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# Theology of Death: Experiencing the Fullness of Life Through the Negation of Life in Death

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*Abstract:* Death confronts us not only as a paradox, but also us as a mystery in that it is experienced as integral to life. Participation in life entails a simultaneous participation in death. This is because life and death constitute a continuum. Death is not something outside life. If it were so, then no one would have bothered about it. Precisely because it is within life, people try to figure out the relationship between life and death. One can grasp this relationship to the extent one is immersed in the mystery of life that envelops the mystery of death. Here the author goes against the position that, "... death is nothing to us, because while we exist, death is not present, and when death is present, we do not exist" and proposes that the mystery of human existence encompasses the mystery of both life and death and that we live our lives in relation to death, i.e. with the knowledge that we will die. This close relationship between life and death implies that we can understand one only in relation to the other. Basing himself on Jewish and Christian traditions, the author tries to understand, appreciate and critique the phenomenon of death and affirms that the promise of new life in Jesus is experienced by actualizing the multi-dimensional relationships here and now. The creative power of God stands over against physical death as a promise of the fullness of life that has already been experienced as part of the unfolding of life. The full realization of the new life remains as a hope founded on God who, as the source of life, "gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist"

*Keywords:* Christian understanding of death, dualism, Jewish understanding of death, fullness of life, mystery of death.

## Introduction

The knowledge that we will die and disappear from the face of the earth is frightening and unsettling as it is certain and universal. However, this awareness does not include the knowledge of the reality of death itself. Death remains the great unknown and unknowable. That is to say, while it may be possible to describe the trajectory of the process of death on the basis of biological, psychological or clinical observations, the reality of death as death always escapes investigation. It is because no one can cross over the threshold of death and return to life with exact information. Thus, the certain knowledge about the fact of death and the impossibility of knowing death itself constitute the paradox of death.

Death confronts us not only as a paradox, but also us as a mystery in that it is experienced as integral to life. Participation in life entails a simultaneous participation in death. This is because life and death constitute a continuum. Death is not something outside life. If it were so, then no one would have bothered about it. Precisely because it is within life, people try to figure out the relationship between life and death. One can grasp this relationship to the extent one is immersed in the mystery of life that envelops the mystery of death. Here I am deliberately going against the position that, "... death is nothing to us, because while we exist, death is not present, and when death is present, we do not exist"[1] As opposed to this view, I am proposing that the mystery of human existence encompasses the mystery of both life and death and that we live our lives in relation to death, i.e. with the knowledge that we will die. This close relationship between life and death implies that we can understand one only in relation to the other.

This would explain why different religions seek to dwell on the mystery of life and death in their attempt to generate a deeper appreciation of life. Death provides a privileged standpoint to understand life and vice versa. However, though religions begin with the avowed purpose of enhancing life, the result need not necessarily correspond to the intention. For example, a religion may emphasize the transcendent finality of life beyond death with a view to enhancing the meaningfulness of our earthly existence. But the unintended consequence might turn out to be passivity, lack of

commitment and the neglect of this life with the expectation of a better life in the other-world. This has happened to almost all the world religions. Christianity is not an exception.

The traditional Catholic Christian approach to the mystery of life and death had been, to some extent, instrumental in diverting the attention of the believers from this world to the other. As it happened especially in the Middle Ages, the Christian existence itself was construed as a preparation for death and for the wonderful life that awaited beyond the grave. The consequence of such an approach is that it tends to reduce Christian ethical life into self-seeking; it makes Christian commitment to redress injustice and oppression something nonessential to Christian living; and it conceives action for change and transformation as peripheral to the Christian faith. Though at present such attitudes do not have much currency, vestiges of them are not entirely absent.

This calls for an adequate theological understanding of the reality of death – an understanding that takes the reality of physical death seriously and one that enhances the deeper significance of life on earth while locating and affirming the future dimension of God's promise of the fullness of life in the midst of tendencies and factors that negate life. Accordingly, the central argument of the paper is that the experience of the fullness of life in its present and future dimensions calls for the negation of life in death. In other words, transforming life into a constant affirmation of the promise of life radically challenges the tendency to make death a pattern of life. The courage to reject life in death facilitates the experience of the fullness of life and, conversely, the preference for death as a pattern of life excludes the possibility of life altogether.

This argument is developed in several stages. The essay will, first, analyze the traditional Catholic understanding of death to identify its strengths and limitations as well as to underscore the need for a realistic understanding of death. Second, the starkness of physical death will be analyzed with a view to highlighting the true nature of death. The third section will focus on the understanding of death in the Hebrew Scriptures to delineate the trajectory of the development of the notion of death. The conception of death in the Christian Scriptures will be the focus of the forth section and it will

also highlight the challenge of death for life here and now and its relation to the Christian hope for the fullness of life. I conclude the paper by pointing out that the fullness of life is the Christian option and not life in death. This necessitates a negation of life in death and the affirmation of the possibility of experiencing that fullness as integral to the unfolding of life.

## Traditional Approach to Death

Catholic theology is yet to develop a full-fledged and an adequate theology of death. Traditionally, the focus of the theology of death has been on the 'before' and the 'after'. It emphasized the need of repentance and reconciliation, anointing and viaticum before death as a preparation for what follows after death. It also discussed elaborately on what follows death: judgment, purgatory, heaven, hell, parousia and general judgment. Death happens 'in between' the 'before' and the 'after' and it is glossed over by stating that death is the separation of the soul from the body.[2]

In the process the anthropological dimension of death has been sidelined. The tragedy, the absurdity, the darkness and the terribleness of death are covered up. As a consequence, death itself is construed in a truncated fashion. When death is understood as the separation of body and soul and the emphasis is placed on the continued existence of the soul after the dissolution of the body, the reality of death is somehow circumvented as death becomes the death only of the body – the material container of the real person who, in fact, does not and cannot die since the person's soul, because of its immortal nature, continues to exist beyond the destruction of the shell of the body. This view is based on a specific Greek philosophical anthropology.[3] Though historically it has immensely influenced the Christian approach to death, in reality it has little to do with what the Christian faith affirms about death.[4]

Moreover, the contemporary understanding of human persons as an integral unity of body and soul (GS 14) does not allow the simplistic definition of death as the separation of body and soul. If body and soul represent the two dimensions of the single reality of the person, then the separation of one from the other must be considered as the dissolution of the person.[5] Realistically, then, the

definition of death as the separation of body and soul says little about the reality of death and it leaves us with no ground for consolation. In addition, the scientific knowledge we have of the cosmos radically questions the traditional way of conceiving the realities that follow death, especially the continued existence of the disembodied soul. For instance, the metaphors of judgment, purgatory, heaven, and hell presuppose a pre-scientific three-tier cosmology that assigns separate places to humans before death and to the soul after death. Underlying the concept of death as separation of body and soul implicitly is a pre-scientific worldview.[6]

At the same time it must be admitted that the emphasis on the continued existence of the soul after the death of the body has a palliative function as it hides, to some extent, the absurdity, threat and pain involved in death. It makes death acceptable and bearable. The argument could be that 'no cost is too much if it helps dealing with the threat of annihilation and tragedy'. But the question is: what is the understanding of death that necessitates palliative measures to deal with it? Could it be authentically Christian? Is there any possibility of conceiving death with all its darkness, tragedy, absurdity and threat, which, at the same time, enhances the Christian vision of human life?

At the base of the traditional understanding of death one can locate the operation of a dualistic anthropology. As I argued elsewhere,[7] a dualistic understanding does violence to the integral, unified nature of the human persons. It brings about an unhealthy and unnecessary dichotomy between body and soul to the detriment of the total human person. This dichotomy finds its extension in one's relationship with other persons, the cosmos and God. The dichotomous view deviates from the Christian vision of human persons. It is, therefore, necessary to integrate the theology of death into the larger context of the Christian understanding of the human persons. This would entail locating human persons in their pluri-dimensional relationality that is constitutive of the persons and an examination of what happens to these relationships in death.

## Reality of Death as Death

A deep insight into the fact of being human in the world is the precondition to understand the reality of death as death. The necessary

insights can be gained by looking at human existence in terms of its essential relationality. Human existence in the world encompasses various relational dimensions. They include the dimensions of embodiment, ecological embeddedness, social rootedness and transcendence. They constitute the reality of being human not as body *and* soul but as body-selves. All these dimensions of human existence are necessary for an authentic approach to death. If human existence is relationality, then death is the end of the totality of relationships that constitute the human person. This is what makes death tragic and absurd. As we shall see, this understanding of death conforms to the earlier strata of the Hebrew understanding of death as well as the Christian understanding of death as the wages of sin where sin is understood as alienation.

Death from the perspective of embodiment has the power to terrorize the prospect of life, for, the bedrock of one's identity is embodiment.[8] One's location in and relation to space and time is determined by embodiment. It is also the source of one's relationships in every form. Thus, from the perspective of a human being as an embodied being, death would mean the death of the whole person. Death destroys a person's identity as a human being, it wipes out a person's history and it shatters every relationship of a person. In this way, the cessation of embodiment is equivalent to a ceasing to be. Here one can locate the root cause that makes death absurd and tragic. It makes life itself absurd. There are not a few philosophers who have emphasized the absurdity of life in the face of death and they do have a point.[9]

Death from the vantage point of human beings considered as ecological beings is somewhat consoling as it underscores the fact that whether we live or die, we belong to the earth and to the cosmos. In life one relates to the cosmos as a living organism. In death this relationship is severed. Human interaction with the environment is torn at one level – often as exploiters of the environment – but, at another level, it is reestablished as a source of life for other life forms. The eco-theologians find in this the intimate rootedness of human life on planet earth as well as the mutual life-giving interdependent and interrelated dimension of existence even in death.[10]

The social dimension of death emphasizes the fact that human persons as social beings are not isolated individuals and, therefore, no one dies in isolation. Death is a social phenomenon just as the human person is a social being.[11] Consequently, death is not only a threat to the individual existence, but also to the social existence. This would explain the elaborate rites and rituals that surround the event of a person's death. Death threatens the solidarity and cohesion of society as well as its continued existence. The funerary or mortuary rites are meant to ward off such threats by reestablishing the social integrity shaken by death. As the individual member is concerned, death brings an abrupt end to all social roles and relationships. It not only affects those specific roles and relationships, but also, and more importantly, questions the very rationale and finality of the roles and relationships in society. The mortuary rites also seek to reaffirm the values challenged by death. Thus, even if it is the individual who dies, it is a travesty to portray death as an individual affair and to treat it as such. This makes it imperative that a realistic approach to death calls for considering the death of a person as a social phenomenon.

The understanding of the death of a person as a transcendent being takes us directly into the sphere of religion. A religion that is silent in front of death may face the same predicament – death.[12] From this perspective, it may also be said that the fear of death and annihilation has a significant function in the development of religions as ways to negate the negation of death through the power of hope. The human being as a transcendent being finds in hope the glimmer of transcendence, which emphasizes one's relationship with the divine and is reinforced by the object of one's faith. Thus, even though death radically threatens one's relationship with God, one's faith in God enables one to challenge death itself with the confident hope of a new life as understood in the light of one's vision of God.

To sum up, the absurdity and the tragedy of death get accentuated when viewed from the perspective of the importance of these relational dimensions for human existence and their destruction in death. However, instead of squarely facing this absurdity, oftentimes death is approached from the vantage point of human beings as transcendent beings and the other three dimensions are relegated to

the periphery of the discussion. This approach provides a theologically truncated view of death that may satisfy theological curiosity without addressing the existential issues that surround death as the death of the total person. It also forfeits the significant anthropological and theological insights that can be gained from the reality of death. It is crucial, therefore, to incorporate the totality of human existence with its multidimensional relationality into the discussion on death in order to gain a comprehensive view of the reality of death.

Though the scriptures and the tradition do not provide such a comprehensive vision of death, a critical approach to the biblical conceptions of death will certainly open up vistas for further deepening of our understanding. In doing so, we shall keep as a backdrop the reality of death as the cessation of relationality and examine the biblical understanding of death in the light of the death of the total person. In the following sections we shall briefly analyze the portrayal of death in the Hebrew and the Christian Scriptures with the aim of advancing the view that the end of life is not death but rather it is the fullness of life.

## Trajectory of the Notion of Death in Jewish Thought

The Hebrew understanding of death is to be located in the context of life.[13] The supreme value of life is the central motive of the Hebrew Scriptures. The Israelites were not so much concerned about life beyond death as with a long life, prosperity and progeny in this life and this was considered a blessing from God (Gen.15:15; Judges 8:32; Job 42:17). Accordingly, the early strata of Israel's understanding of death represents a unique feature in that it does not manifest much concern for individual life beyond death; it considers death in a matter of fact way as something natural.[14] The Israelites were concerned about the future of the nation as a whole. Consequently, we do not find a unified and theologically significant understanding of death and afterlife in the early stages of the development of Israel's faith. Death, as the natural end of human life, comes at the end of a long life and the dead survive in the progeny. (Gen 25:7-11). Life comes as a gift of God: the human being becomes a living being when God breathes God's life-giving breath into lifelessness (Gen 2:7). The human being dies when God

withdraws the breath of life (Ps 104:29; Job 34:14). The human person comes to an end with death. Nothing of an individual survives death except one's name in the memory of the living.

This understanding of death is in conformity with their understanding of human persons. A human person is an undivided whole who ceases to exist at death. Though they conceived a shadowy existence beyond death, that existence was seen as more dreadful than death itself. While life was understood as relational, death was seen as the end of all relationship and the existence beyond death was an existence without any form of relationship. Though death was perceived to be the natural end of human life, death itself did not offer any meaning as it marked the end of all meaningful relationships.

The Hebrew bible does refer to the underworld (*Sheol*) as a place of the dead. *Sheol*, like the Greek underworld (*Hades*), was conceived as a place of darkness without any joy or pleasure, where the dead exist as mere shadows. However, unlike the Greek *Hades*, the use of the term *Sheol* in the Old Testament could be substituted by "pit" or "grave" implying death. Thus, it is possible to consider the verbal usage such as 'going to *sheol*', 'going down to the pit' and 'going into the grave' as hyperboles for death itself without reference to the notion of survival after death.[15] *Sheol* is the common lot and no one escapes it. It is a place where there is no communion; not even the possibility of communion with God through praise and thanksgiving (Ps115:17; Is 38:18ff). Since *Sheol* is characterized by the absence of any form of communion – the characteristic mark of life – it could very well be an equivalent of death without signifying any form of survival.[16]

However, the later development in Jewish thought, especially as reflected in the Wisdom literature, shows a shift in the focus from the nation to the individual. In seeking guidance for the conduct of human life, the Wisdom literature considers death to be an apt topic to reflect upon, obviously without any hope of afterlife. *Ecclesiastes*, for example, highlights the absurdity of life in front of death: "the dead know nothing, and they have no more reward; but the memory of them is lost. Their love and their hate and their envy have already perished, and they have no more any share in all that is done under

the sun" (Eccles 9:5-6). However, it did not eschew the possibility of some form of survival in the memory of others (Wis 4:1) or in posterity (Sir 44:10-14; Job 18:17-19). Some of the Psalms, on the other hand, tend to widen the scope of survival beyond the grave on the basis of the faith that the communion with God transcends death (Ps 49:8 ff, 16; 73:23-26). In these and similar passages one could locate the notions of immortality prevalent in Greece and other surrounding nations beginning to exert an influence on the Jewish belief. Even then the predominant sentiment expressed in the Wisdom literature is one of pessimism and resignation in front of the tragedy of death.

A further development in the understanding of death is seen in the apocalyptic literature. The apocalyptic vision that arose in Israel as a response to the experience of the national tragedies and the consequent darkening of the historical hope as expressed in the prophetic literature accentuated the hope of survival of the dead. However, it is important to note that the apocalyptic literature did not base its hope on the immortality of the soul, as the Greeks did. Rather the hope was for the resurrection of the dead, which was based on the fidelity, justice and the creative power of the God of Israel rather than the immortal nature of the soul. While Daniel 12:2-3, Is 26:19, and 2 Mac 12:43-45 clearly affirm individual resurrection, Ezekiel 37:1-14, through its vision of the dry bones, highlights the hope of national restoration.[17]

Resurrection as an apocalyptic metaphor underscores the universal scope of salvation. As the expectation of the victory of God's justice over the unrighteous turned out to be unrealizable in history and, at the same time, the faith that nothing can negate the promise of God impelled the oppressed groups among the Jewish population to hope for God's vindication of the just beyond the grave.[18] If everyone is to participate in the victory of God, then those who have suffered persecution and died for the cause of Yahweh are to be brought back to life. The justice of God demands that all – the living and the dead – experience the judgment of God in terms of reward and punishment. In this way, the development of the belief in resurrection is intimately linked with the universal lordship of the God of Israel.

Thus, the belief in the resurrection, which specifically aimed at rejecting the notion of the immortality of the soul and challenging the negative attitude toward the material creation as maintained by the surrounding nations,[19] emphasized the creative power of the living God. The apocalyptic literature presented resurrection as a universal event that affected the entire created order at the end of history that was expected to be imminent. It represented, for them, the universal restoration that God would bring about in the life of Israel, the entire humanity and in the entire creation. (Is 65: 17ff). The belief in the resurrection, thus, presents a radically different theological perspective on the survival of the dead from that which is expressed by the immortality of the soul.

This brief overview of the notion of death in the Hebrew Scriptures shows that there is no unified view of death in these Scriptures. The early strata of Jewish thought considered death the end of the life of a person. It was looked upon as tragic and absurd and yet natural and inevitable. This perspective assigned supreme importance to the earthly life of the people. Gradually, the hope for survival beyond death entered into the Jewish thought especially under the influence of the surrounding nations. However, there is a conscientious effort to reject the notion of the immortality of the soul as held by Israel's neighbors probably to avoid the danger of deifying the deceased as happened in Egypt where the pharaohs were deified,[20] as well as to ward off the danger of denigrating the material creation. In Jewish thought preference was given to the notion of the resurrection of the dead, which emphasized the creative power and fidelity of Yahweh. Even then, the notion of resurrection was not accepted by all. It was the popular belief among the persecuted and disenfranchised apocalyptic millenarian groups. Probably, the Jesus' movement as the movement of the disenfranchised subscribed to and accepted the apocalyptic vision,[21] albeit with major modifications as we shall see below.

## Fullness of Life as the Christian Option

The understanding of death in the New Testament is in continuity with the later development of the Jewish apocalyptic thought and is determined by the experience of the death of Jesus. Jesus preached the nearness of God's reign and he, like the apocalypticists, expected

the imminent arrival of the Kingdom of God and understood his role as the prophet of the end times. Jesus, along with the Pharisees of his time, accepted the belief in the resurrection and refuted the Sadducees who rejected it. He did not add anything new to the prevailing views on the resurrection or the survival of the dead.

This prophet was executed by the Roman authorities in collusion with the Jewish leaders. If we were to follow the passion narrative of Mark, it doesn't seem that the hope of the resurrection provided Jesus with much consolation to face his horrible death on the cross. He was frightened in front of death and he was greatly distressed and troubled in the garden of Gethsemane. He died in abandonment, in despair, in excruciating pain and with a loud cry (Mk14-16). The followers of Jesus also perceived his death as absurd and meaningless as they, abandoning him, ran away from the scene. However, the experience of the execution of Jesus and its subsequent interpretation effected a radical transformation in the understanding of death and resurrection. Belief in the resurrection, which was till then held, particularly by the apocalyptic millenarian groups and remained in the periphery of the religious thought, began to occupy a central place in the faith of the community gathered in his name.[22] In the process, contrary to the early Hebrew thought which did not base the demand for living an ethical life on the survival of the dead, the hope for resurrection became the ground for ethical life in Christian thought.

The New Testament does not show that the immortality of the soul, and especially the soul of Jesus, proved to be a source of consolation for his followers. For them, Jesus was crucified and he was dead totally. But when they began to proclaim that Jesus is alive, this preaching was not based on the belief in the immortality of the soul. They did not preach that Jesus came back to life on his own. The core of their faith was that God raised Jesus from the dead. That is to say, the resurrection faith is an affirmation of God who receives a new identity in the event of the death of Jesus. The Exodus experience created an identity for the Yahweh God as the one who liberated the Israelites from the Egyptian slavery and who would liberate people from all forms of slavery. Similarly, the resurrection experience generates a new identity for God as the one

who raised Jesus from the dead and who will raise the dead to life. The Hebrew scripture preferred resurrection when it wished to express the survival of the dead in opposition to the Greek understanding of the immortality of the soul. The New Testament follows this tradition and emphasizes resurrection as revealing the identity of God as the God of life (Rom 4:17). Thus, the resurrection faith establishes a new divine identity that becomes the determining factor in the Christian understanding of life and death. This line of thought needs to be taken seriously in order to properly understand the specific Christian perspective on death and the survival of the dead.

In accordance with the changed identity of God, the understanding of the death of the Christian also undergoes a radical change in the light of the death and resurrection of Jesus. If the death of Jesus was interpreted as a self-donation unto the God of life and the resurrection was seen as God's response to this self surrender, then the Christian views one's life and death as a life and death unto God concretely lived and died in the normal course of one's life. The resurrection of the Christian is God's response, as the God of life, to the life and death of the Christian.[23] This response, in conformity with God's nature, takes the form of an offer of the fullness of life even beyond physical death. This offer does not presuppose the immortality of the soul, which was rejected as the ideology of the elite.

This change in perception is particularly seen in Paul who thoroughly relativizes death in the light of the resurrection experience.[24] According to him, in baptism a believer has already died with Jesus and is raised with him (Rom 6:3-11). In this way the believer lives a new life in Christ. As far as the believer is concerned, death is in the past and the death that comes as a natural end of human life is something awaited in future not with fear and trembling but with eager longing (Phil. 1:21ff). According to Paul, whether we are alive or dead we belong to Jesus (Rom 14:7 ff). It does not mean, however, that life and death have equal significance. Death has importance only in relation to the new life in Jesus. All that matters is life with Christ. The life of the believer is a living with Christ always and everywhere and this new life manifests itself in ethical behaviour in the personal and social spheres of one's

existence. Physical death, as a natural end of life, is a transition to the full participation in the life of Christ.

Physical death is not presented as the consequences of sin in the bible. Human persons are created as finite beings subject to mortality. Whether there is sin or not, as finite beings human life naturally ends in death.[25] Just as in the process of birth so also in the process of death, there is certain passivity. Death happens. It doesn't depend on whether one wills it or not. It is not a punishment of sin imposed by God on the sinner.[26] This point needs to be taken seriously because St. Paul's statement that death is the wages of sin (Rom 6:23) is commonly taken to mean that *physical death* is due to sin.[27] The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World also puts forward this perspective on physical death (GS18). However, it is doubtful whether this point of view is tenable on the basis of the scriptures.

At the same time, St. Paul's affirmation of the connection between sin and death sheds light on the Christian understanding of life as well as death. Human life is relational. It is enhanced through relationships. Pluri-dimensional relationality is the law of life. Sin, on the other hand, denotes a radical negation of the law of life. In other words, sin alienates one from all life-giving relationships. Thus, cut off from the sources of life and turned on oneself, the sinner lives a life in death. Death, from this perspective, is not merely the wages of sin. Sin is death. It cannot be otherwise because the negation of the law of life is the negation of life itself.[28] The remainder after this negation is death.

Jesus' victory over death is to be understood as the victory over this fearful, self-annihilating death. It is not a victory over the natural physical death. In union with Christ, the believer has also died to this death. That is to say, the believer has accepted the life made possible through the death and resurrection of Jesus. This is the new life that the Christian lives (1 Cor 5:17). This is the life that passes through death and approaches us as the resurrected life. This life is characterized by its openness to God, the ultimate source of life, openness to other persons who make the ultimate source of life an experienced reality in our lives and openness to the world that, as the substratum of all life, sustains and enhances human life as

well. In other words, the new life in Christ is a new life of relationships. These relationships continue beyond physical death because they are reestablished by God in Jesus Christ and they are not created by finite human beings.[29]

In this context the question of personal involvement in death comes to the fore. Are the dying persons actively involved in the event of death? There is an impressive body of literature that presents death as a final personal act of freedom, a final decision.[30] The foundation for this argument is more philosophical than theological. Accordingly, persons as conscious and free subjects decide their destiny at the moment of death. The end of consciousness and freedom is not the destruction of death, but rather it is their full flowering in a definitive decision for or against God at the moment of death.

This approach is laudable insofar as it is an attempt to deal with the reality of death as death. This perspective has applicability especially when death comes in the course of life as a natural process. However, its relevance for the cases of sudden death remains questionable. For example, it cannot be applied to persons blown up in a fraction of a second in a bomb blast, or to people accidentally run over by a speeding truck. In such cases it becomes mandatory to bring in exceptions to the rule. On the other hand, we need great ingenuity to apply it to the death of infants and severely handicapped persons. One way to circumvent the problem is to argue that no one dies as an infant or a handicapped person. In death all will reach full maturity of reason. This argument is contrary to experience. For we see even adults losing their mental capacity as they grow older and very few are lucky enough to maintain their consciousness till the last moment. This is because the consciousness and the mental capacity of the humans function through embodiment. As body disintegrates, the mental functions also begin to fall apart. These are serious issues that make the hypothesis of death as a final decision questionable.

There are even more serious issues to be considered. First, the hypothesis propounds an individualistic approach to the death of a person as if the person exists in a social vacuum. Secondly, it actually avoids the reality of death as death because, according to this view,

only a part of the person dies. The most important aspect of the persons, the soul, does not face the threat of death. Thirdly, this hypothesis accepts a subtle body-soul dualism that sees soul regaining supremacy as body disintegrates. Thus, the application of the philosophical notion of human freedom to the event of death raises more problems than resolves them.

However, the notion of human freedom in relation to death is significant from a theological point of view. Human freedom is operative in the choice of life or death in the course of life. The decision to live a new life or a life in death is the decision one makes in the process of living.[31] As the Pauline baptismal theology shows, the life of the believer is a gradual unfolding of this decision for a new life made as a free subject in response to the grace of God in Jesus Christ. The decision contrary to it is a choice of life in death. This freedom is exercised in life as long as one lives. The believer lives with the knowledge of faith that one has decided for the new life offered as a free gift. Both the believer and the one who opted for life in death, undergo the same physical death. The believer lives and dies in the firm hope of the fullness of life. The latter dies with no such hope as he/she lived a life in death. Both of them die passively – one with hope and the other without hope. Thus, in death there is no freedom and there is no possibility of a final decision either this way or that. Freedom is prior to death and it is manifested in the existential attitude toward God's offer of life in Jesus and is actualized in living out the new life.

Since the Christian understanding of death is founded on the death of Jesus, it is necessary to refer to it in order to determine whether this view is scripturally tenable. The core of Jesus' message of salvation was the closeness of God's love, especially to the disenfranchised, and the imperative of the human response to this love in terms of loving one's neighbour. However, in proclaiming this specific message of salvation Jesus had to face the forces of sin/death. He chose to remain faithful to God in his announcement of the nearness of God's love and, in the process, he defied sin as life in death.[32] This is Jesus' active decision. It ensured his victory over death as the consequence of sin.

Apart from the triumphalistic interpretation of the death of Jesus presented in the light of the resurrection experience, the New Testament generally paints a sober picture of his death as something he suffered passively, crying out in utter despair. It is probable that he did not will it on his own; it was imposed upon him against his will. Nor did he attribute any salvific significance to his death. His physical death is the price he had to pay for this victory. He suffered it as something imposed upon him from the outside and he suffered it passively.[33] This perspective is crucial to the understanding of the salvific significance of Jesus death on the cross as well as for the Christian understanding of death. Jesus' death is salvific not because it transmits some magical power. Its salvific significance is in manifesting the love of God in the midst of life in death. Salvation, in Jesus' view, consists in the reestablishment of the broken relationships. It is death of sin and death of death. Jesus announced the closeness of God's love that is capable of putting an end to the life in death. In his death, which he suffered passively and helplessly, this love is manifested as an incarnate reality revealing, in the process, that life in death is the denial of the offer of God's love. And this denial perpetuates the life in death and is sealed in physical death. Conversely, a turning toward God's love in response to this revelation is the path toward a new life, toward the fullness of life. This is confirmed in the resurrection of Jesus: he remained open to God even in the face of a violent death. God affirms his stand as the true path to life by offering him new life.

Thus, God is active in Jesus' death while Jesus remains passive. In the Christian understanding of death primacy needs to be given to the activity of God, the creator and the re-creator who raises and gives life to the dead. Passivity in death is inevitable for finite beings, as they do not have mastery over life and death. However, this passivity is unto God whose creative power leads to the fullness of life. The certainty of new life has its experiential source in the actual rejection of life in death and the affirmation of the promise of life through the establishment of life-enhancing relationships. These existential endeavours definitively come to an end in physical death. But the hope generated by the experience of new life in Jesus Christ together with the faith in the God of life enables the believer to negate and transcend the threat of annihilation.

## Conclusion

The Christian perspective on death derives from the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. These events reveal Jesus' struggle against life in death marked by sin or absence of relationality as well as his victory over it. His struggle and victory paves the way for a new life of relationships to be lived and experienced in the course of one's life. Jesus' victory does not eliminate physical death. It comes as the natural end of human existence on earth. But physical death does not negate God's promise of life in its fullness. In fact, the believer's life is a gradual unfolding of this life in constant struggle against life in death. Thus, the fullness of life is not expected to take place in an ethereal world beyond the grave. The promise of the new life in Jesus is experienced by actualizing the multi-dimensional relationships here and now. It is this very life lived and died that is redeemed by the creative power of God. The creative power of God stands over against physical death as a promise for the fullness of life that has already been experienced as part of the unfolding of life. The full realization of the new life remains as a hope founded on God who, as the source of life, "gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist" (Rom 4:17).

## Notes

1. Epicurus, Letter to Menoeceus 126. Quoted in Simon Tugwell, *Human Immortality And the Redemption of Death* (Springfield: Templegate Publishers, 1990), 64. See also Eberhard Jüngel, Death: The Riddle and the Mystery, Trans. Iain and Ute Nicol (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1975), 13, 15.
2. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1005 (Vatican: Liguori Publications, 1994). Cfr. Ladislaus Boros, *The Mystery of Death* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1965), 3-4; George A. Maloney, *The Everlasting Now: Meditations on the Mysteries of Life and Death as they Touch us in Our Daily Choice* ( Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 1980), 14-16.
3. Terence Penelhum, "Christianity," in Life After Death in World Religions, ed. Harold Coward (New York: Orbis Books, 2000), 44.
4. For a detailed discussion on the Platonic idea of death and its influence on Christianity, cfr. Jüngel, Death, 41-55.
5. Penelhum, "Christianity," 44-45.
6. Ibid., 39.

7. Mathew Jayanth, "Body Spirituality: Incarnation as an Invitation to an Embodied Spirituality," *Jnanadeepa: Pune Journal of Religious Studies* 7, No.2 (July 2004): 112-135.
8. Penelhum, "Christianity," 46.
9. Prominent among the philosophers who emphasized the absurdity of life are Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. Cfr. Rene Latourelle, "Death" in *Dictionary of Fundamental Theology*, ed. Rene Latourelle and Rino Fisichella (New York: Crossroad, 1995).
10. For example, Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing*, San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1992), 251-253
11. Jüngel, *Death*, 30-31.
12. As we shall see, the Hebrew thought in its earlier stages did not pay much attention to finding an answer to the question of death and accepted it as natural to human persons. Death did not play any significant role in the development of the Hebrew religion.
13. Jüngel, *Death*, 62.
14. Penelhum, "Christianity," 36.
15. Eliezer Segal, "Judaism," in *Life After Death in World Religions*, ed. Harold Coward (New York: Orbis Books, 2000), 14.
16. For a detailed discussion on the notion of death and afterlife in the early stages of Israel's faith and life, Cfr. Alan F. Segal, *Life After Death: A History of the Afterlife in Western Religion* (New York: Doubleday, 2004), 120-170.
17. Alan Segal in his book traces the development of the notion of resurrection during the Second Temple Period. Cfr. Alan Segal, *Life After Death*, 248-281. See also Eliezer Segal, "Judaism", 17.
18. For a comprehensive view of the development of the notion of death and afterlife in Israel, see Alan F. Segal, *Life After Death*. Cfr. especially see Chapters 3, 6 and 7.
19. Eliezer Segal, "Judaism", 18
20. ibid., 16
21. Alan Segal, *Life after Death*, 387-88.
22. Jüngel, *Death*, 80
23. Zachary Hayes, *Visions of a Future: A Study of Christian Eschatology* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1989), 108-109.
24. Paul may be considered as the first Christian theologian who dealt with the death from the perspective of the death of Jesus Christ. For a study of Paul's interpretation of the death of a Christian in the light of the

resurrection faith, cfr. Jüngel, Death, 80-94. See also Alan Segal, Death and Afterlife, 399-440

25. Penelhum, "Christianity," 42.
26. Jüngel, 87 88
27. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Vatican: Liguori Publications, 1994), 1008.
28. ibid., 88.
29. Jüngel, 90.
30. Karl Rahner, *On the Theology of Death.* London: Burns and Oates, 1961; Ladislaus Boros, *The Mystery of Death.* New York: Herder and Herder, 1965; Roger Troisfontaines, *I Do Not Die,* Trans. Francis E. Albert. New York: Desclee Company, 1963.
31. Hayes, *Visions of a Future,* 84-85.
32. Jüngel, Death, 99ff.
33. Ibid., 105.

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