Materialism/Spiritualism

Materialism is a belief in a material world, composed of matter. The popular myth that all explanations of phenomena from cot death to cancer need to be sought within the materialist framework is perpetuated in the medical profession, with non-material explanations treated with scepticism and scorn. However it is not unusual to see rationally acquired materialist beliefs jettisoned in the context of death, and emotional beliefs about spiritualism (for instance, the permanent survival of the spirit) being salvaged.

To Indians, the external world is illusory and not composed of matter. Beliefs and values revolve around spiritualism, and the ultimate purpose of human existence is to transcend the physical, renounce the world of material aspirations and attain a heightened state of spiritual awareness through transcendence, or inward-seeking consciousness. Unfettered by materialistic boundaries, natural and supernatural, material and spiritual explanations of phenomena coexist with one another[15]. The concept of materialism, so vital in the West, is a relatively unimportant concept in Indian thinking.

For instance, a woman living in India may accept a system of folk 'theories' which is firmly established and culturally acknowledged there. She may see the death of her child as the influence of the 'evil-eye', and although it might have been diagnosed as due to viruses by an Indian doctor trained in Western medicine, her view would be unlikely to be ridiculed. The two views would reside side by side. But to a Westerner, if a death is caused by viruses, it cannot be caused by supernatural influences. Over time, the mother may come round to believing that her child's death was caused by unknown, unseen 'germs', but, whether or not she does, her own views about the causes of death will be accepted by her own community. In Britain, the same Indian woman would find herself out of sympathy were she to persist in supernatural explanations of her child's death.

The causes of illness, disease and even death in India are explained in terms of sorcery, bewitchment and evil spirits. Persons specially qualified to remove spells or exorcise evil spirits are summoned by the family members of the afflicted or bereaved to help them come to terms with their problems or loss[26]. Faith-healers, mystics, shamans, pirs, bhagats, gurus, yogis or practitioners of ayurvedic and homoeopathic medicine are accorded the same respect as doctors trained in Western medicine.

CONCLUSION

No culture or society has all the answers on the ideal way to mourn and recover from the death of loved ones – if indeed there is an ideal way to recover. Only when cultures meet on equal terms and as equal partners, and express a genuine willingness to learn from each other, may we find tentative answers to these questions. But for the West to assume that there is little or nothing which they might profitably learn from Eastern cultures, many of which have sustained and perpetuated themselves for over 4,000 years, is precisely the kind of attitude which is inimical to a genuine cross-cultural understanding[27].

'There are' as Hamlet exclaimed, 'more things in heaven and earth ... than are dreamt of in your philosophy.'

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OBITUARY

BERNARD WILLIAMS

Founder of the Lesbian and Gay Bereavement Project, UK
Born 5 April 1925; died 5 September 1994

Bernard Williams died of cancer, aged 69, just two days after he and Dudley Cave had celebrated 40 years together as a couple.

At the time Bernard and Dudley started to live together they could have been given life imprisonment for their actions. Undeterred, they both worked for an end to discrimination and criminalisation. They appeared frequently on television and radio, providing many young gay people with their first role model of a happy, well-adjusted gay couple.

Bernard's first lover had been killed in the Royal Air Force. Prevented by prejudice from grieving properly at the time, he later said it had taken him 20 years to come to terms with his loss. After retiring from teaching, he and Dudley together established the Gay Bereavement Project, which provides help to any bereaved lesbian woman or gay man. In 1980 it was the first registered charity allowed by the Charity Commissioners to have the word 'gay' in its title – a significant landmark.

For many years Bernard did much of the daily helpline work and travelled the country giving talks and running workshops. He also provided an essential internal support role. Bernard worked tirelessly for the Project, and his great humour and understanding helped many people through difficult moments.