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# TO DIE AND LET DIE: A JUST THEOLOGY OF CEDING SPACE

## ABSTRACT

*Over the past few years, there has been a significant intellectual and artistic emphasis on the manner in which one considers or approaches the end of life. This is in conjunction with a renewed ethical discussion about choosing the manner and time of one's death in light of a diminished quality of life. Large populations across the world are ageing, presenting unique challenges to healthcare and civic infrastructure. The planet is suffering because of a climate crisis, due to the overburdening of resources. In light of all this, it is argued in this contribution that a renewed theological consideration of death is necessary. In his theology about the Trinity, Jürgen Moltmann makes a remark about his understanding of the perichoretic unity of the persons of the Trinity, in which the persons of the Trinity "cede" space for one another. Ceding space creates space (room) for authentic existence. This contribution considers and utilises Trinitarian "spatial" theology as foundation for rethinking the complexity and balance of life and death. It is ultimately argued that "creating space for death" could serve as a foundation for an ethical framework for decision-making, as well as foster a compassionate community that provides space for each other's diversity – in life and in death.*



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## 1. INTRODUCTION: DEATH – FRIEND VERSUS FOE

The topic of death is no longer relegated to dark and fearful corners. This is clear from a flurry of publications about death over the past few years (Gawanda 2014; Marshall & Mosher 2014; Solomon *et al.* 2015; Van Niekerk 2017;

Wepener 2017; Wiese 2019). Are we finally trying to come to terms with our mortality or are we trying to normalise it into non-existence? I am not really sure which it is. In her reflection titled “Dying well”, Harris (2014:57-67) articulates this contradictory interest in death well:

We are intellectually and artistically fascinated by it [death] ... We follow anxiously the shifting thought on the causes of mortality (and thereby learn that dying is something that we should not do), and we debate the rationality of suicide, even beyond the bounds of terminal or life-limiting conditions. Sometimes we are public in our mourning, creating shrines of flowers ... whereas a generation ago we might have visited the family instead. We are more conversant about death than our parents and grandparents and less inclined to shroud it from children ... Yet, for all our interest in death, dying, and bereavement, we still behave as though ‘nobody died anymore’. We do our utmost to maintain continuity (Harris 2014:57).

The title of a recent Afrikaans publication about death, *Wreed en mooi is die dood*, reflects a related, yet different contradiction when it comes to death, namely that it is simultaneously “cruel and beautiful”. In the introduction, the editor of the book Tobie Wiese (2019:11), states that working on the book helped him live with death in a more “meaningful” and “comfortable” way. This echoes the Roman Catholic theologian Henri Nouwen’s (2010:103-109) assertion that one should approach death as “friend”. This corresponds with the physician and theologian Albert Schweitzer’s (1974:67-76) challenge to overcome death by familiarising ourselves with it. However, “meaning” and “comfort” are not always the first words that come to mind when thinking about death. I would argue that it is only accepted as an approach to death by a well-organised mind and a mature spirituality, something I will come back to in the conclusion of this contribution. The well-known poem by Dylan Thomas (1952), “Do not go gentle into that good night”, illustrates humanity’s resistance to mortality. One could almost say that death is a life-long struggle, as expressed by the late author Karel Schoeman’s (1986) character Dr Kellner, in his novel *’n Ander land* (Another country): to accept the phenomenon of death, to accept the fact that you yourself must die and to face your own approaching death – each is a new crisis and together they constitute a lifelong struggle to accept death (see Wepener 2017:2). In this regard, the approaches of Wiese, Nouwen, Schweitzer, Thomas and Dr Kellner are indicative of what Harris (2014:62) describes as Christian negotiations with death as a friend or a foe.

Despite this recognition of its multifaceted character, death is mainly still regarded as something to try to avoid at all costs, with either an

overemphasis on an unhealthy ideal of perfect health, or a resolute determination to not mourn too much and to focus on the life that must be lived. Despite the recognition of the multifaceted character of death, death remains an enemy in Christian religious spheres. Any attempts at balancing life with death, or discussions about the quality of life and the dignity of death are relegated to debates on God's control over life and death, and related theologically to the doctrine of God's attributes (see Kärkkäinen 2014:283-309).<sup>1</sup> Death, then, is regarded as a human vulnerability above all others, and the result of this denial of death is a decreasing ability to face death with dignity (Fiddes 2000:225). In light of the expanding ecological crisis, our Christian-ethical interpretation of the advancement of medical technologies, renewed debates on the legality of euthanasia, and our very interpretation of "age" in itself, it has become necessary to rethink once again, what I would call, a "theology of death". In this contribution, I present the preliminary strands of my thought. My overarching conviction is that a doctrine of God, as the foundation of human and divine-human communion, and inherently Trinitarian, articulates God as the broad space in which there is "no more cramping" (Moltmann 2008:30).<sup>2</sup>

This is a grammar of faith that articulates God as existing in a creative tension of "spaciousness and belonging", and this theology should be broad enough to accommodate the idea of "ceding space", that is, death. This contribution's title, "to die and let die", refers to this. Just as the complimentary (or opposite for some) "to live and let live" is used to express that a person should live as s/he chooses and let other people do the same, "to die and let die" refers to the same spacious regard for one another when it comes to death. I will unpack this idea in the ensuing pages. Due to the nature and scope of this contribution, this idea is presented from a Christian-theological perspective, which includes references to Greek Orthodox and Reformed theology because of the way in which both have contributed to my approach to death as a relationship between mind and spirit, and between distance and belonging.

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1 In his *Trinity and revelation*, Veli-Mati Kärkkäinen (2014:283-309) offers a useful deconstruction about the classic attributes of God in light of the doctrine of the Trinity in his chapter, "The relational God and the divine attributes".

2 This refers to a statement by Moltmann (2008) in his autobiography *A broad place*. The original statement reads "God's wide space where there is no more cramping".

## 2. SOCIO-SPATIAL CONCERNS: ECOLOGICAL SUSTAINABILITY AND AGEING POPULATIONS

The contributions of postmodern philosophers, theologians and social theorists to a deconstructed understanding of space as a social product, which is subject to power relations, are well documented (Lefebvre 1991; Foucault 1994; Harvey 2000; Hubbard *et al.* 2014; Venter 2006; Jungkeit 2012). They emphasised the way in which social and spatial relations interact to one another dialectically (Venter 2006:205). Edward Soja's (1989) utilisation and development of Henri Lefebvre's "production of space" and Lefebvre's distinction between spatial practices, spatial representation and representative spaces, come together as a socio-spatial dialectic, in which space is socially produced, but space simultaneously produces social effects.

David Harvey (2000:177-178) utilised this socio-spatial dialectic for its practical and political relevance in reference to capitalism and economic globalisation and the resulting production and consumption. Harvey (2000:177-178) argued that, due to space being produced by political-economic capitalism, it mirrors the system's inner contradictions (see Venter 2006:203). This impacts on the environment and, I would add, has implications for continued quality of life, as expressed in the current emphasis on sustainable development.

In response to environmental degradation, the Rio Earth Summit, a United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, produced an action plan – Agenda 21 – in 1992 (UNCED 1992). This was the precursor of the United Nations' sustainability goals set in 2015 and represented in Agenda 2030 (UNGA 2015). Agenda 2030 reasserted the goals of Agenda 21 and added 17 goals to the original action plan (UNSD 2015). In the wake of all this, a significant amount of research has examined the relationship between the size of human population and climate action (Weeks 2005; Pearson 2015; Bergaglio 2017:2023-2038). The research included a re-examination of Thomas Malthus' alarmist prediction that consumption and population growth will outweigh food production, as well as studies on the impact of an ageing population (Pearson 2015:17-38).

There are different viewpoints about how we got to where we are – a space in which the quality of life has come under threat, due to the earth's environment reacting to an overuse of resources. I acknowledge that the relation between current ecological challenges and earth's population is not a simplistic one and that there are different opinions about the root cause of the current numbers of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions (Pearson 2015:135; see IPCC 2018). The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)

Report (2018) did, however, state the relationship between population numbers and climate change as one of the exacerbating factors.<sup>3</sup> Societies have had to alter their social activities, in order to alleviate the effects of population growth (Goodrick 2013:xiii).

The planet was being overcrowded, *initially* due to a cultural-religious-economic-political emphasis on “building the nation” (Van Wyk 2019a: 29-50). The planet *currently* remains overcrowded, because the populations who are the result of this emphasis are gradually living longer, due to food-production technologies (Pearson 2015:141-145) as well as advances in medical technology and public health. Furthermore, populations are generally living longer, due to a decline in fertility rates (Goodrick 2013:3).<sup>4</sup> The result is similar. There are too many people on the planet in terms of available resources and currently, due to people living longer, there is a different set of resource-related challenges (Weeks 2012). These include an increased demand for healthcare services; policy guidelines for increased access to healthcare services (specifically in developing countries); increased dependency burdens; changes in the sustainability of family structures; a greater need for living quarters that are physically accessible; public transport that caters to the needs of the elderly; an economy impacted by the withdrawal of pensioners; resultant changes in the labour force, and, in general, increased social expenditure (Goodrick 2013:xiii).

In this regard, the socio-spatial dialectic is still exacting its influence. Biologically, it might be possible to live longer, but has its socio-economic-environmental influence been considered? Or the psychological effects? Does a longer living human population add to the pressure of sustainable living on an already strained ecology? To put it differently, does the same space that makes it possible for us to live longer (or demands it) enable us to live better or at least in a way that supports our quality of life and the health of the ecosystem? From this overview, it appears that “quality of life” should be a prominent theme in discussions about the space humanity occupies on this planet. Therefore, “quality of life” should be a prominent theme in thinking about death.

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3 As stated in the IPCC’s *Summary for policymakers* (2018).

4 It is estimated that, by 2025, 800 million to 1.2 billion of the world’s population will consist of people older than 65 years, and more than double that amount by 2050 (see Goodrick 2013:3).

### 3. THE QUALITY OF LIFE AND THE REALITY OF DEATH

In 1948, the World Health Organization (WHO) accepted an extended definition of “health” as part of its Constitution: “Health is a condition of complete physical, mental and social well-being, and not just the absence of illness and infirmity” (WHO 2014:1). In *Ethics of hope*, Moltmann (2012:92) criticises this definition in his section on medical ethics as “reaching beyond what is humanly possible”. Moltmann does acknowledge that it is a better definition than that of Sigmund Freud who defined health as the capacity for work and enjoyment (see Moltmann 2012:92). The problem Moltmann has with Freud’s definition of health is that it reflects an industrial achievement-oriented society, which is directed at consumption and production, thereby stigmatising ageing in general, because it would impede our capacity for work and enjoyment. However, Moltmann’s criticism of the World Health Organization’s definition of health lies in how it creates the idea that all-round perfect health is a condition that can be obtained and, for Moltmann (2012:92-93), this is an “inhumane utopia”. It represents an unrealistic idea of human life without suffering, of happiness without pain, and of life without death. Practical theologian Nadine Bowers du Toit (2018:8) argues that the definition was forward-thinking for its time and that it had at least included the physical and social dimensions of health. However, for Moltmann, the definition contributes to a consumerist mentality that promotes a never-ending race towards “perfect” health and immortality. Moltmann (2012:94) rather states that health is about

the strength to be human in conditions of health and illness. This spiritual strength is shown in the capacity for happiness and for suffering, ... seen as a whole to accept life and to surrender life. To put it theologically, it is life and death within God’s great Yes, the acceptance of life and death in the whole space of God’s presence.

For him, ageing and dying are part of life and a healthy stance towards life includes the strength to be human, also in illness. But how, as Volf and McAnnally-Linz (2016:116) ask, should one treat life with diminished capacities in light of an increased ability to delay death’s arrival? End-of-life questions are becoming more pressing in societies with increasing biotechnological capabilities and expanding elderly populations.<sup>5</sup> There was a time when a person who was unable to breathe would die within minutes. Nowadays, this person would be kept alive by either mechanically assisted respiration, artificial nutrition, or tube feeding (Moody & Sasser 2018:278-279). In consideration of Volf and McAnnally-Linz’s question,

5 In the USA, the population aged over 65 years tripled between 1910 and 2010 (Volf & McAnnally-Linz 2016:119).

“diminished capacities”, in the context of this contribution, refers to any and all phenomena that impede quality of life.

Two widespread options that are debated in this regard are (physician-) assisted self-death (suicide), also known as assisted dying and euthanasia.<sup>6</sup> Both broadly refer to the intentional ending of life, in order to avoid or to spare someone severe suffering. With regard to assisted dying, the patient is the last causal actor, because the patient is assisted to take their life, in other words, lethal means are made available to the patient to use at a time of the person’s own choice (Harris 2014:61; Keown 2004:31-32). With regard to euthanasia, a doctor or another person is the final actor. Active euthanasia denotes deliberate intervention to end a patient’s life. This can entail voluntary active euthanasia, where the doctor has an active role in carrying out the patient’s request. Passive euthanasia entails not doing anything, such as withdrawing life support.<sup>7</sup> Finally, euthanasia can also apply to non-human animals and is a generally accepted veterinary practice. Euthanasia has been legalised in Belgium and The Netherlands since 2002, and in Luxembourg since 2009. Assisted dying has been legal in Switzerland since 1942, as well as in three states of the United States of America, namely Washington, Oregon (from the 1990s) and Montana (from 2009).

As Olivier (1994:178-183) pointed out, there are generally three broad views on the subject of euthanasia and/or assisted dying. First, a person should be kept alive at all costs and the moment of death should be postponed as long as possible. This could be justified from both a medical and a theological perspective, as people in the medical profession want, in many cases, to keep someone alive at all costs and many theologians would cite God’s omnipotence and control over life and death. A second view on the notion of self-determination with regard to death is an allowance to withdraw therapy and to ensure that medical care is only used in aid of the patient’s comfort. A third view entails clear support for direct steps to end a person’s life. The second and third views are usually related to concern over the person’s suffering, loss of dignity or a severely impeded quality of life.

Moody and Sasser (2018:279) relate the debate on the choice to end one’s life to ageing. As the timing of death is continuously displaced, older

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6 I prefer the terms “self-death” and “assisted dying”, because “suicide” already implies a pejorative ethical judgement. I am following Jordaan in this regard, as outlined later in this contribution.

7 Different sources have slight nuance differences with regard to the categories of euthanasia and its difference to assisted dying. Sources used, in this instance, to summarise the definitions include Harris (2014); Keown (2004), and Moody & Sasser (2018).

people have a vital interest in this debate. Their argument about ageing and end-of-life decisions are indicative of the almost endless ethical debates on the morality of self-determination of one's death (Volf & McAnnally-Linz 2016; Landman 2019a:91-94). However, they do pose a crucial question, in my opinion, namely: Should older people who are experiencing diminishing life capacity (they include depression) be encouraged to make a decision about the end of their lives or should the conditions that gave rise to the problem be addressed or changed? In essence, I asked the same question earlier about how our environment (space) might make it possible for us to live longer, but might not make it conducive for quality of life.

#### 4. "MUST ONE GO ON LIVING AS LONG AS ONE CAN?"

At the heart of my quest to rethink death is a question Moltmann's neighbour, a Catholic philosopher, once asked him. The neighbour asked: "Must one really go on living as long as one can?" (Moltmann 2012:94). What follows from this is another set of related questions, as Moltmann points out. Is life a duty we have to fulfil until we can no longer do? Must we leave dying to nature, or can we decide on it ourselves, or at least the circumstances under which death takes place? I must admit, these are my questions too and, with this contribution, I am leaning towards answering the Catholics' question with a "No" and Moltmann's question about self-determination of one's own death (if possible) with a "Yes". However, I am not nearly done with thinking about these questions. This contribution is merely a first step in rethinking death in light of the issues mentioned in the introduction.

In the course of history, what determines if a human being is "alive" or "dead" has undergone notable shifts. "Being alive" was localised in either the diaphragm (breath), the heart (beats) and later also in the mind (reason and will) (Moltmann 2012:94-95; Saayman 2019:249-258). What constitutes the "centre of life" migrated from the heart to the brain. Currently, "brain-death" is considered to be the "true symbol" of the death of the whole person.<sup>8</sup> However, Moltmann (2012:95) stated that he had accepted this

8 There is not always uniform agreement of what constitutes death, as the South African pathologist Gert Saayman (2019:219-250) pointed out. The complexity of a definition of death is related to how organs and tissue will keep on functioning in some cases, even when the brain is "dead", allowing the possibility of harvesting organs for donation. The reason why the death of the brain (when brain function ceases) is regarded as "true death" is because other organs can be kept "alive" with mechanical or artificial means – the brain cannot. In South Africa, the law requires that two doctors with the necessary expertise and experience must pronounce a patient brain-dead, for it to be official and accepted.



definition of what constitutes death too readily. When he was a student pastor in Bremen in the early 1950s, he conducted the funeral of two students who had taken their own lives. He could not bring himself to bury them as “self-murderers”. However, he does not opt for “voluntary death” instead of “self-murder”, because he argues that no-one ends their life as a supreme act of freedom. Maybe it is not a supreme act of freedom, but I would argue, along with the well-known South-African psychologist and philosopher, Wilhelm Jordaan, that self-death is not devoid of freedom. Jordaan (2013; 2019) has stated many times over a number of years in different contributions that self-death implies a choice, with which we declare with a calculated finality that death is a way out of the hell of existence, in which there is nothing more to give or to take – except our own life (Jordaan 2013; 2019:37).<sup>9</sup> The months-long correspondence between Karel Schoeman (who was 77 years old at the time) and Willem Landman (2019), in which Schoeman argues his case (at length) for *choosing* the manner and time of his own death, certainly also implies an act of freedom.

Moltmann (2012:95, 96) offers another option for describing suicide (his word choice) in a way other than “self-murder” or “voluntary death”, namely, “self-defence”,

in which we have to reckon with the impenetrable character of the final personal decision and must respect the person’s decision to take their life without reproaches and accusations.

It would seem as if Moltmann ultimately does make provision for a degree of freedom with regard to our choice to end our life. He relates self-death to self-defence in specific cases where we want to defend ourselves against an unbearable condition of incurable illness or unreasonable life-prolonging measures. He makes an ethical judgement and distinction between active and passive euthanasia, which is echoed by his former doctoral student, Miroslav Volf (Volf & McAnnally-Linz 2016). Passive euthanasia is, in all cases, acceptable to Moltmann and the wishes of the person should be respected. But he is weary of “active euthanasia” and its legalisation, for its inherent ability to be misused for commercial or political reasons, like the Nazi ideology that deemed the killing of elderly, disabled or mentally ill persons as “euthanasia” on the grounds that they would not be able to contribute to Nazi ideology’s idea of a good and productive life. In this regard, Volf and McAnnally-Linz’s arguments link up with that of Moltmann once again, as they argue against the legalisation

9 This is my translation of Jordaan’s original Afrikaans statement: “met selfdood, sê ’n mens met berekende finaliteit dat die dood ’n uitweg is uit die hel van die eie bestaan waarin niks meer te gee of te neem is nie – behalwe die eie lewe”.

of physician-assisted suicide or active euthanasia, because “a society in which physician assisted suicide (PAS) is legal would likely become one in which PAS is expected” (Volf & McAnnally-Linz 2016:121), due to the inhumane notions of what constitutes health and valuable contributions to society.

Volf and McAnnally-Linz (2016:117) do, however, debate the issue of whether human life is always the “highest good”, as a Biblical prohibition against killing implies an inherent good quality to life. They state that life in itself should not be idolised. They conclude that we should not refuse to acknowledge death when it comes, but we should also not hasten towards it.

I do not know if these arguments help answer my (and the Catholic philosopher’s) question. Furthermore, I find that these aspects of Volf and McAnnally-Linz’s theological-ethical reflection on “end of life” tend to be one-sided. Within their framework, voluntary or active euthanasia can be nothing else but a selfish expression of consumerism or denial of the human condition of fragility and vulnerability. There is literally no room in their thought for how voluntary or active euthanasia could be related to dignity of life or quality of life. Their reasoning does not provide any framework for addressing a situation (space) that demands you live longer and enables you to live longer, but then punishes you for it and makes it difficult to have a quality life. I have to turn elsewhere for a theological framework to reflect on these issues.

## 5. TRINITARIAN LIFE: CREATING SPACE BY CEDING SPACE

I agree with Rian Venter (2006:206) that Trinitarian theology provides a remarkable creative framework to address contemporary challenges. In my opinion, this is due to Trinitarian theology’s propensity to articulate and confess God as a “reconciling diversity”, a creative Existence that encompasses both sameness and difference – a mysterious one-as-three and vice versa relationship that defies human logic. God’s being, analogously via the *Imago Dei* (Grenz 2005:87-98) and *Imago Trinitatis* theology (Volf 1998; Van Wyk 2019b) (and confession), becomes an ethical foundation for the complexities of human existence (Moltmann 1981). In this regard, I have utilised Trinitarian theology in the past, specifically social Trinitarian theology as expounded by Boff (1998) and Moltmann (1981:xvi), as a foundational framework for dealing with injustices, specifically historical injustices that impede social cohesion in society (Van Wyk 2019b). This is so because dealing with injustice requires a

nonbinary approach, that is a both-and approach and not an either-or approach. It is also the case for thinking theologically about death. In this, I lean on Moltmann's Trinitarian theology of God as a "broad place" (the broad place of the Trinity) (Moltmann 2008:30; 2000:xi) as a foundation for a theology of death which is based on "ceding space". This implies that I confirm Moltmann's analogous correlation between God's Trinitarian activity and human life and ethics. This relates to Moltmann's focus on the so-called "economy" of the Trinity (Goo Lee 2009:90-107), which is about the life and activity of God as opposed to a focus on the being of God, also known as the ontological or immanent Trinity.

Based on his theology about the economic Trinity, Moltmann (2015:57-59) draws a correlation between the ecumenical church and God as Trinity, as well as a correlation between God as Trinity and theological anthropology, both of which relate to Christian ethical conduct. The classic Cappadocian theology is a core aspect of this correlation, as it emphasised the Trinity as "*God ad extra*" (God's outward movement) and emphasised the unique personhood of the three persons of the Trinity (Gunton 1991:44; Papanikolaou 2006:92-128), an emphasis that is often situated in Eastern (Greek) Trinitarian theology, which, in Moltmann's theology, is important for the reconciling-diversity broad space that God constitutes.

In Moltmann's consideration of the Trinitarian God as a broad place, the theological notion of *perichoresis* is indispensable. The contours of this theology are "unhindered dialogue" on the grounds of a communion-based, free and respectful distance and belonging that constitutes the relationship of the Trinity. The Greek notion of *perichoresis* (the Latin equivalent is *circumincessio*) refers to being mutually intertwined, or a mutual indwelling (Durand 2012:177-192). Within this a-hierarchical relation, the individuality of the three persons of the Trinity is maintained, while every one of the persons shares in the life (existence) of each other. Perichoretic unity combines unity and diversity in such a way that the existence of one of the persons is not dissolved into non-being by virtue of the relationship. Therefore, at its core, a perichoretic relationship is an expression of both the space (distance) and belonging in the relational life of the Trinitarian God. It is an expression of mutual interpenetration of the persons of the Trinity, in which the unity-in-diversity implies making space (ceding space) for the "being of another":

[I]n their perichoretic unity the Trinitarian persons are equal. There is no first, second or third Person in the Trinity ... every Person ek-sits in both the others – that is, it exists in and also out of (ek) the others ... by virtue of their reciprocal indwelling, the Trinitarian Persons join themselves to a unity and differentiate themselves

mutually: the Father differentiates between the Son and the Spirit through his different relations to them and so on ... the Trinitarian Persons are not Persons only; they are 'spaces' for each other too ... the divine Persons mutually cede the others life and movement, and make themselves inhabitable for one another ... God becomes the dwelling place of God's creation and creation becomes the dwelling place of God (Moltmann 2003:117, 118).

I am indebted to the work of Venter on the Orthodox theologian Dumitru Staniloae (1994), which provided me with the grammar for a "spatial" theology of death, in which death is the ceding of space. For Staniloae, space is connected with interpersonal communion, but in the sense that space is ultimately distance: it enables the human being in freedom to draw near or to move away. The "possibility of space" and the "end of space" find their origin and end in God as triune space.

In his *Participating in God – A pastoral doctrine of the Trinity*, Fiddes (2000) offers a possibility of considering death as part of Trinitarian life, that is, God's participation in death. He makes use of perichoretic theology to describe a Trinitarian relationship, in which God allows otherness to become alienation, to take a journey into the unknown, by taking "death" into God-self. A perichoretic divine dance of distance-and-belonging implies the possibility of a gap being opened in between the movements of the dance. The perichoretic unity can absorb this interruption, weave the brokenness into the "dance" and transform the movement, transforming the gap, the distance, the space from "nothing" to "something of possibility". If God's being is in relationships, then the persons are in the deepest communion, precisely because they are *different* from one another – because there is real otherness (Fiddes 2000:243). This relationship is about ceding space. But by ceding this space, space is created for the Other to be – other. This, of course, rests on the theological conviction that there is a type of correlation between God's space and creaturely space, as illustrated by Staniloae.

In *Public faith in action*, Volf and McAnnally-Linz (2016:116) start the chapter on "Ending life" with the following conviction:

Life is a gift – mostly a beautiful gift, but sometimes an almost unbearably burdensome gift. The beginning of our life is not in our hands; the end of life should not be in our hands either. This is the dignity of our vulnerable lives: we are not our own but belong to the God of love, who created us, redeemed us and will bring our lives to fulfillment.

I have read their statement many times. Whilst working on this contribution, I suddenly read something that was *not there*. If they had added to “the God who created us” and “redeemed us”, the “God who sustains us”, they could have made a statement about the participation of the Trinitarian God in the lives of humankind’s life and death: God as Creator, God as Redeemer and God as Sustainer, Father, Son and Spirit. As it stands, they have missed the opportunity to interpret life and specifically death within a Trinitarian framework that could reconsider God’s control over life and death from a relational-spatial perspective, in order to arrive at the possibility of a nonbinary approach to death. This is what ultimately constitutes, for me, a *just* theology of ceding space, in which justice is understood as compassion towards each other and towards the complexity of what it means to be human.

## 6. CONCLUSION: TO DIE AND LET DIE – AND CREATING SPACE FOR MERCY AND COMPASSION

I started writing this contribution a long time before the world had (at least publicly) an inkling of the coming Covid-19 pandemic. Completing this contribution during a time of this pandemic, which is changing the world in profound ways which we have yet to realise, however, has made me appreciate that our thoughts about death have become even more complicated than ever. In the face of over 350,000 deaths recorded by the World Health Organization (2020) by the end of May 2020, the way we face up to death has become even more urgent. Faced by the deaths of so many, we might be tempted to retreat back up the path of our open discussion of death and relegate it to the private once more; it might mean being afraid of it once more and running away from it as fast as our legs may carry us. Doing these things, however, will not aid us with what Harris (2014:58) has described as the art of dying (*ars moriendi*), which is now more necessary than ever, as it relates to the art of living (*ars vivendi*).

In this regard, I return to my statement at the start of this contribution about how finding the meaning of death is related to a “well-organised mind” and a “mature spirituality”. The phrase “well-organised mind” is taken from J.K. Rowling’s Harry Potter series, which in its entirety is about death and loss, as expressed by the author herself in an interview marking the twentieth anniversary of the publication of the first book of the series *Harry Potter and the philosopher’s stone*. The phrase also comes from this first book and is a response by the character Albus Dumbledore to Harry Potter’s worry that the immortal alchemist Nicholas Flamel will ultimately

die: “To the well-organised mind, death is but the next great adventure” (Rowling 1997:215). This is directly related to a mature spirituality. The New Testament scholar Marcus Borg illustrated an example of what I would describe as a mature spirituality. It relates to both Nouwen’s and Schweitzer’s perspectives mentioned earlier. Borg passed away in 2015 and, in his eulogy, Barbara Brown Taylor (2017:237-247) alluded to Borg’s “pre-hab” about death, that is to say, being mindful of one’s own death and “working it out” with death before it was time – so that we have the strength we need when the time comes.

In the Heidelberg Catechism, question 21 (Sunday 7) is about what constitutes true faith. The answer: faith is both knowledge and trust. We could say that faith encompasses both mind and spirit and, therefore, one of the core tenets of Reformed theology is about faith as a relationship between mind and spirit. Applied to the task at hand, namely ideas about death, which is so intimately connected to faith for a great number of people, it seems that a theology of death would require both mind and spirit, rationality and spirituality, as route markers of a multidimensional mature approach to death.

Can a Trinitarian theology of ceding space help us interpret the ebb and flow of life and death in its complexity, to cultivate a theology balanced by both rationality (knowledge) and trust (faith and spirituality)? Can it enable us to make “concessions” toward what we perceive to be impassable notions of God’s control over life and death to make a move towards a notion of God’s participation in life and death, thereby truly removing death’s “sting”? I think so, but I acknowledge that this approach might not be a comfortable approach. In this way, this contribution is only the start of a reconsideration of how we approach death.

In the Afrikaans language, there is the interesting phenomenon of referring to euthanasia (in its different permutations) as *genadedood*. There is no equivalent for this in other languages in that form (that I know of). Literally translated, it is “mercy/grace death”, not the German *Sterbehilfe*, the Dutch *euthanasie* or the English *euthanasia*. I could not find the origin of the Afrikaans *genadedood* and, therefore, I do not know how “euthanasia” came to be described thus. I do know that God’s mercy or grace has extremely profound theological implications in Reformed theology, going back to John Calvin’s and Martin Luther’s objections against the Roman Catholic theology of their time, which was a theology of rewards and punishment.

In Reformed theology, God’s grace and mercy denotes being on the receiving end, undeserved, of God’s active involvement in the human

condition and that which results from it. “Mercy” or “grace” can be understood in terms of God’s compassion, which Smit (2018:109-128) connects to justice, because this type of compassion leads to a crossing of perceived divisive barriers – in the language of this contribution, compassion is elementary to the creation of space by ceding space. In this regard, “mercy” and “grace” can absolutely be related to death and God’s wide-open space in which there is no more cramping. In this way, a just theology of ceding space could provide a framework for a nonbinary theology about death and provide the beginnings of an ethical foundation for decision-making ... and maybe in the process of creating space for death, our diverse humanity is brought together, thereby opening new vistas for authentic life.

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