



Let's Talk About Death

by Jonathan Aitken

IN A RECENT SATURDAY MORNING in Washington, D.C., I was strolling along Pennsylvania Avenue in glorious autumnal sunshine when a bearded antiwar protester accosted me. He tried to thrust into my hand a poster featuring a skull and crossbones above the slogan: "Death to Bush!"

Apparently irritated by my refusal of his offering, the bearded one produced from his pocket a small battery-powered microphone and began chanting the oral version of his jihadist message at full volume. Escaping from my tormentor was not easy because when I turned away from him I found myself facing a phalanx of further and worse protesters coming at me from the opposite direction of Pennsylvania Avenue, determined to occupy the pedestrianized area in front of the White House. Trapped between the mob and the man with the microphone, I decided to open a dialogue with the latter along these lines:

"Surely you don't really want the death of the President?"

"Yes I do. I want him to die and burn in hell."

"But supposing he died and went to heaven instead?"

This may not have been my finest hour of forensic brilliance as a cross-examiner, but at least it had the result of getting the microphone switched off as the demonstrator paused to declare that I must be crazy. In

justification of my soundness of mind I pointed out that in the conversation so far, both of us had indicated a belief in life after death. Our disagreement was that I took a more optimistic view of the 43rd President's celestial chances on the day of judgment.

This observation flummoxed the protester. He lowered both his voice and his antiwar placard. For the next 20 minutes or so, we had an entirely civil discourse on the subject of death and what, if anything, comes after it. Predictably enough, we did not agree. My hirsute interlocutor declared himself an atheist and too young to start worrying about what might happen to him at the end of his life. He quoted a Woody Allen line: "It's not that I fear death, I just don't want to be there when it happens." In response I recalled the story of the Irish playwright Brendan Behan being asked during his terminal bout of cirrhosis of the liver if he ever thought about death. "Think about death!" Behan shouted. "Bejus, I'd rather be dead than think about it!"

After making my excuses and leaving the protester I went for a walk through West Potomac Park and Constitution Gardens, stopping at five of America's greatest memorials—the Lincoln, the Korean War Veterans, the National World War II, the Three Servicemen, and the Vietnam Veterans. How strange, I reflected, that while death is virtually unmentionable in most settings, on

this particular sunny morning I had discussed it in the middle of a demonstration and visited a succession of spectacular edifices honoring the war dead. Yet I was not perhaps as confident as I had sounded about my own spiritual conclusions on this inevitable but much avoided subject.

The classic Christian stance on death can sometimes seem artificially optimistic. John Newton, author of “Amazing Grace,” faced his own demise with these words:

What is death to a believer in Jesus? It is simply a ceasing to breathe. If we personify it we may welcome it as a messenger to open to us the gate of everlasting life. The harbingers of death, sickness, pain and conflict, are frequently formidable to the flesh but death itself is nothing else but a deliverance from them all.

Such sentiments, and there were many of them in past centuries when life was on the whole “nasty, brutish, and short,” i.e., free from most of today’s medical blessings such as dentistry, anaesthetics, painkillers, and pharmacology, do not always strike a resonant chord in our 21st-century world of healthy longevity. Practically no one I know seems to be as sanguine about dying as John Newton or as positive as John Keats, who claimed to be “half in love with easeful death.” But closing our contemporary minds to this inescapable subject for as long as possible is not a sensible option. For the way we think about death can help us to reach the answers to the most important questions life puts to us.

ALL RELIGIONS SUGGEST SOLUTIONS to the problem of death—reincarnation, immortality, peaceful oblivion, or even hedonistic paradise in the company of a thousand virgins, to name a few. But only the Judeo-Christian God is presented throughout the Bible as the Creator who is committed to an ongoing relationship with his creation. The possibility of eternal life has traditionally had a defining influence on a Christian’s approach to death. Being creatures of time, we mortals have considerable difficulty getting our heads around the concept of eternity. But the promises of Jesus are the basis for the claim of St. Paul that, through Christ, death has lost its sting (I Corinthians 15:55). Without those promises, confirmed by the Resurrection, there would be no scope for resolving the meaningless injustice and senselessness that are such inexplicable features of

life on earth. Nor would there be any compensating gain in relief from fear and uncertainty about death.

The promise of Christ is not that all human suffering will be relieved but that “I am with you always,

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to the end of time” (Matthew 28:20). Even Jesus at his death experienced anguish and alienation from his Father, despite prior confidence in divine love and faithfulness. Yet Christ’s Resurrection demonstrated that his Father was with him after all, not as one uniquely privileged but as the first to blaze the trail that all Christians can now follow.

The nature of that trail has implications that go beyond the boundaries of conventional religious faith. Perhaps that was why Jesus occasionally made curiously inclusive statements such as “Other sheep have I who are not of this fold” or (a great favorite at funeral services) “In my Father’s house are many mansions.”

In this same spirit of inclusiveness, a large number of people who have no explicit Christian faith still have an intuitive belief that death, although shrouded in mystery, is not necessarily the end. There is also a widely held hope that the God who has been inadequately prayed to and worshipped in most of our lives will nevertheless be sufficiently forgiving to come alongside us at the hour of our death, sharing in our final sufferings and transforming the reality of our earthly endings.

These are deep waters and perhaps it is unwise for a columnist to enter them. Yet the general taboo on speaking or writing about death needs to be broken in the interest of diminishing the fear that our secular society evidently feels towards this topic. The most peaceful deaths I have ever known from personal contact or from reading about them have all been the deaths of Christian believers. One of the most contented of these departures was that of my earlier mentioned hero and biographical subject, John Newton. His last words before meeting his maker were: “I am a great sinner... but Christ is a great savior.” Beat that as an exit line from this mortal coil. ☛

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