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CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT AND ISSUES IN ESCHATOLOGY

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RECENTLY THE International Theological Commission issued a document entitled *De quibusdam quaestionibus actualibus circa eschatologiam.*[1] In this article I shall start by giving a brief summary of the content of that document. Secondly, and principally, I will highlight for critical reflection some of the most significant issues the document raises and some of the disputed questions it touches on. Finally, in light of my critique, I will make some suggestions as to how eschatology should be approached today.

From the viewpoint of content, and also in other ways, the recent document of the International Theological Commission is a continuation and confirmation of an earlier and much shorter document issued by the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on May 11, 1979, entitled *Recentiores episcoporum synodi.*[2] *Questions in Eschatology* takes up again each eschatological issue mentioned in *Reality after Death* and reaffirms *in globo* all the doctrinal teachings contained there.[3] On the other hand, in view of theological developments in the

[1] This document was prepared under the leadership of Rev. Candido Pozo, S.J. The members of the subcommittee included Professors J. Ambaum, G. Gnilka, J. Ibanez Langlois, M. Ledwith, S. Nagy, C. Peter, and Bishops B. Kloppenburg, J. Medina Estevez, and C. Schönborn. The document was discussed in the plenary session of December 1991, approved by written note *in forma specifica,* and published, according to the statutes of the Theological Commission, with the approval of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, president of the Commission. The Latin original is available in *Gregorianum* 73 (1992) 395–435. The English translation is available in *The Irish Theological Quarterly* 58 (1992) 209–43. The document will be referred to as *Questions in Eschatology,* followed by page numbers found in *The Irish Theological Quarterly.*

[2] *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 71 (1979) 939–43. For an English translation by the Vatican Press office, see *The Reality after Death* in: *Vatican Council II: More Post Conciliar Documents,* ed. Austin Flannery (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1982) 500–4. The document will be referred to as *Reality after Death,* followed by page numbers found in *Vatican Council II.*

[3] *Reality after Death* affirms eight eschatological realities: the resurrection of the dead; the resurrection as the raising up of the whole person; the survival of the soul after death; the validity of the Church's funeral rites and practices of praying for the dead; the parousia of Christ as distinct and deferred with respect to the situation of people immediately after death; the unique meaning of Mary's Assumption as an anticipation of the glorification for which all the elect are destined; the existence of heaven, hell, and

intervening decade, the recent document elaborates at much greater length upon the theological context in which contemporary eschatology is being formulated. It also singles out for extensive discussion certain aspects it considers essential to an orthodox doctrine of the last things.

Like *Reality after Death,* the document begins by affirming the centrality of the article of the Creed regarding the resurrection and future life. Unfortunately, it points out, the Christian faith in life everlasting is seriously threatened by the contemporary cultural and theological context. It identifies three factors of this context: secularism, "theological darkness," and temporal messianism. Secularism, with its autonomous vision of humanity and the world, removes the sense of mystery, and hence of the life beyond. By "theological darkness" the Commission refers to what it regards as novel interpretations of dogmas, especially in Christology (e.g. interpretations of Jesus' divinity and resurrection), that throw doubt on articles of faith regarding eschatology and hence perturb the faithful, particularly when these interpretations seep into catechesis and preaching. Finally, temporal messianism is detected in "some theologians of liberation" who so emphasize political and economic liberation that they obscure, if not deny, transcendental salvation.[4]

After these introductory reflections, *Questions in Eschatology* passes in review the major elements of Christian eschatology and contemporary theological interpretations of them. Its positions can be summarized in the following twelve points.

1. The resurrection of Jesus is the cause and model of our resurrection. Since the risen Jesus' body is identical with his earthly body (albeit transformed), our resurrection will also be bodily. Our risen bodies will not be spiritualized or ethereal bodies created *ex novo* by God, but will be really identical with our earthly bodies, though trans-

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purgatory; and the fundamental continuity as well as the radical break between our present life in Christ and the future life (*Reality after Death* 501–2). For an evaluation of this document, see Gisbert Greshake and Gerhard Lohfink, *Naherwartung, Auferstehung, Unsterblichkeit: Untersuchung zur christlichen Eschatologie* (Freiburg: Herder, 1982) 185–92, and R. Blatnicky, "Tra la morte del cristiano e la risurrezione universale: Annotazioni al commento di Antonio Rudoni della "Lettera della Sacra Congregazione per la dottrina della fede su alcune questioni concernenti l'escatologia," *Salesianum* 45 (1983) 63–77.

[4] See *Questions in Eschatology* 209–13. The document has the irritating tendency of referring to "some" theologians without mentioning their names or writings, so that readers are not provided with the opportunity to double-check the accuracy of its claims. Thus it speaks of "some" theologians who question the reality of bodily resurrection (215), and of "some" who explain the theory of resurrection in death by means of "atemporalism" (217).

formed like that of Jesus. Nevertheless, the resurrection is not a return to the conditions of earthly existence. In other words, it is not reanimation. Rather, "this body which is now shaped by the soul (*psychē*) will be shaped in the glorious resurrection by the spirit (*pneuma*)."[5]

2. To defend the identity between the earthly body and its risen form, *Questions in Eschatology* appeals to a series of hermeneutical principles.[6] Since eschatological assertions do not refer merely to the future but also to realities that have already occurred in Christ, made evident in his resurrection, the first principle of hermeneutics of eschatological assertions requires that we fully accept truths which God, who has knowledge of the future, has revealed to us. Second, our interpretation of the resurrection of the dead must be based on our knowledge of the resurrection of Christ. Third, our eternal life must be understood as a life of communion with God in Christ. Lastly, our interpretation of the resurrection must take into account the teachings of the Creeds and of the Fathers, both of which emphasize the bodily dimension of the resurrection and the identity between the earthly body and the risen one.[7]

3. *Questions in Eschatology* strongly rejects the recent theory of resurrection at the moment of death. While sympathetic to its aversion to Platonic dualism, it argues that the theory does not do justice to the *future* character of Christ's parousia with which the resurrection is

[5] Ibid. 215. The document repeatedly refers to the Eleventh Council of Toledo (675) which asserts in its creed: "Hoc ergo exemplo Capitis nostri confitemur veram fieri resurrectionem carnis omnium mortuorum. Nec in aerea vel qualibet alia carne (ut quidam delirant) surrecturos nos credimus, sed in ista, qua vivimus, consistimus, et movemur"; see H. Denzinger and A. Schönmetzer, eds., *Enchiridion Symbolorum,* 36th ed. (Freiburg: Herder, 1976) no. 540; hereafter cited as DS.

[6] The Commission invokes its own document, "The Interpretation of Dogma" (1988). The English text can be found in *Origins* 20, no. 1 (1990) 1–14. The translation from the German original was done by Carl Peter.

[7] See *Questions* 215–16. With regard to the third principle, the document quotes the terse formulation of eschatology by Hans Urs von Balthasar: "God is 'the last thing' for the creature. Gained, he is heaven; lost, hell; testing, judgment; purifying, purgatory. He himself is that in which the finite dies and through which it rises again in him and to him. He himself is such that he turns himself to the world, namely, in his Son *Jesus Christ* who is the manifestation of God and therefore also the sum of the 'last things.' " Balthasar's text is from his "Eschatologie," in *Fragen der Theologie Heute,* ed. Johannes Feiner et al. (Einsiedeln: Benziger, 1958) 407–8. Concerning the teachings of the Creeds and the Fathers, *Questions in Eschatology* quotes the *Fides Damasi* which affirms that the resurrection will take place "in this flesh, in which we now live" (DS 72), and also Irenaeus's statement that the resurrection occurs "in the very same bodies in which they had died: for if (the resurrection were) not in these very same (scl. bodies), neither would those who had died be the same as those who would rise" (*Adversus haereses* 5.13.1).

professed to occur simultaneously. Violence is done to the New Testament texts, the document maintains, if Christ's parousia is interpreted as a permanent event consisting in the individual's encounter with the Lord in his or her death. Moreover, *Questions in Eschatology* claims that the atemporalism theory (which holds that since after death time no longer exists, each person who dies rises in death, and his or her resurrection coincides with a simultaneous collective resurrection) does not conform to the biblical notion of time.[8]

4. As a result of its view of the resurrection as a future event connected with Christ's parousia, *Questions in Eschatology* emphatically affirms the existence of the intermediate state. It argues that such a state is implied in the Old Testament concept of *sheol* and in such New Testament texts as Luke 23:43, John 14:1–3, and Phil 1:21–24. Such a state is transitory; it looks forward to the future parousia of Christ who will conform our lowly bodies with his glorified body.[9]

5. Another consequence of the view of the resurrection as a future event, and not something that occurs at death, is the affirmation of what the Commission calls the "eschatology of souls." Between a person's death and his or her resurrection something that is conscious perdures and can be called the "soul." The survival of the conscious soul prior to the resurrection is, according to the Commission, the guarantee of "the continuity and identity between the person who lived and the person who will rise, inasmuch as in virture of such a survival the concrete individual never totally ceases to exist."[10]

[8] See *Questions* 217–18. The document's argument against the atemporalism theory is threefold: (1) the New Testament texts regarding the souls of the martyrs (e.g. Rev 6:9–11) seem to imply temporal succession; (2) in 1 Thess 4:16 Paul uses the future tense *anastēsontai* in speaking about the resurrection; and (3) a radical denial of any meaning for time in the resurrection does not take into account its truly corporeal dimension.

[9] See *Questions* 219–20.

[10] Ibid. 221. According to the Commission, there have been four principal moments in Christian history when the immortality of the soul was denied: (1) certain 2d-century Christians, under the influence of Gnosticism, held that the resurrection is only a mere survival of the soul endowed with a kind of corporeity. (It is to be noted in passing that the Commission can hardly be right in regarding those Christians as denying the immortality of the soul; rather what they rejected is the resurrection of the flesh); (2) Tatian and some Arabian heretics thought that the entire person dies, including the soul, and that the resurrection is a new creation of the dead person from nothing (*thnetopsychism*); (3) some 20th-century Protestant theologians, in line with their theological anthropology and like the second group, proposed the total death (*Ganztod*) theory according to which the soul perishes at death; for these there is only the resurrection—not both the resurrection and the immortality of the soul; and (4) some contemporary Catholic theologians, uncomfortable with the theory of the resurrection alone, overcame it with the theory of the resurrection in death already mentioned above. The Commission claims that denial of the immortality of the soul causes difficulty in ecumenical dialogue

6. *Questions in Eschatology* rejects the charge that its "two-stage" eschatology is derived from Platonic dualism. Rather it is based, the Commission argues, on Vatican II's anthropology which recognizes the *duality* of the human person, constituted by body and soul. Furthermore, such an anthropology is implicit in the Bible, and the Commission cites among other texts Wis 16:13–14 and Matt 10:28 to support it.[11]

7. For the Commission death is both an evil and a good. Insofar as death tears the human person asunder, it is an evil, and a sense of repugnance and sadness over one's impending death or the death of others is quite legitimate. On the other hand, since the resurrection is not possible without death, and if death is a "death in the Lord," it becomes a good. This fact explains, the Commission says, the hope for death found among saints and mystics. The Commission also points out that, though the Church no longer forbids the cremation of corpses, this practice would be wrong if it expressed a denial of the resurrection of the body.[12]

8. On the basis of the doctrine of the communion of saints, *Questions in Eschatology* reaffirms the validity and necessity of the invocation of saints. It carefully distinguishes this practice from that of evoking spirits, which is designed to obtain hidden information from the dead. The Commission also reiterates the validity and necessity of praying for the dead.[13]

9. The practice of praying for the dead as well as the burial liturgy implies the existence of a "post mortem purificatory phase." *Questions in Eschatology* warns that too close a parallel between the purificatory

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since both the Lutheran tradition (as well as Luther himself) and the Orthodox Church strongly affirm the immortality of the soul. Furthermore, the "eschatology of the soul" is also said to be helpful in interreligious dialogue since many religions affirm the existence of souls after death (*Questions* 221–22).

[11] See *Questions* 223–25. The Commission also goes to great length to show that certain texts of Thomas Aquinas cannot be used to reject the "duality" of body and soul. For example, in *Super primam epistolam ad Corinthios*, c. 15, lect. 2, n. 924, Thomas says that "my soul is not I." (See *Super epistolas Sancti Pauli lectura*, ed. R. Cai, vol. 1 [Turin-Rome: Marietti, 1953] 411). This statement, however, cannot be construed as denying that the soul is an essential element of the human person. What Thomas means, the Commission points out, is that, inasmuch as it is not the entire person, the human soul can be said not to be the "I" or the person. In fact, from this Thomas deduces that there is in the separated soul an appetite for the body or the resurrection. On the other hand, it must be said that "my soul is I," insofar as the human "I," the Commission contends, subsists in the separated soul, because only in this way can the identity and continuity of the risen person with the person that lived be maintained (*Questions* 225–26).

[12] See ibid. 226–29.

[13] See ibid. 229–31.

process and the process of damnation (hell) should be avoided, as if the difference between the two lies merely in that the former is temporary while the latter is eternal. In fact, the former is characterized by love, the latter by hate.[14]

10. *Questions in Eschatology* categorically repudiates the doctrine of reincarnation: "This is a child of paganism in direct opposition to Scripture and Church tradition, and has been always rejected by Christian faith and theology."[15] It charges that this doctrine denies three central Christian dogmas: the possibility of eternal damnation, redemption by God's grace rather than by human efforts, and the resurrection of the body. In opposition to the doctrine of reincarnation, *Questions in Eschatology* affirms that "we have only a single life on earth."[16]

11. The Commission interprets eternal life and beatific vision in terms of friendship with God: "The theme of the vision of God 'face to face' (1 Cor 13:12; cf. 1 John 3:2) is to be understood as an expression of intimate friendship."[17] But since friendship cannot be forced and its offer may be rejected, *Questions in Eschatology* warns that the possibility of hell must be seriously taken into account, though one should be sober in its description and should "avoid attempts to grasp in concrete detail how to reconcile God's infinite goodness and human liberty."[18]

12. The Commission concludes by applying the principle that "the law of prayer is the law of belief" to the doctrine of the last things. From the liturgy for the dead, the Commission derives the following doctrines. First, the resurrection of Christ is the ultimate reality which throws light on every other eschatological truth. Second, our resurrection will take place at the end of the world. Third, there is an "eschatology of souls," that is, an intermediate state which in turn implies the immortality of the soul. Fourth, there is a postmortem purification. Finally, the eschatology of souls is ordered towards the resurrection of the body. In the words of *Questions in Eschatology,* "the liturgy serves

[14] See ibid. 231–32.

[15] Ibid. 232–33. To support this statement, the Commission refers to L. Scheffczyk, *Der Reinkarnationsgedanke in der altchristlichen Literatur* (Munich: Bayerische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1985).

[16] *Questions* 234. The document finds the biblical basis of this teaching in Heb 9:27: "It is appointed to humans to die once and after that the judgment."

[17] *Questions* 235.

[18] Ibid. 236. The document helpfully notes that "the Church has never once declared the damnation of a single person as a concrete fact. But, since hell is a genuine possibility for every person, it is not right—although today this is something which is forgotten in the preaching at exequies—to treat salvation as a kind of quasi-automatic consequence" (236–37).

to strike a balance between the individual and collective elements in eschatology and to bring forth the christological meaning of the ultimate realities, without which eschatology would be reduced to mere human speculation."[19]

ISSUES AND DISPUTED QUESTIONS

My intention in this section is to highlight certain issues broached by *Questions in Eschatology* for critical discussion. For clarity's sake I will divide the twelve points made by the Commission into three groups: those that should command universal agreement without reservation; those that would elicit consent, but *iuxta modum;* and those that will call for critical evaluation. Attention will be focused on the second and third groups.

Universally Agreeable Statements

To the first group belong such affirmations as the following:

1. The resurrection of Jesus is the cause and model of our resurrection and therefore must be the starting point for Christian eschatology.[20]
2. The resurrection is not a return to this life or reanimation.[21]

[19] Ibid. 238–39.

[20] See, for instance, the statement by Ted Peters: "Eschatology begins at Easter. At Easter the end appeared ahead of time. It appeared proleptically. Thus, the resurrection of Jesus Christ is the foundation upon which we must build our constructive thoughts regarding the future" (*God—the World's Future: Systematic Theology for a Postmodern Era* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993] 306. The Christologization of eschatology is also vigorously championed by Giorgio Gozzelino who speaks of the "Christology of the last ends" and insists that this Christological concentration demands that the resurrection of human beings "venga rigorosamente ricalcata, essendone il prolungamento, sulla risurrezione di Cristo; non restringendosi, come se la risurrezione di Gesù si riducesse all' esito del sepolcro vuoto, alla sola ripresa della materia, ma aprendosi invece al corrispettivo antropologico degli eventi cristologici dell'ascensione, sessione alla destra del Padre, acquisizione della signoria sul mondo e sulla storia, ed effusione dello Spirito Santo" ("Problemi e compiti dell'escatologia contemporanea: Come parlare dell'escatologia oggi," *Salesianum* 54 [1992] 93).

[21] The German Catholic Adult Catechism rejects a "primitive materialism" which holds that "we would reassume in resurrection the same matter, the same flesh, and the same bones as in this life" (*The Church's Confession of Faith: A Catholic Catechism for Adults,* trans. Stephen Arndt and ed. Mark Jordan [San Francisco: Ignatius, 1987] 338). Hans Küng also affirms that the resurrection is neither "return to this life in space and time" nor "continuation of this life in space and time" (*Eternal Life? Life After Death as a Medical, Philosophical, and Theological Problem,* trans. Edward Quinn [Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1984] 112–13).

3. The resurrection concerns the whole individual and not only the body or the disembodied soul.[22]

4. The resurrection is not only an event happening to the individual but also an ecclesial and cosmic event.[23]

5. There is both radical continuity and radical discontinuity between the present life and the future.[24]

6. The theological principle *lex orandi, lex credendi* holds for eschatology so that the Church's liturgy for the dead and the practice of interceding for the deceased by prayer, alms, good works, and, most importantly, the offering of the Eucharist constitute an indispensable *locus theologicus* for a theology of the life beyond.[25]

Points Agreed Upon Iuxta Modum

Besides these by-and-large uncontroverted statements there is another series of affirmations and theological elaborations contained in *Questions in Eschatology* which, in my judgment, would meet with a sympathetic hearing from many contemporary Catholic theologians, though they require further nuancing and expansion. These are the hermeneutics of eschatological statements, the description of death, and the doctrine of purgatory.

The Hermeneutics of Eschatological Statements

With regard to the hermeneutics of eschatological assertions, there can be no disagreement with the four principles formulated by the

[22] " 'Body' [*Fleisch*] means the whole man in his proper embodied reality. 'Resurrection' means, therefore, the termination and perfection of the *whole* man before God, which gives him 'eternal life' " (Karl Rahner, "The Resurrection of the Body," in *Theological Investigations* 2, trans. Karl-H. Kruger [New York: Seabury, 1963] 210–11).

[23] "If God's promise includes the body, then it also embraces society, the body politic, and indeed the entire cosmos with which our bodies are so intimately bound up" (Daniel Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology* [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1991] 244). Zachary Hayes, writing from a Roman Catholic perspective, adds the ecclesial dimension: "The social nature of humanity finds its historical fulfillment in the mystery of the church, and its final fulfillment in the sharing of life with all others who together share the life of God" (*Visions of a Future: A Study of Christian Eschatology* [Wilmington, Del.: Michael Glazier, 1989] 196).

[24] "A new and creative tension between the present and the future, between the already and the not yet, between the known and the unknown, between the present life and eternal life, must be maintained in eschatology" (Dermot Lane, "Eschatology," in *The New Dictionary of Theology,* ed. Joseph A. Komonchak, Mary Collins, and Dermot A. Lane [Wilmington, Del.: Michael Glazier, 1987] 342).

[25] See *The Church's Confession of Faith* 347. Speaking of purgatory, this German Catechism says: ". . . the real foundation for this doctrine is the *Church's practice of prayer and penance.*"

Commission.[26] However, it is rather strange that in dealing with this theme the Commission quoted a text from von Balthasar[27] and ignored a work of Karl Rahner which is one of the most influential essays on the hermeneutics of eschatological statements in the history of Roman Catholic theology.[28]

There are several points in which the Commission and Rahner would agree.[29] But there are other principles espoused by Rahner that, had the Commission taken them into account, would have enriched its document considerably. I will mention only four. First, Rahner strongly insists that "knowledge of the future will be knowledge of the futurity of the present: eschatological knowledge is knowledge of the eschatological present. An eschatological assertion is not an additional, supplementary statement appended to an assertion about the present and the past of the human person but an inner moment of this person's self-understanding."[30]

Two corollaries follow from this principle: (1) A balance is preserved between presentist and existentialist eschatology (that of C. H. Dodd and R. Bultmann) on the one hand and eschatology as prolepsis and hope (that of W. Pannenberg and J. Moltmann) on the other.[31] In this way, the insights of these potentially opposing eschatologies are preserved to enrich each other. (2) A criterion is provided for distinguishing between genuine Christian eschatology and popular predictive millenarianism (which Rahner infelicitously calls "apocalyptic"), a distinction left unclear in *Questions in Eschatology*. To read from the present forward into the future (*aussagen*) is eschatology, to read from the future back into the present (*einsagen*) is apocalyptic. Eschatology is not an advance report of the end-time events about which many Christians are curious and search for information in the Bible. Rather, just as protology is an aetiological account from the present situation of sin and salvation back into the origins and not a historical report of

[26] See point 2 of the introductory section above.

[27] See note 7 above.

[28] Karl Rahner, "Theologische Prinzipien der Hermeneutik eschatologischer Aussagen," in *Theological Investigations* 4, trans. Kevin Smyth (New York: Crossrosd, 1982) 323–46. For an exposition of Rahner's hermeneutics, see Peter C. Phan, *Eternity in Time: A Study of Karl Rahner's Eschatology* (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University, 1988) 64–76.

[29] For example, both Rahner and the Commission require that the future dimension of eschatological realities be maintained (Rahner's theses 1, 2, 3, and 5) and that the contents of eschatology be determined by the Christ event (Rahner's thesis 6, parts d and e).

[30] *Theological Investigations* 4.329.

[31] For an interpretation of various models of contemporary eschatology, see Phan, *Eternity in Time* 26–31.

what transpired at the beginning of the world, so too eschatology is an aetiological account from the present situation of sin and grace forward into its future stage of final fulfillment and not an anticipatory description of what will happen at the end of time and beyond. Eschatology is anthropology conjugated in the future tense on the basis of Christology.

Second, Rahner clearly distinguishes between the logical status of statements about salvation (heaven) and that of statements about damnation (hell). The former is a statement of fact, the latter a statement of possibility. This principle, only adumbrated in *Questions in Eschatology,* provides the correct framework for preaching and catechizing about eschatological realities:

> Hence in principle one should speak of only *one* predestination in Christian eschatology. Such an eschatology has only *one* theme which is there for its own sake: the victory of grace in the consummation of redemption. One can, and indeed must, speak only of the possibility of damnation, insofar as, and only insofar as we are forbidden to take the sure triumph of grace in the world as something already fixed and acquired, since we still have to live out our lives in the boldness of freedom.[32]

This principle, too, supplies a context for a discussion of the vexing problem of apocatastasis, as will be discussed below.

Third, Rahner's emphasis on the unity of the human person serves as a necessary counterpoint to the Commission's stress on the duality of the human person, and hence is a necessary corrective to the Commission's "eschatology of souls" and its teaching on the intermediate state. "All eschatological assertions," says Rahner, "have the *one* totality of the human person in mind, which cannot be neatly *divided* into two parts, body and soul."[33] It follows that statements about body and soul, about individual and collective eschatologies, cannot be read as two sets of affirmations about two different things; they must be concerned "in a different way with the *whole* man."[34] Obviously, this principle has implications for the doctrines of the intermediate state and purgatory.

[32] I have modified and clarified the translation in *Theological Investigations* 4.340. *Questions in Eschatology* does state that the Church has never once declared the damnation of a single person as a concrete fact (236–37), but it does not clearly contrast the logical status of statements about salvation with that of statements about hell. Perhaps due to this lack it is unable to discuss the theme of apocatastasis in a genuinely illuminating way. As a consequence, it warns that, because hell is a "genuine possibility," sermons at exequies should refrain from referring to the deceased as "quasi-automatically" saved.

[33] *Theological Investigations* 4.340. [34] Ibid.

Fourth, Rahner points out the need to remythologize or transmythologize the language of biblical eschatology. He rejects Bultmann's demythologizing program insofar as it implies a stripping away of biblical mythical images. Indeed, for Rahner, no thinking is possible without images, as is shown by Aquinas's doctrine of *conversio ad phantasma,* which Rahner brilliantly retrieves.[35] For a systematic theology of the last things Rahner suggests four concrete steps. First, interpreters must submit their sources and methods to a strict, critical examination. For this they often rely on the researches of their biblical colleagues, who employ the appropriate tools of literary and historical criticism to discover the meanings intended by historical texts. Second, they raise the question of which assertions are binding in eschatology by distinguishing the intended meanings from their cultural amalgams. Third, they must see if and how they can reduce these assertions to a small number of basic assertions from which their eschatology can be derived. Lastly, they must ask whether these basic assertions are elements of Christology and anthropology transposed into their mode of fulfillment, distinguishing between authentic eschatology and false apocalyptic.[36]

In sum, had the Commission deployed a fuller hermeneutics of eschatological assertions in developing its eschatology, *Questions in Eschatology* would have been more organically structured, more complete in its exposition, and more receptive to insights of contemporary eschatology even when these do not coincide with its point of view.

The Description of Death

There is no quarrel with the Commission's description of death as both an evil (insofar as it is a consequence of sin) and a good (insofar as death is "the very condition of and way to a future glorious resurrection"[37]). Equally acceptable is its explanation of the "death in the Lord." However, there is missing here the whole theology of death which relates *human* death to freedom and which sees it not only as something to be undergone in a spirit of penance,[38] but also as a mo-

[35] See Karl Rahner, *Spirit in the World,* trans. William Dych (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968); and for an excellent analysis of this work, see Thomas Sheehan, *Karl Rahner: The Philosophical Foundations* (Athens: Ohio University, 1987).

[36] See *Theological Investigations* 4.345–46.

[37] *Questions* 227. The document cites with approval a passage from Gregory of Nyssa's *Oratio consolatoria in Pulcheriam* in which he says that death becomes a good thing because unless it occurs, there is no resurrection; see *Gregorii Nysseni Opera,* ed. W. Jaeger and H. Langerbeck (Leiden: Brill, 1967) 9.472.

[38] *Questions in Eschatology* 226 says: "Death must be accepted by Christians with a

ment of active final and definitive self-determination. One certainly need not accept Ladislaus Boros's theory of the fundamental option at the moment of death (*Endentscheidungshypothese*)[39] to appreciate the fact that in dying one can actively dispose of oneself in freedom and that death can be, to use the words of Rahner, action (*Tat*), fulfillment (*Vollendung*), and self-possession (*Sich-in-Besitz*).[40]

Furthermore, the Commission, perhaps because of its overriding concern to defend the immortality of the soul, fails to emphasize adequately that death affects the *whole* person.[41] Death, as Rahner has pointed out, affects humans not only in their bodies but in their souls as well, not only "at the level of the material and the biological, but on the plane of self-awareness, personhood, freedom, responsibility, love and faithfulness."[42] True, the Commission does affirm that "indeed,

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certain sense of penance, for Christians have before their eyes the words of Paul: 'the wages of sin is death' (Rom 6:23)."

[39] Boros's hypothesis of a final decision in death holds that "death gives man the opportunity of posing his first completely personal act; death is, therefore, by reason of its very being, the moment above all others for the awakening of consciousness, for freedom, for the encounter with God, for the final decision about his eternal destiny" (Ladislaus Boros, *The Mystery of Death,* trans. Gregory Bainbridge [New York: Herder and Herder, 1965] ix; see also 84, 165).

[40] It is well known that Rahner has developed a distinctive theology of death; see his *On the Theology of Death,* trans. C. H. Henkey (New York: Herder and Herder, 1961). For a detailed exposition and critique of the theology of death of both Boros and Rahner, see Phan, *Eternity in Time* 79–115. It is curious that Joseph Ratzinger did not mention Rahner's theology of death either in his 1977 volume on eschatology or in the 1988 English edition of the same work to which he appends an afterword, except for an exceedingly brief allusion to Rahner's theory of pancosmicity; see his *Dogmatic Theology: Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life,* trans. Michael Waldstein and Aidan Nichols (Washington: Catholic University of America, 1988) 191.

[41] Recall that *Questions in Eschatology* stresses the *duality* of the human person, though it carefully notes that duality is not dualism. Joseph Ratzinger discerns in contemporary theology a fear "reaching almost panic proportions, of any accusation of dualism. To see a man as a being compounded of body and soul, to believe in a continued existence for the soul between the death of the body and its resurrection, seemed like a betrayal of the biblical and modern recognition of the unity of man, the unity of the creation" (*Eschatology* 250). It is symptomatic that he speaks of "the death of the body" rather than the death of the human person.

[42] "Theological Considerations concerning the Moment of Death," in *Theological Investigations* 11, trans. David Bourke (New York: Crossroad, 1982) 317. Rahner goes on to say: "[Death] affects man as one and whole. For we of today find it even less possible than those of former times to reduce man either to spirit or to matter. Nor can we conceive of him as a union of both these principles *in such a way that* the destruction of this unity entails no further difficulty either in reality or in our own minds. The death of man consists in the immediate confrontation of man, together with the whole of his history as a free person now consummated and complete, with the absolute mystery, with God" (318).

since the person is not the soul alone, but the body and soul essentially united, death affects the person."[43] However, it fails to elaborate how the soul is truly affected by death, short of ceasing to exist. It would seem that the Commission is still operating with the understanding of death as separation of the soul from the body and appears to be unaware that such a description of death, though legitimate in its emphasis on the immortality of the soul, is seriously inadequate in describing death as a *human* event.[44]

The Doctrine of Purgatory

Another eschatological doctrine expounded by *Questions in Eschatology* with which there is perhaps a large agreement but which calls for expansion is purgatory. The Commission deserves commendation for warning against associating purgatory too closely with hell, since there is an essential difference between them, the former centered on love, the latter on hate. However, the Commission's exposition of purgatory remains unsatisfactory, at least on two counts. First, it lacks an anthropology to account for the necessity of "purification." Its language is still impersonal and objectivistic. It speaks of "stains" resulting from sins that need to be removed.[45] Missing is an understanding of the human person as a multileveled being whose innermost center requires a process of integration and transformation to be fully united with God, even though guilt has been forgiven. In this way, the "temporal punishments" can be understood, not as something imposed from without upon the sinner, but as a required maturing process, more or less intense and painful, whereby the person comes to a full decision for God.[46]

Second, *Questions in Eschatology* remains ambiguous on how the process of purification is carried out beyond death. On the one hand, in defence of the intermediate state and the resurrection of the dead as a future event, it argues that "even the souls of the blessed, since they are in communion with the Christ who has been raised in a bodily way,

[43] *Questions* 226.

[44] For a critique of this notion of death as separation of the soul from the body, see Phan, *Eternity in Time* 84–85.

[45] *Questions* 231.

[46] For an elaboration of this anthropology in connection with purgatory, see Karl Rahner, "Remarks on the Theology of Indulgences," in *Theological Investigations* 2. 175–201; "A Brief Theological Study on Indulgences," in *Theological Investigations* 10, trans. David Bourke (New York: Seabury, 1973) 150–65; "Purgatory," in *Theological Investigations* 19, trans. Edward Quinn (New York: Crossroad, 1983) 181–93. For an exposition of Rahner's view on purgatory, see Phan, *Eternity in Time* 122–31.

cannot be thought of without any connection with time,"[47] though it never explains how this temporal connection is to be understood and how it affects the separated soul. On the other hand, when it comes to explain postmortem purification, it falls back on St. John of the Cross's exposition on how the Holy Spirit acts as "the flame of living love" purifying the soul to enable it to reach the perfect love of God.[48] In this explanation, the "duration" of purgatory is apparently understood not in terms of length of "time" but in terms of the depth and intensity of love.[49] Logical consistency seems to dictate that an understanding of postmortem purification as a process of *personal encounter* with God would jettison the concept of an intermediate state. This leads us into the third series of affirmations of *Questions in Eschatology,* those which will provoke critical questioning.

Points for Critical Questioning

Two issues raised by the Commission will be subjected to analysis, namely, the intermediate state and reincarnation. Another issue, not treated at length by the document but deserving more nuanced reflections, is the possibility of universal restoration.

The Intermediate State

The main burden of *Questions in Eschatology* is the affirmation of the intermediate state. Intimately connected with it are the docu-

[47] *Questions* 218.

[48] See ibid. 232.

[49] It seems that Ratzinger suffers from the same ambiguity in his exposition of purgatory as an encounter with Christ the Judge. On the one hand he affirms that "[m]an does not have to strip away his temporality in order thereby to become 'eternal'," and on the other hand he goes on to say that "[t]he transforming 'moment' of this encounter cannot be quantified by the measurements of earthly time. It is, indeed, not eternal but a transition, and yet trying to qualify it as of 'short' or 'long' duration on the basis of temporal measurements derived from physics would be naive and unproductive" (*Eschatology* 230). This is a clear instance of trying to have one's cake and eat it too. In the same volume, Ratzinger argues that time must be understood not only physically but also anthropologically. He calls this time "*memoria*-time" which, he claims, separates itself from physical time, yet does not for all that become eternity (ibid. 184). Granted that this time exists (and I think it does), still the question remains whether there is a difference *within* this time before and after death (and I think that there is; otherwise death causes no rupture at all). Ratzinger does not seem to be aware of this question and only speaks of this time as different from physical time and eternity. Zachary Hayes is more consistent when he writes: "It seems that once the shift has been made from the concept of purgatory as a place to the concept of personal encounter, the question of any sort of temporal duration may be an inappropriate understanding of the symbol. . . . Purgatory is neither long nor short in temporal categories. It is intense in proportion to the need of purgation in the individual person" (*Visions of a Future* 114). It is interesting to note that Hayes cites Ratzinger to support his view without mentioning the latter's insistence on the fact that the dead have "time."

ment's emphasis on Christ's parousia and the resurrection as future events, its categorical rejection of the hypotheses of total death (*Ganztod*) and resurrection in death (which it regards as "incompatible with a legitimate theological pluralism"),[50] its elaboration of what is idiosyncratically termed "the eschatology of souls," its insistence on the immortality of the soul and the "duality" of the human person, and its explication of purgatory as a temporal process. The Commission falls short of declaring unambiguously that the doctrine of the intermediate state is a dogma of faith, but the whole tenor of its document tends toward that view, especially in its interpretation of Scripture, the creeds (e.g. the *Fides Damasi*), councils (e.g. the Eleventh Council of Toledo), papal documents (e.g. Benedict XII's *Benedictus Deus* and Paul VI's *Credo of the People of God*), and recent Vatican statements (e.g. *Reality after Death*).

The basic question then is: Is the intermediate state a doctrine of faith? The answer to this question can be approached in two ways: by examining the Commission's arguments in defense of the intermediate state and by offering a plausible alternative understanding of it.

It is of course impossible to evaluate all the arguments the Commission advances in support of the existence of the intermediate state.[51] Here I will focus on two aspects, one methodological, the other substantive.

a. The first remark concerns the Commission's appeal to authoritative sources, whether biblical or traditional. In interpreting these sources, it is important to distinguish between what is said and what is meant, or, to use the language of Rahner mentioned above, to identify what assertions are binding by distinguishing their intended meanings from their cultural amalgams. For instance, in stressing the identity between the earthly body and the risen one, *Questions in Eschatology* cites the Eleventh Council of Toledo's formula that we will rise "in the very same flesh in which we live, in which we subsist, and in which we move."[52] Again it appeals to *Fides Damasi*'s affirmation that the resurrection will take place "in this flesh, in which we now live."[53] Finally, it summarizes patristic teaching as affirming that "personal identity cannot be defended in the absence of bodily identity."[54] The question still remaining for discussion is what is meant by "the very *same* flesh," "in *this* flesh," and "*bodily* identity." At the very

[50] *Questions* 222.

[51] By and large these arguments correspond to those Joseph Ratzinger has brought forward in his book *Eschatology*.

[52] *Questions* 214.

[53] Ibid. 216.

[54] Ibid. 216.

least, of course, it must be said that these sources maintain the *reality* of the risen body, but it is not yet decided a priori what counts for the reality of the body. What makes the body real? Blood and bones? Matter-energy? The individual's history of self-determination in freedom in and through the body? Can and should a distinction be drawn between body and bodiliness?[55] Is "bodiliness" sufficient ground for the identity of the person before death and after death? Or does relatedness to history and matter suffice? The answers to these questions cannot be derived simply from texts of Scripture and tradition. Formulated on the basis of these authoritative sources, these answers should be enriched by contemporary scientific, psychological, philosophical, and theological insights on anthropology. Further, even if it is determined that biblical, patristic, and conciliar authors do intend by "body" the physiological entity as such, it still remains to be settled whether this intended sense necessarily belongs to the revealed message, since it may be part of a more naive and prescientific worldview in which the message was formulated, and not the message itself.

Similarly, when *Questions in Eschatology* argues that time must still continue somehow after death, since otherwise it would be difficult to understand Paul's use of the future tense (*anastēsontai*) when speaking of the resurrection,[56] it too quickly assumes that because we cannot speak about the beyond (or God for that matter) except in temporal categories, time must therefore exist in the afterlife. Further, even if it is agreed that Paul did intend the resurrection as a future event, it is still to be settled whether Paul would reject the view that the dead, or more precisely those who die in Christ, are already somehow risen in and through the risen body of Christ.[57] It would seem that

[55] *Questions in Eschatology* claims that the conceptual distinction between a "body" and a "corpse" and that between the two senses of body (represented by the German words *Leib* and *Körper*) are scarcely understood outside academic circles (217). With regard to the first distinction, it must be said that the Commission seriously underestimates the intelligence of the proverbial "person in the street." Regarding the second, Ratzinger concedes that H. E. Hengstenberg's distinction between "body" (the physical reality) and "bodiliness" (the metaphysical principle) is justified, even though, in his view, it does not resolve the problem of the identity of the risen body (*Eschatology* 288 n. 4). At any rate, it seems odd that intelligibility "outside academic circles" should be used as a criterion for the validity of a theological distinction. For a monumental study on the theology of the body, see Benedict M. Ashley, *Theologies of the Body: Humanist and Christian* (Braintree, Mass.: The Pope John XXIII Medical-Moral Research and Education Center, 1985).

[56] *Questions* 218.

[57] At least one exegete, Pierre Benoit, thinks that, on the basis of 2 Cor 5:1–10; Phil 3:20–21; Col 2:12; Eph 2:6 one can say that, according to Paul, those who die in Christ are immediately "risen" by being united to the risen body of Christ; see his "Resurrection

the hermeneutics of eschatological assertions is far more complex than the Commission appears to assume.

b. Turning to more substantive issues, one can raise the question of whether the Commission's arguments for the existence of the intermediate state are compelling. This is tantamount to asking whether its arguments against the hypotheses of total death and resurrection in death are convincing. More positively, are its proofs for a two-phase eschatology and the "eschatology of souls" (the immortality of the soul) persuasive?

With regard to the Commission's use of Scripture (e.g. the concept of *sheol;* Dan 12:2; Isa 26:19; Luke 23:43; John 14:1–3; Phil 1:21–24), what has been said above applies here as well. The most that can be said about these texts is that they do seem to *suggest* the existence of the interim state, but no more than that. Whether in fact they explicitly and unambiguously assert that there is a temporal period between the death of a person and the general resurrection, during which a bodiless soul awaits the reunion with its body, cannot simply be assumed from their modes of expression.

The commission's arguments against the hypothesis of total death (i.e. of the total death of the human person) are twofold: that it is rooted in a Protestant anthropology, and that it cannot account for the continuity between the person who dies and the person who rises.[58] The total-death hypothesis holds that the whole human person dies in death and that he or she is recreated by God only at the end of time. It must be admitted that *Questions in Eschatology* is right in both of its charges, especially in the second one. It is indeed difficult to see how in this hypothesis the identity of the person can be preserved in this and the future life. However, the mere fact that the hypothesis is theologically rooted in a Protestant anthropology does not make it ipso facto suspect. Indeed, there is an insight in it that must, in my judgment, be retrieved for an integral eschatology, namely, that death does affect the *whole* person, including the soul. It is this insight that is brought to the fore in the hypothesis of the resurrection in death.[59]

The Commission's arguments against the theory of immediate resurrection in death are also twofold: that it is unknown to the New

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at the End of Time or Immediately after Death?" in *Immortality and Resurrection,* ed. Pierre Benoit and Roland Murphy (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970) 103–14.

[58] See *Questions* 221–22.

[59] The major proponents of this theory include Joseph M. Shaw, Russell Aldwinkle, Ladislaus Boros, and more recently Gisbert Greshake. It is well known that there has been a long-running debate between Greshake and Ratzinger on the merit of this theory; see J. Ratzinger, *Eschatology* 241–74, and G. Greshake and G. Lohfink, *Naherwartung, Auferstehung, Unstersblichkeit* 156–84.

Testament, which speaks of the resurrection at the parousia and never at a person's death, and that it is contrary to the teaching of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith as expounded in *Reality after Death*. With regard to the alleged lack of biblical basis, it must be said that it is too simplistic to identify the time of the resurrection of the individual simply with the parousia. True, the parousia was referred to as a future event, but no fixed date was given it. Furthermore, though Paul associates the resurrection with Christ's parousia (1 Cor 15), the Pauline tradition does speak of the resurrection as something already occurring in the life of the Christian (Col 2:12–13; Eph 2:5–6).[60] Lastly, one should bear in mind the realized eschatology of John, in which Christ's resurrection and epiphany have merged into a single event and in which the believer by virtue of faith "*has* eternal life and does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life" (John 5:24; cf. 3:18, 3:36; 6:47).[61] Thus, while it is true that the New Testament does not speak explicitly of the resurrection in death, and that it does refer to the parousia as a future event, it cannot, in my judgment, be apodictically proved that the hypothesis of the resurrection in death is totally and absolutely contradictory to the teaching of the New Testament.

Concerning the second argument, it is to be noted that it overstates its case when it affirms that the hypothesis of the resurrection in death contradicts the teaching of *Reality after Death*. In fact, there is a significant difference between the official text in the *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*[62] and the text published in *Osservatore Romano*.[63] The latter text says that "a spiritual element survives and subsists after death, an element endowed with consciousness and will, so that the 'human self' subsists," whereas in the former text, there is an added phrase "though deprived for the present of the complement of its body" (*interim tamen complemento sui corporis carens*). This variance may indicate that there exists an uncertainty on the part of the magisterium regarding the dogmatic value of the doctrine of the intermediate state and therefore suggests indirectly that the doctrine of the intermediate state is not a dogma of faith and that it is not impossible to think of individual resurrection in death.

[60] This is not to say that there is not future bodily resurrection or eternal glory to come; see the error of Hymaeneus and Philetus in 2 Tim 2:18. The question is whether one may speak of the resurrection other than at the moment of the parousia, however this "moment" is interpreted.

[61] In tension with these texts stand others which speak of a future resurrection and universal judgment on the basis of deeds, over which Jesus will preside (John 6:39, 40, 44, 54; 5:27–29).

[62] *AAS*, 19 May 1979, 939.

[63] 23 July 1979, 7–8, no. 3.

The question, then, is whether a plausible interpretation of the intermediate state can be proffered in such a way that no dogmas and practices of faith are thereby denied. Perhaps Rahner's statement of the intermediate state can be taken as paradigmatic:

> I should only like to point out that it [i.e. the doctrine of the intermediate state] is not a dogma, and can therefore remain open to the free discussions of theologians. We shall leave the question open, whether in our time the doctrine of the intermediate state does not perhaps enjoy a certain merit on kerygmatic or didactical grounds, or for reasons connected with religious instruction, or with the history of thought. Where this intellectual framework is still alive and undisputed, and where it can without difficulty make clear to people what is really meant—the blessedness of their souls and the glorification of their bodies—no objection can be levied against it, even today. . . .
>
> Basically, I should like to postulate the following: it is by no means certain that the doctrine about the intermediate state is *anything more* than an intellectual framework, or way of thinking. So whatever it has to tell us (apart from statements about the commencement through death of the final form of man's history of freedom, and about the inclusion of the body in this final form) does not necessarily have to be part of Christian eschatology itself. We might put the matter differently and say: no one is in danger of defending a heresy if he maintains the view that the single and total perfecting of man in 'body' and 'soul' takes place immediately after death, that the resurrection of the flesh and the general judgement take place 'parallel' to the temporal history of the world; and that both coincide with the sum of the particular judgements of individual men and women. As long as he can produce good reasons for his view he can go on maintaining his opinion, always provided that he does not mean that the time scheme of world history itself can also be eliminated from his theological statement.[64]

It is impossible to present a detailed defense of this thesis here,[65] but a few points can be mentioned. Pope Benedict XII's constitution *Benedictus Deus,* to which *Questions in Eschatology* repeatedly appeals to defend its view on the intermediate state, should be regarded not as dogmatically teaching the existence of the intermediate state, but as using it *only* as a framework or cultural assumption to affirm the perfecting or condemnation of the person immediately after death and the glorification of the body.[66]

[64] "The Intermediate State," in *Theological Investigations* 17, trans. Margaret Kohl (New York: Crossroad, 1981) 114–15.

[65] For a detailed exposition of Rahner's view, see Phan, *Eternity in Time* 116–22.

[66] I am in agreement with the view of Giuseppe Barbaglio: "Il testo magisteriale suppone con tutta evidenza l'anima separata dopo morte, ma questo non costituisce la sua intenzione didattica, volta invece a definire l'immediata beatitudine e visione di Dio dopo il decesso .... La rappresentazione dell'anima separata fa parte di un quadro

Rahner acknowledges that there are two series of biblical statements, one affirming the future resurrection of the dead and the other the immediate vision of God after death. To reconcile these two apparently conflicting series of affirmations, later theological tradition employed the twin notions of the intermediate state and the separated soul. But these are only cultural amalgams to harmonize the individual and collective eschatologies, and therefore to deny the existence of the intermediate state is not tantamount to dismissing collective or cosmic eschatology, since it is still possible to conceive of the individual eschatology as an intrinsic element of a progressive transformation of world history and of the cosmos in general.

Without postulating the intermediate state, Rahner believes that the enduring relation between spirit and matter can be expressed in scholastic language by saying that the glorified body is permanently informed by the perfected spirit soul. The identity between the earthly self and the glorified one does not come from the identity of the body or parts of it but from the identity of the free, spiritual subject who has achieved himself or herself in a definitive way through acts of freedom. These acts are performed, of course, always and only in and through the body.

The philosophical distinction of body and soul (in the language of *Questions in Eschatology,* the "duality" of the human person) is a valid element of anthropology. However, even with such a valid distinction the human person must count empirically and ontologically, first and last as being *one,* so that one need not conceive of the soul as separated from the body after death and existing in an intermediate state waiting for an eventual reunion with its body. Furthermore, the immortality of the soul may mean no more than that the human person, as a being of self-transcendence and freedom, is one who through his or her history of freedom can achieve final and definitive validity before God, and need not imply the doctrine of the intermediate state.

Finally, the dogma of the Assumption of Mary need not be seen as excluding the possibility of other human beings enjoying the same "privilege." Rahner concedes that it is quite possible that theologians involved in the drawing up of the Apostolic Constitution *Munificentissimus Deus* might have entertained the notion that the bodily assumption is unique to Mary, but nowhere in the definition is it explicitly declared that it is exclusively true of Mary.[67]

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culturale recepito irreflessivamente e non è elemento insegnato dal documento magisteriale" ("Risurrezione e Immortalità," in *Dizionario Teologico Interdisciplinare,* ed. Franco Ardusso et al. [Turin: Marietti, 1977] 3.135).

[67] See "The Interpretation of the Dogma of the Assumption," in *Theological Investigations* 1, trans. Cornelius Ernst (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1961) 215–27.

In light of all these considerations we may wonder with Rahner whether it is not possible to hold the hypothesis of the resurrection in death. At any rate, he suggests that "the idea of the intermediate state contains a little harmless mythology, which is not dangerous as long as we do not take the idea too seriously and do not view it as binding on faith."[68]

Is Rahner's view consistent with the Church's practice of offering suffrages for the dead? Rahner suggests that the prayers for the dead in "purgatory" can be regarded as intercessions for their blessed death. One may object that these prayers are offered for those who are already dead, and not for their eventual "holy" deaths. Rahner replies that if in the traditional idea of purgatory we still regard suffrages offered for a particular soul in purgatory as appropriate even though we do not know whether that deceased person needs them or not, it would not be absurd to apply our intercessions for a particular "holy" death, no matter when precisely in our earthly time these prayers are said. After all, Jesus' prayers on the cross were valid even for those who had died before him.[69]

Reincarnation

The judgment of *Questions in Eschatology* on the issue of reincarnation is peremptory: the doctrine of reincarnation is "a child of paganism in direct opposition to Scripture and Church tradition."[70] There is

[68] *Theological Investigations* 17.123. For Rahner's further reflections on the body and its relation to the soul, see "The Body in the Order of Salvation," ibid. 71–89. In view of the foregoing reflections, I cannot but regard Ratzinger's evaluation of the hypothesis of the resurrection in death and the intermediate state as excessively sweeping and laboring under *non sequiturs*. Consider, e.g., this excerpt: "The thesis of resurrection in death dematerializes the resurrection. It entails that real matter has no part in the event of the consummation. This theory reduces Christian hope to the level of the individual. If individual men and women *qua* individuals can, through death, enter upon the End, then history as such remains outside salvation and cannot receive its own fulfilment. . . . Denial of the soul and affirmation of the resurrection in death mean a spiritualistic theory of immortality, which regards as impossible true resurrection and the salvation of the world as a whole" (*Eschatology* 267).

[69] See "Purgatory," in *Theological Investigations* 19.186–87.

[70] *Questions* 231. The same unequivocal condemnation is found in the German Catechism: "The assumption of a *re-embodiment* or a *reincarnation* of the soul after death in a new worldly life completely contradicts Holy Scripture and the Church's Tradition of faith" (*The Church's Confession of Faith* 335). The catechism gives three reasons for its rejection of reincarnation: that no number of earthly lives suffices for the purification and fulfilment of humans; that the identity of the person cannot be preserved in reincarnation; and that this life cannot be taken seriously if it is not the only chance humans have for deciding for or against God. It seems to me that reincarnationists have ready

no doubt that this aspect of eschatology has attracted much attention recently, not only in popular culture such as the New Age movement, but also in scholarly circles.[71]

It goes without saying that if the doctrine of reincarnation denies the possibility of hell, redemption, and resurrection, as the Commission construes it to do, then it is incompatible with the Christian faith. Moreover, there are other aspects of reincarnation that are not morally acceptable, such as its connection with the caste system (as in Hinduism) or the possibility of rebirth in forms of life higher or lower than human (as in Buddhism). The question, however, is whether no doctrine of reincarnation can be reconciled with the basic tenets of the Christian faith.

Before we go further with our discussion on reincarnation, a word of caution about its pastoral dimension is in order. One should take care that theological hypotheses remain just that, that is, provisional attempts at making sense of religious experience. They must not be

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answers for all these three objections; see, e.g., Geddes McGregor, *Images of Afterlife: Beliefs from Antiquity to Modern Times* (New York: Paragon, 1992) 207–17.

[71] Representative samples of theological literature produced in the last decade on this theme include: Geddes MacGregor, *Reincarnation as a Christian Hope* (Totawa, N.J.: Barnes & Noble, 1982); André Couture, "Réincarnation ou résurrection? Revue d'un débat et amorce d'une recherche," *Sciences ecclésiastiques* 36 (1984) 351–74 and 37 (1985) 75–96; Augustin Schmied, "Die Reinkarnationsidee als Ansatzpunkt eines Vermittlungsversuch zwischen christlichem und hinduistichem Denken," *Theologie der Gegenwart* 27 (1984) 241–48; Michael von Brück, "Reincarnation or Continuous Manifestation," *Indian Theological Studies* 29 (1985) 234–65; Hans Waldenfels, "Auferstehung, Reinkarnation, Nichts? Der Mensch auf der Suche nach seiner Zukunft," *Lebendiges Zeugnis* 41, no. 4 (1986) 39–50; Denis Müller, *Réincarnation et foi chrétienne* (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1986); Pascal Thomas, *La Réincarnation: Oui ou non?* (Paris: Centurion, 1987); Gisbert Greshake, *Tod—und dann? Ende—Reinkarnation—Auferstehung: Der Streit der Hoffnungen* (Freiburg: Herder, 1988); Augustin Schmied, "Der Christ vor der Reinkarnationsidee," *Theologie der Gegenwart* 31 (1988) 37–49; Hans Beck, *Reinkarnation oder Auferstehung: Ein Widerspruch?* (Innsbruck: Resch, 1988); Herbert Frohnhofen, "Reinkarnation und frühe Kirche," *Stimmen der Zeit* 207 (1989) 236–44; J. J. MacIntosh, "Reincarnation and Relativized Identity," *Religious Studies* 25 (1989) 153–65; Charles B. Daniels, "In Defence of Reincarnation," *Religious Studies* 26 (1990) 501–4; Medard Kehl, "Wiedergeburt—Häresie oder Hoffnung?" *Geist und Leben* 63 (1990) 445–57; Harold W. Noonan, "The Possibility of Reincarnation," *Religious Studies* 26 (1990) 493–500; Jean Vernette et al., "Résurrection et réincarnations: Foi et croyances," *Lumière et Vie* 38, no. 195 (1989) 2–97; Michael Stoeber, "Personal Identity and Rebirth," *Religious Studies* 26 (1990) 493–500; Jean Vernette, *Réincarnation, résurrection, communiquer avec l'au-delà: Le mystère de la Vie après la vie* (Mulhouse: Salvator, 1989); Angela Feder, *Reinkarnationshypothese in der New-Age-Bewegung* (Nettetal: Steyler, 1991); Richard Friedli, "La réincarnation: Une approche en anthropologie culturelle comparée," *Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft und Religionswissenschaft* 75 (1991) 97–116; H. W. House, "Resurrection, Reincarnation, and Humanness," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 148 (1991) 131–50; Joseph Thomas, "Réincarnation ou résurrection?" *Etudes* 374 (1991) 235–43.

immediately communicated in catechesis or preaching, much less translated into pastoral directives. In this case, the task of reflecting on the possibility of understanding reincarnation in Christian terms is made more urgent by the need for interreligious dialogue. To characterize this belief, which is almost universal in other world religions, as "the child of paganism" is not only historically incorrect but also counterproductive to interreligious dialogue.

With this need for interfaith dialogue in mind, let us proceed cautiously to ask: Are all aspects of reincarnation directly opposed to Christian faith? Are not at least some aspects of this belief theologically nonheretical? The doctrine, we may recall, is conceived as an answer to the philosophical and religious question of justice in a world in which human lots are so unequally and unjustly assigned. It seeks to provide both an explanation for human beings about themselves, their origin, and their future, as well as a justification for God. If, however, instead of viewing reincarnation as a solution to the theodicy problem, we place it in the context of death as the termination of the human person's history of freedom, that is, as a process of definitive and final self-determination, then it might be adopted as a plausible theory in those cases in which the physical death of a person does not necessarily coincide with the definitive end of his or her history of freedom.

A hint can be taken from Rahner's reflections on purgatory. In this context Rahner asks whether the Christian eschatological doctrines apply in a binding way as statements of faith to all human beings, that is, all those who belong to the human species. Or do they refer *only* to those who have disposed of themselves in a definitive way through their free decisions? Traditional eschatology has of course always assumed the first alternative. But is this obvious and certain? Is it theologically plausible to maintain that for some people, through no fault of their own, God has refused for all eternity to permit their eternal destiny to be the object of their free choice.

Does this mean that one can accept the doctrine of reincarnation? Rahner himself has little sympathy for this belief. He finds it impossible to accept that version of the reincarnation doctrine in which reincarnation is represented as a continuous and endless repetition of temporal existence. Such endless metempsychosis by which a person can never arrive at final self-determination would be equivalent to damnation itself. He also rejects any doctrine of reincarnation that presupposes that the human soul is understood as a substance independent of the body, surviving the decay of the human bodies which it successively inhabits, even though not unendingly. Finally, Rahner also rejects a reincarnation in subhuman creatures as unnecessary and unworthy of the human person.

But with Rahner one may wonder whether a *modified* version of the

doctrine of reincarnation from the standpoint of a realistic anthropology might not be acceptable to the Christian faith. In line with his understanding of freedom as the capacity for definitive and final self-determination, Rahner tentatively suggests that the doctrine of reincarnation is not implausible in the cases of those whose clinical death is not identical with the end of their history of freedom. One can think of infants who are stillborn or who die before they reach the age of reason. Other cases may include people who because of psychological impairments are incapable of responsible decision. Lastly, even "adults" in the general sense of the word may not always be capable of making *that* decision which engages the depths of the person and is rendered final by death. Of course, Christian faith *must* continue to presume, and rightly so, that such a definitive personal decision can certainly be made in the normal course of *one* human life. On the other hand it *may* accept the theory of reincarnation at least for those individuals whose lives do not possess a genuine history of freedom.[72]

Universalism (Apocatastasis)

The last issue, to which *Questions in Eschatology* briefly refers, concerns universalism or the theory of universal redemption (apocatastasis). To judge from recent literature, it is a theme that, like reincarnation, has recently provoked much theological reflection.[73] It is re-

[72] See "Purgatory," in *Theological Investigations* 19.189–93. Note the extremely tentative and exploratory character of Rahner's speculation on reincarnation. The essay is written in the form of dialogue between two theologians, one of a conservative bent, the other somewhat more progressive. Underlying Rahner's openness to the hypothesis of reincarnation is his understanding of human freedom as the capacity of final and definitive self-determination through categorical choices performed in history; for Rahner's view of freedom, see *Foundations of Christian Faith,* trans. William Dych (New York: Crossroad, 1978) 93–97. For an exposition of Rahner's reflections on reincarnation, see Phan, *Eternity in Time* 128–31.

[73] See, e.g., Jerry L. Walls, *Hell: The Logic of Damnation* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1992); John R. Sachs, "Current Eschatology: Universal Salvation and the Problem of Hell," *TS* 52 (1991) 227–54; idem, "Apocatastasis in Patristic Theology," *TS* 54 (1993) 617–40; Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Dare We Hope "That All Men Be Saved"?* with *A Short Discourse on Hell* and *Apocatastasis: Universal Reconciliation* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1988); Giovanni Blandino, "A Hypothesis on the Eternity of Hell," *Miscellanea Franciscana* 91 (1991) 226–31; Stephen T. Davis, "Universalism, Hell, and the Fate of the Ignorant," *Modern Theology* 6 (1989–90) 173–86; Thomas Talbott, "The Doctrine of Everlasting Punishment," *Faith and Philosophy* 7 (1990) 19–42; Colin Gutton, "When the Gates of Hell Fall Down: Towards a Modern Theology of the Justice of God," *New Blackfriars* 69 (1988) 488–96; Wilhelm Breuning, "Zur Lehre von der Apokatastasis," *Internationale katholische Zeitschrift* 10 (1981) 19–31; Esteban Deak, "Apokatastasis: The Problem of Universal Salvation in Twentieth-Century Theology," Ph.D. diss., University of St. Michael's College, 1979.

grettable that the Commission has not given it more extensive consideration. On the contrary, the remarks it makes in this regard tend to be oblique and rather negative in tone. It mainly emphasizes the seriousness of human decisions and the eternity of hell.

Contrary to reincarnation, apocatastasis—the doctrine that ultimately all rational creatures, including angels, humans, and devils, will share in the grace of salvation—cannot be shown to be absent from biblical and traditional teaching.[74] It does not, of course, lack fierce opponents such as Augustine. In its Origenist formulation, which includes the conversion of demons, it was condemned by the Provincial Council of Constantinople in 543. Some, however, from the Fathers (such as Clement of Alexandria and Gregory of Nyssa) to contemporary theologians (such as Hans Urs von Balthasar and Karl Rahner), have attempted to formulate a version of apocatastasis that is consonant with the Christian faith.

This is not the place to elaborate such a theology of universal restoration. Briefly, four considerations lie at its foundation. First, as has been argued above in the section on the hermeneutics of eschatological assertions, statements on heaven and those on hell are not logically parallel. There is a fundamental "asymmetry" (von Balthasar's expression) between them: the former are about reality, the latter about possibility. Though the possibility of hell is real (first of all for me, then maybe for others), neither Scripture nor church tradition has claimed that anyone in fact has been or will be forever lost. Second, reflections on Christ's descent into hell (von Balthasar's theology of "the mystery of Holy Saturday") show that in Jesus God has demonstrated his radical unwillingness to abandon sinners, even where God is by definition excluded. Third, reflections on human freedom as the capacity for final and definitive self-determination (Karl Rahner's concept of "transcendental freedom") seem to suggest that human freedom will not attain its finality except in God. Fourth, a renewed theology of hope, based on God's universal will to save and on grace as a triumphant reality of human history, argues that we not only may but *must* hope for the

[74] See, e.g., Brian E. Daley, *The Hope of the Early Church: A Handbook of Patristic Eschatology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1991). See also John R. Sachs, who focuses on Clement, Origen, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Gregory of Nyssa, and concludes: "None of them denied human freedom and responsibility. Each of them at times has rather traditional things to say about eschatological punishment. But what really motivated them was an even stronger conviction about the infinity and incomprehensibility of God's goodness and mercy, revealed and bestowed in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. There, rather than in the philosohical currents of their times, is where, ultimately, each of these theologians founded his hope that all will be saved" ("Apocatastasis in Patristic Theology," *TS* 54 [1993] 640).

salvation of all. Such a hope is not an idle posture but constitutes a moral imperative to act in such a way that all will be saved.

While the Commission's emphasis on the real possibility of hell is certainly legitimate, its message would have been "good news" had it taken into consideration contemporary reflections on the possibility of universal restoration.[75]

NEW APPROACHES AND DIRECTIONS

In this concluding part I will first summarize what seems to be secure data that Christian eschatology must accept, and then briefly indicate newer approaches that it would do well to incorporate so as to reflect contemporary religious experience more adequately.

The International Theological Commission has rendered a great service by alerting us to three dangers in contemporary eschatology, namely, loss of the sense of the transcendent and the mysterious, pervasive doubt of certain fundamental articles of the Christian faith regarding eternal life, and one-sided focus on the sociopolitical dimension of human existence. *Questions in Eschatology* has also made a significant contribution by formulating fundamental eschatological principles: the resurrection of Jesus as the cause and model of our own resurrection, the difference between reanimation and resurrection, resurrection as affecting the whole individual, resurrection as an ecclesial and cosmic event, radical continuity and discontinuity between the present life and eternal life, and the *lex orandi* as the *locus theologicus* for eschatology.[76] Finally, the document has also offered useful insights into hermeneutics, death, and purgatory.

Besides these fundamental principles, I would also underline the five lessons which Giorgio Gozzelino derives from his analysis of contemporary eschatology: (1) Despite the reticence of many theologians and preachers to speak about eschatological realities, eschatology *must* be spoken of, for without it the "good news" cannot be proclaimed integrally. (2) Despite a tendency of many theologians to speak only of the *eschaton,* eschatology must refer to both the *eschaton* and the *eschata* on the basis of Scripture. (3) To avoid fragmentation in eschatology, the various eschatological realities must be based on Christology, and the various themes must be coordinated with and related to Jesus' resurrection and the resurrection of the dead. (4) To avoid irrelevance, eschatology must show the import of all eschatological realities for the *present* life of Christians and highlight their *salvific*

[75] For reflections on apocatastasis as an object of hope, see Phan, *Eternity in Time* 152–56.

[76] See the section *Universally Agreeable Statements,* 513–14 above.

significance. (5) Eschatology must create favorable existential conditions for an understanding and acceptance of eschatological truths; it does so by pointing to the witness value of real Christian lives.[77]

I fully subscribe to these directives. However, I would add another one: Eschatology must be done in the context of interreligious dialogue. It is well known that images of afterlife are not the exclusive preserve of Christianity, nor has Christian eschatology been innocent of images and ideas of eschatology found in other world religions. It is imperative, therefore, that a discourse on Christian eschatology be informed and enriched by a genuine conversation with eschatological beliefs of other faiths. I have explored possibilities of this kind in such issues as reincarnation and apocatastasis.[78]

Beyond these general directives, there are approaches in contemporary eschatology that, if critically appropriated, could significantly enrich the Commission's expositions. Of course, it is impossible to expound these recent eschatologies here, even in a cursory fashion. My intention is to indicate where and how they can renew traditional eschatology. The first approach is liberationist.[79] Traditional eschatology was predominantly preoccupied with the eternal destiny of the individual. As the result, its focus was one-sidedly individualistic and otherworldly. On the contrary, an adequate Christian eschatology must enfold the implications of belief in the afterlife not only for the individual's eternal destiny, but also for the promotion of justice and peace and for the transformation of society.[80] Though this strand of eschatology runs the risk of horizontalism which focuses exclusively on innerworldly realities (what *Questions in Eschatology* refers to as "temporal messianism"[81]), it can contribute, when elaborated by such

[77] See "Problemi e compiti dell'escatologia contemporanea," *Salesianum* 54 (1992) 91–98.

[78] Attempts to reflect on Christian eschatology in the context of interreligious dialogue are John Hick's *Death and Eternal Life* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1976) and Ninian Smart and Steven Konstantine, *Christian Systematic Theology in a World Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991) 294–99.

[79] *Questions in Eschatology* briefly mentions liberationist eschatology only to warn readers of the danger of "temporal messianism" (211–12).

[80] See Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, trans. Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1988) 121–40. This chapter is entitled "Eschatology and Politics." See also J. B. Libanio & María Clara Bingemer, *Escatologia Crista* (Petropolis: Vozes, 1985). For a discussion of recent liberation theology, see Peter C. Phan, "The Future of Liberation Theology," *The Living Light* 28 (1992) 259–71; "Peacemaking in Latin American Liberation Theology," *Eglise et Théologie* 24 (1993) 25–41; "Experience and Theology: An Asian Liberation Perspective," *Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft und Religionswissenschaft* 77 (1993) 97–121.

[81] See *Questions* 211.

theologians as Gustavo Gutiérrez and by the documents of Medellín and Puebla, to the renewal of the theology of hope as active anticipation of God, the Absolute Future of history; to the renewal of utopia as denunciation of the existing order and proclamation of what is not yet; to the renewal of a Christian spirituality in which salvation and liberation, faith and political activism, worship and solidarity with the oppressed are seen as two sides of the same coin.[82]

Also inspired by the liberationist motif is the second approach, namely, feminist eschatology. Traditional eschatology paid inordinate attention to the survival of the soul after its separation from the body, and typically had a hard time upholding the ontological unity of the human person. Consequently, it tended to lose sight of the collective destiny of the whole human race and denigrate matter and the human body, in particular the female body. Rosemary Radford Ruether critiques traditional eschatology for its typically male focus on the survival and immortality of the individual rather than on that of the whole of humanity. Furthermore, she chastises it for its ambiguity toward the female risen body which, according to some theologians (e.g. Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine), will be transformed in some mysterious way so that it no longer excites lust or is fit for childbearing. Finally, she suggests that eschatology abandon the linear model of historical progression and adopt a different model of hope and change based on conversion. This conversion is a person's movement toward the center, conversion to other human beings and to the earth, rather than a flight into an unrealizable future to the neglect of the present life.[83]

The mention of conversion to the earth hints at the third approach to eschatology, namely, ecological theology. In traditional eschatology, heaven was often presented as an individual's face-to-face beatific vision of the divine essence *nude, clare, et aperte*. Even when it included the cosmos in the process of salvation ("the new heavens and the new earth"), the perspective was heavily anthropocentric, that is, it viewed the redeemed cosmos mainly as the new habitat for the glorified humanity. Furthermore, it failed to draw ethical implications for our conduct toward the earth and its resources. It has been argued that Western Christian theology, with its heritage of classical Neoplatonism and Jewish apocalypticism, its anthropocentric bias, and its em-

[82] For a discussion of the linkage between these two sets of realities in liberation theology, see Phan, "Peacemaking in Latin American Liberation Theology."

[83] See *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon, 1983) 235–58; "Eschatology and Feminism," in *Lift Every Voice: Constructing Christian Theologies from the Underside*, ed. Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite and Mary Potter Engel (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1990) 111–24.

phasis on the domination of nature by means of technology has been hostile to the environment.[84] Whatever the truth of this charge may be, it is imperative that in our nuclear age, given our unprecedented ability to obliterate life itself, eschatology must reflect on the place and role of humans in the cosmos and on the fate of the universe in the endtime.[85]

Sallie McFague concludes her most recent book[86] with a chapter on eschatology in which she argues that we humans have been *decentered* as the point and goal of creation and *recentered* as God's partners in helping creation grow and prosper in our tiny part of God's body. She outlines five principles of ecological eschatology to replace the "dualistic, hierarchical, consumer-oriented, individualistic, anthropocentric, modern paradigm."[87] Her five principles are these: radical interdependence and independence of each on and from all, and unity in diversity of all with and from all; appropriate living within this scheme of things in which "ecological sin"—wanting to have all for oneself and one's kind—is avoided; salvation understood as satisfaction of the basic needs of all; solidarity with the oppressed; and a view of human beings as called to be stewards of life on this planet and to side with the oppressed life-forms on earth.[88]

Lastly, underlying and supporting both feminist and ecological eschatologies is process eschatology based on the thought of Alfred North Whitehead and Charles Hartschorne. Traditional eschatology tended to view humans as self-enclosed monads and lacked a sense of the dynamic nature of the afterlife. Process eschatology highlights the relational and evolving nature of all reality, including the divine. It

[84] See, e.g., Lynn White, Jr., "The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis," *Science* 155 (1967) 1203–7; Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Liberation Theology: Human Hope Confronts Christian History and American Power* (New York: Paulist, 1972). A more nuanced view is offered by H. Paul Santmire, *The Travail of Nature: The Ambiguous Ecological Promise of Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992). Santmire notes the co-existence of two motifs in the history of theology which he calls the "spiritual motif" and the "ecological motif." The former emphasizes the human person's transcendence over nature, whereas the latter emphasizes his or her rootedness and embodiment in the world.

[85] See Gordon Kaufman, "Nuclear Eschatology," in *Theology for a Nuclear Age* (Manchester: Manchester University, 1985) 1–15; John B. Cobb, Jr., *Is It Too Late? A Theology of Ecology* (New York: Bruce, 1972). For reflections on theology and the ecological crisis as a moral problem, see Peter C. Phan, "Pope John Paul II and the Ecological Crisis," forthcoming in *Irish Theological Quarterly*.

[86] See *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993).

[87] Ibid. 202.

[88] See ibid. 198–202. McFague goes on to elaborate the kind of ethical behavior appropriate to this ecological eschatology and the role of the Church as sign of the new creation in bringing about this organic vision of the world as the body of God.

also emphasizes the radical openness of human history and the essential connection between humans and the environment.[89] Furthermore, it underscores three themes of Christian eschatology, namely, forgiveness of sins in the reign of God, reversal of oppressive structures, and renewal of the earth.[90]

In conclusion, it is clear that Christian eschatology has entered a new era in which another framework is required for interpreting both the *eschaton* and the *eschata*. Interreligious dialogue, liberation theology, feminist thought, ecological theology, the new physics, and process philosophy impel the theologian to take up once again the never-ending task of *cogitatio fidei*. These contemporary developments are fertile fields from which new insights can be harvested toward an eschatology that is both faithful to Christian sources and adequate for our times.

[89] See John B. Cobb, Jr., and David Ray Griffin, *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976), chap. 7 entitled "Eschatology." Cobb and Griffin summarize the main features of process eschatology as follows: "There is agreement that human life is more than a succession of events between birth and death, that God aims at personal life as the condition of intensities of experience, that God saves what can be saved. There is assurance that death and perpetual perishing are not the last word. But there remains a profound mystery which even Whitehead's intuition could not penetrate" (124).

[90] See Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, *God, Christ, Church: A Practical Guide to Process Theology* (New York: Crossroad, 1989) 183–98; see also her work dealing with evil in process eschatology, *The End of Evil: Process Eschatology in Historical Context* (Albany: State University of New York, 1988).