



www.PreciousHeart.net/ti

Volume 3 – 2011

**God, Hope, and, Suffering: An African American
Perspective Coping with the Anxiety of
Death through the Assurance of Future Hope**

Dr. Clanton C. W. Dawson, Jr., Ph.D.
Assistant Professor of Philosophy
Bethune-Cookman University, Florida, USA ¹

Introduction.....	1
A. Anxiety of Death.....	3
B. The Phenomenon of Death.....	5
1. The Threat of Meaninglessness	7
2. The Threat of Finality	7
C. The Power of Hope	8
References.....	10

Introduction

This article is part of a larger work entitled, *God, Hope, and Suffering: An African American Perspective* that will be published in the near future. The larger project’s focus is aimed at addressing how human beings who have made a faith commitment to God and have not abandoned their rationality in lieu of conforming to some contemporary quasi- religiosity, answer and respond to, with hope,

¹ Dr. Clanton C. W. Dawson, Jr., National Baptist,; first African-American to receive Ph.D. in Philosophy from the University of Missouri; dawsonc@cookman.edu and searchlight_4@hotmail.com.

questions about God and evil/suffering. In this article I will attempt to reflect upon a particular expression of evil namely the experience of death in the human experience. I will specifically speak about physical death and the anxiety surrounding the phenomenon. At the end of this article hope will be discussed and how hope in a future existence, particularly for the Christian can be extremely beneficial.

It makes sense that death and its accompanying phenomenon of anxiety would be addressed in this work, for death is the one experience that all humans face. Death can be the source of inspiration and creative activity. However, more times than not death can paralyze personal performance, stymie growth, and prevent the actualization of a person's potential. The New Testament writer Paul saw death as the last enemy to be defeated. Given the recent episodes of senseless death that have stricken such places as Newtown, CT, Oregon, and Colorado we are immersed in conversation concerning death. With the seeming increase of violence and murder in most U.S. communities large and small, we are reminded in a poignant way that death looms as one of the enemies of the human enterprise.

One will quickly notice that I have limited the discussion to *physical death* and have not taken up in this paper other devastating forms of death such as psychological and emotional death. One reason is that physical death is one reality that all humans can agree upon as a *real* phenomenon. It is not imagined. People actually die. Class, status, wealth, or, age have no effect on the presence of death. The rich and the poor alike die. The Christian and the atheist both experience the cessation of life. Even when death is a release from long and lingering illness, we still mourn. Religiosity does not help. We are told not to mourn but rejoice. Too many church folks, not Christians, are quick to say, 'just have faith,' but not willing to address the dark nights of the soul created by death. Yet in the personal and quiet moments of life death creates a sense of depression, despair, and anxiety.

There are some preliminary assumptions that undergird this piece which must be articulated. I assume most readers of this work share with me a *Christian perspective* regarding death. I realize the problem of claiming a Christian perspective given that Christianity is not a monolithic belief system (Ehrman, 2003). There are many forms of Christianity in the world and to not acknowledge this fact is an

exercise in folly. However I take to be central to the Christian faith the affirmation that life does not conclude with death. Jesus is the resurrection and the life and because he is uniquely connected to God (the son of God), the believers holds fast to the hope that there will be life after death. This concept is of course not uniquely Christian, nor pure theologically. Kant, within the framework of rational religion, believed that one of the logical consequences of the categorical imperative was an afterlife. With the emergence of scientific evidence as the source of justification for proper belief, the modern world began the validity of an afterlife. Yet more and more people have at least a folk psychological belief in a world beyond death that or not be classically Christian. I mention these ideas simply to recognize that it is possible to speak about death and hope without a Christian motif at play. However I have chosen to assert a Christian paradigmatic framework this work.

The second assumption is that there exists an uniquely African American understanding regarding life, death, and being Christian. In spite of the claim that the black church is dead (Glaude, 2011) and that there no longer exists a authentically black religiosity (Pinn, 2011) I claim that a unique Christianity arose in Africa via the Coptic Church, survived the Middle Passage, and has been a formidable Christian expression for a people born of struggle, particularly in the U.S and Caribbean context. Being Black in America makes one acutely aware of different manifestations of death. While all people experience death, persons from privilege are not as sensitive to the many manifestations of death that many African Americans face on a daily basis. Drive by shootings, being arrested and killed for driving while black, rape and murder in the penitentiary, being the victim caught in the middle of a bad drug deal on one's way to church, etc. all are part of the tapestry of life of African American people.

With these two assumptions in play, we turn our attention to what is called the anxiety of death.

A. Anxiety of Death

Anxiety must first be distinguished from fear. Anxiety is an indefinite, pervasive, objectless apprehension which, unlike fear, lacks a logically identifiable source. It combines a feeling of being

*vaguely menaced from without, with feelings of being subtly
subverted from within*

from *The Face of Crumpled Linen*)

The experience of death can have a crippling effect on people. The effect of death has caused the social science community to engage in recent research on the anxiety of death. Clinicians assert that there is a qualitative difference between death anxiety and the fear of death (Lehto and Stein, 2009). The medical and social science communities distinguish death anxiety, thanatophobia, as a term to conceptualize the apprehension generated by death awareness (Abdel-Khalek, 2005) and the anxiety or general fear of death. This apprehension may be generated by a specific death, but manifests itself in a non-specific foreboding regarding the reality of death. The sufferer of death anxiety is more obsessive about death, and sees it as a menacing presence that lurks as a potential in every activity of life.

On the other hand anxiety of death seems to be more specific which may manifest itself as a fear of a type of death such as a fear of drowning, or death by fire; and, has more existential characteristics such as questions attached to the phenomenon of death: is there an afterlife, what will I look like, will I know other family and friends, etc. The subject who possesses a fear of death believes that in spite of the presence of death, meaning for its occurrence may be found (Kubler-Ross, 2002). The Christian faith affirms the belief that meaning can be found in death. The claim is that death is not the end but a transition from one form of life to another state of living.

Six main attributes are generally associated with death anxiety. 1) emotion; a core fear of ones annihilation (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, Solomon, Simon, and Breus, 1994); 2) cognitive: the person maintains specific attitudes and thought process regarding death; 3) experiential: the death anxiety is denied or repressed as an adaptive response to prevent the fear and terror of death to become paralyzing, (Yalom, 1980) 4) developmental: the death anxiety proceeds in developmental stages; 5) socio-cultural shaping: the anxiety is shaped by cultural attitudes and customs; and 6) source of motivation: death anxiety is a motivational factor for the person to complete something of importance to the individual. While this explanation of the characteristics of death anxiety is painfully brief I suggest it is helpful to the believer as we attempt to minister to the needs of the people of

God. The church must admit that we have been woefully negligent in understanding the psychological and emotional nuances of the human condition. An understanding of the characteristics of death anxiety will benefit us greatly as we minister to God's people. We must have knowledge and faith if we are to be ambassadors for Christ.

B. The Phenomenon of Death

All human beings when confronted by death are faced with several existential questions. Why is death such a presence in the human enterprise? What is the meaning of life if I am only going to die in the end? Will I be remembered or forgotten? For every thinking Christian, the presence of death adds to the litany of questions. Why create a world where death seems to reign? Many Christians attempt to answer the theological questions of death in quite interesting manners. Allow the presentation of three explanations that as a pastor and philosopher I have been most acquainted.

- 1) Death is the result of Adam's sin which ushered sin into the world. If Adam had not sinned, then death would not have emerged. Death is the consequence of Adam's sin.

This answer is one of the classic explanations for death in the world. Paul uses this reasoning in Romans, and the church over the centuries has affirmed the truth of it. However, the Adam explanation for death is, of course, tricky. The answer begs the question regarding justice. How were the people killed in the movie theatre in Colorado responsible for Adam's sin? If my great grandfather stole a horse in the 1800's am I responsible for his theft? The answer is obviously no. Justice states that every individual moral agent is responsible for her own actions. Adam is responsible for Adam. Dawson is responsible for Dawson. Our sins may have communal effects since humanity is an interconnected species but that is a different argument. Therefore to view death by cancer or vehicular homicide, to pick two examples, as a result of another moral agent's action in antiquity says something problematic about the justice of a God who is good.

- 2) Death is the instrument of Satan in the world. Therefore death is an attack against God by the force of a personalized evil.

Many claim that death is Satan's weapon against the people of God. Satan kills and destroys in order to thwart the relationship between the creatures and the Creator. Therefore death is not an attack against us as much as it is an attack against God. The problem for us is that this explanation takes the personal element out of the experience of death. The fight against evil is not a cosmic game between God and Satan with humans serving as the pawns in a chess game. This concept seems diametrically opposed to Jesus' idea that we are so important to God that God knows every hair on our head.

3) Some claim that death is an activity of God's permissive will.

In this thinking God has two wills: a divine will and a permissive will. Therefore while God's divine will is antithetical to the occurrence of tragic death, God's permissive will allows such events to happen. Several problems emerge with this type of thinking, but I will only mention two. First it challenges the goodness of God. If God is good then to permit Columbine when God could stop it makes God an accessory to the destructive violence that happened in that high school. But second such thinking presents a schizophrenic God. Does God then have two minds, and what is the determining evidence that the action from one mind is divine and the other permissive? Is there a third mind that informs and empowers the other two? This explanation too often leads us into exercises of folly that need not be engaged.

While the above explanations fall painfully insufficient, our consciousness yearns for answers. Howard Thurman writes,

The mystery of life and death persists despite the exhaustless and exhaustive treatment it has been given in song and story, philosophy and science, art and religion. The human spirit is so involved in the endless cycle of birth, of living and dying, that in some sense each [person] is an authority, a key interpreter of the meaning of the totality of the experience. The testimony of the individual, then, is always fresh... (Thurman, Sorrow Songs, The Ground of Hope, (I))

What is the fresh testimony of the individual that sees death as the last enemy to be defeated? What causes death to be so menacing in the life of a person? Three main threats loom large and efficacious cause death to be an enemy and to which we testify as true.

1. The Threat of Meaninglessness

What death does is make the individual question the meaning of life. We are well aware of the myriad of scenarios. From the business woman who has acquired success, wealth, and power to suddenly be killed in an auto accident in her prime, to the infant who is beaten and burned by the boyfriend a woman who is looking for love in the wrong places, to finally the 13 year old who is shot by new day gangsters aiming at another target. Death's powerful presence reminds us of the ontological threat of meaninglessness.

2. The Threat of Finality

Death appears final. None have experienced resurrection except by faith. Finality and meaninglessness act together as different sides of the same coin. While we attempt to comfort ourselves with talk of an afterlife, we do not know if there is something beyond this life. What will happen to us? Where shall we abide? What shall we look like? Is this it?

The threat of interrupted potentiality and reversal of the natural order of things.

There is a difference between the death of an older person and the death of a child. When a child, a young person, or a middle aged person dies we respond differently. It is the phenomenological awareness that the movement from potential to actuality has been interrupted. Our corporate sense is that an injustice has occurred. We are particularly aware with children because the natural order of things has been reversed: it is the moral obligation and proper order of things for children to bury the parents and not the reverse.

What does the believer have at her disposal to thwart the power of death?

C. The Power of Hope

For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently. (Romans 8:24)

Hope is crucial for the Christian and the non-Christian in coping with the anxiety and fear of death. Since death is a universal human experience, hope is the universal challenge to the anxiety and fear of death. There is a fundamental difference between hope and wishful thinking. Wishful thinking is a creative desiring that may or may not have any chance of fulfillment. If wishful thinking is fulfilled it is a matter of randomness and not reasonableness. Hope, on the other hand, is a belief that is future oriented, necessarily connected to a possibility for fulfillment. Christian hope believes that the God who resurrected Jesus will also resurrect us thus providing the necessary possibility for fulfillment. Secular hope or acceptance (Kubler-Ross, 1969) provides conceptual structures that allow the person to find meaning and transcendence in spite of the finality of physical death, thus providing the possibility for fulfillment.

In the human experience there exist enemies of hope. The enemies of hope include, but not limited to, the following: anxiety, despair, doubt, dread, and death. Each of these attempts to lock the person into a mental condition of hopelessness, and rob the person of believing that life has meaning. These enemies of hope create a mental attitude that: doubts the possibility that life will continue beyond the grave, dreads the process of death because of the finality of death therefore confronting the individual with meaninglessness, and despairs over sins committed, work unfinished, people not forgiven, and/or dreams defeated. What is it about the constitution of hope that allows a person to escape the tyranny of death and its accompanying anxiety?

Hope provides both instrumental and intrinsic value for the person of hope (Bovens, 2009). Hope's instrumental value is that it provides the believer the power to risk and trust in God in spite of the presence of the enemies of hope. Secular hope's instrumental value against the enemies of hope is demonstrated by providing individuals with an understanding that death is not the opposite of life but a complimentary component of reality. Christian hope instrumentally buffers the believer from these enemies, and gives her the power to

see more than the death event and trust in the God who promises a kingdom to come. Hope empowers the secular person by pointing to the possibility of transcendence either by ancestral remembrance and cultural continuity. The instrumental value of hope in both contexts is undeniable. Hope provides power over death for the believer and secular actor.

Hope's intrinsic value is that it reminds the believer in hope that the same power that protected her in the past is active and potent in the present, and will remain to be in the future. Intrinsically, hope provides the necessary and sufficient conditions for envisioning a new and divinely transformed state of affairs where the totality of what makes us human is reconstructed and remembered by God. In African American Christianity this was symbolically stated by songs that talked about robes of white and streets of gold. Symbols serve two functions: they a) point to and b) participate in a particular reality. What the symbols of African American Christianity were pointing to was a radically different state of affairs, and in poetic fashion participated in that reality before experiencing it. It is the powerful double value of hope that empowers the Christian when confronted by death. The intrinsic value of secular hope is that it reminds the person that we will be remembered by those who come after us by what we contribute to the human enterprise. As we remember those who lived before, we have the hope that what we do for the good of humanity will stand.

Perhaps it is this aspect of Christian hope that is most attractive: Hope envisions the fundamentally new. Christian hope yearns for something beyond what is seen and known in the ordinary affairs of the human experience. Christian hope believes that in the face of death, no matter how tragic or foreboding death may appear, God will have the victory by creating the fundamentally new. How? We do not know, but intuitively Christian hope guides us to believe that there is a fundamentally new existence 'where the wicked cease from troubling, and the weary will be at rest.' This aspect of Christian hope removes the sting from death and overcomes the victory of the grave. Christian hope affirms that the believer transcends mortality and experiences the fundamentally new after death. Hope maintains, 'blessed are they that die in the Lord, for they rest from their labor.'

References

- Bart Ehrman. *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scriptures and the Faiths We Never Knew*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.
- Eddie Glaude, Jr. “The Black Church is Dead.” *The Huffington Post*, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/eddie-glaude-jr-phd/the-black-church-is-dead_b_473815.html, 2/24/2010.
- Anthony B. Pinn. *The African American Religious Experience*, University of Florida Press, 2007.
- “The Face of Crumpled Linen: Rollo May, Paul Tillich, and Anxiety.” <http://bridgeacrossconsciousness.net/mindmap/13>.
- Rebecca Helen Lehto and Karen Farchaus Stein. “Death Anxiety: An Analysis of an Evolving Concept.” *Research and Theory for Nursing Practice: An International Journal*, Vol. 23, No. 1, Springer Publishing Company, 2009.
- A.M. Abdel-Khalek. “Death Anxiety in Clinical and Non-Clinical Groups.” *Death Studies*, Volume 29, 2005.
- E. Kubler-Ross. *On Death and Dying: Questions and Answers on Death and Dying: On Life After Death*. New York: Quality Paper Book Club. 2002.
- J.Greenberg, T. Pyszczynski, S. Solomon, L. Simon, and M. Breus. “The Role of Consciousness and Accessibility of Death Related Thoughts in Morality Salience Effects.” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Volume 67, 1994.
- I. D. Yalom. *Existential psychotherapy*. New York: Basic Books. 1980.
- E. Kubler – Ross. *On Death and Dying*, New York: Scribner. 1969.
- Howard Thurman. *For the Inward Journey: The Writings of Howard Thurman*, Anne Spenser Thurman, ed. New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, Publishers. 1984.
- Luc Bovens. “The Value of Hope,” *Philosophy and Phenomenology*, Volume 59, No 3, September, 1999. .



www.PreciousHeart.net/ti