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## REALISM AND COMPENSATION: THE RELIGIOUS UNDERSTANDING OF DEATH

The Introduction to *Problems of Suffering in Religions of the World* began with two quotations, one from John Donne, the other from Freud. The quotation from Donne ("How much misery is presaged to us, when we come so generally weeping into the world...") exemplifies the grim realism about suffering which is prominent in all religions; the quotation from Freud ("It seems not to be true that there is a power in the universe, which watches over the well-being of every individual with parental care...") exemplifies the widespread understanding (as much associated with Marx as with Freud) that religions exist and flourish because they offer a supernatural compensation for the natural disasters which overwhelm us with so little apparent equity.

But our ancestors were by no means so stupid or naive as our contemporaries often make them out to be—valuing their art and artifacts at a high price literally so, in the salesroom, but discounting the experience which underlies their imaginative world as childish or primitive superstition. Yet so far as we have access through evidence to their understanding of the universe and of their own situation within it, it is obvious that they faced the realities of death and suffering instead of trying to evade them. It is true that they believed that there would be *some* continuity through death, but the belief that there would be a happy and compensatory continuity of consciousness in a paradise or heaven is by no means easy to verify. In fact, as men established themselves in the Eastern mediterranean world it was generally believed that even if a vague shadow of a life continued beyond death, it had lost all that makes life worth living, namely, the full means of relatedness to its fellows and to whatever theistic realities were believed to exist:

I am no longer a man able to enjoy life:  
The place of my rest is the dust of the earth; here I lie  
among the wicked.

My sleep is grievous; here I lie among enemies:  
My sister, from where I now lie, I can never again rise up.

Even as late as the time of Homer, the prospects for survival were not exactly substantial: the souls of the suitors are as indiscernible as the thin squeak of a bat in the depth of a dark cave. And in Israel, although a vague resemblance of a person might continue in Sheol, there were more secure prospects for survival in one's descendants (hence the Levirate Law of Deut. xxv. 5) and in the memory of others. All this is familiar as described in *The Problems of Suffering*. But the implication is important: contrary to what Marx and Freud supposed, there is widespread evidence that an unevaded and realistic assessment of death is fundamental in religious traditions. But, as I have argued in *The Sense of God*, the evolutionary development of human life has acquired the sense that there are realities external to itself which make a significant contribution to the construction of human lives. The nature of the realities which contribute those effects has been variously described, as god, angels, devils, devas, jinn and the like. These descriptions may well seem to some bizarre, improbable or mistaken. But the experience which creates the imaginative necessity is prior to the description—and in that sense, theological reflection is necessarily parasitic on experience. And the experience is universal, that there is a reality in existence, external to ourselves, which is frequently (though variously) characterized theistically, and which contributes significant effect or input into the construction of human life. Consequently, it is by no means unreasonable to hope that theistic reality may be able to help people in the construction of their lives, not least in relation to the many limitations which threaten or disrupt a lifeway.

Where death is concerned, this is simply one of the many limitations which circumscribe the continuity of a human life in its present form. As a limitation, it is vastly more disturbing and profound than other more immediate limitations, but still, in principle, there is no reason why men should not hope to find a way through that limitation, just as they have not hope themselves to find a way through others. When this evolutionary quest is linked to a sense of theistic reality external to the subject, it is not surprising to find an imaginative exploration of the means of continuity and survival in relation to that putative reality. The

imaginative clothing is very varied, being derived essentially from cues of possible survival arising in the universe. Some of those cues are described in *The Sense of God*: the buried seed rising to new life; the dissolution of salt in water; smoke rising from fire; the breath which passes from the body to the air, to be breathed in by another. The different cues of possible survival lead to very different imaginative descriptions of what may survive, and in what form. Consequently, it is not surprising that fortuitous discoveries, such as mummification among the Egyptians, lead to elaborate architecture and ritual which in neighbouring areas do not occur, as Giedion has pointed out in contrasting Egypt with Mesopotamia. But the point to be remembered is that the imaginative exploration, although it can clearly be triggered by fortuitous discovery and be motivated by fear, nevertheless seems, from the evidence, to be subordinate to the experience of relatedness to a reality which is characterized theistically. This is particularly obvious and well-documented in the case of Israel, where virtually the whole of Tanach (the Old Testament) was written without any belief that there would be a conscious continuity of life with God after death. What generated Tanach was a this-worldly, present-life, experience of relatedness to theistic reality, characterized as *Yhwh*, which was simply a matter of fact. When the belief began to develop that the quality of that experience was so deep and so real that perhaps God would find some way to continue it through death, the Jewish imagination drew on several different pictures, some Biblical, some Greek, with which to clothe its hope. But the pictures are obviously, far less important than the experience which created the necessity for them.

There is, then, no difficulty in finding among our ancestors a realism and reticence which is as sombre as that of Donne—or for that matter, or that of our own contemporaries, who sometimes regard themselves, in this as in other respects, as having “come of age”.

But can *we* still retain an imaginative hope, or have the cues of continuity become so implausible that nothing beyond a realistic acquiescence is left? We do not need to doubt the realism of Donne, but can we share his hope? Of the invaded realism, there is no doubt at all: on Christmas day, for example, in 1629, he was preaching in St. Paul's, and a part of his sermon was based on a text from Ps. xxii: “But I am a worm, and no man; a reproach of men, and despised of the people.” Donne commented: “Let man be something; how poore, and inconsiderable a ragge of this world, is man! Man, whom Paracelsus would have

undertaken to have made in a Limbeck, in a Furance... Man, of whom when David had said (as the lowest diminution that he could put upon him) I am a worm and no man, He might have gone lower and said, I am a man and no worm; for man is so much lesse than a worme, as that wormes of his own production, shall feed upon his dead body in the grave”.

That is a world and a picture we can recognize. It is portrayed with equal clarity by Samuel Beckett. Of his characters, to take an example, in *Endgame*, two appear in dustbins as a summary of their condition, a third is blind and a cripple, the only one who can move about the stage at all in his own strength, is an epileptic whose legs are in the process of collapse. The set for the first production of *Endgame* conveyed a sense of almost womb-like imprisonment, a sense of the characters being trapped in circumstances which they did not desire and over which they have no control.

“Scoundrel”, says Ham to his father: “Why did you engender me?”

“I didn't know.”

“Know what?”

“That it would turn out to be you.”

Obviously, Beckett is not alone in his pessimistic portrayal of human existence. At the beginning of *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche asked whether such a thing as what he called “a strong pessimism” was possible—“a quest of mind for what is hard, terrible, evil, dubious in existence, arising from a surfeit of health... hankering for the enemy, the worthwhile enemy, so as to prove its strength.” It is this kind of ‘strong pessimism’ with which we have become familiar, and which has been formally recognized and personified in the Indian tradition—a vital, almost angry, pessimism, which the realities of our situation have evoked. It is not surprising that Donne was in anguish when he cried “Let man be *something*.” But what? What can he be?

The answer is, obviously, many things. He can fill in the interval before he dies in many ways: tinker, tailor, soldier, sailor, rich man, poor man, beggar man, thief. These, and the many other possibilities which men take up, and in which they are able to find satisfaction and enjoyment, are a practical protest against the pessimism of Beckett and of Donne. “All right”, we say in effect, ‘May be it does not go on for ever; but there is no denying the possibility of happiness and fulfilment before the end comes.’

Yet, finally, Beckett and Donne are right. However great the moments of happiness may be, however splendid our achievements, they cannot be more than a passing splendour. It cannot be much consolation to the dead that they appear in a library catalogue or in the index of a history of England. Or as Donne put it in a sermon preached in 1627: "If you ask yourself, *Quis ego*, What am I? and are able to answer yourself, I am a man of title, of honour, of place, of power, of possessions, a man fit for a Chronicle, a man considerable in the Herald's Office, the sphere and element of honour, go to the Herald's Office and you will find those men as busy there, about the consideration of funerals, as about the consideration of creations: you will find that office to be as well the grave as the cradle of honour....In what height so ever any of you that sit here stand at home, there is some other, in some higher station, that weighs you down: And he that stands in the highest of subordinate heights, nay in the highest supreme height in this world, is weighed down by that which is nothing; for what is any Monarch to the whole world? And the whole world is but that; but what? but nothing."

It is a statement with which Beckett might be expected to agree. But there the agreement would end. At the word "nothing" Beckett would write a full stop and put down his pen, because his statement would be finished and complete. But for Donne it is only a first paragraph. His is the foundation of a more complete statement which turns out to be even more astringently realistic in its assessment of human capabilities than the apparently total realism of Beckett. There is no doubt that for many people a pessimistic response is inescapable, because it is forced upon them by the facts as they are, and in particular by "the ultimate frustration of decay"; and of that recognition, Buddhism is an eloquent testimony. But in the case of Donne the word "ultimate" is wrong. He did not in any way underestimate or understate the realities of human existence, but he also believed this existence to be an expression of the *energeia*, the energy, of God—though his language was obviously different. But was that the optimism of despair? Was it perhaps the case that he was so aware of the agony that he took refuge in 'the comforting illusion' of religion? How could he maintain that belief when he was so clear-headed about the facts which count against it?

The answer lies in the facts: it lies in a serious and experiential grasp of what it may be factually possible for this human subject to become. When Donne was preaching a sermon to com-

memorate the wife of Sir John Danvers, he said in the prayer before the sermon:

O eternal and most glorious God,...enable us, in life and death, seriously to consider the value, the price of a soul... Suffer us not therefore, O Lord, so to undervalue ourselves, nay, so to impoverish thee, as to give away those souls... for nothing, and all the world is nothing, if the soul must be given for it.

But this is simply to ask, in more attractive language, the question which is central to *The Sense of God* (P. 40):

What are the capabilities of this particular organization and assembly of matter which makes us what we are? We know that we are capable of walking, eating, talking, drinking; we know that we are capable of experiencing feelings which we label (culturally) as beauty, truth, love. Is it possible that we are capable of experiencing feelings and effects which we label theistically (i.e. label appropriately as God-derived or God-related)?

Different religious traditions answer that question differently—and as I have pointed out in a recent article in *Concilium*, the answers result in radically different anthropologies—that is to say, radically descriptions of what human nature is and of what it is capable of becoming. Some aspects of those descriptions are mutually exclusive and logically incompatible; and although it is highly important to note that this is not an either/or situation (for example, if, for the sake of argument, the Christian anthropology turns out, eschatologically, to have been less descriptively accurate than the Buddhist, it does not follow that the *whole* of the Christian insight into human nature has been mistaken—as Pole put it to Lupset, "heretykys be not in all thyngys heretykys"), the fact remains that the religious claims cannot all be right: they may all be wrong, but they cannot all be right; nor can they be regarded as a kind of non-empirical poetry, since many of their utterances are expressed in the form of propositions about putative matters of fact. But leaving those issues on one side (and doing so with a reasonably good conscience, since I discuss them in a book about to be published by Oxford University Press, entitled *The Religious Imagination and the Sense of God*), the essential point remains that human beings write their response

to suffering and death, not, usually, in words, but in life: they write their answer in terms of exercise, the exercise of their own capacity as they believe it to be. The Buddhist exercise is very different from the Muslim, because it incorporates a different anthropological understanding of the nature of the subject. But there is a subject, and that is the common point of departure, as Donne, again, observed:

Man is but earth, 'tis true; but earth is the centre. That man who dwells upon himself, who is always conversant in himself, rests in his true centre. Man is a celestial creature also, a heavenly creature; and that man that dwells upon himself, that hath his conversation in himself, hath his conversation in heaven.

For Donne, then, the conversation in heaven is possible because it is already begun on earth, where there may be many languages through which God has spoken to men, but where an unequivocal (or at least an attractive) word has been spoken in the person of Christ. It is in this way that suffering and death, in the Christian tradition, are not evaded but invaded. If, as I have argued in *The Religious Imagination*, the sense of God establishes itself as sharing the characteristics of a network of information, from which we receive signal inputs and to which we can connect ourselves through prayer, worship, contemplation, meditation, then the utterance of God in Christ is clearly feasible; and the continuity of ourselves in that condition of information-relatedness through death is equally probable. We are thus created in and through the realities of suffering and death, but our relatedness to God, expressed and re-established by his self-communication in Christ and appropriated by our attentiveness in faith and prayer, cannot be destroyed by the accidents of time. For the Christian, the fact of Jesus includes Ps. xxii as starkly as Donne quoted it, since it was from this psalm that the 'cry of dereliction' on the Cross was, according to the record, quoted, but it includes also the realization, first in description, then in experience, that death did not destroy his relatedness to God and to ourselves. It is on this basis that we are able still to conclude, as did Donne, in perhaps his most familiar words:

Death, be not proud, though some have called thee  
Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so...  
One short sleep past, we wake eternally,  
And death shall be no more, death thou shalt die.