

“Addressing a broad audience with clear pastoral concern, Gerhard Lohfink admits that the questions which he raises in this volume are his own as well. He brings not only a wealth of biblical and theological sources, but also poetry, literature, science, and his own creative speculation to bear on the ultimate question which faces us all: *Is This All There Is?* Confronted with the stark reality of two possibilities—nothingness or radical hope—Lohfink centers his reflections on the Christian conviction that in the resurrection of Jesus, God’s final ‘new creation’ has already begun. Grounded in that hope he invites his readers to consider what it means to live with and in Christ—not only in the future, but here and now. This text is provocative, passionate, and pastoral—a rare combination and a volume well worth pondering.”

—Mary Catherine Hilbert, OP
Professor of Theology, University of Notre Dame

“Gerhard Lohfink has given us a splendid book: biblically grounded, theologically astute, spiritually concrete and challenging. In a style that is limpid, poetic, and personal, he leads the reader deeper into the mystery of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection and to a renewed sense of the hope that is in all who believe in the risen Christ. Lohfink’s work wonderfully rekindles Christian eschatological faith and imagination.”

—Robert Imbelli
Associate professor emeritus, Boston College, author of *Rekindling the Christic Imagination*

“If you are planning to read this book, prepare for an exhilarating and surprising ride. Lohfink leads us through all the imaginable possibilities of what happens to us when we die and then moves to a most profound description of what our faith teaches us. This is a book that must be read at least twice. Also take time to enjoy Linda Maloney’s excellent translation.”

—Irene Nowell, OSB
Author of *Wisdom: The Good Life*

“Gerhard Lohfink’s *Is This All There Is?* is a stunningly original, profound, and spiritually uplifting and challenging book. Three things stand out in it. First, we cannot validly use our notions of space and time when we talk about life after death. There is a purification process but seeing purgatory as a space like ours and reckoning time in the process as we do on earth is profoundly mistaken. Second, eternal life and resurrection is a pure gift from God. We share in the resurrection of Jesus, the firstborn from the dead. Finally, we need to juxtapose God’s justice and his mercy. Excellent chapters deal with our caring for the dying and preparing for our own deaths. It is also a very well-written book.”

—John A. Coleman
Casassa Professor Emeritus at Loyola Marymount University
Associate Pastor at Saint Ignatius Parish, San Francisco

"This is exactly what one expects from Lohfink, the distinguished biblical scholar and respected theologian: a book that is hugely informed, consistently provocative, conscientiously pastoral, and—in the best sense of the word—imaginative."

—Dale C. Allison Jr.

Princeton Theological Seminary, author of *Night Comes: Death, Imagination, and the Last Things*

"Gerhard Lohfink's *Is This All There Is?* is an extraordinarily clear, well-argued, and thoroughly engaging book. Beginning with a discussion of basic human questions about the meaning of life and death, Lohfink explores Christian beliefs in dialogue with other religious and nonreligious perspectives. Undergraduates will find this book accessible and thought-provoking, while the nuance of Lohfink's analysis will challenge theological experts to reconsider their views. I know of no better overview of Christian eschatology and would encourage its use at all levels."

—Mary Doak

Associate Professor of Theology and Religious Studies
University of San Diego

"Lohfink walks through a theology of the 'last things,' examining ideas of heaven, judgment, mercy, purgatory, and hell in a way that balances speaking about what is ultimately inconceivable while at the same time grounding his ideas in the everyday encounter with God that happens even before death. He addresses popular misconceptions of the last things that have concretized and mythologized our understanding of life after death in a way that has alienated the contemporary critical thinker. In doing so, Lohfink has offered the reader a sophisticated theology that has depth and maturity and can stand up to the challenges of our time, while at the same time maintaining a style of writing that makes these more abstract concepts accessible to all. One does not have to be a theologian to read this book, but this book will offer the reader some of the best ideas of contemporary theology."

—Heidi Ann Russell

Author of *Quantum Shift: Theological and Pastoral Implications of Contemporary Developments in Science*

"It's dangerous to plunge into mystery, be that mystery one of life or death. Fr. Lohfink has no fear here and, with erudition and clarity of style, provides us with new and hopeful vistas on this great mystery. We are indebted to him for a challenging and engaging work."

—Robert F. Morneau

Auxiliary Bishop Emeritus of Green Bay

Gerhard Lohfink

Is This All There Is?

On Resurrection
and Eternal Life

Translated by

Linda M. Maloney



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For Gerlinde Back



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Preface

“Is this all there is?” The question reflects far more than the title of a hit song from the 1960s. It even contains more than the question many people ask when they enter the midlife crisis. It is not simply about the destiny of individual lives, or about dealing with life here and now. It is a question that means to lead us to the ultimate question and at the same time to a hard alternative we cannot avoid: in the end is there just nothing, or is there a resurrection of the dead? It would be a good thing if that alternative would shape reflection on life after death in our day. Alas, that is not the case. A sober “either-or” is rare. Instead, many of our contemporaries entertain a range of gentle and consoling intermediate solutions such as “dissolution in Nature,” “survival in our descendants,” or “continual reincarnation.” Often the individual’s whole interpretation of the world consists merely in a repression of her or his own death.

This book will examine all the intermediate and apparent solutions, one at a time. It will attempt to show that they are not real possibilities. In the end there remains only a genuine “either-or”: either resurrection or inexorable nothingness. In this case “nothingness” means not only that the great questions of human existence remain eternally unanswered but that the countless victims of rape, deadly torture, and “disappearance” throughout history will never recover their life and dignity.

The book addresses a great many other questions as well: for example, why does the Old Testament, through its earlier stages, reflect no hope of resurrection? Is ancient Israel’s solid and overpoweringly worldly belief ultimately something that remains fundamental even for Christians who hope for resurrection?

Still more: Is Jesus' resurrection only an affirmation of Christians' resurrection hope, or is it the elementary starting point without which there is not only no resurrection but resurrection itself cannot be adequately conceived?

Above all: When does resurrection begin? Ten thousand years from now? sometime in the vague future? at the end of the world? Aren't those who think that way adopting a naïve view of time, one that modern physics already sees as deficient and that is nevertheless applied to the world beyond death? But if all earthly time gives way in death, does that not mean that Jesus' resurrection and, with it, the resurrection of all the dead is then immediately present to us?

And so: What is it, really, that is resurrected? an abstract human being? Or is it the whole history of this particular human being, with its defeats and its victories, its sufferings and its ecstasies—everything this person has thought and willed, longed for and loved?

Still more: What about the universe, matter, animals, the pre-human ancestors in transition to humanity, the countless unborn lives that never had a chance to enter the world? Is there a resurrection for them?

Finally: Is there nothing in heaven besides God? or is everything we have ever longed for and everything we have ever loved there, too—but *with God* and *in God*, so that God is "all in all"?

It is because of such questions that I wrote this book. They are my own questions. Obviously I have not looked for the answers in my private and very deficient wisdom. I have sought them in the Old and New Testaments, in the tradition of Christian faith, and in what the great theologians of past and present have thought. But I have also sought them in reason, one of the supreme gifts God has given to human beings.

Because everything in this book is about my own questions, I have constantly struggled to find the right words. How can we speak responsibly today about death and resurrection, judgment and purgatory, hell and eternal life, and ultimately about the perfection of creation? What kind of language can the people of today understand? What words would come across as neither sanctimonious nor sappy?

There is *one* thing I have feared and tried to avoid as I was writing this book: boring the readers. Hence, as far as was possible, I have

relegated arguments over theological opinions to the notes. Those confrontations, sometimes rather lengthy, can easily be found there. But those who don't want to read them do not have to.*

Contemplating and then writing this book have made me newly aware of how liberating Christian faith in the resurrection of the dead really is. Those who root themselves in that faith can live without fear in the biblical "now," because every hour of their lives has both weight and hope. They can invest their strength in building up a just society, because the world to be resurrected in the final form intended for it by God is precisely the world for which we are fighting here, in this history.

But I dedicate this book to Gerlinde Back, in respect and gratitude, because she put the whole project in motion.

Munich, April 2017

Gerhard Lohfink

*To make this book more reader-friendly, the editors and translator have placed notes containing sources and extended discussion of theological questions at the end of the book. Those notes that are purely explanatory and aids to reading are retained at the foot of the page.

PART ONE

What People Think



1

The Question of Questions



What happens after death? It seems that as our animal ancestors gradually became *homo sapiens* over enormously long periods of time they may not have been able to distinguish between the life of the living and the deadness of the dead. There are indications that in the early stages of humanity there was no clear awareness of the finality of death.* But at some point that finality became clearly evident. And with that the question of what happens to people after death entered the world. Its elementary character is obvious from the dizzying numbers of rituals for the dead. The oldest graves we know are from the Paleolithic period, the Old Stone Age. The bones found in these graves testify that the dead were buried with care. Some are laid out as if sleeping, while others are curled up like embryos. Did people think they would be reborn? Often they were equipped as if for a long journey: they were given weapons, stone tools, pieces of meat to eat on the way.

*The fact that highly developed animals can mourn is not an objection. It has often been noted that mother chimpanzees have carried the corpses of their dead infants with them for days on end. It has even been observed that elephants have returned day after day to the body of a dead companion. But none of that necessarily indicates an awareness of what death is.

The practice of dusting the bodies with red ochre for burial is also very ancient. It seems that red-hued ochre was considered a ritual substitute for blood and thus a powerful symbol of the continuing life of the dead person.* Application of red earth was amazingly widespread: corresponding burials have been discovered in Europe, Africa, and the Americas. Often the dead were also laid out facing east, toward the rising sun, or else they were mummified to preserve the body and thus ensure its survival in the world beyond.

People must have begun very soon to celebrate meals at the graves of the dead—most certainly not merely as a consolation for survivors. Rather, it was about ensuring an unbreakable community with those who had died. A festal meal was a coming-together that created enduring connection and gave life.

But the scope of securing the life beyond extended much further: in many cultures there were cultic sacrifices for the dead. Often the deceased were presented with pure water as a drink-offering, to shield them from the bad water of the underworld. Also widespread were magical formulae for the purpose of preparing a path for the dead on their dangerous journey to the land beyond death. In ancient Egypt's *Book of the Dead*, a kind of guidebook to that world, those still living were given formulae with which to meet judgment after death.¹ With their assistance the deceased could tell the forty-two judges of the dead what evil deeds they had *not* committed.² Then the deceased were to recite the following formulae (among others in a long list of declarations of innocence):

I have not despised God.

I have not caused misery; nor have I worked affliction [*of the poor*].

I have caused none to feel pain [*through magic*].

I have made [no man] to weep.

I have not committed murder;

nor have I ever bidden any man to slay on my behalf.

I have not wronged the people.

I have not carried away the offerings made unto the blessed dead.

*The use of ochre can also be regarded as practical: it has an antibacterial and preservative effect. That, of course, as in the case of mummification, by no means excludes a symbolic meaning.

I have not committed fornication; I have not defiled the wife of any man.³

The whole is conceived as a magical event. If the dead person is able to utter these and the other declarations of innocence correctly, the judging gods will allow that person to pass, and to enter the realm of eternal life. But it is obvious that belief in such testing after death also changed life before death. Those still living who learned and internalized the formulae knew quite clearly that it would not be possible to lie to the divine judges after death.

But it was not only through this kind of device that people dealt with death. They also struggled with it through philosophy. The Greek philosopher Plato (428/27–348/47 BCE) tells in one of his most profound writings, the dialogue *Phaedo*, of conversations Socrates held with his friends on the day when he was to be executed in the evening. The subject was the continued life of the soul.

The life of the just, the wise, the philosophical person, says Plato through the mouth of Socrates, is a gradual dying, for those who are truly wise strive throughout their lives for insight and prudence. They seek true being, true reality. Therefore their lives are wholly focused on the soul. They close themselves off from the constant demands of the body, and in this way they cause their inmost being to distance itself from the body even in this life. For there cannot be pure knowledge as long as the soul labors under the heavy burden of the body. Pure knowledge presupposes release from the body.

The mortification, the dying practiced in life, is completed at death, when the soul separates from the body. What dies in death is the mortal part of the person, but what is deathless passes through death whole and undisturbed. In death, Plato says, the souls of the wise and just enter into the realm of what always is, the eternal, indisturbable, and unchangeable. Then, separated from the unreason and fetters of the body, the soul obtains a share in eternal Being, together with the many who have also sought true knowledge: they participate in the perfect world of truth and beauty.

The greatness of the *Phaedo* lies in the fact that all this is not simply decreed as indisputable truth. As in most of Plato's dialogues, Socrates struggles in stages toward knowledge, together with his friends.

At the end of the long day, shortly before he dies by drinking the cup of hemlock, Socrates says:

A [person] of sense ought not to say, nor will I be very confident, that the description which I have given of the soul and her mansions is exactly true. But I do say that, inasmuch as the soul is shown to be immortal, [one] may venture to think, not improperly or unworthily, that something of the kind is true. The venture is a glorious one.⁴

Socrates then goes calmly, almost joyfully to the death the Athenian judges have decreed for him. He drinks the hemlock in the presence of his friends—at least that is how Plato depicts it. The *Phaedo* has had an extraordinary influence in Western history. Its ideas have been repeatedly rejected or adopted, ridiculed or admired.

The question of what comes after death has not died, even today. One need only look closely at the obituaries in any newspaper to find a swarm of Christian and non-Christian, philosophical and aesthetic affirmations of the meaning of death. The question of what comes after death seeps through every society, even the most enlightened. It erupts over and over again, even when it is suppressed and various rituals are invented to veil and repress the reality of death. This question is indestructible.

But does it make any sense? Can there be any answer to such a question? Is Plato too self-assured here? In this situation are we not in a state like that of the Jewish joke? Here two Jews, one of them blind from birth, are sitting together:

“Do you want a glass of milk?” asks the one who can see.

“Well, describe milk for me,” says the blind one.

“Milk is a white liquid.”

“Great. And what is white?”

“Well . . . for example, a swan is white.”

“Aha. And what is a swan?”

“A swan? It’s a bird with a long, curved neck.”

“Good. But what is ‘curved’?”

“Curved? Well, I’ll bend my arm, and you can feel it. Then you will know what ‘curved’ means.”

The blind person carefully feels the other’s up-curved arm, and says:

“Terrific! Now I know what milk is!”

The joke is absurd, yet it is as subtle as many Jewish jokes. Why does the blind person ask the question in the first place? Why not just drink? Then she or he would know quite a bit about milk just by tasting it. Instead we have these intelligent but slightly crazy attempts to explain milk!

And don't we do something similar? We want to explain human life, to know exactly what it is, and while we are doing that we avoid life itself, talk about a life *after* life, think we have to explain life through something beyond it. And in doing so we make the craziest detours instead of simply living. Why don't we just drink the milk of our lives?

Wouldn't it be better to expend all our energies on this life into which we were thrown? Shouldn't we do everything we can to lead our lives as appropriately as possible and keep quiet about everything else? Wouldn't it be better to accept the crooked lines of life, its complexities and riddles, in silence—angry about many things, but still with a great deal of trust—and leave everything beyond this life a mystery about which we can gain no knowledge?

A good many years ago now I spoke with an older priest whom I deeply admired. He was respected and revered in his congregation. Every Sunday he explained the Gospel to them, mindfully, and with empathy. No one could accuse him of being thoughtless or flippant. So I was shocked when, in the course of a long conversation, this man said to me:

We are much too quick to speak about life after death, the hereafter, the resurrection. All that trips too lightly off our tongues. God knows, in the course of my work I have met a lot of people, and especially a lot of old and sick people. Those people's problem was not what comes after death. Their sole concern was: "What will become of my children? Did I do enough for them? What will happen to my family? How will my husband/my wife manage when I am not there? Doesn't my illness make me a burden to others?" Those were their questions. I have met a lot of people who never spoke of the hereafter but had learned to accept their lives and ultimately came to their end quietly and calmly. Is that not the real Christianity? Can anyone wish for more? Should we trouble such people with talk about the hereafter?

As I said, that shocked me at first, precisely because it was spoken by a pastor who, I knew, had never rejected any part of the church's teaching. He certainly spoke of Christian death in his sermons when the situation or the liturgical texts required it; he spoke of the judgment and the resurrection of the dead. I was disturbed that in private he could speak so very differently. I couldn't get it out of my head.

Still, there was something prophetic about what this man told me then. What he said—with foresight, one might say—has since happened. Today many whom the church entrusts with the task of preaching scarcely venture to speak of the “last things.” When does any preacher talk about the right way to die, the return of Christ, judgment on our deeds, eternal life and the consummation of the world? Of course, those old ideas have to be translated—but what preacher dares to do so?

It should be clear by now that the pastor's thinking had caused me to reflect, and yet I could not agree with it. Certainly it is true that there are countless people who do not make big speeches about life, scarcely ask about the hereafter, but say “yes” to their lives and are unquestioningly present for others. That is true. But that silent humanity cannot be the ultimate. As honorable and stoic as it is for people to accept in silence what is unfathomable to them, still the human being is by nature one who questions, indeed, one who asks about the *whole* and never stops questioning. The fact that humans are questioning beings is what distinguishes them from the lower animals.

Truly, the questions of “why” and “after” keep erupting over and over again. In a certain phase of their lives, children never seem to stop asking “why?” It is not good for their insistence to be swiftly and thoroughly quashed by grown-ups. They also ask, in the same way, about “after.”

Not long ago a mother and her little son were walking along the sidewalk in front of me. The mother said, at the very moment when they caught my attention, “It will soon be winter.”

“And then?” the child asked.

“Then it will snow.”

“And then?”

“Then we will go sledding.”

“And then?”

"Then it will be spring."

"And then?"

"Then you will go to school."

"And then?"

"Then you will learn a trade or a profession . . ."

I don't know whether the child kept on asking. We drifted apart. Of course, it was a game for him, a "ping pong" with words that was almost a ritual. But was it *only* a game? Wasn't there an elementary question behind the game—the question of questions?

Between Skepticism and Belief in the Soul



Anyone who reads Greek or Roman epitaphs and tomb inscriptions will see right away how the question about “and then?” preoccupied ancient people. It is true that not all the inscriptions indicate that; certainly not. Many are silent about the question of the hereafter. They simply say who is buried here. Thus, for example, on a Roman tomb in the south of France we read:

Fabius Zoilus had [this tomb] made for himself and his dearly beloved wife Consuadullia Primilla during his lifetime, so that we might have it.

The Latin text is much shorter,¹ and it is as formulaic as many of our gravestone inscriptions today. The tomb does not give the slightest hint about the worldview of this Fabius and his Consuadullia.

Yet there are a great many ancient grave steles and stone coffins that are more eloquent. It is true that they do not always speak directly

¹Hieronymus Geist, with Gerhard Pfohl, *Römische Grabinschriften* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2014), no. 575. Original text: *Fabius Zoilus sibi et Consuadulliae Primillae, maritae karissimae. Vivus ut haberemus feci.*

about the ideas of those who commissioned them regarding the world and the hereafter. Even in antiquity it was the case that the masons who carved gravestones and sarcophagi offered their customers standard texts to choose from. But the customers *could* choose, depending on their own images of the world, and those worldviews could be very different. Many of the ancient tombstones breathe nothing but melancholy and resignation, and so indirectly reveal that for those who commissioned them there was no “after.” One example is a Roman tomb text for a young girl:

Let all who pass this way weep at my sad fate and remain a while by my poor ashes. Weep for me, unfortunate maiden, for whose sake my stricken parents day and night bear deepest pain. It was their ill fate that they begot me; they will never see me married. No wine-exalted singer has struck up a wedding song outside my chamber.²

Other such texts, in contrast, reflect profound confidence, such as this one for a dead man named Menelaos:

My name is Menelaos. But only my body remains here,
whereas my soul is in the Ether immortal.³

Specific ideas nourished by ancient cosmology and physics underlie such epitaphs. Many ancient scientists pictured the “ether”^{*} as the highest, brightest dimension of the cosmos. It was equated with heavenly fire and said to be the home of the gods. Insofar as a person of that time was not a skeptic, she or he then often thought this way: the human body is material and therefore heavy and resistant. The human soul, on the other hand, is weightless. Hence at death it would rise to heaven, as hot air rises above a fire. The countless stars that twinkle in the firmament are nothing other than the souls of the dead. This idea is evident in many tomb inscriptions, such as:

My name was Philostorgos, raised, as a support^{**} for old age, by
[my mother] Nike;

^{*}Greek *aithēr*, “upper air,” from *aithein*, “burn, shine.”

^{**}Lit. “anchor.”

I lived [barely] twenty years. . . . I . . . was suddenly abducted
 . . . [my lifetime, determined] by the goddesses of threads,
 fulfilled.
 Mother, do not cry over me, what is the use?
 Now that I have become a star in the night sky, among the gods,
 show reverence to me!⁴

We can imagine how such ideas arose. Our minds are lightning-fast and our thoughts run everywhere. Our spirits conquer worlds, while our bodies move much more slowly. Often they are even a hindrance, especially as we get older. We would still like to travel, but our bodies won't. Ultimately they become prisons.

That idea was formulated quite explicitly in antiquity, especially by followers of the philosopher Pythagoras. *Sōma*—*sēma*, said the Greeks: "body—tomb." In this world of ideas the soul is what really makes the human; the body is only an obstacle. In death the soul is liberated as if from a tomb, a prison. As we have seen, Plato also presents such ideas in his *Phaedo*. Hence the following Roman inscription from the third century CE sounds very Platonic:

This tomb hides the body of unmarried Kalokairos, but his immortal soul has left the body of the young man. She, his soul, has left far behind the cares of a bitter life and hurries on the divine road so that she might arrive purified.⁵

The only clue that this inscription was for a Christian is the anchor carved beneath the epigram. There is nothing in the language itself that would distinguish it from other, non-Christian tomb texts. There are many similar examples. The pagan formulations of the continued life of the immortal soul were adopted for Christian tomb inscriptions without alteration; only a particular set of symbols shows that the graves are those of Christians: a dove, a fish, an anchor, or the Chi-Rho monogram.

Nevertheless, there are differences, even if they cannot always be perceived in the texts, for ancient ideas about the soul very often make it something divine, and—this is the essential point—divine *by nature*. In death, which liberates from all chains, this divine within the human finally comes into its own. The soul rises to the firmament and is received once more into the sphere of the eternal, from which it came

and where it belongs. Thus the continued life of the soul represents the continued existence of what is eternally divine in human nature.

The attractiveness of that idea can be seen in the fact that aspects of it entered into Christianity and burrowed into many corners and crannies, despite the fact that it is incompatible with the Christian idea of creation and redemption.* One day I came across the following verses in a prayerbook belonging to an elderly religious sister; they sound very pious, but they are basically pagan:

To earth I came without a load,
nothing outward brought with me
except only my soul.

Nothing will I take with me
beyond into the lightsome day
except again my soul.

What, then, to me is earthly life
when in but lightsome garments clad
and shedding every earthly fault
my own and only soul shall fly
to God's paternal hand.⁶

Certainly the verses were meant to be Christian, and they can be interpreted that way, but on closer inspection they reflect nothing but the ancient ideas: the soul is the eternal aspect of the human. The body is only something we make do with. The soul guides the body as a steerer guides a ship, but at some point the steerer leaves the ship, when it has reached its destination.

Of course, we should not suppose that everyone in antiquity thought that way. For a long time the Greeks were convinced that human life ends as a shadowy existence in the darkness of the underworld, and in later periods belief in the soul was by no means the only philosophy. There was also a powerful strand of materialism for which the body was the one and only human reality. That materialism was usually associated with a profound skepticism, and especially the conviction that everything ends with death. At death the

*This took place especially in Gnosticism, one of the most dangerous heresies of early Christianity.

human person falls back into absolute nothingness. A dead person has no “I” any longer, no memory, no awareness, no future.

We find many ancient tomb inscriptions reflecting that idea as well. Often they exhibit pure hopelessness, and they frequently make use of an almost existentialist language. Thus one from ancient Rome reads:

We are nothing and we were but mortals.
You who read this, consider:
We fall in the shortest space of time
from nothing back to nothing.⁷

Similarly, the following inscription says laconically:

I was not, I was,
I am not, I do not care.⁸

A tombstone in Aquileia reads:

Do you, O comrade, who read this, enjoy your life; for after death
there is neither pain nor laughter, nor joy of any kind.⁹

Here, then—as is often the case with ancient graves—advice is given to those still living but who will follow the same path. The inscription for a certain Tiberius Claudius Secundus in Rome is similar. The translation attempts to reflect the classical rhythms of the original inscription:

Baths, the love goddess, and wine—
they do spoil our bodies, it’s true.
But that’s what life is about:
Baths, the love goddess, and wine.*

There are many other ancient tomb inscriptions that speak just that way. Those in transit are urged to enjoy as many good things as possible, to eat and drink and enjoy the pleasures of love, because when death comes, as is often said, “darkness will surround you and eternal oblivion.” Some tombs even deliver little sermons to passersby urging them not to neglect any of life’s pleasures. However, in the other

* In the Baths of Caracalla in Rome. Translation LMM. Original text: *Balnea, vina, Venus corrumpunt corpora nostra, / sed vitam faciunt balnea, vina, Venus.*

direction there are speeches addressed to the one in the tomb. The tomb inscription can say to the dead person, with all the sarcasm of which antiquity was so capable:

What good was it for you to have lived a disciplined life for so many years?¹⁰

In reality the sarcasm was not directed so much at the dead person. It, too, was for those passing by the monument. So belief in the soul was not universal in antiquity. As far as death and the afterlife were concerned there were equal amounts of skepticism, sarcasm, doubt, and bitterness. When figures are carved on the stones—often those of mourning women—their faces quite often show deep despondency and sorrow.

In our times the skeptical voices of antiquity are being heard again. The young Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956), for example, offers a rhyming sermon entitled “Lucifer’s Evening Song”¹¹ that asserts there is only *one* day of life. Then comes eternal night, and everything is over. So one must enjoy this one and only day without any fear, because that is all that humans get. There is nothing “waiting for us.” Those who say that after night comes a new morning are nothing but false promisers, seducers, and betrayers:

1

Do not let them fool you!
There is no way back home.
Day’s on the point of going
Already the night wind’s blowing.
No dawn will ever come.

2

Do not let them gyp you!
Life is not very big.
Drink it! And go on drinking
And when at last you’re sinking
You’ll want another swig.

3

Don’t let them get your hopes up!
Today is all there is.

Let pious people suffer!
 Life's all earth has to offer.
 There's no life after this.

4

Don't let them lure you into
 Exhaustion and duress!
 Why all the trepidation?
 You die like all creation.
 And after: nothingness.¹²

Of course, this sermon with its emphatic rhythms is aimed primarily at Christians. In Brecht's eyes they considered themselves the "saved" because they believed in salvation from the world. It is the old accusation that has never been silenced since Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche: that Christians despise the world and console the poor with pie in the sky; instead of loving this world they hope for another. The charge hits home as far as some false undertones in Christianity are concerned, but it does not touch the fundamental note of Christian faith. The biblical message itself says something completely different, as we will see.

Marie Luise Kaschnitz (1901–1974) was much less dogmatic than Bertolt Brecht. One of her poems on resurrection, entitled "Nicht mutig" ["Not brave"] reads:

The brave know
 They will not rise again
 That no flesh will grow around them
 On Judgment Morning
 That they won't remember anything
 That they won't see anyone ever again
 That nothing of theirs is waiting
 No salvation
 No torture
 I
 Am not brave.¹³

The poem articulates two philosophies of life: First, that of those for whom death is the end of everything. It seems sober and realistic to think that way. Who can really imagine that flesh will grow again on

our bones or that there is a hell in which people are tortured? That philosophy even seems to be based on “knowledge”: “The brave know.” But why are those who know this “the brave”?

The contrary philosophy is so unsure of itself that it emerges only indirectly, through a questioning of the position of the brave. It appears only at the end, in a single sentence: “I—am not brave.” Could it be that there is a resurrection after all?

If we look more closely, of course, we can see that “I—am not brave” implies a hidden critique of the “brave.” Apparently the poem is not so respectful of the “brave” as it seems at first glance.

We might state the underlying thought of the poem in this way: the skeptics who are so confident that they will not rise cannot be sure of themselves either. They describe a position that portrays resurrection in a rather crude and superficial way (flesh on bones, fires of hell) in order to reject it. But even for that they need to be “brave,” and if bravery is needed in any situation, then the outcome is still open and uncertain. Perhaps the “brave” are mightily deceiving themselves.

Does the poem perhaps even contain a breath of mockery at the “brave,” who so boldly open their mouths and fill the world with the sound of their “knowledge” and the universal perspective they pretend to possess? Kaschnitz’s poem will not open its mouth. It does not even dare to express its own idea of resurrection. It does not come forth preaching and cocky like Bertolt Brecht’s verses. The poem’s sole argument is at the end: “I—am not brave.”

Kurt Marti (b. 1921) was far more self-assured in a much-quoted poem in which he preached like Brecht, but in the opposite direction:

it might readily suit many lords of this world
if everything were settled at death
if the dominion of the lords
and the servitude of the slaves
were confirmed forever

it might readily suit many lords of this world
if in eternity they remained lords
in expensive private tombs

and their slaves remained slaves
in rows of common graves

but a resurrection is coming
quite different from what we thought
a resurrection is coming which is
god's rising up against the lords
and against the lord of lords—death.¹⁴

That is a funeral oration pregnant with class conflict. It argues that if there were no resurrection the world's exploiters and slaveholders would always be in the right and triumph even in death. But they will not triumph, because God has long been preparing a revolution that will cast all the mighty of this world, and ultimately even death, from their thrones.

The sermon-text by Bertolt Brecht, the hesitatingly confessional (and perhaps even gently mocking refutational) text by Marie Luise Kaschnitz, and then the provocative one from Kurt Marti show that the dissonant polyphony of voices from antiquity is still with us. The question of questions remains, and the answer still swings between radical skepticism and hope for the wholly "other" that will finally answer all questions.

Survival in Our Descendants?



The Greek and Roman tomb inscriptions show again and again that people in antiquity liked to think up striking texts in memory of their dead and put them into words. Often they were even rendered in verse. And they were almost always intended to convey a message to those passing by the tomb.

It is the same today. The texts on our gravestones deserve to be collected and analyzed by folklorists (more properly: cultural anthropologists), because we have not only inscriptions that simply give the name and the birth and death dates, their spartanness symbolizing that this is the grave of a particular person with her or his unique, distinctive, and irreplaceable history. There are also countless gravestones with shorter or longer additions that shine a bright light on the worldview of our predecessors and our contemporaries as well. Let me choose a random example. A recent grave in a cemetery in the north of Germany contains the saying:

Released from Mother Earth
we slumber, content,
toward the great enigma.

There is a vast difference between that and a gravestone in Detwang, near Rothenburg ob der Tauber in the south. I wrote it down many years ago when I was traveling through the Tauber valley:

Anno 1651, Sunday, 27 April
 in the night, between 12 and 1 o'clock
 slept away in her Redeemer, Jesus Christ,
 softly and blest,
 at the white mill
 the whilom, virtuous Maria Bülgin
 a Waltmännin born,
 her life 22 years, 2 months, 2 days,
 her soul in the grace of God.
 Amen

We could collect many such. It was not only the Greeks and Romans who were drawn to communicate their view of death to passersby. For us, too, death provokes testimony by those left behind. But today the truly revealing texts are no longer written on gravestones but on virtual graves in an internet cemetery or in obituaries sent as letters or published in the newspaper. Those are a positive treasure trove for anyone who wants to know what people today think about death or life after death.

Obituaries contain every imaginable position, from Christian testimonies of faith to poetically veiled nihilism. The words of the Bible or those of poets and authors are frequently quoted. Thus a major newspaper published this text as part of an obituary:

Dear Mama, you had my back in everything I did in life. Dear Papa, you modeled what it means to work with passion and dedication. I owe you everything. You are in me, and you live on in me.

What is interesting here is “you are in me, and you live on in me.” Behind that statement lies the idea that those who have died live on in their descendants. Death is the end for them personally, but the good they have brought into the world is not lost; it continues through their children and grandchildren to distant generations. So it endures, and so the dead themselves remain in the world.

This idea is amazingly widespread, sometimes even in tangible form. In New Guinea it can still happen that family members eat the ashes of their dead. The ritual consumption of the ashes is supposed to ensure that the dead do not die entirely, but remain present in their families or in the clan. These and similar rituals are very ancient; probably they go back to the early ages of humanity.

The idea of survival in one's descendants also appears in the Old Testament. In early Israel every individual was deeply embedded in the extended family as well as the clan structure and its history.¹ The individual's self-concept was nearly identical with that of her or his familial group. Everything one had been went on living, so it was believed, in one's progeny. One's own name lived on in children and children's children. Therefore a family must not die out, a name must not be extinguished, the memory of the ancestors must not disappear. One of the most dreadful curses that could be uttered against anyone was to wish that his or her family would vanish and all memory of it be swept from the land. Psalm 109, whose central portion describes how the one praying the psalm curses opponents, reads:

May his posterity be cut off;
in the very next generation may their name be blotted out.
(Ps 109:13)²

The desire here is that an entire family and—this is crucial—even the memory of them will be destroyed by a death-dealing curse. Only from this perspective can we understand what a sorrowful fate it was in Israel to be childless. Not having children was not only a problem of having no one to care for a couple in old age or to secure the rights of inheritance. Not having children decimated one's whole life. It was an element of death in the midst of life. In contrast, having many children reduced the affliction of death. It was seen as a blessing to have a lot of children; it gave one a share in the blessing bestowed on all Israel—from generation to generation.

It would seem that this interwovenness in the sequence of generations is still a consolation for many people in the twenty-first century. They see themselves in their children and are convinced that in those children they will be able to hand on their achievements to the world. Correspondingly, children also believe that their parents live in them.

What was the obituary said? “You are in me, and you live on in me.”

There is certainly a good deal of truth in that. Much of our ancestors does live on in us. We owe so much to our parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents. But we should consider that in the Old Testament the idea of being embedded in the sequence of generations was firmly tied to the belief that in coming generations God’s promises would continue to be fulfilled again and again. If that faith in the promise should fail, the hope to live on in one’s descendants loses its foundation.

But still more: the devout Israelite not only believed that God would fulfill the divine promises. Such a one was also convinced that every generation, the present one and those to come, was already under God’s blessing—so long as Israel continually returned to its God and turned away from the gods of the world.

If such a faith, which had to be handed on from generation to generation, were to disappear, the hope of living on in one’s descendants would look very different. In that case the ancient biblical idea would suddenly become tragic or even ridiculous. We frequently read a sentence in obituaries today that is attributed now to Lucius Annaeus Seneca, now to Immanuel Kant, even to Ernest Hemingway:

[The one] who lives in the memory of the beloved
is not dead, but only far away;
dead is [the one] who is forgotten.³

This saying is extremely popular. It is constantly used to adorn obituaries and give them some meaning. Incidentally, the fact that we read the same sayings over and over again in obituaries is connected, of course, with the fact that the various mortuaries, as well as the internet, offer sample texts for use by the survivors. The following is also part of the ironclad trove of current texts for the use of those in mourning:

You are not dead, you have only gone away.
You live in us and visit us in our dreams.⁴

But is that true? In death do we only move to another place? And can human memory conquer death? Almost the same idea, though

stated more sublimely, underlies the following motto that also appears at the head of many modern obituaries:

You are no longer where you were,
but wherever we are, you are there.⁵

So the dead person lives on, though no longer visibly present. She or he no longer exists as a real person but lives in memory, in the hearts of her or his descendants. Hence also this mourning verse:

If you seek me,
then seek me in your hearts.
If I have found a home there,
I will live on in you.⁶

The dead are really dead, but they live virtually: in the hearts of their relatives and friends and, just as often invoked, in their successes, their works, their deeds, in what they have done in the world. The obituary of a famous individual in Europe's cultural life who died in 2014 was introduced with the following:

Every life continues somewhere,
my father and mother in me,
and I in everything I have brought to be.
That is what resurrection means to me.
Paradises do not interest me.⁷

That was a clear acknowledgment by the dead person of his view of life and the world. What should we think of such a worldview? Certainly it is true that everything good, true, and beautiful that a person has brought about enters into history. Every accomplishment becomes part of the course of the world, changes some things or even many. How long it remains a part of history is another question. What one has built up can become a ruin in the next generation. And even ruins can be destroyed and simply disappear. The good one has done can crumble. Evil can take its place and destroy it. Untruth and manipulation can triumph over the truth. The beautiful can be destroyed or made ugly.

And human memory, so often invoked, in which we supposedly live on? An equally popular sentiment, placed at the beginning of many obituaries, reads:

After the tears and deep mourning, memory remains. Memory is immortal and gives us consolation and strength.

Or, still more briefly and pithily:

Life is short but memory is forever.

Or more poetically:

Memories are like the stars in the heavens.
Yours will shine forever.

Or, with a touch of “primitive” romanticism:

One day we will sing of you
by the fires of our clans.
Poems will be woven from your life
and the stories will never die.

That is as smooth as an elegant cocktail, but still it is pure illusion. I am constantly amazed at how feeble today’s obituaries can be. “The stars of memory will always shine on you”? Did the author of the obituary really believe that? “The stories will never die”? Really? Even stories die, especially when they are private stories that are of interest to no one else. And the power of human memory is by no means “immortal” and “forever.” Even our memories of our own life stories are fragile, have many gaps, and are full of self-deceptions. Our grandchildren will still know something about us. But beyond that we inevitably begin to be forgotten.

Test yourself: you probably know quite a bit about your parents, though not everything. You know considerably less about your grandparents, but still relatively a lot. You know almost nothing about your great-grandparents, and beyond that, nothing at all—unless, of course, you do genealogical research. But even then all you find are external facts. Of the reality of those lives we know nothing.

The popular author Lee Child describes this accurately in his book, *The Enemy*. The mother of Jack Reacher, the main character in the book, has died of cancer. After her death the following conversation takes place between Jack and his brother Joe:

“Life,” Joe said. “What a completely weird thing it is. A person lives sixty years, does all kinds of things, knows all kinds of

things, feels all kinds of things, and then it's over. Like it never happened at all."

"We'll always remember her."

"No, we'll remember parts of her. The parts she chose to share. The tip of the iceberg. The rest, only she knew about. Therefore the rest already doesn't exist. As of now."⁸

That says everything there is to say about memory. One doesn't really know even one's own mother. And the little we do remember vanishes like smoke. But all the same, our unfailing remembrance by our descendants is untiringly invoked. Denis Diderot (1713–1784), the editor of a famed encyclopedia of the European Enlightenment, permitted himself to say:

We are instruments endowed with feeling and memory. . . .
There is only one substance in the universe, in man and in the animals.⁹

For Diderot, Nature requires no personal God any more than the human requires immortality other than survival in posthumous fame.

Evidently Diderot was all too fascinated by the player piano, then recently invented. Unfortunately, this great mind of the Enlightenment overlooked the fact that pianos do not play by themselves, not even player pianos! But Diderot's other presupposition also has feet of clay. "Posthumous fame" is badly distributed demographically. Only a tiny percentage of the countless people who have lived in this world have found their way into a reference work!

And what kind of miserable immortality is that, to live on in an encyclopedia! Who finds consolation in being buried sometime, somewhere, in the immeasurable flood of information provided by the World Wide Web? In some form of cloud computing, perhaps? "Survival in posthumous fame" is a drafty and absolutely unsatisfying hope. A wisdom teacher in ancient Israel named Qoheleth was much more honest and realistic when he wrote:

There is no enduring remembrance of the wise or of fools, seeing that in the days to come all will have been long forgotten.
(Eccl 2:16)

Woody Allen (b. 1935) demystified the sweet self-deception that we will live on in our admirers and descendants in an interview:

I don't want to achieve immortality through my work; I want to achieve immortality through not dying. I don't want to live on in the hearts of my countrymen; I want to live on in my apartment.¹⁰

PART FOUR

What Will Happen to Us





Now we begin the central part of this book. Everything I have said so far was only preparation, introduction, and a surveying of the terrain. Moreover, what has gone before was, in the main, historical information, whether about ancient belief concerning souls, today's ideas about the afterlife, or Jesus' preaching and New Testament resurrection theology.

But now the method must shift. From here on it will be impossible to argue primarily in historical terms; rather, for the most part we will be presenting a theological interpretation of our statements of faith. Here again, reason is always part of the process, though now its material is drawn from Christian faith.

A second preliminary remark: we can only speak of what comes after death in images. Every statement about the resurrection of the dead, just like every statement about God, is "speaking in parables." Theology talks of "analogous" statements, which means that, in whatever we may say about God and ultimate life with God, what we say is more different from the reality than similar to it.

But similar to what?—to the instants that revolutionize and enrich human life; to the moments of supreme fulfillment that are given us even now, and in spite of the horrifying knowledge of our own guilt. Such experiences are indispensable. If we could not refer to real experiences—our own and those of others—anything we might say about God and God's world to come would be meaningless and even impossible. We must always start with what there is in this world of experience of grace, fidelity, love, and commitment, of self-surrender and going beyond oneself. And still it is true that all these experiences are only shadows of what will happen to us in death. The "not-like"-ness is not only greater but unimaginably greater than the likeness.

Thus everything said in the next twelve chapters about the resurrection of the dead is a matter of images and parables, and we must constantly remain aware of this image-character of what we say. Often it will even be the case that the images and thought-models either augment each other or are mutually corrective. A closed system of eschatological images is neither possible nor adequate.

And finally, a third preliminary remark: everything said in this next, fourth section, without exception, is based in Jesus' resurrection. Christian knowledge of the *eschata*, the "last things," is nothing but an extrapolation of what happened in the resurrection of Jesus. Christian eschatology is not fantastic speculation that produces a richly detailed "geography" of eternal life. Ultimately it only interprets what happened with Jesus. More precisely: Christian teaching about the "last things" interprets what happened in the preaching, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. His life, death, and resurrection are the starting point and center of all Christian eschatology.¹

It is true that for the sake of simplicity I will often speak in part 4 of death as an encounter with "God." But then at the end, in the twelfth chapter, I will write in detail about the truth that the "place" of that encounter with God is the risen, or rising, Christ. Without him there is no resurrection for us, and most certainly no ultimate encounter with God's self. Let that be understood in advance so that this fourth section will not get out of balance. It must be embraced as a whole. The resurrection of Jesus from the dead is the first and fundamental premise for everything that has yet to be said.

1

The Ultimate Encounter with God



In order to speak of the human being beyond death or, better, *in death*, we have to have recourse to the concept of “encounter.” In death the human encounters God, the unfathomable mystery of her or his life. The inner side of death is nothing other than encounter with the living God whom Scripture says heaven and earth cannot contain (1 Kgs 8:27). It is true that the human encounters God even before death, often without knowing it: namely, in her or his longing and joy, but also in lamentations, sorrows, and times of despair—and, of course, also in prayers and in service to those who need one’s help. But in death the human encounters God ultimately and forever.

In all previous encounters God remained incognito and seemed silent, constantly withdrawing. All obedience seeking to follow, all words that tried to grasp God seemed to run off into the void. God remained the hidden God. Now God shows God’s face.

It is impossible to describe how that will be, for this “no eye has seen, no ear has heard, nor the human heart conceived” (1 Cor 2:9). All those who pretend that they can easily describe and elaborate on this ultimate encounter with God make themselves ridiculous. They drag the infinite, immeasurable, incomprehensible God and the power of God’s self-revelation down into a narrow and trivial thing.¹

Still, we must somehow speak of the encounter with God in death. It must not be that Christians, faced with this decisive question of their lives, should fall silent out of fear of the ridicule of others or terror of the unspeakable. But how can we talk of it rightly and appropriately?

It is astonishing how austerely and sparsely the gospels speak of that encounter. "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God," Jesus says in Matthew 5:8. "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world," says the world judge in Matthew 25:34. "Today you will be with me in Paradise," the crucified Jesus promises the terrorist who repents at the last second (Luke 23:43).^{*} "They will see his face," it says in the last book of the New Testament (Rev 22:4).

One of the great theologians of the twentieth century, Hans Urs von Balthasar, summarized the ultimate encounter of the human with God—in fact, essentially the whole of eschatology—in three sentences:

God is the "last thing" of the creature. Gained, he is heaven; lost, he is hell; examining, he is judgment; purifying, he is purgatory. He it is to whom finite being dies, and through whom it rises to him, in him.²

That says it all. Essentially, we need know nothing more. And yet faith must say more and dare not stop speaking at this point. But in what images, in what similitudes or parables? I will venture a voice from the liturgy of Easter that itself reaches back to an Old Testament psalm.

The church's liturgy for the morning of Easter begins, in its oldest form, not with jubilant choirs, not with trumpets proclaiming resurrection, and not with a blare of orchestral music, but with a tender chorale sustained almost by the melancholy of death. I am referring to the Introit, the "Opening Verse" of the Mass for Easter Sunday. It takes up Psalm 139. In its shortened form—omitting the antiphonal repetitions—it reads:

^{*}Literally he is a "robber" or "bandit." That is what the Romans called rebellious Zealots who worked against the occupying power in Israel and ambushed Roman soldiers.

Resurrexi et adhuc tecum sum, alleluia.

Posuisti super me manum tuam, alleluia.

Mirabilis facta est scientia tua, alleluia, alleluia.

Domine probasti me et cognovisti me,

tu cognovisti sessionem meam et resurrectionem meam.

I have risen, and I am with you still, alleluia.

You have laid your hand upon me, alleluia.

Too wonderful for me, this knowledge, alleluia, alleluia.

O Lord, you have searched me and you know me,

You know my sitting down and my rising up.

Who is speaking? Who says “I have risen, and I am with you still”? Of course, it is the Risen One himself who speaks. And to whom does he say it? To whom does he say “you have laid your hand upon me; you have searched me and you know me”? The Risen One speaks to God. The whole Introit for the first day of Easter is part of a conversation between the risen Christ and the heavenly Father.

It is thrilling how the liturgy here, freely using verses from Psalm 139,³ depicts the moment of Jesus’ resurrection in the form of an address of Jesus to the Father—the first words, we might say, that Jesus speaks when he opens his eyes from the darkness of death and looks upon the face of the eternal Father.

Saying such a thing in human words attests to a great deal of audacity—even when the language of the Psalms is drawn on—for who can describe what happens when a dying person ultimately and forever encounters God in death? The liturgy dares to do it—at least as far as Christ is concerned—and sings it early on Easter morning with a positively reticent choral melody, cautiously and almost hesitantly.

Of course, this Introit song is Christian poetry, but it contains a central statement of Christian faith: the inner side of death is encounter with God’s own self—in the case of Jesus an astonished encounter of the Son with the heavenly Father and, in our case, since we are sinners, not only a blessedly astonished but at the same time a shattering encounter with the absolutely Holy. And yet it is encounter, and indeed the sum and summit of all conceivable encounters. Death is encounter with the living, holy God and none other.

It is *God* who is our “place” after this life, says Augustine in his interpretation of Psalm 31:21—and for him that is decisively more

than saying we are “in heaven” or “in Paradise,” or “in Abraham’s bosom.”⁴

The Old Testament itself prepares us to see that God, when encountering humans in death, becomes *everything* to them, so that for each person there is nothing more except God. The one who prays Psalm 73 has cast bitter questions at God, but in the end confesses that, despite these questions, she has constantly remained with God. And as far as death is concerned, she is certain:

You guide me with your counsel,
and afterward you will receive me with honor.
Whom have I in heaven but you?
And if I am with you there is nothing on earth that I desire.
My flesh and my heart may fail,
but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.
(Ps 73:24-26)

This text does not yet speak of “resurrection” but of the certain knowledge that those who seek their pleasure, their security, and their future in God alone are “taken up” into the life of God “forever.” It has always been seen that way in the church’s faith-life as well. “God alone suffices,” said the great Teresa of Avila. Christian doctrine speaks of the *visio beatifica*, the beatific vision of God after death, the eternal knowledge God gives of God’s own self—and in that way of the ultimate encounter with God.

A look at the Old Testament itself shows that Israel was filled with the longing to see God. “Your face, O LORD, do I seek” (Ps 27:8) is one example of such longing, and “I shall see the goodness of the LORD” (Ps 27:13). It was customary in ancient Near Eastern cultures to carry the images of the gods in procession through the crowds at great festivals; then one could literally “see” the “face of the god,” that is, the face of the statue of the god. The Old Testament took up that language, but filled it with new meaning:

My soul thirsts for God,
for the living God.
When shall I come
and behold the face of God?

My tears have been my bread
day and night,
while people say to me continually,
“Where is your God?”
These things I remember,
and I pour out my heart:
how I went with the throng,
and led them in procession to the house of God,
with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving,
in the midst of the surging crowd. (Ps 42:3-5)

Obviously here looking at the face of God no longer means viewing a god’s image. In the first place it simply refers to pilgrimage to Jerusalem and visiting the Temple. This is about encounter with the hidden God of Israel, the encounter with God’s history. “Seeing God” thus meant, in a positive sense: being freed from trouble, rescued, coming to life.⁵ Gradually, as the Psalm proceeds, the “beholding of his face” comes to mean much more: namely, abiding before the face of God for all time, even through and beyond death.

This lays the foundation on which Jesus will build, calling blessed those who have a pure heart, “for they will see God” (Matt 5:8)—the foundation for Paul’s statement that the day will come when we will see God “face to face” (1 Cor 13:12).⁶

We should not think that such statements are obvious. In most archaic religions a person had to descend into the non-communicative underworld after death, or was “gathered” to the dead ancestors, to live on within the structures of the old family—but not before the face of a god. As far as the so-called “world religions” are concerned also, an encounter with God or a Godhead in death is anything but understood.

In Hinduism humans, when they die, move after an interval into the next incarnation. If an individual, after a long journey through newer and newer rebirths, finally finds salvation it is by coming to himself or herself—as a divine being.

In original Buddhism humans are not even permitted so much as to think of an encounter with the Wholly Other. Salvation is a lonely and painful getting free of one’s own desires, and so of oneself. It is not the seeking of a partner and most certainly not the search for a divine partner.

Things are different in Islam, which enjoys a high degree of theocentrism. A Muslim's whole life is oriented to God—in confession of faith, in prayer, in care for the poor, in fasting, in the pilgrimage to Mecca. Against this background it is all the more amazing that in the Qur'an, as far as life after death is concerned, the theocentric focus seems to be omitted. The afterlife is described as a beautiful garden; there is a fixed formula that recurs:

God will admit those who obey Him and His Messenger to Gardens graced with flowing streams, and there they will stay—that is the supreme bliss!⁷ (*Sura* 4,13)

This formula appears about sixty times in the Qur'an,⁸ usually with small variations but often with further expansions. These latter give a more precise picture of the content of the blessedness. The men received into the eternal gardens are greeted by angels, live in constant bliss, keep company with the prophets, are like brothers to one another, have everything they desire, wear green garments made of silk and brocade, are adorned with pearls and golden arm rings, recline on cushions or sit on sumptuous chairs, are surrounded by streams of the best water, of brooks filled with milk that does not sour, of rivulets of wine that does not inebriate. They rest in the shade under trees with low-hanging fruits, are surrounded by fragrant plants, eat from gold vessels, are served by boys like pearls, eternally young—and to all this Allah adds age-matched, large-eyed, lusty virgins ("houris"⁹) and pure spouses. "That is the supreme bliss" is repeated over and over.

And now for the crucial question: In all these good things that Allah bestows in the paradisaal garden, does encounter with Allah himself play any part? perhaps in the phrase that sometimes occurs, "God is pleased with them, and they with Him"?¹⁰ That is uncertain, because the formula need not be interpreted to mean a personal encounter. There is one lone text in which it is said that those who enter Paradise will see the angels "surrounding the throne" (*Sura* 39,75). But here again, everything remains open. Do they only see the angels? Contrast this with the plump and inflated images of earthly pleasures in which eternal blessedness is pictured, recurring throughout the Qur'an. An *encounter with God*, in person, is not clearly evident anywhere.¹¹

A further observation: adoring praise of God plays a significant role in the Qur'an. Indeed, Islam's holy book begins with the words:

In the name of God, the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy! Praise belongs to God, Lord of all worlds, the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy, Master of the Day of Judgement. (*Sura 1,1-4*)

But the fact that this praise plays no role in the multiple descriptions of Paradise betrays a strange disruption.¹² Paradise does not seem to be the real place for adoring God and thus of encounter with God, but is more like a gigantic and effective means of reward, providing private bliss and symmetrically corresponding to hell as an apparatus for punishment.

Please do not misunderstand. There can be no doubt that God is the absolute center of Islam, and mystical movements within Islam have also produced extended discussions about seeing God in Paradise.¹³ But the Qur'an itself, as far as life after death is concerned, contains different emphases.

Certainly Christians should not be puffed up about this: Christianity, in the course of its long history, has revealed similar tendencies. In 1988–1990 Colleen McDannell and Bernhard Lang published their book *Heaven: A History*,¹⁴ in which they showed that in the United States and in Europe since the eighteenth century there has been a notable stream of ideas about eternal blessedness in which God plays a rather minor role. Heaven is seen as a kind of continuation of middle-class life, often more like a family reunion. Being with one's spouse, children, relatives, and friends plays a crucial role. In heaven, as now on earth, there are work, mutual aid, child-raising, education, progress, amusement, and above all multiple love relationships. As in the Qur'an, earthly happiness is completely projected into heaven.

McDannell and Lang call this changed mentality, dominant especially in the Victorian era, the domestication of heaven.¹⁵ Heaven was made cozy because many Christians became resistant to the idea that they would have to spend eternity playing harps, singing "hallelujah!" and meditating on the attributes of God. But the more profound reason, the authors say, was a new image of friendship, marriage, family, and love. People did not want to be deprived in heaven of

these newly gained values of couple relationships and being at home in a nuclear family. They wanted not only to meet God there but above all to be reunited with the beloved and all those they had loved, and to take delight in them.

The “literary push to domesticate heaven” appeared especially in popular novels,¹⁶ paintings, accounts of visions, the sermons of preachers in nondenominational churches and groups, in theologians’ speculations pregnant with the spirit of the times, and in religious literature for the edification of the general public. McDannell and Lang are especially interested in this field. Elsewhere, above all in Roman Catholic teaching, the statement that it is the encounter with God, the *visio beatifica*, that is the basis of all blessedness remained intact. In later chapters I will address the unceasing question about human community in heaven—that is, “will I be with the people I have loved? will they be a part of my existence with God?” (See part 4, chaps. 6 and 12.) But at this point something crucial must be said as clearly as possible: death will be an encounter with God, and it is God who will be the human person’s heaven or judgment. God will be everything for the person and there will be nothing else for anyone, really nothing else, except *in God*.

Above, almost at the beginning of this chapter, I referred to Paul’s saying:

no eye has seen, no ear heard, nor the human heart conceived,
what God has prepared for those who love him. (1 Cor 2:9)

That we must steadfastly maintain. What Paul says here is a sword that cuts through all human fantasies about heaven. Incidentally, we find this same reticence about depicting heavenly glory in Rabbinic Judaism as well. It portrays the joys of the messianic time, but not of the world to come:

R. Hiyya b. Abba also said in the name of R. Johanan: All the prophets prophesied only for the days of the Messiah, but as for the world to come, “Eye hath not seen, oh God, beside Thee.”¹⁷

Similarly, *Sifre Deuteronomy* 356, commenting on Deuteronomy 33:29, tells how the assembled people of Israel asked Moses “Tell us what

goodness the Holy Blessed One will give us in the World to Come," and Moses responds:

"I do not know what I can tell you. Happy are you for what is prepared for you."¹⁸

That is a refusal to answer, similar to that of Paul and to what we find throughout the New Testament. Christian theology and piety should imitate this Jewish reticence and avoid all fantasizing about eternal life.

The question still remains whether there may not be experiences in life, even before death, in the life of every individual, that open our eyes and perhaps even sharpen our perception for what happens in death and beyond death. Rather than list a number of God-experiences that could be mentioned here I will refer to a single text. When the French mathematician and scientist Blaise Pascal (1623–1662) died, a carefully written scrap of paper was found sewn into the lining of his coat; evidently it had meant a great deal to him. This "Memorial," as it became known, describes the experience Pascal had on a particular day at a particular hour. It read:

The year of grace 1654, Monday, 23 November, feast of St. Clement, pope and martyr, and others in the martyrology. Vigil of St. Chrysogonus, martyr, and others. From about half past ten at night until about half past midnight,

FIRE.

GOD of Abraham, GOD of Isaac, GOD of Jacob, not of the philosophers and of the learned. Certitude. Certitude. Feeling. Joy. Peace. GOD of Jesus Christ. *Deum meum et deum vestrum* [My God and your God (John 20:17)]. "Your GOD will be my God" [Ruth 1:16]. Forgetfulness of the world and of everything, except GOD. He is only found by the ways taught in the Gospel. Grandeur of the human soul. Righteous Father, the world has not known you, but I have known you [John 17:25]. Joy, joy, joy, tears of joy. I had departed from him: *Dereliquerunt me fontem aquae vivae* [They have forsaken me, the fount of living water (Jer 2:13)]. "My God, will you leave me?" Let me not be separated from him forever. "This is eternal life, that they know you, the one true God, and the one that you sent, Jesus Christ" [John 17:3]. Jesus

Christ. Jesus Christ. I left him; I fled him, renounced, crucified. Let me never be separated from him. He is only kept securely by the ways taught in the Gospel: Renunciation, total and sweet. Complete submission to Jesus Christ and to my director. Eternally in joy for a day's exercise on the earth. *Non obliviscar sermones tuos* [I will not forget your words (Ps 119:16)]. Amen.¹⁹

This memorial reports a real experience and is precisely dated. Pascal, a scientist, noted it with almost the same precision with which he documented an experiment. It is not a matter of theological insights such as one may have on any given day, but of the shattering experience of a particular hour that changes everything, that one will never forget. But this is not a universal human experience that every religious person can have; it is, in the first place, a specifically *Judaeo-Christian* experience with a prehistory, namely, the faith-history of many generations. Pascal encountered Christ at a particular moment in time, and in Christ he encountered the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. That encounter filled him with a joy that revolutionized everything. At the same time it was an *ecclesial* experience; after all, it is no accident that Pascal specifically names the saints of the day.

We have no right to somehow dismantle the words "Joy, joy, joy, tears of joy," reducing them, for example, to a purely psychological process. In that joy Pascal found peace, a peace that gave new order to his life, reset it at another level, made it clear and unambiguous. Pascal, deeply shaken, suddenly realized that he had previously been separated from Christ even though he had long believed. He knew that he had now truly found Christ, and God in him, and he knew it with the utmost certainty. So Pascal repeated the word.

Many people have had similar experiences: for example, of suddenly standing in the presence of God and being unable to escape; of feeling one's heart on fire; of a joy so deep that all other joys fade; of inner peace and ultimate certainty. These experiences can be very different. They can overpower a person or they can arise so gently in one's heart that one almost misses them. But anyone can have them in one form or another. They happen when one wills only to do God's will and nothing more.

Those who have had such experiences will be able to believe that at some point there will come an hour for which everything past will

have been only a prelude and anticipation: the hour of the ultimate and open encounter with God—the hour in which we finally know and are fully known. “There we shall rest²⁰ and see, see and love, love and praise.”²¹

PART FIVE

What We Can Do



1

Genuine Care for Our Dead



There are many examples showing that animals can grieve. The British biologist Ian Edmond and his team observed elephants who stood for a long time near a female that had died of a snakebite. Eventually they had to go in search of food, but the next day they returned and again remained standing by the dead animal. This process was repeated over several days; the great distance the group had to travel each time seemed to make no difference.¹

It would be wrong to see this as a formal ritual of mourning. It would be just as wrong to deny that the returning animals felt anything like loss, sorrow, and solidarity. In the long process of humanization there must, from the beginning, have been sorrow over the dead, even with growing realization of what death meant. The more human the humans became, and the more they perceived the profundity of their separation from the dead, the more elementary and at the same time the more human must grieving have become.

Psychologists are right to counsel us not to repress grief for our beloved dead. It must be expressed in rituals, it must be communicated, and we have to leave time for it. In the ancient Near East there were extreme rituals of mourning, and they still exist there today. Probably they are more human and healing than the custom of swallowing one's suffering and not showing it to outsiders.

The death of a beloved person is affliction and loss. Suddenly there is an empty place that quickly becomes a dreadful desolation. And swiftly comes the painful question of whether one has done right by the dead. Long-forgotten scenes arise in which one has wounded the person, done her or him injustice.

But gratitude also grows: often gratitude that sees the deceased with new eyes and finds things that had remained hidden before. Perspectives change and the life of the dead person rearranges itself. But above all, one begins to have a deep solidarity with the deceased. We want to do everything possible to honor their memory, make them present in many symbolic ways, and forge a new bond with them.

All that is common throughout the world, in all cultures, and it is profoundly human. It is also normal for Christians—but there are differences. Christians cannot grieve in the same way as those “who have no hope” (1 Thess 4:13). Nor can they practice a cult of the ancestors with long genealogies, small home altars, offerings, and above all they cannot see ancestors as having a kind of divine function in the lives of descendants.

Nevertheless, the solidarity that ties every healthy person who is not utterly desolate to his or her dead exists for Christians also, but here it has an immeasurably deeper dimension and is based on utter freedom. The “fear of the dead” that played such an immense role in many ancient cultures has been overcome by Jewish-Christian faith.

In the previous chapter I spoke of the “togetherness” and “mutual aid” that Paul repeatedly urges on his congregations. They are to “love one another with mutual affection” (Rom 12:10), “have the same care for one another” (1 Cor 12:25), and “bear one another’s burdens” (Gal 6:2). But above all, when other communities are in need of help they are to share with them in solidarity and “supply the needs of the saints,” that is, their fellow Christians (2 Cor 9:12).

I concluded from this that if such solidarity is already essential for Christian communities *in this world* it is most certainly essential also for the perfected communities in heaven. Now let me go a step further: that solidarity must not only exist within the congregations on earth and adorn the community in heaven; it applies also to Christians who have died, who are in that “transition,” that “between” of which I have spoken (see part 4, chap. 7), confronted with the return-

ing Christ, namely, the fire of his judgment that becomes a flaming and purifying fire because it is pure love. In other words: that solidarity must be maintained with all those we used to call “the poor souls in purgatory.” Nowadays we don’t like to call them “poor” souls because they are not only suffering but are already on the way to becoming infinitely rich in their encounter with Christ and the assurance of his love. And we no longer simply call them “souls” without any further thought, because they contain their whole histories and thus are also bodies, since the sum of a life’s story cannot exist without a body. (See part 4, chap. 11.) Finally, we know that their “transition” from death to eternal life can in no way be understood in earthly categories of time. It is a real “interim” but it can no longer be measured in days or years or millennia.

Thus Christian solidarity is in place not only within the pilgrim church on earth and not only in the perfected church in heaven; it must also be true of the church that is “in transition,” that is being purified and cleansed before the face of Christ.²

We must go even a step further than that. The solidarity of Christian communities extends constantly beyond the limits of particular community or congregational structures. Christians help (we hope!) not only their sisters and brothers in faith but all those who are in need of help. Christian sisterly and brotherly love must constantly expand its boundaries within the world. For that very reason our solidarity with the deceased must not be only with our sisters and brothers in faith but with all the dead. Everyone, after all, comes before the face of Christ, whether baptized or unbaptized, those who believe in Christ and those who are far from him, seekers and non-seekers alike. (See part 4, chap. 5.)

But enough of these more or less abstract reflections! Let us finally get down to the concrete and ask what Christian solidarity with the dead, with those “in transition,” might look like. Then, of course, our relationship to our own dead comes first to the fore, our deceased relatives and friends, those close to us and above all those we have loved. How can our care for these dead find concrete expression?

Leaving aside things like burial, tending graves, dealing with inheritance, and so on, what about “real” care for our dead? They are not much interested in how their funerals are carried out and their

graves decorated; this is about their happiness and their need, about what they have left behind in the world—the good and the bad seeds they sowed in their lives.

What is the good seed? Above all it is the faith modeled for us by our parents, relatives, and friends. If we are untrue to that faith it must surely bring them a burning stab of pain. On the other hand, in their encounter with Christ they will behold with a clarity never perceptible before what the reign of God is and what history is all about. If they know that those they have left behind are putting their lives on the line for the Gospel and for the expansion of God's cause it must be one of the profound joys that comes over them in the "moment" of purification. When we ourselves act out of concern for the reign of God we have the right relationship to our dead. Then they are near us; then we have never lost them. A woman who had experienced the sudden death of her mother said to me:

I often talk with my dead mother. I thank her for the good things I received from her. I tell her about all she did for me. Above all I thank her for the faith she modeled for me in her quiet and matter-of-fact way. I ask her to help me remain in that faith. Then I tell her how things are with me, talk about everything that worries me and what makes me glad. I think of her very often. Sometimes I implore her to help me when I don't know how to go on.

Should we lay the prayers of this woman to her mother on the carefully calibrated golden scale of dogmatic theology and discuss whether it is permissible for a Christian to pray to her dead? That kind of carping would be out of bounds, so long as those left behind are aware that ultimately all help comes from God and that their appeals to the dead are also an expression of a deep sense of communion.

We are on much safer ground, of course, in praying to God *for* the dead, a practice with a very long tradition, traceable as far back as 2 Maccabees (second century BCE).³ The early Christians also prayed for their dead,⁴ and even today prayer for the dead has an established place in the eucharistic canons of Catholic churches. For example, the second Eucharistic Prayer in the Roman Missal reads:

Remember also our brothers and sisters
who have fallen asleep in the hope of the resurrection,
and all who have died in your mercy:
welcome them into the light of your face.

Similarly, the Episcopal Church in the United States prays in Eucharistic Prayer D:

Remember all who have died in the peace of Christ, and those
whose faith is known to you alone; bring them into the place of
eternal joy and light.

The form of the Eucharistic Prayer itself is that of pure thanksgiving to God, the Father. But where it contains petitions they have a *gathering* function. This fundamental action of the church is intended to bring all together: those near and far, the living and the dead, angels and humans, saints known and unknown, so that, whenever this great official praise is brought before God, the whole church, earthly and heavenly, is gathered together. The irreplaceable center is the Crucified and Risen One. Just here, in the Eucharistic Prayer, is the proper place for the church to pray for its dead.⁵

Here the church prays to God to receive all deceased “brothers and sisters,” that is, all deceased Christians, into God’s glory, but beyond that not only all Christians but all people who “have died in your mercy.”⁶ These petitions are instructive. They point, as the overall course of the Eucharistic Prayer shows, to Jesus’ sacrifice of his life, his suffering and resurrection. Here is the source of all the mercy and forgiveness God gives. The prayer for the dead, and above all the making-present of Christ’s sacrifice of his life, are the center and summit of care for our dead.

But consider again what the deceased have left behind them: not only the good seeds they sowed, but also the evils they may have brought into the world. In his book on eschatology Joseph Ratzinger, as we have seen, rightly poses the problem:

We can ask whether a human being can be said to have reached his fulfillment and destiny so long as others suffer on account of him, so long as the guilt whose source he is persists on earth and brings pain to other people.⁷

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