

Death as Transformation

A Contemporary Theology of Death

HENRY L. NOVELLO

The Flinders University of South Australia, Australia

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Introduction

The Open-Ended Nature of History

A key tenet of Christian faith is that the crucifixion of the Son of God is a unique death by means of which the powers of sin and death in the world have been conquered so that the future is marked by the promise of the plenitude of life to come in the 'new creation' which will glorify the Father, through the Son, in the Spirit. In the past, however, the good news of the coming of the 'Saviour of the world' (Jn 4:42) was often portrayed in juridical-forensic categories that conveyed a certainty with respect to the majority of sinners being destined to suffer the eternal punishments of hell while a baptized minority would be saved from God's wrathful condemnation of sinners. When one surveys the major works in contemporary theology, by contrast, it would be fair to say that a general consensus is apparent amongst theologians, both Catholic and Protestant, who treat statements about heaven and hell in terms of a basic asymmetry: in light of the triumph of the Crucified One over the powers of death in the world, 'The *possibility* of hell stands in stark contrast with the *reality* of heaven.'¹ A prominent feature of the contemporary theological scene is that grace is treated as the exclusive point of departure in the conception of the God-world relationship, and one of the limitations of this book is that its investigations are confined to contemporary theology. There are no historical surveys that disclose what is to be found in the earlier theological tradition in respect of the nature and scope of redemption in Jesus Christ. This study is concerned with the formulation of a theology of death which hinges on the key principle that not only life, but also death in a special and privileged way, is the location of relationship to God through Christ the Saviour, hence it is intended as a contribution to speculative theology.² It is contended that the saving significance of the life, death and resurrection of Christ is communicated to all at death by virtue of our humanity being ontologically joined to the humanity of the Son.

When we examine the New Testament we find that there is only one explicit mention (Acts 3:21) of the time in which God will finally bring about all that was

¹ Zachary Hayes, 'Hell', in *The New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Joseph A. Komonchak, Mary Collins and Dermot A. Lane (Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier, 1987), p. 459. See also Zachary Hayes, *Visions of a Future: A Study of Christian Eschatology* (Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier, 1989), pp. 186–9.

² The present study is an elaboration of the issues raised in an article of mine entitled 'Death As Privilege', *Gregorianum*, 84/4 (2003): pp. 779–827.

spoken by the mouth of the prophets of old.³ Notwithstanding this fact, there is no shortage of texts, to be found mostly in Paul and John, which express the universal scope of God's saving action in the person of Jesus the Messiah, risen from the dead. A prominent Pauline text, for example, is 1 Corinthians 15:22, where Paul says, 'For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive', while perhaps the most significant and beautiful of the Johannine texts is John 12:32 where Jesus says, 'And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.' From the perspective of the Christ-event, what has been made known to us is the mystery of God's will 'to unite all things' in Christ (Eph 1:10) in whom 'the fullness of God was pleased to dwell' (Col 1:19; 2:9), so that through him all things are reconciled to God (Col 1:20) and made 'new' (Rev 21:5). Therefore, on the basis of the presence of the Risen One in the Spirit, the Christian faith proclaims that God desires all men and women 'to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth' (1 Tim 2:4) and 'become partakers of the divine nature' (2 Pet 1:4; cf. 2 Cor 3:18).

Yet at the same time, given the seriousness with which human freedom is treated in Scripture, we find just as many texts, especially in the Gospel of Matthew, that affirm eternal punishment for the wicked at the end of time (e.g. Mt 25:46). What is more, the notion of eternal punishment is upheld not only in the biblical writings but also in the official creeds and confessions of the churches. The Athanasian Creed, Fourth Lateran Council (Canon 1), the Augsburg Confession (ch. 17), the Second Helvetic Confession (ch. 26), the Westminster Confession (ch. 33), and the Dordrecht Confession (art. 18), all affirm eternal torment for the unrepentant sinner. This means that the biblical writings, together with the creeds and confessions of the churches, are all characterized by a fundamental tension constituted by the definitive conquest of sin and death in the person of Christ – 'objective' redemption – on the one hand, and the need for sinners to willingly receive the gracious offer of eschatological salvation in Christ – 'subjective' redemption – on the other.

This study is the result of wrestling with this basic Christian conundrum and it takes the view, as does Jürgen Moltmann, that this dispute cannot be resolved by appealing only to scriptural texts but must include theological arguments that highlight the qualitative difference between God's decision 'for us' in the crucified and risen Christ and human decisions for faith or disbelief.⁴ The author was motivated not only by the need to reflect in what ways this basic impasse at the heart of the Christian faith might be transcended – without, of course, dissolving

³ Hans Schwarz rightly points out that Acts 3:21 is not the best text upon which to base the idea of a universal homecoming, since Peter in this text has in view the fulfilment of the Old Testament promises. Texts such as 1 Corinthians 15:22 provide a more solid basis for the notion of universal salvation in Jesus Christ. Hans Schwarz, *Eschatology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 2000), p. 338.

⁴ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology*, tr. Margaret Kohl (London: SCM Press, 1996), pp. 240–46, at p. 245.

the mystery of God's action in Christ – but also by the exigency to suggest how Christians might more effectively proclaim the universality of the Christ-event in the context of interreligious dialogue, in an age of postmodern pluralism, and in a time of heightened suffering and instability in our world.

One of the key magisterial statements which prompted the author to investigate the saving power of the paschal mystery of Christ is to be found in the Second Vatican Council's 'Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World' which states that 'since Christ died for all, and since all are in fact called to one and the same destiny, which is divine, we must hold that the Holy Spirit offers to all the possibility of being made partners, in a way known to God, in the paschal mystery' (*Gaudium et Spes* 22).⁵ There are a number of important points that emerge from this key statement in respect of the project undertaken in this book. Firstly, talk of being called to one and the same divine destiny is primarily *ontological language*, which reflects a significant move of the Council away from excessively juridical and forensic language used in the past. Secondly, the one final destiny of humanity as a whole is talked about in terms of 'being made partners' in the paschal mystery of Christ, which recalls the patristic principle of the wondrous or admirable exchange (*admirabile commercium*) of natures in the person of Christ. The latter principle is clearly in evidence in the Council's 'Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation' where it is stated that God's will is that we humans 'should have access to the Father, through Christ, the Word made flesh, in the Holy Spirit, and thus become sharers in the divine nature' (*Dei Verbum* 2).⁶

Thirdly, the Council's statement is not purely christological but is made within a *pneumatological framework*: it is through the universal presence of the Spirit that God the Father offers to all the possibility of becoming partners in the paschal mystery of Christ the Son. Once it is appreciated, moreover, that the Spirit is the principle of God's self-communication to the world, then it becomes apparent that the traditional Logos Christology needs to be complemented by a Spirit Christology which does full justice to the fact that Jesus of Nazareth is the Son of the Father in the power of the Spirit (cf. Lk 1:35). The importance of recognizing the integral role that the Spirit plays in Jesus' life and mission to Israel is at least threefold: firstly, the life of Jesus is more effectively portrayed as a truly human life open to the promptings of the Spirit as God's self-communication in time and history; secondly, the notion of Jesus as the one who possesses the Spirit in eschatological fullness serves to effectively highlight the continuity of his life and mission with the history of Israel and Jewish expectations; and, thirdly, attention is drawn to the need to think of the divinity of Jesus not as an inner core of his person but in strictly relational and trinitarian terms as his total receptivity to his Father's will through the mediation of the Spirit which he possesses in eschatological fullness.

⁵ Austin Flannery (ed.), *Vatican Council II*, vol. 1, *The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, revised edn (Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1988), p. 924.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 750–51.

There is a fourth and final point which emerges from the Council's statement cited above, namely, it is asserted that all are offered through the Spirit the possibility of being made partners in the paschal mystery 'in a way known to God' – the Council does not say 'in a way known *only* to God', in which case we are permitted to reflect theologically on how all might partake of the paschal mystery of Christ as their final destiny. The call to freedom associated with the Christian faith is a freedom not only of the person and action, but also a freedom of thought. Freedom of theological thought is especially problematic, however, given the sheer weight of the doctrinal tradition which inevitably gives rise to anxiety in all theological systems. The Scriptures, the Creeds, the history of doctrine, the various confessional writings, Denzinger's *Enchiridion* and the pastoral concern not to unduly disturb the faithful, all set formidable standards and limits to the *fides quaerens intellectum*. Nonetheless, new insights in theology do inevitably occur as the fuller meaning of the apostolic faith is drawn out gradually over time by the lived experience of the worshipping faithful. This book clearly reflects the anxieties and tensions that arise from the formidable standards that every theologian must face in carrying out their investigations, yet it is committed to the task of addressing problem areas that arise in connection with the basic tenet regarding the significance of Christ's paschal mystery for the attainment of personal identity, real freedom, and ontological perfection. The latter call for a new line of inquiry, particularly given the fact that baptized Christians experience the perfection of Christian life as elusive and the lion's share of the human population is not Christian. According to Vatican II, those who are not baptized into Christ cannot be said to be 'incorporated' into Christ, although it is permissible to speak of them as being 'related' to Christ if they are moved by grace in their hearts and live according to the 'dictates of their conscience' (*Lumen Gentium* 16).⁷ To be moved by grace, though, is to affirm that God is present through the activity of the Spirit living within people's hearts, hence Vatican II is saying that those non-Christians who respond to the promptings of the Spirit are related to Christ and to the Church of Christ, and may attain eternal salvation by partaking of the paschal mystery of Christ (cf. *Gaudium et Spes* 22).

The theory of resurrection at death developed in this study is intended to be a theological response to the fundamental issue of how Christians can intelligibly hold to the claim that Christ is the Saviour of the world, the One in whom all things hold together and are brought to full flowering. In light of Scripture's testimony that the powers of death in the world have been conquered by Christ's unique death on Calvary, it strikes the author that when our own death is conceived as a dying into Christ who has assumed our death into his death, it is simply inadequate to view death in purely negative or neutral terms; rather, such an 'event' acquires a distinctly positive flavour as the hope of new life out of a situation of death (cf. Rom 4:17, 6:5; Rev 14:13). New life out of the abyss of death means that something *transformative* happens to the person at death, in which case the

⁷ Austin Flannery (ed.), *Vatican Council II*, vol. 1, p. 367.

traditional Catholic teaching that the person or soul is unaffected by death is challenged by the author, as is the Protestant tendency to ascribe no significance to death because personal existence ceases at the time of death until the Final Judgement when those who belong to Christ will share in the glory of eternal life. In Catholic theology today, the personal element of death as a dying into Christ is often aptly described in terms of ‘encounter’⁸ with God, although this terminology too suffers from a shortcoming inasmuch as it implies that the person must make a final choice of eternal significance regarding their salvation or perdition in the encounter with Christ. The result is that human freedom is presented as the truly ‘last thing’, not God the Father’s unfathomable gift of the Son and the Spirit who are his ‘two hands’ (Irenaeus of Lyons) in the divine economy of creation and salvation.

In light of this limitation pertaining to the language of encounter with Christ at death, the author came to the view that the principle of admirable exchange of natures in Christ, which was used by the Church Fathers to express the essence of the Christian faith as the ‘divinization’ of humanity in his person, is better able to convey the primacy of God’s freedom in the economy of creation and salvation, not human freedom – otherwise what hope could be entertained for the world? When death is reflected upon in terms of our being ‘drawn up’ (cf. Jn 12:32) into the wondrous exchange of natures in the person of Christ, the stress falls very much on what God in his sovereign freedom has done for us, in order that we might enjoy true freedom (*libertas*) as sons and daughters of God in the Son of God (*fili in Filio*). Integral to formulating this view of death as the gift of being drawn up into the exchange of natures in Christ, moreover, is the contention that the exchange of natures reaches its zenith in the paschal mystery of Christ. This study therefore proposes a gradual or progressive view of the Incarnation of the eternal Word, which repudiates the static (ahistorical) and simple picture of the assumption of humanity by the Word of God as completed at the moment of Jesus’ conception in Mary’s womb. What is presented is a dynamic and complex picture of the Incarnation as involving the following dimensions: the *ontological* aspect acknowledges Jesus as the eternal Word of God; the *historical* element gives due recognition to Jesus’ individuality as unfolding in the context of concrete happenings in his proclamation of the kingdom of God; and the *pneumatological*

⁸ Ladislaus Boros, for instance, proposes that death is a completely personal act because the final decision about one’s eternal destiny is made at death in the encounter with God. Ladislaus Boros, *The Moment of Truth: Mysterium Mortis* (London: Burns & Oates, 1965), pp. ix, 84, 165. Boros builds on the work of Rahner who contends that death is not merely suffered passively but involves ‘an active consummation from within brought about by the person himself.’ Karl Rahner, *On a Theology of Death*, tr. C.H. Henkey, 2nd edn (London: Burns & Oates, 1965), p. 30. A notable difference between the transcendental theologies of death formulated by Rahner and Boros is that for Rahner the consummation of freedom takes place on this side of death, whereas for Boros the final decision takes place in the encounter with God at death.

aspect attributes due significance to the fact that Jesus is the Son of God in the Spirit and that the Spirit is actuated in new ways at different stages in Jesus' life. All these interrelated dimensions are portrayed as reaching a climactic point in the paschal mystery of Jesus Christ.

In this complex picture of a progressive Incarnation, the union of Christ's humanity with the Father is understood as perfected on Calvary where he 'learned' perfect obedience as the Son (cf. Heb 5:8–9), while the power of the Spirit is actuated in a new way in the Son's resurrection from the dead (cf. Rom 1:4) where we see his humanity raised to the glory of the 'imperishable' (cf. 1 Cor 15:42) which constitutes a 'new creation' (cf. 2 Cor 5:17). In such a perspective, what takes place in the exchange of natures in the person of Christ is the 'union of life and death for the sake of life'⁹ so that God reveals himself definitively in the Son's 'going to the dead'¹⁰ and in the Spirit's raising of the Son from the dead (Rom 8:11). It is the resurrection of Christ that reveals what salvation in his person ultimately consists of and this study argues, in support of scholars such as F.X. Durrwell,¹¹ that Easter Sunday should not be viewed merely as God's vindication of the crucified Christ. The term 'nature', moreover, is not employed in this study in a static or closed sense but in a dynamic and open sense that highlights the divine as the 'event' of inner-trinitarian love and pure self-giving that encompasses temporality and mutability, and the human as the 'event' of God's self-bestowal in grace and thus as an emerging reality that is destined to partake of the glory of Christ's resurrection from the dead.

The title of this book is designed to convey the view that death is a special locus for entering into new relations with the Creator of all that is. In the Old

⁹ Eberhard Jüngel, *God As the Mystery of the World: On the Foundation of the Theology of the Crucified One in the Dispute between Theism and Atheism*, tr. Darrell L. Guder (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1983), p. 299. In view of the cross of Christ, God must be thought as being in union with all that is perishable and temporal, 'as having identified the divine self with the struggle between being and non-being, for the sake of life. Jüngel contends that the 'death of God' (Holy Saturday) is the story to be told by the Christian community of faith, which points to a positive element of *possibility* in the process of change and becoming, in contrast to Greek thought which is only capable of attributing negative characteristics – the decay into nothingness – to the temporal world.

¹⁰ Hans Urs von Balthasar states his preference for speaking of Christ's 'going' to the dead rather than Christ's 'descending' to the realm of the dead, because the former suggests no activity of Christ and thus the passivity of death and the situation of utter powerlessness in which Christ finds himself on Holy Saturday. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale: The Mystery of Easter* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1993), p. 150. The self-emptying of the Son reaches its climax on Holy Saturday when the dead Christ wholly identifies with the human condition 'from within' so as to redeem it conclusively and raise it to the glory of eternal life.

¹¹ F.X. Durrwell, *The Resurrection: A Biblical Study*, tr. Rosemary Sheed (London: Sheed & Ward, 1960), chs. 1 and 2. Durrwell argues on biblical grounds that Christ's resurrection is the fulfilment of the Incarnation.

Testament the earthly life is regarded as the locus of relationship to God, but when we come to the New Testament where the Crucified One is at the heart of the ‘good news’ of final salvation in his person, not only life but also death is now affirmed as the locus of relationship to God. In light of the Crucified One’s conquest of the powers of death in the world, the New Testament requires us to think of divinity in terms of pure self-giving in merciful and sovereign love and of humanity as the event of God’s self-giving in grace.¹² A particular difficulty associated with the development of the argument in this study, needless to say, is how to do justice to the human act of appropriating God’s objective salvation in Jesus Christ. The key to dealing with this difficulty will be the recognition of the qualitative difference between God’s freedom and human freedom, as well as the recognition of human freedom as essentially the capacity for God, and, finally, the acknowledgment that the event of death constitutes a new environment of complex interacting between the divine and the human so that human freedom does not operate in exactly the same way as it does in the pilgrim life prior to death. It is proposed in this study that all the dead attain true freedom as a dynamic ‘moment’ intrinsic to their being drawn up into the admirable exchange of natures in the person of Christ and divinized.

In addition to taking Christology as the central focus of theological inquiry, this study also takes the view that Christology should be reflected upon within the contemporary evolutionary perspective of the world as dynamic, processive and therefore ‘emergent.’ The proclamation of the Risen One as the *eschaton* or omega point of the movement of creation is particularly well suited to constructive dialogue with an evolutionary view of the world. In this dialogue, what is especially brought to our attention is the need to appreciate – against Neo-Scholastic thought – that grace is not extrinsic to nature. It is well worth listening to the beautiful way Gabriel Daly expresses this fundamental point in respect of the grace-nature relationship:

Grace is not a detached entity; it is something magnificent which happens to nature. It is nature lit by a new light and fired with a new vision. Whatever metaphor we choose, it should convey the image of suffusion not juxtaposition. We must take careful note of the ambiguity of the word ‘nature’ when it is used as one limb of the nature/supernature dialectic. If we take nature to mean essence or substance, neither grace nor sin can alter the nature of *homo sapiens* ... If, however, we take ‘nature’ in a non-essentialist sense, then nature *does*

¹² Karl Barth spoke of the ‘common actualization’ of divine and human essence in the concrete event of Christ. This study proposes that since in the person of Christ our human essence is conjoined with the divine essence, then our death as a dying into the atoning death of Christ should be thought as a salvific happening in which the common actualization of divine and human essence takes place in a conclusive manner.

change, and morality as well as physical evolution depends on this possibility. It is precisely *evolving* nature which makes the *humanum* possible.¹³

These words of Daly clearly repudiate the notion of ‘extrinsicism’, that is, the view of grace as a superstructure to which nature has only the negative relationship of non-contradiction, which gives rise to the possibility of viewing our daily lives purely within the substructure of nature, unaware of and largely unaffected by grace. Instead, Daly rightly insists that grace be thought of as intimately involved in the process of evolving nature, as ‘suffusing’ nature, but in a way which safeguards the distinctiveness of the two realities of grace and nature. The notion of evolving nature is an important one because it expresses the understanding that the process of becoming involves not merely the quantitatively more but also the qualitatively new, that is to say, a ‘higher nature.’

The notion of evolving nature is also supported by Karl Rahner in his reflections on Christology. To Rahner’s mind, matter develops out of its inner being, through a process of ‘active self-transcendence’, in the direction of spirit – self-consciousness, freedom, knowledge, transcendence towards God – and reaches a climactic point both in the emergence of the human being on the cosmic stage and in the event of the Incarnation of the Word.¹⁴ The notion of active self-transcendence is intended to convey the understanding that the process of becoming something qualitatively new is truly a *self-transcending*, yet at the same time it is the power of absolute being that is interior to the finite being in its becoming without, however, becoming a constituent element of finite being itself.¹⁵ This process of becoming, since it involves an increase of being proper to the previously existing reality, is described by Rahner as ‘a leap to a higher nature’ since the emergent species has greater ontological reality.¹⁶ With regard to the Incarnation of the Word, Rahner therefore maintains that this event is at one and the same time the climax of the process of

¹³ Gabriel Daly, *Creation and Redemption* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1988), p. 132.

¹⁴ Rahner’s position is set forth in the following writings: ‘Christology Within an Evolutionary View of the World’, *Theological Investigations* 5, tr. Karl-H. Kruger (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1966), pp. 157–92; ‘The Unity of Spirit and Matter in the Christian Understanding of Faith’, *Theological Investigations* 6, tr. Karl-H. and Boniface Kruger (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1969), pp. 153–77, at pp. 174–6; and *Foundations of Christian Faith*, tr. William V. Dych (New York: Crossroad, 1978), pp. 81–9.

¹⁵ Rahner intends to stress that God’s immanence in the world is not merely a conserving power, but a power of becoming in collaboration with matter. He bases his understanding on the Thomistic doctrine of primary and second causality: God as ‘primary’ cause continually imparts existence at the level of being to all contingent and finite things (*conservatio*), but God’s continuous action as absolute being does not interfere with the actions of a particular creature as ‘secondary’ cause, doing whatever it is inclined to do naturally (*concursus*). God, however, is not present in all things as an essential part of them, but as maintaining them in their being. See *Summa Theologica* I, ques. 105, art. 5; ques. 10, arts. 4, 8; ques. 45, art. 5; *Contra Gentiles* III, chs. 66, 67, 70.

¹⁶ Rahner, ‘Christology Within an Evolutionary View’, p. 164.

active self-transcendence towards higher levels of being as well as the climax of God's self-communication in grace to the world. The mystery of the Incarnation should therefore be treated ontologically as the goal of the evolution of matter towards spirit that has been occurring for billions of years, for the body of Christ was made up of the same chemical elements common to the world as a whole and the same genetic elements common to all humanity.

The writings of Daly and Rahner serve to underscore the fundamental point that the purpose of the Incarnation of the Word cannot be restricted to the remedial work of forgiveness of sins; rather, it must be elaborated in terms of the constructive work of elevating the whole of reality to a higher nature, that is, to a higher ontological level of glorious communion and union with God. Put more simply, the Incarnation has to do with the *formation of being*. In this picture, the living God appears from all eternity as having predestined evolving nature to a glorious final flowering in the Son, through the Spirit, so that the first divine thought was self-bestowal in grace to humanity and the world, which presupposes a capacity and openness towards the divine on the part of evolving nature. What we are dealing with here, in other words, is an 'ontology of grace' which points to the created world as the stuff of sacrament, as charged with the Spirit of life. The potential of evolving nature to be the sacrament of God's self-communicating presence is fully realized in the person of Christ, the incarnate Son, and the saving benefits of this definitive actualization of creation's potentiality continues today, through the Spirit of the Risen One, in the Church of Christ.

Rahner's argument about how matter develops in the direction of spirit highlights the need today to embrace an ecological model of the one world. If the higher nature always contains the lower which had prepared the way for the actual event of self-transcendence, then the world must be affirmed as a fundamental unity in which everything is linked to everything else. The ecological model represents a shift away from substance thinking and external relations – a mechanistic model – towards event thinking where what is sought is the 'explanation of behaviour at one level in terms of behaviour at other levels and to recognize that behaviour at one level is to be accounted for in terms of complex interacting ... [which] ... is an event, not a substance.'¹⁷ Event thinking views relations as *internal* to events, which means that things or substantial objects are not regarded as existing independently and then subsequently entering into relation with their environments; instead, the explanation of things is presented in terms of the patterns of interconnectedness among events.¹⁸ The full meaning of internal relatedness is highlighted in the case

¹⁷ C. Birch and J.B. Cobb, *The Liberation of Life: From the Cell to the Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 86.

¹⁸ As we move up levels of organization in nature – electrons, atoms, molecules, cells, tissues, organs, etc. – the properties of each larger whole are determined not merely by the units of which it is composed, but also by the *new relations* between the units. This means that properties of matter relevant at, say, the atomic level, cannot predict the properties of matter at the cellular level. Evolution is not simply a rearrangement of the parts, but

of the human being who, uniquely endowed with capacities for rational, moral and spiritual activity, which are emergent properties, takes account of the world and responds to it. The human being is not merely the product of its genetic endowment and its environment, for the human is always also a creative response to these conditions as it strives to transcend the actual given situation to meet its unrealized possibilities and potentialities. This implies that human nature cannot be thought of as a closed system, it does not refer to a definitively known quantity, but rather to an unfolding and emerging reality: it must be thought of in dynamic terms as the quest for a higher nature. In the Christian perspective, the risen Christ is the qualitatively ‘new emergent whole’¹⁹ in whose person humanity and the world have been raised to ontological perfection and to a dignity beyond compare. The reality of being incorporated into Christ, then, means that the human person is introduced into a new set of complex relations involving God, humankind and the cosmos as a whole, and becomes truly ‘alive’ to the ontological reality of their newly acquired higher nature.

It is significant to note that Vatican II emphasized the eschatological character of the Church more than in earlier magisterial documents when it adopted the image of the pilgrim ‘People of God’ (*Lumen Gentium* 9–17) moving toward the ultimate fullness to come, as well as the notion of the Church as the ‘universal sacrament of salvation’ (*Lumen Gentium* 1, 48). The Church is the universal sacrament of salvation by virtue of the fact that it is the sacrament of Christ who has ‘in a certain way united himself with each person’ (*Gaudium et Spes* 22) inasmuch as he is ‘the goal of human history, the focal point of the desires of history and civilization, the centre of humankind, the joy of all hearts, and the fulfilment of all aspirations’ (*Gaudium et Spes* 45). By adopting these images, the Council clearly viewed the life of the Church within a cosmic perspective, for the vision is that of the world’s and the Church’s final transfiguration into the glorified life of the risen Lord. The Church as the sacrament of Christ does not exhaust the mystery of God; rather, it makes sacramentally present God’s grace in Christ, through the Spirit, and symbolically points toward the fullness of life to come as ‘sharers in the divine nature’ (*Dei Verbum* 2, citing 2 Pet 1:4). The eschatological character of many of the statements made by Vatican II reflects a recovery of the biblical emphasis on the radically open-ended nature of history as directed toward a divinely-appointed end, notwithstanding the negative realities of sin, evil, injustice, debilitating illness and suffering in the world.

involves change within the parts and in the organism as a whole. See, for instance, Charles Birch, *On Purpose* (Kensington: New South Wales University Press, 1990), pp. 44–6.

¹⁹ See Henry Novello, ‘Integral Salvation in the Risen Christ: the New Emergent Whole’, *Pacifica*, 17/1 (2004): pp. 34–54.

Outline of the chapters

Against the backdrop of the biblical story where God's final salvation is understood as new life out of the abyss of death, Chapter 1 will concern itself with a christological discussion of how the opposites of being in the world have been transformed by the crucified and risen Christ. Central to this chapter will be the adoption of a literary approach to the Gospel story which calls attention to what a text means on its own terms. If the kerygma is regarded as the primary wellspring of Christology, if reflection on the mystery of Christ arises out of a living dialogue between the Risen One and the Christian community, in the Spirit, then such a personal response must be conveyed by rhetorical elements such as story. This story is not a history that seeks to establish empirical facts about the man Jesus, but rather a story that 'witnesses' to the actions of this unique man who has been glorified by God in his resurrection from the dead, and to the response of those who have committed their lives to the Lord Jesus Christ.

On the basis of the works of Hans W. Frei and Frans Jozef van Beeck, SJ, it will be argued that to fathom who Jesus is all we need is a 'realistic narrative' where persons are depicted as agents; the identity of Jesus develops out of the dynamic interplay of his intentions in enacting his Father's will on the one hand, and the response of his increasingly hostile surroundings on the other. What will emerge is the view that Jesus' very isolation brings about his individuality, for he is the one who willingly accepts the rejection of his opponents so that he becomes their Representative before God the Father. The assumption of humanity in the person of Jesus Christ will therefore be treated as a matter of sustained relationship to his rejectors, the wellspring of which is his personal unity with the Father in love, so that it is precisely in his radical love of enemies (Mt 5:44) that the fullness of humanity in his person is revealed. The tide of isolation and rejection that Jesus experiences culminates in his crucifixion, and Chapter 1 will offer a theological interpretation of Jesus' cry on the cross which is intended to show that Jesus dies not only at the hands of a sinful world, but also at the hands of the Father who delivers him up to God-forsakenness – the Son is the 'sin-bearer' – for the sake of bringing sinners home to God. On this interpretation, the identity of the man Jesus is not given from the very beginning but is to be spoken of in consistently relational terms that convey the significance of his life in itself, which reaches its zenith in the formation of the 'new man' in whom the effectiveness of the Spirit is actuated in a new way in his glorious resurrection from the dead. Martin Buber's thesis regarding the I-Thou relation will also be used to bolster the argument regarding Jesus' relational identity, and to show the shortcomings of the classical Logos-Christology.

The assumption-Christology elaborated in Chapter 1 will also serve to highlight the inadequacy of the notion of 'surrendered attributes' in relation to the mystery of God's kenotic self-emptying in the event of Jesus Christ. The emphasis on the relational character of Jesus' identity will lend its support to a divine ontology according to which no disjunction exists between what God eternally is and what God does in time. As the One who loves in freedom, God has revealed the divine

essence in that God suffers and dies in the assumed flesh of the incarnate Word for the sake of the reconciliation of the world with God and the establishment of the 'new creation,' according to the eternal covenant of grace. As Paul says about the man Jesus, 'For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily' (Col 2:9). Given that what takes place in the event of Jesus Christ is the 'common actualization' of divine and human essence in his person, the first chapter will conclude that the Crucified One is our Representative before God the Father, the One in whom each human life-time is elevated to blessed union with the Father. The contention that the common actualization of divine and human essence in Jesus Christ comes to a climax on Calvary will also serve to underline the basic point that not only life but also death must now be seen as the location of relationship to the living God.

While the findings in Chapter 1 will bring to light the personal and trinitarian aspect of the christological mystery, the discussion, as often tends to be the case in Christology, is restricted mainly to the persons of the Son and the Father. But what role does the Holy Spirit play in the christological mystery? In the tradition of Western theology, reference to the Spirit is made especially in regard to ecclesiology and the Christian life, but the role of the Spirit in Christology proper has not been given much attention. In Chapter 2 it will become apparent that an increasing number of theologians are beginning to recognize that the relationship between Jesus and the Spirit cannot be neglected in conveying the truth of the christological mystery, hence they are becoming advocates of a Spirit-Christology. The latter type of Christology will be presented in this study not as an alternative to the traditional Logos-Christology, though, but as a necessary complement to it.

The validity of this position concerning the role of Spirit in the christological mystery becomes readily apparent when we take stock of key biblical and creedal statements such as the following: the promise of Yahweh in the Old Testament is to pour out his Spirit on all flesh (Joel 2:28); the witnesses to Jesus' life and mission confess him as the person uniquely filled with the fullness of the Spirit (Acts 10:38); in the Gospel of Luke we read that Jesus is the Son of God in the Spirit (Lk 1:35); and the third article of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed confesses that the Spirit is the 'Lord and Giver of Life' who proceeds from the Father and the Son. Throughout the biblical story the Spirit features consistently as the life-giver, as indwelling the human spirit and elevating it towards God, thus it will be argued that the Spirit prepares evolving creation for the event of the Incarnation of the Word. The relationship between Jesus and God simply cannot be fathomed apart from the relationship between Jesus and the Spirit who is immanently present in creation, freely indwells human persons of all times and places, and comes to rest upon Jesus in eschatological fullness so that he inaugurates the messianic age of the kingdom of God. The divinity of Jesus, then, must be treated not only from the standpoint of his filial relation to the Father, which the argument in Chapter 1 highlights, but also from the perspective of his relation to the Spirit who is the principle of God's self-communication to the world. Jesus is the Son of the Father in the Spirit, which is how F.X. Durrwell states the matter, is a succinct and effective way of expressing this fundamental point.

The crux of Chapter 2 will be the argument that the Spirit, as the possibility of God, has the distinct and proper role of ‘drawing up’ all creatures into ecstatic communion and union with God through the representative action of Jesus Christ who is the Mediator between the Father and humanity. It will be contended, however, that it is precisely as the power of resurrection life (cf. Rom 8:11) that the Spirit will ultimately fulfil its proper role as bringer of ecstatic gift of divine communion to all. Central to the argument will be the need to appreciate that Jesus’ being raised from the dead should not be regarded merely as his vindication by God, for he was also ‘raised for our justification’ (Rom 4:25). His resurrection from the dead, then, has soteriological significance in addition to his atoning death on the cross. In light of this understanding, it will be argued that the resurrection involves a new stage in the actuation of the Spirit in the man Jesus – his humanity is fully divinized in his exaltation to the right hand of God – whereas Jesus’ death on the cross concerns the perfect union of Jesus’ humanity with the Father, for Jesus ‘learned’ perfect obedience to the Father through what he suffered.

With respect to the admirable exchange of natures in the person of Jesus Christ, this means that the exchange is completed neither at the moment of the Incarnation, nor on the cross or his descent into hell, but in Jesus’ resurrection from the dead. In respect of justification, moreover, which consists in the remission of our sins, the removal of guilt and the new life in Christ, this implies that the process should be considered not only as the work of Jesus on the cross but also as the work of the Spirit in whose power God raised Jesus from the dead. The admirable exchange of natures in Christ and the work of justification both take on a thoroughly trinitarian structure when the role of the Spirit in the christological mystery is acknowledged. This conclusion has important implications for a theological inquiry into the mystery of our own death as a dying into the risen Lord, and how God is working continually to bring to full flowering the new creation out of the existing creation (*creatio ex creatio*).

The argument developed in the first two chapters of this study will pave the way for Chapter 3 where contemporary theological writings on death will be critically reviewed. The discussion will focus on Karl Rahner, Hans Urs von Balthasar, Karl Barth, Eberhard Jüngel and Jürgen Moltmann, because their theological writings represent the richest sources for the development of a Christian theology of death. It will become clear in the third chapter that much contemporary theology does not adopt a wholly negative view of death as the end of this pilgrim life and as the wages of sin, but intends to counterbalance the traditional view by introducing a positive character to death which is now seen as having a changed value and as merely the ‘sign’ of God’s judgement on sin. The critical reviews of the various Christian perspectives on death will also serve to identify strengths and weaknesses in each on the basis of the arguments and main findings of the previous two chapters of this study. The strengths will be acknowledged as important and integral dimensions of a properly worked out theology of death, while the weaknesses identified will highlight the task of formulating a more comprehensive theology of death that acknowledges its truly trinitarian character and Christ’s

resurrection in the Spirit as integral to the mystery of salvation understood as participation in the new creation that has dawned in the Risen One.

The title of the final Chapter 4 is significant because it expresses the contribution of this study to the formulation of a theology of death. Death is defined as the privileged locus for being drawn up into the admirable exchange of natures in the person of Jesus Christ, an exchange that divinizes the human by elevating it to the glory of ecstatic union with God. Of central importance in the final chapter will be how to understand the terms 'divine nature' and 'human nature', which will serve as a basis for a critical discussion of the complex doctrine of the *communicatio idiomatum* – communication of the properties of each nature to the person of Christ. It will be argued that in order to avoid a dualistic understanding of the Chalcedonian definition, the unity of Christ's person requires that the communication of properties take place between the natures themselves via the person who is irreducible to either his divine or human nature, and that the exchange of natures must be truly reciprocal for eschatological salvation to occur – the divine participates in the human in order that the human might participate in the divine as its final destiny. The understanding that this process is completed in the paschal mystery of Christ suggests that our death, as the event of dying into Christ, should be considered as the privileged locus for receiving eschatological salvation and being created anew in the power of the Spirit of God who 'gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist' (Rom 4:17).

In light of the view that the admirable exchange of natures in the person of Christ has to do with the formation of creaturely being and thus involves the whole person, the third part of Chapter 4 will discuss the 'integral' character of salvation in Christ as involving physical, moral and eschatological dimensions which constitute a complex whole. These three interrelated dimensions of salvation, moreover, will be presented as corresponding to the three dimensions of personal identity; namely, person as agent (the length of one's history), person as relation (the breadth of one's relationships) and person as subject (the depth of one's self-reflection). By embracing this complex model of the human person, and by drawing upon insights offered by the ecological model of nature, the intention will be to advance the proposition that our death as a dying into the Lord Jesus Christ constitutes a *change of environment that establishes new relations* between God, self, humanity and the cosmos as a whole. Human freedom becomes definitive in this complex system, it will be argued, as a 'moment' which is intrinsic to the new ontological reality that opens up to the dead who are drawn up into Christ's paschal mystery, through the activity of the Spirit.

To conclude this introduction, it must be stressed that this book is clearly not intended to be the last word on the paschal mystery and the mystery of our own death as already assumed by Christ's saving death. Rather, the hope is that this study will give impetus not only to further theological reflection on how to intelligibly hold to the fundamental Christian tenet that Jesus, the crucified Messiah of Israel, is the Saviour of the world, but also to further inquiry into the nature, possibilities and limits of human freedom. On a more cautionary note, the reader may get

the impression from this book that ‘this world’ should not be accorded too much attention since it is preferable to direct our gaze wholly to the ‘world to come’ when God’s promises recounted in the biblical story will be made good. This is not the position adopted in this book.

Instead, following the thought of Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his book *The Cost of Discipleship*, which will be taken up in the Conclusion to this study, the intention is to emphasize that in the call to follow Christ the indissoluble unity between faith and obedience must always be upheld; that is, obedience to Christ’s commandment is constitutive of faith, hence true discipleship is always costly discipleship since it is the way of the cross, the way of unremitting compassionate love towards the other regardless of their attitude towards the disciple of Christ. At the same time, however, this understanding points to the limits of the actualization of the kingdom of God within history: the fact that the Messiah was rejected and suffered a violent death indicates the concrete reality of the powers of sin and death in this world, so that we must not think that human society will evolve ever upward and progress toward a golden age of complete justice, full enlightenment, perfect peace and boundless joy for all. To follow Christ in faithful obedience and attachment to his person is to be fully committed to proclaiming the Gospel in the here and now, while living in a fundamental tension between the ‘already’ and the ‘not yet’ of God’s reign in the world.

What is argued for in this book is that all are elevated to final union with God through the transformative event of death understood as the privileged locus for being drawn up into the admirable exchange of natures in Christ and created anew in the Spirit, to the glory of the Father. This life ends in the helplessness of death, but death presents itself as a special situation for revealing the gracious activity of God who, as Creator, brings about new life out of the abyss of death. If by the end of this book the reader is left with a deeper sense of the final graciousness of reality, of the inalienable worth of this laborious and fragmented pilgrim life which God will make whole by the workings of grace,²⁰ and begins to appreciate the need to adopt the fundamental attitude that what really matters in life is not so much what we expect of life but rather what life expects of us, as Viktor Frankl has insightfully highlighted in his celebrated book *Man’s Search For Meaning*, then the effort in writing this book will not have been in vain.²¹

²⁰ Moltmann stresses that every life remains indissolubly ‘before God’ and that entry into the finality of eternal life involves the totality of one’s personal history being reconciled, rectified, healed and completed by the grace of the all-merciful God. Moltmann, *The Coming of God*, pp. 70–71.

²¹ Viktor Frankl writes: ‘Ultimately, man should not ask what the meaning of his life is, but rather he must recognize that it is *he* who is asked. In a word, each man is questioned by life; and he can only answer to life by *answering for* his own life; to life he can only respond by being responsible.’ Viktor Frankl, *Man’s Search For Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy*, tr. Ilse Lasch (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1964), p. 111.