which protect life by sealing the departed into their own realm. Some form of ancestor cult and belief about the dead is coextensive with humanity as such. As the ancient historian Johann Jakob Bachofen put it, it is down streets of graves that we make our way into the past.

This shared view of all early cultures according to which

only this life is really life, whilst death is being-suspended-in-nothingness was everywhere superseded as man's final word on the matter in the course of his own spiritual evolution. When the unreflecting shelter of the tribal state collapsed and the individual stepped forth to claim his full personal identity, this view of things underwent a crisis. This happened everywhere, not least in Israel, though in different forms: a kind of primitive Enlightenment in which being human is highlighted in a new way.

Only in this context can one understand the specific intention of Plato's thought. In Homer's human, all *too* human, depiction of the gods there is a touch of irony, and a suggestion of rebellion against the peevish caprices of the higher powers. In Greek tragedy this incipient revolt is actually declared. The tragedians' *deus ex machina* gives dramatic form to a contestation or denial of the actual world and its gods. Were they truly divine, they would intervene as saviors and establish justice in the city. Such attitudes, thus anticipated in a mythopoeic world view, took on the explicit expression of a rational critique in the work of the Sophists. Those attitudes also generated a program for human emancipation from the traditional powers-that-be. What took the place of the latter was natural law—understood, however, simply as the right to self-assertion of the stronger party. This development was to some extent prefigured in the Homeric figure of Odysseus.

But when trust in being and community is undermined in this way, and the individual's own advantage becomes the only lodestar, the bonds of community cannot hold. The spiritual crisis of the fifth and sixth centuries before Christ was also the political crisis of ancient Hellas. It was to this crisis, at once political and spiritual, that Plato and Aristotle tried to respond: not by turning back the wheel of history and putting together again the broken pieces of

the world of myth but in a way that might lead to a new future. They entered into the spirit of the Enlightenment, drew on the procedures of the Sophists, tried by this very means to find anew those guiding powers which make community possible. Plato, taking his inspiration from Socrates, set over against the natural law of the strong and the cunning a natural law of being itself, wherein the individual finds his place in the whole. Taking up the concept of natural law, he interprets it not in an individualistic and rationalistic way, but as the justice of being which grants to the individual, and to the whole, their possibility of existing. For Plato, what is important is that justice is truth and so reality. The truth of justice is more real than mere biological life or individual self-assertion. In comparison with justice and truth, mere biological existence appears as outright unreality, a shadow cast by the real, whereas the person who lives by justice lives by the really real.

Such a thought provides a fresh foundation for politics and so a new possibility for the *polis* as community. At the same time, Plato gives it a grounding of a religious kind. In developing this insight by reference to religious tradition, he wishes to identify primordial springs of wisdom which may take the place of the shallow religiosity of the by-now-faded myths. The philosophical martyrdom of Socrates belongs in this context. It is both a political martyrdom and a testimony to the greater degree of reality to be found in justice as opposed to simply biological existence.[5]

These reflections appear to be taking us far from our theological problem. Nevertheless, they are necessary. They show how untenable is that caricature of Platonism on which many current theological stereotypes depend. The real goal of Plato's philosophy is utterly misconceived when he is presented as an individualistic, dualistic thinker who negates what is earthly and advocates a flight into the beyond. The true fulcrum of his thought is the

new ground of possibility for the *polis*, a fresh foundation for politics. His philosophy finds its center in the idea of justice. It developed in a political crisis, and derives from the conviction that the *polis* cannot stand wherever justice is something other than reality and truth. The recognition of the living power of truth, which includes the thought of immortality, is not part of a philosophy of flight from the world, but is in an eminent sense political philosophy. These are insights which remain fundamental for an evaluation of contemporary "political theology" and political eschatology. If these movements do not confront the problem of death in its relation to justice at that level of depth which Plato opened up for us, they can in the end only obscure the heart of the matter.

If we try to capture the core of Plato's discovery we can formulate it by saying that man, to survive biologically, must be more than *bios*. He must be able to die into a more authentic life than this. The certainty that self-abandonment for the sake of truth is self-abandonment to reality and not a step into the night of nothingness is a necessary condition for justice. But justice is the condition on which the life of the *polis* endures. In the final analysis, therefore, justice makes possible biological survival itself. When we turn to consider directly the questions of the immortality of the soul and the resurrection of the dead, we shall have to discuss the mythopoeic and political instruments whereby Plato chose to express these insights. It will then become plain to what degree Christian faith had to intervene here, correcting and purifying. There is indeed a profound divergence between Plato and Christianity. Yet this should not blind us to the possibilities of a philosophical unfolding of the Chrisitian faith which Platonism offers. These possibilities are rooted in a deep affinity on the level of fundamental formative intention.

3. THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE QUESTION IN BIBLICAL THOUGHT

(a) The Old Testament

At first, Israel's concept of death simply exemplified the common views of an archaic world sheltered in the conditions of tribal awareness. But from the denial of the gods of myth, and from faith in the unicity of Yahweh, there gradually came about distinct changes in the Israelite picture of reality. Those changes are debated in the crisis of the Wisdom schools, a kind of Jewish parallel to the Greek "Enlightenment." They were in question again in that crisis of Jewish consciousness connected with the figure of Jesus Christ which led to the formation of Christianity.

In the early period, the fulness of life consisted in dying "old and filled with years." What that meant was tasting the full richness of earthly life, seeing one's children and one's children's children so as to participate through them in the future of Israel, Israel's promise. Only childlessness or premature death were felt as inexplicable in natural terms, death's malign intrusion, a punishment falling on man and shattering his proper share in life. Such events were explained by means of a connection between one's actions and one's destiny. That is, they were considered to be results of sin. So here too life, and the idea of life's essential justice, remained in principle intact.

Part of this widespread primitive concept of death, to which Israel has not yet made any distinctive contribution of her own, is that death is not simply annihilation. The dead man goes down into Sheol, where he leads a kind of un-life among the shades. As a shade, he can make an appearance in the world above, and is thus perceived as dreadful and dangerous. Nonetheless, he is essentially cut off from the land of the living, from dear life, banished into

a noncommunication zone where life is destroyed precisely because relationship is impossible. The full extent of Sheol's abyss of nothingness is seen from the fact that Yahweh is not there, nor is he praised there. In relation to him too, there is a complete lack of communication in Sheol. Death is thus an unending imprisonment. It is simultaneously being and nonbeing, somehow still existence and yet no longer life.

When one looks at this nonbeing which is, curiously, something other than complete nothingness, one cannot just accept death as an event of the natural order. From this realization, and above all in her life of prayer, Israel developed a phenomenology of sickness and death wherein these things were interpreted as spiritual phenomena. In this way Israel discovered their deepest spiritual ground and content, wrestled with Yahweh as to their import, and so brought human suffering before God and with God to a new pitch of intensity.

Sickness is described with the epithets that belong to death. It pushes man into a realm of noncommunication, apparently destroying the relationships that make life what it is. For the sick person, the social fabric falls apart just as much as the inner structure of the body. The invalid is excluded from the circle of his friends, and from the community of those who worship God. He labors in the clutches of death, cut off from the land of the living. So sickness belongs in death's sphere; or, better, death is conceived as a sphere whose circumference reaches deep into human living. Essentially, this sphere is dereliction, isolation, loneliness, and thus abandonment to nothingness.

The phenomenology of sickness does not only generate a phenomenology of death, and an elucidation of death's spiritual content. It also comprises a phenomenology of life. Not every mode of existence is necessarily what we

can call really living. Some life is definitely nonlife. To extend it would be not immortality but rather the eternalizing of a torture, a contradiction. Human life does not become real living simply by its mere presence. Genuine living is something we continually touch, yet in touching it experience how distant we still are from it. Life in the authentic sense of that word is present where sickness, loneliness and isolation are not, and where richness of fulfilment, love, communion, contact with God actually are. Life is identical with blessing, death with a curse. Life means communion, whereas the heart of death is the absence of relationship. The purely physical facts of existing or perishing form only the background of that distinctive human, social and—in the last resort—theological phenomenon which is the life of a man in its heights and depths.

Because of this, the question was simply bound to arise eventually as to whether this state of affairs does not point in two directions. If on the one hand the physically still living and breathing human being can be "dead" in a state of noncommunication, must it not also be true that the power of communion, of divine communion at any rate, is something stronger than physical dying? May there not be life beyond physical perishing?

Yahwistic faith, therefore, makes its own potent contribution to belief in that life which is eternal since God's power is its support and stay. In the light of these connections, it becomes apparent that the acceptance of faith in a resurrection was no mere alien intrusion in Israel.[6] On the contrary, Israel's archaic understanding of Sheol is what, if anything, would link her to the nations. That understanding simply illustrates a stage of awareness found in all cultures at a certain point in their development. As yet, Israel's faith in Yahweh had not unfolded in all its inner

consistency. For the notion that death is a barrier limiting the God of Israel to his own finite sphere manifestly contradicts the all-encompassing claims of Yahwistic faith. There is an inner contradiction in the affirmation that he who is life itself encounters a limitation on his power. The state of affairs which such an affirmation betrays was inherently unstable. In the end, the alternatives were either to abandon faith in Yahweh altogether or to admit the unlimited scope of his power and so, in principle, the definitive character of the communion with man he had inaugurated.

This thesis that the indestructability of communion with God, and therewith our eternal life, follows in strictly theo-*logical* terms from Israel's concept of God is of course open to no little objection at the historical level. A number of Old Testament texts show clearly how popular piety in Israel lovingly sought communication with the dead in just the way found in the pagan religions of the ancient Near East. People were familiar with the belief in the afterlife characteristic of Israel's neighbors and, what is more, they cultivated it. The official religion of Israel, as expressed in the Law, the prophets and the historical books of the Hebrew Bible, did not accept these beliefs and practices. It no more denied all existence to Sheol than, at first, it denied the existence of other gods than Yahweh.[7] But it chose not to deal with this area. Indeed, it classified everything to do with the dead as "impure," that is, as disqualifying one for a share in Yahweh's cultus, since, after all, death was synonymous with noncommunication between the Israelite and Israel's God. But in this case, are we not dealing here with a specific option of Yahwistic faith, deliberately setting itself over against the *religio humana et pagana* and excluding belief in immortality in any form? A twofold answer may be given to this question.

In the first place, the classification of the entire sphere of "death" as cultically impure is a rejection of the cult of the dead in whatsoever form. The refusal to admit the legitimacy of a cult of the ancestors—still, of course, widely practiced in that society—was the real reason for the naturalizing of death. In a wide segment of the history of religion, the ancestor cult absorbed people's religious attention to an ever greater degree, finally pushing the high god of a given tradition to the margins of consciousness where he eked out a miserable existence as a *deus otiosus*, dethroned and useless. The ancestor cult presented an attraction which Israel was obliged to resist if her concept of God was not to be destroyed. Thus the comprehensive, exclusive claims of Yahweh, while incorporating the idea of the indestructability of divine communion, demanded in the first instance an absolutely uncompromising ruling out of the cultus of the dead in whatever form. A certain demythologizing of death was needful before Israel could bring out the special way in which Yahweh was himself Life for the dead.

But secondly, the classification of the entire sphere of death as cultically impure was not without its theological consequences. For it had the effect of highlighting the connection between death and sin. Death, being linked with a turning away from Yahweh, throws light on what such separation entails. We shall meet this motif again, as, from its humble beginnings in the primitive logic of "as you act, so shall you be," it becomes ever purer until at last it arrives at insights which point the way to Christology.

By way of conclusion: the "this-worldliness" of Old Testament faith may be ascribed on the one hand to those archaic life-ways which for great tracts of its history were its own, and on the other, to the special claims of the Israelite concept of God. These claims required the elimination of the cult of the dead and the ideas of immortality which

that cult enshrined. Yet at the same time, and inevitably so, the same concept of God made it impossible for such "this-worldliness" to have the last word. What we are confronted with is, therefore, an inherently unstable and open historical process. It is a misconception to regard it as a static dogmatic structure. The apparently contradictory demands of the concept of God in Israel made the long journey a taxing one. The final crisis of the traditional doctrine erupted at last in the Wisdom books, those monuments to the Israelite "Enlightenment." In their different ways, Qoheleth and Job express and canonize the collapse of the ancient assumptions.

Both books offer a radical critique of the long-established connection between action and destiny. They hold that the assertion of such a connection is false. Human life and death have no manifest logic.[8] In Qoheleth this realization precipitates a profound scepticism. Everything is nonsensical: all is vanity. These statements are but parried in a half-hearted way by the author's half-skeptical, half-believing resignation. Though he is ready to live without meaning and to trust in a meaning as yet unknown, he can hardly suppress the question whether it might be better not to have been born at all. Life enters a crisis-condition.

Job gives even more dramatic expression to the internal conflict within the Wisdom schools and the resultant repudiation of their classic "action-destiny" schema. The book's climax appears to be the appeal to God as Redeemer over against the God of senseless destruction found in ordinary experience.[9] Job puts his hope in the God of faith over against the God of such experience, entrusting himself to the One who is Unknown. There may be a glimmer of hope here for an abiding life to come, but the textual tradition is too uncertain to allow any worthwhile judgment about the form such hopes might have taken.

Job and Qoheleth, then, document a crisis. With their

aid, we can feel the force of that mighty jolt which brought the traditional didactic and practical wisdom to its knees. Yet before this *dénouement*, something of a breakthrough to a new level of insight had occurred in the spiritual experience of the prophets and other pious individuals in Israel, and this proved able to sustain faith in the crisis of Wisdom. In the first place, we have the interpretation of the painful experience of the Exile in the Servant Songs of Second Isaiah. There, sickness, death, abandonment are understood as vicarious suffering, and in this way the realm of death is filled with a novel, positive content. Death and deprivation through illness are not simply the duly apportioned punishment for sins. They can be the proper path of someone who belongs to God, and, treading that path in suffering, the servant of God can open for others the door to life as their savior. Suffering for God's sake and that of other people can be the highest form of allowing God to be present, and placing oneself at the service of life. Disease and death are no longer now that threshold beyond which a person becomes useless, a thing without meaning, not least for God whom he can no longer praise. These apparently wholly negative things are no longer forms of subjection to the absolute void of Sheol. Rather are they a new possibility of not only doing but *being* more than one ever could do or be through the holy war, or the cultic service of the Temple. The key to this new possibility is mercy, declared as early as Samuel to be more than sacrifice. The reason why these insights are so important is that sickness, death and Sheol remain phenomenologically identical. Thus death no longer appears as the end, as irreversible falling into nothingness and doom. Rather does it stand out as a purifying and transforming power. Sickness and death are now the way and lot of the just wherein justice becomes so profound that it

turns into the mercy of vicarious service. The question, then, as to whether or not resurrection in the proper sense of that word is already spoken of in such a text as Isaiah 53, 9–12 is really secondary. Resurrection is objectively implied there. Sheol does not hold the one who suffers in the way of the Servant. Contrariwise, it is by his suffering that the surface of our seeming life is pierced by life in all its authentic plenitude.

In its own fashion, the troubled personal piety of many of the psalms contributed depth and maturity to this emerging experience. After the return from Babylon, the ancient tribal situation, supportive as it was, could not be reestablished. The pious were often reduced to a minority vis-à-vis cynics and sceptics. In a personal wrestling with God, and deprived of the support of the clan, they had to endure the question of the meaningfulness of their own spirituality. I would like to refer here to just two psalms which became important for Christian reflection. First, brief mention should be made of a psalm-text which provided one of the principal supports for the early Christian proclamation of the resurrection: Psalm 16. In a profound trust in God's saving power, the psalmist dares to say:

> . . . my body also dwells secure.
> For thou dost not give me up to Sheol,
> or let thy godly one see the Pit . . .
> in thy presence there is fulness of joy,
> In thy right hand are pleasures for evermore.[10]

Even if this text expresses no explicit faith in the overcoming of death, we hear nevertheless the accents of a ringing certitude that Yahweh is stronger than Sheol. The psalmist is aware that he has found shelter in the hands of God, whose life-giving power endures for ever. Even so cautious an interpreter as H. J. Kraus notes:

That living Ground which is God bears up the body of man even in the midst of death. Will not God's life-giving power also bring man through death into new life? This assurance remains as yet concealed within the words of the Old Testament text. Still, no one could mistake the mysterious luminosity of these verses.[11]

Psalm 73—one of Augustine's favorites, by the way—leads us into still deeper waters.[12] Here the psalmist confronts the same problem which had exercized the authors of Qoheleth and Job. Of course, Kraus is perfectly right in pointing out that the psalm is not a scientific treatise but the expression of an existential anguish amounting almost to despair, and of an experience which answers to this necessity.[13] The psalmist notes the happiness of sinners secure in their good fortune. They seem to be supermen who succeed in everything.[14] The world appears to be so perverse that the only rational course is to live like them, to have done with God and to make common cause with the cynical potentates of the earth, the successful people, those human "gods" who seem hardly mortals at all. "They set their mouths against the heavens, and their tongue struts through the earth."[15] Piety seems meaningless and utterly in vain. And in point of fact, so long as one's starting point is the connection between action and destiny, and one's vantage point a concept of religion as earthly utility and justice, the only courses open are indeed either despair or apostasy. The psalmist finds the answer he is seeking in the Temple, that is, not in reflection, nor in the observation of other people, comparing one set with another, nor in an analysis of the course of history which might simply lead to a religion of envy, but in looking at God. In such contemplation he recognizes the phantasmal quality of the happiness of the wicked, its nothingness and pitiableness. The envious man is a fool, no better than a beast.[16] And at this point there arises an experience which,

with truly explosive power, breaks out of everything that came before:

> Thou dost guide me with thy counsel,
> and afterward thou wilt receive me to glory.
> Whom have I in heaven but thee?
> And there is nothing upon earth that I desire besides thee.
> My flesh and my heart may fail,
> but God is the strength of my heart and my portion for ever.[17]

Adolf von Harnack remarked justly that the force of this last verse is overwhelming.[18] Without any borrowing from external sources, without the assistance of any philosophical or mythological structure, the certitude arose quite simply from the psalmist's deeply experienced communion with God that such communion is more potent than the decay of the flesh. Communion with God is true reality, and by comparison with it everything, no matter how massively it asserts itself, is a phantom, a nothing. As Kraus puts it:

The void is filled by a communion with God which shatters all this-worldliness into smithereens.[19]

As we have seen, communication is life, and its absence death. From this thoroughly empirical assertion the psalmist now draws out, thanks to his experience, an inference of decisive importance: communication with God *is* reality. It is true reality, the really real, more real, even, than death itself. The psalmist neither describes nor elaborates. He does not ground his statement in reflection, nor explain it. That is the strength and the weakness of this text. It offers no theory of immortality, simply expressing a certitude of experience which thought must elaborate and interpret using its own resources. Not that any speculative model could ever take the place of this central experience

in all its profound originality. For this is one of those texts where the Old Testament stretches forth to touch the New, and most fully possesses its own deepest implications. It develops a really original idea about the overcoming of death which cannot be slotted into Greek or Iranian categories. It operates neither with the concept of soul nor with the idea of resurrection, being derived from the concept of God and the idea of communion, or, rather, from the experience of communion itself. Looking on God, being with God: this is recognized as the point from which the ever-present, all-devouring menace of Sheol may be overcome.

Before concluding this brief survey of the Old Testament, we must not fail to mention a third group of texts, the martyr literature. Through the experience of martyrdom comes a new assurance of life, and a new way of enduring death. Daniel 12,2 belongs to this context:

> And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.

Here we have the clearest formulation of resurrection-faith that the Old Testament contains. Its context is the Hellenistic age when, in the course of persecution of the Jews, some of the finest testimonies to Israel's faith took shape. Call to mind the image of the three young men in the fiery furnace, that timeless symbol of the suffering people of God, praising God in the midst of the flame.

Besides Daniel, two of the latest books of the Old Testament, Wisdom and Second Maccabees, also belong here. The accounts of martyrdom offered by the latter illustrate very graphically the wider context of thought and experience. Confronted with persecution, the believer faces the question as to which he prefers, the righteousness of Yahweh or his own life, his *bios*. Placed before this option between righteousness and life, no presumed connection between action and destiny can avail. It is faith itself, a righteousness mirroring that of God, which brings about the cruelly premature loss of life. The problematic of the seventy-third psalm takes on its sharpest intensity. In this situation, the believer comes to recognize that Yahweh's righteousness is greater than his own biologically conditioned presence to life. He who dies into the righteousness of God does not die into nothingness, but enters upon authentic reality, life itself. It becomes clear that God's truth and justice are not just ideas or ideals but realities, the truth of authentic being. The Book of Wisdom expresses its author's certitude that the just die into life, not into nothingness, with the help of ideas borrowed from Greek thought.[20] But it would be foolish to speak here of a conquest of Hebrew thinking by Hellenism. What the third chapter of Wisdom gives us, at its heart, is that selfsame spirituality of martyrdom which runs from Isaiah 53 to Psalm 73. All these texts, even those from the Book of Job, stem from a situation which was at any rate "martyrdom-like." In the path followed by the men who wrote the Old Testament, it was suffering, endured and spiritually borne, which became that hermeneutical vantage point where real and unreal could be distinguished, and communion with God came to light as the locus of true life. By comparison with this crucial departure-point, the utilization of an Oriental thought pattern about resurrection in Second Maccabees and Daniel, or a Greek one concerning the fate of the soul in the Book of Wisdom, is altogether secondary. Though such patterns are indeed drawn on to fill out the picture, the real point lies deeper, in the experience that communion with God means a life stronger than death. A parallel suggests itself here between an insight gained on the basis of faith-experience and the experience

of a Socrates dying for justice's sake, as recounted by Plato. Here we hit upon the real connecting link between biblical thought and Platonic philosophy, the factor which made possible the meeting of these two traditions.

(b) The Interpretation of Death and Life in the New Testament

Surveying the dramatic struggle of the Old Testament in its entire development, the unity of the two Testaments stands out in clear relief. The New Testament has no need to formulate any new ideas. Its newness consists in the new *fact* which gathers acceptingly to itself all that went before and gives it its wholeness. This new fact is the martyrdom of Jesus, the faithful witness, and his resurrection. The martyrdom and raising to new life of the Just One *par excellence* clothes in flesh and blood the vision of the author of Psalm 73 and the hope-filled confidence of the Maccabees. In the risen Christ, the cry of troubled faith has at last found its answering response.

How is death evaluated in this new light? The first thing to note is that the New Testament quite clearly preserves the basic thrust of the Old. In the Sign of the Cross, too, there is no apotheosis of death which would supplant an earlier joy in life. At the end of the internal development of the New Testament in the Book of Revelation, the "yes" to life and the assessment of death as something contrary to God put in yet another decisive appearance. At the end, the sea, that mythopoeic image of the underworld of death, must yield up its dead. Death and Hades, that is, the state of being dead, are now cast into the lake of fire and burned for evermore.[21] Death has vanished: only life remains.

We hear the same note sounded in First Corinthians 15. Death, the "last enemy," is conquered.[22] Its destruction signifies the definitive and exclusive rule of God, the victory of life invincible, where the shadow of death cannot fall. The basic Christian attitude to death is thus in continuity with that of the Old Testament, while both are sharply differentiated from such alternative great religious interpretations of reality as that evolved in India by Buddhist piety. There, the highest principle is the abolition of the thirst for being, a thirst conceived as the profoundest source of suffering. Christianity moves in precisely the opposite direction. It gives to our thirst for being the dramatic significance of a thirst for God himself, and sees therein the fulness of our salvation.

At the same time, the New Testament is also determined by a fact discussed earlier which seems (but only seems) to dislodge this fundamental option. Christ himself, the truly Just One, is in his very innocence he who undergoes suffering and abandonment even unto death. The Just One descended into Sheol, to that impure land where no praise of God is ever sounded. In the descent of Jesus, God himself descends into Sheol. At that moment, death ceases to be the God-forsaken land of darkness, a realm of unpitying distance from God. In Christ, God himself entered that realm of death, transforming the space of noncommunication into the place of his own presence. This is no apotheosis of death. Rather has God cancelled out and overcome death in entering it through Christ.

This is nothing less than the inversion of all previous values. Hitherto, life itself had counted as salvation. Now it is in very truth a death which becomes life for us. With the proclamation that the Cross is our redemption, death comes to occupy the central point in the confession of faith. But, one may ask, is not this a way of casting suspicion on life and thus of glorifying death? To find an answer to this question, we need to recall that phenomenology of life and death which had emerged from the inner travail of

the Old Testament. It can easily be verified in our own experience of living. We noted that day-to-day living is for the most part merely a shadow existence, a form of Hades, in which we have only the most occasional inkling of what life should truly be. This is why, in general, people have no immediate desire for immortality. The continuance *ad infinitum* of life as it is cannot appear desirable to anybody. And yet what seems to be the obvious conclusion—namely, that death ought to be arranged as painlessly, if also as belatedly, as possible, being perfectly normal and quite properly preceded by the maximum exploitation of life—this approach does not appear to work either. It is resisted by that quite primordial sensation which Nietzsche expressed in the words, "All joy wills eternity, wills deep, deep eternity." There are some moments that should never pass away. What is glimpsed in them should never end. That it *does* end, and, even more, that it is only experienced momentarily anyway: this is the real sadness of human existence.

How can we describe that moment in which we experience what life truly is? It is the moment of love, a moment which is simultaneously the moment of truth when life is discovered for what it is. The desire for immortality does not arise from the fundamentally unsatisfying enclosed existence of the isolated self, but from the experience of love, of communion, of the Thou. It issues from that call which the Thou makes upon the I, and which the I returns. The discovery of life entails going beyond the I, leaving it behind. It happens only when one ventures along the path of self-abandonment, letting oneself fall into the hands of another. But if the mystery of life is in this sense identical with the mystery of love, it is, then, bound up with an event which we may call "death-like." Here we come back once more to the Christian message of the Cross with its

interpretation of life and of death. That message interprets death by teaching us to see in dying more than the end point of our biological existence. Death is ever present in the inauthenticity, closedness and emptiness of our everyday life. The physical pain and disease which herald death's onset threaten our life less than does the failure to be with our true being. It is this failure which allows the promise of life to evaporate, leaving only banalities and leading to final emptiness.

Can we express our reflections up to this juncture in rather more ordered form? The phenomenon of death makes itself known in three very different dimensions. Firstly, death is present as the nothingness of an empty existence which ends up in a mere semblance of living. Secondly, death is present as the physical process of disintegration which accompanies life. It is felt in sickness, and reaches its terminal point in physical dying. Thirdly, death is met with in the daring of that love which leaves self behind, giving itself to the other. It is likewise encountered in the abandonment of one's own advantage for the sake of justice and truth. How are these three forms of death interrelated? And how are they connected to the death of Jesus? It is by answering this twofold question that the Christian understanding of death must attain its own clarity. The starting point must surely lie in the second meaning of "death": namely, that proper and primary sense of "death" found in the biological component of human reality.

Pain and disease can paralyze one as a human being. They can shatter one to pieces, not only physically, but also psychologically and spiritually. However, they can also smash down complacency and spiritual lethargy and lead one to find oneself for the first time. The struggle with suffering is the place of human decision-making *par*

excellence. Here the human project becomes flesh and blood. Here man is forced to face the fact that existence is not at his disposal, nor is his life his own property. Man may snap back defiantly that he will nevertheless try to acquire the power that will make it so. But in so doing, he makes a desperate anger his basic attitude to life. There is a second possibility: man can respond by seeking to trust this strange power to whom he is subject. He can allow himself to be led, unafraid, by the hand, without *Angst*-ridden concern for his situation. And in this second case, the human attitude towards pain, towards the presence of death within living, merges with the attitude we call love.

As we know, people run up against the fact that life is not at their disposal in more forms than those of such physical limitations as sickness bring home to us. The same thing happens in the central region of the human landscape: our intimate ordination towards being loved. Love is the soul's true nourishment, yet this food which of all substances we most need is not something we can produce for ourselves. One must wait for it. The only way to make absolutely certain that one will *not* receive it is to insist on procuring it by oneself. And once again, this essential dependence can generate anger. One can attempt to shake it off, and reduce it to the satisfaction of those needs that require no adventure of the spirit or the heart for their filling. Conversely, we can accept this situation of dependence, and keep ourselves trustingly open to the future, in the confidence that the Power which has so determined us will not deceive us.

And so it turns out that the confrontation with physical death is actually a confrontation with the basic constitution of human existence. It places before us a choice: to accept either the pattern of love, or the pattern of power. Here we are at the source of the most decisive of all questions. This claim of death upon us which we come across time and again *in media vita*—are we able to receive it in the attitude of trust which will usher in that fundamental posture of love? Or would this just be to throw up life's glittering prizes in exchange for "Waiting for Godot": a something that either does not exist at all or, at any rate, does not exist in the form in which we imagine it? Up to this point, our reflections have shown the interconnection of three distinguishable meanings of "death." But now the relevance of the Christological question begins to become apparent. The God who personally died in Jesus Christ fulfilled the pattern of love beyond all expectation, and in so doing justified that human confidence which in the last resort is the only alternative to self-destruction. The Christian dies into the death of Christ himself. This formula which has come down to us from Tradition now takes on a very practical sense. The uncontrollable Power that everywhere sets limits to life is not a blind law of nature. It is a love that puts itself at our disposal by dying for us and with us. The Christian is the one who knows that he can unite the constantly experienced dispossession of self with the fundamental attitude of a being created for love, a being that knows itself to be safe precisely when it trusts in the unexacted gift of love. Man's enemy, death, that would waylay him to steal his life, is conquered at the point where one meets the thievery of death with the attitude of trusting love, and so transforms the theft into increase of life. The sting of death is extinguished in Christ in whom the victory was gained through the plenary power of love unlimited. Death is vanquished where people die with Christ and into him. This is why the Christian attitude must be opposed to the modern wish for instantaneous death, a wish that would turn death into an extensionless moment and banish from life the claims of the

metaphysical. Yet it is in the transforming acceptance of death, present time and again to us in this life, that we mature for the real, the eternal, life.

If we juxtapose these thoughts with the picture we gained from a consideration of the biblical development of the theme of martyrdom, yet another window opens. Just as the dying of a human being cannot be confined to the moment of clinical death, so also sharing in the *martyria* of Jesus is not something that starts when a person lets his name go forward for imminent execution. Here too, the fundamental form of our participation is not spectacular, but perfectly ordinary. It consists in the daily readiness to give greater weight to faith, to truth and to what is right than to the benefits of not getting involved. It is surely evident that what makes human intercommunication possible at all is just this subordination of individual advantage to truth. How is it that human beings can communicate? It is because above them, common to them all yet proper to each of them, is a third factor: righteousness and truth. Certainly, trust in truth is only fully possible where there is conviction that truth exists and has spoken to us. But this simply brings us back to what we said before: martyrdom with Christ, the repeated act of granting truth more importance than self, is nothing other than the movement of love itself. If death be essentially the closing-off of the possibility of communication, then the movement which leads to communion is at the same time the inner movement of life. The process of dispossession of self uncovers the abyss of Sheol, the depth of nothingness and abandonment to nothingness which is present in our self-glorying, our desire to survive at the cost of what is right. Consequently, this process which seems death-dealing is really life-giving in the fullest sense.

In the light of this one can reach some understanding of

the Christian language of "justification" through baptismal faith. The doctrinal assertion that justification is by faith and not by works means that justification happens through sharing in the death of Christ, that is, by walking in the way of martyrdom, the daily drama by which we prefer what is right and true to the claims of sheer existence, through the spirit of love which faith makes possible. Conversely, to seek justification by works means trying to save oneself through one's own efforts in isolated concentration on the principle that finds the inevitable fruits of one's actions in one's destiny. As worked out in detail in particular cases, this attempt can take very subtle forms, but the basic pattern is always the same. Justification by works means that man wants to construct a little immortality of his own. He wants to make of his life a self-sufficient totality. Such an enterprise is always sheer illusion. This is true no matter on what level it is undertaken, whether in a primitive fashion or with the utmost scientific sophistication in the attempt to overcome death by means of medical research. Such self-assertion is at root a refusal of communication, which issues in a misjudgment about reality at large and the truth of man's existence in particular. For man's own truth is that he passes away, having no abiding existence in his own right. The more he takes a stand on himself, the more he finds himself suspended over nothing. He falls a prey to that nothingness which, taken by himself, he will assuredly enter everlastingly. Only by handing oneself over to truth and rightness does one find that communication which is life. It is intrinsic to my life that I find life only in endless receiving from others, being powerless to achieve it through my own active efforts. It is not works that are vivifying, but faith.

Now this way lit up for us by the theology of the Cross,

especially in the form of the Pauline doctrine of justification, in no way implies a *Weltanschauung* of passivity. Turning to truth, to rightness and to love, precisely as a process of receiving is at the same time the highest human activity of which we are capable. Similarly, it is surely clear that the rejection of "works" does not signify a rejection of the moral task but, on the contrary, a full assent to life as communication in that truth which has found its personal form in the risen martyr Jesus Christ.

Here we have reached a point at which the innermost unity and simplicity of Christianity show themselves for what they are. I may declare that the heart of Christianity is the Paschal mystery of death and resurrection. Or I may say that this midpoint really consists in justification by faith. Or, again, I may affirm that the center of it all is the triune God, and, therefore, love as the alpha and omega of the world. These three statements are, in fact, identical. In all three the self-same truth is indicated: sharing in the *martyria* of Jesus by that dying which is faith and love. Such faith and love are simultaneously God's acceptance of my life and my will to embrace the divine acceptance. And all this is from the God who can be love only as the *triune* God and who, in thus being love, makes the world bearable after all.

One last thought. By reflecting on that most personal event of our own dying, we become aware that Christian eschatology does not sidestep the shared tasks of the world, shifting the focus of human concern to the beyond, or making us retreat into a private salvation for individual souls. The starting point of Christian eschatology is precisely commitment to the common justice guaranteed in the One who sacrificed his life for the justice of mankind at large and thus brought it justification. Moreover, eschatology encourages us, nay, challenges us in most compelling fashion, to dare to realize in our own lives that justice and truth whose claims upon us—along with those of love—are eschatology's very own content.

4. SOME CONCLUSIONS ON THE ETHOS OF DEATH IN CHRISTIANITY

(a) Assent to Life as a Whole

Christian faith favors life. It believes in that God who is the God of the living. Its goal is life, and so it assents to life on all its levels as a gift and reflection of the God who is Life itself. It assents to life even in its overshadowing by suffering. For even then life remains a gift of God, opening up for us new possibilities of existence and meaning. For Christian faith there is no such thing as a life not worth living. Life, with all its shadow side, remains the gift of God, entrusted to us as companions who by loving service one of another acquire true riches and liberty.

(b) The Meaning of Suffering

Christian faith knows that human life is life in a higher and more comprehensive sense than mere biology grants. Spirit is not the soul's enemy but a richer and greater life. Man finds himself only in that measure in which he accepts truth and justice as the locus of real living, even though the opening-up of life to these wider dimensions always takes on, in human history, the character of *martyria*. While faith does not deliberately seek out suffering, it knows that without the Passion life does not discover its own wholeness, but closes the door on its own potential plenitude. If life at its highest demands the Passion, then faith must reject *apatheia*, the attempt to avoid suffering, as contrary to human nature.

In view of the importance of this attempt to avoid suf-

fering, we must here for a moment reflect further. The avoidance of suffering can take place in one of two directions. In the first place, there is an upward *apatheia* which has found impressive elaboration in Stoicism and in Asian piety. On the basis of his spiritual convictions, the Stoic gains such sovereignty over self that suffering, the twists and turns of external fortune, are left behind as something alien. Epicurus, on the other hand, stands for a downward avoidance of suffering when he teaches a technique of enjoyment which would put suffering into a parenthesis. Both ways can achieve a certain virtuosity of practice, and succeed in their ambitions more or less perfectly. However, both ways are reducible to a pride which denies the fundamental character of being human. Both make a secret claim to divinity which contradicts the truth of man. What thus goes against truth is a lie, and so in the last resort is nothingness and destruction. In the end, such techniques close themselves off from the true greatness of life—though in saying this I must not be taken as ignoring that great gulf which separates Epicurus from a spiritually achieved *apatheia* whose highest forms presuppose a passage through suffering.

It is from this vantage point (and not on the basis of a facile contrast between Biblical and Greek thought) that we can understand why the death of Christ is so different from the death of Socrates. Christ does not die in the noble detachment of the philosopher. He dies in tears. On his lips was the bitter taste of abandonment and isolation in all its horror. Here the hubris that would be the equal of God is contrasted with an acceptance of the cup of being human, down to its last dregs.[23]

Owing to the increasing technical powers that man has at his disposal, this theme of the avoidance of suffering has taken on an almost unparalleled importance. The attempt

to do away with suffering through medicine, psychology, education and the building of a new society has grown into a gigantic bid for the definitive redemption of mankind. Of course, suffering can and should be reduced by these means. But the will to do away with it completely would mean a ban on love and therewith the abolition of man. Such attempts constitute a pseudotheology. They can lead only to an empty death and a vacuous life. The person who does not confront life refuses his life. Flight from suffering is flight from life. The crisis of the Western world turns not least on a philosophy and program of education which try to redeem man by bypassing the cross. In acting against the cross, they act against the truth. Let us not be misunderstood: the *relative* value of actions of this kind is undoubted. They become a help to man when they see themselves as part of a greater whole. But taken by themselves, absolutely, they lead into the void. The only sufficient answer to the question of man is a response which discharges the infinite claims of love. Only eternal life corresponds to the question raised by human living and dying on this earth.