

SCIENCE, RELIGION, AND DEATH

by Kenneth Patton

There are certain issues in the interaction between science, religion, and death that I do not intend to treat. I do not intend to give a historical or scholarly treatment of this issue. I do not intend to analyze the way science has modified the handling of death in the various religious traditions. I do not even intend to speak for all liberal opinion and practice in these matters. I intend to adhere to the only area in which I can speak with authority: the way science has conditioned my own personal beliefs and expectations in relation to death; the way science has affected my own ministry to those faced with death; and the conclusions I have reached as to the attitudes of other people in these matters, deriving from my own first-hand experience.

Whatever qualifications I have to speak on these matters derive from some thirty years in the ministry, twenty-five of them in Unitarian and Universalist pastorates and the balance with the Disciples of Christ. But my experience with Protestant and fundamentalist faith and practice relates to the first thirty years of my life, since I was born and reared in its traditions and institutions and educated in its schools. Thirty years against twenty-five years is a sufficient balance of experience between the liberal and conservative traditions in American religion and that amorphous midland that drifts between the poles. I have studied with some scope the religious ways of other peoples in these matters, but I am not equipped to describe how science has altered their belief and practice. So I will stick to my own personally known world.

The major influence of science upon death comes out of that pervasive action that science has imposed on all areas of faith and practice. Science has fundamentally altered the way we look upon the phenomena of the world and has altered the evaluation of our own opinions and prejudices relating to them. In this, the area of death is only a particular instance of a general occurrence. The scientific attitude and the scientific method have altered the aura and the presumptions of all areas of belief and faith.

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Informed people today tend to be skeptical of their own personal presumptions. The world of scientific investigation stands everywhere counterposed to the world of private opinion. Whereas the man of religious faith was once indomitable in his God-given revelations, he has either given up this surety entirely, as with the religious humanist, or he is much less self-confident, even among the fundamentalists. Despite their considerable resemblances, a sea change has occurred in the generations separating Billy Sunday from Billy Graham.

Science has produced an attitude of factuality. We now tend to separate fact from fiction, evidence from assumption. Before science, fact and fancy intermixed with romantic license, and hearsay and folklore carried as much authority as careful observation and objectivity, what little bit there was. Now we have had a painful conscience forced upon us in this permissiveness. Fact rules the day, and we are embarrassed whenever we are caught with our fancy down.

Science teaches us how to eliminate the clutter and the illusion, to look at the fact itself. The hard question of science is: What is the evidence? Without supporting evidence no theory or judgment is permissible in the temples of science. Rudely interrupting the prayers of the faithful is the interjection: "Can you prove it?" This even drifts in off Fifth Avenue into the hallowed aisles of St. Patrick's Cathedral. These are the traffic noises of science that the temples have difficulty filtering out of their services.

This mood of science in relation to death is particularly rude and disturbing. Death is a stark, brutal fact. Nothing is sure but death and taxes, except that, whereas our taxes are raised in an endless escalation, we still only have to die one death. The acids of science have rendered to tattered rags all of our faith about resurrections, immortality, life everlasting, the soul, and heavenly dreams, because it has shown these to be mere wishful thinking, hypotheses unsupported by any evidence, indeed, by their nature forever impossible to be supported by facts forever unattainable. But death, or the end of living, remains an observable, factual, unavoidable reality.

The result of this is that all the romantic folklore associated with man's hope for a reprieve from death in some realm beyond death has disintegrated into a childish mythology, into a credal fairyland. We no longer believe in immortal life with any more conviction than we believe in Santa Claus. But death, this we really believe in.

Just how much do we believe in death? Medicare, Medicaid, Blue Cross, Blue Shield, socialized medicine, the American Medical Association, the procession of skeptical temples strung across the landscape, named hospitals—with their rituals, their berobed priesthood, their

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dedicated female orders, their ascetic and authoritarian disciplines, their immense sanctification via public sentiment—all this declares loudly and insistently the weight we give to death as fact, a fact to be avoided, at whatever fantastic effort and expense, as long as is humanly possible. Death we avoid as nothing but death can be avoided, declaring as no cheap words ever can how little we believe that anything but a void and an oblivion lies beyond the final closing of these mortal eyes. Our answer to St. Paul's, "O death, where is your sting?" is an ungracious, "Are you kidding?"

For this we can thank science. Under the winnowing eye of science death remains fact; immortality has become fancy. The priests must now boldly fly in the face of science and declare the prestige and the power of theological fancies. The Holy Writ and its vaunt of divine revelation must be defended against the scientific treatise and its cruel skepticism.

This involves the people in tragic charades of ambivalence, in which they are encouraged by the sentimentalities of the priesthood. I have been torn by the pity of this on several occasions. Someone is hopelessly ill. You listen to the family recounting the medical reports, and you know that the ill person has no chance of surviving his illness, short of a miracle. And science has taught us not to believe in miracles. And yet the family and the fatally ill person persist in their belief that he will recover. If there is only one chance in a thousand, they will be the lucky ones.

Even when the patient returns for the last time to the hospital, ceases to recognize his wife and family, sinks into the final coma, the stubborn insistence that somehow he will survive is protested. Death is something that no one will acknowledge, the word no one will say.

But then, as soon as death is a fact and the loved one is gone, the scene reverses. The skepticism that moved the long inadmissibility of the inevitable demise evaporates. The life so tenaciously fought for is discounted, and the life everlasting of the immortal soul is everything. From the factual world of life and death the scene shifts to the world of faith and spiritual "realities."

The pity is that death is not admitted as a reality in either case. Before death it is something that can and must be avoided, in the face of all evidence to the contrary. After death the entire world of nature, of human and mortal realities, is denied, and heaven is affirmed as the only destination. And the pity lies in the fact that the partisans do not truly believe in either of the games they are playing.

William Ernest Hocking once observed that he had never seen anyone who did not experience death as a reality, regardless of how his

religion verbalized a faith that it was merely a portal to a greater life beyond. I observed this as a fact many times among Disciples and other Protestants. Faith in life after death was, for them, an unquestionable dogma. They expected this to be affirmed in the funeral rituals and would have been scandalized if any skepticism was offered. It was implicit in all the preaching and practice of their churches. And yet they inevitably met death as a tragic reality. Their grief was real and their loss was undeniable. Their dead were gone, never to return, regardless of their words to the contrary. And one could have nothing but the greatest admiration for the courage and the endurance with which they accepted their loss, for the manner in which they carried on with their lives and their tasks.

After I had left the Disciples to become the minister of a very liberal Unitarian society, where, as far as I knew, no member of my congregation believed in a life after death of any kind, except the persistence of human influence in this world, I discovered that there was no essential difference in the way in which they faced death from the way in which conservative Protestants faced death—except that they admitted the reality and the unavoidability of loss. For both groups death was a real loss, whether admitted or unadmitted. And both groups faced it with an equal courage and strength and dignity. Both groups fought for life and against death with an equal tenacity and purpose. And both groups had an equal resource with which to come to terms with the inevitable.

If this observation of Hocking's is valid, and all of my experience undergirds it, it places a peculiar problem of morality and integrity upon the clergy, who sermonize about death and its significance and who perform the rituals relating to death. We will eliminate from this issue those members of the clergy who truly believe in immortality and in the efficacy of a supernatural salvation. They have no problem relating to their pastoral behavior. Their problem is in coming to terms with a world permeated by the epistemology and attitudes of the scientific method.

The extreme of one type of behavior is illustrated by some rationalistic and urbane members of the orthodox clergy, who admit within their own professional circles that their thinking is scientific, skeptical, and heretical, but who say that they relate as priests to a folk who need the support of the ancient creeds, revelations, and hope for salvation. Thus they preach the supernatural doctrines even though they are naturalists and give promises of forgiveness and life everlasting to their flocks, promises in which they themselves no longer believe. Given a certain kind of theological, sociological *Realpolitik*, this approach could

be theoretically justified. I have heard that some Roman Catholic clergy, especially in France, also make this rationalization of staying in and working through the creeds and sacraments of the Church, even though they have heavily modified their own convictions. The recent upsurge of liberalism within Catholicism and the philosophizing of a Catholic philosopher and scientist such as de Chardin give credence to this situation. Among the Episcopalian priesthood, there is a common practice of meeting such problems of skepticism by handling creedal issues allegorically and poetically when the beliefs will not stand up factually.

Much of the Protestant clergy, and not a few liberals, take an English approach and muddle through. By dint of double talk and sentimental clichés, they get through Easter and funerals without saying that they do or do not believe that there is any existence beyond death. Those who still think they believe are comforted, and the intelligence of the skeptics is not so gravely insulted as to drive them out of the church. Many Protestant clergy have grave problems relating to their personal integrity in these matters.

This was underlined in my own personal experience. Through sheer professional, financial, and sociological pressures, I continued in the Disciple ministry for several years after I had become a naturalistic and scientific humanist. Since I had grown up in fundamentalism, however, I had no problem performing my sermonic and sacramental duties convincingly, although my conscience was taking a beating. Then I escaped into the rarefied world of humanistic Unitarianism, where I could preach in my own vocabulary, and no dissembling in matters of opinion was expected or desired. I left all invocations to the Deity, prayers, heaven-haunted hymns, talk about souls and salvation, and assertions of immortality behind me. But about a year after making the transition I was asked to go back to my last Disciple parish to preach the funeral sermon of a young man with whom I had had a close friendship. Personal considerations overwhelmed my scruples, and I agreed. Everything went well enough until it came to the prayer. During my Christian ministry my prayers had been commented upon for their sincerity and emotional warmth. Perhaps I had been better able to perform my role when my eyes were closed. I had thought there would be no problem in slipping back into this familiar "art form," but I was mistaken. I stuttered and stumbled through the prayer in a hopeless manner. I vowed then that I would never again attempt such dissembling for any reason or anyone. But there are thousands of ministers who continue in this role all through their ministries.

Their position is like that of a Congregational minister, who criti-

cized humanism and blamed most of the ills of the world on the atheists. A humanistic philosopher went to the minister's study to take issue with him. At one point he said to the clergyman, "Al, when you stand in the pulpit on Sunday and use the word 'God,' do you really know what you mean?" After some hesitation, the preacher admitted, "Well, I may not know exactly what I mean by 'God,' but the people do."

I have sometimes wondered what I would have done if a series of circumstances had not precluded my becoming a chaplain in the armed services. Since chaplains are often the only religious persons available to troops from many different religions, there are occasions when they are expected to be all things to all men, religiously speaking. I think this necessity would have kept me out of the chaplaincy, even if my physical condition, a family, and a pacifistic idealism had not also prevented it.

The approach opposite to that of the tribal realism of the orthodox patriarchs is that of complete candor and openly acknowledged unbelief, as practiced by a good many liberal ministers, myself included. It, too, has its problems, if not as to one's intellectual integrity, then concerning one's human relations. It was this difficulty that lured me back for my last funeral under Christian auspices. I have very seldom, if ever, had this problem since then. Since I have become somewhat notorious as a dogmatic humanist, no one even considers me as a fit envoy to help conduct an immortal soul through the gates of heaven. I have had an answer prepared, in case it was necessary, which is to suggest that a true believer would be someone who would be more preferable than myself. Unlike the chaplain who must deliver the last rites to a dying soldier on the front lines, there are many priests of every conviction ordinarily available in the peacetime ministry, and I have no compulsion to be a minister to all men. Since I do not believe that any god undergirds my words and wisdom, I am much too modest to make any assumption as grandiloquent as that. The people in my liberal parishes have made it all too clear that they do not think I can do very much to help them with their problems. At best all I can do is to help them locate a psychiatrist who can really help them. And since I am sure that within half an hour they will be analyzing the psychiatrist, I am happy to let him have the pleasure.

There have been funerals, however, when by some indefinable communication, a feeling in the air, I know that I have failed persons in giving them what they expected. Often it is when I am asked to officiate at the rites of a non-church person, whose family and friends know that they do not want an orthodox service, but they do not quite know

what they do want. And evidently I have left out something they expected, even though they can't define it. People without any formal or organized religion still feel a vague admonition, an atavistic rising of a tribal taboo, that urges them to be married and to be buried by a priest of some kind.

There have been many more times when those attending a funeral have come from assorted religious backgrounds. Since many liberals are come-outers from orthodoxy and have not been able to bring their relatives with them into the unpromised land, my policy has been to think only of the deceased and his immediate family and let all the others take potluck. The reactions, those that are reported to you, are interesting. A couple came from two Catholic women. One thought it the most meaningful service she had ever heard. The other spoke in a shocked whisper, "Why, he didn't pray once."

Science has an insidious influence on all areas of credence, since it establishes in us certain habits of mentality, certain patterns of doubt and belief, which we cannot help applying to all areas of faith and morals, as well as to the areas ordinarily considered as suitable for scientific investigation. It is one thing for the Pope to assert that he has infallibility in areas of faith and morals, and it is another to get even his own Catholic constituency to believe him. And even when they profess verbal acquiescence, they may practice something the opposite, as millions of Catholics have been doing with birth control. Then the Pope has to figure out a way of scrapping one infallible dogma and substituting it with an opposite infallible dogma, and still prolong the illusion that he is infallible.

Probably the most potent of all the scientific postulates is that of the function of the hypothesis. In scientific investigation, any proposition, any proposal of a possible answer, is considered to be a hypothesis until it has been supported by evidence gained through controlled research. Webster defines a hypothesis as: "A proposition, condition, or principle which is assumed, perhaps without belief, in order to draw out its logical consequences and by this method to test its accord with facts which are known or may be determined."

One who becomes deeply involved in the scientific attitude and method cannot help looking upon all theories and assumptions that he can isolate and define as hypotheses and to search for corroborative evidence before he gives them any credence. Once he begins doing this, he discovers that some of the most treasured religious dogmas have no evidence whatever to support them, such as the existence of God, the soul, man's fallen nature, the separation of the body and the spirit, the power of salvation, and immortality.

There are some religions that claim there are two realms, that of matter and that of spirit, and science has no relevance in the latter. But of course, to the scientifically minded person, this reasoning is circular, since this claim is in itself only another unsupported hypothesis. He can cling to it only if some undeniable sense of the spiritual reality is more convincing to him than the propositions of science.

But to many persons, such as myself, the opposite is the case. The world of nature, revealed by my own senses and everyday experience, and also elucidated by scientific findings, becomes a completely convincing reality, one that we would even describe as mystical and religious in its impact, or what we might call its "self-revelation." And the world of the spirit fades off into an intangible fantasy that we cannot in any way correlate with the world of our knowledge and experience.

Then we can no longer put the dogmas of religion into a special category. They seem to us, indubitably, to be merely human guesses, because they always come to us from other human beings, and we can see no reason to accord them some special efficacy and faculty. We take the faith of traditional religion relating to death, and we treat it simply as a proposition, as a hypothesis, and then look for its proof. I have been doing this with the hypothesis that there is a life after death for some forty years, and I have never come upon one shred of evidence that would have given it support. I would like to live forever as much as any Methodist, but my scientific temper cannot permit me the luxury of what would have to be a raw and presumptuous overbelief, based completely upon the fact that I wanted it to be so.

What were once articles of faith have now become merely hypotheses. This I believe is the heart of the relation of science to the way we face death in our religions. There is another outcome that is related to this and that has to do with semantics, with how we use and evaluate words. The analysis of language and rhetoric has become scientific in its rigor and discipline, and some seek to make language as unambiguous as mathematics.

Semantics has been particularly hard on nouns, some of which have had immense prestige. A word is expected to have a denotatum, to point to an evident reality. If we have a word "cat," there must be real cats in the world to which the word cat refers, which the word denotes. By this test many words are found to have no denotatum at all. "Death" is one such word.

Death refers to nothing at all. It refers to the fact that something that once was is no more, the life process in a living creature. In another sense, there is no such *thing* as life. There is an activity, a

complex process of interrelated functions in an organism, which would better be treated as a verb, since it is an activity. When the living activity ceases, the body, the object, is still there, but its activity has now become that of unliving matter.

Hypostatization is the process of taking an activity and turning it into a thing, taking a verbal or adverbial proposition and making of it a noun. A common hypostatization is the word "mind," which is no reality in itself, but rather the thinking activity of the human nervous system and the memory and other capacities of the brain. Life is a hypostatization, a reification, of the living activity of the organism.

What is death, in this consideration? It cannot even be properly called a hypostatization, since it does not refer to any activity. The state of death is only the absence of the activity called life. There are two realities in sequence, the living organism and the non-living matter that is left when the living ceases, the corpse. I would even question the semantic validity of the term "dying." Dying is not something that the organism does; it is only a term for the final, ebbing activity of living. We do not have to face anything called death. What we have to face is that a once living organism has ceased to live.

Increasingly, as science investigates the life process, we are convinced that it is a completely natural process. We are told that scientists will be able to develop living tissue in a test tube. Living develops, evidently, as a process of matter, when certain conditions prevail for a long enough period of time, just as wood will burn under certain conditions. We look back on a time in our geological evolution when there was no living activity at all in the matter of our earth. We look forward to the possibility that there may come the end of a cosmic cycle, when all the galaxies of our universe will fall back into a common mass and all living activity will be extinguished.

The science of medicine is concerned with keeping the living activity of the organism in operation as long as possible. We tend to cling to this process as an absolute value, but increasingly we know this is not so. A once thriving, thinking, loving human being may be reduced to a lump of protoplasm, an unthinking, unconscious, unresponsive kind of vegetation that may go on for years before the long coma ceases. Is this a human living process? Should it be prolonged? Science and religion, in their discussion of euthanasia, are struggling toward a new attitude relating to the value of the living process in human beings.

I would be happy, as a complete naturalist, to wipe the word "death" out of the language. It serves no real semantic purpose, and it can be very confusing, especially in religion. The reality is living. It can be

indicated in three dimensions, the beginning of life in the birth process, the prolongation of the living activity, and then the cessation of that activity. The reality is the life process. Death is a word for nothing. It is, moreover, not informative to call unliving matter "dead." It is not inert. It has an intense atomic activity. It can easily become again a part of the life process. Matter passes in and out of living processes, so how can it be called dead matter? Matter is rather the very stuff of living activity.

What I have been involved in has been not so much a discussion of semantics as an attempt to elucidate what the solution of the problem of death can be for contemporary religion. My answer is that death ceases to be a problem at all, perhaps in time even a consideration. The word might drop from the language if the attitude here proposed becomes the common sense of the race, and under the influence of science it may well become so.

What, then, would the concern of religion be? It would be to make the living years of people as productive, as developmental, as creative, as moral, as satisfying, as happy, and as long as they can be. What we now think of as the problem of death is more properly the problem of the length and completeness of living. When living ceased, this would be accepted as natural and inevitable. That is as long as it remains something unavoidable. It is possible that science may sometime discover how to keep the living process going on in the same organism indefinitely. But even so, this would not alter the basic presumption that the problem of religion relates to the length and quality of the life process. This is the reality. It would only give religion and science different problems to solve.

Interestingly, the slogan for this point of view could be taken from Jesus, "to have life, and have it more abundantly." The principle also relates to a Buddhist idea, that we should not be any more considerate of another person than nature itself is. This may seem an abrupt and unloving idea at first, but closer observation will make clear its inevitable wisdom and its scientific relevance. Science tries to discover the realities and processes of nature. We live in and by those processes and realities. These conditions are the same for all creatures. The benefits of nature's providence are available to all alike, and the limitations of nature's beneficence, if we may talk poetically, are also shared by all. By what arrogance, therefore, should one of us try to stand before one of our fellows and the reality of nature? If the end of living faces us all, should we try to shield it from some? The sentimentalities of some funeral practices and religions and of doctors and family hiding from a patient the fact that his life is nearly over are examples of the

violation of this consideration of naturalistic equality. Life as we know it has ineradicable dimensions of tragedy. Should we not all have the privilege of living our own tragedies without dissembling and shielding? And what can be hidden after all? Life will cease for each of us. We live under this sentence all our days. Only the date is hidden from us. Who thinks he can shield another man from that nature which is the intimate environment, the very substance of being for us all?

Science is the great revealer of the realities. It has an immense candor, a ruthless honesty. It publishes its findings inexorably, believing that it is best to know the truth about reality, no matter how blunt and cruel it may seem to be now. There are more benefits to be gained from knowledge and an equal sharing of knowledge than from any withholding of the facts known or withdrawing from scientific study for fear that what may be discovered will be undesirable. For nature is what it is, whether we remain in ignorance of its ways or not. It will wreak its results whether or not we can follow its process. The scientist does not believe that ignorance is bliss; he believes that ignorance is merely ignorance and that any hope we have of growing in freedom, in dignity, and in wisdom depends on knowing more and more about ourselves and our world.

When we alter our proposition from religion facing the problem of death to religion facing the problem of the span of life, we see that the problem is not essentially coming to terms with the end of life. Except to come to accept it psychologically, there is no way to come to terms with it. It just is. It is one of those inevitables that must simply be accepted. There is nothing that can be done about it. When the life process ends, we simply cease to be. The end of life is not itself a problem; it is rather the end of all problems for the individual. We may have difficulty accepting the fact that we will not live forever, but the end of life is something we do not have to accept. It lies outside the realm of acceptance or denial. It happens.

The real problem, and it is an involved and subtle one, is coming to terms with the span of life. To be lived successfully, life must have a strategy, a procedure. A life is like an art form, in that it is a closed set of dimensions within which we must create and express ourselves. It is not an accident that it most resembles a novel, since the novel was developed in order to depict the growth and meaning of a life. We may not know exactly how long the story will be until we actually come to the end of the last chapter, but we have a good sense of what its possible scope can be. How to proceed creatively through childhood, education, youth, the years of our full capacities, to use the fading strength and faculties of old age to their maximum capacity,

and to harvest all the varieties of experience and satisfactions and relationships that the ages of man make possible, this is the problem. The problem is not that life will end but how to make the best use of the years before life ends.

With our growing problem of geriatrics, we are coming to see that the problem is how old age can be lived happily and productively to its very end. It is when old age has a "left over life to live" that waiting for its end becomes a problem. But if our lives have been wisely constructed and well spaced and conserved, there will be none of life left over to spend futilely sitting around waiting for its quietus. I heard of a medical research scientist who learned that he had a terminal case of cancer. He medicated himself and kept working on his projects until the day before the end of his life. When Frank Lloyd Wright died, he had several buildings in the planning stages, which his fellowship went on to construct after he died. The problem is life, how to live it up.

With this religious view of life, I have come to have an immense affection and respect for humanity. Sometimes I think that they are the worst weeds in the garden of the earth, but at other times I cannot fathom their reserves of courage, of acceptance, of serenity. Sometimes I sit and watch people in a park, on the street. All of them are living out their terribly brief lives. Oblivion is just around the corner for them all. And yet, most of the time they go on energetically, brightly, enthusiastically about their business, doing what they can while they are here. I know how much morbidity men and women are capable of, but taking them all in all, and their tragic condition, how little morbidity there is in contrast with how much there very well could be. And how well most people hide their fears and put them aside to go on with their tasks.

When we fail thus quietly, reservedly, to carry our yearning and our terror with equanimity, we deride ourselves. We accuse ourselves of "slopping over," of bathos. But the self-pitying of bathos is not actually unrealism. Our condition is pathetic in essence, the necessity for life to end so quickly. The amazing thing is not that occasionally we slip into bathos but rather that we do so seldom.

Now that more people are living longer lives, it is possible for a family to go on for many years without having to face the death of a near relative. Sometimes children will grow up without having anyone close to them die. But, since death is inevitable, this is only postponing the reckoning. We have been living through a period of a rapidly lengthening average life, but the over-all span of life has not been in-

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creased. The time will come when the number of deaths will more nearly equal the number of births.

But what happens on occasion is that a family will face a wave of serious illness and death. Life turns into a nightmare of loss and grief. A serious car accident can plunge us into it. Then we must face at once and massively the fact that all men die. It is then that people need religious resources.

But such a time of catastrophe is not really an exception. It only proves the universal and inevitable case. I have noticed within myself that there are times when the approaching end of my life, and the lives of those around me, seems so stark, so fearful, that I wonder if I can overcome it and live out the years that remain. In these times we understand why some do not eke it out and rush to the end in suicide. In such moods I am not hallucinating. The tragic reality is there to be seen; it is always there.

And then there are opposite times, and I am glad these predominate, when, without anything having changed except my own internal emotional state, it is life and strength, endurance, and prolongation that seem to be everywhere. Everywhere is the fact of life, the joy of life. How can twenty or thirty years look so abundant at one time and so abysmally brief at another time? Paradoxically, our remaining time is both of these things at the same time. The mood of religion must be the love of life, the exuberance of life, the use of life, the reverence for life.

We cannot maintain this accent on life unless we have made our terms with its brevity and accepted its ending. This might be called stoicism, but I think it is more nearly realism. My favorite expression of this comes in the Tao-te-Ching.

Be utterly humble
And you shall hold to the foundation of peace.
Be at one with all these things which, having arisen and flourished,
Return to the quiet whence they came,
Like a healthy growth of vegetation falling back upon the root.
Acceptance of this return to the root has been called "quietism,"
Acceptance of quietism has been condemned as "fatalism."
But fatalism is the acceptance of destiny
And to accept destiny is to face life with open eyes.¹

The traditional Christian concepts of death and immortality have not been typical of a great deal of religion, and the approach to death of some religions accords very well with what science has been indicating is the condition of humanity in the scheme of things. There is virtually nothing about any life after death in the Old

Testament of the Jewish scriptures. What mention there is of Sheol relates to a dim, unpleasant underworld, similar to the Greek concept, not heaven by any stretch of the imagination, but a place from which one would want to escape back into the world. Traditional Jewish religion was oriented to the righteous living of this life.

Early and strong traditions in three Oriental religions, Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism, relate completely to this world and this life and to man's creative adjustment to the scheme of things. There is a strong theme in Western culture, seen in Ecclesiastes, Lucretius, and much of the Greek anthology, and eventuating in religious humanism in our own time, which shares this basic world view. Thus it is not something new. Mankind has used it over several thousand years, and it seems to have worked as well for these naturalistic and humanistic people as supernatural and otherworldly religions have worked for their cohorts.

Returning to the observation of Hocking that all people face death as an unescapable reality, regardless of their theology, we get an insight as to what the approach of religion to man's tragic state should be. Do not all people seek the same basic resources in their grief and loss? Under all the elaborate and supernaturally justified rituals there is a human constituency. These are the gatherings of the members of the human community, to share and commiserate with each other in the loss of a treasured and irreplaceable personality. Psychologists have described this as our "grief work." The agencies of tears, of being together, of talking, of mourning, of ritual, of remembrance and celebration, enable us to come to terms with the immediate loss and to ease into the long and slower years of loneliness, of memories that lie ahead. But all religions perform this function, each in its own way, and perhaps our ways are really not so different after all.

A man in one of my Disciple parishes died very suddenly in his forties of a heart attack, without any previous warning of its onset. Within an hour he was dead. He left behind a young daughter and his wife. It was a small town, and neighbors and relatives came to surround the wife and child. Food was brought in, arrangements were made, everything was done that could be imagined. The church was filled for the service. The wife said again and again, "I didn't know that Bill had so many friends." It was the human comfort, aid, and companionship that really helped her through. She wanted and received the comforting words of scripture, the assurances of immortality, but was not the real support human and natural?

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Even when religion has accepted the world view of science, the naturalism of biology, and the limitation of one's beliefs to what the evidence can support, this does nothing to alter the religious function of love, companionship, community, compassion, sharing, and ritual. A religion that comes to terms with science functions in much the same way that religion always has functioned. There is no diminution of the worth and dignity of the individual, no loss of meaning, no necessary alienation, no inevitable despair. The loss is accepted as a dimension of living, and we go on with those who are still among the living.

My favorite mentor in this matter is Chuangtse. When he was about to die, his disciples wanted to give him a sumptuous funeral, to which he said:

"I regard the heaven and the earth as my coffin and outer coffin, the sun and the moon as a pair of jade gifts and the constellations as my burial jewels. And the whole creation shall come to my funeral. Will it not be a grand funeral? What more should I want?"²

Chuangtse's wife died and Hueitse went to offer his condolence. The visitor found him sitting on the ground and singing, beating on a basin to keep time.

"Someone has lived with you and raised children for you and now her old body dies. Is it not enough that you should not weep, but that you should be singing to the music of a basin? Isn't it too much?"

"No," replied Chuangtse. "When she died, how could I help but feel very sorry? But I began to think and I realized that originally she had no life, and not only no life, she had no spirit. She was part of a mass of formlessness. Then she changed and received spirit, the spirit changed, and she was given form, form changed and she was given life, and now she changes once more and goes to her death. She merely goes through a process resembling the rotation of spring, summer, autumn, and winter. There she lies so peacefully in a big house. If I should break down and cry aloud, I would behave like one who does not understand destiny. Therefore, I stopped."³

I hope that when my life is over, people will be able to say that I lived my life like one who understood destiny and that they will take my passing in the same way. Let them be sorry for awhile, but I hope they will soon honor me, as Chuangtse honored his beloved wife, and sing a song for me.

NOTES

1. Witter Bynner, *The Way of Life According to Laotzu* (New York: John Day Co., 1944), pp. 33-34.
2. Lin Yutang (trans.), *The Wisdom of Laotse* (New York: Modern Library, 1948), p. 181.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 180.