LIFE AFTER DEATH[1]

By GERARD O'HANLON

The question

IT IS DIFFICULT TO SPEAK ABOUT DEATH, especially when it has replaced sex as the great taboo subject of our culture. This is a culture which preaches the good news of economic growth, autonomy and psychological self-fulfilment, high-tech health care and promise of long life. Everything conspires to make death somewhat suspect as a respectable topic of conversation. It has become rather morbid to treat it like other serious issues of the day. It is better then, as in the BBC sitcom *Waiting for God*, to joke about it. One also recalls that a former manager of the Liverpool Football Club, when asked whether football was a matter of life or death, replied that it was a lot more serious than that!

The denial of death in our culture means that it is hard to get even to first base in a discussion about life after death. This is made even more difficult by a world-view which takes as real and true only what can be measured or quantified. This prevailing cultural positivism and empiricism, dating back to the Enlightenment, is due mainly to the success of science and technology.[2] It means that discourse about life after death can seem a somewhat endearing but rather quirky anachronism. It can also seem to offer a rather dangerous hostage to fortune to the Marxist critique of religion as the opium of the people, reconciling its adherents to an unjust *status quo*. The remark of my thirteen-year-old nephew recently that while he was 99% sure of the existence of aliens on other planets, he was only about 50–50 on some kind of life after death for us humans is a little more hopeful than the recent findings of the European Values Study which indicated that only 43% of people in Western Europe believed in life after death.[3] Christian believers, often to their own puzzlement and dismay, are not immune from this secular denial and scepticism, or at least agnosticism.

Nonetheless, despite all these cultural influences, sooner or later, very often most strikingly with respect to our own mortality or that of our loved ones, these questions about death and afterlife come back to haunt us. I think of someone whose faith was strong and yet who felt he was faced with a huge wall, with no sense of what, if anything, was on the other side, when he got the news of a life-threatening illness. And yet this same person, on a visit to an ancient church, experienced a really strong

sense of the Communion of Saints, of death as a going home to new life. I think of a nurse, attending the bedside of a terminally ill patient, who was struck at some stage by the similarity between the breathing of the dying man and that of the women giving birth in the labour-wards where she usually worked. I think of the recent death of a wonderful fellow Jesuit, who in full awareness of his terminal condition, remained interested and involved in life to the end in an inspiring testimony of lived faith in the continuity between this life and the afterlife. I think of the terrible poignancy and grief associated with the death of loved ones – where is the person who made this corpse live, what is left now, how is it in the midst of such shattering circumstances that buses go on running and newspapers continue to get printed? And is this what is going on all the time in Bosnia, in Somalia, in so many countries of the Third World where so many die so young and with so little chance to make the kind of impact on our world that can transcend the power and whim of our remote controls as we adjust our television screens according to more entertaining and less disturbing fare? And once one begins to question there seems to be no end to it. Why, if there is life after death, don't our deceased relatives and friends come back to tell us about it? Might there really be grass in heaven, as I was once asked by a little boy, mad keen on football, preparing for his first communion in the knowledge that he would soon die of the terminal illness from which he suffered? It is into this context of denial, of scientific and sociological scepticism and of enduring existential wonder, pain and hope that the Christian words about life after death are spoken. The challenge is to find a mode of speech that can protect the integrity of the Christian symbols of afterlife in an age characterized by a post-critical consciousness.[4]

What can we know?

This means first that we need to be able to give a satisfactory account of the kind of knowledge that is available about life after death. Knowledge of the future is problematic in itself – it is even more so when what is involved is an absolute future that is radically different from what obtains in our spatio-temporal world. Does Christian revelation take away the veil from the modest affirmations about immortality found in classical, non-gnostic philosophy? This is the issue of hermeneutics as applied to eschatology, the theology of the end things – what principles of interpretation might be useful in attempting to understand critically what the scriptures are saying in a way which respects the peculiar difficulties associated with this kind of knowledge?[5]

First, despite cinematic titles like *Apocalypse now!*, political references to the Evil Empire and Armageddon, end-of-millennium flights to the tops

of mountains with prognostications of imminent second comings, we should not see in the scriptures detailed, literal information about the end of the world and the form of the next life. In this respect the words of Jesus remain foundational: 'But of that day or that hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father' (Mk 13:32). All language about God is in a general sense analogical, non-literal. This is particularly true about the images used to speak about the afterlife which 'no eye has seen' (1 Cor 2:9), like the kingdom of God, the banquet, the wedding feast, the city, paradise and so on – this is the language of poetry and it is a category mistake to treat these images as univocal carriers of meaning.[6] Of course it would be equally naïve to jump to the conclusion that what is poetical is not true, and to suppose that poetry and conceptual prose are simply opposed.

Secondly, it is the Christ-event which is at the heart of the scriptural word on life after death. We look to his life and death to help explain the cluster of images and metaphors used throughout the Bible to speak about the afterlife, including those images of resurrection, ascension and second coming which are used to speak about Christ himself. Christology, then, is the key to eschatology, because with Christ in a real sense the end is already with us, there has been a decisive breakthrough of God into our world in a way which allows us a real anticipatory experience of the final reality of the kingdom.

Thirdly, philosophy, and in particular philosophical anthropology, if they can retain their metaphysical nerve, help to make more precise what scripture means. We may expect some continuity between human self-understanding and the plan of God. In this respect the dialogue is between philosophy and the Christian mysteries of creation, Christology, grace and eschatology. And so even if the future is radically different, nonetheless there is continuity too, since from the beginning God plans to reconcile all to God's self (Eph 1; Col 1) in a movement full of struggle (the cross) and surprise (grace) but never arbitrary or disrespectful of the nature of humanity and the cosmos.

Fourthly, while eschatology since medieval times, in reliance on one strand of the biblical tradition, has often been identified with an individualistic focus on the so-called four last things of death, judgement, heaven and hell, more inclusively it refers to the whole cluster of questions around the relationship between the next life and this life, mediated of course by the event of Christ referred to above. The group as well as the individual is involved, the cosmos as well as humanity, historical time (past, present and future) as well as eternity. What this means is that once again, while allowing for the radical difference of the

absolute future, nonetheless there are analogies between our experience now and what will happen after death which enable us at least to hint at what might be involved. So, while Christian revelation does not pander to idle curiosity in a fortune-telling approach to the future that would nullify human value and the call to exercise freedom responsibly upon which it is based, it does claim to offer real knowledge of what is to come as nourishment for what we now experience.

This austere, 'need to know' hermeneutic is the sober, disciplined other side of the coin of God's prodigal and joyful love, to a share of which we are called precisely as free human beings and not as automatons bowing to an inexorable fate.

What awaits us?

It is on the basis of God's revelation, above all in Jesus Christ, and of the nature of humanity, that we can affirm the reality of life after death and even offer a partial description of this reality. Our belief in the resurrection of the body is founded obviously on the resurrection of Christ. With the other scriptural images such as banquet, wedding feast, city, paradise, eternal life and so on we are invited to hope for a fullness of life centred on relationship with our trinitarian God and through this with everyone and everything else. This life will have a recognizable continuity with our lives now – hence the insistence on the resurrection of the body.

Nonetheless – in analogous fashion to the change from the era of Old to New Covenant, from the order of creation or nature to that of grace – there will be an altogether surprising transfiguration of the glorified body, apparent already in the New Testament accounts of Christ's resurrection in which the body somehow becomes more simply at the service of the spirit in a unity which excludes us except by way of remote anticipation in our times of earthly grace. Similarly all creation, all human history and culture, will be present in a transfigured way after death – even our sufferings, like the wounds of Christ, will perhaps remain, but now as redeemed memories revealing their joyous side of love, as John's Gospel speaks of the glory of the cross of Christ. If then our God is personal by that absolute giving and receiving in relationship which we mean by the notion of Trinity, we are invited to a participation in this world of relationality which exceeds by far the wildest dreams we have of knowing and being known, of loving and being loved. At last, after the manner of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we will be transparent to all and all to us without any diminution of our own individuality or their otherness. There is no satiation or boredom present in this

fulfilment of all our hopes and expectations, since we become part of the divine life of mystery and surprise whose perfection is expressed better by the comparative 'evermore' than by any simple superlative.

One needs to root this biblical language more fully in human experience, in longings for fulfilment in times of good health, in the seeming absence of all feeling except perhaps fear or resignation when the cloddish heaviness of human flesh in ill health is pumped up with pills and there can be present the sad sense of oncoming death as the great leveller. One does this by several converging considerations. First, despite all our protestations of autonomy, we are intrinsically interdependent, on one another and on our cosmos. Even our very name, that which is most personal to us, is given to us. This itself is a profound symbol of the reality that we are called into being and that our burgeoning individuality takes place within a community of nature, language and history, mediated by relationship with parents and others. Not only this, but as individuals we never outgrow this basic solidarity with all else that is, and our individuality is fulfilled only in relationship. Secondly, and most centrally, this relationship is first of all to God. Only in God do we find ourselves and all else in a way that ultimately satisfies – in this respect the Augustinian experiment of naming in vain everything else that might satisfy human desires and concluding with the cry that we can only 'rest in Thee' remains valid. Our interdependency then is grounded in our dependency on God, a dependency not fated to promote eternal infantilism but rather one which empowers to friendship and becoming sisters and brothers of the Son who, far from viewing the Father in any Oedipal light, enjoys equal ontological status. And thirdly this means for the person who is dying, perhaps in fear or resignation, that there is fullness of life to hope for which belies their present experience of oncoming death. One can draw on instances of resurrection after metaphorical death experienced already in this life to make this more real – times of enrichment after separation, new beginnings after failure and disappointment, experiences within marriage and parenthood and so on. In this 'beatific life', which includes but goes beyond the primarily cognitive notion of the beatific vision, one will find the recapitulated goal and answer to all the longings and questions of the human heart and mind, not excluding those experienced at the crisis points of illness and death.

What awaits us then is not a simple resuscitation of 'dem bones' in Ezekiel's valley of death, but rather a realization of that confident prayer in the Preface of the Mass for the Dead that 'life is changed, not ended'. It is changed in that at last we realize our unique individuality as part of

the trinitarian dance of relationship in which through our communion with God and the saints we see that to be personal and communal are but two sides of the same coin. In this context the suitability of a meal, especially in view of the table-fellowship offered by Jesus in his preaching of the kingdom as a symbol for life after death, is very apparent.

What about this life?

If the life of glory is such a wonderful consummation of the life of grace, there might be the temptation to think of this life as simply a valley of tears in which one gets tested but without any more intrinsic connection with what is to come. Within this horizon there seems little motivation to work for a better world now, and the Marxist critique that religion basically reinforces alienation can seem valid. The Second Vatican Council was aware of the need to face this issue. It taught that hope in the next life ought to strengthen rather than weaken our resolve to work for a better world now (*Church in the modern world*, n 39). Since the Council, theologians have tried to understand better how this affirmation can be supported, and in examining their attempts we may hope also to deepen our awareness of what awaits us after death.[7]

First, in this life we are called to become the sort of people who would be at home in that community of God, humans and all creation that we have described as the afterlife. A ticket is a useful but arbitrary symbol which allows entry into a game of football, just as the sounding of a whistle is an equally useful if arbitrary sign that the game is over. There is nothing arbitrary about the connection between this life and entry into the kingdom of God – we need to have freely decided to be the sort of people who would be at home there. In this context there is good, intrinsic sense to the biblical notion of testing – the test in question is not extrinsic, not a question of a pass or fail to do with keeping rules that bear no relation to the end in sight; it is rather a measure of the extent to which already in response to God's call and grace I am becoming attuned to heaven. I cannot enter heaven if I say no to God and my fellow creatures. And this is something that is happening now, as I live, and in this sense heaven is not simply 'after' this life but, as Jesus says about God's kingdom, it is already with us, at least in anticipation.

Nonetheless there is a difference between partial anticipation and complete realization. This means, secondly, that the Christian openness to an absolute and radical future that transcends all spatio-temporal arrangements is a powerfully subversive resource against any ideological reductions contained in political or other inner-worldly programmes. This refusal to identify the absolute future with any categorical futures

opens up the space for Christian prophecy, for the recognition that evil continues to flourish and that we are called to be critically vigilant in discerning the signs of our times.

However, thirdly, the biblical notion of testing and the eschatological proviso or reserve present in the notion of an absolute future need themselves to be brought into a more positive relationship with this life. One may do this by observing how in God's plan the different notions of creation, incarnation, sin, grace, death, resurrection, all indicate distinct modalities of what is ultimately a unified reality. And this unity is one of fulfilment and transformation, not of frustration and annihilation, except with reference to death and sin. This means that due recognition is given to the value of our human and natural worlds, without thereby making them into absolutes. Rather we can be assured, without knowing how this is to be so, that nothing of value in these spheres will be lost, that indeed it will be enhanced in ways that surpass the logic of imagination, never mind that of inference. And since through the action of Jesus Christ we live in some real sense in the end-times now and are called to co-create anticipations of God's kingdom in history, there is real urgency to our engagement in this world at all levels, including those of the socio-economic and political. How could it be otherwise if we are aware of the real beauty and terrible suffering of our world, and if we appreciate that all this, far from being a *maya*-type illusion, is the very stuff of who we are and who we are called to become? In this engagement we share in the dream of God to overcome evil by love and to realize the trinitarian image in creation and in humanity. With this perspective we may see history not simply as a circle of endless repetition, nor as a straight line signifying endless progress, but rather as an ascending spiral, in which good and evil continue to coexist, but which approaches asymptotically that sublimation of history into eternity which preserves all that is of value and eliminates only that which is pure sin. Individuality, history, culture, art, nature – all will have their transformed place at the end in Christ (Eph 1:10).

Other issues

It may seem that, albeit within a somewhat extended framework, we have limited our discussion to one of the four last things, heaven, and simply ignored the others. It remains to show very briefly the wider implications of what has been said.

Once creation and this world are so intrinsic to eschatology one can begin to appreciate why hell continues to form part of the Christian message. This is because freedom is at the heart of human creation, and

since we are free to say no to God then hell must remain a possibility. It is this appreciation of the significance of freedom in giving meaning to life that has militated against any Christian acceptance of reincarnationalism with its excessively fatalistic and Pelagian foundations. The fact that death puts an end to our single chance of life in this world invests our lives with real seriousness in that our decisive acts of freedom have eternal consequences. And it is perhaps out of respect for this freedom that no one comes back to tell us what the afterlife is like – although given that we used to say that if we had known certain world disasters were happening we would have acted differently, and now through television we do know and it has so little effect, perhaps God is simply being kind to us in arranging things so and in refusing to heap burning coals on the heads of our unaccountable incredulity. Nonetheless it is right that (unlike Augustine!) we hope that all will be saved, that we understand that hell is at a different level of possibility for Christians than is heaven, since the latter is willed by God for all and we may hope, without understanding how this can be so, that without interfering with our freedom we will all in the end be persuaded to say yes to God. With Kierkegaard one might say that I experience hell as a possibility for myself, not for anyone else, and one might add to Kierkegaard that even with respect to myself I have more confidence in God's persuasive ingenuity than in my own considerable powers of stubborn resistance. In this respect one may concur with von Balthasar's notion that in the final analysis hell is a christological place.[8]

The Roman Catholic teaching on purgatory may be understood then as the completion of that radical choice for God and others that I have made through life. Am I ready at death to sit down at table with all my enemies? The purification needed to complete this process is one of love, not punishment. Is there 'time' after death for this to take place and, in particular, is there an 'interim period' between the particular judgement of the individual involving the separation of body and soul and the general judgement of all at the end which will involve the resurrection of the body? Official Church teaching, albeit not at the dogmatic level, talks about such an interim period, most recently in a document on eschatology issued by the International Theological Commission.[9] However the understanding of what is involved here is a notoriously controverted issue without general agreement and one need not go into further detail in an area with little promise of clearer insight. Related to this whole area is the very particular difficulty which an empirically minded culture has with the notion of the resurrection of the body when faced with the seemingly awful finality of the cremation or decomposi-

tion of the dead person's corpse. While once again noting that the details of this resurrection transcend the dimensions of time and space, and therefore of our spatio-temporal mode of understanding, nonetheless science itself alerts us to the fact that even in this life our bodies effectively regenerate themselves every few years or so. If already within this life continuity is maintained despite such enormous material change, then science itself seems to afford to the believer less problematic grounds for accepting the hope of the ultimate resurrection of the flesh.[10]

Life after death after all?

There are good grounds then for confidence, beyond what current surveys suggest. Perhaps just as Christ's breath of love in his passion lasts longer than that of sin,[11] it is also indeed true that the dying person's breath is indeed an instance of new birth? And perhaps, most wonderful of all, the suffering that accompanies biological death because of sin is, through the Christ-event, translated into a suffering for sin as part of that 'exchangeability of all spiritual goods in the household and circulatory system of the mystical body of Christ'.[12] In other words, our belonging to one another and to God is so complete that we suffer for one another (1 Cor 12:26; Col 1:24) so as finally to rejoice in one another and in our cosmos. This co-redemptive mystery is something we experience already in this life and it is a preparation for saying yes to death. Death in this perspective is not the ultimate negative experience of losing control, but is rather the most positive affirmation of that loss of fearful control which liberates us to the fullness of the other and of love. In this context one is not simply 'done unto' by death. No matter what the immediate feelings may be in facing one's end, for the Christian there is the graced opportunity to utter an ultimate yes to death, confident in the sure hope that in so doing one is like a little child jumping from a high wall into the father's embrace.[13]

NOTES

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[2] See E. Cassidy, 'Do we still believe in eternal life?' in D. Harrington (ed), *Death and new life* (Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1993), pp 75–82.

[3] D. G. Baker, L. Halman and A. Vloet, (eds), *The European values study* (Leicester and Tilburg, 1992).

[4] See M. Hellwig, *What are they saying about death and Christian hope?* (New York: Paulist, 1978), p 63.

[5] For what follows see D. Lane, 'Eschatology' in J. Komonchak, M. Collins, D. Lane (eds), *The new dictionary of theology* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1990), pp 329–42; *idem*, 'Stirrings in Eschatology', *The Furrow* 40 (1989), pp 577–85; Z. Hayes, *Visions of a future* (Deleare: Glazier, 1989), ch 3.
[6] See M. Hellwig, *op. cit.*, ch 2; also *idem*, 'Eschatology' in F. Schüssler Fiorenza, J. P. Galvin (eds), *Systematic theology* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1992), pp 674–76.
[7] For what follows see especially Z. Hayes, *op. cit.*, ch 5.
[8] See H. U. von Balthasar, 'Eschatologie im Umriss' in *Pneuma und Institution* (Einsiedeln: Johannes, 1974), pp 410–55; *idem*, *Dare we hope* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1988).
[9] See International Theological Commission, 'Some current questions in eschatology', *Irish Theological Quarterly* 58 (1992), pp 209–43.
[10] See K. Rahner, 'The intermediate state' in *Theological investigations* vol 17 (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1981), pp 114–24.
[11] See H. U. von Balthasar, 1974, *op. cit.*, p 423.
[12] See M. Kehl, W. Löser (eds), *The von Balthasar reader* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1982), p 420.
[13] See H. U. von Balthasar, *Homo creatus est* (Einsiedeln: Johannes, 1986), pp 374–75.