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# ***jnanadeepa***

**Pune Journal of Religious Studies**

**Death:  
Scientific and Religious Perspectives**



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## Editorial

Death is a fact of life which is both inevitable and universal. It threatens life not only in the last moments of life but right from the beginning. We humans are beings unto death. It is death which gives life “its radical uncertainty, final seriousness and ultimate mystery” (John R. Sachs). That is why we think it worthwhile to seek to understand death from an inter-disciplinary perspective.

There are three articles in this issue of *Jnanadeepa* which deal with death from the point of view of modern science. The first one attempts a molecular definition of death. Biologically people are considered dead when the electrical activity in the brain ceases. It is presumed that a stoppage of electrical activity indicates the end of consciousness. However, the suspension of consciousness must be permanent, and not transient, as occurs during sleep or a coma. The basic events leading to death involves the brain ceasing to supply information vital for controlling ventilation, heart rhythm, and/or vasodilation and vasoconstriction. The lung is unable to supply oxygen to exchange with the blood stream. The heart and blood vessels are unable to maintain adequate circulation of blood to vital tissues. Problems in the central nervous system that may lead to death include infection, blood vessel disruption, malignant tumors etc. In the respiratory system, problems that can lead to death include lack of pulmonary blood flow, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, infections and cancer metastasis. A second article looks at death biologically. Death represents the failure of homeostatic mechanisms. In life cell death by injury or suicide is a regular phenomenon, but the organism continues to be alive because of an adequate replacement of cells. However, a point is reached when such replacement is unable to compensate for the deterioration caused by aging. Impairment of function beyond a point in one or more vital organs results in the death of the whole organism. One can also view death from a perspective that is beyond biology. Death

is both a physiological and a spiritual necessity. Death is inevitable because the imperfection of the body when the body has exhausted its functional space it must die. Death is also a spiritual necessity because the true purpose of life is the spiritual growth of the person. But there comes a point when the body cannot respond any further to the thrust for the further growth of the spirit. At that point it becomes necessary for the body to die. The third article makes some scientific reflections on death. After a brief discussion of the different ways in which different peoples and cultures understand life and death, the article seeks to look at death from the Human Genome Project. It also examines the possibility of physical immortality through the Human Genome Project or through cloning. Even if such immortality is possible, is it desirable? The article concludes by pointing out the need to develop new and effective ethical principles to respond creatively to the challenge of the modern developments in science.

Closely related to this group of articles is one that discusses the constructive contribution which science and religion can make to the development of a culture of life. In many ways science and religion have been responsible for a lot of death and destruction in the history of human-kind. All the same, the article proposes that a healthy collaboration between science and religion will improve the chances of our personal well-being and collective wholeness (salvation).

Included in this issue is an article on the Buddhist view of death. It is a critical study of the Tibetan Book of the Dead. It points out that Tibetan Buddhism has adopted a very pragmatic approach to death which acclimatises humans, through a process of mediation, to the auspicious period after death. It has also devised effective methods of accompanying the dying so that they can face death with a smile. This book offers valuable lessons to humanity in the art both of happy living and joyful death.

There are two articles in this issue which deal with death and resurrection from a Christian perspective. The first one seeks to develop a Christian theology of death. It begins by pointing out that there is a close relationship between life and death so that we can understand one only in relation to the other. The creative power of

God stands over against physical death as a promise of new life which is initially experienced in the unfolding of the present life. Its full realisation remains as a hope founded on God who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.

The second article deals with the resurrection of Jesus Christ and seeks to clarify its significance for humans. The Christian faith is based on the encounter of the first apostles and disciples with the risen Lord. They realized that Jesus was alive after he was crucified, died and was buried. The resurrection of Jesus gives us an insight into the mystery of God, of humans and the world. And it demands from us humans that we take responsibility for the future of humanity and the world.

There are two articles in this issue which discuss the understanding of death which is found in the funeral rites of the Catholic Church. The first one deals with the funeral service in the Latin rite and points out that the new funeral rite brings out three significant aspects of Christian death. Christian death is a proclamation of the death and resurrection of Christ. Through baptism Christians enter into the paschal mystery of Christ. What was symbolically realized in their life through the reception of this sacrament has to be actualized throughout their journey in this world and will reach its climax when in death they will hand over their lives into the hands of God as Christ did on the cross. Further, Christian death is a gospel proclamation. The gospel is the good news of God for humanity. Its content is the risen Lord who destroyed sin and restored new life to humankind. It has to be proclaimed wherever the power of sin is at work in the world. Moreover, Christian death is an event of communion. Although death is usually experienced as separation, yet in the Christian vision of faith death is a moment of a deeper solidarity and personal communion with Christ and the Christian community. The second article develops a liturgical and theological reflection on the funeral rite of the Syro-Malabar Church. This rite is largely based on the funeral service in the East Syrian tradition. The East Syrian liturgy of the funeral with its highly appealing prayers and gestures reveals the East Syrian theology of death. The whole liturgy is a celebration of our participation in the death and resurrection of the Lord. The prayers,

hymns, scripture readings and actions like processions enable the faithful to understand the meaning of death as a participation in the death of Christ as well as our hope of sharing in Christ's resurrection.

Included in this issue is an article on Ecosophy: An Indian Paradigm of Eco-Spirituality which because of some technical problems was not published in the last (January 2006) issue of the Journal. This article explores some of the classical sources of India's spiritual heritage in order to develop a healthy, integral spiritual attitude to nature. There are basically two ways of dealing with the things of nature. The first takes them as objects for humans to possess, develop, control and consume. Such an approach has alienated humans from the life-nourishing eco-system and caused a growing sense of meaninglessness in the consumerist way of life. This is the spiritual crisis that affects individuals and societies today. The effective antidote to this malaise is to develop a second perspective; to look at the earth as the mother-base out of which we are born, through which we grow and into which we return and to relate to plants and animals as members of one family. This is the perspective of an earth-bound spirituality which leads to a harmonious living together of all created things.

It is our fond hope that the articles in this issue will help our readers to develop a healthy attitude to death and nurture within themselves the hope for the fullness of life.

Kuruvilla Pandikattu, SJ  
Guest Editor