

Robert Reiss Death, where is your sting?



DEATH, WHERE IS YOUR STING?

Dying and Death Examined

Robert Reiss

Part way through this book, Reiss notes that 'truth' is not the same thing for a physicist as it is for a lawyer or an economist – let alone for a musician or philosopher. And yet there is a feeling that he writes about the truth of faith with the handbrake on – as if a fear of not being rigorous in the disciplines of philosophy and neuroscience prevents a more expansive allowance for the unique truth that faith seeks to present.

That said, this brief essay on death covers a lot of ground, noting different cultural approaches as well as the arc of philosophical debate. He points out that our sense of death

is very much integrated with the sense of what it means to be human: and remarks that the popular idea of a soul within a body (Cartesian duality) remains strong many decades after philosophy and neurology have rejected this idea of being human. So today, most commentators seem to suggest that thinking, desiring, willing do not happen independently of the brain: there is no 'soul' or 'self' or 'mind' beyond the physical neurology. Which means that, at death, everything about us dies.

And to be fair, the total death of the person is what the church has always taught too, despite a common sense that when we die, we simply 'get off one horse and jump on the next'. Resurrection was never originally portrayed as 'that which naturally happens anyway': it is a shocking surprise – whatever 'it' was.

And this is perhaps where Reiss is most circumspect, allowing for little more than the memory and teaching of Jesus to 'live on' which seems a rather flimsy account for the extraordinary impact of Christianity from the beginning and across the ages. His analysis of the New Testament record is fair enough, noting that the earliest comment on the resurrection in Galatians has none of the elaborations of later documents like Luke and Matthew which he believes are not 'history remembered' but 'prophecy historicised'.

Commendably Reiss notes that faith mustn't make claims that contradict knowledge ascertained in other disciplines, but it may be that he wishes to place a greater freight on absolute scientific truth than it is willing or able to bear. Indeed, if there is a criticism here, it is in the confidence with which he writes on a topic about which we can have so little absolute certainty.

Readers may not agree with the path Reiss treads, but will surely be sympathetic to his two main conclusions: a) that our focus needs to be on God, not on ourselves; and b) our faith should direct us more urgently to the needs of this world than too much concern for our 'place in heaven'.

This short book is a personal testimony based on many years of reflecting deeply on experience and learning. It warns of the pitfalls of much fanciful – and dishonest - thinking within the church and, as such, deserves and rewards our attention.