Research Article

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God and the Goodness of Death: A Theological Minority Report

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Abstract: This article offers a critical re-evaluation of the role of death in Christian theology, especially as it is viewed in light of the incarnation. It situates the problem of death as an extension of the problem of evil and analyses the classical responses to this problem in the Western Christian tradition. From here, it brings in the theological “minority report” on the role of death that runs through the Western tradition, ultimately using it as a springboard for a constructive repositioning of death as a potential locus of encountering the benevolence of God in Christ.

Keywords: death, incarnation, Ambrose of Milan, Christology, problem of evil, Augustine, theodicy

1 Introduction

The purpose of this article is to offer a critical re-evaluation of the role of death in Christian theology, especially as it is viewed in light of the incarnation. I do this by situating the problem of death as an extension of the problem of evil, and by looking at the classical responses to this problem in the Western Christian tradition. From here, I bring in the theological “minority report” on the role of death that runs through the Western tradition, ultimately using it as a springboard for a constructive repositioning of death as a potential locus of encountering the benevolence of God in Christ.

2 The problem of death and the problem of evil

The problem of death has been intimately connected with the problem of evil in the Christian tradition. The first chapters of the book of Genesis deal with this latter problem, namely, that in the good world of creation, the possibility of evil occurs. The temptation narrative of Gen 3 offers a theodicy by linking disobedience to God, through the eating of the forbidden fruit, with death. It gives an explanation for death, namely, that it exists because of human disobedience to God. Thus, God’s proclamation to Adam, “you are dust and to dust you shall return” and further God’s statement that “the man has become like one of us, knowing good from evil” (Gen 3:19, 22).¹ This begins a long trajectory of “retribution theodicy” in the Hebrew Scriptures in which evil is introduced to God’s good world through human action.² Moreover, the

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1 All quotations are from the NRSV unless otherwise noted.
2 Laato and Cornelis de Moor, Theodicy in the World of the Bible, xxxii.

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same thread runs through Pauline literature (1 Cor 15, Phil 1:18–26), in which the biblical author situates
death as a consequence to evil through sin. The first chapter of Wisdom explicitly denies that God created
death and though the books of Job, Psalms, and Proverbs counter the dominant narrative of evil and death
as consequences of sin, they essentially point to exceptions that prove the rule.

That evil comes as the result of human sinfulness is not in dispute in the history of Christian theology.
With this being said, however, questions remain about the nature of evil. Does evil have a substance of its
own or is it simply the shadow side of goodness? The locus classicus for the problem of evil in the Western
Christian tradition is Augustine’s Confessions. Here Augustine argues the latter, that evil is not something
that exists at all, but rather it is the privation or corruption of the good. He notes, “whatever things exist are
good, and the evil into whose origins I was inquiring is not a substance, for if it were a substance, it would
be good.” This was later reiterated by Thomas Aquinas as he sought to answer whether or not death came
as the result of the sin of Adam and Eve. This consensus of Augustine and Thomas that evil is the privation
of the good became the launching point for much further exploration of the problem of evil in the modern
period. The problem of evil remains generative in the present, being the subject of the work of David
Bentley Hart, for example. Or, from the analytical tradition, thinkers such as Alvin Plantinga have offered
sound responses. Still, the problem of evil is a perennial one when set against the backdrop of God’s
providence, and one finds that attempts to explain it, while offering significant insight, do little to ame-
liorate the existential incongruence of the problem. Even at its most comprehensive, a doctrine of provi-
dence must never have total explanatory power, and vestiges of the absurd remain.

If the problem of death is couched within the problem of evil, the traditional Augustinian conception
of evil, that it is a non-entity, that it is the privation of the good, can be applied to the existence of death as
well. Death becomes one more discrete instance of evil, or the privation of the good. This is in fact what
Augustine suggests, that not only is death a retributive judgement, but that it is the privation of the good
of life. Thomas takes Augustine’s view for granted, ultimately suggesting that death and bodily defects are
the result of the first sin of Adam and Eve. He goes on to affirm, like Augustine, that God is not the author of
death, as if it were part of creation, but rather it is a privation of life as a result of sin. Both Augustine and
Thomas see the actual separation of the soul from the body that occurs in death to be part of the evil of
death, because of the rift this creates in the union of the human person.

In sum, the mainstream view of death in the Western Christian tradition as it is presented by Augustine
and Thomas is that death is an instance of evil that is the result of human disobedience. It is punitive,
though it is not directly authored by God. This view comes through a reading of Christian Scripture,
especially the noteworthy passages outlined above.

3 Augustine, Confessions, VII.11–22.
4 Ibid., VII.18. I should note that I will be limiting my discussion of Augustine’s response to evil to his Confessions simply
because it has been the most influential of his works on the topic. But this is not meant to suggest that this is all the Bishop of
Hippo has to say about evil and death.
5 Thomas, Summa Theologica, II-II.164.
6 For an overview see Neiman, Evil in Modern Thought.
7 See Hart, The Doors of the Sea: Where Was God in the Tsunami?; and Hart, That All Shall Be Saved. In the latter, see especially
part one, which frames the question of eschatology amidst concerns about theodicy.
8 Plantinga, God, Freedom, and Evil.
9 It may be that the quest to resolve the tensions within theodicy is itself misguided, “Sitting in my office reflecting on the
problem of evil is more like a game than a serious activity. I’m not even sure I have the right to engage in such speculation, since
little about the way I live my life hinges on the answer, no matter what it may turn out to be.” Hauerwas, God, Medicine and
Suffering, 2.
10 See Fergusson, The Providence of God, 297–342.
11 Augustine The City of God, XIII.1–6.
12 Thomas, Summa Theologica, II-II.164.1.co.
13 Augustine, On the Holy Trinity, III.7; Thomas, Summa Theologica, I.89.
3 The “minority report”: Death as enemy and friend

Though death as a punishment from sin tends to be negative because it stems from human disobedience, theological reflection surrounding other aspects of death is not always so negative. There are theological resources within the Western Christian tradition that allow us to reframe death in certain respects, especially when it is viewed in light of Christ’s redemptive work.

Before turning to the Christological reframing of death, we must first ask if there is any potentially positive role for death in the Christian tradition. It seems there is room within the Christian tradition for the argument that death is an essential part of created life. It is not merely a fall-out from primordial sin, but a gift from God, a threshold through which all human creatures must pass. Richard Doss notes that “in the history of Western thought it is possible to distinguish two opposing interpretations of the relationship between life and death: those who see death as the natural termination of finite existence, and those who look at death as that which gives authentic and final meaning to life.”¹⁴ In this former sense, it is possible that death can be viewed merely as the culmination of finite existence and not necessarily as the consequence of human sinfulness, for Doss also notes, “throughout the Old Testament mortality and finitude are said to be a natural part of human existence. The attempt to explain the relationship of death and sin by appealing to a literal Adam story is in fact a denial of man’s mortality.”¹⁵ What Doss is referring to here is not the link between death and sin to which the serpent alludes in Gen 3, but rather the absence of immediate physical death for Adam and Eve that follows it. Moreover, he refers to passages such as Ps 88:8–12 in which the Psalmist questions God’s presence in death, not portraying it as a punishment, necessarily, but as the termination of physical life. Ps 139:7–12 provides another perspective here in which the Psalmist allows for God’s continued presence even in the grave. Ecclesiastes too provides a more ambiguous picture of death, with the author noting “for everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die”; and further on, “a good name is better than precious ointment, and the day of death, than the day of birth. It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting; for this is the end of everyone, and the living will lay it to heart” (Eccl 3:1, 7:1–2). I began this essay with referring to the classical interpretations of death from Gen 3 as a punishment, but we see now that the witness of Scripture is more textured and nuanced.

Death might also be viewed more positively when one takes into account Doss’s distinction between death itself and the process of dying, which can often be painful, and always comes with existential angst.¹⁶ Though Doss does not make the connection himself, this point is actually representative of a much older Christian tradition. For example, drawing from Platonic influences via Origen and Porphyry, this was the view taken by St. Ambrose of Milan, an older contemporary of Augustine, whose views on this matter have not been as popular. In his treatise, De bono mortis or “Death as a Good,” Ambrose sets himself alongside the mainstream Christian tradition by suggesting that God imposes death on humanity after the fall, though Ambrose does not see this as an evil.¹⁷ Rather, there are three purposes to death, all of which are good. One is death due to sin, second is death to sin in order to live to God, which is a mystical death, and third is death as the end of the human lifespan, which is essentially the separation between the soul and the body.¹⁸

Death as the completion of the human lifespan sits midway between the death that comes as a result of the evil of sin and the good death to sin in mystical union to God. Ambrose draws from the book of

¹⁴ Doss, “Developing a Theology of Death,” 226. One may argue that there is nothing distinctly Christian about the idea that death is simply the culmination of, or natural end to, human life. However, insofar as the Old Testament serves as a discreet witness within Christian Scripture, his point stands, even if it is not fully developed until later periods. On the integration of Old Testament theology within the milieu of the early Christian theology, see Mutie, Death in Second-Century Christian Thought, especially 23–36.
¹⁵ Doss, “Developing a Theology of Death,” 227.
¹⁶ Ibid., 229.
¹⁷ Ambrose, Seven Exegetical Works, 69. See also Jones, Approaching the End, 24–36.
¹⁸ St. Ambrose, Death as a Good, 2.3. For more on this sentiment see St. Ambrose, On the Belief of the Resurrection, NPNF, vol. X, 2.35.
Philippians as well the book of Ecclesiastes to arrive at his position that though life has its pleasures, it is full of vexations, and death provides relief. He writes, “and so if life is full of burdens, its end comes as a relief. Now the relief is good, death is the end – death therefore is a good.” Further, in reply to the objection that God does not create death, Ambrose notes that the separation of the soul from the body means that the good of the soul “is not lost by death, but is increased.” And moreover, the good enjoyed in life is not the union of the soul and the body, but “virtue and moral conduct.” While the separation of the soul from the body was viewed to be an evil by Augustine and Thomas because of their theological anthropology that required the soul and body to be in union, Ambrose, drawing from Platonic thought, suggests that this is not necessarily the case. His suggestion is that a person comes into his or her own as a person by attaining the good, not by the union of the soul and body. Further, though Ambrose recognizes God did not create death – as Augustine argues as well – God has allowed death to play a role as a passage in which the soul is separated from the body. He writes, “therefore the Lord permitted death to steal in, that guilt might cease. But so the end set by nature might not also be in death, there was granted a resurrection of the dead, that the guilt might fail through death, but the nature be continued through resurrection.”

Thus, we see that for Ambrose, death is not an evil, but in its capacity as an instrument of mystical union with Christ (I will say more about this below) and in its usefulness in separating the soul from the body, it is a good, or at the very least, not an evil as it is understood in these two senses. Moreover, Ambrose’s characterization of the separation of the soul from the body as something good is a move away from Augustine’s and Thomas’ belief that it is evil when the two (soul and body) are separated.

It is important to note at this point that for Ambrose the belief that death is the separation of the soul from the body is not built on a Christological framework, though it does gesture towards the resurrection which Christ achieves in the. That the soul and body are united in physical life and separated in physical death does not require a doctrine of the incarnation to elucidate it, but the doctrine of the incarnation comes to the fore in Ambrose’s second conception of death as mystical union with Christ. The possibility of this union means that Christ has changed death, for the union of the soul with God in dying to sin and rising in Christ was not theologically comprehensible before the incarnation. That is, while death can be rightly viewed as problem of theodicy, a question within the doctrine of providence, or an element within the doctrine of creation, it can also be viewed as a feature of Christology. In Christ God reveals himself most fully, and because of this, the incarnation ought to be a ground of Christian reflection.

4 Reframing death through the particularity of Scripture

So far, I have argued that the problem of death can be subsumed under the problem of evil and indeed this has been its treatment within the Augustinian-Thomistic account of death in the Western tradition. Death as an instance of evil, for Augustine and Thomas, is privation of the good, and this privation comes as the result of human sinfulness. In addition to this tradition, however, there exists a second tradition influenced by Platonism that I have shown in the work of St. Ambrose. From this perspective, death-as-consequence for sin remains in focus, but this truth is brought alongside of death as the end of a finite creature. One can

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19 St. Ambrose, Death as a Good, 2.5.
20 Ibid., 4.13.
21 Ibid., 4.14.
22 Ibid.
23 Jones, Approaching the End, 51–2.
24 While it is true that for Ambrose the separation of the soul from the body may lead to mystical union with Christ, it is not the equivalent of such a union. In his writing, it remains a distinct but related kind of death.
25 Anselm’s Cur Deus Homo gives us a cue. The task of theology is not to theorize about the various ways God might interact with creation, but to look at the instances of his interactions – most supremely the incarnation – and to ponder why it is that God has revealed himself in just this way.
separate this death, which in its essence is the separation of the soul from the body (not an evil, in Ambrose’s view), from the process of dying itself, which can be painful and ridden with anxiety. But both descriptions of death-as-consequence and death as the separation of soul and body stand as purposes apart from any reference to the Trinitarian economy in which the Son becomes incarnate in human flesh. That is, taken on their own, these two purposes of death can be constituted without Christological reflection. To turn to the resources of Christology opens the possibility for a changed or transfigured role of death, that goes beyond the possibility of death-to-sin in mystical union with Christ that Ambrose suggested. More specifically, when death is viewed in light of its role within the economy of salvation, we see that all three ways of speaking of death (punitive, mystical union, and separation of soul and body) are reconstituted as goods. In Christ, the enemy of death is defeated (1 Cor 15:26–29) so that it is no longer an evil. The following section will make the case as to why this is so.

God’s loving nature is not only revealed in Scripture, in his covenant with his people Israel, and ultimately in the incarnation of his Son, but it is revealed in the death of his Son. This is not to say that all facets of Jesus’ life (e.g., his miracles, teaching, cleansing of the Temple, or weeping over Lazarus) are not revelatory, but that Christ’s death is a focal point with particular emphasis in the economy of salvation. Death, then, is not just an accidental or superfluous part of human life, but the very means by which God has chosen to reveal himself most fully. Death is an elective part of God’s self-revelation in the economy of salvation.

To look at the problem of evil, or the problem of death, without the specific tools of Christian revelation is to come only to general answers to general questions. That is, Augustine’s response to the problem of evil does not require one to agree with his views of the economy of salvation. It can be postulated on the terms of classical theism, without reference to Christ, or his death on a cross. It assumes the existence of God who possesses the classical theological attributes of goodness, justice, and so forth, and it assumes that evil does exist. From these two premises it works for a synthesis. It is a synthesis that is indeed compelling, but part of its compelling nature is that it is intelligible across a spectrum of religious and philosophical traditions that subscribe to classical theism.

I am arguing for an additional and distinctly Christian account of the purpose of death that goes beyond a deduction from general principles about God’s nature and the human encounter with death. Christian theological reflection on death must coinhere with the trinitarian economy of Christian salvation. To ask about the meaning of death as a Christian, one must pose one’s questions in light of Christ’s death and resurrection as conclusive means by which we know God. The particularity of the death of Christ must have something to say about the place of death more generally. Christ’s human life takes on further significance in his death, but so does death take on further significance in light of the fact that it is Jesus Christ who is the one dying.

The distinction between natural and special revelation is helpful here. For instance, through natural revelation one can come to intuit something general about the nature of God. Without reference to the economy of salvation, one can intuit that God is omnipotent and omniscient, for instance. There are, however, attributes of God’s character that can only be known through his revelation to his people. We see this first in the history of Israel and her Scriptures. So much of Christian worship and theology relies on God’s dealing with Israel. Even Christ himself can only be understood through the calling of Abraham and the offering of Isaac, through the bondage of Israel to the Egyptians and their wanderings in the wilderness, and through Israel’s eating of heavenly bread and their deliverance through the Red Sea (1 Cor 10:1–6). Human beings could not naturally come to understand God as the protector of his people, the one to shield them in a cloud by day and fire by night (Ex 13:21) without the particular knowledge that comes through the Scriptures of Israel. Throughout Genesis and Exodus, the special revelation of God to his people becomes increasingly specific and proleptically points forward to “the summit of which is the resurrection and

26 Granting that we can know something of the nature of God through natural theology, Steven Duby argues that natural theology is itself positive revelation, though it is ultimately preparatory for the “supernatural revelation of the gospel.” Duby, God in Himself, 132.
glorification of the physical body of Christ.” The revelation begins with Israel first. While some of God’s attributes are revealed in nature, or in rational reflection, God specifically reveals himself as the God of the Jews, not just as the God of the Jews, but as the One who takes on Jewish flesh.

As we seek to examine the theological meaning of death, with this in view, then, in addition to the broader strokes of natural theology and philosophy, we must all look at the way that death is revealed in God’s dealing with Israel, and most notably in the way that death is revealed in the Jewish flesh of his Son Jesus Christ.

5 Reframing death christologically

Christ’s death and resurrection stand together as the pinnacle of Christian Scripture. Various Old Testament passages point to his death and traditionally have been understood to find their ultimate fulfillment in Christ’s death. This is also woven into the fabric of liturgical Christian worship. For one example, one can look to the reading of Ps 22 or Isa 53 on Good Friday as passages that are interpreted Christologically, pointing to Christ’s own experience. Moreover, the death of Christ features as a liminal event in the economy of Christian salvation. It is presented as a moment of judgement and forgiveness, a reality into which the Christian might enter to find salvation (Rom 6:8–18). It gives weight and substance to the rite of Christian baptism, a liturgical act in which Old Testament imagery (flood, Red Sea) and Christ’s own baptism in the New Testament are intimately linked with participation in Christ’s death. Finally, death is the necessary precursor for Christ’s resurrection, the foundation of Christian hope. The eschatological vision of the New Testament is only possible because of the resurrection, and the resurrection only has significance because it follows what happens in Christ’s death.

In light of all of this, then, death becomes a significant feature of God’s revelation as it has been given. When viewed from its role as a locus for Christological truth, death is a beneficent gift for it becomes the means by which God’s own gift of himself is realized. This is not to detract from the other purposes of death that Ambrose proposed in De bono mortis, namely that it is a response to sin, a mechanism by which Christians become mystically united to Christ, or the natural end to human life (including the separation of the soul from the body). However, in addition to all of these purposes, death is also the way by which God is made known to his people and so becomes a central tenet of the Christian creeds. Even if one rejects the natural possibilities for the purpose of death, seeing death in light of this additional element of Christology frames it as a vital part of God’s self-revelation. Death becomes a means of conveying the very nature of God, and put to this use, death is transfigured for the Christian to be a means of grace. To put it more bluntly, death becomes a communicative event, a tool by which God freely chooses to reveal his character in Christ.

The significance of death’s instrumentality in God’s revelation might become clearer by asking what would be lost if death did not exist. If death did not exist, human beings would not know the depths of God’s self-giving love in Christ. Furthermore, so much of Christian Scripture that centres on the death of Christ, from the proto-evangelion of Gen 3 to Pauline reflections on union with Christ in his death in Rom 6:4–6, rely in part on the revelatory significance of Christ’s death. One might counter by suggesting that to

27 White, Exodus, 50.
28 I am not only referring to the prophetic capacity of Scripture, but to reading Scripture figurally or Christologically so that the whole Scripture bears witness to Christ. This was common practice in the patristic period and has seen a resurgence with the rise of theological interpretation of Scripture in commentaries such as Brazos Theological Commentary of the Bible series or standalone volumes such as Chapman, I Samuel as Christian Scripture. See also Treier, Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture; Webster, Holy Scripture; Radner, Time and the Word.
29 See Barth, Church Dogmatics, IV.1, 211–83.
30 This sentiment is reflected in the descriptions of the grave as a “bed of hope” in the Compline services of the most recent editions of the Irish and Canadian Anglican prayer books.
say God’s love cannot be fully realized without the existence of death is tantamount to saying that God’s love cannot be fully realized without the existence of evil, a claim that no Christian would want to make. But this is not so.

To return to Ambrose’s thought in De bono mortis, we can see that if death is not an evil, then it is not the mere absence of life in the way that evil is the absence of the good. And if this is true, then death is not a surd, but a thing with a purpose of its own, another aspect of the economy of salvation. What is the purpose of death in the economy of salvation? In addition to Ambrose’s three purposes (that it is a response to sin, a means of mystical union with Christ, and the means of separating the soul from the body), it also serves as a revelatory key to the extent of God’s love. Given that God is God, he could have chosen another instrument by which to reveal his love, but he has chosen to use death to communicate its very depths. Again, this is not to deny the other potentially good purposes of death, but to posit another alongside of them, namely that death reveals God’s love in the economy of salvation.

6 Implications

It is not necessary to embrace death and suffering as if they are to be welcomed and celebrated. There is a certainly a mystical tradition that seeks to do just this: From Julian of Norwich’s Shewings to Francis of Assisi’s reference to “Sister Bodily Death” in Laudes Creaturarum. While these responses should not be rejected out of hand, neither are they required for the Christian. Death is ambivalent as it appears throughout Scripture. It is to be feared, it calls for prayers of deliverance, it is – in some senses – an enemy (Ps 116:8, 1 Cor 15:26). In light of this, humans ought to approach death with the same awe as Job does Leviathan, or Jonah the whale.

Therefore, death need not fully be shunned or rejected either. The Christian tradition teaches that while life is good, as all creation is good, it is not an ultimate good (Gen 1). Not only will creation be remade (Rev 21), but other goods – such as the good of martyrdom – outweigh the good of life itself. Because of this there is room for a careful appreciation of death in the life of the Christian. Moreover, there is appreciation for death in its revelatory role by way of the crucifixion of the incarnate one. This latter point is really the focus of my argument. In conclusion, death, like fearsome creatures, has its role to play in creation. It is not necessarily an evil as far as it is a separation of soul and body. Still, even taken in this sense, death can have negative, tragic effects. In any case, death remains crucial for unveiling the love of the Triune God in the death of Jesus Christ. And for this one purpose, then, death must be appreciated and welcomed, even if it is an unwelcome spectre in other aspects of human life.

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