

COPING WITH DEATH IN WESTERN RELIGIOUS CIVILIZATION

by Jerome R. Malino

CHOOSE LIFE

It was a haggard and disconsolate King Saul who sought out the Witch of Endor with a request that she violate one of the king's own laws in summoning to his presence the spirit of Samuel the prophet. The prophet had conferred the kingdom upon him and had, in anger, taken it away because of Saul's trespass against the word of the Lord. The woman cried out in terror when she saw a "godlike being" appear before her. Samuel was in the guise of an old man dressed in a robe, and his first words to Saul were words of rebuke: "Why have you disturbed me by bringing me up?"

Samuel had presumably been summoned from Sheol, the final resting place of all the dead, high born and low born, rich and poor, kings and commoners. On being summoned up by the woman of Endor, Samuel apparently became aware of his surroundings and of the king who sought his counsel. Until that moment the dead Samuel had been in a state of unconsciousness, forgetfulness, and silence. "The dead shall not praise thee nor those who descend into silence," wrote the psalmist, for those who completed their earthly span were assigned to a slumbering eternity, denied communion with God, and protected from intrusion by biblical legislation against recourse to sorcerers and diviners. The author of the 139th Psalm tells us that there is no escape from the spirit of God even in Sheol, but God's spirit could bring no animation to the countless generations doomed to an everlasting quiet. Surely there was nothing attractive to the living in the future that lay before them after death. It was but an empty, unenviable eternity devoid of meaning and irrelevant to life.

It would be surprising indeed if, in a work like the Old Testament, product of a thousand years of spiritual and literary endeavor, one were to find but a single conception of life after death, a lone and forbidding picture of mute desolation. Were not the spirit and body of

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man separate before his creation? And should they not be parted after death, with the former enjoying a return to its source even as the latter returns once again to the dust of which it was formed?

And the dust returneth to the earth as it was,
And the spirit returneth unto God who gave it,

wrote the author of Ecclesiastes; while Job is even more specific as he affirms, out of his torturous agony,

But as for me, I know that my redeemer liveth,
And that he will witness at the last upon the dust;
And when after my skin this is destroyed,
Then without my flesh shall I see God;
Whom I, even I, shall see for myself,
And mine eyes shall behold, and not another's.

In the Book of Isaiah, we are told of the final victory over death in which God "will swallow up death forever, and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces." A poetic extravagance, no doubt, or the expression of a pious hope for some future moment; hardly an optimistic expectation for frail flesh coping with each day's sorry problems.

But let us not have the impression that the mood of the Old Testament is a grim one, or that the general absence of some promising hereafter cast its pall over the life of the people. Death, in violent or premature form, was looked upon as a punishment from God. Death, in the fulness of years, was often welcomed as appropriate reward for those who had successfully completed the business of living. If there is a preoccupation in the Old Testament, it is with life, life to be lived to the fullest, in obedience to the law of God. There was a promise for the future, varied in form and expression. A real continuation of the life of the individual was to be found in his offspring, in the fruit of his loins, in the realization of his hopes through generations yet to be born and bearing within them the life force of their progenitor. Abraham could not have confidence in God's promise so long as Sarah remained barren. In the Book of Ruth and in the custom of Levirate marriage we find expression of the idea, not unknown among prebiblical peoples, that children are assurance to the dead of continued and meaningful existence.

In yet another way the frail mortality of the individual could be transcended and that was through sharing the history of the folk. The promise for the future was given more to the collective entity than to the individual, more to the nation as a whole than to the human parts comprising it. Israel is deathless, and through Israel the Israelite lives on. An eternal God will grant eternal being to his chosen folk as long

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as they maintain their part in the covenant between them. "I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that I have set before thee life and death, the blessing and the curse; therefore choose life, that thou mayest live, thou and thy seed. To love the Lord thy God, to hearken to His voice, and to cleave unto Him; for that is thy life and the length of thy days." One must note that the Hebrew text uses the second person singular as though to stress the obligation of the individual in assuring the continued life of the folk and to emphasize his share in its eternal promise.

FROM THIS WORLD TO THE NEXT

The wholesome preoccupation of the biblical period with life proved, in the face of national catastrophe and personal frustration, to be inadequate. The more dismal the experiences of daily living, the stronger became the need for some assurance that there was more to life than the pathetic endeavors to keep body and soul together. It was precisely this awareness of the dichotomy between body and soul that nourished the deep longing for such assurance. The agonized human spirit could not believe that man, the triumph of God's creation, sharing with him the capacity to distinguish between right and wrong, could have a fate no better than the grave. The testimony of the eyes had to be believed and the body was doomed to decay, but the spirit was, of a certainty, destined for something more than worms and maggots. In the postbiblical period, in the writings of the Apocrypha, we find emerging the strong conviction that man's spirit would persist beyond the grave and assure him a life beyond his years on earth. While the Book of Ecclesiasticus indicates a lack of such future expectation, the Wisdom of Solomon (3:1-5) tells us "The souls of the righteous are in the hands of God and no torment will ever touch them. In the eyes of the foolish they seem to have died, and their departure was thought to be an affliction, and their going from us to be their destruction; but they are at peace. For though in the sight of men they were punished, their hope is full of immortality."

It was the Second Book of Maccabees that added to the idea of the spirit's immortality the promise of bodily resurrection for those who suffered martyrdom at the hands of their people's oppressors. We must recognize here a grappling with one of the profoundest problems of ethical religion. How is one to reconcile the goodness of God and the suffering of his servants? If this life is all and the triumph of the wicked is the last word to be spoken, then a mockery is made of God's justice and those who live by his will are dupes of divine whimsy. It

was as impossible for the faithful to contemplate a God who was less than just as it was impossible for them to depart to the right or to the left from the Law he had ordained. Redress for the ethical imbalance everywhere discernible was assured in a life that would begin only after this earthly existence had ended in death. If the wicked seem to be enjoying an ill-gotten prosperity, it is only as prelude to an eternity of torment. If the righteous seem to be suffering, they are redeeming their sins in this life and will know an eternity of bliss in the life to come.

One detects in postbiblical Judaism a less than unqualified acceptance of the *Olam Haba* or world to come. It is true that the doctrine of resurrection is firmly fixed and the inequities of history are expected to be adjusted in the messianic age, but it is the folk as well as the individual that will know this resurrection. While this world is but an entrance chamber to the world to come, and everyone is destined to stand in judgment before a celestial judge, emphasis is still, in rabbinic Judaism, on this life. "Better," says Rabbi Jacob, "is one hour of repentance and good deeds in this world than all of the life of the world to come"; and the inclination to rely on a heavenly reward for righteous behavior is discouraged by the reminder, "The payment for a good deed is a good deed, and the payment for a transgression is a transgression." We are cautioned against being like those who serve their master for the sake of a reward.

Whatever qualification there might have been in Judaism regarding the idea of bodily resurrection at a time of final judgment, there was none in Christianity. The belief in resurrection was not the result of any intellectual process nor the fruit of any logical inference. It was born, not of a wistful hope, but of the total acceptance of the resurrection of the risen Christ. The idea so clear in Zoroastrianism that the final judgment will separate the righteous from the wicked became a cornerstone of Christian faith. Emphasis was shifted totally from this world to the next, and all of life had to be understood in the light of the ultimate denouement when the sheep would be separated from the goats and the sinless from the transgressors.

"THE CONVICTION OF THINGS NOT SEEN"

"Faith," said Paul, "is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." Nowhere was this faith more strikingly manifested than in the assurance and conviction concerning life after death. Real as this life might seem to be—and the trials and woes of daily living were real enough—it was but a shadow world when held against the

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crystal splendor of the world to come. Indeed, the more difficult life became, the more persistent the wars, the plagues, and the exploitation of princes, the more real and tangible became the heavenly bliss laid up for the righteous and the more certain the torment awaiting the wicked. So real had the world to come become for the faithful that its demography, topography, climate, and geography all became subjects of investigation for the curious and an intellectual exercise for the imaginative. For the Christian there was heaven, a place of angelic bliss and idealized splendor. This was, of course, the reward of the completely righteous, and the mere contemplation of it could bring to the believer the sheerest ecstasy. At the other end of this spectrum of retribution was hell, and the righteous found a vicarious satisfaction in devising tortures of infinite variety for unbelievers and transgressors. Somewhere between the two, purgatory provided punishment for venial sin and satisfaction for trespass. Here souls were purified in their progress to final bliss, and here the efficacy of prayers for the departed could be measured. Even those who did not accept literally the conventional ideas of heaven and hell saw in the latter a state of remorse and in the former the bliss of conscious communion with the highest.

Bliss, too, awaited the pious Jew in a poorly defined *Gan Eden* or paradise that was more academic in character than angelic. The popular imagination did not adorn this realm with angels and the sweet music of harps, but assigned to each resident a lectern and a ponderous volume of sacred writ. Over the protest of the rabbis and the philosophers, the popular mind assigned to the recitation of the Kaddish, the mourners' prayer, the power of reducing the suffering of the departed. The maximum period of such suffering being twelve months, the mourners' prayer was to be recited by dutiful male offspring for their parents during a period of eleven months—long enough to assure a substantial measure of protection and short enough to discourage the impression that one's parents merited the full punishment.

Like the Christian and the Jew, the Moslem assigned unbelievers to the tortures of hell, but promised the faithful an abundance of feasting, music, fine garments, perfume, and large-eyed maidens.

During these centuries of faith, death was not an end but a transition. Whether it could be greeted with sublime calm or with hopeless despair depended on one's estimate of the life he had lived, of the state of grace in which he found himself in that last moment of life, and in the concern that would be reflected in the prayers recited in his behalf. The here-now vanished in the hereafter, the future swallowed up the present, and the moment was lost in eternity. Each faith, aye even the

subdivisions within each faith, devised their own exclusive heavens and hells to which were assigned respectively those who shared their theological credo and those who rejected it.

“ECRASEZ (ECRASASSIEZ) L’INFAME”

The faith which for so many generations had sustained the morale of the multitudes and given meaning to their lives was not to go unchallenged. The extravagance of its conclusions and the fanaticism with which it was all too often espoused could not fail to provoke a reaction in those who sought to guide their lives, not by the blind acceptance of an age-old tradition, but rather by the light of reason. The religious and temporal institutions of society might be on the side of faith, but there was a compelling force to the voice of reason that could not be denied. With the coming of the modern period many things that heretofore had been unquestionably accepted were subjected to the ruthless scrutiny of reason and a reliance on the testimony of pragmatic evidence. Science, the offspring of reason, based its conclusion on observable phenomena and the controlled techniques of the laboratory. Nothing was to be accepted on faith, and only the pragmatically provable was to be believed. It is not surprising, then, that we come upon a period in which science and religion seem to be in irreconcilable conflict. That this conflict was more apparent than real, that it was often the result of a failure to understand the true nature of religion, was lost on most of the protagonists. There were far too many, on both sides of the struggle, who identified religion at times with a revealed text, at other times with a particular supernatural theology, and at still other times with the institutions of the religious establishment. If any of the conclusions of reason or science challenged these manifestations of religion, they were construed to be enemies of religion itself. The battle lines were sharply drawn, with the forces of religion arrayed on the side of past and tradition and the forces of reason committed to follow its guidance even to a denial of every orthodoxy. For reason's devotees the Bible was naïve and suspect, creed was a device for blinding the eyes of the masses, and the church nothing but a powerful temporal force struggling on behalf of the maintenance of the status quo.

It was inevitable that there would be a shift in emphasis from the next world to this. The industrialization of society and the recognition of the role of the individual conspired to undermine authoritarianism, both political and ecclesiastical. The social and political revolutions of the mid-nineteenth century had their counterpart in upheavals in the

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institutions of religion. A new faith replaced the old. It was a faith in man's capacity to make a heaven of this life if only the beguiling conceptions of the next life could be destroyed. If the masses could but awaken from the drugged sleep of the centuries, they could create an earthly paradise, a classless society which would take from each according to his ability and give to each according to his need.

Work and play, live on hay,
You get pie, in the sky,
When you die—
It's a lie!

This was but a beginning. Forgoing the "pie in the sky" would release the creative forces of men and enable them to create God's kingdom here on earth. The church itself was not immune to these ever growing influences and the end of the nineteenth century saw the development of a social gospel which sought to translate the dynamic of religion into an improvement of society. Putting this world in good order took precedence over concern for the next.

The new faith looked forward to the "Parliament of Man." Man's acquisitive instincts would atrophy in the good society, and moral deficiencies would vanish as his basic material needs would be met. If there had been a naïve reliance on a world to come to adjust the inequities of this world, there was now an equally naïve reliance on the force of reason and the techniques of science to produce a perfect society and a new race of men.

Alas, the new faith succumbed as did the old. Two world wars, the bloodiest in human history, disabused those who had shifted their faith from God and the church to man and his machines. The presence, in Hitlerism and Communism, of what appeared to be demonic forces for evil, gave pause even to those who were most sanguinely optimistic about the future of man. Revolution and the class struggle were everywhere, and they brought in their wake, not peace and equity, but violence and exploitation.

Denied both this world and the next, and shorn of hope, the thoughtful and the sensitive were indeed bereft. Estranged from this world and bewildered by it, and unable to accept a conception of a future life that could give meaning to the bizarre journey from the cradle to the grave, man found himself alienated from God, from church, from society, and from himself—living in a time variously characterized as the Age of Anxiety, the Age of the Lonely Crowd, or the Age of the Failure of Nerve. The complexities of modern life are bewildering. Modern scientific knowledge, once thought to hold the promise of a future of

happiness and fulfilment, seems disjointed and uncorrelated at best, and at worst is a ready tool for the forces of evil. Add to the foregoing the personal emotional problems of the individual and the anxiety and uncertainty of daily life. Man has to contend with the Secular City and must do so without the help of a transcendent faith or a God thought by many to be dead. Unable to cope with life, how can he cope with death?

"THROUGH THE CRACK OF THE VISIBLE UNIVERSE"

Man is the victim of a fateful dichotomy. This is the source of his woe and the source of his greatness. He is a creature of earth and, like the beast of the field, is born and dies. Like the beast of the field, he struggles for his food, takes his rest when weary, and produces his young. But he is also a creature of heaven or, as the psalmist put it, "but a little lower than the angels." He is capable of love and compassion. He has the capacity to appreciate beauty and the talent to create it. He has a consciousness of himself and an awareness of others. He knows of his own finiteness, yet has a conception of the infinite. He is endowed with a capacity for moral discrimination and the ability to see order and law in the processes of nature. He has a memory of the past and a hope for the future. Such a creature as this can, of a certainty, not live by bread alone. Nor can he live on faith alone. His too, too solid flesh demands more nourishment than a creedal or philosophical abstraction. His love must have with it an embrace, his compassion the institutions of an ethical society, his mind the houses of learning and the techniques of the laboratory. His future lies neither in the disavowal of the flesh nor in the rejection of the spirit. His career on earth must be motivated by the continuing effort to integrate the seemingly disparate elements that abide within him in order that he might realize to the fullest both his physical and spiritual potential. His mind and his soul must give wings to his body, and he must, like Jacob's ladder, reach to the heavens even while his feet are planted firmly on earth. Faith is still his need. Not the blind faith of ages past, but a faith born of an understanding vision of his true character and potential. Not an antirational faith, a "credo quia absurdum est," but a faith consistent with knowledge, in harmony with the testimony of his reason and his senses. He must be able to reckon with the non-rational without becoming a victim of the antirational. He needs imaginative constructs to give meaning to the knowledge he possesses and to sustain him in his ignorance.

We hear more today of myth than of faith, but the distinction be-

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tween the two is more semantic than real. The role played by religion through the centuries is now being assigned to other forces in our society which might minister to the spirit of man. Says Rollo May, "A society furnishes means for its members to deal with excessive guilt, anxiety and despair in its symbols and myths. When no symbols have transcendent meaning, as in our day, the individual no longer has his specific aid to transcend his normal crises of life, such as chronic illness, loss of employment, war, death of loved ones and his own death, and the concomitant anxieties and guilt. In such periods he has an infinitely harder time dealing with his impulses and instinctual needs and drives, a much harder time finding his own identity, and is prey thus to *neurotic* guilt and anxiety." Mark Schorer's comment is equally revealing, "Myths are the instruments by which we continually struggle to make our experience intelligible to ourselves." Man is continually seeking some meaning to the facts of ordinary life, and without such meaning his experience is chaotic and fragmentary. Schorer quotes Philip Wheelwright in telling us what is the very essence of myth. It is "that haunting awareness of transcendental forces peering through the cracks of the visible universe."

We need not be frightened off by a vocabulary. What Wheelwright tells us is the essence of myth is, for me, the very essence of religion: a "haunting awareness of transcendental forces peering through the cracks of the visible universe."

This awareness of transcendental forces must be communicated to man by contemporary religion and contemporary culture if he is to have the means with which to live fully and be able to accept, with maturity and calm, the prospect of his own demise. In his discerning analysis of the anatomy of anxiety outlined in his book *The Courage To Be*, Paul Tillich speaks of the dread of non-being. Somehow we must be able to understand our "non-being" for what it is—realizing that it is partial, not total, and aware of how much is immune to its ravages.

We can cope with death. The time will come when violent and premature death will succumb to knowledge and experience. As we share our blessings and our bounty on a global scale, as we advance our social and medical understanding and put an end to the senselessness of war, we will be able to extend the life-span of men and remove the afflictions that presently bring so many to their graves before their time. Death in the fulness of years will lose much of its terror and will find the human spirit better prepared to meet it. Full and fruitful living will enable us to be reconciled to the demise of our bodies.

There are ways of surviving death. My death need not be the end of my being, though it spell the end of my flesh. Our meaning for life and life's meaning for us need not be confined to the days of our years. We can extend our influence, our purpose, our very being beyond our mortal span. The thoughts which follow are neither original, esoteric, nor profound, but they may, nonetheless, suggest ways of sustaining our spirits with an immortal hope.

We continue beyond our own lifetime through the children we bring into the world, through their children and their children's children. William Saroyan, deprived of his father when he was young, said, "Fathers don't die—every man is his father."

We are able to survive our own demise in the thought and memory of others. We cannot live in the past, but the past can have its life in us. As the strength, the mind, and heart of former generations are alive in us, so will we live in the memories of those who will abide beyond our time.

We live after death in the influence we have on the lives of others. As teachers, parents, friends and co-workers, we leave in the minds of those who know us the indelible effects of our association and companionship.

We survive our deaths through identification with the timeless aspirations of the human spirit. William James has said, "The greatest use of a life is to spend it for something that outlasts it." The institutions that men create have a durability far greater than the mortal substance of their flesh. As we become parts of institutions of learning or of worship, even as we pursue the truth at an "Institute on Religion in an Age of Science," we make ourselves a part of a social and spiritual force that will transcend our time on earth.

If that time will come when our world will be a better place in which to live, when justice will triumph, and truth and righteousness reign supreme, this will be not only a tribute to the multitudes of former generations who lived and died for the kingdom of God on earth but it will be, as well, their assurance of immortality, their promise of enduring life.

"A thing of beauty is a joy forever" and "What is excellent, as God lives, is permanent." Excellence and beauty confer on those who pursue them the abiding quality they themselves possess.

Perhaps I ought to refer briefly and parenthetically to the question of physical immortality. I hope I may be allowed a personal comment in which to suggest that physical immortality holds no attractions for me. In *Gulliver's Travels* we read of those who at birth are

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granted immortality and who, as a consequence, lose their incentive for living. I remember, also, having read somewhere, "Isn't it amazing how many people there are who long for immortality, but can't amuse themselves on a rainy afternoon."

How shall we cope with death? We come full circle to the biblical wellsprings of our religious tradition and its injunction, "Choose life." The business of refashioning the world in accordance with the kingdom of God gives purpose to our living and is a bulwark against death. We see ourselves as part of the whole of mankind, finding joy in the promise of a society redeemed and a continuation of our own being in the life of the community of men. I am fully aware of the fact that this promise may be betrayed by a catastrophe that will spell the destruction of our race, but I most certainly will not build my life or my thought on so ominous an eventuality. Perhaps I have enough confidence in the good judgment of this uncertain creature, man, to assume that no matter how close he may come to the brink of self-destruction he will be dissuaded from taking the fatal, final step.

Death's most powerful enemy is love. The author of the *Song of Solomon* more than hinted at this when he said:

Set me as a seal upon thy heart,
As a seal upon thine arm;
For strong as death is love.

A true love for our fellowmen, an identification with the whole of the human race, a sense of participation in the adventure of mankind will grant us the means with which to transcend both our littleness and our temporal limitations. We are bound in an everlasting covenant with the living and the dead and with those who are yet to be born.

In a brief and moving poem, the Hebrew poet Rahel speaks of "My dead ones."

They alone are left me, and in them alone
Death cannot sink its sharpened blade
At the turn in the road, at the day's decline
They silently circle and quietly follow
A covenant of truth is ours, a bond unbroken
That which I have lost is eternally my own.

How shall we cope with death? How we die will, in the final analysis, depend on how we live, and death's terror will vanish before life, love, and endeavor. The petition of the psalmist must be ours

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as well: "So teach us to number our days that we will get us a heart of wisdom." The heart of wisdom comes not from otherworldly promise, but from the way in which we number our days. Death can, at most, but make life more precious, more wisely to be used, more gratefully to be prized. We cannot fear what we can master.

So shalt thou feed on death that feeds on men,
And death once dead there's no more dying then.