

PROBLEMATICS OF THE DIMENSIONS OF DEATH

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Among the fears ineluctably buzzing around death both as fact & as idea is the fear of the spiritual dimension of life, even of the very word "spiritual." Eg, Lloyd Glaubermen, inventor of Hypno-Peripheral Processing (the latest in psychotechnology: multiple-track audiotapes to pre-change behavior from the unconscious to conscious living--incorporating Milton Erikson's subliminal story-telling & Neuro-Linguistic Programming's dual induction--"to build self-esteem, dispel depression, and generate a healing effect in both mind and body") says the use of myths-stories "can bring meaning and purpose to many of us. **I hesitate to say that the stories have a spiritual message**, since this word for many may equate to a lack of substance. Rather, I might just say that the stories, the myths, have a universal application and appeal." (Interview by David Beeman in April-May/90 PASTORAL COUNSELING LETTER; boldface, mine) The S-word is scary for a profounder reason than this that our psychoacoustical stress-manager alludes to. It is scary fundamentally because "spiritual" signals the deepest/highest dimension of our lives, where most--indeed, everything--is at risk as we face the "Mysterium tremendum et fascinosum" ("the Mystery that causes us to tremble, but so fascinates us we can't run away"). And of all life-events, none other can compare with death in grabbing our attention for the "spiritual" dimension. No wonder the current flood of books on the death/spirituality relationship--many on Hospice chaplaincy.

This Thinksheet arose from Hospice chaplain Loree Elliott's calling my attention to the chart I here reproduce from p.22 of one of these books, viz Kenneth Kramer's THE SACRED ART OF DYING: HOW WORLD RELIGIONS UNDERSTAND DEATH (Paulist/88). The chart is in chapter 1, "The Three Faces of Death," which are (p.12) "physical (the irreversible loss of brain waves, central nervous system, heart and breath functions); psychological (the life of quasi-consciousness, living, as if having already died); and spiritual (the death or transformation of old patterns, habits, roles, identities and the birth of a new person)."

Distinguish, please, this positive meaning of "spiritual death" from (also p.22) "a subjective loss of faith or the objective loss of the sacred"--the latter including the 1960s "death of God" movement, which the author describes [p.25] thus: Christians should "act as if God did not exist (Bonhoeffer), as if the word 'God' was dead (Van Buren), as if God died in Jesus (Altizer), as if God died in his absence (Hamilton), or as if God died when humans killed him (Nietzsche)."

While the chart is too facile, revealing the general weakness of "comparative religions" (as in the author's Paulist book two years earlier, WORLD SCRIPTURES: AN INTRODUCTION TO COMPARATIVE RELIGIONS),

there is some value, if one avoids the notion of equivalency, in making the rough comparison (p.23): "Spiritual death refers to dying while still alive, what Hindus call **moksha**, what Buddhists call **nirvana**, what Taoists call **wu wei**, what Zen calls **satori**, what Jews call living the Torah, what Christians call **rebirth**, and what Muslims call **fana**....a spiritual rebirth or awakening to deathlessness....the transformational presence of death in life" [freeing one from death anxieties]...self[ego]-sacrifice is life-giving....dying with Christ is also rising with him."

Spiritual Death East and West

	EASTERN RELIGIONS	WESTERN RELIGIONS
TRADITION	Hindu Buddhist Chinese Tibetan Japanese	Egyptian Mesopotamian Jewish Christianity Islamic
GOAL	Realization of Self Enlightenment Actualization of One's "True Self" (an inner-subjective realization of True Nature)	Salvation from Self Rebirth Participation in the Presence and Power of the Transcendent One
SOURCE	Immanent The Impersonal Within The "True Self" The Silence at the Center	Transcendent The Personal Without The "Wholly Other" The Word of God
METHOD	Self-Sacrifice Self-Surrender Spiritual Death/Rebirth	Self-Sacrifice Self-Surrender Spiritual Death/Rebirth

But useful though this meaning of "**spiritual death**" is, I must enter the following objections:

1 It's **idiosyncratic**. In the new edition of Random House Dictionary, the only thing you'll find anywhere near it is "*8 Christian Science*. the false belief that life comes to an end."

2 It's **confusing**. The lexical rhetorical violence of reversing a word's normal (set of) meanings has the virtue of shock, but here the genre is wrong: the book is a work not of rhetoric but of exposition.

3 It's **illusional**, conquering death by sleight of mouth, papering it over, fumigating it--yes, ultimately, evading it.

4 It's a case of **mislabeling**. The concept it's being used to represent should be given some label expressing its positive content, rather than a label ("spiritual death") requiring a defensive excuse for having used a negative word ("...death").

Well, what label? Possibilities:

(1) "Dying while still alive" (p.23). But here the accent still falls on death, whereas the experience being described is LIFE! Look again at the final ¶ on p.1 of this Thinksheet: none of the foreign words (moksha, nirvana, wu wei, satori, fana) puts the accent on death (& how odd to let "living the Torah" = "spiritual death" for Jews!).

(3) "Rebirth" (on p.23, wrongly emphasized: it's English, & parallels, "living the Torah," which is not emphasized). H.R.Willoughby's PAGAN REGENERATION shows how common was this metaphor in the spiritual world into which Christianity was born. The NT makes extensive use of "born again" out of the world's & one's own spiritual death.

(3) "Awakening," the governing metaphor in Buddhism ("budh" equating "waking up" & "knowing").

(4) "Conversion," turning (to take a new direction) as spiritual metaphor.

(5) "Eternal life," experiencing, here & now (as well as hereafter), life-giving communion with God. While the expression is specifically Christian (esp. Johannine), the core of it is universal: here-&-now time-transcending spiritual experience.

(6) "Resurrection." This has the advantage that (unlike (3)-(5)) it is death-connected: our author insists on the death connection, as his book is THE SACRED ART OF DYING: HOW WORLD RELIGIONS UNDERSTAND DEATH. (This fact, I think, accounts for the misfortune of his choice of "spiritual death" to express the positive thisworldly spiritual experience he's tracing in the book.) "You have died, and your life is [now] hidden with Christ in God" (Col.3:3). But "resurrection" has this disadvantage: it's usual use is with reference to life after physical death.

5 It's **nonsequential**. The author's series--"physical death" (dead body), "psychological death" (dead, or quasi-dead, psyche)--requires that "spiritual death" mean dead, or quasi-dead, spirit. The author acknowledges this meaning (p.22): "a subjective lose of faith or the objective loss of the sacred." Too bad he didn't stick with this normal meaning of "spiritual death," & finish his series with (perhaps) "phobic death," dead fear, fear-anxiety gone, or at least reduced, because of some life-transformative, death-transcending spiritual experience. (Current scientific studies are backing what the religions teach, viz the negative correlation of spirituality & both state- & trait-anxiety.)...RHD² defines "spiritual death" as "loss or absence of spiritual life."

6 It's **alienating**. The author is asking his readers, almost all of whom are of Western religious background, to accept & use an expression (a) not having, in Judaism-Christianity-Islam, the meaning he gives it, but (b) having an opposite meaning. "Death" in Judaism is nonmetaphorical, & of little metaphorical use in Islam. In Christianity, "spiritual death" is what Jesus through the resurrection delivers us from (so Christian joy & fearlessness face-to-face with death).