

VERITAS

Series Introduction

“... the truth will set you free” (John 8:32)

In much contemporary discourse, Pilate’s question has been taken to mark the absolute boundary of human thought. Beyond this boundary, it is often suggested, is an intellectual hinterland into which we must not venture. This terrain is an agnosticism of thought: because truth cannot be possessed, it must not be spoken. Thus, it is argued that the defenders of “truth” in our day are often traffickers in ideology, merchants of counterfeits, or anti-liberal. They are, because it is somewhat taken for granted that Nietzsche’s word is final: truth is the domain of tyranny.

Is this indeed the case, or might another vision of truth offer itself? The ancient Greeks named the love of wisdom as *philia*, or friendship. The one who would become wise, they argued, would be a “friend of truth.” For both philosophy and theology might be conceived as schools in the friendship of truth, as a kind of relation. For like friendship, truth is as much discovered as it is made. If truth is then so elusive, if its domain is *terra incognita*, perhaps this is because it arrives to us—unannounced—as gift, as a person, and not some thing.

The aim of the Veritas book series is to publish incisive and original current scholarly work that inhabits “the between” and “the beyond” of theology and philosophy. These volumes will all share a common aspiration to transcend the institutional divorce in which these two disciplines often find themselves, and to engage questions of pressing concern to both philosophers and theologians in such a way as to reinvigorate both disciplines with a kind of interdisciplinary desire, often so absent in contemporary academe. In a word, these volumes represent collective efforts in the befriending of truth, doing so beyond the simulacra of pretend tolerance, the violent, yet insipid reasoning of liberalism that asks with Pilate, “What is truth?”—expecting a consensus of non-commitment; one that encourages the commodification of the mind, now sedated by the civil service of career, ministered by the frightened patrons of position.

The series will therefore consist of two “wings”: (1) original monographs; and (2) essay collections on a range of topics in theology and philosophy. The latter will principally be the products of the annual conferences of the Centre of Theology and Philosophy (www.theologyphilosophycentre.co.uk).

Conor Cunningham and Eric Austin Lee, *Series editors*

The Role of Death in Life

A Multidisciplinary Examination
of the Relationship between Life and Death

edited by

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Life and Death in the Age of Martyrdom

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FOR THE TOPIC ON the role of life in death and death in life, the age of martyrdom, here understood to be the first two or three centuries following Christ, offers much material for reflection. It presents us with a dramatic reversal of how we usually understand life and death, and does so in the immediacy of the event of Christ's own passion, understanding this defining event through the apocalyptic opening of the Scriptures (the "Old Testament") by the slain Lamb (cf. Rev 5) and interpreting current events in this light, rather than through the framework of a systematic theology elaborated after the Christian church adjusted to a more comfortable (though still tense and uneasy) relationship with the world. Having given a few examples from the martyrdom literature, this essay will draw out three key themes, pertaining to life/death, creation, and the human being, and offer a few concluding reflections.

The Martyrs

Ignatius of Antioch at the turn of the second century, that is, in a period still with a living memory of Christ and the apostles, while being taken under guard to Rome to be martyred for his faith, wrote to the Christians in that city, imploring them not to interfere with his coming trials. While journeying slowly but surely towards a gruesome martyrdom, he nevertheless embraces his fate with joy, exclaiming:

It is better for me to die in Christ Jesus than to be king over the ends of the earth. I seek him who died for our sake. I desire him who rose for us. Birth-pangs are upon me. Suffer me, my brethren; hinder me not from living, do not wish me to die. . . . Suffer me to receive the pure light; when I shall have arrived there, I shall become a human being [ἄνθρωπος]. Suffer me to follow the example of the passion of my God. (Ign. *Rom.* 6.)

Life and death are reversed for Ignatius, compared to our usual patterns of speech. "Hinder me not from living," by seeking to stop my martyrdom; "do not wish me to die" by trying to keep me "alive"! He is in the process of being born, in a birth through which he will become a "human being"—a human being in the stature of Christ, the "perfect human being" (Ign. *Smyrn.* 4) or the "new human being" (Ign. *Eph.* 20), as the martyr refers to "the faithful Martyr, the Firstborn of the dead" (Rev 1:5), "the Pioneer of our salvation" (Heb 2:10).

Death, here, is a defining moment: not the end, but the beginning; not disappearance, but revelation. As Ignatius also pointed out to the Romans: "Now that Christ is with the Father, he is more visible than he was before" (Ign. *Rom.* 3). That is, when Christ walked amongst us in the flesh his disciples never really understood who he was; now that he has passed through his passion, the "exodus" that he accomplishes in Jerusalem (Luke 9:31), and is with the Father in the kingdom, now they can finally "see" who he is.

A second example comes from later in the second century. Reporting on a violent pogrom that had taken place in Lyons around 177 AD, the author of a letter, probably Irenaeus of Lyons, addressed to the Christians in Asia Minor and Phrygia, focuses upon the figure of Blandina.¹ As a young slave girl—the epitome of weakness in the ancient world—she personifies Christ's words to Paul: "My strength is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor 12:9). She was so "weak in body" that the others were fearful lest she not be able to make a good confession. Yet, she "was filled with such power that even those who were taking turns to torture her in every way, from dawn until dusk, were weary and beaten. They, themselves, admitted that they were beaten . . . astonished at her endurance, as her entire body was mangled and broken" (*Hist. eccl.* 5.1.18)

Not only is she, in her weakness, filled with divine power by her confession, but she becomes fully identified with the one whose body was broken on Golgotha:

1. Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 5.1–3.

Blandina, hung on a stake (ἐπὶ ξύλου), was offered as food for the wild beasts that were let in. She, by being seen hanging in the form of a cross, by her vigorous prayer, caused great zeal in the contestants, as, in their struggle, they beheld with their outward eyes, through the sister, him who was crucified for them, that he might persuade those who believe in him that everyone who suffers for the glory of Christ has for ever communion with the living God. . . . [T]he small and weak and despised woman had put on the great and invincible athlete, Christ, routing the adversary in many bouts, and, through the struggle, being crowned with the crown of incorruptibility. (*Hist. eccl.* 5.1.41–42)

Through her suffering, Blandina becomes identified with Christ: she no longer lives, but Christ lives in her (cf. Gal 2:20). This is, of course, only seen by those who are undergoing their own ordeal with her in the area, those who have also truly taken up the cross. Those looking down from the seats in the amphitheater would have looked upon the spectacle quite differently, though perhaps some were moved to reflect further on what kind of witness she was providing. Blandina's passage ("exodus") out of this world is Christ's entry into this world—and this is again described as a birth, both hers and that of Christ.² After describing her suffering, and that of another Christian called Attalus, the letter continues:

Through their continued life the dead were made alive, and the martyrs showed favor to those who had failed to witness. And there was great joy for the Virgin Mother in receiving back alive those who she had miscarried as dead. For through them the majority of those who had denied were again brought to birth and again conceived and again brought to life and learned to confess; and now living and strengthened, they went to the judgment seat. (*H.e.* 5.1.45–46)

The Christians who turn away from making their confession are simply dead: their lack of preparation has meant that they are stillborn children of the Virgin Mother, the church. But now, strengthened by the witness of others, they also are able to go to their death—and so the Virgin Mother receives them back alive, finally giving birth to living children of God. The death of the martyr is their "new birth," and the death of the martyr is celebrated as their true birthday (*Hist. eccl.* 5.1.63).

2. Cf. Ign. *Trall.* 11: "Through the cross, by his suffering, he calls you who are the parts of his body. Thus the head cannot be born without the other parts, because God promises unity, which he himself is."

Finally, Irenaeus of Lyons, the first Christian theologian to use all the standard features of later theology—using the writings of the apostles and evangelists as Scripture, appealing to a “canon of truth,” tradition, succession—in the first comprehensive theological vision, encompassing creation and salvation together, also focuses on the martyr. In one of his most-quoted lines, he asserts: “The glory of God is a living human being,” and continues, “and the life of the human being is to see God” (*Haer.* 4.20.7). As “a human being cannot see God and live” (Exod 33:20), it is not surprising that he too is speaking of the martyr as the living human being, the glory of God. For Irenaeus they exemplify the words of Christ that the Spirit is ready, while the flesh is weak, and so demonstrate what happens to the “pledge” of the Spirit given in baptism when it fully bears life in the witness of one dying in Christ:

For it is testified by the Lord that as “the flesh is weak,” so “the Spirit is ready” [Matt 26:41], that is, is able to accomplish what it wills. If, therefore, anyone mixes the readiness of the Spirit as a stimulus to the weakness of the flesh, it necessarily follows that what is strong will prevail over what is weak, so that the weakness of the flesh will be absorbed by the strength of the Spirit, and such a one will no longer be carnal but spiritual because of the communion of the Spirit. In this way, therefore, the martyrs bear witness and despise death: not after the weakness of the flesh, but by the readiness of the Spirit. For when the weakness of the flesh is absorbed, it manifests the Spirit as powerful; and again, when the Spirit absorbs the weakness, it inherits the flesh for itself, and from both of these is made a living human being: living, indeed, because of the participation of the Spirit; and human, because of the substance of the flesh. (*Haer.* 5.9.2.)

It is not that the martyrs think death to be of no account, or simply embrace it nihilistically, but rather do so as martyrs following Christ. It is, moreover, in their witness, their *martyria*, that God’s creative work comes to fulfillment, for in their death the martyrs image Christ, who is himself the image of God, so that in this way the handiwork of God is perfected as a truly living human being, bearing witness to the paradoxical words of Christ that his strength is made perfect in weakness (2 Cor 12:9). The Spirit inherits the flesh, possesses it in such a manner that the flesh itself adopts the quality of the life-giving Spirit, and so is rendered like the Word of God (cf. *Haer.* 5.9.3). The paradigm of the living human being—flesh vivified by the Spirit—is the martyr.

These three examples, which could easily be multiplied, present us with very dramatic words and descriptions, inverting our usual understanding of life and death: one only becomes human, or rather one is born into life as a human being, through following the trail blazed by Christ. There are three key ideas at work here, which I will explore below, before offering some conclusions.

1: It is Finished

The first point relates to Ignatius’ words that only through martyrdom will he finally become a human being. Ignatius, as also Irenaeus, comes out of Asia Minor with a theology shaped primarily by the evangelist John. It is well known that John presents his gospel in a manner that deliberately parallels Genesis: they both begin “In the beginning . . .” But to understand the particularity of this gospel, and a further allusion to Genesis, we need to consider briefly its relationship to the Synoptics, that is, to Matthew, Mark, and Luke. In these gospels, it is only through the Passion of Christ that the disciples came to know who Christ truly is. This is often referred to as the “messianic secret”: the Lordship of Christ is hidden from his followers (though not to the reader) until after the events of the passion. The only exception—Peter on the road to Caesarea Philippi (Matt 16)—is the exception that proves the rule: after making his confession (“You are the Christ the Son of the Living God”) Peter is told that he did not know this “by flesh and blood” (by seeing Jesus), but by a revelation from the Father. When Christ then tells this supposed “rock” (“Peter” in Greek means “rock”), upon whom he will build his church, that he must go to Jerusalem to suffer and be killed, Peter bursts out “That will never happen to you,” only to be called “Satan” by Christ, precisely for trying to separate Christ from the passion. When it comes to the crucifixion in the Synoptics, the disciples abandon Christ; Peter even denies him. When they find the tomb empty, they don’t understand; nor do they immediately recognize the risen Christ when they meet him. It is only once he opens the Scriptures (the “Old Testament”) to show how “Moses and all the prophets” spoke about how “the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory” (Luke 24:26–27), that their hearts start to burn, so that they recognize him in the breaking of the bread. At this point, however, he disappears from sight, so that the disciples are left to await his coming, looking backwards at the Scripture

seen in the light of the passion to seek the coming Lord. And so it is in terms drawn from the Scriptures that they present Christ in their gospels.

The Gospel of John, however, begins where the other gospels conclude: that which the disciples only know at the end of the Synoptics—the opening of the Scriptures by the slain Lamb—is where John begins. After the opening verses (known as the “Prologue”), the narrative begins with the Baptist crying out when he sees Jesus: “Behold the Lamb of God” (John 1:29). Then, when Philip says to Nathaniel, “we have found the one of whom Moses in the law and the prophets wrote,” that is, what the disciples are taught by the risen Christ in the Synoptics, Christ promises that “you will see greater things than these” (John 1:44–51)! The Gospel of John, known from the earliest times as the “spiritual gospel” written by “the theologian,” thus reflects a movement from a human, historical perspective, recounting what had happened as it happened, to a divine, eternal perspective, telling all things, with the Scriptures already opened. And so, in his gospel, John depicts Christ as the exalted Lord from the beginning: Christ repeatedly tells his disciples that he is from above—from the heavens, born of the Father—while they are from below, from the earth, born of Adam. As such, if Christ goes to the cross, he does so voluntarily, and therefore his elevation on the cross is his exaltation in glory. Identified as the Lamb of God from the beginning of John’s Gospel, Christ is crucified, naturally, at the time of the slaying of the lamb in the temple, rather than on the following day as in the other gospels. His crucifixion is also depicted differently: he is not abandoned and his words are not a cry of abandonment. Rather, after addressing his mother and beloved disciple, Christ says with stately majesty: “It is finished” (John 19:30).

What is it, though, that is “finished”? Here, perhaps, we can turn back to Genesis to catch a deeper allusion than simply the opening words of the book of Moses and that of John, “In the beginning.” In the opening chapter of Genesis, there is a striking difference in the way that God’s activity is described. Scripture begins with God issuing commands: Let there be light. . . . Let there be a firmament. . . . Let the waters under the heavens be gathered. . . . Let the earth put forth vegetation. . . . Let there be light in the firmament. . . . Let water bring forth swarms of living creatures. . . . Let the earth bring forth living creatures. . . . God speaks everything into existence by his “fiat”—“Let it Be.” This “fiat” is sufficient for the existence of the universe: “and it was so . . . and it was good.”

But, having declared all these things into existence by a word alone, God then announces his own project—not with an injunction, but in the subjunctive: “Let us make the human being [*ἄνθρωπος*] in our image, after our likeness” (Gen 1:26). This is the only thing that God is described as specifically deliberating about; this is his divine purpose and resolve. That this is indeed the work of God is shown, for Irenaeus, by the manner in which Christ heals the blind man, recounted only in the Gospel of John. The blind man healed by Christ was born blind not because of his fault or that of his parents, but, as Christ says, “in order that the works of God might be made manifest” (John 9:3). As the way that Christ heals the blind man, mixing spit and earth, parallels our initial fashioning, mixing the power of God and the dust of the earth, Irenaeus concludes: “The work of God is the fashioning of the human being” (*Haer.* 5.15.2, *opera autem Dei plasmatio est hominis*).

However, returning to Genesis, this divine deliberation and resolve is the only thing in the creation account that is *not* followed by the words “and it was so.” This project of God, God’s own work, is not completed by his word alone. Only with the culmination of theology in the Gospel of John do we hear that the work of God is complete. Shortly before Christ declares that it is “finished,” we hear confirmation of the completion of God’s project in the words uttered unwittingly by Pilate: “Behold the human being” (John 19:5). That Christ is the first true human being in history is a position maintained right through the first millennium and more. Nicholas Cabasilas, writing in the fourteenth century, put it this way:

It was for the new human being [*ἄνθρωπος*] that human nature was created at the beginning, and for him mind and desire were prepared. . . . It was not the old Adam who was the model for the new, but the new Adam for the old. . . . For those who have known him first, the old Adam is the archetype because of our fallen nature. But for him who sees all things before they exist, the first Adam is the imitation of the second. To sum it up: the Savior first and alone showed to us the true human being (*ἄνθρωπος*), who is perfect on account of both character and life and in all other respects.³

Although within the scope of our history, as we collectively and individually experience it, Christ comes later, nevertheless the biblical Adam is already made *in* image of Christ (Gen 1:27), who *is* the image of God (cf. Col 1:15). From a divine perspective (meaning, reading the books of

3. Cabasilas, *Life in Christ*, 6.91–94 (6.12 Eng)

Scripture in the light of the passion) Christ preexists Adam; Christ is “in the beginning” (John 1:1). As such, Adam is only ever, as Paul puts it, “a type of the one to come” (Rom 5:14), a preliminary sketch of the fullness of humanity that is Christ.

Finally, if this is the culmination of creation, then the Sabbath on which God rests from his work is none other than the day on which Christ rests in the tomb. As an ancient Eastern Christian hymn for Pascha puts it:

Moses the great mystically prefigured this present day, saying: “And God blessed the seventh day.” For this is the blessed Sabbath, this is the day of rest, on which the only-begotten Son of God rested from all his works, through the economy of death he kept the Sabbath in the flesh, and returning again through the resurrection he has granted us eternal life, for he alone is good and loves humankind [φιλ-άνθρωπος literally: loves-the human being].⁴

The project, the work of God announced at the beginning, is completed at the end by one who is God. As Maximus put it: Christ, as human, completes what he himself, as God, has predetermined to take place.⁵ And, as such, for us to become human requires, as Ignatius affirms so resoundingly, our own *martyria*.

2: From Genesis (“coming-to-be”) to Gennesis (“birth”)

One further point to be drawn, from our consideration above, about how it was that the disciples finally came to know who Christ is, is that the revelation of Christ as God coincides with his death as human. It is in *the way* in which he died as a human being that Christ shows us what it is to be God. It is not by being “almighty,” as we tend to think of this, but rather, in the Pauline inversion of the cross—strength in weakness, wisdom in folly—by his *all-too-human* act of dying, in the particular manner that he does, offering his life for others, that he shows us the life of God and the love that God is (1 John 4:8). It is not that Christ died because he was human, and that because he is God he was able to conquer death. That would “split” Christ apart, and be of no help to anyone else! Rather, as the disciples concluded—not simply by seeing the risen Christ but by going back to Scripture (in particular Isaiah 53, the suffering servant)—it was his death that conquers

4. Doxastikon, Holy Saturday Vespers.

5. Maximus the Confessor, *Ambig.* 41.

death, and so it is his death that is the means of life for others, because it was the death of an innocent victim, one over whom death had no claim, and so whose death for the sake of others was completely voluntary and freely given.

This is the heart of the theology defended by the councils of the first millennium. That which we see in the crucified and risen Christ—as proclaimed by the apostles through the words drawn from the Scriptures, the prophecies and narratives, the poetry and the prayers—is what it is to be God. This is the meaning of the affirmation that Christ is “consubstantial with the Father,” asserted by the Council of Nicaea (325 AD): Christ is *what* it is to be God, and yet *other* than the Father, something only known in and through the Holy Spirit, by whom alone one can confess Christ as Lord (1 Cor 12:3) and through whom one adopted as sons of God, and so is also confessed to be what it is to be God, one of the Holy Trinity. The heart of the affirmation of Chalcedon (451 AD) regarding the person of Christ is that what it is to be human and what it is to be God—death and life—are seen together in one concrete being (*hypostasis*), with one “face” (*prosōpon*): that is, we do not look at one being to see God and another to see the human; both are revealed together in one, “without confusion, change, division, separation.” What it is to be God and what it is to be human remain the same, but the miracle is that each is now revealed together in one and, therefore, also through each other: mortality is not a property of God, creating life is not a property of humans, but Christ has brought both together, conquering death by his death and in this very act conferring life, a life which can no longer be touched by death.

To take this reflection further, we should consider again the words of Ignatius, that, through his death in conformity with Christ, he is about *to be born* as a living human being. A contrast is implied here, which becomes fully explicit with Maximus the Confessor several centuries later, between *genesis* (“coming into existence”) and *gennesis* (“birth”).⁶ Through *genesis* we have all come into existence, without any choice on our part (as Kirilov put it in Dostoyevsky’s *The Demons*: “No one asked me if I wanted to be born!”). We are, to use Heideggerian language, thrown into an existence in which, whatever we do, we will die. Mortality, in fact, is the only thing that is common to life on earth; and the ability to contemplate and to use our

6. The two words, *γένεσις* and *γέννησις*, distinguished only in graphical not aural form, derive from two different verbs, *γίγνομαι*, “to come into being,” and *γεννάω* “to beget.”

mortality is that which is distinctively human. Despite our knowledge of our mortality, however, or rather because of it, we are tempted to hold on to this "life" as we know it, to do whatever we can to secure it, to live it as mine for as long as I can perpetuate it. It is the "fear of death," as the Letter to the Hebrews put it, that has held us "in life-long bondage" (Heb 2:15).

However, the Christian gospel turns this upside down: "whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever would lose it for my sake will gain it" (Matt 16:25). Following the language of Hebrews, it is not from death itself that Christ has delivered us (we all still die, after all), but from "the fear of death." Through his death, as Maximus the Confessor puts it, Christ has changed the "use" of death for all men and women throughout time:

When willingly submitting to the condemnation imposed on our passibility [that is, our passive subjection to suffering], he turned that very passibility into an instrument for eradicating sin and the death which is its consequence.⁷

Christ has provided, as Maximus explains: "another beginning and a second birth for human nature, which through the vehicle of suffering, ends in the pleasure of the life to come." In this way, Maximus continues, Christ has "converted the use of death," so that "the baptized acquires the use of death to condemn sin, which in turn mystically leads that person to divine and unending life."⁸ Rather than being passive and frustrated victims of death and of the givenness of our mortality, in Christ we can freely and actively "use death," in Maximus' striking phrase, not as an act of desperation, bringing about the end, or as passive submission to victimization, resigning oneself to one's fate, but rather as the beginning of new life.

Losing life for the sake of Christ is the path taken by Ignatius and Blandina in the most dramatic terms possible, through their martyrdom, which is nothing other than their birth into life.⁹ It is also, somewhat less dramatically, the step taken by those who would be baptized in Christ: "Do

7. Maximus the Confessor, *Ad Thal.* 61

8. *Ad Thal.* 61.

9. The resonance of this with Michel Henry's Phenomenology of Life is striking and deserves further study. Cf. Henry, *I am the Truth*, 59–60: "To be born is not to come into the world. To be born is to come into life. . . . To come into life here means that it is in life and from out of it alone that this coming is capable of being produced. To come into life means to come from life, starting from it, in such a way that it is not birth's point of arrival, as it were, but its point of departure." See also the contribution of Crina Gschwandtner to this volume.

you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his" (Rom 6:3–5). By freely "dying" to oneself (to "the old man," to "Adam," to our involuntary created existence) and beginning to live ecstatically, beyond ourselves, for others and for God, the life that is begun is, even now, a life that has been entered into through death and, therefore, a life that can no longer be touched by death. In so doing, we transcend the limitations of the life into which, through *genesis*, we have involuntarily come into existence. In and through Christ, we now have the possibility of freely using the givenness of our creaturely mortality to enter, freely and willingly, through birth, *genesis*, into existence as a human being with a life without end, "born from above . . . from the water and the Spirit" (John 3:3, 5). In this way, freedom, rather than necessity, becomes the basis for a truly human existence in Christ. This is a new existence, beginning with an act of freedom—that of Christ voluntarily going to his passion, "converting the use of death" for all—and in this way, enabling us also to start over—*freely*—by following him.

To live in this divine manner, however, requires growth and maturity. At several points in his magnum opus, Irenaeus addresses the question of why God did not simply create human beings as such at the outset, and offered various reasons. He suggested, for instance, that Adam and Eve, whom he depicts as infants (having but recently come into existence) in paradise, needed to grow in order to achieve perfection, the fullness of being human to which they were called by God. He gives the example of a mother, who could give a newborn child meat rather than milk, though this would not benefit the infant at all, for the infant needs to grow before being able to receive such food. So also, he suggests, God could have given us a full share in his life and existence from the beginning, but we would not have been able to receive such a magnificent gift, without being prepared by learning through experience (*Haer.* 4.38.1). This doesn't necessarily imply any imperfection in that which comes into existence, but qualifies the notion of perfection: in the same way that a newborn infant may have "perfect" limbs, but needs to exercise (and to fall) before being able to walk and to run; so, too, a creature needs to be exercised in virtue before they can share in the uncreated life of God (cf. *Haer.* 4.38.4).

He further explains that this growth is bound up with different kinds of “knowledge” (*Haer.* 4.39.1). There is knowledge that is acquired by hearing and there is knowledge that is only gained by experience, such as, what it is for something, such as honey, to be sweet. Moreover, someone who has lost their sight, but then regains it will value sight much more than those who do not know what it is like to be blind. Likewise, he suggests it is only by our mortality, by the experience of death in our separation—apostasy—from God, that we come to value life, knowing that in ourselves we do not have life, but depend for it upon God. Our experience of death drives home this point in a way that we will never otherwise fully know. We need to know experientially what it is to be weak, if we are to know the strength of God, for as Christ both exemplified and affirms: “my strength is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor 12:9).

Irenaeus points to the case of Jonah as an analogy for understanding the wisdom of God in these matters (*Haer.* 3.20.1–2). As God appointed a whale to swallow up Jonah, not to kill him but to provide an occasion for Jonah to learn—so that having been in the belly of the whale for three days and nights and then unexpectedly cast out, Jonah would acknowledge himself to be a servant of the Lord, dependent upon him for his life—so, likewise, Irenaeus suggests that in preparing beforehand the plan of salvation worked by the Lord through the sign of Jonah, God allowed the human race to be swallowed up by the great whale from the beginning, not to destroy the human race, but so that once they unexpectedly received salvation, they would then know that they do not have life from or in themselves, and so be willing to receive it from God. In this overarching arc of the economy of God, which leads from Adam to Christ, the human race comes to learn of its own weakness, but also and simultaneously comes to know the greatness of God manifest in their own weakness, transforming the mortal to immortality and the corruptible to incorruption. In this way, intriguingly, Jonah is a sign of the perishing human race and, at the same time, a sign of the savior, for it is precisely by his death that Christ has conquered death.

Finally, Irenaeus adds that only in this way can there be created beings who can freely respond to God in love, who can adhere to him in love, and so, in love, come to share in his existence. Any other approach would have resulted merely in “automatons.” He then concludes, rather shockingly, that if we ignore all this, and especially the need for experiential knowledge of our own weakness: “we kill the human being in us” (*Haer.* 4.39.1). From what we have seen, we might also say that in order to be a true human being

in the image of God—who is Christ the true human being, “the firstborn of all creation” (Col 1:15)—we must be born into a new existence in Christ by a birth effected through our voluntary use of our mortality, as an act of sacrifice through baptism, thereby freely choosing to exist as a human being and grounding that being and existence in an act of freedom, and so living the same life of love that God himself is. Only in this way can a created being come to share in the uncreated life of God, a life that Christ has shown to be one of self-sacrificial love: one cannot come into existence (*genesis*) already “in” that state; it requires growth and maturity.

In this way, then, the desired intention of God expressed in Genesis, to make a human being, is realized, when the creature brought into existence gives his or her own “fiat”—“Let it be!” For every other aspect of creation, all that was needed was a simple divine “fiat”—“Let it be!” But for the human being to come into existence, required a creature able to give their own “fiat!”

This is accomplished sacramentally in baptism, and the life of the baptized thereafter is one of “learning to die,” learning, that is, specifically to take up the cross of Christ. However, until I actually die and lie in the grave, I’m caught in the first-person singular. *I* can only say: “Didn’t *I* die well to myself today?” It is still *I* who am working, while I learn how to let go of all that pertains to my self. Until I actually die, it is still *I* who am doing this, dying to myself. When, on the other hand, *I* am finally returned to the dust, then *I* stop working. Then, and only then, do *I* finally experience my complete and utter frailty and weakness. Then, and only then, do *I* become clay (for *I* never was this), clay fashioned by the Hands of God into living flesh. And so, it is also only then that the God whose strength is made perfect in weakness can finally be the Creator: taking dust from the earth which *I* now am and mixing in his power, he now, finally, fashions a true, living, human being—“the glory of God.”

3: From Breath to Spirit

Another way of putting all this is in terms of the contrast between breath and Spirit, as Paul explains it with reference to Genesis. While the first Adam was animated by “a breath of life” to become “a living being” (εἰς ψυχὴν ζῶσαν cf. Gen 2:7), the “last [or final] Adam became a life-creating spirit” (εἰς πνεῦμα ζωοποιοῦν 1 Cor 15:45). In context, Paul is discussing the resurrection of the dead and what kind of body the raised shall have.

The difference is not between a “physical” body (as the RSV translates ψυχικόν) and a “spiritual” body; the continuity is precisely the body itself, and the difference lies in the manner in which it lives, either as animated by a breath of life or vivified by the life-creating spirit. And the transition is effected through the death of the body: “What you sow does not come to life unless it dies” (1 Cor 15:35). Animated by a breath of life, Adam could have used this gift of life in a divine manner. But to do so, as Christ shows us, requires living not for oneself, but rather being willing to die to oneself and live for others. Christ himself shows us what divine life looks like by his own sacrifice. But, not having yet seen this, Adam took his life to be his own possession to do with as he pleased, and trying to secure his own immortality he ends up dying. Yet, through the work of Christ, our very mortality itself now becomes the very means by which we learn to live the life of God—through our experience of weakness and all the other things we considered. Through this mortality, when we now embrace it actively, by taking up the cross following Christ and living for others, we come to live, even now, the life given by the life-creating Spirit, a life that, as entered into through death (dying to ourselves, living for others), can therefore no longer be touched by death, but is eternal, everlasting.

This distinction could also be rendered in terms of a contrast between βίος (*bios*) and ζωή (*zoe*), both terms meaning “life,” with the difference that, in Christian theology, the first is used of all that which is animated by a “soul” whereas the latter is that which comes about through Christ: “I have come that they might have life and have it in abundance” (John 10:10). Gregory of Nyssa, following the Stoic philosopher Posidonius, differentiated three different kinds of soul manifest in things that “live”: the power of growth and nutrition found in plants; the power of sensation and movement found in animals; and the power of rational thought found in human beings. Each level of “soul” or animation includes the previous level and raises it up to a higher level, an order that he found in the opening chapter of Genesis, such that he was able to say that “nature makes an ascent as it were by steps—I mean the various properties of life—from the lower to the perfect form.”¹⁰ In contrast to such animation, life as *zoe* is what comes about in Christ: “what came to be in him is life.”¹¹ Life, as *zoe*, lives when

10. Gregory of Nyssa, *De hom. op.* 8.7.

11. Cf. John 1:3–4: “All things came to be by him and without him nothing came to be. What came to be in him was life [ὃ γέγονεν ἐν αὐτῷ ζωὴ ἦν], and the life was the light of human beings.” This is the way that many of the early writers, including Irenaeus, cite the verse, as well as a number of early manuscripts.

life, as *bios*, no longer lives for itself, but rather lays itself down for others, in the manner initiated by Christ and exemplified in the martyrs.

The pledge of such life, given in the Spirit through baptism, will be completed when we finally die and are raised in Christ. Breathing our last breath—expiring—we are no longer animated as by the breath of life, but rather, the pledge, which had been kindling the spark of new life, will be set ablaze in the fullness of the life-creating power of the Spirit through our actual death and resurrection in Christ: “What is sown in an animated body is raised in a spiritual body” (1 Cor 15:44). This movement, from breath to Spirit, is affirmed in the Psalm of creation, which may well antedate Genesis itself (and which is said at the beginning of every vespers in the Byzantine tradition, the beginning of each new day):

When you take away their breath they die and return to their dust;
when you send forth your Spirit, they are created and you renew
the face of the ground. May the glory of the Lord endure forever
and may the Lord rejoice in his works. (Ps 104 (103): 29–31)

From breath, through the earth, to the Spirit—and so, finally, created. It is, in fact, only with our actual death, completing that which begins in baptism, that we become earth: this is our end-point, rather than our beginning, but it is an end-point that becomes our beginning, as creatures of God, creatures not simply in the sense of having come into existence by creation, but creatures reflecting or embodying the will of the Creator through their own fiat and birth into life through death, thus completing at the end the stated intention of God at the beginning.

Conclusion

The witness of the martyrs, and the theology of those who reflected on their witness, provides a stark challenge to us today, on a number of levels: it consistently, and coherently, reverses our usual understanding of life and death, creation and what it is to be (truly) human, the beginning and the end. It is theologically challenging, for we have come to think of perfection much more in terms of protology, as the way things were in the beginning before “the fall,” and of Christ’s work as being a remedy for our deviation. That is, we tend to think of creation and salvation as being two distinct moments or operations, a Plan A followed, after human error, by Plan B. For these early theologians, however, Christ is not Plan B, but rather

the realization of God's intention, stated at the beginning, and brought to completion by the arc that leads from Adam to Christ. The work of Christ in the passion is not simply a remedy, but the expression of the life, love, and being of God, which encompasses and transforms human deviation and death itself: our deviation becomes a pedagogic instrument (cf. Jer 2:19 "your own apostasy shall teach you," cited by Irenaeus in *Haer.* 4.37.7), and death becomes the means of life, not a resuscitated breath continuing our *bios*, but rather the life, *zoe*, created by the Spirit through the act of losing our life for the sake of Christ and others. Life comes through the cross, and only the one who lives in this way is truly a human being.

The challenge of this vision is accentuated greatly by the fact that in most Western countries we no longer "see" death today. People still die, of course, whether peacefully at home or tragically in accidents, and we hear of many more deaths than ever before, whether through warfare, or terrorism, or natural calamities such as famines and diseases. But in a very real sense, we no longer "see" death. Until a century or so ago, it was normal to have at least one sibling die in childhood and for one parent to die before one reached adulthood. Their bodies would be looked after at home, laid out in the bedroom or the dining room, tendered and cared for, with friends and neighbors keeping wake, until they were taken to church to be commended to God and interred in the earth. Today, however, the bodies are removed as quickly as possible, to the morticians, who prepare the body to be placed under pink lights in the funeral home, so that they appear to be living and that comments might be made such as "I've never seen him/her looking so good." The bodies are increasingly disposed of in crematoriums, with only a few people present, and a "memorial service" is held, without the person being there (for after all they have "left" the body behind) in which their "life" is celebrated. This discarding of the traditional funeral liturgy (in all the senses mentioned above), such that we no longer "see" death, is perhaps the biggest change in human existence in history. If it is true, as I have argued above, that, at least from a Christian perspective, Christ shows us what it is to be God in the way that he dies as a human being, the removal of the "face" of death from society and our experience, is simultaneously the removal of the "face" of God. It results in a very imminent perspective on human life—human life is what we now live, as we "live life to the full"—and a very odd relationship to our bodies: while we are "living," our life is all about our body and its plasticity, ready to be fashioned and refashioned

as we desire, as traced out so well by Hervé Juvin, but when we die the body is discarded as nothing but our earthly shell.

In such a culture, the idea that life comes through death, and that death therefore has a role to play in life, giving birth to a life beyond the reaches of death, cannot but strike us as bizarre. Yet, as Irenaeus underscores, death nevertheless will have its final say, though, as he would add, the final say is that of God who uses our mortality to educate us of our finitude, our embodiedness, and our earthiness, and so enables us, finally, to receive that which we don't have in or from ourselves, that is, life. Or, as Juvin concludes his fascinating study: "Alone the body remembers that it is finite; alone, it roots us in its limits, our last frontier (for how long?); and even if—especially if—it forgets, the body alone still prevents us from being God to ourselves and others."¹²

12. Juvin, *The Coming of the Body*, 177.