DEATH IN

MICHAEL TAR

AMERICA

Edited, with an introduction by **DAVID E. STANNARD**

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INTRODUCTION

IT HAS BEEN A COMMON PRACTICE THROUGHOUT HISTORY FOR MEN TO personify death in a great variety of ways. As well as the literal identification of a specific spirit of death in most of the world's religions, there are the more popular images of death as the Grim Reaper, the Pale Horseman, the Destroying Angel, the King of Terrors, and so on. It is now twenty years since the English anthropologist Geoffrey Gorer, in a brief essay published in *Encounter,* suggested that another name might be added to this pantheon. Although he did not actually use the term, Gorer in effect pointed out that in the modern West death possessed the characteristics of the emperor who wore no clothes. And, as happened in that famous children's tale, once Gorer spoke the forbidden words identifying death as the "new pornography" about which nothing should be said in polite company, he was joined by a rousing and rising chorus of echoing voices.

Since that time, with ever-increasing frequency, the reading public has been deluged with all manner of writings on the problem of death in the modern West, and particularly in modern America. One of the striking things about this recent literature on death and dying is that at first glance the themes pursued most often seem curiously contradictory. On the one hand there is the popular social criticism, exemplified by Jessica Mitford's *The American Way of Death,* focusing on the excesses of the funeral industry and its largely successful effort to construct its own "grotesque cloud-cuckoo-land where the trappings of Gracious Living are transformed, as in a nightmare, into the trappings of Gracious Dying."[1] On the other hand there is the more scholarly sociological analysis of the common fate of most Americans who now die in hospitals and rest homes, deserted by their families and friends, and faced with doctors and nurses so intent on maintaining their professional demeanor that they avoid personal contact with the dying at every turn—so lonely that they are forced into such pathetic strategems as removing their bedside telephones from the hook in order to at least hear a human voice.[2]

Under closer scrutiny, however, what becomes clear is that each of these responses—the extravagant masquerade of death, and the determined

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[1] *The American Way of Death* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963), p. 16.
[2] Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, *On Death and Dying* (New York: Macmillan, 1969), p. 44. Cf. Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss, *Awareness of Dying* (Chicago: Aldine, 1965); and Jeanne C. Quint, *The Nurse and the Dying Patient* (New York: Macmillan, 1967).

avoidance of the dying—are reactions with a common source. For the phenomenon of death has become something of an acute embarrassment to modern man: in a technological world that has effectively ruled out of order explanations of a mystical nature, man is brought up short in his inability to understand or give meaning to death. The answers of the past are no longer appropriate; the answers of the present are insufficient. Death is thus avoided as much as possible, and when it is no longer possible—when a body must be confronted and dealt with—it is turned over to professionals who provide their own special skills in the effort of denial. The dead are transformed in appearance with the aid of such products as Nature-Glo "the ultimate in cosmetic embalming"; they are provided with "Beautyrama Adjustable Soft Foam Bed Caskets," and are placed in "slumber rooms" for viewing by the bereaved; and, if circumstances are sufficiently favorable, they may even be fortunate enough to spend the future in a Forest Lawn crypt outfitted with air conditioning and piped-in music.

Forest Lawn, of course, is by no means a *typical* American cemetery. Neither, perhaps, are all of the other approaches described above typical of every American funeral. They are, however, vivid exemplars of the general direction funeral customs have taken in America during the twentieth century.

It also may not be typical for the dying individual to reach for his bedside telephone merely to be afforded the privilege of hearing a voice. But if it is not typical, it is not so in large measure because the dying are generally not capable of such activity—for the great majority of deaths now occur in hospitals where the dying individual has long been sedated into unconsciousness. One 1967 study of approximately two hundred and fifty deaths in California hospitals, for example, reported that barely a dozen subjects had been conscious when death took place, and none of these had been engaged in conversation at the time.[3] Indeed, the term "social death" is now well established in the sociological lexicon as describing that point when an individual is sedated into a pre-death comatose state and effectively regarded from then on as a corpse; this affords the hospital staff the convenience of adequate time to make preparations for the occurrence of actual death, allowing them to see to it, for example, that the individual's eyes are properly closed, as this is a more difficult task to perform once death has taken place.[4]

Perhaps in part as a response to these earlier works, still another type of literature on death and dying has recently emerged. This latest literature can perhaps best be described, with no flippancy intended, as of the "how-

[3]David Sudnow, *Passing On: The Social Organization of Dying* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1967), p. 89.
[4]Ibid., p. 74.

to-do-it" variety, instructing survivors on the most dignified and rational ways of coping with the deaths of loved ones and of preparing for their own eventual demise. Along with the recent proliferation of societies dedicated to the ideal of simplicity and gracefulness in the face of death, and of hospital seminars on the most humane ways of treating the dying, it may well be that we are in the midst, or at least on the verge of major changes in the modern American attitude and approach to death. But if this very personal approach is the most recent variation on the contemporary literature on death, it is also the one with the deepest roots in the traditions of Western man. And it is also the best example of modern man's treatment of death not only as a response to the secularization of the religious universe, but also as a consequence of the modern ordering of social structure. For whether we look to the hedonistic advice of Siduri the wine maiden in the ancient Mesopotamian *Epic of Gilgamesh,* to the harrowing block-prints of the medieval *Ars Moriendi,* or to the sentimental poetry on death in nineteenth century school books, it is evident that few eras in human history have been without some sort of advice literature on the best way of making a good end. What is most striking about these historical precursors, however, is not their mere presence, but the fact that they have varied so much in the advice they have had to offer—and that this advice has been a reflection of the specific culture's way of life as much as it has been a reaffirmation of the profound disquietude the prospect of death has always brought to the mind of man.

The physical residue of death is the most valuable material archaeologists have had to work with in understanding the life of prehistoric man, for the earliest evidence of uniquely human-like behavior among our ancestors— pre-dating even the crudest cave paintings by at least tens of thousands of years, and perhaps even preceding the development of the ability to express abstract ideas in language—are the remains of the ritualized binding and coloring of the dead by Paleolithic man. Such coloring, almost invariably with a red ochre substance, is generally interpreted as suggestive of a new life for the dead, while the binding, usually with the corpse in a pre-natal position, has been variously interpreted either as indicating a belief in rebirth or as an attempt at constraining the dead from returning to haunt the living. Recently, speculations have even been made concerning Neanderthal attitudes toward children, cripples, and the aged, based on detailed analysis of Neanderthal grave sites.[5] But whatever the specific findings may be, the

[5]Ralph M. Rowlett and Mary Jane Schneider, "The Material Expression of Neanderthal Child Care," in Miles Richardson, ed., *The Human Mirror: Material and Spatial Images of Man* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1974), pp. 41–58. For estimates of the early stages of man's development when engagement in burial ritual first appeared, see (among many sources) Johannes Maringer, *The Gods of Prehistoric Man* (New York: Knopf, 1960), p. 37; and V. Gordon Childe, "Directional Changes in Funerary Practices During 50,000 Years," *Man,* 45 (1945).

important point is that the physical remains of prehistoric man's burial rituals are the earliest real evidence we have of man's ability to carry out and respond to abstract thought.

With the rise of modern anthropology and the sociology of religion in the nineteenth century, scholars recognized in the rituals surrounding death what Jack Goody has termed "the kernel of their studies."[6] Death has since often been regarded as the source of all religion and even, as Goody notes, as the origin of Greek tragedy and of the Olympic games.[7] But if there is disagreement on some of this, one general connection between death and the organization of human culture that has been repeatedly observed and analyzed since the turn of the present century is the tie between attitudes toward death and the sense of community purpose and meaning a people may or may not enjoy.

Writing in 1907 Robert Hertz, a young student of Emile Durkheim, noted that in virtually all cultures the death of an important leader brought on a significant response by the society at large, while that of someone less critical to the functioning of the community was often barely noticed. He made the elementary but seminal point that if sociologists and anthropologists were to make any sense of this they would have to recognize that every individual in a society possesses not only a biological being, but also a "social being" that is "grafted onto him" by other members of the society.[8] The death of an important individual thus brings with it serious damage to the social fabric, and a natural and spontaneous effort is then made by the society to compensate for the loss. This is particularly evident in the dramatic funerary rites of smaller, more unified societies where, as Robert Blauner has more recently written, "much 'work' must be done to restore the social system's functioning."[9]

Such smaller, more unified, simpler societies were the rule in America until at least the early years of the nineteenth century. Prior to then, and in small scattered pockets since then, death generally brought with it a substantial disorganization of the community's structure and ongoing functions. Whether or not the family was a more cohesive unit in the past—a question of some continuing debate among social historians—in virtually all American communities of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the family was well-integrated into the web of *community* cohesiveness. Death had a great deal of meaning for the individual, meaning that admittedly differed substantially from time to time and from place to place, and it had

[6]*Death, Property, and the Ancestors* (Stanford: Stanford University, 1962), p. 13.
[7]Ibid.
[8]Robert Hertz, "The Collective Representation of Death" [1907], in Hertz, *Death and the Right Hand,* translated by R. and C. Needham (Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1960), p. 76.
[9]Robert Blauner, "Death and Social Structure," *Psychiatry,* 29 (1966), 387.

a great deal of meaning for the community; but because its meaning was diffused throughout the community at large, its burden was lightened somewhat from the shoulders of the immediate family whose sense of bereavement was widely shared.

We are now well into the closing years of the twentieth century. The tides of secularization in religion, specialization and diversification in commerce, and individualism and mobility in social relations have long swept over the civilization of our time. Few individuals can any longer, when faced with death, find solace in the promise of a spiritual paradise, or can locate a sense of genuine importance for themselves in either their work or their community. When they face death they must often do so with a sense of its meaninglessness, and of their own insignificance; and when their small circle of intimates are forced to provide the meaning that is absent, they must often turn to the only source available—the commercial funerary establishment.

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None of the essays in this volume were written with a single theme in mind, other than that they should address the problem of death. They were written by historians, anthropologists, literary scholars and art historians—each with his or her own choice of chronological, geographical, and conceptual focus—and they can and should be read primarily with their individual concerns in mind. There are, however, a good many overlapping and complementary themes. The relationship between death and childhood, death and religion, death and social class, death and cultural expression are only a few such common denominators. It was intended that this collection would help fill a prominent gap in the contemporary literature on death by providing historical background for what has almost invariably been a parochial concern for the present. But in assembling these writings it became clear that each in its own different way was also a building block toward a general history and perhaps at least a partial explanation for the disturbing turns the concept of death has taken in modern American society.

The brief opening comment by Jack Goody introduces some of the recent scholarship on death in a variety of social settings and suggests certain reasons for its continuing importance to those who would seek to understand the many levels of organized human culture. Despite the fact that, as he puts it, "only the bare bones of death are seen today in Western societies," Goody demonstrates ways in which modern studies of traditional cultures—from the work of anthropologists in Africa and Asia to that of the *Annales* school of French social historians—can assist in understanding the contemporary cultural suppression of death.

My own essay on childhood and death in Puritan New England focuses on a problem treated at least in passing in the later articles by Saum, Douglas, Kelly and Ariès. Taking issue with some recent interpretations of the meaning of childhood in early American society, I suggest that the Puritans' concerns and fears of death had their roots in the imposition, on the child's naive sense of reality, of a vision of death beset with theological pessimism and internal contradiction. Death often had terrifying meaning for the Puritan, but such meaning, I argue, can only be grasped by understanding the world-view of the relatively closed society in which the Puritan lived.

In a sense, the early Mormon movement can also be characterized as a closed society, but one in which the picture of the world of the living and the world of the dead differed fundamentally from that of the Puritan. Mary Ann Meyers points out that a sense of continuing, evolutionary "progress" marked the thought of the founders of Mormonism, with the result that death did not bring with it the stunning changes traditionally perceived in the Christian cosmological scheme. Nor, as a consequence, did the Mormon suffer the deep-seated apprehension in the face of death so common to Christianity in general and so exaggerated in the Puritan context.

But in the eventual mainstream of American culture, Puritans and Mormons alike were something of an anachronism. Their contrasting visions of death suggest some of the ways the elasticity of Christian dogma can provide approaches to the problem that vary even to the point of opposition. But with the dawning of the nineteenth century and the emergence of cultural Romanticism, a broader gauge "American" vision of death began settling in. One of the earliest pieces of evidence attesting to this new sentimentalized attitude toward death was the construction, in 1796, of New Haven's Grove Street Cemetery. As Stanley French indicates, the new rural cemetery movement of the early nineteenth century—exemplified finally by Boston's Mount Auburn Cemetery, built in 1831—carried with it strong currents of Romanticism, but also the seeds of a rising ethic of possessive individualism.

If, as French concludes, the rural cemetery movement was at least in part an effort at "cultural uplift . . . during the Age of the Common Man," so too was much of the literary outpouring on death that marked that era. At a time when religion was increasingly becoming the province of women and children, as Ann Douglas vividly demonstrates, death (like religion) took on new meaning. Schoolbook poetry and popular consolation literature spread wide the message that death was a thing to be desired and hoped for with all one's heart: it meant deliverance from this mundane world, and glorious reunion with loved ones in the dazzling palaces of heaven. Death was indeed so marvelous, wrote one popular author of the

time, that God had found it necessary to implant in man a natural apprehension of it, in order to "keep his children from rushing uncalled into his presence, leaving undone the work which he has given them to do.[10] Heaven literally became home to much of nineteenth century America.

But not to all of it. Lewis O. Saum's combing of various state and local archives for evidence of attitudes toward death among less urban and less urbane Americans during roughly the same period as that studied by French and Douglas has turned up strikingly different results. Far from spiritualism and sentimentality, Saum found an attitude of frankness and openness, a "seeming insouciance"; and far from envisioning in death the splendor of "the golden stair" to heaven, the subjects of Saum's inquiry saw death as, at best, "escape from the world's sadness." It was, he writes, "a qualified, even a negative vision. But for people whose quotient of delight had had severe limitations, it seems to have been heaven enough."

Patricia Fernandez Kelly's essay on death in Mexican folk culture provides an instructive comparison which can help in understanding the fundamental differences among nineteenth century Americans in their attitudes toward death—as well as extending the boundaries of this volume beyond the restriction of viewing the United States as all that is "American." Despite the centuries of forced immersion of Mexican folk life in a powerful solution of European Christianity, Kelly shows that the resulting syncretistic cultural fusion has been characterized by much retention of traditional beliefs and attitudes. The tenacity of folk culture has been such, for example, that the idea of the Resurrection—so central to the Christian metaphysic—is largely ignored in contemporary Mexican folk religion. Although it is, of course, vastly different from either of the approaches to death described by Douglas or Saum, in its openness and its absence of romanticization the attitude toward death of Kelly's subjects seems conceptually closer to that of the "common" people described in Saum's essay than to that expressed by the consolation literature that is at the core of Douglas' study.

One tentative conclusion that might be drawn from this parallel—a conclusion that is underscored by some of the more recent theoretical work that has been done on death and social structure[11]—is that, in contrast to those nineteenth century Americans who wrote and read the volumes of sentimental literature on death and who celebrated Mt. Auburn and its many subsequent imitators as a charming "dormitory" for the deceased, the provincial and folk cultures of the United States and Mexico were better

[10]John Pierpont, *The Garden of Graves* (Dedham, Mass.: H. Mann, 1841), p. 7.

[11]E.g., Blauner, "Death and Social Structure"; and Le Roy Bowman, *The American Funeral: A Study in Guilt, Extravagance, and Sublimity* (Washington, D.C.: Public Affairs Press, 1959).

able to maintain a sense of communal unity and integrity, were less affected by the socially alienating forces of modernism, and thus had less of a need to create an *artificial* meaning for the experience of death. In these societies death continued to have the significant disruptive effect on the social fabric described by Hertz more than half a century ago, and its meaning remained clear both for the individual anticipating death and for those who would survive. In the more urban, cosmopolitan world that is the subject of French and Douglas' essays—a world witnessing the emergence of commercial specialization and social isolation and mobility—this "natural" social disruption occasioned by death was rapidly losing its force; sentimentalization and the locating of heaven as the real "home" for all men was one way of re-creating the sense of community that was thus lost, and of re-establishing meaning in the experience of death that waned with the lessened cohesiveness of the social structure.

But such efforts were doomed to eventual failure. For as their central premise they had a widely-felt and literally conceived religious world-view, a world-view that had become essentially anachronistic before the middle of the twentieth century. The search for meaning in death became no less demanding—if anything, it was intensified—but if it was to be found it would have to be located in a world of increasing secularization. As Philippe Ariès points out in his concluding essay, avoidance and denial on the one hand, and commercial exploitation on the other, seem to have been the inevitable result.[12]

Moving back well beyond the Puritan experience which marks the chronological beginning of this collection, Ariès views contemporary American attitudes toward death in the context of developments having their roots in the early Middle Ages. With the shifting pattern of family life at the heart of his analysis, Ariès sees the modern concern with death as a reversal of certain structural themes that marked the medieval era, a reversal intimately bound up with what he calls the modern "crisis of individuality." But Ariès is careful to avoid the "moralistic and polemical" tone of social criticism that he notes has marked so many of the recent treatments of modern American funerary ritual; indeed, he views the contemporary American approach to death as an almost heroic attempt to devise new rituals to fit new conditions. And in so doing he implicitly supports the contention stated earlier that the two most striking and seemingly contradictory characteristics of our culture's response to death and dying—avoidance and ostentation—are merely variations derived from a common source. Each is a necessary, and yet by itself inadequate, response to a world in which religion has lost much of its power to explain, and to a so-

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[12]I have developed some of these themes more fully in the closing chapter of a forthcoming study, *The Puritan Way of Death: A Study in Religion, Culture, and Social Change.*

ciety in which the death of an individual touches deeply only a small handful of intimates.

It is in opposition to these tendencies toward avoidance and ostentation that the new literature on death, the hospital seminars on the treatment of the dying, and the societies committed to openness in the face of death have arisen. But, as all of the essays in this volume suggest, the success of such endeavors is dependent upon major changes in the world-view and social structure of the society at large. For if any single theme dominates the entirety of this work, it is that the way a people look at death and dying is invariably and inevitably a direct concomitant of the way they look at life.

CONTENTS

DEATH AND THE INTERPRETATION OF CULTURE: A BIBLIOGRAPHIC OVERVIEW

JACK GOODY

THE FACT OF DEATH PROVIDES A CENTRAL FOCUS AROUND WHICH HUMAN cultures develop in two main ways. Firstly, there is what we may loosely call the conceptual aspect of death; secondly, the organizational. Or to put it another, and not altogether overlapping, way, there is the anticipation of death and the actuality of death, the ideology and the interment.

The first of these clusters of meaning lies at the core of much religious and indeed philosophical activity, and from it perhaps stems the whole mesh of religious beliefs. The inevitable fact of death needs to be reckoned with and accounted for; it has to be explained and to be included in a wider scheme of representations, a belief system, a religion, an ideology. In a recent volume on "the origins of a sense of God," J. Bowker argues that religion has failed to disappear because of the great "constraint" of death; the role of religion is to find a way through this limitation to human existence.[1] The theme echoes Malinowski and the many scholars of previous centuries who, taking a cue from the actors themselves, stressed the link between the journey of the soul (death, survival, immortality and passage to the other world), the dualistic concept of the human being (body and spirit/soul), and the existence of *spiritual* beings.

The theme requires little elaboration. It characterizes Euhemerist explanations of the origin of religion, and runs through the evolutionary schemas of 19th century scholars like Herbert Spencer and E. B. Tylor.[2] Indeed it is enshrined in the latter's minimum definition of religion.[3] But such specula-

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[1] *The Sense of God: Sociological, Anthropological and Psychological Approaches to the Origin of the Sense of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973).

[2] For a fuller account see the opening chapter of Jack Goody, *Death, Property and the Ancestors* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1962).

[3] For a recent comment, see Gillian Ross, "Neo-Tylorianism: A Reassessment," *Man*, 6 (1971), 105–16.

tions about origins, whether from the pen of theologians, sociologists or historians, are backed by little evidence. Historically the elaborations of human burials in the Upper Palaeolithic strongly suggest the existence of a symbolic and ideological halo around the physiological facts of death, specifically in the use of red ochre, of special burial positions, and other funerary rituals. Such a set of beliefs would clearly require the elaboration of a complex system of communication which permitted the reference to "concepts" that were not physically present to the actors, in other words, a language. But whether these forms of disposing of the dead constituted in any way an "origin" of the whole complex of religious beliefs must remain guesswork, though one that fits with an acceptable logical model.

But when we come to deal with the religious activities of specific societies, then the role of death and the dead is clearly of central importance. H. Sawyer has recently argued that in West African religion God is indeed the Great Ancestor.[4] On another level, since death is the ultimate misfortune, religious cults that offer some hope of dealing with man's calamities, with disease and with want, inevitably have to deal with death. Herein lies a basic contradiction; such cults have not only to ward off death but also to comfort the bereaved and the dying, since mortality is a state of being both avoidable in the shorter run and inevitable in the long. Christ is at once the earthly healer and the heavenly savior.

The complex of beliefs and practices surrounding death are of great significance to the sociologist and historian alike. In treating general aspects of the "world view," the historian is inevitably handicapped because what usually persists as documentary evidence of "belief" are the written elaborations of specialists. Indeed the very fact of reducing such beliefs to writing may well have some radical influence upon them. For those working in a living society, there is the questionnaire, which often has similar disadvantages, or, better still, the passive ear, an instrument of research whose utility is often greatly underrated. But apart from the literary reflections of priest, poet and philosopher, death leaves other material traces of which historians and sociologists have recently begun to make considerable use. In the first place we have the will, that is, testaments made in anticipation of death, which in earlier times were concerned not only with the disposition of property but also with the fate of the soul. Notable among achievements in this field has been the work of French historians of the "Annales" school, especially that of M. Vovelle. Following up the study of Daumard and Furet based on marriage contracts, a work that was central in the formation of a school of "l'histoire quantifiée," Vovelle examined a large number of wills not in a search for the manner of distributing property but in order to es-

[4]*God: Ancestor or Creator?* (London: Longmann, 1970).