

Death Where Is Your Sting?

Death Where is Your Sting? is the title of my book and it might seem a slightly gloomy subject, but death is something the COVID-19 virus has caused us all to think about over the last year, although my decision to write my book predated the virus. But attitudes to any notion of life after death are quite diverse in our society. In America about 75% of the population believe in it, but the proportion is far lower in this country. According to a ComRes survey of religious beliefs carried out for the BBC in 2017 46% of the population believed in it and 46% did not. Men were more doubtful than women, 36% believed and 50% did not, but those figures were almost exactly reversed for women. Interestingly the same survey broke down responses according to religious belief. Of those who described themselves as Christian 61% believed in it but 31% did not. A further break down to those who described themselves as 'active Christians', i.e. regular churchgoers, showed 85% believed in it, but 11% said they did not and 4% said they did not know. It will be interesting to see if COVID-19 produces any change in those figures in the future.

Now you might think that because I have been a priest in the Church of England for over 50 years I must be in the believer category, but I have to confess at the very least I wondered about it when my father died 30 years ago and my mother 20 years ago. Of course people wrote with comforting words about their being 'in a better place' but even then I wondered 'How do you know?' Since embarking on this book I have discovered just how broad the debate has been even within very informed theological circles.

Within different religious groups that is not new. The Jewish society that Jesus knew was divided on the matter; the Sadducees, the guardians of the Jerusalem Temple who provided the High Priest did not believe in it, although the Pharisees, a Jewish movement that started about two hundred years before Jesus was born, did, as was shown in the gospel story where the Sadducees challenged Jesus about the matter and he gave a classic Pharisaic response to it. And it was not just Judaism that was divided. According to Plato the Greek philosopher Socrates did believe in it, although even Plato gives an example of Socrates hedging his bets, and ancient Greek philosophers were themselves quite divided on the matter. Of course in the light of Jesus' reply to the Sadducees the early church did believe in it, especially because of the tradition of the resurrection of Jesus, and that held sway in Christian circles for a long time until the middle of the last century for reasons that I shall explain in a moment. And even among those who believe in some form of an afterlife there is a wide variety of what is actually believed; Eastern views of reincarnation, which were also held by some ancient Greek philosophers are fundamentally different from Christian views of resurrection.

Now there is not time to cover the whole variety of debates that has gone on in Christian and other circles over the last two thousand years and I will concentrate on the last seventy or so years and look at four sets of issues, historical, philosophical, scientific and theological, that have been discussed.

Take the historical one first. Obviously for Christians the notion of the resurrection of Jesus must be carefully considered. But in thinking about that we need to know that the New Testament was not all written at the same time. The earliest books are not the Gospels but the letters of St Paul, many of which were written in the 50s, within a few years of the death of Jesus. Paul certainly speaks of others seeing Jesus and also says 'he appeared also to me' but he says remarkably little about what he meant by that, and gives no description of what he saw. And it is very difficult to square his

account of appearances to others with what is said elsewhere in the New Testament. We also need to know that the accounts of his conversion in the Acts of the Apostles were written down many years after Paul's own death. He does say that Jesus was dead and buried, but he says nothing about the tomb being found empty. That was first written in St Mark's Gospel, probably written in the late 60s some thirty years or more after the events it describes. And Mark saying nothing about any appearances to anyone; he ends his gospel saying the women left the tomb because 'they were afraid.' It is only when we get to Gospels written much later, probably in the seventies in the case of Luke and Matthew and the 90s or even later in the case of St John's Gospel that we get descriptions of visions. And we need to remember the Gospel writers were not twenty-first century historians or journalists, they were evangelists and their purpose in writing was to encourage others to believe.

And their accounts are very confusing. In Matthew's Gospel all the appearances happened in Galilee, while in St Luke's they all occurred in or near Jerusalem. It is only in the last of the Gospels, St John's, that there are appearances both in Jerusalem and Galilee. In St John's Gospel there is the account of Jesus appearing to doubting Thomas, who makes that remarkably confession 'My Lord and my God'. According to John that happened a week after the first Easter Sunday in the presence of most of the disciples, but if that really was an historical event it is extraordinary that neither St Paul, St Mark, St Mathew nor St Luke mentioned it. That is why a number of biblical scholars think the story was told for theological rather than for historical purposes.

So the upshot is that it is very difficult to be sure of exactly what it was that caused the belief in the Resurrection. Was it an event in history after the death of Jesus, or was it an interpretation of his death in the minds of his followers? In the chapter in my book on the matter I look at the work of three internationally recognised biblical historians, John Dominic Crossan, an ex-Roman Catholic priest who was a major figure in something known as the Jesus Seminar in America, Tom Wright, the former Bishop of Durham, and Dale Allison, a Professor in Princeton University. They have all looked at the same documents, the Gospels and the other non-canonical documents of the time, but they come to radically different conclusions. Wright is by far the most conservative of them all, Crossan is the most radical, and it says a lot for him and Wright that they regularly debate together in America, and Allison is, in my view, the most balanced between those extremes. But the fact that they so disagree with one another indicates to me that the documents themselves are ambiguous. It really is very difficult to be sure of what exactly happened.

My second set of issues is about philosophy. One person whose influence extended over a few hundred years was the French Catholic philosopher, Renè Descartes. He wrote in the 17th century and wanted to work from basic first principles, which led to his famous dictum *cogito ergo sum*, I think therefore I am. He suggested that human beings have two quite distinct parts, a physical body that exists in time and space, and a mental life, that exists purely in each human being's mind. The theory became known as Cartesian dualism, from Descartes' name and the idea that there are two distinct parts to each person. The theory lasted relatively unchallenged for some centuries and indeed such dualistic notions are still alive in many people's thoughts today, but the notion came under sustained attack, first from philosophy, and then more recently from science and particularly neuroscience.

Gilbert Ryle, Waynflete Professor of Metaphysical Philosophy at Oxford, launched the philosophical attack in a very influential book called 'The Concept of Mind' published in 1949. He summarised

what he described as 'the official doctrine', 'Mind and body are normally harnessed together, but after the death of the body the mind may continue to exist and function...A person has two histories, one consisting of what happens to his body, the other consisting of what happens in his mind. The first is public, the second private. The events in the first history are events in the physical world; those in the second are events in the mental world.... One person has no direct access of any sort to the events of the inner life of another.'

Ryle continued in a robust combative style: 'Such in outline is the official theory. I shall often speak of it, with deliberate abusiveness, as 'the dogma of the Ghost in the Machine.' I hope to prove that it is entirely false, and false not in detail but in principle.'

He maintained that to consider the mental world and the physical world as two parallel categories was a confusion, but I am afraid there is not time now to go into the details of his argument, you will have to read my book, or even better read Ryle's book for those details, but his view was reinforced by the work of probably the greatest philosopher of mind in the twentieth century, Ludwig Wittgenstein. His views stemmed from his approach to language; in order to think we need a language in which we can express our ideas. He therefore questioned whether a 'private world of mind' could exist without a public language in which it was expressed. Philosophically he and Ryle won the day and Sir Anthony Kenny, who was the Master of Balliol College, Oxford and author of a four volume History of Western Philosophy summarised the position when he wrote "Most contemporary philosophers would disown Cartesian dualism ...but among educated people in the West who are not philosophers it is still the most widespread view of mind.'

Now if the attack on Cartesian dualism had purely been from philosophy perhaps we would have had to leave it there, but more recently there has been an attack from another quarter, neuroscience, which is part of science and hence my third scientific issue. It just so happens that I met Anthony Kenny at a book launch and took the opportunity of asking him about his approach to neuroscience and he told me I should read 'The Philosophical Foundations of Neuroscience' by Bennett and Hacker. Bennett is a neuroscientist and Professor of Physiology at Sydney University and Hacker is an Oxford philosophy don and an expert on Wittgenstein. I followed Kenny's advice and have read most of that book, which is 450 pages long, but found it fascinating and discovered there is a huge debate within neuroscience. Bennett and Hacker both accept that Cartesian dualism is dead, but they found a new form of dualism amongst neuroscientists, which they described as an example of the mereological fallacy. Now I must confess when I first read that I had no idea what a mereological fallacy was, but evidently it is to ascribe to one part of a process what actually belongs to the whole. Some neuroscientists attribute the decisions of human beings to the brain. Bennett and Hacker certainly recognise that the brain is involved in thinking, but rather than saying as some neuroscientists do 'the brain thinks' they believe it is far more accurate to say a human being thinks, using his brain but also all the other information he receives from the other parts of the body, not least of all his genetic inheritance or even the influence of his gut through what he ate that morning.

Bennett and Hacker are particularly critical of the reductionism expressed by some neuroscientists. They define reductionism as 'a single unifying explanation of a type of phenomenon' as when Francis Crick wrote 'your joys and sorrows, your memories and ambitions, your sense of personal identity and free will, are in fact no more than the behaviour of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules', or when another neuroscientist, Colin Blakemore, says 'All our actions are

products of our brains ... we feel ourselves, usually, to be in control of our actions, but the feeling is itself a product of the brain, whose machinery has been designed, on the basis of its functional utility, by means of natural selection.' Bennett and Hacker certainly do not dispute there may be some scientific truth in what Crick and Blakemore say, but the problem is when that is considered to be the whole and only truth. No doubt the minds and brains of a Mozart or a Beethoven, or even of Jesus Christ or the Buddha, were subject to such constraints, but to describe them as 'no more than that' is to ignore the influence of music or religion on human life more generally. That is the reductionist error. And in connection with that it is interesting to note that Lord Martin Rees, a former President of the Royal Society, who describes himself as 'a practising but unbelieving Christian', comments that 'mathematics is the language of science, but music may be the language of religion.'

So when the American philosopher Wilfred Sellars wrote 'in the dimension of describing and explaining the world, science is the measure of all things, of what is that it is and what is not that it is not' Bennett and Hacker comment 'There is no such thing as explaining the world, only different ways of explaining different phenomena in the world....Law, economics and sociology explain things no less than physics describes and explains physical phenomena and chemistry describes and explains chemical phenomena. Within their proper domains, the social sciences are no less a measure of what is and what is not. And history, which is neither a natural nor a social science, is a measure of what was that it was and of what was not and that is was not ... there is no prospect whatsoever that legal, economic, sociological and historical phenomena should be explained by, let alone be reducible to, any natural or biological science. It is grotesque to suggest that these subjects are all pseudo-sciences or mere fables, enmeshed in a vacuous and obsolete vocabulary.'

Now I completely accept that criticism of reductionism in some neuroscience, but that does not undermine the basic contention that dualism in the sense of a Cartesian dualism between the body and the mind is dead. Neuroscience says we are psychosomatic unities, bodies and minds are linked together inextricably and the vast majority of neuroscientists certainly reject dualism and I believe they are right.

That leads to my fourth area of issues, the theological arguments in recent theology since the collapse of dualism in philosophy. As on so many other matters theologians are, of course, divided. There are some who still hold on to notions of dualism, Richard Swinburne, former Professor of Christian Theology in Oxford is one and Keith Ward, a former Regius Professor of Divinity in Oxford is another. But others certainly take a different view. Karl Barth, who was probably the most influential Protestant theologian of the last century, certainly rejected it. If you Google 'Karl Barth and the afterlife' you will find a remarkably robust statement from him saying why he doesn't believe in it. And Karl Rahner, a Jesuit priest who was probably the leading Roman Catholic theologian of the last century also questioned it. John Macquarrie, a former Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity at Oxford who I find one of the most persuasive of recent theologians, was another, as was David Edwards, a former Canon of Westminster who went on to be Provost of Southwark Cathedral and Norman Pittinger, a former Chairman of the Theological Commission of the World Council of Churches. Among the arguments that influenced them there were three I should mention now.

The first is anthropology – what is a human being? Are we psychosomatic unities? Karl Rahner certainly thought so. He wrote 'If we maintain that man ... really is a corporeal person with an

absolute and ultimately irreversible unity of matter and spirit ... this must necessarily say something about the salvation of the single and total person. Christian anthropology would be incomplete and even false if it wanted to understand the individual's final state merely as the salvation of an abstract human soul'. John Macquarrie wrote something similar. 'Human life seems to be so bound up with the body that we cannot envisage for it any reality when the body is dissolved.' Norman Pittinger wrote 'Not only do we all die, which is obvious enough, but all of us also dies, which to many may not appear obvious. We die, body and mind, even 'soul' (if that word is right to use here); and all talk in the world about 'immortality of the soul' will not deliver us from this kind of finality.'

A second factor is what do we mean by eternity? In the 1920s Wittgenstein wrote 'Death is not an event in life: we do not live to experience death. If we take eternity to mean not infinite temporal duration but timelessness, then eternal life belongs to those who live in the present. Our life has no end in just the way in which our visual field has no limits.'

Although they did not quote Wittgenstein that view certainly influenced some theologians, perhaps most significantly Karl Barth. Eschatology is the study of the last things and Barth challenged the pre-first World War view of it as the gradual realisation in history of the Kingdom of God. Rather he held that the 'wholly other' God broke into time and history where every moment could become the eschatological moment when eternity broke in with judgement and grace. He wrote 'Eternal life is not another and second life, beyond the present one. It is this life, but the reverse side which God sees although it is yet hidden from us.' And Karl Rahner wrote of eschatology 'It does not mean that things continue on after death as though, as Feuerbach put it, we only change horses and then ride on ... No, in this respect death marks the end of the whole person.... Eternity is not an infinitely long mode of pure time, but rather it is a mode of the spiritual freedom which has been exercised in time.'

Now I am certainly not saying all theologians accept that, some certainly see eternity as time continuing beyond death, but that relates to the third fundamental issue - what sort of God one believes in.

Is God to be found in this world, by a careful analysis of what we observe, but also of what we think and feel? Or is at least some of the content of belief in God to be transferred to another world, the very structure of which might be very different to the world and universe we know? If so then it can never be disproved. If the structure of such a universe is not only not known to us but is incapable of being known in this life then we have no choice but to accept ultimate ignorance. But personally I think the reality of God can be found in attending to the world we know.

In Martin Rees's book *Our Cosmic Habitat* he opens by saying 'The preeminent mystery is why anything exists at all'. To my mind the word God is simply a convenient way of describing why anything exists at all, which leaves open whether all that the church has said about creation in the past is accurate. But it is the mystery of this world that is what is at stake, so the opportunities life offers me which I value means I am grateful to God for those opportunities. I also deeply believe that the Christian view of life embodies a moral way of being that is supremely important; scarcely a day passes in my life when I do not reflect on those words attributed to Jesus at his crucifixion 'Father forgive them, for they know not what they do.' A basic thankfulness coupled with a willingness to forgive and a willingness to follow Jesus' command to love your neighbour as yourself is where I root my knowledge of God, and those things are in the present and not in some future world.

So let me conclude by talking of someone who I think was a very profound theologian. Hubert Richards was born in 1921 and was ordained as a Roman Catholic in 1946. Cardinal Heenan appointed him as Principal of Corpus Christi College in London, but his relationship with Heenan became more difficult as time went by, Richards being sympathetic to developments in the Catholic Church the far more conservative Heenan opposed. Richards therefore resigned as Principal in 1972 and then resigned as a Roman Catholic priest in 1975. He married a former nun and was invited to be a lecturer at an Anglican Teachers Training College in Norwich. He remained there for many years and wrote a series of books, starting with *The Miracles of Jesus, What Really Happened?* And followed them with books on the First Christmas and the First Easter with the same strap line. Then in 1980 he wrote *'Death and After: What Will Really Happen?'* In it he quoted John Donne's *'Death be not Proud'* which includes:

'One short sleepe past, wee wake eternally,

And death shall be no more: Death, thou shalt die!'

Richards comments 'In other words, we have no need to fear death, because we won't really die or come to an end.' But then he added 'The truth is, of course, that we will. To gloss over this fact is dishonest, and no less so for being thought the Christian thing to do. Human life does come to an end, and however painful the realisation of this may be, we do psychological harm to ourselves by taking refuge behind talk of 'sleep' or 'release' or 'passing on'. There is a tragic finality about death, which we must take seriously or it is not death we are talking about.'

He suggests the memory of us will last at least for a period after our deaths, even if only in our families and perhaps especially our children, and those memories may continue to be influential on others. Now the continuation of our influence beyond death in that sense is not nothing, and whatever sort of mark we have made on the world becomes part of a wider consciousness. Richards commented on the corporate nature of this.

'To speak of the resurrection of the body is to speak of the sharing by all men in the future of mankind and in the world we live in. The difficulty we have in coping with this idea stems from our western individualism. We are used to thinking in terms of 'my' soul, 'my' salvation, 'my' union with God. The biblical hope is not so self-centred... We cannot speak of our own bodily resurrection without including the resurrection of all, indeed of the whole universe. We cannot profess our faith in the resurrection of the body without hoping to be embodied in each other. And insofar as we already have some experience of this here and now, the resurrection of the body has begun, and in fact is going on all the time.'

'In dying our relationship to God's creation takes on a new dimension. Instead of being safely insulated from the world around us, we enter into a deep communion with it. Instead of being isolated from our fellow human creatures, we are finally at one with them. Instead of being embodied in one human individual, we are now embodied in all.'

He acknowledges that some might see that as a loss of individuality, but he wrote: 'But what if individuality, far from being a prize possession that must be safeguarded at all costs, is in fact an obstacle to our real fulfilment? What if our human personality, far from being diminished by being embodied in the human community, is thereby perfected? For our true self does not consist – as it

seems to do for things – in an individual separateness, but in an ability to communicate. Personality in fact cannot exist except in terms of relationship with others. If that relationship extends to all, the personality is enriched not impoverished.’

Speaking for myself that is how I make any sense of resurrection. When I die, all of me dies, my body, my mind, my consciousness. But the memory of me is incorporated into the memory of my family and friends, the church I have sought to serve, and even in what I think I can call the mind of God. And that is enough for me.