

# On Death and Human Existence

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The topic of death, now fashionable and much discussed, raises questions in almost every field of thought. Death has always been thought hateful, or almost always; hateful, and enigmatic. In the Christian and Jewish traditions death has always been terrible, something that reveals the distance between God and man and man's dereliction; and it is therefore thought to be something that in some obscure sense ought not to happen. The primitive account of the passion in Mark and Matthew—characteristically and no doubt deliberately omitted by Luke—records the great cry of agony taken from Psalm 22: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" In the same psalm we find: "I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax, it is melted within my breast . . . and my tongue cleaves to my jaws; thou dost lay me in the dust of death." Here is no attempt to prettify death or to make the process of dying acceptable. Death is intolerable.

Of course, there are other biblical ways of looking at death. In (and out of) the Bible we are given the picture of the just man full of years and honour who dies surrounded by his children and his children's children. This is a fortunate death, and if to this we add the element contributed by Christianity, namely, the reception of the eucharist (viaticum, journey money, analogous to the placing of a coin in the dead man's mouth to pay Charon's ferry charges), and the anointing (formerly) of those parts of the body that have so often taken us away from God, and the sacramental remission of sin through confession and absolution, we understand how this can properly be called "a happy death." But death (and there can be no guarantee that even the death of the just will be "happy" in this sense) remains terrible and the prospect of dying repugnant. It is true that one element in our tradition is represented by the oracular saying: Those whom the gods love die young. But presumably this is because the young do not endure the long process of decay and the pain and the disappointment that are inseparably a part of a long life.

Death is not only a horror. It may often seem a piece of confusion. This comes out in the wonderful description of Falstaff's death in *Henry V*, II, iii.

*Pistol.* Boy, bristle thy courage up; for Falstaff is dead. And we must earn therefore.

*Bardolph.* Would I were with him, wheresome'er he is, either in heaven or in hell!

*Hostess.* Nay, sure, he's not in hell! He's in Arthur's bosom, if ever man went to Arthur's bosom. 'A made a finer end, and went away an it had been any christom child. 'A parted ev'n just between twelve and one, ev'n at the turning o' th'tide. For after I saw him fumble with the sheets, and play with flowers, and smile upon his finger's end, I knew there was but one way; for his nose was as sharp as a pen, and 'a babbled of green fields. "How now, Sir John?" quoth I. "What man! be o'good cheer." So 'a cried out "God, God, God!" three or four times. Now I, to comfort him, bid him 'a should not think of God; I hoped there was no need to trouble himself with any such thoughts yet. So 'a bade me lay more clothes on his feet. I put my hand into the bed and felt them, and they were as cold as any stone. Then I felt his knees, and so upward and upward, an all was as cold as any stone.

*Nym.* They say he cried out of sack.

*Hostess.* Ay, that 'a did.

*Bardolph.* And of women.

*Hostess.* Nay, that 'a did not.

*Boy.* Yes, that 'a did, and said they were devils incarnate.

*Hostess.* 'A could never abide carnation; 'twas a colour he never liked.

*Boy.* 'A said once the devil would have him about women.

*Hostess.* 'A did in some sort, indeed, handle women; but then he was rheumatic, and talked of the whore of Babylon.

The separate threads of life are not here tied together. The end of the great project of life is not rounded, satisfying, and complete. It is a piece of untidiness. Falstaff's death is closer to the actual world than

Nothing is here for tears, nothing to wail  
Or knock the breast no weakness, no contempt,  
Dispraise or blame, nothing but well and fair,  
And what may quiet us in a death so noble.

The king has broken Falstaff's heart and the great ruin of a man, this compound of sensuality and fantasy, this sophisticated dialectician, this parasite on the social body, spittle of diseases, lord of misrule, lies playing with the sheets, looking at his fingers, crying out for sack and for women and for God, fumbling after the Twenty-third Psalm: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want, / He makes me lie down in green pastures." Today we may think

that in some ways even his untidy death is fortunate. He is in his own bed; he has one person with him who loves him in a kind of way, his old bawd, Mistress Quickly; and he calls on God and vomits up his sins and dies with the words of the psalmist in his mouth. We may compare this with a characteristic death of our own time: a man or woman in a hospital bed, drugged into insensibility, without friends present, with a family perhaps in the hospital waiting room wondering when the end will release them; or with what is today called by many a fortunate death—a sudden and unforeseen death by stroke or heart failure. How nice for him! we hear people say.

There is another kind of death, perhaps hard to achieve today, what we may call the noble death: Doctor Johnson's death is a case in point, and an interesting one. All his life Johnson had a morbid fear of death; he was just the kind of man doctors today might think ought not to be told about his condition. But when he entered what he thought was probably his last illness he asked his physician for a "direct answer" as to whether or not he was dying. "The Doctor having first asked him if he could bear the whole truth, which way soever it might lead, and being answered that he could, declared that, in his opinion, he could not recover without a miracle. 'Then [said Johnson]; I will take no more physick, not even my opiates; for I have prayed that I may render up my soul to God unclouded.' "

This noble death is in fact the death of a Christian. But the determination to meet death with full consciousness of what is happening, in the presence of friends and family, enemies forgiven, final dispositions made, this is not confined to Christians or to religious believers. Such were noble deaths in antiquity (the pious man freed his slaves)—not so noble as a death in battle but honorable all the same. But even the most tranquil of such deaths has about it the trace of a final combat, a struggle with the grisly king. I am not suggesting that statistical analysis, if it were possible one could be made, would show that this was the *average* way of meeting death in some periods. Many deaths are sudden and unforeseen, many of the dying are comatose before they know they are dying—these things are always true. But so long as such an ideal style of dying was operative it was hard to think it a good thing that a man should be cheated of his death or lied to about it, or left alone with doctors and nurses, these last uncertain about their functions: even now, beginning to conjecture that society may require of them that they be public executioners rather than witnesses to a final solemn act, and consolers of the dying.

When death is faced and valued in the Johnsonian way there is no pretence about the finality of death, about its being the common human lot, about the pangs of death, and about the

physical consequences of death. The man we can point to and embrace will fall into decay and the skeleton will show itself; the man has gone. Corpses stink and should be buried quickly. Except sometimes in the case of kings and other notables, dead bodies were not in Christian society stuffed and painted in a stupid parody of life; and the ancient Egyptian habit of embalming did not rest upon sentiment or aesthetic considerations; it was connected with a theory of the afterlife and could be given a rationale. How men thought in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, even down to the nineteenth century, is reflected in the Anglican Book of Common Prayer, a book that nourished Johnson's piety and formed the sensibility of the English until the day before yesterday. The Book is not mealy mouthed about death (or about sex for that matter: marriage is quite properly called "a remedy for fornication," an expression bowdlerized out in the unfortunate 1928 revision). In the litany men pray to be delivered from "sudden death," the fate so much desired by modern men; and we also find in the litany: "In all time of our tribulation: in all time of our wealth; in the hour of death, and in the day of judgment, *Good Lord deliver us.*" In the Burial Service we find: "Man that is born of woman hath but a short time to live, and is full of misery. He cometh up, and is cut down, like a flower; he fleeth as it were a shadow, and never continueth in one stay . . . O holy and merciful Saviour, thou most worthy judge eternal, suffer us not, at our last hour, to fall from thee." Catholics have always had a daily reminder of their mortality in the Hail Mary: "now, and at the hour of our death."

Why should death, the common lot, have to be something that poses a problem, so that we have to be reconciled to it, if we can, or go to it in anger ("Rage, rage against the dying of the light," as a well-known poem by Dylan Thomas puts it)? In the first place, it may be connected with what is perceived as the duality of our existence. This seems to be thought prior to all philosophizing and quite without reference to any religious belief; our duality is felt as agonizing, tormenting, self-dividing; we have the idea that the mind has as it were a crystalline structure whereas the body is warm, thick, indistinct, mutable, fragile, perishable. Each grips the other; and the grip is loosened by the ills of the body and the mind and broken at death. Our duality is a torment when we look at sexuality as well. We are conceived, as are all the mammals, *inter faeces et urinam*—"Love has pitched his mansion in/The place of excrement," as Crazy Jane said to the Bishop in Yeats's poem. Hence the wild swinging between Manichaeism and Romantic views of sexuality, from "sex is dirty" to "sex is divine." But in relation to our entire fate, to the tissue of life as it is lived forward in time, the contrast seems to lie between our urgent animal

nature which is so plainly tied to change and to the imperatives of appetite, is so subject to pain and weariness, and our ability to transcend space and time, to think eternal thoughts (Pythagoras), to comprehend the world of nature, to survey the fortunes of mankind in the discipline of history, to consider what is good and what evil for man, and to rise in thought to the existence of the one who is alone and beyond us, and yet always present, the one who is God.

To interject a philosophical consideration: an absolute dualism is not thinkable. To put it crudely but accurately and effectively, I see with my eyes, it isn't that I, a mind, peer through my eyes, it isn't that my eyes see and report to the mind. My identity is connected with my bodily persistence through time. I am now in Minneapolis, now in Toronto. *I* don't go to Minneapolis and take my body with me. Newman once put it well in a sermon. "God graciously called Himself *the God of Abraham*. He did not say the the God of Abraham's *soul*, but simply of *Abraham*. He blest Abraham, and He gave him eternal life; not to his soul only without his body, but to Abraham as one man."

Dualism is not thinkable to the end; but there are genuine dualities within the one man. Some of these have been given a number of classic descriptions from Saint Paul to Freud; and to speak of dualities seems irresistible, perhaps because it is so familiar. The described dualities do not only rest upon the obvious duality of a being with an animal nature and an intellectual, symbol-framing and -using nature. Take, for example, one of the best attested features of all intimate personal relations. I hate and I love, says the pagan poet. I hate *because* I love. The one with whom I wish to merge my existence and who provokes in me the impulses of generosity and self-sacrifice is also the one who menaces my existence, my independence, *through* my love. The things I really want to do are the very things I find I don't do; and the things I find myself doing are the very things I loathe. Thus the Apostle Paul. Such inner conflicts are plainly not all straightforwardly spirit/flesh, intellect/appetite conflicts. The division between "passion" and "reason" is from Plato down to Milton thought to be the root of the difficulty and seems to carry with it the implication that our troubles come from our being pure spirits unfortunately (and contingently) connected with wayward bodies.

Oh wearisome condition of humanity!  
Born under one Law, to another bound:  
Vainly begot, and yet forbidden vanity;  
Created sicke, commanded to be sound:  
What meaneth Nature by these diverse Lawes?  
Passion and Reason, self-division cause. . . .

Fulke Greville's lines represent one side of our tradition, and on the whole the predominant one. We might call it the Platonic tradition, represented by Plato himself and by the neo-Platonists, by much Christian theology influenced by this tradition, and by Descartes and the empiricists. The central idea is what I have called absolute dualism, that man is essentially two things: a body, perishable and subject to decay; and a soul, spiritual, immortal, the essential man, the man in man, as Plato puts it. The death of John Smith, then, is the death of John Smith's body, not the death of John Smith; and with the death of his body John Smith is at last free to move, as all he essentially is, into the celestial regions. Historically, this is how many men, perhaps most, have thought; dualism has in its favour a striking consensus. It profoundly affects the Christian tradition, despite the authority of the Old Testament and of Aquinas. As the English Penny Catechism puts it, or used to put it: "Of which ought I to take most care, my body or my soul? *Answer.* My soul, because my soul will never die." On this view, the idea of resurrection is accidentally, not essentially, connected with the Christian hope. Resurrection appears as kind of extra, an uncovenanted piece of good fortune. Everything would still have been absolutely splendid without it, even if things are still better with it. And thought about in this way the "I await the resurrection of the dead" at the end of the Nicene Creed seems to lack weight and credibility; even, perhaps, it seems a bit speculative and therefore a piece of mythology to be dispensed with.

But it seemed quite certain to the Apostle Paul that if Christ is not risen then we shall not rise, and then we are of all men most miserable (1 Cor 15:12-19). Paul doesn't say: O well, never mind; after all, we're immortal, so it doesn't really matter about a miraculously renewed personal existence.

Scholars seem to agree that in Judaism before the Christian era the notion of the survival of death is at first scarcely there, develops late, and in the Judaism of the Maccabean period and later appears among some Jews as a belief in the resurrection. In the New Testament sectarian differences within Judaism are connected with belief or disbelief in the resurrection. (Incidentally, most of the Old Testament record shows that a vigorous religion, with habits of deep personal piety, can flourish without much explicit commitment to a belief in the individual survival of death. The survival of Israel is what people seem to care about. There seem to be traces of a belief in a kind of sad survival—the survival of man as a ghostly being. This isn't thought to be a good thing, any more than it was by the Greeks.) For the Greeks (of course, not all, for there were the Pythagoreans and the adherents of the Orphic cults who had more crisply formulated views on survival)

Hades was a place “where the dead live on without their wits as disembodied ghosts”; and Achilles said to Odysseus, when he was summoned from the underworld, that he would rather be a poor labourer on earth than King among the dead (*Odyssey*, Book 11). Survival as such is not a cheerful hypothesis. The epitaphs in the Greek Anthology are not filled with the spirit of hope. But the doctrine of Plato survived, partly because his arguments (*Phaedo* and *Republic*) seemed cogent, partly because the belief in immortality was connected with powerful scientific doctrines about the nature of the world, e.g. the Pythagorean view that in some way numbers constitute reality.

As I have said, there is a striking consensus about the truth of dualism and Christians have never been unaffected by this consensus. But it can't be doubted that on the whole the place given within the biblical tradition to bodily life and to physical reality is quite incompatible with Platonic (or Cartesian) dualism. The Old Testament hope is for a restoration of the physical and social life of Israel, within whatever situation of misery the prophet finds himself; it is not a hope for a timeless spiritual existence in a transcendent realm. And what is in the Old Testament a hope for Israel (though here and there a hope for mankind) becomes in the New Testament a hope for all men, individually and socially, and even for the physical universe. Nothing is more striking in the early centuries of Christianity than the way in which men who are by culture and disposition “Greek” nevertheless in the end are compelled to witness against all Gnostic tendencies and in particular against the various christological heresies that deny the full physical and human reality of Jesus. The Fourth Gospel is in many ways influenced by Greek thought, that is, by the thought of Hellenised Judaism; but it is also by far the most “physical” of the gospels. And in First John the theme is repeated: “That which was from the beginning, which we have *heard*, which we have *seen with our eyes*, which we have *looked upon* and *touched with our hands*...” The Hebrew doctrine of creation, the insistence in the early conciliar definitions on the full humanity of Christ, these things have always controlled our fundamental statements of faith and our fundamental responses to the world of nature, despite all the powerful tendencies in our tradition to run off into a kind of Gnosticism. I say “fundamental” advisedly; for I think if we examine the life of devotion and attitudes to life of the senses in the general Christian tradition we shall find that heretical attitudes cluster round all those questions that have to do with the relations between soul and body. As Karl Rahner<sup>1</sup> has shown

<sup>1</sup>‘Current Problems in Christology’ *Theological Investigations* Vol 1. (London, 1961) pp. 149-200.

there is a kind of implicit Docetism in much popular preaching and devotion, just as in the Protestant tradition there is a great deal of implicit Adoptionism. Of course, this isn't to accuse either party of formal heresy. It is simply the case that the balance which is safeguarded by the dogmatic formulas of the great Councils is hard to achieve in practice, just because it involves holding with tenacity to two predicates the conjunction of which is ordinarily absurd.

The analysis of human nature I am trying to stress, with a view to seeing its implications for our thinking about death, is on the whole reflected in our ordinary discourse. The answer to the question: Where does John do most of his intellectual work? is surely: In his study. Where in his study does his intellectual work go on? is either answered—if at all, for it is a very strange—with a reference to where John is, spatially, e.g., seated at his desk, or dismissed as a nonsense question. “In his head” is not an *alternative* way of answering the question (as “in bed” would be); the force of “in his head” comes from its contrast with such an expression as “on paper”. Of course, I don't *do* anything in my head in the way that I bake bread in the oven. (It may be true—no doubt it *is* true—that things happen inside my head when I think; but I am not acquainted with these things and need know nothing about them to think effectively, just as I can learn to walk the tightrope without knowing anything about the functions of the middle ear in enabling me to balance myself.) The sense, then, in which men *have* bodies is not a sense which excludes the possibility that a man *is* a body of a certain kind with certain characteristic activities and capacities. Talk about the soul is not talk about a human life which exists side by side with the life of the body; it seems that apart from the body there is no human life, for what would a human life be without sensation and memory, physical movement, all that makes up the substance of our life and underlies all the concepts embodied in our language? We sometimes have the idea that we can imagine how it would be to die and then float above our body and look at it—indeed, some people claim to have done this—just as we can imagine talking beasts in the Beatrix Potter stories or in *Alice*. But we smuggle into our descriptions concepts that would have no purchase except for creatures that occupied space, had eyes and organs of touch, etc.

I won't go into all the philosophical issues connected with these problems. Aquinas, following Aristotle (or what he takes the sense of Aristotle to be), thinks the soul is the “form” of the body. This raises for him a startling problem when he comes to consider the question of the survival of the “separated” soul; for what is a form without its matter. . . ? In discussing the possibility of the survival of the separated soul Aquinas (*qua* philosopher)



strikes me as being like a cat on hot bricks, in part because his own analysis doesn't seem to leave room for the soul as a separate and subsistent *entity*; certainly the separated soul seems not to be a substance and it seems therefore that it can have knowledge of itself only through God's action in, as it were, constituting it as a quasi-substance. I sometimes think that what Aquinas has to say is that the survival of the separated soul means that God keeps that man in mind after he is dead. Two things seem to stand in the way of our thinking that, though perhaps they don't. (After all, what limits could be set to the consequences of God's having a man in mind after he is dead. . .?) First, there is the condemnation as heretical of John XXII's teaching that the just don't enjoy the beatific vision until after the general resurrection; and secondly, the primitive and constant practice of praying for the dead.

At any rate, *anima mea non est ego* (I am not my soul), says Aquinas, commenting on the passage in First Corinthians about the resurrection. My soul's survival is not *my* survival; only *I* survive if in some sense I am recreated as a living body. This is a very difficult idea, a mystery if there ever was one; and if one reads 1 Corinthians 15:35-56 one finds that Paul is reduced to a kind of spluttering wonderment, a vain attempt to say what can't be said. This is why the kinds of questions theologians used to raise (they seem to have stopped doing this, or perhaps I just haven't come across instances), such as, At what age shall we be resurrected? If a man has lost a leg will he get it back? Shall we be able to walk through doors?, have a kind of indecent inappropriateness, as do, for example, nice and intricate questions about the mode of our Lord's presence in the eucharist. (Don John Chapman once said of some of these that they were "merely nasty.") Such speculations belong to what really is mythical, the picture of the resurrection as crowds of people climbing out of their graves, shooting up like torpedoes from the bottom of the sea, flying up into the clouds. For even if such pictures are in a way inevitably constructed, they have to be treated in a spirit of irony. What is interesting about the resurrection is not physical or quasi-physical survival—for any spiritualist seance can offer, no doubt fraudulently, the same assurance through its ectoplasmic figures—but *human* survival. As to what this will mean for us, "it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is" (1 Jn 3:2).

Now, if man is a unity two things seem to follow. First, certain attitudes to human beings, attitudes that suggest we are concerned essentially only with spirits and accidentally—perhaps inconveniently—with bodies are ruled out. This makes Christianity a very queer religion by world standards. Most world religions are much

more *spiritual* than Christianity, which to them must seem very materialistic. And there are many grossly heretical offshoots of Christianity—Mary Baker Eddy’s Christian Science is the most familiar in North America—that indict Christianity for its materialism, in that Christians hold it to be a real fact about the world that there is matter and that organic beings suffer pain. Again, “new moralists” of various kinds offer certain high-minded doctrines of a Gnostic kind, doctrines that avoid the truth that it is because men are bodies of a certain kind that there can be moral absolutes about human actions, e.g., it is always wrong deliberately to lie with the wife or husband of another or to slit the throat of, napalm, poison, shoot, or suffocate an innocent human being, no matter how grand the purposes in the mind of the offender may be. Many of our contemporaries don’t understand this at all. This comes out in the discussion of abortion. That a foetus is, and recognisably is, from very early on (everyone by now has seen the photographs) human, doesn’t seem to many a ground for having a rule against killing a foetus. What matter are “values,” “the development of personality” and other airy concepts, By a similar corruption of the mind we slaughter innocent people in war and justify it in terms of “western values,” “democracy,” and what have you. It isn’t accidental that in the gospels the *corporal* works of mercy are the types of what Christ wants us to do. The very imagery used to convey our longing for God comes from our bodily life, and from that part of our life we share with the other animals: we hunger and thirst, we melt inwardly, our bowels are moved. “As the driven hart pants after the streams of water, so longs my soul for you O God” (Ps 42:1).

It seems then to follow that death, even with the Christian hope of resurrection, is more terrible than we are commonly prepared to admit. It is the end of John or Mary, and apart from the Christian hope it would be a dark fact of human existence. It is therefore quite un-Christian in spirit to be too jolly about death. Some of our modern locutions—“passed away,” “passed on,” “passed to the higher life,” all the language that goes with the modern undertaking industry and the death-denying forms taken by modern graveyards (Forest Lawn)—are quite contrary to the Christian tradition. I understand the theological reasoning behind the abandonment of the black vestments and the old form of the requiem mass, but I must confess I am suspicious about the atmosphere out of which it comes and which it seems to encourage. If I thought the liturgical change testified to a more lively faith in the resurrection I should be happy.

Death, then, is dark and—setting aside the Christian hope—tragic, at any rate in the case of mature persons. This is one way of saying that it is a serious business both for the dying man and for

the living who have to do with him. It is a feeling for this that has prompted much recent concern about and discussion of our current attitudes to death and to the practices of undertakers and doctors.

There is a growing revulsion from the undignified—and expensive—practices of the undertaking industry, with the mendacity and false sentiment that batten on the days of mourning for the dead person. Again, the whole setting of death (as of birth) has changed. Now we (in the opulent “western” societies) are often born in hospitals and die in them, whereas formerly we were born where we were conceived and died where we were born, that is, at home, in bed. Men are beginning to see this change as a loss, in part because in the hospital setting death is a clinical rather than a human event, in part because the duties of the physician begin to blend imperceptively with the duties of the public executioner wherever it is thought a possible duty to ease the dying out of existence. In general, it doesn’t seem to be the function of nurses and physicians—perhaps it can’t be their function—to reconcile the dying to their condition or to provide purgation and consolation for the bereaved family and friends. Again, changes in medical technology and the growth in the demand for spare parts of the human body have raised new questions about when a man is to be judged to be dead; and whether or not there is a distinction, from the standpoint of morality, between letting a man die without inflicting on him a lot of useless plumbing and actually administering a lethal dose of a drug. (The distinction is intuitively clear but holding on to one’s clarity in the face of ingenious arguments for euthanasia demands some fairly hard thinking about the topic of intention.) Again, the common and, by many, approved practice of abortion has got people worried about killing, and what kinds of killing count as homicide and what kinds of homicide count as murder. Finally, our time has seen death in bizarre forms: death coming from the sky onto the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and Coventry and Dresden and on terrified and uncomprehending peasants in Indo-China; and death coming to Jews, gipsies, Slavs, in the gas-chambers of the Third Reich and death coming to millions of people in the Soviet Union through starvation and cold in the Arctic and in central Asia.

If men have been inclined to think that God is dead, this has not been on account of the vapouring of theologians in fashionable divinity schools but because the skies were indifferent above Auschwitz and Treblinka. Death on such a scale, and out of such inadequate motives without regard to guilt or innocence, age or sex, seems without sense and without consolation. perhaps only in *King Lear* has the poet ever contemplated happenings so bleak and so absurd. Slaughter attributable to ignorance and fanaticism has

been a constant feature of human history, at least since the rise of the first civilizations. What is uncanny about the deaths I am talking about is that they are not the work of such men, but the work of petty clerks, no doubt respectable family men quite without a share in the frenzies of Hitler and Himmler, and of nice boys flying the B-52s who rain death on people they have never seen and about whose human reality they are ignorant. We ought not to think of all this as lying behind us. The spirit that lay behind the death camps and the mass bombing lives in the public cult, in the arts of sadism and voyeurism. A profound contempt for copulation, suffering and death has bubbled up in the midst of our culture and has shaken all our minds. It is now difficult to be consistent. The opponent of capital punishment and the critic of American foreign policy in Indo-China may ask for abortion on demand or depict Genet or the Marquis de Sade as a moral pioneer. The opponent of abortion—he who is pro-life!—may look on the possibility of nuclear war with calm of mind: for is not the West justified in taking all measures against the Satanic enemies of God and man?

A difficulty that stands in the way of our looking steadily at the phenomenon of death is that curiously death is in the opulent societies not very visible. In the Nineteenth century deaths by tuberculosis and pneumonia were commonplace; these diseases were killers at all ages. Children died frequently (the Victorian novel is realistic in making much of the deaths of children). Women often died in childbed. Now we have the impression that death is something that can be postponed almost indefinitely through surgery and the use of antibiotics. To adopt Newman's terminology, our assent to the proposition that all men are mortal tends to be notional rather than real. Deaths in war and from natural catastrophes are witnessed on the television screen and have the unreality that belongs to the medium, sandwiched as they are between commercials for deodorants, dog food, instant coffee, and pills to stop men and women getting old.

But death doesn't go away, neither as *my* death nor as the common fate of all men. I have tried to show that even on Christian premises death is terrible, the splitting of our substantial unity, the end of our human existence; it is something enormously tragic apart from the Christian hope in resurrection, the restoration of *human* existence in a way that is the hidden work of God's providence. To say this is to invite smiles or consternation even among believers, perhaps accompanied by cries of demythologise! demythologise! There are even some "radical" Christians or so I'm told, who want to get rid of the whole notion of personal survival. If this is a sign that they are discontented with the still influential crypto-Platonism, then I think that this

could, as is so often the case with heresies be a sign of the failings of the orthodox. If we are to be the leaven of our society in this matter of death, we have to think seriously about the place of death in our culture. More important, it seems that we have a duty to make our distinctive faith more obvious, not to be afraid of the spirit of the age as it is represented by the undertaking industry, the hospitals and the doctors, by the high-minded Gnosticism of the fashionable sects, by all those who have power over our lives and over the style in which we shall be allowed to die. If Christians were as distinctive in their attitudes to death—repudiating, for example, the practice of embalming the dead—as are Orthodox Jews, western society would become healthier and saner.

## **Christ and China**

**Gerald O'Collins**

It has been conventional to describe theology as 'faith seeking understanding'. We might, however, care to shift from the private sphere of understanding to the public sphere of language and call theology 'watching one's language in the presence of God'. Either way Christian theology must show itself to be truly Christian. It should seek understanding in the light of Jesus Christ. It should watch its language in the presence of the God-man.

Using either version of theology, what might we say about the New China and the recent Chinese experience? What insights and reflections does faith in Christ suggest about the era and the nation on which Mao Tse-tung has put his stamp? Where can belief in the Crucified and risen Jesus take its stand vis-a-vis contemporary China?

When asked to confront Christ and Mao's China I have no short or easy answer to give. Let me single out two themes (suffering and the emulation of heroes), and then conclude by listing some major points of comparison and contrast when we bring together the two figures themselves, Jesus and Mao.