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Book Review of *Approaching the End: A Theological Exploration of Death and Dying* – By David Albert Jones

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“O Death! Where is thy sting?” Herein lies the heart of many contemporary controversies in medicine and medical ethics. Where, and in what precisely, consists the sting of death? Is it in the loss of biological, physical life itself? Is it in the assault dying inflicts on human autonomy? Or does death's surdity lie in the realm of metaphysics, in the potential for eternal damnation of the immaterial and indestructible human soul? Do we, as Christians, even believe in life - after - death and the resurrection of the body, and if so, what do we actually believe about these matters? What difference might it make?

David Albert Jones, Senior Lecturer in Bioethics at St Mary's College, University of Surrey, and until recently Director of The Linacre Centre for Healthcare Ethics, seeks to provide “a systematic theological account of death” in order to clarify Christian thinking and practice on end - of - life issues. In the end, the book achieves neither of these objectives, but this does not mean that it is without strengths. The usefulness of this book lies in Jones' careful and lucid exposition and critique of the writings of four seminal figures in Catholic theology on death and related questions: Ambrose, Augustine, Aquinas, and Rahner. For this reason, the book marks an important contribution to scholarship in the field of Christian bioethics. Moreover, through what it accomplishes, the book makes clear the kind of theological work on these topics remaining to be done.

The bulk of the book, chapters 2 - 6, consists of a careful reading of the writings of Ambrose, Augustine, Aquinas, and Rahner on death and related questions. One chapter is devoted to each figure, with one chapter (Chapter 4) comparing the positions of Ambrose and Augustine and elaborating on their thoughts on Paul, virginity and mortification, suicide and martyrdom, as well as fear of death, grief, and care for the dead. The analysis in each chapter is thorough and engaging. Jones draws on key texts for each figure, while demonstrating developments between early and late writings in the thought of Augustine and Rahner.

Jones presents these four figures as constituting “a single extended argument on the theology of death” (p. 7). And indeed, the writings of Ambrose, Augustine and Aquinas are shaped by a set of shared questions—the relationship between the body and the soul, what happens to this relationship upon death, and whether human death is natural or a punishment inflicted by God as a consequence of sin, and so forth. Ambrose sets the terms of the debate. Blending Christian and Platonic thought, he concludes that death potentially has no sting, that it is “ ‘in every sense a good’ ” (p. 34). Positing death as natural and life as wretched, miserable, and vain, he follows Plato in seeing death as the moment when the soul is released from the prison of the body. These premises lead to the radical theological position that death is a gift, that God imposed death upon humanity not as a punishment for Adam's sin but rather as a remedy, as a limit to the punishments involved in the present human condition (p. 30). It is only the second death, the eternal punishment metaphysically consequent upon sin, in which we finally find death's sting.

Augustine and Aquinas concur with Ambrose's evaluation of the second death, but disagree with him on almost every other point. Both Doctors were shaped by similar contexts (the Manichees, Donatists and Pelagius on the one hand, and the Cathars on the other), and so take issue with a Platonic anthropology, countering it with a robustly theological account of creation, of grace, and of the resurrection of the body. Augustine outlines the basic theological structure, which Aquinas fleshes out using the tools supplied by Aristotelian categories. Both maintain the essential, natural, original, good, and created union of body and soul and the necessity of this union of particular souls with their own particular (though radically transformed) bodies for complete eternal beatitude. Death, for Augustine, is all sting, “not good for anyone” (p. 44). It is, for Aquinas, “the destruction of the human being as a whole and the displacement of the soul into a diminished and unnatural state,” a state of only “naked abstract thought and memory” (p. 110). Both provide accounts of how this sting is, indeed, the punishment or at least consequence of Adam's sin, the result of the loss of God's grace that completed our mortal human natures by superadding an original immortality. We are now incomplete, fated for dis - assembly, a fate that can only be countered through God's salvific grace.

In Chapter 6, Jones turns to Rahner, and the reader experiences a MacIntyrean moment: although we are told that we are in the middle of a single, extended argument (what one might call a tradition), it is clear that the conversation has shifted radically. Fragments of the past—words like body, soul, judgment—dislodged from their theological frameworks float amidst new language—now “nature,” “person” and “freedom”—the latter of which are determinative. Between Aquinas and Rahner, Kant and Heidegger have intervened, and no longer will the Christian theology of death be the same. For Rahner, the essence of death is “personal” —it is not simply something that can be suffered; it becomes necessarily “a human act” (p. 158), a self - consummation, a personal self - affirmation, yes a biological destruction but most importantly a self - realization brought about by the person him or herself by which the soul is freed from the particularity of its body to become “pancosmic” (p. 152) (at least in the early Rahner). One might argue, as Jones does, that with Rahner we have returned to Ambrose, and there are certainly similarities, for again, death here has little sting.

As mentioned, the real strength of this book lies in Jones' presentation of the thought of these four theologians. His analysis brings alive the nuance, careful complexity and theological depth of Augustine and Aquinas on these questions. It also makes abundantly clear the problems Kant created for Christian theology and the problems with Rahner's position; this is particularly important insofar as Rahner, for the past thirty years or so, has figured as one of the most important theological influences on contemporary Roman Catholic health care ethics (p. 6).

It is in the turn from the four figures to health care ethics that the book becomes less than satisfactory. Contrary to his stated objective, Jones does not pull his analysis of the theologies of death together in a systematic or synthesized manner. The four figures are presented; development can be traced; but the findings are not neatly drawn together. Moreover, to create a truly systematic, and Roman Catholic, theology of death would require a broadening of resources—including at least some attention to magisterial documents and liturgical practices.

Partly due to the lack of synthesis and systematization, in the end Jones does not bring the theology of death to bear on end - of - life issues in a satisfactory manner. His conclusions are orthodox, but because the theology is not synthesized systematically, he is unable to utilize it in order to carefully and systematically reflect on contemporary questions. For example, after 205 pages of Ambrose, Augustine, Aquinas and Rahner, the complex questions of assisted suicide and euthanasia merit less than three pages of analysis combined; the questions of law and public policy, withholding and withdrawing treatment, sustaining the unconscious, and making a good death are treated likewise. There is quite a disconnect from his careful and thorough analysis of the theologians to a rather superficial analysis of key issues in contemporary medical ethics.

As mentioned at the outset, one of the main contributions of this book is to point in directions for further theological exploration. For example, although the book is subtitled a “theological exploration of . . . dying,” Jones does not present material from the four theologians (beyond occasional reflections on grief) that would speak to contemporary issues surrounding “dying” rather than death. A study of the tradition on this question would be helpful. Jones does include in his discussion the ways in which these theologians discuss analogous “types of death” —i.e., ascetic death - to - sin or death of the soul through sin. His analysis, however, is incomplete. It would be worth exploring further what theological purposes it serves to speak of death analogically. Moreover, his analysis makes clear that little of the writing on the “theology of death”—even in Augustine and Aquinas—is Christological. Rahner comes closest to having a Christological component in his account, though it remains inadequate. What might a thickly Christological theology of death look like? Finally, by demonstrating the vibrancy and contemporary relevance of the work of Augustine and Aquinas, Jones' study makes clear the critical importance of metaphysics for a theology of death. But equally, his analysis shows that any Christian metaphysics must be deeply grounded and continuously re - grounded in scripture, doctrine and liturgical practice, lest it spiral off into mere speculation.