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The dignity of a dying human in different religions of the world

Abstract

Attitudes towards death, preparations for it and faith in life after death are the core of each religion and philosophical system. Death is the final ritual, the last chance to discover the ultimate meaning and aim of life. That is where the dignity of a dying human comes from, which is expressed by the rituals connected with a religion: preparations for death, accompanying the dying person, as well as the rituals of funeral and way of experiencing mourning. The approach of a religion towards the problem of suicide and euthanasia stems from that.

The paper describes attitudes to death in Judaism, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism. It also discusses the basic philosophical and existential ideas, as well as problems of preparation to death, handling a dead body and behaviour of the relatives during the period of mourning. Due to the growing multicultural character of societies the knowledge is necessary for people working in palliative care.

Key words: dying, religion, dignity of human

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The attitude to death is the most crucial issue of religious and philosophical systems.

“From the perspective of the world religions dying is a sacred craft, an authentic ritual, the last chance giving us the possibility to discover the meaning and purpose of life” [1].

This definition clearly suggests that the concept of dying in the light of religion brings the acceptance of the dignity of a dying human being.

The meaning of death bears the testimony to the dignity of a dying person — the circumstances of death can help in understanding this dignity by the dying and the their surroundings, but cannot alter the fact that the most difficult death can be a dignified death (for example death in a concentration camp). What decides about the dig-

nity of dying is not the external, but the spiritual aspect.

Certainly, the rituals of different religions underline this dignity in various ways. A very significant exponent of respect for the dignity of the dying is constituted by the rituals connected with the funeral and experiencing the mourning. Thus, profanation of the dead body is treated as one of the most hideous crimes.

All the traditional religions treat death as a way of transformation [1] as opposed to the contemporary lay culture, which treats death as a threat to life arousing anxiety and as destruction, although it also emphasizes the right to a “dignified death”, understanding it rather more as creating proper external conditions (lack of pain, suffering, disability) and in some cases accepting the possibility of eu-

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thanasia. Let us analyse the approach to death in 4 most prominent world religions: Judaism, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism.

This issue has more than only a theoretical meaning. Modern societies are getting more and more multicultural and multi-confessional. The most important assumption of palliative care is the respect for religious beliefs and patients' confessions.

The proof of respecting the dignity of a dying human, even if it differs from our beliefs and customs, is providing spiritual care according to patients' needs, if possible also the ritual connected with dying and not violating their religious restrictions [2].

Judaism

The approach to death in Judaism was changing throughout centuries. The Bible did not exactly give any precise view on life after death. There were various images:

- return to ancestors;
- return to God;
- staying in Sheol;
- death as a consequence of the sin of Adam and Eve, but also one's individual sin.

The belief in resurrection appeared quite late — in 5th–3rd century BC [1]. The Torah does not describe any particular rituals connected with death. A negative attitude to a dead human body is characteristic (touching a dead body caused ritual impurity). However, the obligation to bury the body was very important, in times close to the New Testament it was connected with a specific ritual that required anointment with fragrant oils, wrapping the body in cloth and putting into the grave, which was often a cave cut in the rock.

Nowadays in the majority of Jewish communities there are organizations taking care of the dead, which are called Chevra Kaddisha (the "holy society") [3]. A contemporary Jew is also more concentrated on living in accordance with the commandments and performing good deeds than on engaging himself in a profound theology of life after death.

An important element to secure dignity to a dying person is the presence of close relatives and a prayer for the dying.

The respect for life following the Mosaic laws is absolute and complete. The value of human life does not alter when s/he suffers from an incurable, fatal disease. Until the breathing and brain

function does not stop, it is not allowed to do anything that could accelerate death. It is prohibited to touch the man in his agony, to neatened his pillow or close his eyelids, because there is a threat that the smallest movement could shorten his life. However, it does not mean that one's life should be prolonged at any cost. Obviously, any direct action aiming at shortening one's life is forbidden [3, 4].

Most rabbis claim that the Talmud law allows to resign from any action that is only the case of "therapeutic ferocity" [4]. It is permitted to administer painkillers in order to relieve or alleviate pain [4].

But there are still a few rabbis who take the position that every human life has to be prolonged at any cost [4].

After death the body should not be left without care, the staff (of any other confession) cannot touch the body. The activities such as closing the eyes, cleaning or dressing the body are performed by the son or the closest family. The funeral should take place within 24 hours.

During the funeral (and during the period of mourning) the following prayer is said:

May the deceased whom we reminisce today, find peace and blessing in the eternal life. May those who left us find grace and mercy of the Lord of Earth and Heavens. May their souls rejoice the unspeakable good which God gives to those who are afraid of him, and may the remembrance of them be the blessing for those who retain them in their memory [1].

The mourning in case of orthodox Jews has, especially in the first week, a very intense character and is based on full ascetism and prayer. It is the way to express the respect to the deceased and longing for him [1, 3].

Islam

According to the Koran, God gives life and death. Life deserves the highest respect, because it comes from God, but death is not evil.

... We created the morsel bone and we clothed it with flesh; then we produced it another creation. And blessed be God

The best of creators!

Then shall ye after that surely die

Then shall ye on the day of resurrection be raised

The Koran Sura 23 [1]

Similarly, the dignity of a human being comes from God [4].

Human body — alive or dead — should be treated with respect, as the work of the Creator. Human body does not belong to the man — it belongs to God, who will point at it on the Judgment day. The belief in resurrection is one of the basic dogmas of Islam.

As everything is the creation of God, the illness but also medicines are treated as such. The doctor performs the will of God. If God wants the death of his worshipper, this moment should not be accelerated or postponed. Neither euthanatic practices nor “therapeutic ferocity” are accepted [4]. It is confirmed by the Islamic Code of Medical Ethics form 1981 [5].

The doctor is not allowed to perform any procedures that may shorten life. He is also not allowed to stop any procedures that may give any chance of restoring a patient's health. A patient's will is of no great importance. The life-saving procedures should not prolong the process of dying [4].

As it comes to the painkillers, Islam believers are not allowed to take any addictive agents (including alcohol and drugs). Yet, when the pain exceeds the tolerable level it is permitted to administer morphine [4]. A dying person should be laid with his face towards Mecca. Nobody considered “impure” (e.g. a woman with menstrual bleeding) should stay in the same room [1, 2]. A dying person or the relatives say the proper Koran Suras and the basic Islam credo: “There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is his Prophet”.

One closes the eyes of the deceased, ties his legs, cleans the body and anoints it with fragrant oils (family; the members of staff have to wear gloves). The autopsy is prohibited. The burial should take place within 24 hours. The following prayer is said for the deceased:

O Allah, relieve his concerns, cause that whatever comes on him is not a burden, favour him with your presence and cause that what he is heading for is better than what he has just left.

O Allah forgive me and him and let me be blessed with a generous reward after him. Let those who are mourning this death understand: We belong to Allah and we will all return to him one day [1].

Hinduism

Death in Hinduism is a natural and inevitable thing, yet it is not authentic — it is not the end of

life. This is expressed in the song of the bards of Bengal:

*Between the door of birth and death
There is another door, completely inexplicable
He who can be born at the gate of death
Is eternally devoted
Die before you actually die
Die while you are living [1]*

Death is the end of a certain phase — life after death is just different. The belief in reincarnation (transmigration) is characteristic of Hinduism — at the moment of death our physical flesh leaves us and the soul (jiva) returns to the stage of temporary happiness, and then is reborn in a new physical flesh at the time and in the way determined by karma. The ultimate goal is liberating oneself from the circle of death and rebirth and the ultimate unification with Brahman — the Absolute Reality [1]. The preparation for death, especially in case of monks, is called moksha — spiritual death that allows to avoid further incarnations and unify with the Absolute [1].

Euthanasia and aided suicide are forbidden, because the aim of a man in the present life is to deserve a better “karma” in the future life. The acceptable form of the suicide is self-starvation or self-suffocation by means of holding breath, used by the monks in order to achieve nirvana [4]. Hinduism does not support artificial prolonging of life [4].

Death ritual:

Before death, the son or relatives should pour into the dying person's mouth water taken — if it is possible — from the Ganges river. It relieves thirst and at the same time guarantees that the dying person will receive the Ganges blessing. The surrounding sings pious songs and Vedic mantras which bring solace [1].

May your eye go away to the Sun, may your Life go back to the wind. Through your life full of merit which you made during your life, go to heaven, to come back (reincarnating) to Earth or to Water, if you feel at home there. Stay among fragrant herbs together with the flesh you want to take [1].

If there is a monk present — he recites mantras and states death.

The body after cleaning and anointment is burnt at the stake in a special ritual. However, it is worth

noticing, that the notion of “dignity” practically differs from our European idea. People from the lower caste, considered as those with “bad karma” — can deserve through their suffering a better karma in the next incarnation. Maybe that is the reason why nobody cares about a poor Hindu dying in the street. The idea of the “dignity of a dying human” was introduced on this ground by Mother Teresa of Calcutta and is still implemented by her spiritual daughters - the missionaries of love. For many of us this way of emphasizing the dignity of a dying human became an inspiration for work in palliative care.

Buddhism

Nirvana — is the land without death; what is left when illusions, ignorance, desire and attachment disappear.

One cannot understand it, it is a mystical experience. Entering nirvana while living denies the power of death [1].

The Buddhist doctrine of rebirth (unlike the Hindu one) does not cover the belief in soul which can be reborn in further incarnations. What is reborn is rather the state of consciousness.

One can imagine the reincarnation in Hinduism as successive beads on a string, but this process in the Buddhist doctrine resembles rather the way of building the tower of blocks.

The first moment — the thought of future life will be born as a consequence of the last moment — the thought of the present life [6].

Therefore, it is important that the dying takes place with full consciousness, with the mind clear and calm [4].

The dying person should be surrounded by friends, family, monks reading sutras and repeating mantras which help the dying one to achieve a serene state of spirit [1]. The contemporary Buddhist monks advise using the palliative medicine procedures, including the use of painkillers that do not disturb the consciousness but secure tranquil physical as well as spiritual leaving [4].

The destruction of the body through a suicide or euthanasia does not make sense. It causes that the spirit leaves in an unfavourable atmosphere and in the future it will carry bad marks of this action (bad karma). Apart from that, if you break the suffering, it will continue in the next incarnation, until it is completed [7].

Since for a Buddhist the death does not mean a defeat, an endless prolonging of life is pointless. If

there is no chance for recovery, any attempts of artificial life prolonging should be abandoned. At this very moment the man does not need any further medical treatment, but rather moral and spiritual support which will allow him to die in peace and dignity [4].

After death the body should not be left alone. Near the head of the deceased one puts the vase with flowers (representing Buddha), after 3 days the body is burnt [1].

Conclusion

In the above paper we discussed the approach to death in 4 great world religions: Judaism, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism. The respect for death and the will to make it dignified is characteristic of each of those religions. All of those religious systems are also marked with high respect for life — suicide (although in practice it looks a bit different in case of Islam and Hinduism) and euthanasia are unacceptable. Similarly — except for a small fraction of super-Orthodox Jews — the idea of the “persistent therapy” is wrong.

Yet one should remember that each of these 4 religions has numerous fractions that differ in their approach even to the most fundamental issues connected with life and death. Apart from that — everywhere practice does not always correspond to the beautiful ideals which are the basis of a particular religion.

In this work we avoided any comparisons to Christianity, but everyone can find here numerous similarities and differences.

The basic rule of palliative care, important especially in multicultural societies of the Western Europe or America, is respect for a patient's beliefs and religious convictions.

It is significant to know them in order not to violate the dignity of a dying human being. It should be also noticed [7] that in Poland appears (following the Western idea) the tendency to introduce Buddhist meditation techniques together with the general Buddhist philosophy concerning the care of an ill person who is suffering and dying.

For every Christian patient this could be dangerous, because it hinders the opening for the transcendent God [7]. Each and every religion has valuable elements of a dignified experiencing of dying and death itself — but only the man who had professed this religion before is able to use it to the greatest extent.

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