Attitudes to death: Some historical notes

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Men have been talking of death from time immemorial – sometimes sublimely in prose and poetry, in painting and sculpture and in music – till silence seemed to fall in the recent past. Now men are again talking about death – interminably but colloquially. They talk on television, on the radio, in books and in pamphlets. Dr Kenneth Boyd therefore finds it entirely timely to offer this historical sketch of attitudes to death. The earlier part of his paper covers fairly familiar ground but his final and longest section on the work of a social historian, Philippe Ariès, may be new to many. Ariès is reinterpreting the long history of attitudes to death in a form which may well interest those who today are concerned with helping modern man to accept his own death – death which still, for most people, is the death of another, not of oneself.

Browne on immortality

The Pythagorean school of philosophy was almost certainly the source of the Hippocratic oath¹; and although it does not appear to have passed on to the medical profession its belief in the transmigration of souls, it was successful in commending its habit of reticence. It is difficult as a result to know just what most doctors have thought about death, despite their familiarity with all that led up to it. Thus it is particularly interesting that a physician whose opinions on the subject are well documented can be found at a pivotal point in the history of western attitudes to death.

'I remember', wrote Sir Thomas Browne, 'a Doctor of Physick in Italy, who could not perfectly believe the immortality of the soule, because Galen seemed to make a doubt thereof'². Browne too had once believed that 'the soules of men perished with their bodies'³. But by the time, around 1636, when he came to write *Religio Medici*, Browne regarded this belief as one of the errors of his 'greener studies': his more mature opinion was that 'the soules of men . . . outlive death by the privilege of their proper natures' and that 'the soules of the faithful as they leave earth, take possession of heaven'⁴. 'How shall the dead arise' he writes, 'is no question of my faith; to beleieve onely possibilities is not faith, but meere Philosophy; many things are true in Divinity, which are neither inducible by reason, nor confirmable by sense'⁵.

Browne's change of mind, however, was not as

radical as it may seem, since the point at issue was not man's eternal destiny, but what happened to human souls between death and that far-off event. With the Reformation, different aspects of Christian thought on the subject soon attracted party labels. Calvinist and Anglican orthodoxy held that the souls of the dead, some in peace and others in torment, expectantly awaited the resurrection and last judgment. This view differed from that of the Catholic Church mainly by denying the possibility of moral and spiritual progress after death, and hence such notions as purgatory and the intercession of the saints. To exclude this possibility more firmly, Luther held that the souls of the dead were asleep, a view which had some Scriptural support and which many Anabaptists as well as Lutherans adopted. It was only one step further in the same direction, for those who conceived of the soul in dynamic rather than substantial terms, to claim that it died with the body to be resurrected with it at the last day. This, in some form, was the view which Browne had originally held (as in their turn did Milton, Hobbes and many Baptists and other sectarians)⁶. Exactly what form of it he held Browne did not make clear. Nor, since he continued to assert that philosophy had not thoroughly disproved the idea⁷, were his reasons for giving it up entirely clear either.

In abandoning thnetopsychism, as his heresy was called, Browne settled for orthodoxy and a quiet life in Norfolk. Such was the feverish religious climate of the time, however, that his remark, in *Religio Medici*, about philosophy not disproving the heresy produced at least two publications (by Sir Kenelm Digby and by Alexander Ross) taking him to task for it⁸. It is not surprising therefore that although Browne subsequently returned to the subject of death in *Hydriotaphia, Urne Burial* (1658) and in *A Letter to a Friend upon the Death of an Intimate Friend* (1690), his antiquarian, clinical and pathological observations were now more in evidence than his theological speculations. But his characteristic expressions of Christian hope were in no way diminished: *Hydriotaphia* ends with Browne 'ready to be anything, in the extasie of being ever'⁹; and in the *Letter* he clearly identifies himself as one of 'those resolved Christians, who looking on . . . the Death of this World but as a Nativity of another, do contentedly submit unto the common necessity'¹⁰.

These expressions of hope suggest deep roots in

the Ages of Faith. But in turning away, however slightly, from theological speculation Browne was also anticipating the future. Browne has been described as a Janus-like figure in a Janus-like age. A 'scholastic training combined with the expansive curiosity of the Renaissance' made him 'capable of many and varied responses to experience, instead of being confined to a few stereotyped ones'¹¹. Thus although he was a keen Baconian experimentalist, the world of scientific experiment was no more – or less – paradigmatic for his understanding than the world invisible. Browne and his age, 'half scientific and half magical, half sceptical and half credulous'¹², thus represent a moment of equipoise and a pivotal point in the history of western attitudes to death. But the moment passed; and since that time a stance like Browne's has been increasingly difficult to maintain. Unable, like Browne, to solve the theological problems of the seventeenth century, and aware of the disastrous results of attempting to settle them in trial by combat, the curiosity of the West engaged instead with science and, increasingly profitably, with technology. In this process the world invisible became decreasingly plausible, until eventually even Protestant theologians began to pass from equivocation to unbelief.

Burials and beliefs

In *Hydriotaphia* Browne showed himself well aware of ancient burial customs and beliefs about death, which were in his opinion much inferior to those of Christianity. These customs and beliefs, however, can tell us something about how attitudes to death changed and developed, and can indicate how Browne's moment of equipoise was reached.

The practice of burial, distinguishing humans from other animals, can be dated at least as far back as Neanderthal man, between 25 000 and 100 000 years ago. From the food and tools placed in Neanderthal graves, through the more elaborate customs of Palaeolithic and Neolithic burials, to the beliefs of surviving primitives investigated in the nineteenth century, it seems clear that some kind of survival was almost universally assumed.¹³ It is much less clear whether such a survival was desired; and the earliest literary evidence tends to undermine theories which locate the genesis of survival beliefs either in terms of wish fulfilment or as instruments of political control. Neither the pre-exilic Hebrew Sheol, nor the Homeric Hades, offer in their respective underground shadow survivals anything very attractive to the living; and any notion of a better life above the sky was on offer only to the few who already enjoyed the privileges of high rank on earth.¹⁴

The idea of a better life after death for anyone other than the representative leaders of the people emerged earliest in Egypt, around 2500 BC, and was

associated with a postmortem judgment for which the deceased had prepared with protestations of moral rectitude. A more optimistic view also emerged at the same time in India, although in a less developed form. It was not, however, until between the ninth and third centuries BC that the idea of a desirable personal immortality arose in the thought of Zoroaster, in the teachings of the post-exilic Hebrew prophets and in the mystery cults of Greece. These developments (roughly contemporary with the teaching of both Confucius and Gautama) were related, it has been argued,¹⁵ to the reshaping of old religious beliefs in changing social contexts, and in particular to a new sense of the individual's religious significance and moral responsibility.

Greek ideas about life after death were elaborated, among others by Pythagoras (who, Thomas Browne confidently asserted, could never have literally believed in transmigration¹⁶); and, in the Socratic tradition which Pythagoras influenced, they were given enduring philosophical clothing and moral significance. In Hebrew thought, the ideas of resurrection and a postmortem judgment gained considerable ground in the second and first centuries BC and provided categories within which Jesus taught and his followers interpreted their Easter experience.¹⁷ However, these categories were far from agreed among the Jews, some of whom looked forward to an earthly and others to a more spiritual resurrection. In Christianity, the expectation of Jesus' imminent return postponed such problems, allowing a variety of different metaphors of the Christian hope to coexist, even within the New Testament. But when the second coming was delayed, and the first generation of Christians began to die off, these problems were forced on the Church's attention.

The problems were never entirely resolved. Such notions as the thousand-year earthly reign of the saints (derived from Jewish thought and described in the Book of Revelation) dropped out of sight to all but the millenarian sects. But others, such as the distant resurrection and last judgment of official belief, coexisted uneasily with the more popular idea of an immediate postmortem judgment and consignment to heaven and hell. The picture was further complicated by the Church's belief, adopted at an early stage, in purgatory. And although theologians like Augustine and Aquinas could construct authoritative schemes and syntheses, popular attitudes were probably more deeply influenced by pictorial representation. And there, unfortunately, 'the serried ranks of the saved provided less inventive stimulus than the sufferings of the damned'.¹⁸ Attitudes to death in the Middle Ages therefore often reflected fear as much as hope, so much so that by the close of that period, 'the whole vision of death', it has been suggested, 'may be summed up in the word *macabre*'.¹⁹ 'The mediaeval soul' the same author adds, was 'fond of a religious shudder'.²⁰

Death tamed and wild

The tensions inherent in mediaeval Christendom's beliefs and attitudes regarding death were relaxed rather than resolved by the Renaissance and Reformation. Thus Browne, as we have seen, was able for a moment to hold the visible and invisible worlds together. But for Protestants in particular, the task became increasingly difficult. Deprived of a belief in purgatory, they were forced to defend the stark alternatives of heaven and hell. And in time the latter doctrine came to seem not only incompatible with God's love but also purposeless and deeply unjust in its failure to 'correspond to the innumerable gradations of human good and evil'.²¹ The Christian response in the twentieth century was thus to let hell quietly go the way of purgatory, or to reinterpret it in terms of hell on earth. This further attenuation of the theological vocabulary has, however, if anything, deepened the unsolved religious problems and confusion of attitudes to death which characterize contemporary western culture.

In the absence of any solution to these problems, what has happened to western attitudes to death? In the view of Ivan Illich²² death has been medicalized. Illich's interpretation of what has happened leans heavily on the work of the social historian Philippe Ariès, who sees the development of western attitudes to death in terms of four stages of historical development.²³ Ariès calls these: 1) 'tamed death', 2) 'one's own death', 3) 'thy death' and 4) 'forbidden death'.

'Tamed death', according to Ariès, is found in traditional peasant societies and in the early Middle Ages up to about the tenth century. (He calls it 'tamed' by contrast with the modern experience of death which, he suggests, has become 'wild'.) This kind of death takes place at home, in bed, surrounded by friends, family, even children; and the dying person prepares himself for it through ancient customs and ritual gestures. Death is experienced here as part of the collective destiny, something that is essentially commonplace and taken calmly.

Things began to change, Ariès suggests, in the later Middle Ages as greater emphasis was placed on the significance of the moment of death and the art of dying. Illustrating his thesis with reference to developments in pictorial art, which becomes interested first in the distant last judgment and then shows that event taking place in the bedchamber of the dying, Ariès suggests that death has now become 'one's own death'. The dying person still conducts the old collective rites, but with a new consciousness, born around 1000 AD, of his significance as an individual. This change, Ariès believes, is further reflected in the return of funeral inscriptions (almost unknown since Roman times) and the development of effigies on tombs and masses offered for dead individuals.

A further shift takes place around the sixteenth

century, characterized at first by pictures of the Dance of Death showing death raping the living. This Ariès sees as an early sign of death being experienced not as part of the natural order of things, but as a violent, irrational rupture of daily life. A significant and related change concerns the family of the dying person, of whom much more is now expected. Hitherto the customary mourning rituals performed two functions. First, they constrained the family to show in the prescribed way and for the prescribed period a sorrow they might not feel. Second, they protected the sincerely grieving survivor from the excesses of his grief by giving him things to do which might dissipate it. But now he is expected not just to show grief, but to feel it; and this reaches its crescendo in what Ariès calls the hysterical mourning of the nineteenth century. In addition to being expected to feel grief, the family is also now expected to take over responsibility for the rituals of death from the dying person himself.

From about the seventeenth century onwards, therefore, according to Ariès, individuals in the West begin to think of death not primarily as something which happens to themselves, but as something which happens to another, particularly a significant other – 'thy death'. But this attitude to death, characterized both by a sense of its unnaturalness and by the need to respond to it not simply with ritual but also with feeling, is emotionally exhausting for those who have now assumed responsibility for the conduct of death. Thus the family, overtly attempting to spare the dying person an undue ordeal, but also attempting to spare themselves, proceed to seek ways of avoiding strong emotion in the presence of death. This brings Ariès to the notion of 'forbidden death', the development of an attitude which seeks to conceal the reality of death. This end, the twentieth century discovers, is best achieved when the family hands over responsibility to the hospital, and death takes place under sedation, surrounded by professionals, and perhaps without the individual concerned ever realizing what is happening. An 'acceptable style of living while dying'²⁴ has thus been achieved. It is not an achievement of which Ariès thinks we should be proud.

Ariès' interpretation of western attitudes to death is in many respects highly plausible. It is, however, flawed by the fact that 'tamed death' was not as tame as he implies. Even in traditional societies many people do not die in their beds, for famine, pestilence and war all have to be taken into account. All these factors interrupted life before the tenth century, and afterwards there was the harrowing of society by plague, when often the only member of the family faithfully watching to the end was a dog.²⁵ That dimension is missing from Ariès' account; and so too is its correlate, the fact that life expectancy before the tenth century was less than

30 years, in the fourteenth century about 30, in the seventeenth about 40 and in the nineteenth still not much above that. Only in the last half-century has the average age at death risen to 70²⁶; and that fact alone has surely transformed the experience of death more than any other single factor.

Such criticism, however, does not necessarily invalidate Ariès' important and imaginative reconstruction of at least some of the reasons why western attitudes to death have now become so problematic. He sees clearly that there is 'a permanent relationship between one's idea of death and one's idea of oneself'²⁷ – a relationship which we have already noted in connexion with the parallel rise of western ideas of a desirable immortality and a new western sense of the individual's religious significance and moral responsibility. And there is no need to doubt either the seriousness or the significance of the question with which Ariès ends his essay: 'Must we take it for granted', he asks, 'that it is impossible for our technological cultures ever to regain the naïve confidence in Destiny which had for so long been shown by simple men when dying?'²⁸

Ariès' interpretations and questions are sufficiently important to merit attention in their own right. But the use made of them by Ivan Illich in his *Medical Nemesis* adds interest. Building on Ariès, Illich has mounted a radical attack on what he calls 'the monolithic world religion'²⁹ of medicalized health care. Since the sources he uses are often impeccable, many of the detailed criticisms Illich makes of contemporary medicine (especially in the Third World context) are widely acknowledged to be fair and even constructive. It is only the overall picture which fails to convince. By focusing upon what almost amounts to a conspiracy theory to explain medicine's contemporary role, Illich misses the point that if medicine has become 'a monolithic world religion', this is primarily because the genuinely religious problems of the West remain unsolved. He appears to suggest (at least in *Medical Nemesis*) that these problems cannot be solved: 'until now,' he writes, 'recognizing the sacred dimension was a necessary foundation for ethics . . . but recourse to the sacred has been blocked off in our present crisis'.³⁰ Yet what he offers in place of medicine and in default of religion is a sort of ecological Kantianism, and 'hygiene as a virtue'³¹. In this there seems little hope of anyone regaining 'the naïve confidence in Destiny' desired by Ariès.

But is there hope anywhere else that this confidence can be regained? There is perhaps one possibility. Ariès' recognition of a 'permanent relationship between one's idea of death and one's idea of oneself' carries the implication that the relationship may be a two-way process. The ancient western hope of a desirable immortality was first stirred by a new understanding of the value of the individual. It may be that a new understanding of

death and eternal life can restore to the individual some of the value he has lost. Such a new understanding is unlikely to be found simply within the attenuated religious tradition of the West. But the contemporary phenomenon of interaction between the faiths of East and West, grounded in social, political and cultural change, offers many hitherto unconsidered possibilities. At least some religious thinkers are now considering the prospect of a 'Copernican revolution in theology', and of 'a shift in the picture of the religious life of mankind as centring upon and culminating in one's own religion, to a view of the religions as different responses to various overlapping aspects of the same Ultimate Reality'.³² A revolution of this kind clearly is unlikely to take place overnight. But if it does take place it will inevitably have implications for attitudes to death, perhaps even restoring confidence in destiny – and giving new meaning to Sir Thomas Browne's view of the world as 'not an Inne, but a Hospitall, and a place, not to live, but to die in'.³³

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