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Death and Resurrection in the Middle Ages: Some Modern Implications¹

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In 1233, a witness at the canonization proceeding for Dominic of Guzman, the founder of the order of mendicant friars known as the Dominicans, testified as follows:

When his illness got worse, [Dominic] had himself carried to Santa Maria del Monte, which was said to be a healthier place. There he sent for the prior, who came with twenty brethren from the community; he gave them a long talk. [And] the prior of Santa Maria said: "I shall bury him in this church, and I will not allow him to be taken away." When the blessed Dominic realized this, he said to those of his brethren who were standing by, "Quick take me away from here. God forbid that I should be buried anywhere except under the feet of my brethren." So he was taken back to the church of St. Nicolas. . . .

An hour later, he called the witness [i.e., Brother Ventura] and said to him, "Make yourselves ready."

. . . [And] when [the brethren] asked about themselves, [Dominic] replied, "I shall be more useful to you and more fruitful after my death than I was in my life." After this, [he] said . . . "Begin." And during the office of the commendation of his soul, [he] was saying the words with the brethren because his lips were moving. While the brethren were saying, "Come to help him, you saints of God, and receive his soul," he breathed his last.²

There are many interesting aspects of this description, but I focus on two: the suggestion that dying was a process prepared for, even controlled and willed by the dying person; and the stress on the body itself, both on where it is buried, and on its usefulness for those left behind. I connect these two aspects of Brother Ventura's testimony to three larger emphases in medieval religious practice and eschatology: first, the idea that a person's own death is a moment of judgment, of individual accounting and significance; second, the idea that the bodies (or relics) of the holy dead are special loci of access to the

¹Read 8 November 1996.

²Simon Tugwell, O.P., ed., *Early Dominicans: Selected Writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1982), 66-69.

divine; third, the doctrine of bodily resurrection—that is, the notion that all people will receive again at the Last Judgment the specific material bodies they possessed in life. These are not modern ideas, nor indeed are they attractive, or even comprehensible, to most modern folk without some historical clarification. Yet I would suggest that these three notions are among the roots of current Western attitudes toward person; understanding them helps us to understand why bodies are so important in our thinking about identity, about dying, and about laying grief to rest. Before I consider further the modern connections and analogies, however, I shall explain a little more about these three aspects of medieval death.

As the great historian Philippe Ariès has taught us, the medieval stress on personal death, “my death,” developed within an attitude that was far older, even pre-Christian: a sense that death is familiar and near, an expected part of life, an experience of which persons are often forewarned.³ Such an attitude was not merely a literary topos. When Lancelot (in one of the romances) takes off his armor, lies on the ground in the form of a cross with his head pointing toward Jerusalem, and waits for death, we might say: this is only an idealized image of peaceful death, a poetic imagining. But accounts of Francis of Assisi show the saint similarly performing his own death, choosing costume and setting: Francis insisted on taking off all his clothes to die, lying naked as he was born, while he prepared for re-birth. And the great twelfth-century abbot Bernard of Clairvaux said of the death of his friend and hero, the Irish bishop Malachy:

The physicians at first could find in him no symptom. . . . He, however, full of spiritual joy, confidently affirmed that his death was inevitable. . . . For . . . he had chosen this of all others to be the place of his resurrection, and had long entertained the desire that he should be laid to rest on this day. . . . We therefore return thanks to God . . . for that he has been pleased to honor our unworthiness by permitting us to be the witnesses of so holy a death [and] that He has willed to enrich our poverty with the treasure beyond price of so sacred a body. . . .⁴

As this passage and the testimony concerning Dominic suggest, medieval people died in company. Monastic customs required that, when

³Philippe Ariès, *Western Attitudes Toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present*, tr. P. Ranum (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), 27-52, and *L'homme devant la mort* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1977), 99-288. For recent literature on the topics I treat in this short paper, see Paul Binski, *Medieval Death: Ritual and Representation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), on death; Arnold Angenendt, *Heilige und Reliquien: Die Geschichte ihres Kultes vom frühen Christentum bis zur Gegenwart* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1994), on relics; and Caroline Walker Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200-1336* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), on resurrection.

⁴Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sancti Bernardi Opera*, ed. J. Leclercq, C.H. Talbot, and H.M. Rochais, 8 vols. (Rome: Editiones Cistercienses, 1957-77), 5: 418.

a monk or nun drew close to death, bells were rung, the community was summoned, and the dying person's companions shared, in word and ritual, every moment of the process. Chronicles, wills, and letters inform us that aristocratic deaths were public events, attended by relatives, friends, courtiers, even children and servants. Not only was dying part of life; the dead, especially dead bodies, were part of life as well. Medieval cemeteries were not particularly sinister or taboo; ghosts certainly walked, but they could appear anywhere. Cemeteries were social places where lovers met, jugglers performed, prostitutes solicited clients, and merchants displayed their wares. Indeed, dead bodies were not only *not troubling*, they were exciting and powerful. We see such excitement in Bernard's sermon, when he speaks of Malachy as "the treasure beyond price of so sacred a body." The cult of relics—of the saintly dead, present to the faithful in their whole or divided corpses or in objects that had touched those corpses—is one of the most characteristic and singular aspects of Western Christianity.

This cult evolved slowly in the early Middle Ages. The pre-Christian Mediterranean world was characterized by a quite considerable fear of the dead; dead bodies were seen by both Romans and Jews as polluting. Early martyr accounts suggest that Christians felt particularly humiliated by what they perceived (perhaps wrongly) to be Roman efforts to prevent them from reassembling and burying the bits of their executed heroes and heroines. Yet by the fifth century, Christians were beginning to revere exactly those pieces their enemies had created by persecution. By the Second Council of Nicaea in 787, relics were *required* for the consecration of altars. And by the High Middle Ages, there was traffic in and competition for holy bodies all over western Europe. In the passage I read to you from the canonization process of St. Dominic, you could hear Dominic's awareness that he was becoming a relic. When he said "I shall be more useful to you and more fruitful after my death than I was in my life," he referred not just to his presence before the throne of God in heaven praying for his brothers, but also to his presence under the floor of the church, or in the altar, working miracles. By the fourteenth century, the bodies of those reputed to be holy had to be guarded while they died to protect them from companions who were too avid for holy bits. In 1308, for example, the body of Clara of Montefalco was torn apart by her sisters on her deathbed because they were convinced they would see (as indeed they did) the marks of Christ's passion incised on her heart.

We can thus say that both the process of dying and the bodies of the dead were, to our distant European ancestors, a part of ordinary human experience. Nonetheless it would be both superficial and inaccurate to say that medieval people were "comfortable" with death, although Ariès has sometimes been misread to argue this. For, in the High Middle Ages—from roughly the twelfth century on—we find an increasing obsession with decay and rot, a growing fear of hell and damnation, and what Jean-Claude Schmitt has recently called an "invasion of ghosts," that is, of returnees sent to warn or petition the

living.⁵ The moment of dying became more and more highly charged; it became the moment at which not only one's fate but also one's significance was judged. Whereas in early Christianity, the realm beyond death had been seen as shadowy and unclear, even safe or pleasurable, we find by the twelfth century an acute sense of God's judgment. Stories circulated of a few special individuals who voyaged beyond death to acquire information that would inform and terrify those on earth. The great Romanesque and early Gothic tympana were carved, displaying to the faithful an eternal division between the ordered ranks of heaven and the horrid chaos of hell where the wicked are eaten, divided, and digested forever.

The Last Judgment of Romanesque tympana was located at the end of time. But increasingly the focus of preaching and piety turned to the moment of personal death. Although resurrection would come at that far-off trumpet blast, when Christ would judge the living and the dead, the faithful were increasingly certain that a determination was made at one's own death. The newly important region of the afterlife, purgatory, allowed some spiritual growth after death, it is true; but the moment of dying decided for all eternity whether one went to hell or (immediately or eventually) to heaven.

The emphasis on judgment was, of course, purveyed by preachers, anxious to turn the worldly to virtue. In this "evangelism of fear," as the French historian Delumeau has called it, there was a strong element of social control, and of psychological projection as well.⁶ Clerics saw visions of laymen languishing in hell for failure to pay church taxes; laypeople delighted in revelations that located popes and fat clerics in the circles of hell devoted to avarice or gluttony. But the sense of personal judgment at death was related to a new sense of personal responsibility, emotionality, and intentionality as well. Authors began to stress that my death is *mine*, *my* experience, the judgment and weighing of *me*. The well-known literary and iconographic theme of the Dance of Death was not merely a clerical effort to frighten the careless, but also a recognition that the worth of one's life is summed up in that moment when death seizes one, whether aware or unaware.

The increased emphasis in the later Middle Ages on personal death was connected to a new representation of death in devotional literature. Dying became an intense physical and emotional experience, associated with suffering, affective response, and self-understanding. Death was the moment of self-knowledge in which one moved from one's own misery to identification with the misery of all humanity and hence to union with the glorious suffering of the dying Christ. More than a summing up, death was expiation. As Barbara Newman has recently stressed, this idea was particularly important in

⁵Jean-Claude Schmitt, *Les Revenants: Les vivants et les morts dans la société médiévale* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994).

⁶Jean Delumeau, *Sin and Fear: The Emergence of a Western Guilt Culture: 13th–18th Centuries*, tr. Eric Nicholson (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990).

the writings and stories of women.⁷ The thirteenth-century leper Alice of Schaerbeke, for example, thought she could offer her own suffering and death to save others. She said: "Dear sister, do not grieve for me; and do not think I suffer for or expiate my own sins; I suffer rather for those who are already dead and in the place of penitence [i.e., purgatory] and for the sins of the world."⁸

The late-fourteenth-century mystic Julian of Norwich described the moment of her own death as both ecstasy and excruciating pain.

And when I was thirty and a half years old, God sent me a bodily sickness in which I lay for three days and three nights, and on the third night I received all the rites of Holy Church and did not expect to live. . . . So I lasted until day, and by then my body was dead from the middle downwards, as it felt to me. Then I was helped to sit upright and supported, so that my heart might be more free to be at God's will, and so that I could think of him whilst my life would last. My curate was sent for to be present at my end; and before he came my eyes were fixed upwards and I could not speak. He set the cross before my face, and said: I have brought the image of your saviour; look at it and take comfort from it. . . . After this my sight began to fail. . . . Everything around the cross was ugly and terrifying to me, as if it were occupied by a great crowd of devils.

. . . And suddenly at that moment all pain was taken from me, and I was sound. . . .

And at this, suddenly I saw the red blood flowing down from under his crown, hot and flowing freely and copiously, a living stream, just as it was at the time when the crown of thorns was pressed on his blessed head. . . .

And in the same revelation, suddenly the Trinity filled my heart full of the greatest joy. . . . And I said: Blessed be the Lord! . . . and I was greatly astonished by this wonder and marvel, that he who is so to be revered and feared would be so familiar with a sinful creature living in this wretched flesh.

. . . [And] I saw that [our Lord] is to us everything which is good. . . .⁹

Thus, to women such as Alice and Julian, the moment of death was not only personal (my death is decisive, and it is *mine*) but also redemptive (my suffering can fuse with Christ's redemptive suffering; it can substitute for the expiation owed by others). Indeed the emphasis that late medieval preachers, poets, and artists gave to the process of dying stressed the bodily suffering even of God.

⁷Barbara Newman, "On the Threshold of the Dead: Purgatory, Hell and Religious Women," in *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 108-36.

⁸Life of Alice of Schaerbeke, chapter 3, par. 26, in *Acta sanctorum*, ed. J. Bollandus and G. Henschenius, new ed. J. Camandet et al. (Paris: Palmé, etc., 1863-present) June, 2: 476.

⁹Julian of Norwich, *Showings*, tr. Edmund Colledge, O.S.A., and James Walsh, S. J. (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), Long Text, cc. 3-5, pp. 179-83.

Bonaventure was only one of a host of devotional writers who emphasized that Christ on the cross suffered the most extreme pain possible because his most perfect of all bodies was therefore most capable of pain.

The attitude I have referred to as “personal death” valorized individual experience. By the later Middle Ages, it valorized bodily suffering as well. And it was body, of course, that was valorized by the other aspect of medieval practice I have just discussed: the cult of relics. The significance of the body in death was also underlined by the third medieval idea I shall describe today: the doctrine of bodily resurrection.

Bodily resurrection is one of the three core beliefs of rabbinic Judaism and a tenet in the earliest Christian creeds. It raises many questions, from the quaint to the deeply philosophical—almost all of which were debated by rabbis and Christian theologians during the Middle Ages. Twelfth-century Christian schoolmen puzzled, as had Tertullian and Jerome centuries before, over how every particle could come back. If everything returned, wouldn’t our fingernails and hair be a good deal too long? And what if we had been the victims of cannibalism: in whose body would the bits then arise? By the thirteenth century, ingenious use of Aristotelian ideas of form and matter solved some of these conundra and raised others. But, whether or not they interpreted the “body” that rises as exactly the same atoms of matter that were laid in the grave, theologians agreed that body is crucial. What is and must be redeemed is a psychosomatic unity, a person, fully individual both in its physicality and its consciousness. Although what survived death immediately was separated soul, soul was not person. Without its body, it was incomplete. Hence separated soul had to be, by definition, body-capable; it yearned for its body; indeed it carried, packed into it, the characteristics of its particular body (such as color, size, or sex) waiting to be expressed in matter. Metempsychosis or body-hopping was impossible; to suggest it was heretical. In vision literature, ghost stories, and popular devotion, body became so important that soul itself appeared somatomorphic (i.e. body-shaped).

The idea of bodily resurrection was, of course, an oxymoron. For body was matter; hence in medieval philosophy, it was by definition potency, the capacity to change. Yet resurrection was the reconstitution of body as changeless. This body expressed our identity and individuality; all our specific characteristics returned. *Requies aeterna* was thus a guarantee that our identity can never cease, that we will be eternally ourselves. When the fourteenth-century Milanese poet, Bonvesin de la Riva, described heaven, for example, he saw it as the exact mirror and reversal of the flux and decay of earth. Its bread is “of the whitest white, . . . precious and sweet”; garments there never wear out, for there are no moths to eat them or filth to spatter. And we are resplendent there, with “teeth of whitest white, complexion brilliant. . . . In that place there is no one sick or ailing or in pain or. . . . crippled or ruptured or old or misshapen or mute or leprous or lame or crooked or blind or freckled. Instead each one there is healthy and lively . . . whole and beautiful. . . . There is no one slothful or foolish . . . no one is rotten inside or ugly . . . nor does

their breath smell bad. . . .”¹⁰

To Bonvesin, human individuality and physicality are fully preserved in heaven (we still have teeth, limbs, and innards), but all flux is stilled. The heavenly self is no ghostly vapor, no mere collection of memories; it is the resurrected body—glorified, hardened against physical change or decay, yet beautiful and burning with desire. Hence, like the idea of relics (holy cadavers) as places of miracles and power, the doctrine of bodily resurrection expressed a deep conviction that physical body is crucial to self.

Once one understands exactly what such medieval ideas meant, it is hardly necessary to spell out their modern parallels and implications. It was Woody Allen who said: “the only kind of immortality I’m interested in is the kind that comes from not dying.” For some, the appeal of medieval beliefs and stories lies simply in this—their confidence in victory over the grave. Nonetheless, it seems to me that we have returned recently to two more specific aspects of medieval sensibilities (in part because of the AIDS epidemic, in part because of the threat of modern technology). Those sensibilities are there to return to because of our history, and their medieval roots may help us to understand them better.

First, Ariès was probably right that medieval attitudes left death more in the emotional, psychological, and spiritual control of the dying person than does modern death. We have lost control of our bodies to specialists—doctors, hospitals, university-trained ethicists, etc.—and we see at this very moment, in the hospice movement and the clamor for a “right to die,” how much some modern people wish to return to a sense of “personal death.” In contrast then to an early-modern enthusiasm for technology, we have recently wanted to let the dying own and fashion their deaths much as Dominic did. Indeed the past twenty years have seen a number of illness journals, written by the dying themselves or by those close to them, that are very close to the accounts by Julian of Norwich or Catherine of Genoa of their own deaths, or the account of Malachy by Bernard of Clairvaux.

Second, in contrast to early-modern ideas of self as a stream of consciousness or memory, we have recently returned to a sense of embodied self, and indeed of bodies, that recalls medieval relic cult and theological discussion of bodily resurrection. Space-craft explosions, airplane crashes and bombings, the fate of MIAs in war and of “the disappeared” under terrorist regimes—such phenomena have given us a deeper sense of how important it is to handle bodies in death, how distorted our grief becomes when we cannot put our dead to rest. A spate of recent movies about body-hopping (*Maxie*, *The Switch*, *Freejack*, *Heaven Can Wait*, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, etc.) suggests that

¹⁰ Bonvesin de la Riva, *Volgari Scelti*, tr. P. Diehl and R. Stephanini (New York: Peter Lang, 1987), “The Book of the Three Scriptures: The Golden Scripture,” 153–54, lines 613–28. See also Manuele Gragnolati, “From Decay to Splendor: Body and Pain in Bonvesin de la Riva’s *Book of the Three Scriptures*,” paper for the Columbia Medieval Guild Conference entitled “Death, Judgment and the Eschatological Imagination,” 26 October 1996.

we do not really think transfer of our consciousness into another physical body would result in the return of “us.” Our agonized discussions about the care of victims of Alzheimer’s or Huntington’s chorea make it clear that we often feel body is person even when personality is distorted and intelligence gone. Social workers regularly report that both organ donors and organ recipients behave as if something of self is given along with a body part. It does not surprise us when the film *Jesus of Montreal* presents organ donation as the modern equivalent of resurrection.¹¹

Two weeks ago the brother of a friend of mine was killed in a hideous industrial accident. I talked with her several times as she sat in the hospital while her brother waited on life supports until he could be (as the technical term puts it) “harvested” for organs. I did not need my knowledge of theological debates in the thirteenth century to understand why my friend hoped (and feared a little too) that the transfer of body parts would be a transfer—a gift—of self. Nor did I need stories of Malachy or Alice of Schaerbeke to understand why she felt compelled to sit with the body even when the graphs said his brain waves had ceased. But the time I had spent thinking about these old debates and stories helped me listen to my friend with a deep sense of recognition. For medieval people understood that our death is *ours*, that we die *in our bodies*, and they knew—as we all find when our own time comes to sit beside our brothers and sisters—that it is to *bodies* that we must say “good-bye.”

¹¹See Caroline Bynum, “Why All the Fuss About the Body? A Medievalist’s Perspective,” *Critical Inquiry* 22 (Autumn, 1995): 1-33.