



Life after Death? A Response to Theology's Silence about Eternal Life*

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“Indeed, it is perhaps most proper that one who is going to depart and take up his abode in that world should think about the life over there and say what sort of life we imagine it to be.” So spoke Socrates in his last conversation, immortalized by the creative hand of Plato into a basic text of Western metaphysics at the end of which the condemned philosopher drinks the poison certain of the freedom to come.¹

But it is not only in our final moments that we are “going to depart.” How do we know that in our last hour we will have the clear Socratic head needed to “think about the life over there and say what sort of life we imagine it to be”? By then it could well be too late. Therefore, Christian piety reminds us, soberly but relentlessly, that we are always “going to depart.” “Even as we live each day, Death our life embraces.”²

These days we know this anew. We sing once more today how our life is threatened by death at every step. Yet what the old chorale sang in its slow and weighty style has been turned into dramatic accusation by modern song writers. They are no longer concerned with individual death which can strike any one at any time in any place; instead, their song is an incantation against the collective end that humanity threatens to bring upon itself.

Every child learns today that it is not only the individual self but all of us

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¹*Phaedo* 61e, in *Great Dialogues of Plato*, trans. W. H. D. Rouse (New York: Mentor, 1956) 464.

²Martin Luther, “Even as We Live Each Day,” Hymn 350, *Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg; Philadelphia: Board of Publication, Lutheran Church in America, 1978).

together who are embraced by death even as we live each day. This comes to children not as Christian truth through religious education but in the sand box—where suddenly one day they can no longer play because the sand may be contaminated with deadly radiation. Even if the fear proves to be unfounded in a particular instance, the knowledge is there and will not go away: the knowledge of the deadly threat to our own existence that comes not from any inability to act but from our very ability to exercise scientific power. Success in our quest for understanding and our ability to translate knowledge into technology has made nature vulnerable to us in a way that rebounds on our own heads. An intrusive humanity regards earth, sea, and air as things to be investigated and transformed, no longer as cosmic powers infinitely superior to the human intruder. Now we experience nature's strength only in the power of natural forces run amok.

More and more we experience nature out of balance, as it counters human moves against

it. It seems we are unable to deal with the consequences of our own achievements. In every sphere—land, water, and air—we endanger ourselves: “Even as we live each day, Death our life embraces.” We are in the embrace of death because we threaten to conjure up—within and against the world—the void out of which the world was created. No doubt there is a song to be sung about this—a sad and ugly song. This song transforms the slow, weighty—but unrelenting—note of the old chorale into sharp, pointed, and fervently rendered accusations: songs against death, songs as calls to action.

But all of this ignores one question. The old chorale’s observation about death leads into a question which is unknown and alien to the modern songs: “Even as we live each day, Death our life embraces. Who is there to bring us help, Rich forgiving graces?” Christian faith can do nothing other than pursue this question: Who is there to bring us help?

The point of the pursuit is not to call into question the newer songs against death, nor certainly to underestimate the dangerous situation in which humanity has involuntarily placed itself through its mighty achievements. The pursuit continues because even if we were able, through thoughtful self-limitation of these achievements, to prevent collective suicide, even then—when the new songs against the new form of self-made death had done their work and we had been able on our own to turn away from collective suicide—even then every single one of us sometime, somewhere would have to die. And then what? For those who are “going to depart” it is most proper to think about and imagine what comes with death and after death. To be sure, we modern Christians need to rediscover this pursuit. As children of the Enlightenment, we have learned so to love this world that we have made the transformation longed for by Ludwig Feuerbach: we are no longer “candidates for the hereafter” who are blind to the world; instead we have become “students of this world” who have forgotten the hereafter.³ The Christian hope for life in the coming kingdom of God has been reduced solely to an interest in life this side of death.

Meanwhile the interest in eternal life has been taken over by an esoteric religiosity which has drifted away from institutional religion. This new religiosity

³Ludwig Feuerbach, *Lectures on the Essence of Religion*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Harper & Row, 1967) 285.

vaguely combines elements of eastern mysticism and revived gnosticism. It gives new plausibility to the Platonic myth that the human soul survives the destruction of the mortal body to embark on an ambiguous journey: either to return in another life form or to find its final release from the physical world.

Things esoteric and speculations about reincarnation are alive and well. Only the church’s proclamation seems to be tired of thinking about life after death. And academic theology anxiously protects itself from talking about the fact that, as Socrates said, we are “going to depart”—not to mention from any conversation about “what sort of life we imagine” hereafter. Where Christian hope does still extend beyond death, it has become amorphous and mute.

But must the indisputable right to life this side of death, must the justified and much articulated interest in the present world, must the study of this age—which cannot be urged too strongly—must these stand so squarely in the way of hope for eternal life that, in matters of eschatology, the church suffers verbal paralysis?

Of course there is great danger that hope for the future might pervert faith into an opiate

for those who suffer in the misery of the present. Not only Ludwig Feuerbach and Karl Marx, but already the great Immanuel Kant and (among the theologians) Friedrich Schleiermacher warned against this. Schleiermacher ascribed our religious interest in the hereafter to “the natural curiosity of the child in us who fears death.”⁴ Such curiosity, he thought, was unworthy of the mature Christian, for it would lead us to fix on consolations which would “spoil for us the present.”⁵

Heinrich Heine popularized this attitude in verses which are still vehemently propagated by critics of religion:

A newer song, a better song,
My friends, let's bring to birth now!
We shall proceed right here to build
The Kingdom of Heaven on earth now.

.....
The soil produces bread enough
For all mankind's nutrition,
Plus rose and myrtle, beauty and joy,
And sugar peas in addition.

Yes, sugar peas for everyone
Piled high upon the barrows!
The heavens we can safely leave
To the angels and the sparrows.⁶

I have nothing against Schleiermacher's passion for the present! Nothing against Heinrich Heine's emphasis on life here on earth—on sufficient food for

⁴Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On the Glaubenslehre: Two Letters to Dr. Lücke*, trans. James Duke and Francis Fiorenza (Chico, CA: Scholars, 1981) 58.

⁵Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith* 158.3 (New York: Harper & Row, 1963) II.703.

⁶Heinrich Heine, *Germany: A Winter's Fable*, Caput 1: “*Ein neues Lied, ein besseres Lied / O Freunde, will ich euch dichten / Wir wollen hier auf Erden schon / Das Himmelreich errichten. . . / Es wächst hienieden Brot genug / Für alle Menschenkinder / Auch Rosen und Myrten, Schönheit und Lust / Und Zuckererbsen nicht minder / Ja, Zuckererbsen für jedermann / Sobald die Schoten platzen / Den Himmel überlassen wir / Den Engeln und den Spatzen.*” English translation by Hal Draper in *The Complete Poems of Heinrich Heine* (Boston: Suhrkamp/Insel, 1982) 484.

every person plus earthly beauty and joy! No speeches against finding pleasure in roses, myrtle, and sugar peas! But does such an emphasis mean we have to turn heaven over to the angels and the sparrows? That would be a necessary alternative only if the hope for eternal life and the coming Kingdom of God actually were so proclaimed that they did in fact spoil the present.

For all too long that is just what happened. In reaction, contemporary humanity began to seek the meaning of life more and more in the present, and theology and church accommodated themselves to this move. But “the natural curiosity of the child in us who fears death” cannot be suppressed forever. And when, over against such curiosity, the church's proclamation and the

theology that informs it offer only an awkward silence, it is no surprise that even Christians succumb to that aimless religiosity and its glittering promises.

As long as theology and church know how to portray for believers only the threat of death and life this side of death, even the most pious will be tempted to cast longing glances at the pictures supplied by superstition. Our theological silence virtually forces believers out into the syncretistic marketplace of impossible possibilities.

And all the while, when it comes to the question of hope, Christian faith itself is anything but reticent, anything but devoid of images. Christian hope does not project itself into an empty and indefinite future from an indifferent starting point. When faith begins to hope, it already starts with a very particular past, a past which contains the future within itself and which is determinative for time and eternity. Everything for which we Christians hope is based in the story of Jesus Christ, in his earthly life, his death, and his resurrection.

This story gives Christian hope its certainty and, at the same time, the images with which that certainty is expressed. After this life we meet not a void but the heavenly Kingdom of God; we approach not only our own decay but also our resuscitation and life with God—we hope for these things because they are already guaranteed by God himself in the story of Jesus Christ. His cross makes good the promise that death does not have the last word. And his resurrection and ascension to life with God makes us certain that we too are on the way to such a life.

So those who are “going to depart,” those who as Christians confront their future in the certainty of faith, will take up Socrates’ challenge and begin to “think about the life over there and say what sort of life we imagine it to be.” We will do this as Christians, which means we will not have to think things up on our own, nor, of all things, will we be guided by some esoteric or occult fantasy. As Christians we will think about eternal life by thinking about the Word of God; by examining the Scriptures we will say what sort of life we imagine—rightly imagine—that life to be.