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Review

John Behr and Connor Cunningham, eds, *The Role of Death in Life: A Multidisciplinary Examination of the Relationship between Life and Death*. Cambridge: James Clarke & Co, 2016, 200 pp. (Pbk). ISBN: 978-0-227-17572-9, £15.50.

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At a time when we are seeking to bring discussions of death into the open in many areas of life, personal, organizational, local and societal, it is encouraging to find a book which tackles this area in some depth from a variety of academic perspectives. *The Role of Death in Life* is a collection of ten essays originally delivered at an international symposium organized by the John Templeton Foundation in 2013. Contributors were asked to consider the hypothesis that by dying as human, Christ shows us what it is to be good, so offering us a way of participating in the life of God. This explicitly Christian premise limits the scope of the book somewhat, but lack of breadth in this direction is balanced by depth of thought. I review it as a Christian. It would be fascinating and helpful to read responses from perspectives from other faiths and beliefs, especially to the final essay.

Each contributor brings expertise from their own field to consideration of this premise. Theologians and philosophers feature most prominently (including the editors, whose own essays are included); they are sandwiched between essays from the perspectives of astronomy, biochemistry, and anthropology which start the collection, and contributions from medicine and bioethics to finish.

The depth and intricacy of argument contained in these essays, and the weighty bodies of thought referenced by its contributors, gives the book an academic feel. This should not deter us from accepting the challenge it offers. As chaplains, we are encouraged to use the depth of our own faiths and beliefs to inform, review and ground our work. Certainly I found that, even when I failed to grasp the nuances of argument, each essay asked questions of situations I encounter in my daily work, and helped me to reflect on

them from a fresh perspective. It was the final essay which helped me most to see each contribution in relation to the others, and in relation to my work as a chaplain and life as a Christian.

Contributors wrestle with two central themes: the nature of life and death, and the nature of suffering. To tackle the second first, suffering is seen by medicine as something to eliminate (hence as part of its definition of palliative care, the World Health Organization talks of "the prevention and relief of suffering"). Yet this clashes with our experience of death. Death involves suffering. This cannot be made sense of through a scientific approach to death, which seeks to describe it as part of the natural world. But our theological understanding as Christians gives us a different perspective, where suffering is the means of salvation. Davies' anthropological insight suggests a human need for hope; Christianity is not the only way of facing suffering rather than avoiding it. As chaplains, rather than preventing suffering, perhaps part of our role is to accompany those who suffer.

Even more central to the book is of course the question of life and death. Many of the contributions (notably not those based in science) offer impassioned critiques of materialist, physical and technological approaches. In particular, science is criticized for its inability to define life and death. The biochemist Luc Jaeger points out that "an unequivocal definition of life at an organic level is still a matter of debate" (p. 15); fans of the Infinite Monkey Cage on Radio 4 will know that they too consistently fail to answer this question. An alternative perspective is needed to give us a language which makes sense of life; trying to make sense of death clarifies this need. In the final essay, Jeffrey Bishop depicts this most starkly in describing current thinkers' suggestion that organs could be removed for donation before someone is declared dead. His argument is that this conclusion is not reached due to a lack of metaphysics, but a metaphysics that puts society at the centre. This means that those following this line of thought believe that our purpose as bodies is to maintain society. When our bodies can no longer do that, their greatest use is to help other bodies achieve that purpose. What we need is not just another language, but another metaphysics.

This seems to offer a strong challenge to us as chaplains. Do we accept the metaphysics of our health services (and argue that our care helps patients in their purpose of maintaining society), or do we offer an alterative, and care for our patients for other reasons? As Christians, perhaps we might recognize the purpose of each body not as maintaining society, but as embodying the image of God, the resurrected body of Christ. Theological and philosophical contributors offer more detailed and involved alternative metaphysics, sometimes clashing, all with something to chew over. For me, the book was ultimately definitely worth the effort it took.