Thinking on the Last Things

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The four last things are death, judgement, heaven and hell, of which only one is certain: the first. Death is the key to the four last things, and thinking about death is the key to the devotion based on the four last things which flourished in a small way at various times and places during the middle ages, and in a changed form in counter-reformation Europe.

Here I am not writing about the last things themselves, but about the devotion, and, even then, not about the counter-reformation devotion, which was part of a different world from the one in which the mediaeval devotion flourished, and had a completely different significance. I want to look at the four last things in the middle ages, as one devotional subject with the emphasis changing from one to another of its constituent parts so that it acted as a barometer for the mood and atmosphere in the Church.

In the last twenty years or so thinking on the four last things has had something of a revival and has, I believe, again been reflecting the Church's current moods, though in traditional style.

Possibly the most noticeable feature of this devotion, or subject for contemplation, is that it has only been really popular when the religious atmosphere has been restless and when there has been criticism of the established Church to the point of disillusionment. Its popularity has also been related to concern for the individual soul. It has only been in the last few years that theologians have tried to combine communal and personal salvation in a devotion on the four last things. For the most part it has been an intense, individual meditation. That is not surprising, given that its starting-point is death, and death is the one absolutely solitary thing that happens to us, however many of us it happens to at any one time.

The point of the devotion is to purify your soul, as only you can do by directing it towards its true purpose, as described in Ecclesiasticus 7:36: 'In all your actions remember your last end and you will never sin.' Your last end is death, and the meditation was the religious focus of fear about death and all it brings, including the possibility of eternal loss.

Augustine had a far greater influence than any other writer on the meditation, because of his influence on the Western Church's

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eschatological expectations. In his *De Trinitate* he wrote:

> Let us who are mortal according to Adam hold fast to this with a true faith and with a certain and firm hope, that we should be immortal according to Christ. For in this way we can now bear the same image, not yet in vision but in faith; not yet in reality but in hope.

Last-ditch hope was always the heart-beat of the meditation, at least in theory, but it was more theoretical at some times than at others. Hope is vulnerable, and never more so than when facing death. What never changed or weakened was fear.

When meditation on the four last things first appeared, in the mid-11th century, it was with an almost obsessional fear of death and judgement, which were often seen as identical. Here was a different spirituality from that of the first Christians. It also appeared in surroundings that came to be the standard setting for this meditation throughout the mediaeval period: intense prayer, impatience with contemporary religious life and an interest in early Christian asceticism, in particular the poverty and prayer-life of the desert fathers and the first hermits and monks. Except for one layman at the very end of the middle ages, everyone who wrote about the four last things in those centuries was either a monk or a member of a lay-community living a monastic life, and even the solitary layman had spent two years in an enclosed monastery where, he said, he had thought intensely about death, judgement, heaven and hell.

As the way to purify one's soul through meditating on these subjects began with meditating on death, it was natural that most devotional writing on them was emotional and often highly-coloured. However, the first piece of writing on them that we have, *Concerning the Last Things and Anti-Christ,* is one of the few unemotional and academic texts to have come down to us. That is because it is more a last trumpet-blast for millenarianism, before that became a marginal movement in Christianity, than a full treatment of the four last things.

It was written by Peter Damien in about 1060, and, as the title suggests, he was really only concerned with the end of the world and the last judgement. It is a short work, in the apocalyptic tradition, describing the reign of Anti-Christ, the coming of Christ, the fire burning the world, the tombs opening to release the dead for judgement. On the other three last things—death, heaven and hell—and even on what judgement itself might be like, he is quiet:

> You ask me, brother, what there will be after the judgement. You drag me into the unknown... You ask me what I do not know... It is enough to think how short is the time of our transition here in comparison with eternity.

A century later the English abbot Aelred of Riveaulx took what was

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to become a much more typical attitude to the unknown in a text he wrote for the edification of some nuns, opening with reflections on death as a frontier or gateway—a favourite early Christian image often vividly portrayed as the moment of struggle for the individual soul between God and the devil. This is Aelred on the moment of death:

> Horrible spirits will come for the wicked, to tear them out of their bodies with infernal instruments, as out of an infected tomb.

Aelred is the classic 12th-century enthusiast for the devotion on last things. A dedicated, puritanical member of the new Cistercian order, he was anxious to provide a deeper way of thinking about death, judgement, heaven and hell than was offered by the esoteric millenarianism which was developing, and which was going to find Joachim of Fiore its most persuasive prophet. Not only Aelred but also his contemporary, Peter Lombard, the Master of the Sentences, and, in the 13th century, the Franciscan Bonaventure, all wrote about the four last things, castigated the contemporary Church for its worldliness and advocated absolute material poverty such as Joachim looked for as one of the marks of the true Church of Christ.

Material poverty, but not psychological poverty. The meditations of this period on the last things are not very elaborate, but they are vivid , intense and individualistic, and they all explore the psychology of faith and how to cope with its problems and fears. The end of the world is much less Bonaventure's concern than is individual judgement, and he believes (like most writers on the last things from the 12th century onwards) both in an individual judgement and a general judgement at the *eschaton*. It is the individual person he wants to address. 'Who is more contemptible,' wrote the 12th-century humanist John of Salisbury, 'than he who scorns a knowledge of himself?'

Bernard had extended that self-knowledge to a knowledge of oneself in death, judgement, heaven and hell. Aelred leaves out hell; Bernard, in his sermon XII on the quotation from Ecclesiasticus 'Remember your last end and you will never sin', then leaves out heaven:

> What are the last things? ... They are death, judgement and hell. What is more horrible than death? What is more terrible than judgement? ... Tremble, O man, because in death you will be separated from all the good things of the flesh and that sweet bond of flesh and spirit will be cut in the most bitter separation. Be fearful, because in judgement there will be no chance to deceive or resist. In hell there will be no consolation at all, but perpetual grief, howling, weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Peter Lombard, who wrote the first full discourse on the four last things, is much calmer. In fact his approach is stolidly scholastic,

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without a hint of the emotional interest or personal fear that colours Bernard's and Aelred's accounts. He divides the world up into the four ranks there will be at the general judgement, works out where the saints will sit, discusses how quickly the sun and moon will be obscured by the brighter light of Christ, and how many ranks of bliss there are in heaven and how many of suffering in hell, and whether the damned will sin in hell (he concludes that they will not). Peter Lombard is not typical, however.

In the next one hundred years there are fewer writers meditating on the last things. Radical religious seriousness and impatience with the status quo was to find expression in the work of the friars. There were exceptions to this generalisation, of course. In the late 12th century Adam Scott joined the new Premonstratensian order. He later left for the Carthusians, but while he was still a Premonstratensian, the abbot of Dryburgh in Scotland, he wrote a sermon on the four last things. It is personal, with some of the earthy and detailed realism that is characteristic of writing on the last things by enclosed religious like the Carthusians, whom Adam later joined:

> It is quite often my job to fill the flagons with water ... Looking into the water, I saw that I was rotten and rancid, ugly and ungraceful, and, shaken by a great fear, I wondered ... what I shall be like when my body has died. What will be dissolved by death will be ground into dust, then, when it has rotted, it will go to the worms, and when the worms die, to dust again ... and in that hour my enemies will accuse me, my conscience will bear witness against me and my judge will examine me.

It is a long sermon and, though realistic, it is purely spiritual, without a word of practical advice on how to focus one's thoughts or sustain concentration. It was written for experienced meditators.

Bonaventure had a different approach. It was he who introduced meditation on the last things to the laity, with the stages of meditation set out for beginners and with a scholastic fondness for dividing and categorising:

> This, indeed, is the blessed cross with all its branches, pointing in four directions:
> Death should make you moan,
> Judgement should make you tremble,
> Hell should make you full of horror.

The fourth branch must be the one going into the ground, for he says nothing about heaven.

It is not until the 14th century that hope is as evident as fear and heaven appears alongside hell, with some attempts at imaginative and descriptive detail. The 14th century was the golden age of meditation on

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the last things, predominantly in the Low Countries, England and, to a lesser extent, the Rhineland. Why there is a striking growth in emphasis on hope of heaven during this particular period is not clear. Perhaps one of the reasons is that most of the works of the late 14th century were written for lay people, who did not have the monastic liturgy to give them diversion from private prayer.

There was also a close connection between attention on the four last things and mystical (or at least affective) prayer, which is of its nature aspirational. The 14th-century writers on the last things were by temperament and outlook not scholastic, and stressed the importance of surrendering to grace, rather than learning how to define it. They were proponents of contemplative prayer—often wordless—arising out of meditation on God and the last things He had prepared for humanity. Reflecting on the last things was the best way of getting a sense of the world's transcience and futility and of concentrating the mind and heart on God. Hope was considered to do this more effectively than fear, which leads to a centering on the self and an obsession with what is going to happen to oneself.

'For hope doth infuse into the affections the savour for things eternal, and doth restore them to the love of that which is higher.' That was written by Gerard Zerbolt of Zutphen in his book *Concerning Spiritual Progress*. The work has a section on returning to purity which begins with a meditation on the four last things. It was a very popular book in the late 14th century and again in the late 15th century, by which time it was being edited with the emphasis put on sin. But it was written with the emphasis on grace and hope.

Gerard wrote it for followers of the Devotio Moderna, the predominantly lay revival movement, originating in the Low Countries, pioneered especially by the quasi-monastic association, the Brethren of the Common Life, of which he was one of the early members. However, like participators in most reforming movements, followers of the Devotio Moderna were austere, and Gerard was fired not only by hope but also by Bernard's magnificent grimness regarding the last things. The theme of *Concerning Spiritual Progress* is that, thanks to God's inspiration, man yearns for the heights from the depths of sin and a sinful nature. Gerard worked out a rigorous system of spiritual exercises (on which Ignatius Loyola about 130 years later based his *Spiritual Exercises*) to fit in with the meditations and work of the Brethren. This included practical work such as visiting the sick, and he died of the plague himself, in 1398, when he was only 31.

Death was not an obsession in *Concerning Spiritual Progress*. Nor is it an obsession in *The Four Last Things*, the book written by Gerard of Vliederhoven, in which it is said that the thought of death ought to be enough, without too much dwelling on it, to bring on a wave of penance,

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contrition and humility. Gerard of Vliederhoven brings together the practical and the meditative, the affective intensity of Bernard and the practical sympathy of the Brethren of the Common Life, of which he was also a member.

He made some quite creative suggestions to help his readers reflect on hell, but his description of heaven is merely a long list of negatives—no pain, no sorrow, no jealousy. But, then, heaven is altogether beyond our satisfactory imagining: whatever we might imagine, we could always suggest improvements. Heaven is an imaginative impossibility.

Richard Rolle, the early 14th-century hermit and mystic, described an experience he had of grace while he was meditating on the four last things. Like everyone else, he found bliss impossible to put into words:

> The sight of God shall be reward and food and all delights that any creature may think of, more than any may tell, to all his lovers for ever.... It is much easier to come to this bliss than to describe it.

In the meditations of medieval writers on the last things heaven is never as convincing as hell, nor as death, which can be described literally and was, over the centuries, the most arresting. Unlike nowadays, everyone at that time would have seen somebody die, and their knowledge that they were going to die themselves had a much more pressing sense of reality than ours. At the very end of the middle ages, the physical facts of death held writers on the last things spellbound.

Let us end with a look at the last manifestation of this mediaeval tradition. Thomas More wrote a short treatise on the four last things in 1521—2, when he was a successful young courtier, but carrying in the back of his mind the memory of his time in the London Charterhouse, where he had meditated on the last things. More never finished the treatise. In fact, he never got further than writing about death. Whether that discouraged him or whether he became distracted by life we will never know. His discourse on death is a world away from Peter Damian's 'You ask me talk to about things which I cannot', of five centuries earlier. Peter Damian is tacit, More is hideously forthcoming:

> When we lie dying ... while we lack stomach and strength to bear any one of so manifold heinous troubles, will it not be, as I was about to say, a pleasant thing to see before thine eyes and hear at thine ears a rabble of fleshly friends, or rather of flesh flies, skipping about thy bed and thy sickly body like ravens about thy corpse, now almost carrion, crying to thee on every side 'What shall I have? What shall I have?'

However, what More's world-sick, physical description of death does have in common with his predecessors who wrote on the last things is a fundamental concern, bordering on panic, about individual salvation

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and the importance for that of individual contemplative prayer.

This medieval tradition of devotion on the four last things was a minor but, I think, valuable tradition, aimed at helping those who were disappointed or disillusioned with the conventional Church establishment and conventional prayer to recover some of their religious vitality. We are just in the middle of a revival of interest in the last things, with theological writing on all four last things and even on purgatory. We have all the necessary requirements for interest in them: restlessness in the Church and worry about individual personality and identity in an age of statistics, mass production and mass media. It is noteworthy that the most powerful modern books on the four last things, like Alois Winklbofer's *Das Kommen seines Reiches* of 1959, aim at combining individual and communal salvation. We also have a great fear of death, which we have come to think of as an outrage that should soon surely be dealt with by modern medicine, but at the same time threatens us with universal extermination. And we have got the necessary fatigue, with too many facts and figures and too much religious talk and noise.

It is no wonder the last things are back in fashion.

This is a revised and shortened version of the Aquinas Lecture given at Blackfriars, Cambridge, in 1987.

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