

The End of Life, the Ends of Life: An Anthropological View

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Abstract

All known human societies have a worldview that deserves to be called religion; all religions must explain death. Anthropologists study the diversity of religious systems, present and past, in order to understand what is common to humanity. Rather than starting from the view of a particular revelation or set of doctrines, the anthropologist tries to step outside his or her own subjective worldview and identify patterns in the evolution of human thinking about the reality of physical death. Are humans the only animals that are conscious of death, or do we share sentiments observable in our closest living relatives, the chimpanzees? At what point in history did the concept of an afterlife, life in some spiritual sense after physical death, appear? Is the religious explanation of life and death a mere reflection of a communal social fact, as the sociologist Emil Durkheim suggested, or a shared psychological trait, as more recent scholars assert? Can and should the modern scientist make a definitive statement about the finality of death and human consciousness?

Key Words: Anthropology of religion, mortality, mortuary rituals, end of life.

For a conference of Muslim physicians and health-care professionals, it is fitting to begin with a quote from the Prophet Muhammad صلى الله عليه وسلم. This is a hadith with several variants, including one in the *Musnad* of Imam Ahmad, attributed to Usama b. Sharik:

فجاءت الأعراب فسألوه فقالوا يا رسول الله تداوى قال
نعم تداووا فإن الله لم يضع داء إلا وضع له دواء غير داء
واحد الهرم

I was with the Prophet, when some bedouin came and asked: 'O Messenger of God, should we treat the sick?' He replied: 'Yes, O servants of God, treat your sick. For indeed God, the Glorious One, did not make any disease without making healing for it, except for one disease.' 'What is that?' they asked. 'Old age,' he replied."^{1,2}

As the scriptures of Islam, Judaism, and Christianity all teach, the end of life in its physical sense is inevitable for humans, as it appears to be for all creatures.

Several millennia before the revelation provided to the Prophet Muhammad صلى الله عليه وسلم, another text, an epic tale about death, circulated in ancient Mesopotamia. This is the story of Gilgamesh, leg-

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endary king of Uruk, and his wild friend Enkidu. The story culminates in a search by Gilgamesh to obtain eternal life after his friend dies. Gilgamesh sets out to find Utnapishtim, the Babylonian Noah who survived the flood and death. Not unlike the friends of biblical Job, the survivor of the Babylonian flood story advises Gilgamesh:

Yes, the gods took Enkidu's life.
But man's life is short, at any moment
it can be snapped like a reed in a canebrake.
The handsome young man, the lovely young
woman – in their prime, death comes and
drags them away.
Though no one has seen death's face or heard
death's voice, suddenly, savagely, death
destroys us, all of us, old or young.
And yet we build houses, make contracts,
brothers divide their inheritance, conflicts
occur – as though this human life lasted forever.³

“As though this human life lasted forever.” This is the hope that humanity has no doubt created since it first deserved to be called human. Thus, it should not be surprising that wherever anthropologists have gone to study human societies, there is a way of thinking and acting that deserves to be called religion, and the meaning of death plays a prominent, if not the prominent, role in all religions. Were we to live forever, there would be no need for the idea of an afterlife. In secular terms, we humans would be like the Babylonian deities who granted immortality to Utnapishtim. But, in the end, death destroys us all. As a Yemeni proverb, told to me more than three decades ago, states: *ākhir al-dunyā mawt* (the last part of this life is death).

I speak today as an anthropologist, the kind of scholar who approaches humanity as an evolutionary continuum with earlier forms of life and treats all cultural views of life and death as worthy of analysis regardless of their truth or falsity. My aim is not to denigrate any religious perspective, nor to convert you to a secular perspective, but to provide a comparative view of how the diverse cultural heritage of *Homo sapiens* has viewed its own existence. A large amount of historical and ethnographic information is available, so I will only make a few broad statements.

Given our specific evolutionary trajectory as apes, it is not yet possible, if it ever will be, to say when our ancestors first recognized the significance of death and created the hope of some kind of afterlife. Other animals demonstrate sympathy for the dead.⁴ Elephants at times pick up the bones of a dead herd member, hold the pieces in their trunks and pass them around or over many years return to the spot where a relative died. The evidence for chimpanzee sympathy for the dead was noted by ethologist Jane Goodall, who observed Flint, an 8-year-old chimp, who after his mother died barely left her side and slowly succumbed to death three weeks later. It is possible, as Goodall suggests, that Flint died from a weakened immune system due to depression, what poets call a broken heart. The detailed observations of Frans de Waal at a chimp colony led him to conclude: “Seeing the termination of a familiar individual's life, chimpanzees may respond emotionally as if realizing, however vaguely, what death means – or at least that something terrible has befallen the other.”⁵

In the archeological record, three kinds of findings about death stand out. One is the evidence of deliberate burials. It is impossible to determine when humans began to literally bury their dead, nor is it the case that all human societies adopt this practice for meaningful disposal. Neanderthals excavated at the northern Iraqi site of Shanidar Cave show evidence of deliberate burial at 60-80,000 years ago due to positioning of a skeleton in a fetal position and an abundance of pollen, suggesting that flowers, possibly medicinal, had been thrown over the bodies. Second, the application of red ochre, symbolizing blood, on bones in prehistoric burials may be a symbol of anticipated afterlife, as has been documented ethnographically in some cultures. Third, some of the earliest cave art in prehistoric Europe deals with death, including an approximately 17,000-year-old image from Lascaux Cave of what appears to be a man killed by a bison.⁶

From the myths of Osiris in ancient Egypt to the Descent of the Goddess Inanna to the Underworld in Mesopotamia, the earliest historical records indicate a well-established belief in an afterlife, a point also echoed in the Adam and Eve story in the biblical Genesis. The 19th century founder of modern anthropology, Edward Tylor, hypothesized that the evolutionary origin of religion came about through a

process he labeled “animism.”⁷ The first part of this was the belief that souls of individual creatures were capable of continued existence after death, a belief that Tylor considered the key element in defining religion cross-culturally. The second aspect was a hierarchical range of deities, some of which may have started out as ancestor spirits, controlling, or at least influencing, human destiny. A century of ethnographic research has validated Tylor’s claim that belief in spirits of some kind is universal, while belief in a supreme being, once argued to be primordial in both Western theology and academic scholarship, is not found to be universal.

As noted above, anthropologists, and indeed sociologists, are concerned with the functional value of religious beliefs surrounding death rather than the truth or falsity of life after death. One of the more famous sociological arguments was given by Emile Durkheim in his early 20th century *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. Durkheim argued that religion was “a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things” the function of which was to unite individuals into “one single moral community.”⁸ In simple terms, echoing the dictum of Marx that man makes religion, religion was analyzed as entirely a social phenomenon, the way in which individuals represent to themselves the society of which they are members. Hence, the explanation for dominance of anthropomorphic imagery in many religions. Durkheim suggests that belief in some kind of survival of the dead came about in order to explain the birth of the living, as can be seen in the numerous religious systems that incorporate reincarnation.

Death rituals, usually styled mortuary customs, have been a major focus of previous ethnographic research.⁹ From a functional perspective such rituals are obviously meant for the living, a means of maintaining communal cohesion and assuaging grief. In defining death as the end of life, it is important to remember that most cultures have conceptualized social as well as physical death. Determining the latter is often straight-forward, but the idea of what happens to a person’s soul, spirit, or anima is far more complicated. In a social context, the end of life for the individual inevitably leads to the need for some kind of ritual, both to honor the body of the deceased and aid or appease the spirit. Does the soul linger in the community until the corpse is properly

disposed of and mourned? Does some part go directly to an afterlife or the next stage in a cycle of death and rebirth? Much Islamic teaching, for example, cites a postdeath zone called *barzakh*, a state in which the soul is said to rest until the final Day of Judgment.

Proper disposal of the corpse is a major concern in most societies, but there is no single pattern historically, despite the current emphasis on burial. Some religions mandate cremation. One of the more unusual customs recorded is that of the Wari’, an indigenous group in the Amazon region of western Brazil.¹⁰ Up until missionary contact in the 1960s the Wari’ practiced “mortuary cannibalism.” While cannibalism is often dismissed as an inhuman act of aggression, the opposite was the case for the Wari’. On a person’s death, relatives would gather for a ritual funeral in which the male affines of the deceased would consume the flesh, heart, liver and grains of the well-roasted body. There is a dual logic here. First, since a baby comes out of a living human being, so it should be consumed by living beings out of respect. The idea of leaving a body to rot in the ground was abhorrent to the Wari’. Second, as Durkheim noted, the ritual serves a social function as a means of maintaining alliances in a society without chiefs and based on reciprocity. In Wari’ belief it was necessary to consume the body so that the spirit of the dead person could become a water spirit, a realm of primal spirits that control most aspects of life on earth. Eventually, the water spirits come out of the water and visit earth as animals and fish that give themselves up for food to humans. Thus human death was seen as part of a cycle in harmony with nature.

The anthropological lens has also been focused on Western culture, including the suggestion over three decades ago by Geoffrey Gorer that the contemporary societal repression of death has replaced sex as the most unmentionable topic, with the result that “a society which denies mourning and gives no ritual support to mourners is thereby producing maladaptive and neurotic responses in a number of its citizens.”¹¹ Unfortunately, contemporary funeral arrangements in the United States and Europe both sanitize and commercialize death. It is usually no longer the family or the community that is responsible for the corpse, but more often than not a paid-for service in which the embalmed body is artificially

enshrined in a casket, which is then taken in a solemn procession to a cemetery. The funeral ritual, not unlike erotic portrayal of the body in pornography, is no longer natural but an item for display; hence Gorer's penetrating analogy of the "pornography of death."

Harking back to the hadith in which the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ reminds us that there is no cure for physical death, a major issue today is the ability of a terminally ill patient to die a natural death rather than being kept alive on a life support machine. This is a relatively new problem, given the increasing longevity in developed countries and advances in medical technology. A century ago in America, before the spread of community hospitals, the elderly usually died at home, under the care of close relatives. In some societies, such as the Inuit of the Canadian Arctic, in particularly harsh winters an old person might ask his family to leave him on the ice to die so that the rest of the family could survive. This is obviously an extreme example, but even today there are individuals in severe pain who wish to die at their own request, often to die with dignity rather than face a slow death on breathing tubes in a hospital room.

Four years ago my father was taken to the hospital, and it was clear to his doctors that he was nearing death. For several years he had been in constant pain, asking me on one recent visit why his body would not just let him die. This time in the hospital he insisted that he wanted to die a natural death and not be kept alive on machines. Once, when my sister and I were out of the room, a new doctor on the shift walked in and said he wanted to do an operation on my father's throat (he had a major swallowing problem for years). The nurse told us later that my father gathered his strength, sat his frail frame up in the bed and said, "I am 89 years old, let me die in peace." When he returned home, under home hospice care, I watched as he refused food and his body slowly shut down. I distinctly remember his last breath, as he finally received his wish to have his own life end. Such decisions involve ethical and emotional issues that can have no simple "medical" solutions, no matter what the society.

What does all of this research on religious diversity mean for you as physicians? One important point is that no human society regards the physical aspects of death as a totalizing "end of life," either in

terms of survival of some aspect of the individual or in terms of the continuing social awareness of that individual in a community. Historically, Islamic law describes procedures for treating the corpse at the time of death, washing and shrouding the body and proper burial, as well as for consoling kin and loved ones of the dead person.¹² To the extent that one believes the soul of the deceased continues in an afterlife and that there will be a spiritual "resurrection" of the physical body, the issue of determining when death occurs is less important than following the prescribed rituals for the body and the related beliefs about an afterlife. In this sense the meaning of death, common to most if not all religions, has dimensions that are both social, a shared sense of responsibility by a community, and individual.

Second, there really should be no conflict between a religious perspective that posits some form of life after death and the secular atheist (perhaps better called humanitarian) view that physical death is the total cessation of an individual's consciousness as we know it. In either case, death has a social function, a meaning that extends beyond the individual. It is this aspect of social death, which is invariably characterized by elaborate details for care of the corpse and how the community should respond, that has cross-cultural and pan-human resonance. Regardless of the ultimate "truth" of Muslim belief in death and the afterlife, or of any religious perspective, it is a fundamentally human trait to be concerned about the role of the community in properly treating the corpse. Whether this is through a certain kind of burial, cremation, or some other ritualized form of disposal, the essential point is that the human body must be properly treated. It is undoubtedly a sad irony that today, as well as throughout history, in areas of conflict that a person may receive better treatment as a corpse than he did in life.

Third, and finally, one of the basic human traits, often lost in the constant reporting of violence, crime and war, is that caring for the old is an important feature cross-culturally. I mentioned earlier the Shanidar Cave in which several Neanderthal burials were discovered. One of these was an individual partially blind, one-armed, and crippled when he died. It is doubtful a person in such shape could have survived on his own, which suggests that even at this early date it was a society that cared for its elderly. In this sense the end of life is always intertwined

with the ways in which a society views the ends of life, those ends defined as meaningful and fulfilling.

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Question from the audience:

Could there possibly have been some influence from the Old World on the group of people you mentioned deep in the Amazon?

Dr. Varisco's response: Some people think that perhaps the Phoenicians came over here very early. [That] would be an old world influence. I think the answer is probably no. There is no direct evidence that I know of that would substantiate that. This is a group that really was isolated from any other outside contact. It is not the only example. There are other examples in other parts of the world. It is the kind of thing that if one steps back, it makes sense. I know that sounds crazy, but we are so used to thinking that the way we think about treating the dead is the normal way of doing it. We have to step back and say, "There is a logic." When you understand their logic, you say, "Wow, that is interesting." You come out of a body, you go back into a body. So you can see how I think that would come up naturally. I do not think that was in ancient Phoenicia but it is an interesting historical question.