

Introduction

The “Great Matter of Life and Death,” as the Buddhist expression puts it, has probably been a subject of great concern to humans as long as there have been humans.

Rennyō, a 15th-century Japanese Buddhist priest of the Pure Land tradition, wrote many letters to the lay people under his care. This is one of them:

When we pause to think of our floating life, it is a fleeting thing; its beginning, middle, and end pass by in a single season, like an illusion.

Thus, who has ever heard of anyone living 10,000 years? A life passes so easily. Who today has kept their bodily form for 100 years? Death may come to me before you, or to you before me. It may be today, or it may be tomorrow. Whether after another or before another, our lives, it could be said, fall more often than raindrops on the roots of the trees, than the dew on the tips of leaves.

So, even though your face is radiant and healthy in the morning, your body may turn to white bones in the evening. Already, the wind of impermanence is blowing; your two eyes close in an instant, your breath ceases forever. Your complexion changes; its ripeness, like that of a peach or plum, is lost. When this moment comes, your dear family gathers to weep and mourn, but to no avail.

Since it must be so, your body is burned to ashes and ends in smoke; only the white bones are left. Pitiably it is, to be sure, and unsatisfying in the extreme. Will you be old or young then? No one knows, so fleeting is human life. Then we should all make haste to take this Great Matter of life and death to heart, and call upon Amida Buddha for mercy. Meditate on the name of “Amida.”

My profound respects to you.¹

Centuries before, and on the other side of the world, the Jewish Psalmist wrote:

¹ “White Bones Letter”; my translation

Lord, make me to know mine end, and the measure of my days, what it is: that I may know how frail I am.

Behold, thou hast made my days as an handbreadth; and mine age is as nothing before thee: verily every man at his best state is altogether vanity. Selah.

Surely every man walketh in a vain shew: surely they are disquieted in vain: he heapeth up riches, and knoweth not who shall gather them.

And now, Lord, what wait I for? My hope is in thee.²

And the writer known as “Isaiah” wrote:

The voice said, Cry. And he said, What shall I cry? All flesh is grass, and all the goodliness thereof is as the flower of the field:

The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: because the spirit of the Lord bloweth upon it: surely the people is grass.

The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand for ever.³

Two religious traditions from opposite sides of the earth and centuries apart in time, but basically very similar meditations: a sober reflection on the brief, fleeting nature of life, balanced with a mention of some kind of religious consolation. Though the language of the latter is different in the two traditions, one mentioning a Buddha and the other the Jewish God, it may very well be that, since the feelings expressed seem to be universal human ones, the words “Buddha” and “God” might actually be meant to refer to somewhat similar entities.

The way language works in this sort of matter will be one of the subjects considered in the following pages. For now, I ask the reader simply to turn each of these passages over in her or his mind for a while and look at how they connect—if they do—with one’s own feelings and experiences. One could call the beginning and end of each one “poles,” like the poles of a battery: “negative” and “positive.”

I would guess that they do call up some sort of feelings in every reader. At least, one or another pole will: either the lamenting “negative pole,” or the comforting, hopeful

² Psalm 39:4–7; King James Version—I don’t know Hebrew and therefore cannot make my own translation.

³ Isaiah 40:6–8; King James Version

“positive pole.” Some of us will find the positive pole meaningless, recognizing no source of comfort in the world as we know it; others may insist that we feel no pain or fear thinking of death, that we are quite confident that “death is swallowed up in victory,” as a prominent leader in still a third religious tradition once put it. Still others may find that they do not react to either pole. For them, these quotations are dead batteries; the Great Matter of life and death is of no interest or concern to them at all.

If you are in this third group, you may not find the following essay worth your while in the slightest. But the rest of us do find ourselves grappling at least now and then with the well-known fact that there is something besides taxes which is inevitable. This essay is based on the assumption that looking at the ways in which death was meditated on by several writers in human history, widely separated from each other in time and space, may be of some help in coming to our own conclusions on the subject.

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While most of us manage to get through most hours of most days without giving much thought to the inevitability of our death, now and then we do follow the old Latin tag, *memento mori*, and remember it. When we do, many of us—in some places, such as the United States, most of us—associate such thoughts with religion. This connection seems so obvious in the culture at large that expressions such as “no atheists in foxholes” (where death is presumably much more likely than it is for the lucky folks back on the home front) and “deathbed conversion” (which assumes that even the staunchest atheist is likely to think better of her presumptuous spitting in the face of God at the last minute, just in case) are commonplaces.

Yet a principal aim of this essay will be to make the case that death and religion are not necessarily so closely linked. We all will die, but we need not all deal with this fact in a religious manner. It is possible to reflect seriously on the subject of death in general, and our own individual fates in particular, without buying into any particular religion, or any religion at all.

To argue this proposition will require a close look at the connection between death and religious beliefs. We will be surveying this subject not by taking an exhaustive look at all the ways human beings have dealt with death and all religions, which would obviously be an enormous undertaking, but by picking out a few illustrative examples in which death has been understood in religious and non-religious ways. They will range from the culture of ancient Mesopotamia, as revealed to us through the earliest great written epic, that of the hero Gilgamesh, through early Christianity (primarily in the person of Paul),

followed by the great Japanese Buddhist thinker Dogen, and finally his near contemporary on the other side of the world, Thomas Aquinas.

My reasons for choosing these particular examples of reflections on death and religion are primarily personal: in thinking for some time about the subject, I happen to have found these writings and writers especially illuminating. I would not try to argue that these are necessarily the most important authorities on the subject; other people will certainly choose their own favorites. But I hope to be able to explain why I find them particularly meaningful.



For reasons which may or may not be obvious, the idea of death, when we happen to let our thoughts drift toward it, generally arouses a strong fear in most people, and many are so afraid of this fear itself that they almost never entertain thoughts of their own death. To do so—especially among Westerners—is often thought to be a kind of mental illness. In 1973, Ernest Becker published a Pulitzer-winning book, *The Denial of Death*, in which he carefully examined this subject, and advanced the rather provocative thesis that this very repression of the thought of one’s own death is the source of much mental illness.

Be that as it may, we human beings have composed a number of variations on the theme of death besides the “bipolar” kind mentioned above. The “Mourner’s Kaddish” or “Orphan’s Kaddish,” recited by the survivors of a death in the Jewish tradition, could be considered one in which the negative pole is omitted and only the positive one is retained:

May His great name be exalted, and sanctified is God’s great name
 In the world which will be renewed,
 And where He will give life to the dead
 And raise them to eternal life,
 And rebuild the city of Jerusalem
 And complete His temple there
 And uproot foreign worship from the earth,
 And restore Heavenly worship to its position,
 And the Holy One, blessed is He, reign in His sovereign splendor.
 And may His salvation blossom and His anointed be near

During your lifetime and during your days
 And during the lifetimes of all the House of Israel,
 Speedily and very soon! And say, Amen. ...⁴

On the other hand, those modern folks often called, either proudly or in derision, “secular humanists” of course omit the positive pole. When they explain their view of death, they commonly sign onto one or more of the following themes:

A) The fact (which they take to be a fact) that we have only one limited lifespan makes each day or moment of life much more meaningful and precious than it would be if we could look forward to an extended afterlife.

B) Facing the inevitable fact of our consciousness, our thoughts, feelings, and passions, passing into the void generates (or at least should generate) great compassion toward ourselves and others.

C) Although we do not live on in an afterlife in some mythical other dimension, as far as we can tell, we do survive in the memories of our families, friends, and all who benefit from the good we have done in our lives (and unfortunately, of course, all who suffer from our evil deeds, though this is rarely mentioned in humanistic funeral orations).

D) In any case, facing reality courageously and with a clear vision is far better than trying to comfort ourselves with fictions.

However, this concept of death threatens many, because it seems to do away with the protection against the forces of nature, especially the causes of illness and death, that they feel they derive from a divine creator and governor of the universe. Death no longer seems to be the door which opens onto an eternal life of sheer enjoyment, presided over by that deity, for the righteous, and eternal punishment (pictured in one way or another) for the guilty who have managed to escape retribution for their sins in life.

In reply, secularists will sing with Phil Ochs that we must make heaven on earth while we live. Don’t wait! In the words of his song “When I’m Gone”:

There's no place in this world where I'll belong when I'm gone
 And I won't know the right from the wrong when I'm gone
 And you won't find me singin' on this song when I'm gone
 So I guess I'll have to do it while I'm here.

⁴ From Wikipedia article “Kaddish”

And I won't feel the flowing of the time when I'm gone
 All the pleasures of love will not be mine when I'm gone
 My pen won't pour out a lyric line when I'm gone
 So I guess I'll have to do it while I'm here.

And I won't breathe the bracing air when I'm gone
 And I can't even worry 'bout my cares when I'm gone
 Won't be asked to do my share when I'm gone
 So I guess I'll have to do it while I'm here.

And I won't be running from the rain when I'm gone
 And I can't even suffer from the pain when I'm gone
 Can't say who's to praise and who's to blame when I'm gone
 So I guess I'll have to do it while I'm here.

Won't see the golden of the sun when I'm gone
 And the evenings and the mornings will be one when I'm gone
 Can't be singing louder than the guns when I'm gone
 So I guess I'll have to do it while I'm here.

All my days won't be dances of delight when I'm gone
 And the sands will be shifting from my sight when I'm gone
 Can't add my name into the fight while I'm gone
 So I guess I'll have to do it while I'm here.

And I won't be laughing at the lies when I'm gone
 And I can't question how or when or why when I'm gone
 Can't live proud enough to die when I'm gone
 So I guess I'll have to do it while I'm here.

To which the religious will reply that this sounds like a very dangerous philosophy of life. It amounts to "worshipping Man instead of God," giving in to our "sinful nature," which we can only overcome with the help of an omnipotent god and a hope (or fear) of the afterlife. As Becker expressed very well:

Culture is in its most intimate intent a heroic denial of creatureliness. But

this denial is more effective in some epochs than in others. When man lived securely under the canopy of the Judeo-Christian world picture he was part of a great whole; to put it in our terms, his cosmic heroism was completely mapped out, it was unmistakable. He came from the invisible world into the visible one by the act of God, did his duty to God by living out his life with dignity and faith, marrying as a duty, procreating as a duty, offering his whole life—as Christ had—to the Father. In turn he was justified by the Father and rewarded with eternal life in the invisible dimension. Little did it matter that the earth was a vale of tears, of horrid sufferings, of incommensurateness, of torturous and humiliating daily pettiness, of sickness and death, a place where man felt he did not belong, “the wrong place,” as Chesterton said, the place where man could expect nothing, achieve nothing for himself. Little did it matter, because it served God and so would serve the servant of God.⁵

This theme was already announced at the origin of Christianity; in the words of the apostle Paul we hear:

Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.

For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality. ... Then the saying that is written will be fulfilled: “Death has been swallowed up in victory.”⁶

These are among the themes and variations I will be discussing in the following pages.

What I would like to do in them is to consider at least two ways of dealing these questions, and with the fear of one’s own death, which have been practiced by many people, and which are identified with the Christian and Buddhist traditions (though people outside those traditions may deal with this fear in very similar ways, also). I will not try to argue that one is better than the other in any absolute sense, though I personally find the

⁵ Becker, *The Denial of Death*, pp. 159f.

⁶ 1 Corinthians 15:51–4 (New Revised Standard Version)

latter, Buddhist, approach much more convincing. Instead, I want to point out some relationships between them which I think shed much light on the general contrast between the two views of life and the universe, and which may also help those who (like most people in Western culture) are more familiar with the Christian worldview understand what the Buddhist way of doing things is all about. If these musings also have some practical benefit to the reader, I would also be very happy about that, of course.



To exemplify the Christian approach to the Great Matter, I will first look at some passages from Paul's letters in the New Testament. As I read him, much of his psychology was motivated by a great fear, even terror, of death, and his great joy upon becoming convinced that Jesus not only came back from death, but provided a way for everyone to do the same. Some students of Christian history believe that Paul in fact more or less invented Christianity single-handedly, but even if he didn't (and I don't know that I would attribute that much importance to him in that history), everyone agrees that he was certainly a very influential figure.

To draw out some philosophical underpinnings of the Christian worldview in which the Christian way of dealing with death functions, I will also provide some analysis of the philosophical principles of Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), considered by many Christians one of the greatest theologians of their history. And I will use an almost exact contemporary of his from the other side of the world, the Japanese Zen teacher Dogen (1200–1253), as a figure who helps to focus on the contrasting worldview of Zen. I find it quite interesting that the thoughts of these two writers, who of course were completely unaware of each other's existences, can be connected so revealingly.

My aim in this essay is precisely expressed by the quotation from Spinoza which Becker chose as the epigraph for his book: "*Non ridere, non lugere, neque detestari, sed intelligere*—Not to laugh, not to lament, not to curse, but to understand."



The great question of life and death, of what if anything happens to us after death, seems to have been on the minds of King Edwin of Northumbria and his advisors when they met in 627 to consider whether or not to convert to Christianity, an offer which had been made to them by Paulinus, a missionary sent by Pope Gregory I. The rather well-known story about the advice given to the King by one of his advisors was told by

Venerable Bede, in his history of the Christian church in England up to his time. As Bede quotes him, this man was dissatisfied with the information their own religion gave them about life and death, which, it seems, was essentially none:

The present life of man, O king, seems to me, in comparison of that time which is unknown to us, like to the swift flight of a sparrow through the room wherein you sit at supper in winter, with your commanders and ministers, and a good fire in the midst, whilst the storms of rain and snow prevail abroad; the sparrow, I say, flying in at one door, and immediately out at another, whilst he is within, is safe from the wintry storm; but after a short space of fair weather, he immediately vanishes out of your sight, into the dark winter from which he had emerged. So this life of man appears for a short space, but of what went before, or what is to follow, we are utterly ignorant. If, therefore, this new doctrine contains something more certain, it seems justly to deserve to be followed.⁷

Indeed, the King did decide to convert to Christianity, although it seems that Northumbria reverted to paganism after his time, and it was a while longer before England became securely Christian. Nevertheless, the new belief system from sunny Italy obviously did impress Edwin and his court with its epistemological superiority.

My point in re-telling this story is to emphasize that it is rather easy, when we are facing the question of life and death, to seize on some new idea which impresses us by its certitude. But in fact, I firmly believe, no one really knows what happens to us after death, despite all of the glorious tales of heavens and hells, past lives as princesses of ancient Egypt, or whatever. Although our culture is still largely dominated by the traditional Christian picture of heaven and hell (think of all the images of angels floating on clouds with their harps and devils with long tails stoking the fires of hell you have seen), the people of many societies in the history of the human race in fact have had very vague ideas of the afterlife, or none at all—they seem to be rather incurious about the whole subject.

One of the main conclusions of this essay will in fact be that a state of ignorance about what, if anything, the afterlife promises is a quite normal and even preferable condition. Since I will be comparing Christian and Buddhist, specifically Zen, views of the question, I will follow this Christian story with a Zen *koan*, about a Chinese Buddhist priest and his teacher, who, if the story is true (always an open question with *koans*), may

⁷ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, Book II, Chapter 13.

have lived at about the same time as King Edwin, or somewhat later.

Priest Jianyuan of Tan once accompanied his teacher, Daowu, on a condolence call to a family funeral. When they arrived, he tapped the coffin and said, "Is this life, or is this death?"

Daowu said, "I won't say life, I won't say death."

Jianyuan said, "Why won't you say?"

Daowu said, "I won't say, I won't say."

On their way back Jianyuan said, "You should say it quickly for me, teacher, or I will hit you."

Daowu said, "Hit me if you will, but I will not say." Jianyuan hit him.

After returning to the monastery Daowu said to Jianyuan, "You should take leave for a while; I'm afraid if the head monk finds out about this he will make trouble for you."

After Daowu passed away, Jianyuan went to see Daowu's successor Shishuang, told him the story, and asked for guidance. Shishuang said, "I won't say life, I won't say death."

Jianyuan said, "Why won't you say it?"

Shishuang said, "I won't say, I won't say." Jianyuan immediately realized it.⁸

Since I will be discussing this *koan* later, I will not stop now to give an interpretation of it and explain the student's hitting his teacher, etc. My only message at this moment is that when we ask, "Is there life after death or no life after death?" the world seems to answer, "I won't say, I won't say, even if you hit me." Can we coax it to tell us any more, and if not, what do we do about this situation? And the question I now put to you is: what is the "it" that Jianyuan realized?

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One more point before I go on: the reader may have noticed that all of the texts I have mentioned are quite old, none later than the 13th century C.E. Why so antiquarian? Aren't there any newer writings and writers worth considering?

⁸ Quoted from Roshi John Daido Looi's discussion of the koan at <http://www.mro.org/zmm/teachings/daido/teisho12.php>

Of course there are, but for one thing, I'm writing this piece, so I get to confine it to whatever I want. But a more substantial justification for my choices is that, in a subject that is closely related to things like religion and mythology, people's pasts are important to them. Most religion is profoundly conservative and—one might almost say—even rigidified and ossified. It has to do with folks' "roots." This is primarily because it is the basis for much of the meaning that people give to their lives, and most of us have a habit of feeling that our lives have little meaning unless they are connected with some sort of tradition. No one, or hardly anyone at least, likes to feel that they are floating in empty space, psychologically and existentially speaking. So I think that a good way of exploring this sort of religious and mythological topic is to burrow around in some of those roots.

The trouble is that, since we feel that we need to be connected to a past, we naturally want that past to be one we like. So we set about applying plenty of lipstick and rouge to our historical roots in order to make them look their best, or at least resemble something we are comfortable with. Hence, the pictures most people have of their religious, social, and political histories deviate considerably from what professional historians, those irritating eggheads, come up with in their research.

In this essay, I will try to resist that cosmetic practice as much as possible, and rely on the findings of the professionals as well as I comprehend them. To the extent that I have any religious roots, they are closer to Christianity than anything else, since I attended a Quaker church (not a silent "Meeting for Worship" of the more traditional Society of Friends type, but a branch of Quakerism which more closely resembles standard American Protestant sects) in the Midwest of the United States as a child. However, I never felt particularly "religious," and became quite comfortable with an atheist world view as my education proceeded. I was also interested in Buddhism early on, to the extent that I could find out anything about it in the 1950s in middle America, and eventually settled on the academic field of philosophy, in which I earned a Ph. D. In my 30s, I finally became acquainted with Zen practice, as opposed to merely reading about the Dharma. This about sums up my personal background, such as it is, for the following discussion.