

# DEATH WITH DIGNITY DEVOTION:

## THE IRRECONCILIABILITY OF STOIC & CHRISTIAN DYING ---- ELLIOTT #1761

Around our hearthfire last evening (14Nov83) sat, with Loree and me, Oliver and Eleanor Powell, who in a few days are off to reside in Pilgrim Place, a UCC retirement complex in Claremont. As both E. & L. are deeply involved in Hospice, I tried on the company my view of what's happening in that highly significant caring movement in America (there now being more than 1,200 USA Hospice organizations), viz., that as through the "Scientific Intelligence" (M.M.Yogi) movement Hinduism gained access to Am. public schools (whence it was driven out by the concerted efforts of some of us Christian theologians), so Stoicism, chiefly in the person of Elizabeth Kübler-Ross, has gained access to the major current Am. movement in care for the dying (though the British origin of the Hospice movement was specifically Christian) --and no major Christian-theological attack has yet been mounted: why?...The views of this thinksheet are mine: I make no effort here to relate them to the views of the three other participants in the conversation.

1. What's important in dying and in care for the dying? An 18th-c. novelist gives us two friends; one "knew everything," and the other "knew other things." Well, what things, in "death and dying," are to be known and made known? In the word of Hagar the Horrible, what's "important"?

### HAGAR the HORRIBLE

by Dik Browne



2. The context of the Christian answer is the cosmic liturgy: God, Source and Destiny of "all things," is to be also Center of all humanity in consciousness (in the basal mode of worship, liturgy-as-RITUAL), and in behavior (in the derivative mode of worship, liturgy-as-LIFE). This is biblical religion, as in the Jewish prayer we call the Lord's Prayer: the sanctification (hallowing, by prayer-praise-action) of God's Name in what supports physical life ("bread") and what supports communal life ("forgiveness"). In this irrefutably biblical perspective, "sin" is any way of making end runs around humanity's liturgical obligation-invitation-opportunity--such as (1) amnesia and (2) alternative cosmic-paradigms. Applied to dying, this the biblical perspective states that we are to die, and help others die, (1) with attention centered on God, not on self or society or any other creature. (2) To die (e.g.) with dignity is blasphemy, for we are called to die with devotion, as in our Lord's dying words "Into Your hand I commit myself." (This leaves open, of course, the possibility that one may die in a dignified manner: one may or may not go dignifiedly--Dylan Thomas hoped his father wouldn't: "Rage, rage, against the dying of the light!") This is what is *sine qua non*: not dignity, but "I will praise you, O Lord my God, as long as I have my being"(Ps.104.33).

3. The Stoic dying-project is radically other. It's center is not God--any god, to say nothing of the biblical God: it's center is BEING IN CHARGE (*autarcheia*, self-in-control, the center Stoic value and virtue). "Dignity" is derivative from this in-charge-ness, for the same reason that a corporate executive has "dignity," i.e., self-conscious power to manage things. Hugh Hefner's "Playbody Philosophy" is Stoic: how to become and remain in charge of the world of sex, in your own interest. So we may speak of the Am. version of the "Hospice Philosophy," which promotes the value-virtue of (1) egocentric "dignity" in dying and (2) not losing

"Isn't it enough just to be present?" It's too much: without oral pointing to God (indicating that one is present for, on behalf of, as witness to and representative of God), one is "playing God" (if not as God, at least in loco dei as a substitute for God)--and thus helping the radical aloneness into which God wants to step.

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7. K.-R.'s current lecture is on "Life and Living": Godless dying, so a fortiori godless living. Thus "God"-Living violates the law of parsimony (minimal hypothesis), so "God"-believing is illogical, "just doesn't make sense"; and church-going is one of many Sunday options (it's "all right for those who like that sort of thing"). Trivialization!

the dying-process initiative to anyone else: "The patient is in charge of the process, including what matters shall be talked about." When Christians buy into this paradigm, they are in alliance with the devil in promoting the Stoic way of dying as not only an acceptable but also the best way of dying. Stoicism has been permitted to define (1) the situation and (2) the mode of caring.

4. Well, what is the situation? This is it in the light of biblical revelation: The Christian minister to the dying is (1) committed to attending unto God in all things and to calling humanity under all circumstances, including dying, to attend unto God; and (2) committed to view, and help others view, death in the light of Jesus' resurrection. If the dier is not in this God-centering, God-worshipping (liturgical) frame of mind and spirit, a deathbed repentance is "indicated" (to use medical jargon). Jesus preaches that radical-transformative experience is possible "late in the day" (as the last-employed farm hands got the same wage as those who'd worked all day, e.g.); so deathbed conversions have always been stock-in-trade in Christian preaching. Stoicism (and so Kubler-Ross) teaches that in dying, as in living, you should be called upon not to repent of your sin (centrally, your failure of the liturgical obligation toward the Center) but rather to affirm "who you are," viz., a human being with dignity and all the obligations pertaining thereto--obligations K.-R. spells out (without giving any credits) with the aid of Moreno's "working through" the so-called negative emotions so as to come to "peace with yourself" (NB: not "with God"), Frankl's "freedom to choose the attitude you take toward what's happening to you," and Sullivan's interpersonalism (psychosocio-reconciliation with "the significant others" in your life)--to mention the contributions of three fellow-Stoics of hers.... Seen from another angle, the situation is that the dier is dealing, consciously or unconsciously, with life's Primary Relationship, viz., with God (for one expression, dying as "meeting God"), and with also both secondary relationships ("loved ones") and tertiary relationships (special care-givers, medical and Hospice, to the dying). Humanism uses "primary relationship" of secondary relationships and so eliminates theism, i.e., biblical religion. This is no semantic quibble: language is life, life-shaping, mind-forming; it both illumines and obscures. On this biblical insistence on theism, see this week's ecumenical lectionary--e.g., 1Chron. 29.10-13--on which my Kirkridge Lectionary paragraph uses the Stoic word "honor": "Hallowing God's Name is the project behind, and the question about, all honors given among us.... when honors given among us are primarily given to God, we have, along with this hallowing of God's name, less idolatry in those who honor and more humility in those who are honored." Instead of honoring ("glorifying," "praising") God, K.-R. teaches to honor these idols: "Unconditional Love" (=her way of salvation), "Life" (her M.D. commitment), and "Dignity" (her philosophy-religion: one honors humanity, one's own and others, by dying with dignity). The program is precisely, classically Stoic, the position which was Christianity's #1 enemy for the 1st 4cs. and is now again our #1 enemy (under such guises as "humanism," "the human-potential movement," "the transformation movement," "the new-consciousness movement"). Christianity is the Revolution, and helping people live/die stoically is counter-revolutionary activity that makes hypocrites of Christians who participate in it. (NB: So powerful is Stoicism in our culture, especially its upper reaches, that many who think themselves Christians are actually Stoics with a Christian tinge; and the current low estate of adult Christian education hardly touches this hypocritical ignorance.)

5. While ordained Christians and Jews are specially commissioned to the verbal promotion of the biblical faith (i.e., the promotion of life-attention to the biblical God), all biblical persons are called to verbal witness (Greek, "evangelism"). Christians in Hospice need training in what this "God be in my tongue and in my speaking" means in Hospice work, and the Church (not Hospice) should provide this training. Or is the Hospice Stoic collar so tight it must strangle Christians, who accordingly should not participate (as the early Christians could not participate in the military, dominated as it was by the Imperial Cult)?

6. K.-R.'s 1983 NOVA program shows her controlling everything in Gauleiter fashion--e.g., in flatland(godless)-interpreting, to parents, of children's drawings!.... She extrapolates metaphysics not from adrenalin but from endorphins.