

ABSTRACT

Death as a Model of God

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Feminist theologian Sallie McFague's book *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* highlights the need for a variety of imagery to represent the divine. In light of her work, this thesis proposes death as an abstract, communal, and genderless model of God to supplement the feminine metaphors McFague proposes. The first chapter examines McFague's work and lays the theological framework necessary to present death as an influential model of God. Chapter Two utilizes three questions from McFague to examine the death model's legitimacy in Christian theology and ethics. Chapter Three then discusses how the western Protestant approach to God informs Protestant perspectives on death. The fourth chapter concludes this thesis by outlining the characteristics of the divine that the death model highlights as well as the death model's place within Protestant theologies. Drawing on a variety of theological books and journal articles, with special attention given to McFague's work, this thesis presents death as a powerful supplementary model of God in an ecological, nuclear age.

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DEATH AS A MODEL OF GOD

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

Baylor University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

Honors Program

By

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Waco, Texas

May 2023

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CHAPTER ONE

Introducing Death as a Model of God

The Need for Supplementary Models

In her book *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*, leading feminist theologian Sallie McFague explores feminine models for God to supplement the masculine models most commonly used in American Protestant churches. Following McFague's argument, the Christian church must utilize ever-evolving images of the divine to relate God in fresh, applicable ways to ever-evolving cultures. To adapt metaphors to changing worldviews is not to abandon the truth they communicate. Rather, metaphors must be adapted because their meaning changes with cultural norms and practices. Even if metaphors' implications never changed with the language used to express them, they still could not express the whole, dynamic character of God. God remains above human understanding. Because language is the means by which humans make sense of the world around them,¹ when human comprehension fails in the face of God, human language will inevitably fail to express a true and complete picture of the divine. In the face of the trinitarian Godhead's indefinable substance, metaphors present to their audience a piece of God's substance or a glimpse at God's operation, but none communicate the entirety of the divine. As a result, the language used to describe God is a long-held debate within Christianity, and one with which this thesis continues to dialogue.

¹ Sallie McFague, *Speaking in Parables: A Study in Metaphor and Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 22.

All metaphors are inadequate, and all metaphors break down over time and space. McFague explains the limitations of metaphors when she writes, “Since a metaphor is a word or phrase appropriate to one context but used in another, no metaphorical construction can be univocally applied, that is, applied in the form of identity.”² For example, the metaphor the psalmist uses to say “The Lord is my rock,”³ accurately presents a constant, reliable nature of God, but it breaks down if taken so far as to say God consists of minerals. It also cannot be taken exclusively, for then God would not be relational or protective as the image of God as a mother hen suggests.⁴ Furthermore, the meaning of a rock changes across cultures and times. A rock may be a safe hiding place, a dangerous weapon, or a challenging climb. The metaphor’s author must speak carefully of the divine to ensure the intended message about God’s nature is the same message the audience receives. To communicate a holistic picture of God’s character to a diverse audience, theologians must employ a variety of metaphors.

In *Models of God*, McFague presents three alternatives to the monarchical model for God which presents God as a king or Lord. Such archaic, hierarchical images do not relate to modern Americans removed from the realities of feudal life. She instead suggests images of God as a mother, a lover, and a friend. The mother image offers a female alternative to the father model most frequently employed by western Christians. Because a mother bears the responsibility of growing and birthing a child, this model

² Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 22.

³ Psalm 18:2 (NRSV).

⁴ Luke 13:34 (NRSV).

suggests God sustains and creates the world, including non-human life.⁵ A lover hints at the passion with which the creator loves creation.⁶ A friend suggests the “free, reciprocal, trustful bonding” of God’s relationship with mortals.⁷ Each of her models portrays individual relationships, and each model works to counteract the predominantly male models currently employed.

Her work, along with the work of other feminist theologians, necessarily counters misogyny in western churches. When male models monopolize imagery of the divine, they exclusively highlight the importance of male relationships (e.g. the male to male relationship of a father and son) without representing female to female relationships. They also suggest men, who are in the image of a male Christ, have access to the divine or are redeemed in ways yet unavailable to women.⁸ Western Christians lacking a theological education are at risk of accepting male models beyond the models’ viability. That is to say, churchgoers risk taking their male metaphors to mean God is male.⁹ Rather than interpreting Father, Son, and Spirit as names depicting close filial relationships between three persons, churchgoers may wrongly believe them to designate three masculine natures to the persons of the trinity. Stemming from this misconception,

⁵ Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*, 121.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 126.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 171.

⁸ Natalie K. Watson, *Feminist Theology*, ed. Sally Bruyneel et al. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 34.

⁹ Though some defend these male models because Jesus Christ was male, the maleness of Christ should be viewed as part of his human particularity, not a statement about the gender or sex of God. Saying God is male because Jesus was male is comparable to saying God is a Mediterranean peasant because Jesus was a Mediterranean peasant. Of course, Jesus is the full representation of the Trinity, and he did take on flesh within the particularity of time, place, culture, and gender. But Christ’s particularity, including his sex and gender, should not be applied as an essential characteristic of the trinitarian whole. Thus, the metaphors of God as father and son break down if taken to mean God literally fathered a child, God literally has parents, or God is literally male.

men are implied to have a closer relationship to the God with whom they share a gender, and they are more often allowed to take leadership positions than women, especially positions in the church and home.¹⁰

In reality, metaphors are only applicable within their *modus significandi*. When describing the proper use of metaphorical language, “As Aquinas sometimes put it, the difference between words used analogically [and those that are not] is not that they differ in literal meaning but in their way of meaning (*modus significandi*).”¹¹ To say a man is a father has a far different *modus significandi* than to say God is Father. To say a man is a father implies the man has male sexual organs, has reproduced, and possibly raises or provides for the child in some capacity. To say God is Father and Son, however, has two levels of meaning within its *modus significandi*. The first level of meaning speaks to God’s relationality. This metaphor highlights the filial love both within the Trinity and from the Trinity to all creation. It also speaks to God’s power and authority over creation because the Bible, written in a patrilineal and patrilocal system stricter than the United States’ system today, not only presents God as a masculine figure but as a *father*. Theologian Luke Timothy Johnson describes the way of meaning of Father God when he writes, “The name ‘Father’ suggests power and authority, but as Jesus has taught us, ours is a Father who not only brings to life but also raises to new life.”¹² Most significantly, God the Father’s *modus significandi* differs from that of describing a man as father

¹⁰ Natalie K. Watson, *Feminist Theology*, 29-30.

¹¹ Herbert McCabe, “God and Creation,” *New Blackfriars* 94, no. 1052 (2013): 388, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2012.01486.x>.

¹² Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Creed* (New York: Doubleday, 2004), 81.

because not only does God the Father not physically reproduce in the way human fathers do, but this divine father brings life through both birth and resurrection.

The second level of meaning is God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit are names for the persons of the Trinity. Although a metaphor and a name are different forms of communication, names cannot be separated from their metaphor because they inevitably conjure images of a father, son, and spirit. All names imply their metaphors, but not all metaphors imply their use as a name. For example, to use Dwayne Johnson's ring name from his WWE wrestling career, "The Rock," implies the metaphor of a rock applies to Johnson because of his strength. However, to call John Cena, another professional wrestler and public figure, a rock would not lead one to believe he answers to the name "Rock." Thus, to use Father and Son as names suggests power, authority, and life are so central to God's character, humans may actually identify God by them. In light of this distinction between metaphor and name, this thesis offers a supplementary model for God to counter the male-dominated images currently in use, not an alternative name for God.

Because of human language's inability to capture the divine, male imagery necessitates female imagery to grasp a fuller picture of God, in whose image all humans are made. A shift to feminine imagery would aid a shift in the western perspective of male dominance, especially androcentrism in Christian thought despite the west's present patriarchal system. Feminine language for the divine would subtly undermine the patriarchy's ongoing influence on Christian life. Thus, feminine imagery for God necessarily supplements masculine imagery, though such images need not replace masculine metaphors or names for God. Luke Timothy Johnson defends feminine

imagery as a supplement, not a replacement, to male imagery for God in the following passage:

It has the advantage of preserving the sense of God as person. It reminds us that when we call God “Father” we do not mean that God is male. It is supported by passages in Scripture that speak freely of God in terms of female imagery. It expresses the fact that God is as much female as God is male, since God cannot be either female or male in the way that humans are male or female, since God is Spirit rather than body. And finally, it does not displace the specific symbolism of the biblical witness, which speaks of God as “Father” and “Son” as well as “Spirit.”¹³

Because McFague herself argues for a multitude of models, she does not present her models to replace male metaphors for God with exclusively female imagery.¹⁴ Rather, her models supplement those already commonly used. She even notes, “the question arises whether any personal metaphors should be employed for imaging God’s presence. Are not more abstract, impersonal, or naturalistic metaphors better for encouraging an ecological sensibility?”¹⁵ McFague’s models capture shocking and insightful aspects of the divine, but they are not abstract, impersonal, or naturalistic. Given the need for communal models which relate to their present-day audience, this thesis proposes death as a supplementary model for God. Within its *modus significandi*, death offers metaphorical insight without threatening God’s doctrinal names. It also captures all three of these characteristics McFague’s lacked—it is abstract, impersonal, and naturalistic. Death is abstract because its intangibility and separation from American life renders it an idea in most individuals’ lives rather than a harsh reality. It is impersonal because it is indiscriminate. It does not specifically target any one person, but it comes to all people in

¹³ Ibid., 84.

¹⁴ Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*, 63.

¹⁵ Ibid., 62.

due time. Meanwhile, death's abstract and impersonal nature does not sacrifice the intense, personal emotions associated with grief.

Death in Christianity

This argument's working definition of death is the separation of personhood from the body and the general cessation of physical processes necessary for survival. This thesis discusses Protestant Evangelical approaches to unintentional, anticipated death, as opposed to shocking, traumatic, or suicidal deaths. The reason for this follows:

In cases of unexpected death, the moral question of why someone has died takes dramatic precedence over how they died, [...] The death of an aged parent, by contrast, seems more natural and inevitable, though relatives still expect a cause of death to be given, since in modern societies there is a general expectation that people will live until some illness carries them off in old age.¹⁶

My discussion of western Protestant Evangelical Christians' approach to death also deals heavily with American tendencies towards death in general. Larger cultural attitudes towards death heavily influence western Christian thought surrounding death. The primary cultural force influencing the United States' approach to death is individualism. Not only can this close-knit relationship between Protestantism and individualism be seen in the United States, but "We can also think of Protestantism beginning with a change in historical consciousness, *individualism*, and with a change in technology, the invention of the *printing press*."¹⁷ With individualism at the root of western Protestantism since its origins, this discussion of western Protestant approaches to death requires an exploration of larger individualistic approaches to death and God.

¹⁶ Douglas J. Davies, *Death, Ritual, and Belief: The Rhetoric of Funerary Rites*, Second Edition (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2002), 64.

¹⁷ Dennis Klass, "Spirituality, Protestantism, and Death," in *Death and Bereavement Around the World*, ed. John D. Morgan and Pittu Laungani (Baywood Publishing Company, 2002), 129-130.

With this clarification in mind, this thesis deals heavily with American Protestant deathways and theology. Though Protestant denominations vary in their practices and theological understandings, in an American context, especially in the south, Protestant churches carry strains of individualism and capitalism. In addition to these strains, American Protestant churches share broadly Protestant tendencies like adherence to *sola scriptura* and familiarity with the Christus Victor theory of atonement. Such Protestant congregations with individualistic and capitalist tendencies can be found outside the United States as well, so this thesis' conclusions may be generalized to certain churches across the globe, though it intends to address specifically American practices. Throughout this thesis I reference southern conservative evangelicalism, western or American Protestantism, or some combination of the above descriptors to reference these Protestant churches which exhibit individualistic and capitalist tendencies.

Kenneth Paul Kramer's book *The Sacred Art of Dying* outlines the core beliefs which inform the Protestant Evangelical approach to death explored throughout this thesis. He identifies four pillars of the Protestant approach to death: "death is a consequence of sin, death is a temporary separation of body and soul, death to sin is birth into eternal life, and the dead will be raised and judged at the second coming of Christ."¹⁸ Because of the intrinsic connection between God and death within the Protestant tradition, how American Protestants view one inevitably affects the other. Thus, while these aspects of death inform Protestant Evangelicals' understanding of God, this adapted

¹⁸ Kenneth Paul Kramer, "Christian Attitudes Toward Death," in *The Sacred Art of Dying: How World Religions Understand Death* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 145.

view of God in turn adjusts one's approach to death in an ongoing and reciprocal process of deconstruction and reconstruction.

This thesis therefore examines both how death in western life informs Protestants' view of God and how this view of God simultaneously informs their perception of death. To begin this discussion, this chapter first outlines death's function as both a metaphor of juxtaposition and a metaphor of association. The first contrasts death with God while the second compares death with God. In both cases, death highlights God's characteristics which will be further explored in the fourth chapter. The last section of this chapter argues death as both types of metaphor is relevant for western Protestant churches today given death's centrality to Christian doctrine.

Death as a Metaphor of Juxtaposition

In another of Sallie McFague's books, *Speaking in Parables*, she defines two types of metaphors. The first are metaphors of juxtaposition, in which the objects contrast one another, and the second are metaphors of association, in which the objects of the metaphor parallel one another.¹⁹ Death is a metaphor of juxtaposition for God because the Protestant Evangelical tradition associates God with life. God begins life, sustains life, and offers eternal life. Christ even describes himself as "the life."²⁰ Kramer remarks on this connection between Christ as the life, therefore the opposite of death, when he writes the following:

By saying 'I am the resurrection' Jesus identifies himself both as one who has the power to revive Lazarus and as the power of resurrection itself. At the same time, he identifies himself as 'the life,' or as the power of eternal life. To see Jesus in

¹⁹ Sallie McFague, *Speaking in Parables: A Study in Metaphor and Theology*, 106.

²⁰ John 14:6 (NRSV).

this way is to recognize that Jesus' resurrection reconciles death with life, darkness with light, and completes the life cycle by overcoming death.²¹

The dichotomy of life and death runs deep in the biblical tradition. Death as a metaphor for God not only shocks because of death's permanence and pain but because of the juxtaposition between death and the God who self-identifies as life. Furthermore, death is viewed in the Protestant Evangelical tradition as the consequence of sin.²² Though some will take this to mean separation from the God who is life results in spiritual death, there is an additional, literal meaning to this statement. One of the most haunting consequences of the first sin is exile from the Garden of Eden and the cessation of life.²³ In this sense, physical death is quite literally the result of Adam and Eve's sin. Thus, death is further associated with sin and, therefore, further contrasted with the sinless, life-giving God.

For the purposes of this thesis, I define sin simply as division. Though some understand sin to be human disobedience to biblical law²⁴ and others as humans' pride,²⁵ neither definition suffices for the purposes of this paper. Sin cannot be categorized exclusively as disobedience to God. Such a definition does not address the influence of sin outside human action. In the Protestant Evangelical tradition, Adam and Eve's original sin curses all subsequent generations to be born into a condition of sinfulness

²¹ Kenneth Paul Kramer, "Christian Attitudes Toward Death," 143.

²² Romans 6:23 (NRSV).

²³ Genesis 3:19, 23 (NRSV).

²⁴ Joseph Benson, "1 John 3 Benson Commentary," BibleHub, quoting *Benson Commentary on the Old and New Testaments*, https://biblehub.com/commentaries/benson/1_john/3.htm.

²⁵ Norman Wirzba, *Food and Faith: A Theology of Eating* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 77.

regardless of their own individual disobedience.²⁶ While disobedience in the Garden of Eden caused original sin, certain injustices today such as illness or natural disaster stem from a condition of sin over humans and creation alike, not necessarily one person's actions.²⁷

Sin also may not be defined as pride alone lest the Protestant church's understanding of sin reinforce its androcentrism. Even definitions of sin like Ritschl's, which defines sin "as that universal tendency of all humans for selfishness, which stands in opposition to the ideal of human unity that finds its fullest expression in the Kingdom of God,"²⁸ still suggest pride's centrality. Enough pride renders itself to selfishness because one believes themselves worthy of consideration before and over others.

Feminist theologian Valerie Saiving critiques traditional theology's definitions of love and sin as selflessness and pride respectively:

It is clear that many of the characteristic emphases of contemporary theology—its definition of the human situation in terms of anxiety, estrangement, and the conflict between necessity and freedom; its identification of sin with pride, will-to-power, exploitation, self-assertiveness, and the treatment of others as objects rather than persons; its conception of redemption as restoring to man what he fundamentally lacks (namely, sacrificial love, the I-Thou relationship, the primacy of the personal, and, ultimately, peace)—it is clear that such an analysis of man's

²⁶ Beth Felker Jones, *Practicing Christian Doctrine: An Introduction to Thinking and Living Theologically*, (Baker Academic, 2014), 111.

²⁷ Because most Protestants ascribe to Augustine's doctrine of original sin, referenced above, it is worth briefly exploring Augustine's privation theory of evil. Should Protestant Evangelicals agree with Augustine that evil is not a tangible force of its own, the juxtaposition of death and God becomes even more evident. Because goodness and life are associated in this theology with God, then evil and death are contrasted with God. Thus, just as evil is the absence of good, death can be defined as the absence of life and division the absence of unity. These parallels are not necessary for my claim that death is a metaphor of juxtaposition, but they do emphasize the breadth and depth of insight this model provides in a variety of theological schools. Even if evil were a fighting force of its own, the dichotomy between goodness and life on one hand and evil and death on the other still remains. They are shocking opposites regardless of the tangibility or activity of evil and death. This contradiction situates death as a powerful foil for God's characteristics.

²⁸ Chad Meister and J.B. Stump, *Christian Thought: A Historical Introduction*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2017), 458.

dilemma was profoundly responsive and relevant to the concrete facts of modern man's existence.²⁹

To define the root of sin as pride is inherently androcentric. Following Saiving's logic, where women are expected to be mild, submissive creatures, the natural tendency to pride does not apply to them. The remedy of selflessness, self-sacrifice, or self-forgetfulness is inappropriate for a gender already conditioned to minimize themselves to make room for their male counterparts.

The division definition, on the other hand, agrees with feminist norms while highlighting sin's connection with death. Alienation between God and humans, humans and other humans, humans and creation, and division within one's own psyche results equally from the human situations of both men and women. In the tradition of original sin, Adam and Eve's disobedience results in division between one another (they hide from one another behind clothes), themselves and the divine (they hide from God), and between themselves and the earth (there will be animosity with the snake, pain in the process of childbirth, and difficult labor with the earth).³⁰ Their actions also demonstrate an internal struggle to reconcile their understanding of right and wrong with their own actions. When they realize they disobeyed God's command not to eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, they clothe themselves and hide. Their shame demonstrates division—what they did differs from what they were taught to do.³¹ Trauma

²⁹ Valerie Saiving, "The Human Situation: A Feminine View," in *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*, ed. Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row Publishers, 1979), 35.

³⁰ Genesis 3:7, 8, 14-19 (NRSV).

³¹ Paul reiterates the cognitive dissonance described here in Romans 7:15.

such as illness and natural disasters, results of a condition of sin over the earth, still further divide the communities and places they destroy.

If the will of God includes the unity of the church, then any division of humans, especially within church, directly contrasts the will of God. But the will of God does not just include the unity of the church; it *is* the unity of the church. The High Priestly Prayer of John 17 is Christ's last appeal before his arrest, and in these last peaceful moments Jesus prays for unity. On the cross, when Christ's final words include a plea for the forgiveness of his murderers,³² he prays for unification between these sinners and God. With this plea Jesus also rectifies the divide his crucifiers created between themselves and Christ. Further, 1 Thessalonians 4:3 clearly states the will of God is the church's sanctification. To be purified from sin and its maladies throughout the course of one's life is to unify the division between humans and God, between humans and other humans, between humans and the earth, and within one's own self.

Sin, being division, is thus the refusal or corruption of relationships. McFague agrees with this assertion when she writes, "It [sin] is not pride or unbelief but the refusal of relationship—the refusal to be the beloved of our lover God and the refusal to be lover of all God loves."³³ Thus, if death is the ultimate manifestation of sin, life is the ultimate manifestation of unified, loving relationships. A love-unification-life triad counters the sin-division-death connection.³⁴ The sign of a righteous life, then, is healthy and bountiful relationships with oneself, others, God, and the environment. The church

³² Luke 23:34 (NRSV).

³³ Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*, 139.

³⁴ Figure 1 depicts these contrasting triads to emphasize death as a metaphor of juxtaposition.

should primarily distinguish itself from other civil societies because of the high caliber of restorative relationships it fosters.

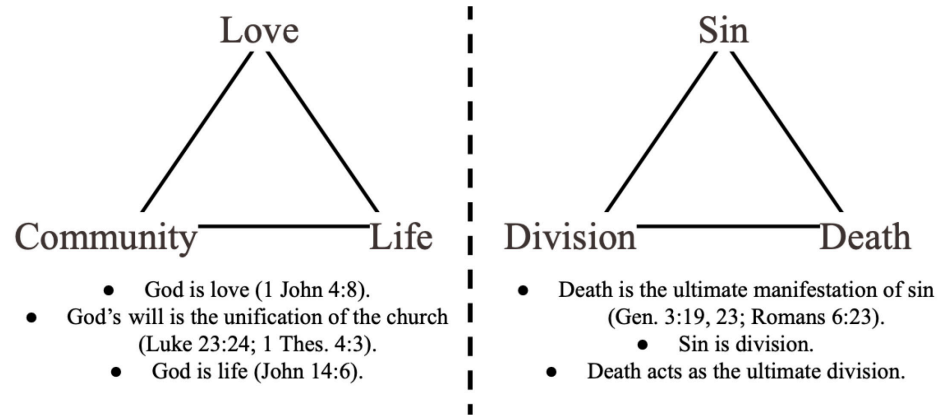


Figure 1: Death as a Metaphor of Juxtaposition

Division does not play into the androcentrism of traditional theology because it does not exclusively result from the will-to-power. It may just as well result from excessive self-denial, external circumstances, or the cognitive dissonance portrayed in Adam and Eve’s story. Sin is division, and the consequence of sin, death, is the ultimate division. It permanently separates individuals from the earth and from their community. Death is therefore the ultimate manifestation of sin. The remedy for sin, then, is a unifying, inclusive love which must be acted out in a living community. Philosopher Herbert McCabe defines sin as “This failure to respond to the summons into life, this failure of faith.”³⁵ For McCabe, faith is an invitation to live which, when done well, is also to love. To sin is to fall short of the unification of life and love. The failure of this

³⁵ Herbert McCabe, “Good Friday: The Mystery of the Cross,” in *God Matters* (London: Geoffrey Chapman), 94.

calling results in death and suffering which, as I argue, are division. McCabe thus presents the life-love dyad as well as its counterpart death-division dyad.

Death juxtaposes God because in traditional theology and popular thought death is the opposite, negative counterpart to life. Death not only deprives one of further life, but “it [also] consists of the permanent annihilation of a person, where a person is a highly valuable entity.”³⁶ Death removes a valued life and piece of creation from the world, so it is an enemy to the creator and the source of eternal life. God is also love,³⁷ but death removes the object of one’s affection. Though the object of one’s affection cannot receive acts of love beyond the grave, the love one holds for another often remains post-mortem even when it cannot be acted on directly. Indirect displays of affection from the living to the dead, such as visiting gravesites or leaving flowers for the deceased, must suffice instead. Although relationships seem to cease between the living and the dead in the Protestant individualist approach to death, these indirect acts of love testify to the continuation of love beyond death. For this, love overcomes death even before the general resurrection. This continuation echoes the most obvious triumph of love over death, the resurrection of Christ from the dead.

The death model juxtaposes the love-unification-life triad with the sin-division-death triad. In so doing, the death model proves God’s love greater than death’s dividing power. Just as God (i.e. the love-unification-life triad) is greater than sin (i.e. the sin-division-death triad), so are God’s characteristics more fully exhibited, more intrinsic to

³⁶ Thaddeus Metz, “Meaning in Life in Spite of Death,” in *Exploring the Philosophy of Death and Dying: Classical and Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Travis Timmerman and Michael Cholbi (Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 2020), 253.

³⁷ 1 John 4:7 (NRSV).

God's nature, and more powerfully displayed than death's characteristics. For example, if death is anxiety-inducing, how much more peace-giving is God? If death is a depravity, how much more abundant is the new life God offers?

Death as a Metaphor of Association

As discussed above, all metaphors eventually collapse. Though death is an adequate metaphor of juxtaposition for God, there will still be agreement between death's characteristics and God's own. In these cases, death serves as a metaphor of association rather than a metaphor of juxtaposition.³⁸ Though death serves as both a metaphor of juxtaposition and association, neither type of metaphor negates the other. Lawrence R. Samuel writes in *Death, American Style* to reframe the current, negative western Protestant view of death: "Why did life have to be good and death evil? [...] Ideally, those who had come the longest way in reconciling their own demise came to see death and life as alternative expressions of the same force, separate but equal points on an identical plane."³⁹ The "identical plane" he references is existence. Death is not the opposite of existence because death can never undo one's life. Death is an inactive existence, for to die is to no longer *actively* exist as a living person does, but it can never take away the fact that a person did exist. Regardless of whether or not one is immortalized through

³⁸ In order to differentiate between the characteristics which overlap and those which are contrasted, one must rely on scripture read with Jesus as the hermeneutical key. Personal experience supplements the scriptural tradition, but because personal experience varies, one cannot understand a clear picture of God's character amongst a population with varying life experiences and understandings of the divine. If one says the divine is cruel, wrathful even, and another says God is merciful and benevolent, how is the religious community to find truth? In keeping with the Protestant evangelical tradition of *sola scriptura*, scripture read in light of doctrine informs one's interpretation of personal experience.

³⁹ Lawrence R. Samuel, *Death, American Style: A Cultural History of Dying in America* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2013), 12.

remembrance, their humanity inevitably offers them existence. That is, existence is infinite and undoable. The moment life begins, an organism exists even unto death.

Death and life therefore present opposite modes of existence, inactive and active respectively, but they are inherently united under the umbrella of existence. Their areas of overlap and contrast are depicted in Figure 2. The previous section's exploration of the juxtaposing love-community-life and sin-division-death triads examines the contrast between inactive and active existence. Though death and life are contrasting modes of existence, their characteristics will overlap at times because of their common existence. Death's overlapping characteristics do not eliminate the contrast between death and the God who is life, nor does the juxtaposition between God and death eliminate their commonalities. Death therefore serves as both a metaphor of juxtaposition and association.

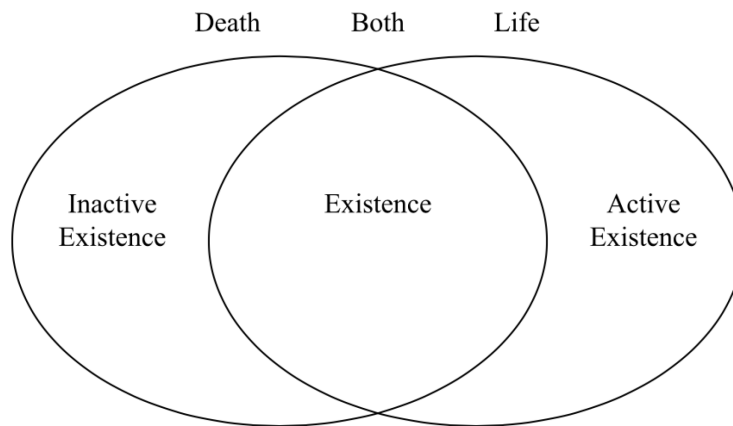


Figure 2: Death as a Metaphor of Association

Where death's nature (i.e. American perceptions of death) agree with the character of God (i.e. American Protestant perceptions of God), God's characteristics are

emphasized. Because the Protestant Evangelical tradition presents Christ as overcoming death through his resurrection to new life, Christ's positive characteristics similarly overpower death's positive traits. Within the Protestant Evangelical tradition, the love of Christ so powerfully draws his creation to unification that not even death could separate his followers from him. After all, the story of the gospel, "such a story par excellence, the story of victory over death."⁴⁰ At the time of the general resurrection of all Christ-followers, neither will death separate Christians from each other or creation. The triumph of Christ shows his power over death. Just as life proves more powerful than the consequence of sin, when God's characteristics overlap with death's, their shared characteristics are more powerful in God than in death. If death is a peaceful release, how much more peace-giving is God? If death is restful, how much more rest do Christians find in God? Thus, whether death acts as a metaphor of juxtaposition or association, one's view of death informs their view of God.

The triumphalism just described intentionally draws on imagery from the Christus Victor theory of atonement even though feminist theologians oftentimes find Christus Victor's dualism and violence problematic. After all, how is a feminist theologian supposed to promote feminist norms such as equality, cooperation, justice, peace, and mutuality when the rhetoric used to interpret their very salvation—the crux of Christianity—opposes these norms? Historian Lewis Saum describes a "triumphant" death as one in which the dying individual not only recognizes they are dying but submits readily and humbly to divine providence, taking their death as it were without too many

⁴⁰ Sallie McFague, *Speaking in Parables: A Study in Metaphor and Theology*, 36.

negative emotions or pleas to take away the fact of death itself.⁴¹ To triumph over death is not to violently attack but to cloak oneself in peace and humility. Saum writes on death prior to the American Civil War when healthcare was far less advanced or accessible than it is today. Today's medicine can postpone death far longer than in previous centuries, yet in both eras there comes a point when medicine can do no more. Death remains immanent. At the moment when medicine can do no more, remembering Saum's description of a "triumphant" death reconciles Christus Victor with feminist theology for the purposes of this thesis.

This kind of triumphant death mirrors the death of Christ, the one who would later literally arise victorious over death in his resurrection. Though Christ feared the pain of dying, anxiously praying in the Garden of Gethsemane "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me,"⁴² he submitted to the fact of his own death. Christ still submissively and humbly accepted his betrayal, arrest, and crucifixion. He did not defend himself in his trial, nor did he allow his disciples to defend him from his arrest.⁴³ He did not fight against his killing. He triumphed in death through his submission, not his violence.

Feminist theologians may, however, find his submission problematic, for "submission" is an ideal often only directed towards women to keep men in positions of social, economic, or professional power over them. Christ's submission here, however, is not blind obedience to a higher masculine being. He does not ignore his own will or

⁴¹ Lewis O Saum, "Death in the Popular Mind of Pre-Civil War America," *American Quarterly* 26, no. 5 (1974): 44, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2711886>.

⁴² Luke 22:42 (NRSV).

⁴³ See Matthew 26:52 (NRSV).

minimize his needs, as can be seen in his anxious prayer when he clearly states his desire to live. He submits when he puts another's will before his own without minimizing his own desires. Christ's love aids others without disparaging himself. This love exhibited in service without self-minimization fits into feminist norms of interdependence, reciprocity, and mutuality. The Father provides for the Son in the resurrection as the Son provides for the Father's will in the crucifixion.

Christus Victor's triumphalism over death, related to submission in this case, is also not against feminist norms of peace and justice, nor does this thesis' reliance on Christus Victor discount its contributions to feminist theology. Therefore, it is within the bounds of feminist norms to present death as a metaphor for the God who self-identifies as life and offers eternal and abundant life to God's followers. In fact, because the allusion to Christus Victor heightens the dichotomy between life and death, it also emphasizes the juxtaposition between death and the divine. This thesis draws on the Christus Victor theory of atonement precisely because its dichotomy between life and death further emphasizes the positive traits highlighted when death is a metaphor of juxtaposition, and its triumphalism emphasizes God's positive traits highlighted when death is a metaphor of association.

Death as an Appropriate Model for God

McFague herself links death's role to western theology because of its preeminence in western society. The unintentional, anticipated death discussed in this thesis pervades daily life with heart disease, cancer, and diabetes. Samuel writes, "Death increased in volume and intensity through the twentieth century and into the twenty-

first,”⁴⁴ and later concludes, “With the biggest generation in history already in or rapidly hurtling toward its sixties, America is on the brink of becoming a death-oriented society.”⁴⁵ Furthermore, McFague argues the threat of mass extinction from nuclear war most intensely extends the constant threat of death. Death is no longer a threat to individual people or populations but to entire species and ecosystems. This threat shapes westerners’ view of life, death, ecology, and the divine more prominently than ever before. Western theology’s metaphors for God must relate to the modern Christian’s understanding of the world, largely shaped by their understanding of death. Death can effectively relate the divine to a society familiar with its impact, so it will serve as a relevant model for God.

Furthermore, the link in popular thought between death and the existence of God makes death a reasonable metaphor for God. The thought of death often leads to thought of the afterlife and, therefore, of the divine. As anthropologist Jack Goody writes, “But when we come to deal with the religious activities of specific societies, then the role of death and the dead is clearly of central importance.”⁴⁶ Death’s close relationship to both western society and the divine perfectly position it to be a metaphor for God.

In addition to death’s connection to modern western culture and to the divine, the death model properly supplements McFague’s work with feminine imagery because it offers a genderless model with a communal impact. Though death is occasionally gendered in popular media, such as Brad Pitt’s portrayal of death in the movie *Meet Joe*

⁴⁴ Lawrence R. Samuel, *Death, American Style: A Cultural History of Dying in America*, ix.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, xi.

⁴⁶ Jack Goody, “Death and the Interpretation of Culture: A Bibliographic Overview,” in *Death in America*, ed. David E. Stannard (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1974), 2.

Black, death is clearly not literally Brad Pitt nor literally a human man. More often than not, death in Protestant western communities is portrayed as a ghost, a wind, or even the Grim Reaper. Take, for example, death's portrayal in the popular movie *The Prince of Egypt* in which death is a white fog moving from house to house. In this case, death's fog symbolizes the miraculous, unexpected, horrific, and divinely orchestrated slaughter of Egyptian firstborn sons in the final plague. Death's mist form suggests divine mystery, supernatural activity, and God's fearsomeness. Its presence in the movie forces the audience to empathize with Israel's fear for their sons and their helplessness in the face of a higher power. No human could counter the fog on their own—not even Pharaoh—so the Israelites relied on the mercy of God to spare them from the formidable fog. Death is a natural, inescapable phenomenon at times personified in media, but death's portrayal is not confused with death itself. Death and other natural, genderless models for God encourage western Christians to view God for the spirit God is rather than misunderstanding masculine or feminine imagery to mean God is male or female respectively.⁴⁷

Death is a natural phenomenon which tears one individual from another while disrupting larger social networks. Death's communal impact is clear because grief's pain stems from the loss of a prominent figure in one's life. Were interpersonal connections not important, death would not affect those still living. Death's major threat to the living is the disruption of social networks,⁴⁸ thus emphasizing the importance of communal relations to human life. To grieve is to emotionally process the loss of a loved one while

⁴⁷ John 4:24 (NRSV) states, "God is Spirit."

⁴⁸ Donald Joralemon, *Mortal Dilemmas: The Troubled Landscape of Death in America*, (Walnut Creek: Taylor & Francis Group), 17.

reorganizing social connections around their absence. Communal living is therefore central to both the pain and processing of death. As a result, death offers both an impersonal and a personal image for God. Death is impersonal because it is a natural image for God rather than an overtly relational one like mother or father. Death is personal because of the intense emotions related to grief and because it pushes the living further into intergenerational community, as will be discussed at length in later chapters.

According to McFague's own criteria for proposed models of God, death is an appropriate and necessary model. Before proposing her own models for God, McFague writes, "For instance, the question arises whether any personal metaphors should be employed for imaging God's presence. Are not more abstract, impersonal, or naturalistic metaphors better for encouraging an ecological sensibility?"⁴⁹ Death is an abstract, impersonal, and naturalistic metaphor to supplement McFague's individually relational models, yet death still impacts both bilateral and communal relationships.

McFague offers this second criteria for a good model of God: "Does [the model] have both marks of a good metaphor, both the *shock* and the *recognition*? Do these metaphors both disorient and reorient?"⁵⁰ Because of the permanence and pain associated with death, death as a model for God will shock readers. This shock draws attention to the model and its implications about God. Dry, overused metaphors, however, become clichés out of what once powerfully communicated the radical love and power of the divine.⁵¹ For example, while both death and life could fit into a model of juxtaposition

⁴⁹ Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*, 62.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 33.

and association, comparing God to death shocks far more than comparing God to life. As a result, the disorienting and reorienting power of the death model offers further reflection on the divine nature than a life model would. Death shocks and disorients present-day readers as New Testament models would have for the first century church, and it reorients readers with greater insight to God's character and its implications for religious living. Death falls precisely where it shocks readers into critically considering its implications for the divine while still remaining familiar enough to be relevant to its audience. This familiarity, however, does not mitigate its shock value.

Death is first and foremost recognizable because it is a basic and inescapable stage in the life cycle. McFague even defends her own proposed models when she writes, "In an understanding of the gospel for a holistic, nuclear age, when the continuation and quality of life must be seen as central, we need to return to the most basic realities of existence and to the most basic relationships, for metaphors in which to express that understanding."⁵² The most basic reality of all, even more basic than the "sex, food, water, breath, and blood"⁵³ McFague mentions, is death. Death is the most assured constant in life, but because God gives and sustains life, the death model sharply contrasts Christian expectations.

Death is also recognizable because it is already employed as a metaphor for other natural phenomena. Davies writes, "Physical death is such a powerful force in human experience that it has been extensively employed as a symbol for other cultural events, especially where one phase of existence is reckoned to end and another established in its

⁵² Ibid., 84.

⁵³ Ibid.

stead as with initiation rituals.”⁵⁴ Death’s metaphorical power infiltrates western life. Take for example, how Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s poem “Snowflakes” envisions winter with darkness and death to communicate sorrow. John Knowles’ novel *A Separate Peace* utilizes the death of the protagonist’s best friend to symbolize the protagonist’s loss of innocence. So too does Shakespeare use the deaths of Romeo and Juliet to depict the danger of deep-set divisions and youthful naïveté. Davies continues, “This universal experience of encountering death has provided a powerful image of dramatic change adopted by many cultures as a symbol of many lesser changes befalling people during their lives.”⁵⁵ Its usage as a model for other phenomena does not mitigate its power as a model for God because these other metaphors leave death’s emotional weight unchanged. Death as a metaphor in other areas sets the precedent for its comparative insight which applies to the divine without sacrificing its power or accuracy.

Furthermore, death is already a major part of the Christian tradition. Its presence in the tradition offers it further recognition, but because the tradition presents death antagonistically and dualistically towards God, to connect death to God within a metaphor still shocks the audience. As French philosopher Françoise Dastur writes, “What is specific to Christianity is the importance it gives to death, despite the promises of immortality and eternal life that it also offers. What is at the heart of its foundational ritual is the death of Christ.”⁵⁶ It is expected for any Christian tradition to bring death into a conversation about God. In fact, the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ, central to

⁵⁴ Douglas J. Davies, *Death, Ritual, and Belief: The Rhetoric of Funerary Rites*, 145.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Françoise Dastur, *How Are We to Confront Death?: An Introduction to Philosophy*, trans. Robert Vallier, 1st ed. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 33.

any Christian church doctrine, depends on the association of God with death: “the New Testament understanding of death and atonement begins in a paradox: the death of Jesus was understood as the key, the cross-shaped key, which opens the door to forgiveness and a new way of life.”⁵⁷ Because Jesus’ death allows for eternal life, the gospel stories testify to the intrinsic connection both spiritually and practically between life and death. It is because of Christ’s life that he died, and it is because of his death that many are brought to new life.

In fact, the connection between life and death is fundamental to Christian beliefs. Despite vast differences in Christian understanding of the Eucharist, or in Protestant circles communion, “all interpretations agree in connecting the Eucharist to the death of Christ, and in seeing the Eucharist as relating ourselves to that death which is the means of our salvation and in which we are already involved through baptism.”⁵⁸ Our deaths are the means to our salvation for eternal life. Death leads to life as life leads to death. The Eucharist invites Christians into Christ’s death just as it also invites Christians into Christ’s resurrected life. So too does baptism since believers are buried with Christ through water and from the water are raised to walk in new life. The sacraments invite Christians into eternal life here and now, despite never having physically died. This newness of life, symbolized and held within the sacraments, juxtaposes death’s division with its inclusivity:

The death of Jesus, with which Christians are involved in the Eucharist, states that it is not just for the few assembled at that Last Supper that this blood is shed; it is

⁵⁷ John Bowker, *The Meanings of Death* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 91.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 86.

for you and for many (for a vast multitude) for the forgiveness of sins. The Eucharist is thus the great reunion party: it is the re-established union with God.⁵⁹

The Eucharist evidences life and death's marriage as well as their contradictions—while death divides humans, life indiscriminately includes all.

Even in Christian circles where the ordinances are not frequently practiced, death is intrinsically linked to the Christian tradition because Christ relates himself to the concept of death in his own self-identification. Interestingly, when Christ refers to himself as the Son of Man in Matthew, “he referred to himself most frequently by a phrase which is not a title, nor even a category of special relationship with God, except in so far as it emphasizes the relationship in which *all* people are included, the relationship of the creature to Creator, subject to the universal fact of death.”⁶⁰ While this title Christ uses for himself is often associated with the book of Daniel, according to religious studies scholar John Bowker, there is another “association in Scripture, to man as ‘less than God’ and subject to the penalty of death.”⁶¹ Christ uses this word which implies his own subjection to the “universal fact of death” and to his union with humankind. Christ's incarnation relates him to death because with his humanity comes his death, the end of all human life. He bonds himself to his fellow humans, even in the common experience of death.

Death is first a relevant model for God because of death's prominence in modern American society. Within the American church, death is an appropriate metaphor for God because it already plays an essential role within Christian doctrine. Its preexisting

⁵⁹ Ibid., 93.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 79.

⁶¹ Ibid., 80.

association with Christianity works together with its contradictions to the life-giving, unifying Christian God to render it shocking and disorienting. The sin-division-death triad opposes the love-community-life triad while remaining at the heart of Christian tradition, deeming death an appropriate model of God. The following chapters contend it is an accurate and insightful model as well.

Conclusion

As discussed in the opening section of this chapter, no language sufficiently encompasses the divine. Using the language available to humans in creative and newfound ways, Christians communicate long-held truths. McCabe writes, “Most theological mistakes come from carelessly thinking that we have now ‘grasped’ what our terms mean, that we no longer need to work them out again for ourselves. Theological understanding, such as it is, comes just as the meanings elude our grasp.”⁶² This thesis works out once more the terms used for God with specific attention given to death as a model for God. Given death’s relationship to Christian thought and tradition, death is an appropriate model both because of its association and juxtaposition to God.

Since death offers a shocking, insightful, and appropriate gender-neutral model of God, in the following chapters I analyze how the American Protestant view of death should inform these churches’ views of God. Focusing on death as a model, I first respond to McFague’s three questions for proposed models of God: “What sort of divine love is suggested by each model? What kind of divine activity is implied by this love?”

⁶² Herbert McCabe, “God and Creation,” 389.

What does each kind of love say about existence in our world?”⁶³ Death as a model for God suggests agapeic love from God; God's divine activity is marking the identity of Christians; and lastly, this model demands inclusive love towards fellow humans with a heavy emphasis on the intergenerational church community. In the third chapter, I explore the American Protestant approach to death. This approach is largely influenced by individualism and characterized by ignoring or attempting to control death. As approaches to death and God mutually inform one another, I outline how Protestant theology may better our approach to death. Most importantly, because I propose this model in response to McFague’s call for models for an ecological, nuclear age, death as a model for God deems life in all its forms of the utmost importance. Lastly, in the fourth and final chapter, I describe a wide variety of characteristics this model emphasizes in the divine including but not limited to inescapability, transcendency, immanence, and indiscriminateness. With these characteristics in mind, I outline how death informs both liberal and neo-orthodox theologies just as these theologies informed western approaches to death in the third chapter.

⁶³ Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*, 92.

CHAPTER TWO

McFague's Three Questions

The Love of Death

The previous chapter identified the need for a variety of models for God in light of language's insufficiency to encompass the divine. I proposed death as one supplementary model for God because as both a metaphor of juxtaposition and association it disorients its audience's perception of God. Before exploring how western Protestant views of death and God mutually inform one another in the third and fourth chapters, this chapter first analyzes how the death model reorients one's perception of God. To do so, I draw on McFague's three questions for proposed models of God. Her three questions respectively explore the nature of the divine according to the proposed model, how God relates to humans according to the model, and how humans should relate to one another in light of the model. This chapter is therefore divided into four parts: the first to respond to McFague's first question, the middle two sections discussing her second question, and the final section answering McFague's third question.

The first of McFague's questions is, "What sort of divine love is suggested by each model?"¹ In response to this question, death as a metaphor of association highlights God's agape love towards creation. Agape love is characterized as inclusive, self-sacrificial love for another. In the words of John Alan Lee, a Canadian author and

¹ Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 92.

academic, “Agape is selfless, giving, altruistic love. The lover considers it a *duty* to love, even when no loving feelings are present.”² This kind of love is inclusive because it does not depend on one’s emotions for another, which cannot be cultivated for all individuals at once. Rather, one must choose to love those in need: “the beloved is defined as anyone in need of such care. Thus, the agapeic lover in a relationship is likely to see the partner as only one of many people in need.”³ Agape love is indiscriminate, as are life and death. It includes all just as God loves all. Since God’s nature is to love, for “God is love,”⁴ God must love all creation inclusively, equally, and fully. God’s love is inevitable just as death is inevitable.

Death follows the precedent of McFague’s motherhood model which also highlights the agapeic love of God. Following McFague’s model, mothers give of themselves for the wellbeing of their children.⁵ From the start of motherhood, women give even their own bodies to nurture the fetus in their wombs and in many cases to feed the child postpartum. Like a mother gives of herself to care for her children, God gives of Godself to personally invest in the formation of life. Genesis’ second creation account exemplifies the mother/creator model in which God sacrifices God’s own energy to form humans out of the ground and personally plant earth’s vegetation. Both with mothers and God, creating and nurturing life demands a sacrificial, agape type of love. Death echoes this agape love of creation at the opposite end of the life cycle.

² John Alan Lee, “Love-Styles,” in *The Psychology of Love*, ed. Robert J. Sternberg and Michael L. Barnes (Yale University Press, 1988), 48.

³ Ibid.

⁴ 1 John 4:8 (NRSV).

⁵ Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*, 103.

Where the mother/creator model highlights God's agape love bringing life to the world, death highlights agape love as life exits the world. Take, for example, the life and death of Moses. God's provision and protection deliver Moses from the massacre of Hebrew children, from the consequences of murdering an Egyptian, from his defiance of Pharaoh, through the Red Sea, and through the wilderness. Moses' death, then, returns him to the same dust from which God's love formed him. Moses' disobedience of God causes him to die outside of Canaan instead of entering the promised land with his people, but nevertheless, God's agape love persists.⁶ Even in the midst of his sin-division-death condition, the same condition the rest of humanity continues to reside in, God personally buries Moses' body.⁷ Where God hand-formed man in Genesis 2, here God buries man by hand. God offers physical effort to care for creation from its beginning to its end. Thus, even the sin-division-death triad outlined in the first chapter evidences God's agape love.

God's involvement in Moses' death and burial is exceptional compared to most biblical characters', yet God's agape love persists in other humans' deaths. Death first entered the world following Adam and Eve's original sin. Because of their sin, their relationships with one another, God, and the rest of creation were no longer as intimate, vulnerable, or loving as before. They hid themselves from each other with leaves while also hiding from God.⁸ They could no longer coexist peacefully with creation, for God had to sacrifice an animal to clothe them in skins.⁹ Their exile and eventual death outside

⁶ Numbers 20:10-13 (NRSV).

⁷ Deuteronomy 34:6 (NRSV).

⁸ Genesis 3:7-8 (NRSV).

⁹ Genesis 3:21 (NRSV).

the garden depict God's self-sacrificing compassion for the people. Rather than allow them to live in the garden, where they may eat of the Tree of Life and live forever in their state of division, God exiled Adam and Eve. God sacrifices God's own desire to live in unity with creation in order to heal the humans' sinful condition. They will live, and they will die, but they will continue multiplying future generations until God redeems all humanity. Death allows humans the opportunity for redemption instead of forcing them into an eternity of division. Death throughout the rest of scripture and into the present day is therefore a sign of God's sacrificial love. Humans need not live forever in our present division, but God is instead working for a greater unification of all people to one another, to Godself, and to creation at large. Despite God's love evidenced through death, death still embodies division, and it still opposes God's plan for redemption and unification. God protects humans from themselves, though humans still face the consequences of their sinful condition until their redemption and glorification. Thus, death operates as a metaphor of association because it demonstrates God's agape love, but it simultaneously operates as a metaphor of juxtaposition because it exemplifies the division God overcomes through the death and resurrection of Christ.

As argued in the first chapter, death is an even more effective model for God because self-sacrifice through death is especially prominent within the Christian tradition. First and foremost, Jesus Christ sacrificed himself out of love. He allowed himself to be taken into custody by Roman guards and crucified. In doing so, Christian doctrine explains he atones for the sins of his followers and therefore eliminates the need for death to result from sin.¹⁰ Out of love for his followers, he wants them to live. In order for this

¹⁰ Romans 3:25, Romans 6:4 (NRSV).

life to continue fully and eternally, Jesus must eliminate any division between themselves and God, including sin and death. Because of this self-sacrificial death for the purpose of inviting all into eternal life, agape love is often associated with God. Furthermore, death demonstrates the sacrificial nature of agape love better than most other metaphors because death inherently requires loss. Not only do grieving individuals lose their loved ones, but one's death costs them a piece of themselves. Death is inherently self-sacrificial not only for those who grieve but also for those who die, for the deceased unknowingly sacrifice the potential for continued living. For both the living and the dead, death is sacrificial, as is agape love.

The death model thus suggests God demonstrates agape love because death is inherently sacrificial. Death's sacrificial nature lies at the heart of Christian doctrine because Christ's sacrificial death draws Christians into eternal life. The Christian tradition links death with life because life enters through death. Death opposes life, as seen with the sin-division-death and the love-unification-life triads established in the first chapter, yet eternal life depends on death. In the wake of Christ's sacrificial death, Christians must reject their own sinful ways to adopt the agape love of God. In this way, Christians sacrifice themselves when they sacrifice their former divisive ways in order to draw nearer to the community of believers. In metaphorically dying to themselves, Christians contribute to the life of the church, thus reenacting the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ in their own lives. God thus exhibits divine love in three primary ways: (1) Christ's own life and death, (2) God's provision through and because of humans' own deaths, and (3) God's followers adopt agapeic love in their own lives and deaths. In all these instances death lays the groundwork for new life.

God's Relationship with Humans

McFague's second question asks, "What kind of divine activity is implied by this love?"¹¹ In this case, how does God's agape love for creation impact God's activity and relationship to humans? The death model suggests the divine's relationship with humans is the source of human identity. That is, the divine declares human identities, and humans receive their identity. To fully dissect this claim, this section will first discuss God's role as identifier, and the next section of this chapter examines how death operates metaphorically to emphasize God's divine activity.

In Genesis' first creation account, God follows creation with an identifier, be it a name or a value. Take, for example, Genesis 1 in which God creates light, separates light from dark, and "God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night."¹² Yet again when God separates the waters above from the waters below, "God called the dome Sky."¹³ The creation to identification process continues for Earth and Seas before creating the sun, moon, stars, and life on earth. God first creates and then names the creation. After each day, God identifies creation as good or very good.¹⁴ God is creator first chronologically, then identifier. McFague proposed mother as a model of God which, as a metaphor of association, portrays God's creative nature just as mothers

¹¹ Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*, 92

¹² Genesis 1:5 (NRSV).

¹³ Genesis 1:8 (NRSV).

¹⁴ See Genesis 1:10, 12, 18, 25, 31 (NRSV).

“create” their children. Death highlights through juxtaposition God’s second role as identifier.

Even in cases in which God does not explicitly name creation, such as Genesis’ second creation account in which the author merely states “God formed man,”¹⁵ God provides humanity’s identity in terms of God’s own self. God lends his own nature as creator to the identification of all creatures because humans are first known as God’s creation. In this way, God’s identifying behavior enacts the inclusivity and sacrifice key to agape love. On the most basic identification level, human’s creaturely identity stems directly from God’s role as Creator, but humans are also identified as God’s own because all humans were made in the image of God. Each act of creation is also an act of identification as it differentiates between creature and creator. In one breath, God’s word enacts both creation and identification.

Throughout the Old Testament, God identifies individuals based on their origin or nature. For example, God gives Sarah the name Isaac for her son because her and Abraham’s laughter mark the beginning of his birth narrative. In Exodus God identifies himself to Moses as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,¹⁶ the first of Genesis’ patriarchs, because Moses identifies his own faith with his forefathers’. The Israelites’ creation narratives therefore identify them in relation to the God who created them and the earth they have inhabited since their beginning. It too lays the foundation for their character throughout their history. Before Israel is a family, nation, or monarchy, it is the Creator’s creation in nature and origin.

¹⁵ Genesis 2:7 (NRSV).

¹⁶ Exodus 3:6 (NRSV).

Matthew and Luke's chronologies of Christ evidence the influence of one's communal origins on identity. Matthew, who writes to a Jewish audience, relates to his audience by relating this Christ back to the father of Israel in order to identify Jesus as a Jewish person. The genealogy in Matthew also connects Christ's lineage to David through the repeated number fourteen, which numerically indicates the name David, and through allusions to Moses.¹⁷ On the other hand, Luke writes to a primarily Gentile audience, so his chronology links Christ back to Adam, the forefather of all humans, not exclusively the Jewish people.¹⁸ Though the Gentiles do not share Israel's patriarchal origins, their origins lie with Adam, who came from God. They are also identified as the Creator's creation, so they too can worship the creator alongside Jewish Christ-followers. Identification for Christians, then, is based primarily on one's relationship with God, their first forefather and creator, rather than ethnic relations to a community of faith. Their identity exhibits itself in how Christians interact with other descendants of Adam and Eve who, by the same birth right as Christians, may also enter this family of faith.

Humanity's common creatureliness thus serves as its first divine identification. Humanity shares this first identification with the rest of the earth, for all created objects are God's creation as much as humans. Humanity's sin, or division, therefore impacts the whole of creation as much as God's redemptive work extends beyond humans to the whole of creation. So too does God's identification extend chronologically from creation's initial naming to creation's final judgement. To judge another is ultimately a

¹⁷ Andrew E. Arterbury, W. H. Bellinger Jr., and Derek S. Dodson, *Engaging the Christian Scriptures: An Introduction to the Bible* (Michigan: Baker Academic), 160-161.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 169.

simple act of identification. Because God is judge,¹⁹ God is the ultimate human identifier, but God also judges the condition of the earth to which humans are intrinsically linked.²⁰

The New Testament differentiates two categories humans can be judged into: sinners and saints. Paul depicts these two groups when he writes “that you, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness.”²¹ Scripture gives these “slaves to righteousness” a variety of titles to better express their close relationship with God and their ongoing pursuit of righteousness. The righteous are both free from their sinful nature and free to serve God who is the source of all goodness. Because of this freedom, “So then [they] are no longer strangers and aliens, but [they] are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God.”²² Paul later refers to whole church congregations as saints in the openings to his letters in Romans, Corinthians, Colossians, Ephesians, and Philippians.²³ The righteous should therefore act as saints because God, their identifier, has identified them so via scripture.

¹⁹ Isaiah 33:22 (NRSV).

²⁰ See, for example, Isaiah 21-23 in which the prophet speaks oracles over five pieces of wilderness. These oracles solidify God’s role as identifier over humans and creation alike.

²¹ Romans 6:18 (NRSV). Paul uses the metaphor of slavery to explain to his audience, which was familiar with slavery in the first century Roman world, to explain those who live in sin but who ultimately strive for a unified and holistic relationship with God are metaphorically slaves to righteousness, and therefore to God. Those who partake willfully and without remorse in their sin are identified as “slaves” to sin. Paul’s slavery imagery is obviously concerning to modern readers who should not hope to find justification of slavery or the subordination of some humans to others in the present world, but he himself writes, “I am speaking in human terms because of your natural limitations.”²¹ He writes in tangible terms his audience understands and relates to because they, like modern readers, do not have the capacity to grasp the divine on their own. His slavery image does not support slavery but rather shows the extent to which Paul is willing to use relevant images to bring his audience closer to knowing God. As McFague argues in *Models of God*, so too must modern theologians use new metaphors to relate to a new audience in a new time period and a new culture while staying true to everlasting truths about a God whose characteristics remain unchanged (see Malachi 3:6 and Hebrews 13:8 for God’s unchanging character).

²² Ephesians 2:19 (NRSV).

²³ Romans 1:7, 1 Corinthians 1:2, 2 Corinthians 1:1, Ephesians 1:1, Philippians 1:1, Colossians 1:2 (NRSV).

Those who place their identity in their relationship to God, and therefore to the service of others, are saints, and those who do not are sinners. Saints allow God to identify them, and are therefore drawn into a unified family of creatures under one creator. They accept the creatureliness which binds them to the earth and all other living beings. Sinners either attempt to play the role of God as identifier or give the role of their identifier to activities, objects, or their relationships to other humans. That is, they put themselves in the position of God, or they put other parts of their lives in the position of God over them. Either way, they misplace God by denying God the position of authority and power God should have over humans. In doing so, they misplace the source of their identity. When multiple identifiers exist or when an incorrect identifier exists (i.e. any identifier other than God), division results. In short, saints say yes to God's identification while sinners deny it.

One's actions exhibit their identity. That is, identities are performed. For example, Jacob's name means "heel-grabber" because he came out of the womb fighting his brother Esau.²⁴ As he ages, he performs this identity when he deceives and/or manipulates Esau and his father Isaac to take the birthright for himself. He performs his name until his identity is changed at Peniel. After wrestling with a divine figure in the night, Jacob's name changes to Israel which means "He strives with God."²⁵ Following this identity shift, Jacob performs his new identity when he reconciles with his brother Esau. Yet again in Genesis 35, Jacob's response to his name change is to offer sacrifices to God and to obey the commandment from the Garden of Eden repeated over Jacob to

²⁴ Genesis 25:26 (NRSV).

²⁵ Genesis 32:28 (NRSV).

“be fruitful and multiply.”²⁶ Instead of continuing in deceit, Jacob participates in the unification of a relationship his sin divided while creating new individuals to grow the family of faith. Jacob performs his identity as he becomes a “slave to righteousness.”

God’s identity as God Almighty gives God the authority over humans to identify them. Before commanding a response from Jacob to produce offspring, God identifies Godself: “I am God Almighty.”²⁷ In response to this authority, God determines humans’ identities as sinners or saints, and humans respond in action accordingly, with sinners acting out their own wills and saints striving to reflect the character of God through obedience to God’s teachings. The saints’ response to their God-given identity is first and foremost a response to God’s identity, for it is from God’s identity as “Almighty” that God has any power over humans.

To perform one’s identity as a “slave” to righteousness entails unifying oneself further with God instead of allowing sin to continue dividing the divine-human relationship. Saints unify themselves to God as they mimic God’s perfect holiness, and as they mimic God’s holiness, they further unify themselves to God in an ongoing cycle. Saints strive to reflect God. Since the death model highlights the agape love of God, the saints must also exemplify agape love to their fellow creatures. To perform agapeic love towards creation means to serve others even though it will require sacrifice from the lover be it time, energy, resources, or in the case of Christ, even one’s own well-being.

Though the saints perform their identity in their own actions, identification is itself a performative utterance. That is to say identification is completed as it is spoken

²⁶ Genesis 35:11 (NRSV).

²⁷ Genesis 35:11 (NRSV).

regardless of further action. For example, “to promise” or “to judge” are also performative utterances. A promise is made as the words “I promise” are spoken, just as judgement is made just as one utters the phrase “I judge you guilty/not guilty.” God’s naming and judging are two examples of God’s identification as a performative utterance. Though identities are performed, the saints often perform their sainthood inadequately. The shortcomings of the saints to act saintly in all circumstances does not mitigate their identity as saints, for God has already uttered them to be so. Thus, though identities should be performed in response to God’s performative utterance, identities are not dependent on human action but on the word of God alone.

Identification is first and foremost a performative utterance because as God identifies humans, God is automatically the identifier and humans the identified. Because the same divine word creates and identifies, the two cannot be separated. At the moment of creation, God is first and foremost simultaneously titled Creator and Identifier while the rest of the universe is dubbed Creation and Identified. God has the authority to identify humans because God created humans. Humans on the other hand pale in comparison to God’s authority and knowledge, so humans cannot name God in the same way God names humans. While humans name others and God to make sense of their surroundings through their language, humans cannot fully understand God. Neither human language nor human knowledge can fully grasp God, so both human names and metaphors inadequately identify God. God, on the other hand, has the knowledge and authority to identify humans through naming, describing, and judging. Human names and models for God respond to the performed character of God, but God’s identifiers for

humans demand performance. Thus, the God-human relationship is a relationship with solidified roles between the identifier and the identified.

While humans do not have authority over God to declare God's identity, humans title the divine in order to describe what is beyond them. Because humans cannot fully understand the divine and human language, which is gendered and temporal because the human experience is gendered and temporal, no name will adequately encapsulate God. A variety of educational images help further grasp God's character, but none should claim exclusivity because all are inadequate. In the apophatic theological tradition, since humans cannot capture the full nature of God in knowledge or language, the only adequate name for God is the refusal to name God at all. The refusal to take on the role of God by identifying God with a name demonstrates the appropriate reverence for God. In addition to reverence, to refuse to identify God demonstrates submission to one's divinely uttered role as the identified, not the identifier.

Silence is the only adequate response to a God of unfathomable and ineffable majesty. Silence does not break down like other metaphors for God. If names must be employed, the best choices are the unspeakable tetragrammaton or the unprintable G*d of the Jewish tradition. The Jewish tradition of not pronouncing the tetragrammaton and refusing to write the name of God, instead opting for G*d, leaves God alone in the role of identifier. That is, they come as close to the absence of naming as naming can be. Death's all-encompassing nature and power over humanity mimics God's omnipresence and omnipotence. This view of death informs one's view of God because God will never be encompassed in human language, just as the ever-present notion of death will always be ineffable.

Death Pointing to God as Identifier

How then does death operate metaphorically to draw attention to God's identifying activity? While God's role as identifier is already obvious in the Christian Scriptures, death juxtaposes this role. Where death is a metaphor of juxtaposition, death threatens one's identity because it disrupts the social network they create throughout their lives. If death disrupts identity, death juxtaposes God who provides a complete and unchallenged identity for humans. Because the identity God gives the saints is addressed communally, individual identity is found within their communal network, which in this case is the local church. In the church setting, identification with loved ones cannot be separated from God's identification of saints.

As a result, the deaths of loved ones shape individual identity prior to one's own death. According to Michael Cholbi, the Chair in Philosophy at the University of Edinburgh, "What unites all those for whom we grieve is what I call *identity investment*. Each of us has a set of concerns, commitments, values, and goals. Let us call this set a person's *practical identity*."²⁸ Cholbi later expands the argument that "we grieve for those in whom our practical identity is invested. [...] This is the sense in which these individuals are sources of *practical identity* for us: We choose and act in ways that make reference to them and that we recognize as influenced by them."²⁹ Individuals not only

²⁸ Michael Cholbi, "Why Grieve?," in *Exploring the Philosophy of Death and Dying: Classical and Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Travis Timmerman and Michael Cholbi (Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 2020), 185.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 186.

grieve the loss of their loved one, but they also grieve the part of themselves lost when the person who helped shaped their practical identity is gone.³⁰

Grief is a tumultuous time of emotions because not only must one cope with the loss of another, but they also must learn to adapt their own identities, their very selves and their habits, to the new reality of life without the deceased. Their relationship with the deceased shifts from a relationship with a living and active human to a relationship with a set of memories and past experiences. Cholbi describes the identity crisis one experiences following such a shift:

My own view is that grief is a particularly distinctive opportunity for a good that we might call *self-knowledge* or *self-understanding*. As noted earlier, the deaths of those in whom our practical identities are invested induce in us something of a relationship crisis: We cannot continue in the relationship as before, but it is often not evident how, if at all, to continue that relationship. But this crisis also represents a crucial opportunity to examine our values and commitments and identify which of these we hope will carry us into the future.³¹

Ultimately, these values or commitments will ideally allow the bereaved to rebuild their practical identity in the absence of the deceased.³² Following Cholbi's argument, though grief is a difficult burden to bear, it allows the bereaved to continue developing and exhibiting their practical identities under new conditions.

The bereaved must further adjust their practical identities because not only do the bereaved lose parts of themselves in addition to the deceased, they also lose the parts of others the deceased inspired. Each individual in the deceased's community adjusts their identities, thus creating an entirely different group dynamic amongst the surviving. In the

³⁰ Ibid., 187.

³¹ Ibid., 188.

³² Ibid., 189.

wake of death, one adjusts their relationships with others, with the deceased, and with their own identity. Anthropologist Donald Joralemon relates this idea of one's individual identity being found in their social network when he explains social death—that is, “the disintegration and disappearance of a person's social identity.”³³ He describes your social identity as a “network of social relations” which must mend when you leave the network: “The repair of the network requires a reorganization of the bonds without you, or at least without your ongoing engagement.”³⁴ This reorganization requires work from the living. Grief following death encompasses processing one's emotions while also working to reorganize one's social network and one's habits around the absence of a loved one. It is worth quoting Douglas Davies, professor at the University of Durham, on the matter:

At death identity is not only altered through the loss of figures who have served as sources of identity but also by the new responsibilities which the living must take upon themselves. [...] Grief is that human emotion which expresses death's rupturing of relationships. But, as a form of self-reflection, it also reflects the depth of human life itself: life, not as some abstract idea, but as the very physical experience of ourselves and of those with whom we live and work. The closer the living is bound to the deceased, the greater is the sense of loss at death.³⁵

Our identity is shaped by those around us, by their actions which affect us, and by their relationship to us. Death disrupts identity largely because of its communal impact, so it requires a restructuring of identity as well as relationships. Death divides individuals between life and death, it divides communities because it tears apart social networks, and it divides the bereaved from their former practical identity.

³³ Donald Joralemon, *Mortal Dilemmas: The Troubled Landscape of Death in America* (Walnut Creek: Taylor & Francis Group, n.d.), 17.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 18.

³⁵ Douglas J. Davies, *Death, Ritual, and Belief: The Rhetoric of Funerary Rites*, Second Edition (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2002), 5.

Even before death, identities deteriorate with age when the elderly live outside of an intergenerational community. As they move to homes and facilities, “More time is spent in the exclusive company of persons similarly situated in the life cycle. [...] For those who survive beyond the statistical mean for their gender and ethnicity, the sense of a shrinking social universe is intensified by the progressive loss of close friends and relatives.”³⁶ Death’s division exceeds individuals’ loss of bodily function. It isolates generations even before it actually arrives. Without connection to life at all generational levels, to numerous individuals, and/or to a cause, movement, or organization which will outlast any one lifetime, one risks losing their social identity with each passing generation.

With this division in mind, there are two primary ways of viewing death’s impact on identity: the narrativist approach and the deprivation view. The narrativist approach to death heightens the association between God and death. According to the narrativist approach to death, meaning accumulates over time.³⁷ That is, as one continues to experience the world, create memories, and develop as an individual, their identity also accumulates throughout the course of their lifetime. In this case, one’s own death is a fundamental factor in the completion of their individual identity. Narrativism brings the anxiety that one’s life story will end too early or too late.³⁸ Should our narrative create our identity as it unfolds, death signals the completion of this narrative and the full

³⁶ Donald Joralemon, *Mortal Dilemmas: The Troubled Landscape of Death in America*, 18.

³⁷ Kathy Behrendt, “Death in Mind: Life, Meaning, and Mortality,” in *Exploring the Philosophy of Death and Dying: Classical and Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Travis Timmerman and Michael Cholbi (Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 2020), 248.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 249.

characterization of its protagonist. The narrativist approach paints death either as a comforting rest from the now-completed novela or, if one is not comfortable completing their life and identity, a grave threat. In the first instance, death acts as a metaphor of association. If death completes one's identity and offer rest, comfort, or peace, then how much more secure of an identity does God give God's followers? How much more restful, comforting, and peaceful is God? In the second instance, death acts as a metaphor of juxtaposition for God.

Given American Protestant churches' individualism, instead of viewing death as the completion of their own identity, many western Protestants believe death indefinitely terminates the deceased. This deprivation view paints death as a metaphor of juxtaposition. Protestants, especially those in the United States, avoid death to protect themselves from death's threat. In an individualistic society, the death of an individual is the end of the individual. Western Christians are more inclined to see death as a threat rather than the natural progression of the community overall. Mitchell-Yellin argues the position most westerners would agree with today: "The suspicion that you can't grasp who you are until your story's all told ignores the fact you've been telling it all along."³⁹ According to this view, one's identity does not need death to fully develop. Death is not a promising fulfillment of a person; rather, death threatens the potential for one's individual identity to continue developing. Seen through the individualist lens, in which each person molds and shapes their identity throughout their life in their own historical and social context, death indeed deprives the individual of further time to continue

³⁹ Benjamin Mitchell-Yellin, "How to Live a Never-Ending Novela (Or, Why Immortality Needn't Undermine Identity)," in *Exploring the Philosophy of Death and Dying: Classical and Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Travis Timmerman and Michael Cholbi (Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 2020), 134.

shaping and living out their identity. Through this deprivation view of death, death is the enemy of the self. As a metaphor of juxtaposition, when death threatens individuals, how much more protection does God offer them?

While many Christians look to the general resurrection as God's final redemption of death's threat, God's protection from death presently lies in God's intergenerational church. Because death disrupts one's social network, and therefore their identity, in order to restore and overcome what death challenges, God solidifies Christians' identities *within a community of other Christians*. God identifies the whole of believers, the church at large. The priesthood is the collection of believers, the entire nation is identified as holy,⁴⁰ and the saints are identified plurally.⁴¹ One individual is not a royal priesthood or a holy nation in and of themselves, so one person's death does not terminate the priesthood or nation as a whole. Individuals may, of course, claim these communal titles as their own because they are a part of the ongoing global church, but none may claim exclusive ownership of such markers. When death is understood communally rather than hyper-individualistically, death is not the fulfillment or deprivation of one person's identity. Death does not threaten one's individual identity because the community to which their identity belongs continues beyond their death.⁴² Rather, death keeps church

⁴⁰ 1 Peter 2:9 (NRSV).

⁴¹ Romans 1:7.

⁴² Even from the narrativist perspective, in which the church would have to die to fully develop its identity as an institution and as a community, the continuation of the church does not limit its identity in relation to God. The Christian scriptures have already revealed the complete narrative of the church, of Christ the bridegroom, and of individual believers who make up the church. This narrative and God's declarative statements about the church act as performative utterances declaring the church's identity, as previously discussed. God has already marked the church with the seal of the Holy Spirit in addition to the various identifying epithets such as a Royal Priesthood and chosen nation, the bride of Christ, chosen ones, and children and heirs (See Ephesians 1:13, 1 Peter 2:9, John 3:29, Luke 18:7, and Romans 8:17). Thus, from either the narrative or the deprivation view of death, the full identity of the church is already established

members from performing their God-given identity through community traditions and rituals. The individual's identity will outlast them in the church, even though the individual will not continue to perform this communal identity after their death.

Though the death of the individual does not necessarily cause the death of the larger community, the church community does depend on the participation of its members. Even with the protection the church offers its members from death, death still legitimately threatens the church. Death is therefore an adequate metaphor of juxtaposition which highlights God as the ultimate identifier of human nature, God as the power by which the church embodies its identity, and finally the communal nature of the church.

The Ethic of Death: Intergenerational Communal Living

The third and final of McFague's questions states, "What does each kind of love say about existence in our world?"⁴³ In other words, how should this model shape one's interactions with the world around them? Identification with God lends itself to association with the local church and service of others. As discussed in the previous section, death's pervasiveness highlights the need for intergenerational community in the church. This special social network outlasts any individual's death because the community as a whole comprises of many generations. It constantly grows and declines as new members are born and/or baptized and elders pass away. Rather than a rigid individual identity, the church is elastic and therefore resilient in the wake of death.

because of God's performative utterance, but death limits the exhibition of this identity within a community of believers.

⁴³ Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*, 92.

Death's consistency and inevitability teaches Christians to lean into the church's intergenerational community instead of adopting an individualistic approach to faith and death alike.

In sharp contrast to the rise of western individualism, the church draws Christians into an intergenerational community. On the rise of individualism Goody writes, "There is the sense of personal loss to be dealt with. [...] The lack of *communitas*, of *gemeinschaft*, the growth of individualism, involves a certain withdrawal from each other's personal problems including their deaths and their dead."⁴⁴ When surrounded by babies, children, youths, young adults, middle-aged adults, and the elderly, communities see the full cycle of life right before their eyes. To see the full cycle of life as a circular process remedies the warped perception of life Samuel explains when he writes the following: "In her *The Mansion of Happiness*, Harvard historian Jill Lepore convincingly argues that through the nineteenth century, life was viewed as circular ('ashes to ashes, dust to dust'), while in the twentieth it became more linear, the root cause of our problems in dealing with death."⁴⁵ Intergenerational living daily confronts community members with both ends of the life cycle, thus forcing one to reckon with their similarities ("ashes to ashes, dust to dust"). When all stages of the life cycle become a communal, intergenerational experience, death is not an escapable fear but a part of life just like birth, marriage, love, and loss.

⁴⁴ Jack Goody, "Death and the Interpretation of Culture: A Bibliographic Overview," in *Death in America*, ed. David E. Stannard (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1974), 7.

⁴⁵ Lawrence R. Samuel, *Death, American Style: A Cultural History of Dying in America* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2013), xii-xiii.

As previously discussed, God's identification of God's followers leads them to agapeic love for others because they perform their identity. That is, the saints should resemble the character of God, through the performance of agape love. Because agape love is relational, an identity-marking relationship with God leads one into the local church body to communally worship and serve—a relationship clearly stated in Christ's commandments to love God and love others.⁴⁶ One must sacrifice room within themselves to allow space for others to exist in relationship with them. While God can and will work outside the church body to draw more people into God's agape love, Christian identity depends on fellowship with Christian community.

Because relationships amongst the saints in the church are founded on service to God, in response to their God-given communal identity, the church should represent the ideal of relationships. Agape love should remove divisions within the church in favor of inclusive and service-oriented love for God and others. While individuals should reflect the characteristics of God in their own selves, church relationships should also reflect the relationships within the trinitarian God. All three persons of the trinity are equal members, distinct only in their relationships to one another.⁴⁷ Meanwhile, the relationship between God and humanity is unequal, or in theologian Herbert McCabe's terms unreal, because God does not need humans.⁴⁸ Human to human relationships are equal, or real, because humans are of one common creaturely status. Humans can only properly and

⁴⁶ Mark 12:30-31 (NRSV).

⁴⁷Beth Felker Jones, *Practicing Christian Doctrine: An Introduction to Thinking and Living Theologically*, 69.

⁴⁸ Herbert McCabe, "God and Creation," *New Blackfriars* 94, no. 1052 (July 2013): 394, <https://doi.org/DOI:10.1111/j.1741-2005.2012.01486.x>.

most fully reflect trinitarian relationships, and therefore the love that is God, to other humans. Thus, agape love exhibits itself as loving service towards other human beings.

The love that is God, and therefore the love which Christians should reflect, draws Christians into a local intergenerational community. The church Paul describes portrays a group of diverse ethnicities, ages, genders, marital statuses, experiences, and talents. The differences amongst members strengthen rather than divide the church. See, for example, 1 Corinthians 12 in which Paul writes, “Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; [...] To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.”⁴⁹ Diversity allows one member to support and depend on another. The communal nature of the church does not lose the uniqueness of each of its members but rather encourages the interdependence and mutual servitude of its members—an interdependence and servitude which depends on a wide variety of skills, abilities, and perspectives. As each member depends on another for varying talents, experiences, and resources, so each generation depends on another within this community. The elders depend on the young for care as the young generations depend on the elders for guidance. The children depend on parents for care as the parents depend on children for their youthful energy, helping hands, and reciprocal care in parents’ old age. Agape love equips community members to serve their fellow members selflessly, to “sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.”⁵⁰ Local churches must provide this local, intergenerational community dependent on and founded within the agape love of God.

⁴⁹ 1 Corinthians 12:4, 7 (NRSV).

⁵⁰ Acts 2:45-46 (NRSV).

CHAPTER THREE

Western Protestant Deathways

Introduction to Western Protestant Deathways

The first chapter of this thesis laid the framework for the death model, and the second analyzed the death model in light of McFague's three questions for proposed models for God. From this analysis I established the following: (1) death highlights God's agape love for creation, (2) death juxtaposes God's role as identifier of creation, and (3) because of Christian's common creatureliness with the rest of the world and the agape love they first received from God, Christians should participate in the church's intergenerational community. Death threatens Christian's performance of the church's collective identity, yet the church protects individuals from the threat of death because the church community carries this identity beyond any one person's lifespan. In light of the divine and human relations within the death model, this chapter will analyze current American approaches to death. Where Chapter Two analyzed how deathways inform Christianity's lived religion, Chapter Three explores how this lived religion informs American deathways. While these approaches specifically apply to the United States, they may be more generally applied to western post-Christian nations.

The ethic each model for God suggests is constantly recreated and reinforced through a cycle of experience and interpretation. As each new generation experiences death, interprets its meaning, and continues to experience death in light of this meaning, the death model continues and adapts. While one's view of death informs their view of

God, as discussed at length in Chapter Two, so too does one's approaches to God impact their approach to death. Experience informs interpretation just as interpretation informs experience. This chapter explores the current American approaches to death in order to shed light on western approaches to God and, in turn, to critique understandings of death based on the love, activity, and ethic described in the previous chapter. This chapter specifically critiques American tendencies to control, ignore, or excitedly anticipate death and instead proposes death acceptance.

Because western Protestantism is, like all other forms of Christianity, immersed in its culture, individualism largely affects western Protestants' approach to death just as it does their approach to God. Its most obvious impact is in its attempts to control or ignore death. These attempts include but are not limited to the medicalization of death, the social taboo of death in everyday conversation, and even most city plans isolating cemeteries from everyday activity. Modern medicine can postpone death just as it can sedate grief in death's wake. Day to day conversation dare not stray to the morbid. Meanwhile, bodies are hidden from sight as hospitals take them out backdoors, away from the public eye, and graveyards largely remain on the outskirts of town. Despite its best efforts, the individualistic approach to control, postpone, or ignore death ultimately proves futile because death is inevitable.

Just as westerners limit death's role in everyday life, they also limit God. With western life's dependence on technology and medicine, its citizens seemingly control their own lives without God's help. Be it hyper-independence, unruly devotion to a well-paying job, or the social taboo around religion, westerners' take pride in their ability to care for themselves and themselves alone. Even spiritual fulfillment is advertised as an

internal spirituality while communal religious involvement is not publicly discussed, especially not with strangers. Just as it is futile to ignore or control death, so too is it futile to control God, limit God's control over one's life, or ignore the presence and activity of the divine.

As established in the first two chapters, death acts as both a metaphor of juxtaposition and association for God. In the case of American *approaches* to death, death acts as a metaphor of association. Twenty-first century western approaches to death mirror common individualists' approaches to God. This chapter outlines two methods of avoiding the reality of death are to control and ignore death. Douglas Davies describes the relationship between death and self-sufficiency when he writes, "Death involves a challenge to life and it is likely that the inevitability of death becomes more of a problem as members of a society become increasingly competent in mastering the natural world."¹ Though humans cannot avoid death forever, if they can either postpone death or sterilize death in a medical setting, then death is tame enough to safely set aside.

Christians should not shun medicalization or other attempts to postpone death. Such acts are helpful progressions of the medical world which allow Christians further time to love and serve others. After all, death juxtaposes God's love-community-life triad and, therefore, should be combated with available tools. Rather, such attempts to postpone death should be undertaken with the baseline acceptance that death is beyond human control. Medical services should be undertaken to prolong life, which allows for the enactment of love through service, not to avoid death. Death will still come regardless

¹ Douglas J. Davies, *Death, Ritual, and Belief: The Rhetoric of Funerary Rites*, Second Edition (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2002), 62.

of medicine. An antagonistic view of death should not lead one into denial of death's reality or into attempts to preserve life which ultimately cause more harm than good. Rather, Christians should view death as a great tragedy and come to terms with death by the grace and guidance of the Holy Spirit.

This perspective shift invites death back into humanity. It is a grievous part of humanity, albeit, but a part nonetheless. Rather than shun and attack this stage in the life cycle, Christians should accept death as a contribution to the full range of human experience just as are birth, adolescence, heartbreak, marriage, and parenting. The following pages explore attempts to control or ignore death not to suggest they must cease entirely, but to highlight themes within western approaches to death which shed light on their respective approaches to God.

The final section of this chapter critiques certain Protestants' overzealous approach to death in order to maintain death's position as an insidious juxtaposition for God. While some control or ignore death, others anticipate death believing it leads to eternal life. After all, "living is Christ and dying is gain."² While death very well may mean the deceased reside with God once more,³ to ecstatically anticipate death ignores and delegitimizes grief. I remind readers death still acts as a metaphor of juxtaposition, so while Christians may anticipate their reunion with God in the afterlife, they should not conflate hope of eternal life for excitement to die. As one ages, death may become a welcomed presence, but to long for death patiently as a long-awaited friend differs from the anxious anticipation many Protestants exhibit today. To ecstatically await death as an

² Philippians 1:26 (NRSV).

³ 2 Corinthians 5:8 (NRSV).

escape to a foreign paradise disrespects remaining life. Protestantism should confront death not as a fate to be feared nor one to be sadistically rejoiced in. Rather, death enhances western Protestant churches' views of God and highlights the love and life of God in the midst of tragedy.

Controlling Death

Anthropologist Donald Joralemon describes how westerners control death and grief alike with medicine and social services because their culture demands it.⁴

Westerners did not medicalize death in a cultural or historical vacuum; rather, "The effort to treat some forms of grief as a disease must be understood in this broader context of medicine's expanding monopoly over life's passages."⁵ Modern westerners medicalize death more and more just as they do all other health conditions. Death is a pandemic infiltrating western life's fortress of comfort. It must be cured or, if not cured, its symptoms alleviated.

Capitalism drives death's medicalization. For most westerners, Americans especially, everyday life consists of work, deadlines, and individual contributions to corporate productivity. Accordingly, death becomes a project with a deadline. Death and grief are tasks, obstacles to overcome, risks to manage, problems to solve. Death deforms the market because it reduces the labor force. Meanwhile, grief keeps individuals from participating fully in everyday life's social and economic exchanges. Just as westerners must control death, they must "fix" grief like they would any setback in productivity.

⁴ Donald Joralemon, *Mortal Dilemmas: The Troubled Landscape of Death in America* (Walnut Creek: Taylor & Francis Group, 2016), 90.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 89.

Western capitalism thus drives its participants to rid themselves and their communities of grief quickly. To reach peak efficiency, members of a capitalist society must manage, control, or ignore grief just as they do death.

Donald Joralemon expands on how American society in general has recently adjusted the process of grief in two primary ways: shortening the grieving period and relying on pharmaceuticals to more efficiently manage grief.⁶ Finding funeral and burial arrangements flood the bereaved with tasks to distract them from their pain. They are tasks expected on time like any other corporate profit-bearing project. Once completed, the bereaved return to their literally profit-bearing projects in the workplace. When necessary, medical attention spurs this process along. What was “Once a fundamental social demonstration, mourning has now become a psychological effort for neutralizing death.”⁷ Similarly, “death, like life, is something to master.”⁸ Grief is a task like the rest of life in a capitalist political economic system. Dastur describes this managerial approach to death and grief in the following passage:

But is mourning really a matter of ‘work,’ a task to be executed, or is it on the contrary a process that we should *let happen* by itself? The whole process happens as if it were obeying the modern social imperative of “breaking even” or “profitability” and of getting rid of the dead as quickly as possible. This is why mourning must be managed in the least visible manner possible, without disturbing the social environment of the grieving. We must in some way ‘be done’ with death, erase every trace of the deceased, which perhaps explains why we make ever-increasing recourse to cremation, reducing the place made for the dead as much as possible and taking the dead out of public space.⁹

⁶ Ibid., 23-24.

⁷ Françoise Dastur, *How Are We to Confront Death?: An Introduction to Philosophy*, trans. Robert Vallier, 1st ed. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 9.

⁸ Lawrence R. Samuel, *Death, American Style: A Cultural History of Dying in America* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2013), xi.

⁹ Françoise Dastur, *How Are We to Confront Death?: An Introduction to Philosophy*, 10.

In order to better manage death, westerners control their grief. In doing so, they mitigate grief's necessity and death's lasting impact. If grief can be tamed, how powerful is it really? If grief can be limited, how important is the death which caused it? When controlling grief's expression, humans suggest death is not as impactful as it truly is. The management of grief and death render death ignorable, therefore effectively denying the full extent of its juxtaposition to God's love-community-life triad. If one can manage death, then death is not a powerful enough force to be compared to an all-powerful God.

Meanwhile, individualism draws people out of larger communities. Without communal identification and preservation, westerners have no mode other than their own memories to carry on the dead's legacy. When it comes to one's approach to their own death, "Individuals began to have more of a sense of themselves apart from their collective identifications. [...] Earlier, [Phillipe Ariés] argues, death had been tamed, for it was a part of the natural processes and could be made acceptable by the rituals provided by the church. With the sense that 'I am an individual,' death became a crisis [...]"¹⁰ As individualism grows, there is increasingly less hope of an ongoing community to hold onto when one passes away; death is simply the end. Rather than cultural practices, rituals, and traditions connecting the living to the dead who partook in these acts before the present generation, hyper-individualists exist in and of themselves. Death is therefore a direct attack at their existence.

Whereas in a communal culture the living carry on the dead's legacy in cultural practices, within individualism the living must remember the dead's every detail. In

¹⁰ Dennis Klass, "Spirituality, Protestantism, and Death," in *Death and Bereavement Around the World*, ed. John D. Morgan and Pittu Laungani (Baywood Publishing Company, 2002), 130.

addition to restructuring one's life around the absence of another, grief comes with the added responsibility of remembering the deceased. Joralemon describes individualism's effect on grief when he writes, "I think it is that we have commodified and, to some degree, democratized the act of remembering."¹¹ Remembering the dead's memorable moments, words, and accomplishments is a formidable task for the bereaved. A communal approach to Christian life and to grief relieves the pressure to memorialize a loved one's every detail, for it is not this remembrance which immortalizes the deceased. It is the communal practices which connect the generations, living and dead alike, in remembrance of Christ. With each communion cup, one remembers their ancestors who partook the same blood of Christ years before. With each baptism, one remembers baptisms past, all connected under the name of one Spirit and one community—that is, the holy catholic church. Yet again, intergenerational church community protects believers against death's threat to the individual.

Because western Protestants fail to communally approach death, various strategies emerge to cope individually with death's finality. For instance, philosopher Françoise Dastur explains how in Plato's tradition, thinking of death in some sense separates the soul from the physical appetite of the body and in this way, prepares oneself for death before they have died.¹² Michel de Montaigne similarly argues Christians should think of death in order to normalize it before its arrival.¹³ Certainly, there is value in reckoning with one's death rather than pretending it will never come. Yet all too often westerners

¹¹ Donald Joralemon, *Mortal Dilemmas: The Troubled Landscape of Death in America*, 121.

¹² Françoise Dastur, *How Are We to Confront Death?: An Introduction to Philosophy*, 36.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 37.

conflate the quiet contemplation of death's immanence with a death fixation. This too is an attempt to control death. Death fixation "others" death. Othering death via hyper-awareness defeats Montaigne's stated goal to appropriately prepare for and normalize death with one's thoughts. Instead, death becomes a formidable fate one must fixate on in order to offer the false perception of control over an uncontrollable reality.

This fixation often assumes management of practical concerns following one's death. In the United States, a primary focus on logistical concerns about what to do with one's body and belongings after their passing in part stems from western capitalism. In such a system, productivity remedies all problems, yet prioritizing practicalities often comes at the expense of addressing the emotional toll death takes on the community. Joralemon explains his understanding of our anxious and avoidant approach to death: "I think the mixed message of modern social death—*prepare to die and struggle to live*—is a major source of the contemporary angst about dying and not the often-cited invisibility and loneliness of a medically managed biological death."¹⁴ Facilitating the practicalities of burial and funeral services leave spiritual, mental, and emotional preparation for death untouched.

How, then, can one mentally or emotionally prepare for death and grief without using hyper-fixation to control their experience with either? That is, how does one address death and grief, develop a healthy outlook on both, and prepare to process them without allowing their thoughts to fall into obsession? Montaigne suggests contemplating death to normalize its presence in the life cycle. Timmerman and Cholbi expand on Montaigne's work when they argue individuals should contemplate death with a sound

¹⁴ Donald Joralemon, *Mortal Dilemmas: The Troubled Landscape of Death in America*, 23.

mind. Individuals must develop their outlook on death before grief robs them of their emotional stability. Timmerman and Cholbi write in their introduction to *Exploring the Philosophy of Death and Dying*, “The ideal time to think through philosophical issues about death are not during times of duress, but rather when a person is in a position to be as level-headed as possible. This requires creating a space to discuss philosophical issues pertaining to death in an everyday context.”¹⁵ They argue humans should have their outlook on death fully formed before it is needed. Following their argument, developing a healthy perspective of death before its arrival in one’s immediate social network allows them to process their experience with a stable, pre-established understanding of human finitude, loss, and their own impending demise. Yet within the Christian church, this preparation should take a communal approach. Furthermore, philosophizing about death should never keep Christians from grieving death fully. Preparation should not equate domestication.

Timmerman argues it is reasonable to prepare in advance for death because humans already tend to think of death more than other parts of the life cycle. Timmerman explains this idea when he writes, “Our impending death should be *salient* to us (or, more colloquially, “on our mind”) much more frequently than our birth.”¹⁶ He argues humans can take measures to reduce the risk of an early death. Since humans are actively trying to avoid death, for an untimely death would deprive them of life’s future joys, they will

¹⁵ Travis Timmerman and Michael Cholbi, introduction to *Exploring the Philosophy of Death and Dying: Classical and Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Travis Timmerman and Michael Cholbi (Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 2020), xv.

¹⁶ Travis Timmerman, “If You Want to Die Later, Then Why Don’t You Want to Have Been Born Earlier?,” in *Exploring the Philosophy of Death and Dying: Classical and Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Travis Timmerman and Michael Cholbi (Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 2020), 109-110.

think of death more than other matters out of their control.¹⁷ Furthermore, the uncertainty surrounding death's timing and cause will cause anxiety, leading it to be more prominent in one's thoughts than life's other milestones.¹⁸ This tendency to ponder death may help western Protestants on their journey to accept death's reality, but they must not let their philosophizing lead them to obsession. Death does require both emotional and practical preparation, but hyper-fixation offers the mere illusion of control over death.

Ignoring Death

Closely linked to attempts to control death are attempts to ignore death. Rather than hyper-fixating on death, some take the opposite approach. Denying death once more evidences how experience and interpretation mutually inform one another, for as society finds death uncouth, social and medical structures reshape themselves accordingly. In turn, as modern practices make it easier to avoid the reality of death, the taboo around death strengthens. It is worth quoting Dastur on westerners' death denial:

In the last decades of the twentieth century, then, we could rightly say not only that death has constituted the principal interdiction or taboo of modernity (just as sex once did), but also that contemporary society favors the attitude of flight from death, thus engendering a denial of death, as expressed by the fact that we no longer find the time or space to integrate the dying and the dead.¹⁹

Individual and structural ignorance take subtle forms: “from the basement back door of hospitals to the cemeteries remote from city centers, our entire culture conceals from us the reality of death.”²⁰ Even “celebrations of life” veil death within the very funerals

¹⁷ Ibid., 110.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Françoise Dastur, *How Are We to Confront Death?: An Introduction to Philosophy*, 8-9.

²⁰ David Farrell Krell, Foreword to *How Are We to Confront Death?: An Introduction to Philosophy*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), ix.

designed to mourn death. With each death denial, westerners slip further and further away from acceptance.

In this way western Christians deny death socially and structurally, but they also deny death medically and morally. Most obviously westerners approach science as a way to postpone or avoid death. Death is not part of one's own lifecycle but rather an external enemy to be defeated: "In such a perspective, death, given back to its impersonal exterior, could only ever be passively submitted to by the patient and could only be considered a personal failure by the caregiver."²¹ Death is unacceptable professionally to those working in medical environments, and it is unacceptable morally as a sign of weakness. In Protestant capitalist circles where one's work productivity heavily determines one's worth, for patients or professionals alike to submit to death reflects poorly on their own character. The American medical system transfers Christ's victory on the cross to its own professionals, and it grows increasingly frustrated with its own failure live up to God's precedence and overcome death.

While western society reshapes itself to keep death from the public eye, westerners feed themselves the lie they can overcome death altogether. If medical advances do not fortify this deception, then one's own false sense of invincibility will. Actions which pose a risk to one's physical safety allow them to come as close to death as possible without committing to their fate. This recklessness strengthens one's perceived power over death, thus bolstering the ego and helping them ignore death's inevitability. If one can skydive, if one can drive far over the speed limit without consequence, if one can consume drugs and alcohol irresponsibly, then what could kill

²¹ Françoise Dastur, *How Are We to Confront Death?: An Introduction to Philosophy*, 46.

them? Dastur comments on the use of invincibility to actively ignore death when she writes, “But this kind of defiance of death is, paradoxically, a stratagem that is hatched in order to escape death, because it is accompanied by a feeling of omnipotence, which is the opposite of a true assumption of finitude.”²² Instead of accepting death’s reality, one pretends they are stronger than death. They risk physical safety to come ever closer to death yet slip through its grasp.

Attention-seeking behaviors similarly seem to postpone death. While reckless behaviors earn attention, this attention also follows grand accomplishments, fame, or popularity. Dastur explains this connection in the following statement:

One slips away from the radical forsakenness accompanying a true confrontation with death by continuing to situate oneself in relation to the judgment of others. This is why another way to give oneself the illusion of immortality is to become the point of convergence of every gaze—by becoming a celebrity. The concern here is not a search for glory, or a desire to inscribe one’s name in history, or the creation of works likely to be passed on to posterity, but rather an attempt to find immediate relief from one’s sickness of being by asking others (*autrui*) for a testimony to one’s existence.²³

One’s audience constantly reminds them of their own existence. If a number of individuals care about one’s life and death, then how could they truly die? If they do pass away, are they not a legend to live on in memories? Rather than caring for the community, one appeases the public opinion for their own personal gain: “this is what is obscurely sought in celebrity: self-objectification, identification of the self with one’s public image in order to be alleviated of the burden of one’s finitude.”²⁴ Immortality’s appeal to individuals drives people to others for external validation and the hope of

²² Ibid., 28.

²³ Ibid., 30.

²⁴ Ibid., 31.

remembrance. Western life moves away from death, from carrying on the legacy and tradition of one's community as they grieve, and towards individualism. It moves to the immortality of oneself rather than the community as a whole, yet its individualism demands validation from external viewers.

Ignoring death in these ways strengthens the death model's connection to God. Since God is often associated with the afterlife, death and the divine are intrinsically connected concepts. To approach one with willful ignorance requires willful ignorance of the other. Samuel describes how just as westerners ignore death, they ignore God: "A more secular age, centered around the many pleasures and freedoms to be had in place of a judging God, encouraged an aversion to death and dying."²⁵ Because one's view of God and of death are intrinsically linked, as Americans ignore death, so too do they ignore God.

Religious Americans are no exception. Today's Protestant Christians' interpretation of death veils the threat of death with the promise of eternal life. Though death is intrinsic to Christianity, as discussed in the previous two chapters, death is ignored in favor of the greater hope of eternal life. Dastur perfectly encapsulates this attitude when she writes, "Many people in our culture have faith in the immortality of their soul, but it is a far harder and far rarer act of faith to believe that we will die."²⁶ It is a difficult calling to reckon with death or to marry grief with hope, yet if Christians sacrifice one, they sacrifice the full range of the human experience to which God invites them. This calling is not to say death is more substantial than the hope of ongoing life,

²⁵ Lawrence R. Samuel, *Death, American Style: A Cultural History of Dying in America*, xvii.

²⁶ David Farrell Krell, Foreword to *How Are We to Confront Death?: An Introduction to Philosophy*, x.

but a full understanding of the depravity of death will in turn highlight the gravity of Christians' hope. To experience both heavy sorrow, anger, and emptiness is an inherent part of the human experience—a part which evidences God as much as the more positive aspects of human emotion. To deny one grief—to try to mitigate death's damage with unseen promises—is to deny them the full expression of their love. For if a loved one is lost and you do not feel sorrow, have you truly loved? If you do not allow yourself emotional turmoil, then how can God also be the God of the brokenhearted? Rather, the bereaved must invite God into their experience, and the church should integrate grief into its practices. In doing so, the church would more fully confront individuals' deaths rather than veiling the pain of bereavement with the promise of eternal life.

As the second chapter of this thesis established, intergenerational community follows faith. In light of the communal nature of both the church and grief—as grief affects one's entire social network—processing death should be a communal task. For death and dying to become communal would combat American tendencies to retreat within oneself in the face of death: “According to the French historian Philippe Ariès, the modern obsession with individualism and the promotion of secular views have stripped us of our capacity to create a community around the dying and to share in each other's mourning.”²⁷ Western churches must counteract their individualistic tendencies to create a supportive community capable of maturely and preemptively processing emotions and existential questions regarding the end of life.

In order to keep from denying God alongside death, this communal approach must actually confront death's inevitability. Western Christianity not only limits its view

²⁷ Donald Joralemon, *Mortal Dilemmas: The Troubled Landscape of Death in America*, 15.

of God, but it actively pushes people away from the church when it fails to fully face death and bereavement. In the *Atheist Manifesto*, Michael Onfray explains Christianity, Judaism, and Islam's popularity stems from an inability to cope with death's finality:

Far better to swallow fables, fictions, myths, or fairy tales than to see reality in all its naked cruelty, forcing him to accept the obvious tragedy of existence. *Homo sapiens* wards off death by abolishing it. To avoid solving the problem, he wishes it away. Only mortals have to worry about death's inevitability. The naïve and foolish believer *knows* that he is immortal, that he will survive the carnage of Judgement Day.²⁸

Onfray argues the three major monotheistic religions stem from a death fixation. Rather than accept or confront one's finitude, humans invent God to give them purpose and life beyond their own existence. For churches to communally prepare for and respond to death requires they confront the reality of their finitude rather than veiling it in promises of eternal life.

While death does operate as a metaphor of association in one's *approach* to God, death itself primarily operates as a metaphor of juxtaposition. In the introduction to Françoise Dastur's book *How Are We to Confront Death: An Introduction to Philosophy*, David Krell juxtaposes God with death:

We may insist that it isn't 'healthy' to think about death. It's morbid, in fact. Better to keep on smiling; better to sail on the river of denial. Yet our skepticism and our confident mental hygiene go down the tubes when we fall in love. [...] Suddenly the *life* of this astonishing creature is vital to us. And we have to confront, in all our happiness, the worry that this miraculous being is in fact vulnerable. Even if we escape kindergarten, grade school, and high school unscathed, without having to confront death, we would have to escape friendship and love altogether to be really safe. Such safety would not be healthy, however, but really sick. And boring. Deadly dull. So, there we are. And there is death, at least as a menace.²⁹

²⁸ Michael Onfray, *Atheist Manifesto: The Case Against Christianity, Judaism, and Islam*, trans. Jeremy Leggatt (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2007), 2.

²⁹ David Farrell Krell, Foreword to *How Are We to Confront Death?: An Introduction to Philosophy*, xi.

Not only is death “a menace” to our life but also to our love. God, on the other hand, is the source of the love-community-life triad. It is, then, one of the greatest tragedies to a God who is both love and life to see God’s creation experience death. In the sense that death is “a menace,” death juxtaposes God. To ecstatically await death rejects the juxtaposition between death and God.

Because of Christianity’s promise of eternal life, western Christians are torn between the dichotomy of eternally postponing death and hopefully anticipating death. When death is the door to an everlasting, perfect life, of course Christians are zealous to die. While Christians believe they will die bodily, death in its truest sense does not apply to them: “The acceptance of death here has the dialectical form of a recognition that is at the same time a denial.”³⁰ Yet even these excessively positive portrayals of death in the Christian tradition function as an alternative form of ignoring death. These Christians don’t allow themselves death, and in doing so they deny themselves the full extent of their humanity. Resurrection is a joy, but it does not refute the need for grief now. In reality, both death and bereavement belong in the Christian faith because both demonstrate the full range of the human experience. God need not distract God’s followers with promises they have yet to experience. Rather than treat resurrection hope as a cure for death and bereavement, Christians should answer Dastur’s calling to have faith in their own death. Christians would enhance their own spiritual lives, and perhaps clear their name of Onfray’s accusations, if they would have faith in their own death just as they have faith in the resurrection.

³⁰ Françoise Dastur, *How Are We to Confront Death?: An Introduction to Philosophy*, 35.

Just like all other parts of humanity, Christ took on death. To deny death, then, is to deny a piece of the savior and the climax of salvation history. If Christians minimize death's tragedy with their enthusiasm for it, then they minimize Christ's sacrifice. To minimize death which antagonizes the love-community-life triad minimizes the God who is life and love. Rather, Christians should recognize death's tragedy and inevitability to further recognize God's own goodness and infinitude—God overcame *death*. It is inappropriate to act as though the fate of all living creatures is not a tragic, horrific display of life's decay. Though Christians grieve with hope on the horizon, Christians must still grieve. Willful ignorance of death masked as hope of life further proves Onfray's thesis that Christianity cannot accept death.

Christians' refusal to accept death minimizes the grieving process because it minimizes the source of grief. It also minimizes the eternal life to which they have been called. If one does not understand the depths of the death (i.e. the sin-division-death triad) from which they were saved, then how can one understand the true lengths to which they have been raised up when they were promised resurrection (i.e. the love-community-life triad)? Christians, of all people, must grieve death as the enemy to the unified communal life they have been called. Christian grief is a biblically acknowledged part of life. 1 Thessalonians 4:13, which states, "Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope," permits Christians to grieve death in light of eternal life. It does offer hope in the midst of suffering, but equally as importantly, it permits Christians to grieve despite eternal life. In fact, it assumes if not requires this grief. Never does it permit Christians to ignore death's significance or distract themselves from the reality of

death because of the eternal life believed to follow. If Christians are to truly value life, as they claim, then they must also take death seriously, for it removes life from their midst. To be human is to grieve and to die. To grieve is a privilege which does not suffocate hope. Christians' exclusive emphasis on eternal life in the wake of death minimizes tragedy and ignores the very human reality of death, dying, and bereavement.

Accepting Death

How, then, are Christians to approach death if not with inappropriate fear or joy? Christians should approach death through the engagementist perspective rather than adopting the deprivation view. As discussed earlier, the deprivation view paints death in a negative light because death “deprives the person who is dying of additional life worth living.”³¹ Philosopher Kathy Behrendt dubs the deprivation view the “*too-soon problem*” because, as its name suggests, death has come too soon.³² She later relates this problem to westerners' willful ignorance of death: “If death deprives us of more meaning in life, and there's no viable way to avoid this, we may be better off keeping death far from our minds.”³³ This explains much of the western approach to control or ignore death. Americans see death as a deprivation which comes too soon, so they either avoid death or fixate on death to simulate control over its timing.

³¹ Travis Timmerman, “If You Want to Die Later, Then Why Don't You Want to Have Been Born Earlier?” 104.

³² Kathy Behrendt, “Death in Mind: Life, Meaning, and Mortality,” in *Exploring the Philosophy of Death and Dying: Classical and Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Travis Timmerman and Michael Cholbi (Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 2020), 245.

³³ *Ibid.*, 246.

Since death is almost as unpredictable as it is inevitable, the deprivation view does not allow one to truly make peace with their end. Humans must manage death, but their illusion of control will necessarily fail. The alternative is engagementism. While no approach to death entirely eliminates the pain of deprivation, engagementism finds meaning in the intrinsic value of activities, not the accomplishment or additive meaning of completing activities.³⁴ Death keeps humans from further life, but engagementism assuages the fear surrounding deprivation because it transfers the value of one's life away from future activities and onto present work. Currently, it seems engagementism "is better regarded as aspirational: an approach to meaning in life that many do not emulate, but which might, in some respects, make things better for us if we did."³⁵ Yet it is precisely this aspirational approach which Christians should seek out.

Finding the intrinsic value in one's work, be it their actual career, volunteer work, relational work, or other labors, should mark the Christian life. After all, Christians will likely not see the fruit of their labor. Christians will work towards the will of God, their sanctification,³⁶ but they will likely not see the restoration of earth or their own glorification until their deaths. The Westminster Catechism describes the ultimate end of humans outside of their own actions when it states, "Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever."³⁷ To glorify God and enjoy the divine presence forever offers

³⁴ Ibid., 250.

³⁵ Ibid., 251.

³⁶ 1 Thessalonians 4:3 (NRSV).

³⁷ "The Westminster Shorter Catechism," *The Presbytery of the United States*, accessed 21 January 2023, <https://www.westminsterconfession.org/resources/confessional-standards/the-westminster-shorter-catechism/>.

one's work an intrinsic value even though Christians will probably not see the fruit of their labor in their own church or lifetime.

Furthermore, as discussed in Chapter Two, the performance of Christians' identity does not depend on outcome. That is, their identity is already given as a saint, as a justified person in the eyes of God, so no good work defines them. Good works stemming from faith are not motivated by outcome so much as they are motivated by the intrinsic value of exercising faith and performing identity. Rather, charity and service anticipate a future independent of any one individual's participation. The kingdom's return to earth does not depend on any one Christian or any one church, so the intrinsic value of goodness, which stems from God who is the ultimate good, motivates Christians' good works.

Thus, for Christians death should be a cyclical, normal pattern of life. Samuel describes death's centrality to the life cycle when he writes, "We learn that those who did master the art of dying saw death not as a stranger or the enemy but as an essential, natural part of life. Death is not a separate entity or epilogue to life but an integral dimension of it, in other words; such a view offers our best chance to increase the likelihood of dying well."³⁸ The best way to view death is as the natural progression and end to life. Death is not a decisive moment ushering in immortality, for one's eternal life began when they were baptized by the Holy Spirit and justified before God. Death does not define the Christian life, but its importance cannot be ignored. It is the utmost of tragedies which, despite our justified and painful grief, points to the majesty of a loving, life-giving God who overcame death.

³⁸ Lawrence R. Samuel, *Death, American Style: A Cultural History of Dying in America*, xi.

Christians look forward to the eschaton, when the kingdom of heaven will be fully realized, but death itself is not an end goal because Christians' eternal life has already begun. Theologian Kenneth Kramer defines death and eternal life as present and ongoing realities:

The third aspect of the New Testament teaching has to do with what could be called a mystical or immediate experience of death, a dying beyond dying, the art of self-emptying that can take place while one is yet alive. To be thoroughly prepared for death from the New Testament viewpoint, one must die to all that is false and enter into the beginnings of the eternal life while yet alive.³⁹

For many, physical death marks the beginning of eternal life, once one has left the body's temporal life here and now, yet the third of Kramer's New Testament aspects to death highlights how living Christians participate in eternal life here and now. Davies clarifies, "The symbolic language speaks of this [death as a natural process] in terms of baptism, through which the old nature of humanity – involving death and destruction – comes to an end as the baptized person is 'born again' in a spiritual sense."⁴⁰ That is, death is not a gateway to a greater life, for the abundant life promised to Christians is already a reality.

Though Christians do not yet live in the promised new heaven and new earth, they live with the Holy Spirit. Baptized by the Spirit, they experience life abundant in their present world. The eternal life is already present though not yet fully realized as it will be after the Parousia. Kramer further expands on this idea of eternal life when he writes, "Heaven then for the Christian is the possibility of one's eternal participation in the eternal purpose of God."⁴¹ Christians participate in the purpose of God now—this purpose

³⁹ Kenneth Paul Kramer, "Christian Attitudes Toward Death," in *The Sacred Art of Dying: How World Religions Understand Death* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 147-148.

⁴⁰ Douglas J. Davies, *Death, Ritual, and Belief: The Rhetoric of Funerary Rites*, 19-20.

⁴¹ Kenneth Paul Kramer, "Christian Attitudes Toward Death," 139.

being our sanctification and worship in our daily lives.⁴² Death is a sinful stain on a larger tapestry of ongoing eternal life. It is a natural phenomenon not to be feared nor seen as a major transitory period, for Christians' eternal life begins at justification. At the same time, death is horrific and painful, not a future to be hoped for in the name of immortality.

In pursuit of acceptance of death, modern Christians should learn from German theologian Meister Eckhart's detachment towards death. Such an approach accepts one's limited time in this life. This acceptance contrasts modern attempts to ignore, overcome, or postpone death beyond life's profitability. Montaigne describes Eckhart's detachment as "a letting be[...] it is the state characteristic of one who has separated himself or herself from common opinions and common fears, not through the violent refusal of his or her own finitude, but rather in order to be opened to its truth."⁴³ It is an acceptance of death and even of our anxiety towards death, rather than a complete absence of anxiety. It does not require one to be unmoved by the inherent anxiety of dying. That is, this detachment Eckhart promotes does not require "a state of *ataraxia* with respect to death, that is, the total absence of disquiet or disturbance that both Stoicism and Epicureanism recommend to those seeking happiness."⁴⁴ Detachment allows humans to reckon with tragedy and anxiety while still accepting rather than denying its pressing reality.

In this way, just as death informs our view of God, God informs our view of death. Just as God is beyond humans' control, humans must not attempt to control death

⁴² 1 Thessalonians 4:3 (NRSV).

⁴³ Françoise Dastur, *How Are We to Confront Death?: An Introduction to Philosophy*, 42.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 42.

but rather accept its reality. Just as God is inevitable, so too is death. Humans must not ignore death nor hyper-fixate on its immanence. Yet again, western Protestants must accept death's reality, allowing for grief but acknowledging in the midst of grief the vastness of God and of the human experience. Adopting the engagementist approach to death and practicing Meister Eckhart's detachment aid Christians in this process of acceptance. These approaches also marry grief with the church's communal life. Christians ultimately continue the intergenerational community's legacy onwards in the midst of their grief.

CHAPTER FOUR

Revisiting the Death Model in Christian Theology

Introduction

Thus far this thesis has proposed and analyzed death as a model for God because of its power as both a metaphor of juxtaposition and association. The first chapter proposed the death model and established it as a relevant and appropriate model of God. Chapter Two provides a framework for the death model's theological and ethical implications, and Chapter Three demonstrates the reciprocal impact one's view of God has on their view of death. The third chapter explores western post-Christian approaches to death and critiqued these approaches in light of the second chapter's insights. In summary, Christians should resist the urge to either control, ignore, or anticipate death and instead integrate death and grief into community life. This fourth and final chapter revisits how death informs western Christians' view of God. Death and God mutually and reciprocally revise one another in an ongoing process of reorientation and orientation. In this chapter, I will first discuss the characteristics of God the death model highlights either through association or juxtaposition. I will then outline death's role within both liberal and neo-orthodox theology. Placing death within liberal and neo-orthodox theologies is not an extensive exploration of death's place in Christian beliefs. Rather, death's inclusion in these theologies demonstrates the flexibility and applicability of the death model across a variety of Protestant backgrounds.

Characteristics

One's Ownmost

Heidegger's philosophy of death in *Being and Time* presents death as one's ownmost, nonrelational, and not to be outstripped. These three characteristics illuminate the western approaches to death explored in the third chapter of this thesis and, therefore, highlight characteristics of God. When explaining death as one's ownmost, Heidegger argues "my death is my own. I alone will die my death. Since I can know what it means for me to be going to die, death cannot be shared by anyone."¹ Humans are first introduced to death when someone in their social network dies. Though they first experience death secondhand, each individual must experience their own deaths for themselves. Grief and death are closely related phenomena, but to grieve is not to die.

Just as one's death is one's own, so is one's faith. Faith is a communal practice comprised of personal affirmations and accountability. While the individual requires a community to live out their communal identity, the community would not exist were it not for the individuals comprising it. Personal responsibility for one's own participation in the community remains central to communal wellbeing, just as communal wellbeing remains central to individual wellbeing. Without the community, the individual faith would disintegrate. Faith is therefore one's ownmost responsibility to the community just as the community bears the responsibility of caring for the individual. The ownmost nature of faith does not negate faith's communal nature. Death is one's ownmost just as faith is one's ownmost responsibility to the community.

¹ Diane Zorn, "Heidegger's Philosophy of Death," *Akademia* 2, no. 2 (1979): 10.

Nonrelational

Death inhibits relationships primarily because it disrupts social networks, as previously discussed. Death keeps the deceased from participating in their community, and it requires reorganization of larger social ties around the deceased's absence. Beyond this disruption to literal interpersonal relationships, death's association with sin further associates it with non-relationality. Because the sin-division-death triad intrinsically links death and sin, even when one has not literally died, sin divides relationships between humans, between humans and God, and between humans and the earth. Death is nonrelational because in both sinful life and in death, death is always associated with the disruption of relationships.

On an even more basic level, death is nonrelational because one's own death cannot be shared with others. In Kress' introduction to Dastur's book, he discusses death's disruptive activity, and in doing so he echoes Heidegger's nonrelationality of death. He writes, "Death is *nonrelational*, in the sense that I cannot find a representative who will stand in for me and take it off my back and out of my future; someone may rescue me from danger, but both she and I will not be able in the end to pass our dying onto someone else."² Because death is one's ownmost, it must be nonrelational, not because death does not allow for new relationships with God but because none can take another's place.

This description of death juxtaposes the relationality of God. Not only does God engage in relationships with God's people, but the substitutionary theory of atonement

² David Farrell Krell, Foreword to *How Are We to Confront Death?: An Introduction to Philosophy*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), xviii-xix.

dominates Protestant theology. According to this theory, one may not stand in on your behalf for death except in the case of Christ, whose love and life were so great he substituted himself for the deaths his followers deserve in order to instead offer them eternal life. Death is generally nonrelational except in the face of God, whose love-community-life triad overcomes the sin-division-death triad. No one can share in another's death except in the case of Christ, whose love overcame death's boundaries. Christ now stands in Christians' place, and Christians act out the crucifixion and resurrection in their own lives as they die to themselves.³ Where death almost universally excludes the deceased from their community, with the exception of Christ, God offers inclusion into eternal life and communion with Godself and other created beings. Death thus acts as a foil for God, highlighting God's relationality through its own non-relationality.

Not to Be Outstripped

When Heidegger states death is not to be outstripped, he "refers to the inevitable possibility of death."⁴ That is, death is a possibility throughout one's life which will inevitably come to fruition. None can escape the possibility of passing away. In other words, death is always on the table. The inevitable possibility of death is similar to how Christians view God. In the Christian tradition, God's identification or judgement of God's people is an inevitable possibility the church awaits. The church hopes for a general resurrection in the wake of Christ's own resurrection. To approach death

³ See page 32 of this thesis.

⁴ Diane Zorn, "Heidegger's Philosophy of Death," 10.

knowing its possibility may be realized at any time mirrors the confidence with which Christians approach God knowing God's return may be realized at any time.

Similar to God and death's characteristic not-to-be-outstripped nature is their infinitude. Death is infinite because it universally impacts living beings. Its reach spreads infinitely and indiscriminately outwards, thus condemning living beings to finiteness. Death's infinitude causes creaturely finitude. That is, death contrasts God because of the finitude it causes, but death acts as a metaphor of association in its own infinitude. When describing death's infinitude, Kress' writes, "death cannot be *overtaken*, we cannot get around it, surpass it or pass it by; death is *impassible*, though certainly not impossible."⁵ So too is God infinite in God's limitless power and omniscience. God affects the entire universe, but this finite universe and its passions do not affect this impassible God.

God's reach extends infinitely just as God's characteristics extend infinitely. God's characteristics are complete and unified in one divine being. That is, the infiniteness of God's characteristics allows for the divine simplicity. God is not just in the sense that God answers to a higher ideal of justice. God's justness is so infinite that God *is* justice, and in the same breath which God is justice, God is also life and love. No single characteristic can be applied to God because all God's characteristics extend into, through, and beyond the others in one complete whole.

Unknowable Yet Inevitable

Just as death's possibility remains a mystery to the beings-towards-death, God too is a dark unknown. Death is a dark unknown because none can say with full knowledge

⁵ David Farrell Krell, Foreword to *How Are We to Confront Death?: An Introduction to Philosophy*, xix.

what transpires after one passes. God is a dark unknown because none can say with full knowledge who or what God is. God remains beyond human capacities. Furthermore, though God brings order to chaos and light to the darkness, God first and foremost sits in the watery chaos of nothingness. Even in the beginning when there was nothing, God was. God hides in the dark mishmash of Genesis' first chapter. Yet God's dark unknowability need not inspire fear like death often does.

A matter's inevitability does not automatically render it a fearsome possibility. Breathing, for example, is an inevitable possibility for newborns, but its inevitability does not make breath a threatening phenomenon. Death's inevitable possibility does not designate it a negative possibility, but it often becomes the source of fear because of its unknowability. It is the afterlife we cannot see; it is the darkness of sleep from which we will never wake. It is the dark night we must not gently enter. Following death as a metaphor of comparison for God, God has undergone and overcome the darkness of death. Christ suffered to the point of death and arose from death to life. God is in the dark and the light, omnipotent and omnipresent. God is in the chaos and over the chaos. God is not a man in white robes bellowing down demands of faithfulness; God is one who silently remains in the midst of death's possibility.

Rest

For others, death is a darkness whose uncertainty is a point of rest. It is a sleep they can escape into from the often-exhausting experience of living. Death's characteristics overlap God's when individuals view death as a restful, peaceful phenomenon. While this framework often follows a negative worldview, life need not be miserable for death to be restful. Be it rest from suffering or from the adrenaline-inducing

positive experiences of life, death brings release to a world where there are no worries, no pains, no discontentment. One need only decompose. With this note in mind, it is worth considering German philosopher Schopenhauer's worldview as it enlightens death's respite. According to Timmerman and Cholbi, "Schopenhauer is the father of pessimism."⁶ He sees life as an endless cycle of suffering in which the goods do not outweigh the bad: "the objects of his desires continually delude, waver, and fall, and accordingly bring more misery than joy, till at last the whole foundation upon which they all stand gives way, in that his life itself is destroyed and so he receives the last proof that all his striving and wishing was a perversity."⁷ From this line of thinking, death is a release: "Our life is like a payment which receives in nothing but copper pence, and yet must then give a discharge for: the copper pence are the days; the discharge is death."⁸ Ultimately, Schopenhauer concludes death is the end and purpose of all life, a long-awaited completion and termination of suffering.

Whether Christians themselves will approach death in a pessimistic or optimistic light varies from individual to individual. Regardless of where they lie, all will undeniably experience suffering in the world. Death is still a relief, though this relief cannot overshadow death as an enemy to God's good intentions and kingdom coming. Schopenhauer's view of death overlaps with God's characteristics because God too is a release, a comfort, a protector, and a peace in the face of suffering, worries, and daily

⁶ Travis Timmerman and Michael Cholbi, Introduction to "How Does Death Affect the Meaningfulness of Our Lives," in *Exploring the Philosophy of Death and Dying: Classical and Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Travis Timmerman and Michael Cholbi (Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 2020), 239.

⁷ Arthur Schopenhauer, "World as Will and Representation (excerpts)," in *Exploring the Philosophy of Death and Dying: Classical and Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Travis Timmerman and Michael Cholbi (Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 2020), 242.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 241.

labors. While death remains a tragedy for those who lose loved ones, for those who die death is a peaceful rest in a deep bed of soil or ash.

When approaching death, anxiety eases and peace increases. Samuel describes the peace death brings to those who are dying when he writes the following:

[Fear of death] seemed to ease when death actually approached. Those who knew they were dying often felt a sense of calm and peace, exactly the opposite of what one might expect. Rather than feel a need for haste, to try to do as much as possible in the short time they had left, these people were in no particular hurry.⁹

For all the United States' efforts to control or ignore death, many approach death peacefully as it draws nearer. Dastur ultimately argues humans approach death medically from one mortal to another with "vulnerability,"¹⁰ and they see mortality not as a limit to existence but that which allows them to interact with the world and one another.¹¹ Death, though fear inducing at times, does not have to rid one's life of joy altogether. Rather, death can become a dear friend as its possibility grows increasingly immanent over the course of one's lifetime. Yet again, with death acting as a metaphor for God, if death is a restful, comforting possibility, how much more restful and comforting is God?

Unifier

As discussed in previous chapters, death is a division. This division foils God's unity. God has no division, and God's ultimate goal is for the church to overcome all its divisions. The High Priestly Prayer in John 17 demonstrates this ultimate goal. Christ's

⁹ Lawrence R. Samuel, *Death, American Style: A Cultural History of Dying in America* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2013), 20.

¹⁰ Françoise Dastur, *How Are We to Confront Death?: An Introduction to Philosophy*, trans. Robert Vallier, 1st ed. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 47.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 44.

last wish before his death, his last intercession on behalf of his people is for the unity of the global, intergenerational church. God works from Genesis 3 until the end of Revelation, through the present age, to unify God's people to Godself, to their sinless state, and to each other. God restores what sin divides. Even God's own self knows no division. Divine simplicity epitomizes unification, as even God's own characteristics are one. God is not a meshing of justice and love and goodness. God is just. God is love. God is good. God is one; God knows no parts.

Just as God is unifier, God is equalizer. Death draws all humans down to the same level. There is no discrimination in death along class, racial, ethnic, age, or social lines. Since death acts as a unifier and an equalizer—bringing all to the same fate—how much more unifying is God? Bowker expands on this comparison between death and God when he writes, “As, then, death is universal, so also is the atonement, effected through the death of Christ.”¹² All will have to bow before God,¹³ and all will be judged by God according to the same standard.¹⁴ Unification and equalization are linked processes, both of which God enacts and death highlights.

Death and Liberal Theology

The Christian approach to death should mimic their approach to God. For the purposes of this thesis, Protestant Christianity will be explained in light of both liberal and neo-orthodox theology. The former generally tells the Protestant Christian story as the following:

¹² John Bowker, *The Meanings of Death* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 99.

¹³ Romans 14:11 (NRSV).

¹⁴ See John 5:30 and 1 Peter 1:17 (NRSV).

1. The individual lives a life marked by sin, the wages of which are death.
2. The Christian comes to faith in Christ whose sacrificial death on the cross offers an atoning payment for their sins. This death which is sufficient for all sins at all times becomes efficient for those marked by faith in Christ.
3. Through various spiritual disciplines and church involvement, the Christian undergoes a process of sanctification to become more like Christ.

The Christian story begins within sin, but life enters the Christian story through Christ's death and resurrection. Through the process of sanctification, God draws the Christian evermore out of this death-inducing condition until they are fully drawn into the eternal life and presence of God. Similarly, Christians approach death as the following:

1. The individual lives in fear of death. Attempts to control or ignore death dominate this stage.
2. The individual recognizes their eternal life begins at the moment of justification by faith. The Christian forgives themselves their humanity, their mortality, as Christ has forgiven their humanity's sinful condition. The promised rewards of the Christian life have already been realized.
3. The Christian awaits the full manifestation of the realities already experienced, but death still exists as an ominous reality.

Thus, Christians parallel their redemptive attitude to God with a redemptive attitude towards death. In both cases, forgiveness acts as the means of reconciliation. Where sin drives a wedge between creation and creator, following the atoning work of Christ, forgiveness reconciles creation with God. Where an overwhelming fear of death

contradicts Christian's hopeful promise of eternal life, forgiveness of one's humanity reconciles their anxiety with their religion.

To forgive oneself one's humanity reaches towards Meister Eckhart's detachment. Christians allow themselves to exist as mortal beings, with the anxiety mortality introduces to the human experience, without allowing their anxiety to overtake them. Though their fear remains, Christians forgive themselves their feelings of mortality as well as their mortality itself. Christians follow in Christ's footsteps to forgive themselves their humanity's shortcomings, its propensity to die, as Christ also forgave them their tendency towards sin, which death epitomizes. The Christian lives with the present reality of death's threat, but the Christian lives unmoved in the example of Christ's forgiveness. Despite the fear and joy common to the mortal experience, the individual stands unmoved in a forgiven and forgiving community. Anxiety of death without joy is existential dread. Joy for death without anxiety is masochism. When both coexist with forgiveness in the Christian life, neither anxiety nor joy should change the practical or theological stances of the church community.

In this way, just as death informs our view of God, God informs our view of death. Just as God is beyond humans' control, humans must not attempt to control death but rather accept its reality. Just as God is inevitable, so too is death. Humans must not ignore death nor hyper-fixate on its immanence. Yet again, western Protestants must accept death's reality, allowing for grief but acknowledging in the midst of grief the vastness of both God and the human experience. Just as Christians see God inviting them into eternal life presently, they may see death as a tragic enemy to life—but an enemy which must be accepted. In turn, they continue the intergenerational community's legacy

onwards through church practices and ordinations, and they grieve death because it mitigates communal participation in eternal life.

Death and Neo-Orthodox Theology

Karl Barth's neo-orthodoxy offers a different understanding of Christian death than liberal theologians. Rather than present eternal life as a present reality, Barth presents death as the manifestation of nothingness. To sin is to move away from God, and since object exists within and because of God's sustenance, to step away from God is to step towards nothingness: "Without God, man moves toward nothingness. Therein lies the anguish of man's sin, in death."¹⁵ Theology of the resurrection lies at the heart of Christianity because resurrection life draws Christians out of death, which is nothingness, and into God: "Aside from Christ and the Resurrection, Sin and *Death* is the last word. Hope must be rooted beyond this life if it is not to be hopeless, unrealizable, frustrated in this life."¹⁶ Barth reaffirms the significance of bodily death and resurrection to the Christian life. He does not present eternal life as a present reality but looks beyond the present life to future fulfillment of God's promises. Death remains a significant factor to church life because it acts as the precursor to Christ's resurrection, which is the crux of salvation, and because it allows one to enter into their own union with God, unmarred by sin.

Where Barth differs from his liberal counterparts, neither theology negates the approach to death proposed in the previous chapter. Emil Brunner, a liberal theologian,

¹⁵ George M. Schurr, "Brunner and Barth on Life After Death," *The Journal of Religious Thought* 24, no. 2 (1967): 101.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

allows for a sense of dying to oneself presently, which invites eternal life presently. Barth, on the other hand, affirms the importance of bodily death and resurrection to Christian thought, and in doing so, he affirms the discontinuity of life presently and life after death. Both in this shift from life to death and in the process of sanctification, for Barth change is the work of God alone: “For both Brunner and the liberals there is a curious sense in which God is just there, it is man who must change. For Barth, it is God who changes man.”¹⁷ Thus, Barth believes God is the sole enactor of salvation and sanctification. God changes humans and elects Christ through whom humans are brought to God from nothingness. Bodily death and resurrection act as physical disruptors of humans’ current propensity towards nothingness.

Though Barth “does not clearly affirm genuine personal continuity in the resurrection body,”¹⁸ his work still affirms “God steps into [*this* life] in stepping into history, to take the substance of human life, historical human life, to Himself in Christ. It is *this* life which is redeemed.”¹⁹ Barth proposes God disrupts this life to redeem this life. Following this logic, Barth’s understanding of salvation resembles the following:

1. The present human condition tends towards nothingness, which Christians call sin. Death epitomizes this nothingness.
2. God elects Christ whose bodily death and resurrection disrupts humans' present condition. Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection draw Christ’s followers into

¹⁷ Ibid., 103.

¹⁸ Ibid., 104.

¹⁹ Ibid., 101.

Christ's own election.²⁰ Humans may adopt this election to eternal life or refuse and slip further into the nihil.

3. Those who accept Christ's election as their own within the context of the Christian church are drawn evermore into Christ's eternal existence while maintaining their own individuality.²¹

Barth's neo-orthodox theology allows for a more communal understanding of salvation than the liberal approach. Following this understanding of salvation, Christians approach to death would resemble the following:

1. The individual lives in fear of death, so attempts to control or ignore death dominate this stage. The creative and sustaining love of God holds the world around the individual together. To move towards death by way of sin strikes the individual as unnatural because it contradicts the life-force of God which surrounds the individual.
2. The individual recognizes the dichotomy between Christ's election and the nihil. As the church is drawn up into Christ, the communal religious body acknowledges and rejects the sin-division-death triad as the embodiment of nothingness.
3. The church awaits full communion with Christ in life after death, but they recognize their present involvement in Christ's eternal life and resurrection.

The church must reject death as a nihilistic threat to the church's eternal life, but the church can still grieve death while remaining hopeful of its resurrection. Once again, the

²⁰ Ibid., 102.

²¹ Ibid.

question remains: how to reconcile the salvation Christians have already received with the still imperfect state Christians live in? How do Christians continue to live in the midst of their already achieved redemption and their not-yet fully realized glorification? Like with liberal theology, the Christian must forgive themselves and their fellow humans for their tendency towards sin and death to reconcile this eschatological “already” and “not yet.” In both cases, Christ’s invitation to eternal life enables forgiveness first from God to humans and then from humans to humans.

Conclusion

Death acts as an appropriate and necessary model of God. It draws on natural imagery to depict God in genderless language. It highlights God’s agape love, God’s role as identifier, and the need for intergenerational church community. Death as a model of God informs Protestant approaches to death, urging its audience to accept death intergenerationally. Death is neither a phenomenon to be feared or anticipated but rather accepted warmly in its own time.

This chapter presents death as a metaphor of juxtaposition and association to highlight God’s characteristics. Where death contrasts God, God’s characteristics outweigh death’s. For example, where death is division, God is more unifying than death is divisive. When acting as a metaphor of association, God’s characteristics outweigh the same characteristic in death. For example, while both death and God are restful, God is far more restful and peace-giving than death. Because God is more powerful than death, God’s traits are vaster, and God’s ability to model these traits in action is greater. Protestant approaches to death, be they positive or negative or attempts to ignore death altogether, inform the Protestant church’s view of God who overcomes death’s division.

This chapter also outlines two common soteriologies in western Protestantism and how one's approach to death parallels their theology. Both applications of these soteriologies to death require forgiveness of one's humanity and participation in an intergenerational local church. Death therefore not only illuminates God's characteristics both as a metaphor of juxtaposition and association, but one's theological approach to God informs their approach to death. Death thus mirrors the divine in character and in theological application.

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