

Why is modern man afraid of death?

Abstract

In this research I will address the question of fear of death for modern man. No doubt this question was flickering in the silence of the Covid quarantines, seeing the reaction of others to the sudden deaths. To this end, I will analyze Western attitudes towards religion, legacy, the value of life, and the change in death rituals. The conclusion is based on the current context, the worldview of modern man.

Keywords: fear of death, truth regime, legacy, death education, culture of hospitals

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Introduction

In the general face of the Covid-19 pandemic, many have wondered about the meaning of life, the transience of life and what comes after the pandemic or even after this earthly life.

This essay was inspired by the “Tamed death” chapter written by Philippe Aries. The question of why modern man is afraid of death is a topical one, and in due course it always arises, so I decided to revisit this question and reflect on the images behind it, what and what information leads to it, and whether it is possible to explain this reaction.

Insights

Some of the more striking images that emerge from the text¹ of Philippe Aries’s “Tamed Death” are the knight of the Rueful Countenance, Don Quixote; the valiant Roland from the Song of Roland; Tristan from the popular love legend Tristan and Isolde; the Knights of the Round Table... These are the people of the old world, based on moral guidelines, especially the struggle between good and evil.¹ They are prepared for death, a very natural process that is part of life; they do not question this fact. Don Quixote was born in the pages of Cervantes, a Spanish writer, who testifies to the human bond, to following the doctrine of the Church. It is the Church that establishes the rituals to image/mark the Wheel of Time that sets the guidelines for the moral life, that introduces the itinerary of the earthly journey and that gives instruction. The fact of death itself was prepared for, the dying process was a natural part of life, even public.

From this perspective, let us once again ask why modern man fears death. A picture of the Church today comes to mind: a headline about the pedophilia scandal. Not one. One has the impression that there is no more to know about the Church, only these facts. Clerical pedophilia is increasingly becoming the main storyline of films and TV series; if a Christian community is depicted, it is simply not appropriate to write a screenplay without this image... Cinema and the media are becoming more real than the events themselves, the hydra continues to feed... When the media chooses to brighten and give only this image all the necessary shades and ramp lights, one is disgusted by the acts of the Church; its condemnation is followed by disgust, uncertainty, suspicion, confusion, mistrust of the institution.

There is a great distrust of the Church, its doctrine, doubt about Salvation and the Day of Judgement. This distrust is fearful, because, after rejecting what has been clear, handed down as guidelines, an integral and irreducible part of life, it becomes unclear what the meaning of death will be.

¹Aries Philippe. Tamed death. In: Western attitude towards death: from the Middle Ages to the present. USA: John Hopkins University Press; 1974; 1–25.

Death is the unknown; it is fearful. This is where The Matrix films come to mind, made in the run-up to the new millennium. There were rumors that there would be no second millennium, that everything would just take over and end. The film itself seems to anticipate this, presenting a space where the future lives on. Man is transported, connected, extended. Once he has moved into the digital space, he has all the possibilities to continue to function, to act... Another film comes to mind-Transcendence (2014, directed by Wally Pfister). The protagonist’s life is not interrupted, his mind, his essence, is simply “recorded” in a computer. The character’s creativity, his mental development, is not interrupted. Again, many films create the image that in the future a way will be invented, a way proposed by scientific progress, by which ‘we’ will be able to live and exist uninterruptedly, inscribing ourselves in another space, often digital, without interrupting our activities and endeavours.

This leads to the idea that legacy is very important in the face of death. It is a word that measures your value, your life, the quality of your performance, even the meaning of your life. Here I am reminded of Foucault’s idea² that death is the end of power that it is not subject to power. In the old days, whoever holds power or any kind of authority has the right to decide who lives and who dies (patria potestas).² Under this Roman law, the head of the family controlled the members of the family and even had the right to punish them to death. It is worth a note that the power of the father consisted in rights over the children’s property or personal liberty, which he could exercise as he saw fit. With the Enlightenment, with science joining the historical narrative, power was revealed not in the ability to kill/determine death, but in the promotion of continued life. Scientific advances, improved nutrition, cures for diseases, extended life expectancy provided the tool to control life and the time it takes to live. The position of power has changed: it is now not death that is at the disposal of power, but the exploitation of the living for value and benefit. Since the twentieth century, power has no longer been guided by the coming of the Saviour or the restoration of customary law. What matters to it is life- man’s basic possession, necessity and immense potential- which can be more usefully disposed of in a way that generates benefits and value.

Calvin Conzelus Moore and John B. Williamson write similarly,³ developing the idea and analyzing the fear of death through the religious and symbolic systems of ancient cultures, which presented the reality and inevitability of death as a socially unifying aspect linking this world and the other world.³ In introducing the subject,

²Michel Foucault. Right of death and power of life. The History of Sexuality. Volume I, 1976.

³Moore Calvin Conzelus, John BW. The universal fear of death and the cultural response. In: Handbook of death and dying. USA: SAGE Publications; 2003; 3–14. ISBN: 0-7619-2514-7.

they use Hinton's idea⁴ that human existence is fulfilled through social relations, which in turn give meaning to life. In this way of thinking, death is the force of difference that interrupts everything that shapes life.⁴ Since the beginning of time, human life has been influenced by religion, beliefs and attitudes, and it is worth mentioning Weber,⁵ who viewed the fear of death through religious structures: they empower people's lives by having the answers to the key questions of the fear of death and the afterlife.⁵ However, we come to two options: either death is not to be feared because it will result in the release of an immortal soul for a new life after death, or there is simply nothing left after death (neither the promised life nor the punishment).

Like Foucault in his chapter "Right of death and power of life", Elizabeth Hollach and Jenny Hockey reflect⁶ further, pointing out that because of this fear of death, in the modern world there is an attempt to simply push it out.⁶ Medical advances, psychotherapy, philosophical systems, death education all these are mechanisms created by society to erase the experience of death in everyday life, to ease the transition from life to death.

Scimecca's point⁷ that the fear of death in the face of humanity is turning into a fear of meaningless extinction is a very good one.⁷ This idea again brings us back to the semantic systems of the first cultures, but the author goes on to explain the myth of the hero, invented by society, which everyone can use to make sense of and contribute to the common good. These are the ideas that underpin the desire for legacy, because life must be meaningful, otherwise what is the point of all this?

All reflection still comes to a crossroads: modern man can choose what to believe; what end to believe in. The reaction to death follows from this, but one thing is clear: the modern world is betting on life, prolonging it in every way, and clogging it up with diversionary tricks so that death is kept to a minimum in people's lives, and so that it is as little of a concern as possible, ending up at the door of the white ward. I will support this idea with another chapter by Philippe Aries in the same book, 'Forbidden death'.⁸ In this chapter, the author analyzes the changes in human attitudes towards death in each epoch and presents the tendency to exclude death from everyday life that emerged in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.⁸ He argues that this was due to the culture of hospitals, which (instead of the Church, as had been the custom since the Middle Ages) took over the event of death and the rituals surrounding it, hiding the process from the individual. In the past, the body of the deceased was prepared by relatives and layed out in the living room of the house. The farewell to the deceased, which lasted at least three days, was accompanied by lamentations and the preparation of meals for the large family. And if we go back to the Baroque period and take the funeral of a nobleman (*pompa funebris*) as an example, we can see that the farewell lasted from a month to half a year. Ceremonial processions, entombments, St. Masses for the soul of the deceased, readings of the last will. The culture of the hospitals caught my eye: the preparation of the remains is left to special staff and dressers, the relatives are left to choose the last costume of the deceased. The image of death has also been erased from everyday

life by the increased conviction that life should be full of happiness. Mourning, tears, self-pity and sadness have become the feelings that accompany and represent the ritual of the funeral, and therefore specifically oppose the idea of a "happy life".

Looking at the different texts and the various complementary ideas, it is evident that the fear of death that often visits modern man, and which has really broken through to the surface of the subconscious with the so-called Covid pandemic, has such an effect because of the idea of life broadcast by the organs of power. Everything is concentrated and devoted to the idea of life: entertainment, fine arts, medicine, etc. In just a century and a half, the practice of the Wheel of Time of the past has been forgotten, in which both life and deaths play a part. It is therefore bold to assume that the great apostasy from the (Christian) Church, the freedom of the individual to choose his/her beliefs/religion, has contributed to this. The belief system that has been in place for a long time loses its power in an enlightened person, but with the ability to choose comes even greater confusion. It becomes frightening. Fear is probably just a side effect here.⁹ What is important is the perception of death as a phenomenon that can be shaped by the truth regime,⁹ which is used as a tool by the institutions of power.¹⁰ In the end, the truth that a believing society believes or imagines is valid.¹¹ And that belief in an established, valid truth is determined by science as the main dimension of the justification of 'truth', of proving the veracity of a fact.¹² Thinking further about Balibar's idea of science as the only reliable means of discerning truth, one gets the impression that it is only evolved science, capable of preserving and prolonging life that creates a new truth about life and death, rejecting the beliefs and truths of the past.⁹ The effect of fear emerges as a glimpse through the mode of truth, a glimpse of the happy mode of life, of the truths that are universally believed and inculcated.

Discussion

In order to analyze and clarify the modern man's reaction to death, this article reviews the thoughts of different authors and provides illustrative images. From this study it is possible to see that there is no longer any real sacrality in the life of modern man. The sacrality as a Supreme Being that gives life, that gives meaning to existence. Such tendencies began to emerge in the twentieth century, when the inclination towards nihilistic philosophy displaced the Lord and the belief in Eternal Life. Christianity had a strong hold on the self-consciousness of man of the Old World, and the promise of Eternal Life was a source of morality and hope. Death, as a companion to life, encouraged sobriety and concentration. It is also important to mention the formation of New World society. As the sacred was rejected, this society turned to science for solace in the major issues of life. Thus, faith, which comes from an emotional- sensory framework, was replaced by empirical science, which is characterized by rationality and certain clarity. Modern man seeks the 'truth' about phenomena immersed in the unknown, for instance death, in the empirical realm, and seeks to gain knowledge from science about a certain taming of death. Nevertheless, there is another element at work in this equation:

⁹The concept used by Foucault.

¹⁰Weir Lorna. The concept of truth regime. *Canadian Journal of Sociology/ Cahiers canadiens de sociologie*; 2008;33(2):367–389.

¹¹Each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth — that is, the types of discourse it accepts and makes function as true. Foucault cituojamas Lorna Weir. The concept of truth regime. *Canadian Journal of Sociology/ Cahiers canadiens de sociologie*. 2008;33(2):368.

¹²Historical epistemologists conceptualize scientific truth as provisional, with science characterized by internal rupture as it overturns previously accepted theories and cosmologies. Étienne Balibar citata Lorna Weir, The concept of truth regime. *Canadian Journal of Sociology/ Cahiers canadiens de sociologie*. 2008;33(2):370.

⁴Hinton John. The physical and mental distress of the dying. *Quarterly Journal of Medicine*. 1967;32:1–21.

⁵Weber Max. The sociology of religion. Boston: Beacon; 1956.

⁶Hollach Elizabeth, Jenny Hockey. Death, memory and material culture. New York: Oxford University Press; 2001.

⁷Scimecca Joseph A. Cultural hero systems and religious beliefs: the ideal-real social science of Ernest Becker. In: Review of Religious Research. 1979;21:62–70.

⁸Aries Philippe. Forbidden death. In: Western attitude towards death: from the Middle Ages to the Present. USA: John Hopkins University Press; 1974;85–107.

the institution of power. This institution has found a short-term solution to existential fear and has mobilized society in the pursuit of a 'happy life'. Through cinema, literature or entertainment, the subconscious is fed only with happy thoughts, while the reality of death is hidden and displaced.

Conclusion

Thus, it has been possible to analyze the fear-of-death effect by drawing on the ideas of various authors, in the context of current phenomena. Naturally, it was necessary to compare the public's perception of the world in the past with its current perception and to reflect on the reasons for this. The analysis is based on three poles: the Church, its role in the life of the individual; the institutions of power, their rhetoric and the programme they stream; and science, whose achievements give a sense of comfort, confidence in the individual and a sense of constant forward movement towards a better future. It is not possible to give a single answer to the question posed at the beginning of the text, but only to refer to the authors' thoughts, because each individual has his or her own opinions and convictions, which, mixed with the factor of feelings and sensations, do not fit into the rules and axioms.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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