CHRISTIAN ESCHATOLOGY: PRESCRIPTION FOR LIFE

Byron C. Bangert
Bloomington, IN 47401

Pastor-Theologian Program Essay
April 20, 2000

The story is told of a landlubber who was taking a cruise on a storm-tossed sea. Glued to the railing, he had already lost most of his lunch and was in a miserable condition. The ship's doctor happened by and said, in a cheery voice, "Don't worry, my friend. Nobody ever died of sea-sicknesses." To which the poor wretch heaved back a weary reply, "Don't say that, Doc. It's only the hope of dying that's keeping me alive!"

What is the point of Christian eschatology? I suppose it serves various purposes. Human beings are inveterately curious. We want to know all kinds of things, including the future. We want to know how the story that is our life, our world, our universe, turns out. Human beings are also unique in knowing that they will die. We know that we may not be around to "see" how it all turns out. This is not a small thing. It is a burden we carry with us most of our lives. It is a weight of grief, to realize that we may not necessarily be witnesses at the "end" of the story. We may not even be around to see our grandchildren, or to see them marry, or to see our great-grandchildren. We may not be around to see what happens to the institutions we serve, the communities we have helped to create and build up, the projects we have begun. We must spend our entire lives not knowing what fruit our efforts will ultimately bear, or whether we have labored in vain. For all we know, the Preacher, Koheleth, is right: "Vanity, vanity, all is vanity." All may be no more than "a chasing after wind."[1]

Here is the problem that is unique to human beings: How are we to live in the face of the knowledge that we will die? We know that we will die, but our natural human tendency is to try to keep this knowledge from ourselves. And insofar as we cannot keep this truth from ourselves, we go to great lengths to deny its implications. As Ernest Becker wrote in the preface to his Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *The Denial of Death*, "the idea of death, the fear of it, haunts the human animal like nothing else; it is a mainspring of human activity--activity designed largely to avoid the fatality of death, to overcome it by denying in some way that is it the final destiny for man."[2] The problem becomes more acute in the face of the knowledge that all things, as we

---

[1]Ecclesiastes 1:2, 14

[2] The Free Press. Macmillan. New York. Page ix. For Becker, there is no escaping the psychological mechanisms by which human beings invariably repress the knowledge of the conditions of their finitude. Neither is there any escape from the conditions themselves: "There is simply no way to transcend the limits of the human condition or to change the psychological

know them, will pass away.

It is hardly clear, however, that the death of the individual has always presented the same sort of challenge to human hopes and aspirations that it seems to present today. Hebrew faith prior to the Exile apparently needed little assurance of individual immortality, resurrection, or survival beyond the grave.[3] It was enough to regard the future in terms of the continuing life of the people. There was a corporate sense of identity and survival, such that individuals and families could think of themselves living on in their descendants. Defeat and dissolution, first at the hands of the Assyrians and then the Babylonians, shattered that world-view. Notions of resurrection, influenced by Zoroastrianism, began to find their way into Israelite cosmology and theology. At the same time, Ezekiel and other prophetic voices challenged the previous understandings of corporate guilt and punishment. No longer would the sins of the "fathers" be visited upon the children unto the third and fourth generations.[4] The question of the status of the individual before God was brought to the fore. The sense of corporate identity was not entirely abandoned. Ezekiel's vision of the desolate valley of dry bones attests to that. But it now requires a dramatic action of the Spirit of God to bring back to life what was destroyed. Notions of continuity in the history of the human community have been significantly qualified. Only God knows what is possible for the continuation of God's people on the earth.[5] It is beyond human knowledge or power. By the time of Jesus older notions of human community and continuity have become even less secure and determinative: "God is able from these stones to raise up

---

structural conditions that make humanity possible" [p. 227]. On the one hand, we cannot bear to exist without repression of the knowledge of death. On the other hand, we only make human existence all the more tragic and demonic if we try to exist without some realism regarding our limitations. To re-cast Becker's conclusion in terms congenial to this essay: It is critical for human existence that we acknowledge our finitude. Otherwise we live falsely, we do not take life seriously, and we compound the tragedies of existence. It also seems critical for human existence, however, that we not regard this finitude as the last word. Otherwise we have no grounds for further human achievement, and can hardly resist the temptation to lapse into meaningless stupor.

[3]In his essay "Faith at the Nullpunkt," Walter Brueggemann notes, "Only two texts--Isa. 19:26 (sic) and Dan. 12:2--seem to be clear attestations of life after death, and they are commonly regarded as quite late, cast in apocalyptic language, and influenced by the entry of Judaism into a world of Hellenistic thought." In John Polkinghorne and Michael Welker, *The End of the World and the Ends of God: Science and Theology on Eschatology*. Trinity Press International. Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Page 151. The correct Isaiah reference is 26:19.

[4] Deuteronomy 5:9; cf. Eze. 18:2-4, 20; Jer. 31:29-30

[5] Cf. "Mortal, can these bones live?" "O LORD God, you know." Ezekiel 37:3

children to Abraham."[6] Human hopes for significance, meaning, and a future in the face of what are perceived to be potentially radical temporal discontinuities[7] all depend upon the action of God.

I am not sketching what is to be regarded as a uniform and unilinear progression of thought within Judaism and early Christianity. It is, nonetheless, a development that should make clear that within early Christianity there was already a need to cope with the reality of death, not just in terms of the deaths of individuals, and not just in terms of the deaths of human communities, but death in terms of the passing away of the world as we know it. The little apocalypse of Mark 13 and its parallels in Matthew and Luke manifest the cosmic dimensions of the envisioned dissolution of all things living and ordered within temporal existence. Such apocalyptic thinking is problematic, both in terms of its ethical dualism and in terms of its implied judgment that the time has come to wipe clean the slate of human history and start over. On the other hand, such thinking does seem to grasp the reality that all things as we know them will ultimately pass away. That is to say, if our human history is to have any ultimate meaning or significance, given that it is destined some day to end, it must be at the hands of God. It is certainly not within our power.

I would suggest that Christian eschatology, at its best, serves to help us live in the face of the knowledge that we and all things created will die. It does so in ways that may appear somewhat paradoxical. For one thing, "it is only the hope of dying that is keeping [us] alive." That is to say, the meaningfulness of life, its vitality and purpose, are related in a very important sense to the fact that one's own life will have an end. This end signifies a point of closure, beyond which one is not called to plan, project, or labor. The various parts of the story of one's life will ultimately converge, or at least cease to undergo development and change. Each of us can hope to come to the point where we can say, "It is finished!" We have fulfilled our calling. We have done what was set before us. We have fought the good fight. We have kept the faith.

Granted, many lives do not end on such a note of affirmation. The point is that knowing we will die does give meaning to our years in terms of an envisioned closure and completion. We do not have to go on forever, knowing that our labors are never to be completed, that, like Sisyphus, the stone we have rolled up the hill will need to be rolled up again and again and ever again. People who have had near-death experiences often speak of how precious and joyous each day becomes, now that they know in a more vivid and compelling way that their lives will not last forever. And for those whose lives are filled with suffering, the envisioned end of this life may be seen as a blessing. They do not have to "keep faith," or maintain integrity (as did Job), forever.

Moreover, the personal aspects of traditional Christian eschatology demand that we embrace human finitude. As Hans Weder observes in his essay, "Hope and Creation":

> The Christian concept of resurrection, which has risen in the context of early Jewish

---

[6] Matt. 3:9; Luke 3:8

[7] Cf. "even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees"; Matt. 3:10; Luke 3:9

> eschatological insights, cannot think of an eternal life that has not undergone death. Thus, finitude (death) is at least a necessary presupposition of eternal life, if not an important element of it in the sense that a pure eternal life can only come after death as the end of any human fight against truth and purity.
> . . . The life of the risen Christ had . . . a quality that differs in a qualitative way from any earthly life. The most predominant difference is the character of eternity, that is of not being subjected to finitude any more. . . As a consequence of Christology the Christian eschatological concept of life after death had an extremely positive relationship to finitude. The qualitative newness of eternal life cannot do without the radical end of temporal life. This implies a specific and positive understanding of finitude.[8]

One need not share every theological commitment that seems implied in this statement in order to recognize the general force of Weder's argument. Whatever else may be understood by Christian resurrection, it surely implies a qualitative newness of life that also requires us to view death in larger perspective as a form of blessing.

The knowledge that there will be an end also has a moral significance that helps sustain our existence. Not forever will the wicked prosper. Not forever will the righteous suffer and endure misfortune. At the very least, we are thus assured that the ultimate dispensation of things does not include an ultimate, absolute, or enduring acceptance of the moral injustices, inequalities, and disparities of earthly condition that mark our temporal existence. This is so, whether or not we also believe that beyond the grave lies another dispensation of rewards and punishments that will reverse and rectify the injustices of this life. The last word on wickedness may be death, or it may be worse than death, but it assuredly is not life.

But what is the last word on righteousness, or goodness, or faith? What is the last word on life itself? It is difficult enough to imagine one's own non-existence. It is even more difficult to imagine the non-existence of all that one cherishes and loves. What ultimately happens to the goodness that we know, experience, see, taste, touch, feel, enjoy? Christian eschatology, at its best, does not envision the destruction of all that is within the providence of God, but rather its transformation. Nonetheless, it acknowledges the reality of radical destruction of temporal expressions of goodness: people suffer horribly and die in all stages of unfulfillment, nature is ravaged, species are decimated, the beauty of the world is scarred beyond recognition. Simply imagine what it must have been like, and what it would be like again, for an asteroid to strike this planet as may have happened 65 million years ago, when the dinosaurs and much else was destroyed. Some Christians would say that God will never let that sort of thing happen again. Or they would say that if it should happen, God would re-populate the world. In short, life will go on, the wonders of creation as we know them will not cease.

---

[8]Op. cit., Polkinghorne and Welker, page 191.

The biblical view, however, is that "heaven and earth will pass away."[9] It is in any case much too glib to suppose that life as we know it will never cease. Even if it were in God's power to preserve humanity indefinitely, God would hardly be obliged to keep us on retainer forever. This is not to say that we necessarily need a Christian eschatology that envisions radical destruction as a part of God's plan and purpose. It is at least as problematic to maintain that the Creator may intend the destruction of the creation as it is to assert that God will never countenance our destruction.[10] But should the end of life as we know it come to pass, Christian eschatology should be able to affirm that God would be able from whatever remains again "to raise up children to Abraham."[11] Not that these children would ever know Abraham, or even resemble Abraham in any recognizable way; only that the possibility for conscious, intelligent life coming into existence in some future place and time must be considered to be within the realm of divine providence. Indeed, once this is understood, it must be considered to be within the realm of divine possibility that there already have existed or now exist such forms of life elsewhere within the universe.

What can be said from this perspective is that all of the endings we can envision for ourselves and all that we cherish receive their ultimate meaning and significance from God, who "lays to heart" all that is precious in creation.[12] Nothing good is lost on God. So long as we can believe in the continuing presence and work of God as creator of the universe, we can make this affirmation in the context of all eschatological visions regarding the world as we know it. The Apostle Paul affirmed that "from God and through God and to God are all things. To God be the glory forever!"[13] All things find their source and end in God, the Alpha and Omega. All life,

---

[9]Matt. 24:35; Mk. 13:31; Lk. 21:33; cf. Matt. 5:18; Lk. 16:17; Isa. 65:17; 66:22; II Pet. 3:13; Rev. 21:1

[10] These remarks are clearly pertinent to the theodicy question, which I do not wish to pursue further here. Suffice it to say that I regard God's power as contingent in the formal sense that it must conform to God's love and in the material sense that divine sovereignty does not mean unconditional freedom from the constraints of actual existence in which the only limitations upon divine action are Self-imposed. This is to say at least that the creation that God has brought into being possesses an integrity of being and action that God cannot violate. Thus I cannot agree with Weder when he asserts that "death is . . . the point where God's power can act in an unlimited way" [op. cit., p. 195], if that is taken categorically and not just as a statement about God's freedom to act without resistance in the context of human relations marked by human death. If the statement is to be taken only in the latter sense, then I find its meaning unclear.

[11]Matt. 3:9; Lk. 3:8

[12] Cf. Isa. 57:1; Jer. 12:11

[13]Romans 11:36

indeed all existence, is "in God."

This brings us to the threshold of what is historically unique about the intellectual challenge to Christian eschatology, and Christian faith, in our times. The thought of our own individual beginnings and endings is difficult. The thought of the beginning and ending of life and the world as we know it is thoroughly bracing. But the thought of the beginning and ending of the universe is unfathomable. At least I cannot fathom it. For many scientists the great mystery is that there is something and not nothing. It seems no less a mystery to think that, there having been something, there could ever be nothing. The Big Bang theory of the universe may provide a believable account of the origins of our universe, but in many respects it begs the larger question of the Absolute Beginning. After all, if our universe got started with such a bang 12-15 billion years ago, what was happening before then? What existed before then? And if this universe will ultimately some day burn up and die out, or collapse back in upon itself, then what? Surely that does not answer the question of an Absolute End.

There are certain kinds of questions that our ways of thinking make impossible to answer. For example--and assuming an evolutionary account of the origins of life on earth--when did humankind first become humankind? That is, when, precisely, did we cease to be apes or whatever else we were and become human? And, assuming our continued evolution, when might we cease to be human and become some even higher--or at least different--form of life? This is not just a question of taxonomy of the sort familiar to students of natural history, though it may be that. It is also a question regarding the fundamental meaning of being human. We do not fret ourselves about what it means to be a cat, or a bear, or even an ape. We assume that the focal point of God's creation is humankind, and that the central theological questions all have to do with humankind's existence. Within this ultimately inescapable anthropocentric framework of thinking, however, we are probably prevented from recognizing the profound inadequacy of many of our assumptions, theological and cosmological, about the way things must be.

What if there is no beginning, and no ending? What if space has no boundaries, time no starting or ending point? What if there are multiple universes, perhaps even an infinity of them? What if, to borrow Freeman Dyson's phrase, everything is "infinite in all directions"? I am not suggesting the classical distinction between the temporal condition of things created and the eternal being of God. I am not suggesting a realm of "timelessness" in which all things and all time are eternally co-present with God. I am wondering out loud, so to speak, whether it makes any sense any more to speak of beginnings and endings in any but a highly relative and contingent sense. I am wondering whether there might <u>not</u> be a beginning or ending of this universe, and even if there was and will be, whether that has any theological significance as such. We have come to the point where we no longer think of God only as the God of Israel, or the God of the Church of Jesus Christ, or even as the God of heaven and earth. We now think of God as God of the universe. Why not God of a multiplicity of universes? Was the Big Bang God's first and only experience of creating a universe? Are we a prototype, or one of the more highly advanced models? The imaginable possibilities boggle the mind.

We are in a situation today where, it seems to me, what astrophysics tells us about the universe and what theology tells us about the God who, presumably, is the Creator of that universe, are simply unfathomable if not utterly incredible in the most literal sense. What is, in its totality, is beyond our comprehension, and it is beyond our comprehension that it might cease to be. In terms of what I said earlier about the significance of death for human existence, it must be acknowledged that the idea of "infinite in all directions" seems to preclude any possibility of absolute or ultimate meaning to Existence. If nothing ever comes to an end, there is no final closure or resolution, there is only endless duration. I know of nothing in Western thought or Christian theology or any other intellectual tradition that can provide an intellectually satisfying answer to the question of the ultimate meaning of life, yet alone the destiny of the universe. But perhaps Christian eschatology, at its best, can disabuse of us false notions of happy endings, and perhaps it can still provide us with provisional assurances regarding the manner of human existence that seems most likely to serve us well through the end of our days.

The false notions of happy endings that one typically finds in popular Christian thought are known to us: an eternity of playing the harp in heaven, joyful reunion with family, unending feasting as at a great banquet, and so on. We may perhaps value these as metaphors for bliss, but hardly as descriptions of future experience. The vision of an eternity of harp playing is only a bit less dystopian than the eternal punishments of hell. The point is that going on forever, albeit in somewhat more commodious surroundings than we enjoyed on earth, is not a happy or meaningful prospect. After the joyful reunion with family, then what does one do for the next million years, and the million after that? Whatever God may have in store for us, and however we may subjectively experience it, surely it must be something other than a "happily ever after" fairy tale sort of existence. Indeed, insofar as it is integral to Christianity to affirm that the end of this life is not the end for us, we need to examine more thoughtfully how it is possible to conceive of a future that does not partake of the inherent dissatisfactions of human subjectivity as we know them in actuality (e.g., self-concern, anxiety, regret, finitude). Perhaps what is in store for us is a self-transcending union with God, in which the Ego dissolves and "it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me . . ."[14] The dilemma for Christian theology in defining or attempting to describe the nature of resurrection as it relates to life after death is not simply one of maintaining the notion of individual identity in the face of profound discontinuity. It is, even more problematically, the dilemma of providing an account of enduring subjectivity itself that is both coherent and desirable. Again, we are at the limits of human comprehension.

And how may Christian eschatology provide us resources that give us provisional assurances regarding the manner of human existence that seems most likely to serve us well through the end of our days? Biblically speaking, we are called to "make the most of the time."[15] However, the passage in Ephesians that so enjoins us is one in which the days are seen as evil. As I understand William Schweiker in his essay, "Time as Moral Space," and as I myself believe, the days are

---

[14]Gal. 2:20

[15] Eph. 5:16

also good. What Schweiker says about "the work of disambiguating the world" strikes me as particularly important in this regard.[16] The work of "disambiguating the world" is precisely a work of reining in the chaos and tyranny that are the main moral terrors of existence, rather than resigning ourselves to the inescapable burdens of our human condition. As Schweiker puts it,

> the moral meaning of Christian faith cannot be a hidden 'no' to finite existence in all of its limitation, wonder, and travail. Christian faith, if it is a real power in the world, must be a radical transformation of human existence and thus a moral regeneration of life. The new creation, the regeneration of conscience, is a way to think about faith's transformation of life within an integrated cosmology. On this account, the moral meaning of eschatological faith is the love of life and love of the living God even amid the pressing facts of finitude and its limitations. The new creation is a moral transformation by God's grace that enables and empowers us to respect and enhance the integrity of life. The disposition is not stoic resignation, false consolation for a better world, or a relentless pursuit of present goods. It is a real joy."[17]

The authenticity of such an approach to life and living cannot be vouchsafed for us merely by eschatological pronouncements regarding the reign of God, however. Nor do I find resort to scriptural affirmations sufficiently compelling to accomplish the work of disambiguation, although the biblical witness possesses undeniable authority as corroborating evidence of the human experience. Nor is there any intellectual conception of God and the world, i.e., any theology, that is finally adequate to answer all the questions we can bring regarding the ultimate meaning and disposition of things. The theological task requires inquiry into the natural world, deep appreciation and understanding of the actual conditions and possibilities of human existence. As Schweiker puts it, "In my judgment, any viable engagement with the theme of eschatology in our age requires attending to the vitalities and limits, the processes and patterns, of life. In terms of ethics this means showing how claims about the complex integrity of life in its diverse forms rightly *funds* concepts of moral worth."[18]

As Schweiker footnotes, "what is at stake here is some form of moral realism and naturalism."[19] The alternative to ethical naturalism is ethical formalism, like that found in Kant. Death, human death in particular, presents a special problem for ethical formalism because, as Irving Singer notes, "it intrudes upon our search for a meaningful life.[20] Moral value, in the formalist

---

[16]"Time as a Moral Space: Moral Cosmologies, Creation, and Last Judgment," in op. cit., Polkinghorne and Welker, pp. 127ff.

[17]p. 128

[18] p. 128, my emphasis

[19] p. 128, n. 7

[20] p. 131

perspective, as in all constructivist/linguistic moral theories, is a human creation, and "the job of human life is about making, not finding, meaning in existence. The shared point of contact between all of these developments is that time is a moral space, but in the uniquely modern sense that it is 'empty,' awaiting us--as individuals and communities--to give it content. The right to create value is ours and ours alone simply because moral values--how we organize the world as a place in which we can live meaningfully--are not 'out there' to be found. We must create them. This," says Schweiker, "is the final triumph of the disconnection between sciences and ethics."[21]

This disconnection, it must be noted, constitutes a form of denial of finitude, contingency, and death. It allows human beings to imagine and engage in the pursuit of dreams without particular regard for "the way things are."[22] Schweiker is pointing here to another facet of the same human propensity that Ernest Becker warned us about in *The Denial of Death*. It is the same propensity that the best of Christian theology in the Reformed tradition has recognized as central to its doctrine of sin. It is the propensity to that particular form of pride that is self-delusion, the over-reaching of human ambition, the desire to be "like God."[23] In Schweiker's terms, "Any form of

---

[21] ibid.

[22] ibid., p. 136

[23]Gen. 3:5. There is perhaps a growing recognition among leading theologians today that the Christian faith needs to be articulated more specifically in light of the realities of human finitude, because it is this finitude that constitutes the fundamental fact of the human condition as it is perceived today. Thus Douglas John Hall observes: "I have found myself wondering: has not the Christian religion put far too much emphasis on sin, and far too little on finitude, mortality, creaturehood? Well, I am a Protestant! I believe in my heart that sin is a splendid concept, full of wisdom--and, when it is understood biblically, that is, relationally, that is, as the abrogation of relationship, it is itself, at bottom, a highly compassionate teaching. But sin has rarely been understood biblically, and the press that it still has today is so moralistic, so tied to guilt of the most privatistic nature (above all, to sex), that it is hardly helpful in the Christian apologetics of salvation in our social context. Compassion is evoked in Jesus, and in those whom Jesus calls, not by the recognition of human guilt, though it is certainly true that we are guilty, we rich especially! But Jesus' compassion arises in response to our finitude--that is, the strange admixture of possibility and impossibility that constitutes the being of the human." From "Confessing Christ in a Post-Christendom Context," address to the Covenant Network of Presbyterians, Atlanta, Georgia, November 5, 1999. Jurgen Moltmann writes in his recent book, *The Coming of God*, "It is the awareness of death which first creates fear for life, the fear of not getting one's fair share, of not having enough from life, the fear that life will be cut short. This leads to a craving for life, and to greed. The person who senses death in the midst of life wants to live, and if not to be already immortal, at least to be invulnerable while living. People like this look at the immortal gods and want to be like them. They break away from their poor, frail, vulnerable and mortal human nature and want to be like God. They want to be rich, healthy, invulnerable and immortal. That is the origin of the sin that destroys life: not being willing to be

ethics that in principle undercuts the input of the natural and social sciences in our assessment of courses of action and the limits on human desire is dangerous."[24]

As previously noted, however, this alternative to ethical formalism sees the future, not in terms of negation but in terms of transformation and fulfillment. Thus it requires attending to the possibilities that are already present and call for discernment within human existence. In Schweiker's words, "The exploration of patterns and processes of natural and social reality are nothing other than attempts to grasp signs of God's purposes for this good creation."[25] Such exploration rests upon a conviction that life is good, and that being is good, the chief theological expression of which is the doctrine of creation. An adequate eschatology can hardly be articulated apart from a vigorous theology of creation.

Schweiker's essay provides a conceptuality for relating what is given in human experience and what is promised in religious faith. One of the central questions raised by eschatological thinking concerns the extent to which that which is given and that which is promised are to be differentiated. In the language of biblical theology, the distinction has often been drawn in terms of the "already" and the "not yet" of divine grace, redemption, and salvation. The perspective here is that there can be no sharp divide between what are experienced as the realities of experience and the realities of faith. Theologian Bernard Meland used the metaphor of ultimacies and immediacies to express the understanding that the divine goodness is accessible to us, not in a chronological relation of future to present, nor as end to means, but in the intrinsically relational communal ground of all existence. "There is no immediacy in history or experience that is without its ultimate depth, its ultimate reference," he wrote.[26] For Meland it is not merely that which is objectively knowable through the rigors of the natural and social sciences, but that which impresses itself upon us in all of experience, that is at least potentially disclosive of the "realities of faith":

> [E]ven as we acknowledge depths of realities that are beyond our comprehension, we are made aware of the fact that we participate in them at the level and mode of experience which we call duration. To this extent we know by acquaintance through bodily feeling, or though the sheer act of existing, much that we shall never know in any explicit, cognitive way. The ultimate range of meaning is not a penumbra of mystery that simply

---

what one is . . ." Fortress Press. Minneapolis. 1996. Page 93.

[24] op. cit., p. 135

[25] p. 138

[26] *The Realities of Faith: The Revolution in Cultural Forms*. Oxford University Press. New York. 1962. Page 168.

supervenes experience; it is a mystery and depth of the immediacies themselves.[27]

That is to say (if I understand Meland aright), there is nothing that is withheld from us until such day as we inherit our reward. It is simply that we, as finite creatures, are able to see only "in a mirror, dimly" at best, able to know only "in part."[28] Christian eschatology is really not about the chronology of divine dispensation. It is an expression of affirmation regarding the fullness of that divine goodness of which our human experience under the conditions of finitude allows us only intimations and partial apprehensions, genuine but very partial knowledge. It must be enough for us, provisionally, to "disambiguate" the world, and thus to know something of how to live and move and have our being. It is hardly enough for us to puzzle out the whole of our existence in this painfully perilous yet wondrously mysterious universe.

The caveat remains: there is no theology of beginnings or endings that is completely intellectually satisfying. Thus theological belief or conviction about first and last things requires confirmation in the joy of existence itself. Apart from the experience of life as good one can hardly be persuaded that God is good. In the discernment, discovery, and experience of value in existence we are offered tokens and foretastes of what we may believe to be true of all existence, and thus of the Source and End of all existence. This is more an existential realization, born out of our joyous participation in the community of living beings with all creation, than it is an intellectual achievement. It is a faith that is given to us, as a gift of grace, by the Author within whose providence we have been granted supporting roles to play in the Unfolding Drama that extends much further than we can know beyond the story of our lives.

---

[27] ibid., p. 223

[28] I Cor. 13:12, 9. Meland writes: "Existence, itself, is a greater mystery than we know or acknowledge it to be. We but touch the fringes of its meaning in our day-to-day transactions. Our utilitarian existence is far removed from the depth of sensitivity in quality and meaning which forms the communal ground." Ibid., p. 232.