
Douglas Davies is a professor of religion, and this specialism is conspicuous in his book about death. He describes how people deal with death and gives a rich variety of aspects of death. It is amazing that in less than 200 pages the author can present so much information, and in addition, that he opens thought provoking perspectives to the reader. Topics ranging from the physical material of coffins to the death of Christ on the cross, and from rapture of the elected ones to cremation pass the revue. And in all the cases, Davies tries to describe what moves people to make decisions and to opt for specific rituals.

Davies is with the University of Durham in the UK. His British context is clearly apparent in the book. He is not interested in rituals from distant countries, except occasionally for the sake of comparison. He is interested in people from his own context: (post)modern, mainly secular England. How do they deal with and cope with death—with their own and the deaths of their beloved ones? Even more focused, the context of the Church of England is clear. It is represented in many references to its liturgy and in the way of argumentation. This focus, however, is not a disadvantage, but operates as a focus should operate—it gives clarity and depth to the study. Davies does not speak about human beings in general, but about the very people he meets in his own life.

The author is convinced of the intrinsic relationship between death and life—not only because every life ends in death and every death is the end of a life, but more so because there is an intrinsic relation in people's attitudes towards both. How people think about death has consequences for their life and vice versa. From his book, it is clear that people think very differently about both—and that they are urged to deal with death unless they conceive their life as valueless, which nobody actually does, not even in the case of suicide in its ambiguity and even paradoxality.

Davies deals with all the aspects of death, not just with its religious aspects. People who do not have connection to a church, nor would call themselves religious, try to find ways of expressing the meaning of life by rituals of death. Davies does not make a clear distinction between an anthropological need of coping with death and a religious interpretation of it. He also does not make a distinction between religious studies and theology. When facing death, they all seem to flow into each other in one search for meaning of a life that ends in death. Therefore, Davies uses the term ‘theology’ in the title. It certainly has to do with his backdrop in the Church of England, where the aspects of life, religion, and theology are closely linked together and their demarcations fluid, but also because death itself easily evokes religious feelings, related to giving meaning or longing for afterlife.

‘The Theology of Death’ is the title of the book. It seems to be an overstatement: can this overview of people's dealing with death be the only theology on the subject? Davies deliberately chose this title because, in his opinion, theology is not a coherent system, but a process. It is the dynamic process of how people try to express their relationship to God, which at the same time is the ongoing process of their own self understanding. For this he quotes Calvin's beginning of his Institutes, but with quite a different interpretation than Davies indicates himself—and even more than he indicates.
This process of theology develops in various ways—actually, in as many ways as people search for self understanding. Davies states that all these theological tracks have to be accepted as ways of understanding. That would be in line with his backdrop in religious studies. It is, however, very clear that he does not maintain this position. Although he wants to deal with the whole spectrum from traditionalists to liberals, he actually refutes the former, labeling them as ‘conservative’ or ‘fundamentalist,’ and often using the word ‘still’ when referring to them. That there exists an orthodox tradition that is fully up to date seems to not be in his field of vision.

On the other hand, he struggles with cremation. The very presence of fire makes it difficult to introduce it into a Christian liturgical language play. Fire has to do with destruction and with final damnation. It has negative connotations. Total destruction also conflicts with an anthropology of embodiment which is very important for Davies. For the same reason, he seems to be rather positive about woodland burials: new life arises from the human dust.

When looking deeper into Davies’ own position, it is clear that he is not merely describing, but indeed has his own theological position. This becomes most obvious when he speaks about death as an act in life: giving up yourself. Self sacrifice is the core of life—in it life and death are intrinsically related. It is the sacrificing of an embodied life, just as Christ gave his body on behalf of his people. Death and dealing with death are not bad as such. If well understood, they can lead to an intensified life—a concept the author loves. With this Davies does not mean a life that tries to grasp as much as possible, but a life that receives depth: a deeper self understanding, a deeper relation with others, and deeper religious understanding and experience—just like in the liturgical transformation of the Eucharist.

To summarize: this is a challenging book with many triggers for thought, also in those elements about which one might disagree with the author.

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