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# Historical Perspectives on Attitudes concerning Death and Dying

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**HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES ON  
ATTITUDES CONCERNING DEATH AND DYING**



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## **Introduction**

Beliefs and practices concerning death have changed throughout human history. In pre-modern times, death at a young age was common due to living conditions and medical practices. As medical science has advanced and helped humans live longer, attitudes and responses to death also have changed. In modern Western societies, death is often ignored or feared. Changes in lifestyles and improved medical science have depersonalized death and made it an encroachment on life instead of part of life. This has left many people ill-equipped to deal with death when it touches their lives.

## **Primitive**

Rudimentary medical practices and often inadequate defenses against predators caused death to be a familiar experience in earlier societies. The process of dying was often painful and rapid. Some primitive societies feared death because they believed that death was not a natural process but an unnatural, accidental occurrence. Other societies had no fear of death. They perceived death not as an end or extinction of life, but as a change in existence in which the soul passed to another realm. The living world prepared the dying for this transition by various pre-death rituals and funeral practices.

## **Pre-Literate**

In many preliterate societies, attitudes toward death focused on the dead and their effects on the living. The living either honored or feared the deceased. In some of these societies, memories of the dead were kept alive through memorials, rituals, and stories. In other societies, the dead were feared because of the threat of harm they might cause to the living. Out of fear, the dead person was never acknowledged by the living. Funeral rituals therefore were often designed to honor the dead or "to offset fears about the potential malevolence of the dead towards the living," (DeSpelder & Strickland, 1983, p. 36).

## **Ancient**

During early Greek history many people believed that the spirits of the dead continued to live after death and that in this state knowledge was attained. Plato wrote,

It has been proved to us by experience that if we would have pure knowledge of anything we must be quit of the body-the soul in herself must behold things in themselves: and then we shall attain the wisdom which we desire, and of which we say that we are lovers; not while we live, but after death; for if while in company with the body, the soul cannot have pure knowledge, one of two things follows-either knowledge is not to be attained at all, or, if at all, after death.

(Plato, trans. 1976, p. 204)

Many early burial practices reflected a belief in life after death. Archaeological discoveries of ancient Egyptian, Greek, Roman, and primitive American Indian burial sites, for

example, have shown the importance of preparing the deceased for the afterlife. Many sites have revealed the dead surrounded by artifacts, which may have been used by them in life and were expected to be used by them in an afterlife.

### **Post-Antiquity**

Philippe Ariès identified three periods of development concerning understandings of death in post-antiquity Western culture. The first period is considered to be between the 6th and the early 12th century. The second period is identified as being between the later 12th century and the 17th century. The third period began toward the late 17th century and has run through the 20th century. Attitudes toward death changed significantly during this final period and can be subdivided into two periods: the 17th century through the 19th century, and the 20th century.

In Western culture from the 6th through the early 12th century, death was accepted as the collective destiny of all human beings. Concerns about one's own death were overshadowed by a social awareness of the death of others. Due to limited medical skills and limited knowledge to prevent or treat fatal diseases or recover from many injuries, death continued to be an accepted, common occurrence in life. Some people viewed death either as an escape from life's troubles or as leaving the pleasures of life. The Venerable Bede, around the 7th century, described his view of his society's attitudes regarding life and death in the following manner:

When compared with the stretch of time unknown to us, O king, the present life of men on earth is like the flight of a single sparrow through the hall where, in winter, you sit with your captains and ministers. Entering at one door and leaving by another, while it is inside it is untouched by the wintry storm; but this brief

interval of calm is over in a moment, and it returns to the winter whence it came, vanishing from your sight. Man's life is similar; and of what follows it, or went before, we are utterly ignorant. (Enright, 1987, p. 2)

The church and its teachings were the accepted source of knowledge and hope concerning death, dying, and afterlife beliefs during this period. Religious teachings were also used as a means to control social and personal behavior. Heaven was considered the reward for righteous living, whereas the punishment of hell was a result of an evil life.

Attitudes toward death between the 12th and 17th centuries concerned more the individual's own mortality than the social aspects of death. The individual became more aware of her or his life and impending death, as opposed to the death of others. The act of dying became an important personal experience. A belief in a personal afterlife became more important than what happened to others after death.

The accepted source of knowledge also began to change during the 12th through 17th centuries. Within the aristocracy, religious thought and influence began to give way to secular, scientific reasoning. Social changes during the Renaissance period reflected a focus away from religion and toward a secular, scientific basis for knowledge.

From the end of the 17th century and through the 19th century, attitudes toward death again began to change. The death of others began again to overshadow the individual's perception of her or his own death. Death was romanticized, depicted as a human companion in art and literature. Dying and life after death were believed to be beautiful, peaceful experiences. One romantic depiction of death compared it with the emergence of a butterfly from a cocoon. According to DeSpelder and Strickland (1983),

(t)he old notions of Heaven and Hell that had so motivated people in an earlier



time were replaced by a hoped-for immortality of the soul and an eventual reunion of loved ones in an afterlife. (p. 60)

By the end of this period death "remained familiar and tamed" (Ariès, 1974, p. 58). Mozart reflected the views of his time in a letter to his father in 1787:

As death, when we come to consider it closely, is the true goal of our existence, I have formed during the last few years such close relations with this best and truest friend of mankind, that his image is not only no longer terrifying to me, but is indeed very soothing and consoling! And I thank my God for graciously granting me the opportunity . . . of learning that death is the key which unlocks the door to our true happiness. (Anderson, 1966)

The romantic, familiar attitude toward death began to change again during the latter part of the 19th century. During the late 19th century and into the 20th century, modern Western culture began to view death as a fearful, forbidden occurrence. Dylan Thomas reflected this fear when he wrote, "Do not go gentle into that good night, Old age should burn and rave at close of day; Rage, rage, against the dying of the light" (Jones, 1971, pp. 207-208). The fear of death has been exacerbated by reduced confidence in organized religious doctrines regarding death and an increase in medical science's intervention in the dying process. Scientific advances have also increased the secularization of social and intellectual thought, supplanting religious doctrines. Modern scientific advances have caused many people to lose touch with longstanding religious and cultural beliefs and practices, which has left a void in many people's ability to deal with death.

## **Modernity**

Science and technology have influenced how many people in the United States approach death. The process of dying has been affected by advances in pharmacology, medical practices, and medical treatment facilities. In premodern Western society, dying usually took less time because of primitive medical practices and the absence of the availability of pain reduction drugs. Dying also often took place in the home in the care of family members. In modern Western society, however, many humans have lost touch with death. Advances in medications and medical practices have reduced much of the physical pain associated with dying. Also, the dying are often removed from the familiar surroundings of their homes and institutionalized in hospitals and nursing homes. Further depersonalization of death is evidenced in the care of the dying person often being removed from the family and placed in the hands of health care professionals.

Modern medicine also has attempted to tame death by prolonging life. This prolongation of life is, at times, at the expense of the quality of life. The impersonal objectivity of modern medical care has reduced the interpersonal relationships between the medical community and the dying person. This depersonalization has left the dying person more fearful of death because of a sense of loss of control over her or his life. According to Elizabeth Kübler-Ross, the fear of death could be reduced by improving interpersonal communication with all patients: "If we could combine the teachings of the new scientific and technical achievements with equal emphasis on interpersonal human relationships we would indeed make progress" (Kübler-Ross, 1969, pp. 11-12).

In the past 40 years there has been an increased interest in death. This has been due, in

part, to an increased awareness of death brought to the public through the media, increased life expectancy, and a social movement toward self and group awareness. Kalish (1981) states, “I firmly believe that the recent interest in death and concern for the dying are not merely fads but the consequences of a variety of social changes” (p. 15). This increased awareness of death has resulted in advances in medical sciences and services to the dying and elderly, an awareness of potential natural and political destruction, and an increased introspection of self by many people.

During the 1960s there were many social movements, such as that against the war in Vietnam and for civil rights. As civil rights laws were enacted and the war in Vietnam ended, some people who had been socially active found new causes in the rights for the disabled, the dying, and the elderly. Education and research was focused to meet the needs of these groups. Kübler-Ross pioneered the education of health care professionals and the public to the needs of the dying with her book On Death and Dying. Hospices were formed to provide home health services and special care to the dying and their families. And the elderly, with their increased numbers and activism, brought attention to their needs, and since they represented a high number of the dying, also brought attention to the needs of the dying. Services to the elderly and dying became part of Western society.

With the attention that had been placed on the Cold War by the media and government, the threat of nuclear destruction, reports of ecological disasters, and the immediacy and graphic reports of death throughout the world, many people have become more sensitive to death and dying. The media continues to bombard the public with reports and pictures of death and mayhem throughout the world. The awareness of the prevalence of death has lead to many people to be more aware of death. However, the detached method of presentation of these deaths has lead many people to a false confidence that death only happens to others. It is only within

the private moments that many people may consider their own mortality and confront the fears associated to this awareness.

Many modern Westerners fear the extinction of their lives and the unknown nature of life after death. These fears have not been lessened by scientific knowledge. Science can define and sometimes retard death and also can make the process of dying less painful. However, scientific reasoning has no explanations regarding what happens after death, except what happens with the deterioration of the physical body. To date, there has been no empirical evidence for the claim that there is life after death. Inversely, there also has been no scientific evidence to disprove the existence of an afterlife. Since the existence of an afterlife cannot be confirmed or discredited, an afterlife may or may not exist. Without scientific confirmation of life after death, many people still fear being dead and the unknown nature of what happens after death.

### **Conclusion**

As science and technology failed to answer many of the questions people have had regarding life and death, many have turned inward in search of their own soul. Religious and spiritual practices have increased in the United States. There had been a decline in reports of religious affiliations, after the growth of religion in the 50s. With the aging of the parents of the baby boomers, the maturing of the boomers, and religious movements such as the Jesus Movement and other charismatic and fundamentalist movements of the early 70s, more people were returning to practicing a religion. More attention also has been given to paranormal experiences such as near-death experiences to provide possible glimpses into the afterlife realm. Books and research concerning these experiences have proliferated since Raymond Moody's

publication of Life After Life in 1975. It is estimated that more than 5% of the United States population have had a near-death experience and more and more people are becoming comfortable sharing what happened during their near-death experience. With attention being paid to the value of spiritual or transpersonal experiences, more people are using the knowledge of and belief in these experiences to overcome fears of death and improve their lives.

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