

**CHALLENGING THE DELUMEAU THESIS:  
EVIDENCE FROM THE *ARTES MORIENDI***

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

The eminent French historian Jean Delumeau has argued that late medieval and early modern clergymen, both Catholic and Protestant, used manuals about dying, the *artes moriendi*, as one of many tools to instill fear and guilt in European Christians. Their deliberate attempt to create a widespread culture of fear and guilt is a process that he calls *culpabilisation*. This paper challenges Delumeau's thesis of *culpabilisation* using evidence from six popular *artes moriendi* of the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries. The authors of these manuals—the unknown author of the original *Ars moriendi*, Martin Luther, Erasmus of Rotterdam, Thomas Becon, Robert Bellarmine, and Jeremy Taylor—were not pastoral terrorists. Their goal was to prepare Christians for a holy death and blessed afterlife and to comfort the dying.

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## **CHALLENGING THE DELUMEAU THESIS: EVIDENCE FROM THE *ARTES MORIENDI***

During the late Middle Ages and early modern period, Europeans were intensely concerned with death.<sup>1</sup> Frequent references to death in the art and literature of this period reveal that death was viewed in many different ways. One of the most common ways to see death was through the *danse macabre*, a popular graphic motif which presented gruesome depictions of partially decomposed bodies or of death lurking in the form of demons waiting to drag the living to their graves. The main message of the *danse macabre*, as of much of the art and literature of this time, was the universality of death. The idea that death could strike anyone—rich or poor, young or old—at any moment hung over Europe. The deep anxiety about death is perhaps not surprising in a world with high infant mortality and a life expectancy of around forty years.<sup>2</sup> Plague and war resulted in the deaths of large segments of society within a short period of time, the Black Death and the Hundred Years War being the most prominent examples.

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<sup>1</sup> There are many books and articles on the history of European attitudes toward death. For a good introduction see Philippe Ariès, *Western Attitudes Toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present*, trans. Patricia M. Ranum (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1974), or see Philippe Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, trans. Helen Weaver (New York: Vintage Books, 1982).

<sup>2</sup> The numbers vary from study to study, but several studies conclude that the mean life expectancy for the late medieval period (roughly 1000 to 1400) was around forty years. W. J. MacLennan and W. I. Sellers arrive at this conclusion, providing scientific data and a history of ageing and dying from Neolithic to Modern times in their article "Ageing Through The Ages," *Proceedings of the Royal College of Physicians Edinburgh* 29 (1999): 71-75.

To many, death was a terrible, inescapable fate, while for others it was a welcome release from a difficult and dangerous world, but for almost all it was seen as the beginning of a new, eternal life, either in heaven or in hell. Medieval and early modern Christians seem to have been particularly concerned with the fate of a person's soul after death and, beginning in the fifteenth century, religious manuals appeared to meet this concern. These manuals, known as the *artes moriendi* or arts of dying, offered practical advice about how to prepare for death. They gave advice and instruction and a warning to those who did not take the task of preparing for death seriously. But according to the authors of these works, the manual's primary purpose was to prepare readers for the moment of death so that they would die well and be worthy of heaven.

The eminent French historian Jean Delumeau suggests, however, that the *ars moriendi* had a different purpose. He contends that both its purpose and effect was to instill fear and guilt. This assessment of the *ars moriendi* serves his larger thesis of the emergence of a guilt culture in Western Europe from the thirteenth to the eighteenth centuries. In fact, Delumeau argues that the *ars moriendi* was one of the many tools that clergymen of this period deliberately used to create a guilt culture.

While historians have debated his larger thesis on the emergence of a guilt culture, no one has directly assessed Delumeau's interpretation of the *ars moriendi*. This paper will test his thesis against several examples, varying from the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries, of the *ars moriendi*. It will show that the evidence from the *ars moriendi* contradicts Delumeau's thesis. The purpose of the *ars moriendi* was not to instill fear and guilt but to provide comfort and encouragement to Christians preparing for death. Before we begin our



examination of the *ars moriendi*, however, we must discuss “the Delumeau thesis”, as it has come to be known, in more detail.

Jean Delumeau has been called one of the “most thoughtful, provocative, and prolific historians in France today.”<sup>3</sup> Thomas N. Tentler and John Patrick Donnelly are just two of the many scholars who praise his work and Donnelly calls him “one of the greatest historians of early modern Europe.”<sup>4</sup> Delumeau calls himself an historian of religious mentalities. Three of his major works—*La peur en Occident (xiv<sup>e</sup>-xviii<sup>e</sup> siècle): Une cité assiégée* (1978), *Le péché et la peur: La culpabilisation en Occident, xiii<sup>e</sup>-xviii<sup>e</sup> siècles* (1983), and *Rassurer et protéger: Le sentiment de sécurité dans l’Occident d’autrefois* (1989)—constitute a series which interprets Western civilization in the late medieval and early modern periods through its fears, its conception of sin, and its pursuit of security.

A major contention of Delumeau’s series is that Europeans during this period were consumed by fear: first of physical threats such as plague, famine, and Turkish invasions, and second—and more significantly—of spiritual dangers such as sin and damnation. Of the three books in this series, *Le péché et la peur* (1983), which appeared in an English translation in 1990 as *Sin and Fear: The Emergence of a Western Guilt Culture, 13<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> Centuries*, presents Delumeau’s main thesis.

Delumeau argues that clergymen were wracked with fear of eternal damnation and haunted by the guilt of their sins. Consequently, he says, their

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<sup>3</sup> Robert Bireley, “Two Works By Jean Delumeau,” *Catholic Historical Review*, 77 (1991), 78.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas N. Tentler, review of *Sin and Fear*, by Jean Delumeau, *The American Historical Review*, 90 (1985): 1186-1187. John Patrick Donnelly, introduction to *Robert Bellarmine: Spiritual Writings*, trans. and ed. John Patrick Donnelly and Roland J. Teske (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 35.

religious outlook was overwhelmingly pessimistic, for they believed that man was inherently evil,<sup>5</sup> that God was eager to punish sinners, and that human life was nothing but a “veil of tears”. Christian teachers and preachers transmitted this pessimism, fear, and guilt complex to the general population through sermons, hymns, and treatises, including the *ars moriendi*. Crucial to Delumeau’s thesis is the argument that clergymen made a deliberate attempt to harness fear and foster guilt, a process he calls *culpabilisation*. The result of this “concerted theological campaign”<sup>6</sup> was the emergence of a widespread collective guilt culture unlike any that the world had ever seen. According to Delumeau, “No civilization had ever attached so much importance to guilt and shame as did the Western world from the thirteenth to the eighteenth centuries.”<sup>7</sup> Although France features most prominently in his study, Delumeau maintains that all of Europe was consumed with fear and guilt. And, although he gives much more attention to Catholicism, he argues that Protestant leaders also instilled in their followers a strong sense of guilt and fear by using the same methods as their Catholic counterparts.

While many scholars praise his work, many others disagree with the Delumeau thesis. The most common criticism against Delumeau is that he fails to prove that a guilt mentality, if it did in fact exist, was widespread. Along with others,<sup>8</sup> Gavin Langmuir sees no clear evidence that the majority of Christian

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<sup>5</sup> Delumeau writes: “At the heart of this cultural ‘melancholy’ lies the bitter certainty that humans are great sinners.” *Sin and Fear*, 189.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 420.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>8</sup> See for example, J. K. Powls, “Repression and Autonomy: Christians and Christianity in the Historical Work of Jean Delumeau,” *The Journal of Modern History* 64 (1992): 368.

laymen had the same beliefs and attitudes as the religious elite upon whom Delumeau depends for his evidence. Even if the writings of the elite had been widely read (which Delumeau suggests they were) it is still, in Langmuir's opinion, "a large jump from that evidence to the use of terms such as 'collective mentality,' 'collective anxiety,' or 'collective guilt complex.'"<sup>9</sup> Peter Stearns agrees and adds: "This top down history at its worst seeks to use massive evidence from Christian intellectuals to convince us that ordinary Christians were paralyzed by their fears of death and damnation."<sup>10</sup>

Of greater significance to this paper is the criticism that Delumeau does not deal directly with alternate evidence or interpretation. While Delumeau presents a massive amount of evidence suggesting that people led melancholy lives filled with fear and self-loathing he ignores or overlooks evidence suggesting that more positive attitudes can also be found during the period in question. A good example of his failure to engage with alternate evidence is seen near the beginning of *Sin and Fear* when he interprets part of a well-known prayer for a happy death. Delumeau argues that the prayer is an illustration of how pastors tried to instill fear of death and damnation, but Robert Bireley points out that Delumeau neglects the prayer's constant references to God's mercy and that this neglect "anticipates the tendency of his volumes."<sup>11</sup>

Delumeau presses his thesis too far and presents a one-sided interpretation of the *ars moriendi*. Larissa Taylor disagrees with Delumeau's thesis and reminds us that we should not generalize about religious mentalities:

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<sup>9</sup> Gavin Langmuir, review of *Sin and Fear*, by Jean Delumeau, *Speculum* 67 (1992): 658.

<sup>10</sup> Peter N. Stearns, review of *Sin and Fear*, by Jean Delumeau, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 23 (1992): 157.

<sup>11</sup> Robert Bireley, "Two Works By Jean Delumeau," 82.

“It would take quite a pair of rose-colored glasses to deny that themes of death and the afterlife figured prominently in the sermons and religious literature of the late Middle Ages and Reformation, or that some individuals were consumed by fear and guilt. Yet recent research suggests a more complex reality.”<sup>12</sup> She points to the work of Eamon Duffy whose research on the wills of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Englishmen and women testifies “not to a morbid obsession with death but to a vigorous relish for life.”<sup>13</sup> Corrie Norman also questions the Delumeau thesis and reminds us that religious mentalities are complex.<sup>14</sup> As this paper evaluates Delumeau’s use of evidence it will attempt to provide a balanced interpretation of the *ars moriendi*.

In his chapter on the *ars moriendi*, Delumeau notes that not all manuals are the same and that the style of the manuals changed over time.<sup>15</sup> He recognizes that some have a more consoling tone while others are “terroristic”, although the latter, he claims, were always more popular.<sup>16</sup> He also identifies a number of characteristics that are common to the *ars moriendi* and claims that these support his thesis that the clergy tried to instill fear and guilt.

First, Delumeau notes that the early fifteenth-century *ars moriendi* portrayed a strong sense of the macabre, and gave place to “suicidal

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<sup>12</sup> Larissa Taylor, “God of Judgment, God of Love: Catholic Preaching in France, 1460-1560,” *Historical Reflections* 28 (2000): 249.

<sup>13</sup> Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England 1400-1580* (New Haven, 1992), 301.

<sup>14</sup> Corrie Norman, “The Social History of Preaching: Italy,” in *Preachers and People in the Reformations and Early Modern Period*, ed. Larissa Taylor (Boston: Brill, 2001), 177-9.

<sup>15</sup> Delumeau, *Sin and Fear*, 348-9.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 349.

temptations”.<sup>17</sup> But he is far more interested in manuals of the late sixteenth, and especially the seventeenth century, and notes that in these the sense of the macabre grew more discreet and the place given to suicidal temptations diminished.<sup>18</sup> There was now, he argues, more emphasis given to the idea of a lengthy preparation for death, one that lasts an entire life. This lifelong preparation consisted of developing piety, performing good works, and obeying God’s commandments. To assist the reader, the manuals often discussed “practices of piety that would be useful either in the usual course of life or towards its end.”<sup>19</sup>

Despite their emphasis on lifelong preparation, the manuals also stressed the importance of the final moments of life and, according to Delumeau, they teach that a person’s eternal fate is decided by the state of his or her soul at the final moment before death, also known as the “fatal moment”.<sup>20</sup> In addition to stressing the importance of the final moment, the manuals emphasize the disturbing side of the final days and encourage lifelong preparation for the final hour.<sup>21</sup>

Delumeau informs us that the manuals encourage the practice of meditating on death because “the continual thought of death ultimately quells all vices.”<sup>22</sup> And, to help readers think clearly and often of death, the *artes moriendi* indulge in morbid details such as the image of worms eating the flesh of the

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 350.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 349.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 350.

dead.<sup>23</sup> They also recommend that people speak of death in their prayers, visit cemeteries, watch saintly people die, look at images of skulls, and view “the spectacle of the decomposing body.”<sup>24</sup> They encourage any practice that calls to mind the thought of death, and especially the thought that the body will one day be eaten by worms and turn to dust.<sup>25</sup> According to Delumeau, the manuals also teach that it is good to meditate on the torments of hell and to have the fear of damnation always before you throughout your life.

For Delumeau, the most important characteristic of all, and “the great common denominator” of the *ars moriendi*, is the concept of *contemptus mundi*.<sup>26</sup> The *ars moriendi*, he argues, taught that hatred of the world should grow into contempt of life and a desire for death because this brings one closer to God.<sup>27</sup> Delumeau sees *contemptus mundi* as a pessimistic attitude that was very important to the process of *culpabilisation*.

Each of the six *artes moriendi* that we will use to test Delumeau’s thesis was popular in its day and is recognized as a significant example of its literary tradition. They come from various parts of Europe (England, France, Germany, and Switzerland). Three of the six works are by Catholics and the other three by Protestants.

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 351.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 353.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 351.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 352.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 353.

Any proper study of the *ars moriendi* must include the work that gave birth to the literary tradition and which gave it its name. This is, of course, the famous *Ars moriendi* written in the early fifteenth century. Mary Catherine O'Connor believes that the author of this work was influenced by Jean Charlier de Gerson (1363-1429), chancellor of the University of Paris, who devoted a chapter of his catechetical *Opusculum tripartitum* to the subject of the art of death.<sup>28</sup> However, the author also incorporated much that was his own.

We do not know the author, exact date of composition, or a precise place of origin for the *Ars moriendi*. We know from several extant copies dated to the time of the Council of Constance that the work was completed by 1418,<sup>29</sup> and the presence of a manuscript dated 1409 containing both a Low German and a Latin version supports a hypothesis of both an earlier and a Low German origin.<sup>30</sup> What is certain is that the work was very popular and that it quickly spread throughout Europe.

O'Connor found that the *Ars moriendi* exists, in one of several versions, in at least 300 manuscripts in Latin and the Western vernaculars. Over 100 of these copies were made before 1500, and copies continued to be produced frequently during the first half of the sixteenth century and even up to the first years of the seventeenth.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Mary Catherine O'Connor, *The Art of Dying Well: The Development of the Ars Moriendi* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1942), 21.

<sup>29</sup> Nancy Lee Beaty, *The Craft of Dying: A Study in the Literary Tradition of the Ars Moriendi in England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 2.

<sup>30</sup> Mary Etta Scott, "Go, Crysten Soul: A Critical Edition of *The Crafts of Dying*" (Ph.D. dissertation, Miami University, 1975), 15.

<sup>31</sup> O'Connor, *The Art of Dying Well*, 1-2.

The title *Ars moriendi* is a generic one which actually refers to two distinct, though related, basic texts, a shorter and a longer one. The longer version is often referred to as the *Tractatus artis bene moriendi* or *Speculum artis bene moriendi*. The shorter version—about a third as long as the other—is generally called *Ars moriendi*, but, as noted earlier, this title is frequently used to refer to the longer version as well. To distinguish more easily between the two versions, modern scholars often refer to the shorter version as the QS after its *incipit*, “Quamvis secundum.”

O'Connor held that the *Tractatus* is the earlier version and that the QS is basically an abridged version of one chapter of the former work. The latter consists of a group of eleven woodcuts, five depicting deathbed temptations, five depicting corresponding “inspirations” to help people combat these temptations, and one representing the moment of death. Each woodcut is accompanied by a single page of text. The block book was therefore designed for the literate as well as illiterate. Both the long and short versions were extremely popular,<sup>32</sup> but more copies of the *Tractatus* survived and only the *Tractatus* text is known to have been translated into English. The English version, known as *The Craft of Dying*, survives in at least eleven manuscripts copied between 1440 and 1500.<sup>33</sup>

The *ars moriendi* tradition grew significantly in the first half of the sixteenth century with the introduction of more manuals by different authors. Among those who wrote these manuals were two of the century's most famous religious thinkers: Martin Luther and Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam. Luther's

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<sup>32</sup> Beaty, *The Craft of Dying*, 2; Scott, “Go, Crysten Soul,” 1; O'Connor, *The Art of Dying Well*, 1.

<sup>33</sup> Scott, “Go, Crysten Soul,” 1. This paper will use the English version found in *The Book of the Craft of Dying and Other Early English Tracts Concerning Death*, ed. Frances M. M. Comper (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1917).



*Sermon von Bereitung zum Sterben* (*A Sermon on Preparing to Die*) was first printed in November 1519.<sup>34</sup> Although it was written two years after the 95 Theses at Wittenberg, O'Connor notes that it "contains nothing contrary to Catholic doctrine."<sup>35</sup> She suggests that the theme of this short tract is "the overcoming of the fears born of the pictures of death, sin, and hell presented by the devil, by means of those which Christ presents—life, goodness, and heaven," and she thinks it is probably inspired by the scheme of the old block book.<sup>36</sup> The *Sermon* was very popular as it appeared in twenty-two editions within three years of its initial publication.<sup>37</sup>

Erasmus contributed to the *ars moriendi* tradition in 1534 when his *De praeparatione ad mortem* (*Preparing For Death*) appeared from the Froben Press in Basel.<sup>38</sup> According to John W. O'Malley, "There was no strong precedent for the form Erasmus' treatise assumed, that is, a continuous discourse that was more than a collection of disparate pieces, which is what the two versions of the original *Ars moriendi* had been. ... It seems safe to say that Erasmus' treatise created for the genre its 'modern' or humanistic form."<sup>39</sup> The work was original in its content

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<sup>34</sup> All references to this work are to Martin H. Bertram's English translation found in *Luther's Works*, vol. 42, *Devotional Writings*, ed. Martin O. Dietrich (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969).

<sup>35</sup> O'Connor, *The Art of Dying Well*, 190.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> John W. O'Malley, introduction to *Collected Works of Erasmus* (CWE), vol. 70, ed. John W. O'Malley (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), xxvii.

<sup>38</sup> All references to this work are to John N. Grant's English translation found in *Collected Works of Erasmus*, vol. 70, *Spiritualia and Pastoralia*, ed. John W. O'Malley (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998).

<sup>39</sup> O'Malley, introduction to CWE: 70, xxviii.

as well. It emphasized the need for a righteous life as necessary preparation for death and discussed at some length of what a righteous life consists.

*De praeparatione ad mortem* turned out to be one of Erasmus's most popular works. It ran through some twenty Latin editions in six years<sup>40</sup> and fifty-nine editions before 1566.<sup>41</sup> It appeared in a number of vernacular editions as well, including French, Dutch, Spanish, German, and English in the first six years alone.<sup>42</sup>

Also from the sixteenth century is Thomas Becon's *The Solace of the Soule*, which the author composed in 1548.<sup>43</sup> The full title of the work is *The Solace of the Soule veri comfortable against the bytter stormes of sicknes and death greatly encouragyng the faithful both patiently and thankfully to suffer the good pleasure of God in all kinde of aduersytye*. In this brief treatise, Becon, a Calvinist preacher, includes advice on "how they are to be comforted which are in peril of death" as well as prayers to be said by and for those who are near death. Becon was well-known in England for his devotional works. He wrote forty-seven in all, some of which, including *The Solace of the Soule* and *The Sicke Mannes Salve* (another work about death) were among the best selling Elizabethan devotional works in general.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, xxvi.

<sup>41</sup> Hilmar M. Pabel, "Humanism and Early Modern Catholicism: Erasmus of Rotterdam's *Ars Moriendi*," in *Early Modern Catholicism: Essays in Honour of John W. O'Malley, S. J.*, eds. Kathleen M. Comerford and Hilmar M. Pabel (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 26.

<sup>42</sup> O'Malley, introduction to *CWE*: 70, xxvi.

<sup>43</sup> All references to this work are to *The Catechism of Thomas Becon, S. T. P., With Other Pieces Written by Him in the Reign of King Edward the Sixth*, ed. Rev. John Ayre (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1844).

<sup>44</sup> Beaty, *The Craft of Dying*, 108; Richard Wunderli and Gerald Broce, "The Final Moment before Death in Early Modern England," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 20 (1989): 264.

One of the best known *artes moriendi* of the seventeenth century was Saint Robert Bellarmine's *De arte bene moriendi* (*The Art of Dying Well*).<sup>45</sup> Bellarmine, a distinguished Jesuit theologian and cardinal who won wide recognition for his spiritual writings,<sup>46</sup> wrote this work in 1619, two years before his death. The book is divided into two main sections; the first lists sixteen "rules of the art of dying well" which should be applied throughout one's life, while the second explains "the art of dying well as death draws near." O'Malley has noted that "several passages in *The Art of Dying Well* indicate that it was written for Christians in all walks of life,"<sup>47</sup> which helps to explain its popularity. The book appeared in 56 editions and was translated into at least ten languages, including French, Italian, German, Spanish, English, Flemish, Polish, Hungarian, Dutch, and Czech.<sup>48</sup>

If Bellarmine's *The Art of Dying Well* is the most authoritative Catholic *ars moriendi* to come out of the seventeenth century, Jeremy Taylor's *The Rule and Exercises of Holy Dying* is quite possibly the greatest by a Protestant.<sup>49</sup> The treatise consists of five chapters, including one offering advice to those attending people near death. Like Erasmus's *ars moriendi*, this work teaches that the best preparation for a holy death is a holy life. Taylor's treatise first appeared in 1651 and was immensely popular. It has been celebrated as not only a work of spiritual

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<sup>45</sup> All references to this work are to the English translation by John Patrick Donnelly and Roland J. Teske found in *Robert Bellarmine: Spiritual Writings*, trans. and ed. John Patrick Donnelly and Roland J. Teske (New York: Paulist Press, 1989).

<sup>46</sup> John W. O'Malley, preface to *Robert Bellarmine: Spiritual Writings*, trans. and ed. John Patrick Donnelly and Roland J. Teske (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 3.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 23-4.

<sup>49</sup> All references to this work are to Jeremy Taylor, *The Rule and Exercises of Holy Dying*, ed. Thomas S. Kepler (New York: The World Publishing Company, 1952).

worth but of great literary merit,<sup>50</sup> prompting Nancy Lee Beaty to call it the “artistic climax” of the English *ars moriendi* tradition.<sup>51</sup>

A number of recent books and articles examine our six manuals and also the *ars moriendi* in general. Although most of them do not directly address Delumeau’s thesis, many of their observations about the *ars moriendi* contradict it. The consensus is that the art of dying manuals are meant to assist and comfort Christians who are preparing for death. O’Connor writes of the original manual that

[i]n spite of its purpose the *Ars moriendi* is not a doleful book—no clarion call to repentance. There is little stress upon hell, only hope of heaven. Always is Moriens encouraged and consoled. ... Again and again he is reminded of the pity and the mercy of God, which is above all wickedness. The *Ars moriendi* is no more intended to frighten and depress than is any medieval book on hunting and hawking or on table manners for children.<sup>52</sup>

Mary Etta Scott agrees with this interpretation, adding: “Its message is one of hope and consolation, a prospect of immortality, and an assurance that man can make the final choice alone to triumph over the devil and be with God everlastingly.”<sup>53</sup>

Dick Akerboom sees many similarities between the original *Ars moriendi* and Luther’s *Sermon von der Bereitung zum Sterben* and suggests that both provide comfort and assistance to the dying. Luther’s treatise, he notes, does so mainly by focusing attention on the image of Christ, which is the greatest source

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<sup>50</sup> O’Connor, *The Art of Dying Well*, 208.

<sup>51</sup> Beaty, *The Craft of Dying*, 197.

<sup>52</sup> O’Connor, *The Art of Dying Well*, 5.

<sup>53</sup> Scott, “Go, Crysten Soul,” 27.

of inspiration and comfort.<sup>54</sup> Hilmar Pabel argues that the pastoral intent of Erasmus's *De praeparatione ad mortem* is to alleviate anxiety about dying and death.<sup>55</sup> He explains that Erasmus recast the *ars moriendi* tradition in the form of a humanist rhetoric of consolation<sup>56</sup> and that "[t]he aim of Erasmus's rhetorical theology was to console his readers (and possibly himself too), not to engage in theoretical discussions more appropriate to academic theologians."<sup>57</sup> John O'Malley writes that Bellarmine's *De arte bene moriendi* "defies facile categorization." It is, he explains, not entirely a work of consolation nor an example of "pastoral terrorism" but instead "a much more detached, more moralistic—less emotional—consideration" that could be described as Stoical.<sup>58</sup> Beaty describes Taylor's *The Rule and Exercises of Holy Dying* as a masterful work with a powerful and positive message, namely that "God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself" and that over the faithful "death shall have no dominion."<sup>59</sup> Significantly, she concludes that "[r]ather than being a breakaway from, *Holy Dying* is in fact the noble culmination of, its devotional tradition."<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Dick Akerboom, "'...Only the Image of Christ in Us': Continuity and Discontinuity between the Late Medieval *ars moriendi* and Luther's *Sermon von der Bereitung zum Sterben*," in *Spirituality Renewed: Studies on Significant Representatives of the Modern Devotion*, eds. Hein Blommestijn, Charles Caspers, and Rijcklof Hofman (Dudley, Massachusetts: Peeters, 2003).

<sup>55</sup> Pabel, "Humanism and Early Modern Catholicism," 30.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>58</sup> John W. O'Malley, preface to *Robert Bellarmine: Spiritual Writings*, trans. and ed. John Patrick Donnelly and Roland J. Teske (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 7.

<sup>59</sup> Beaty, *The Craft of Dying*, 270. The words are Taylor's.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 269.

The *artes moriendi* represent an effort of pastoral consolation and encouragement, not terrorism. Their purpose is two-fold: first, to prepare Christians for a holy death and blessed heavenly inheritance, second, to comfort the dying. The *artes moriendi* prepare the dying in a number of ways. First, they emphasize the need for a lengthy preparation for death. They warn that death can come at any moment and in many different ways. They teach that Christians should therefore not think that they can be rebellious while young and repent later in life, for death often comes earlier than expected. Christians also should not put off repentance until death draws near because death can come suddenly and without warning and because deathbed repentance is seldom sufficient to save the sinner. Taylor writes that resolving ahead of time “to repent upon our death-bed is the greatest mockery of God in the world.”<sup>61</sup>

The manuals teach that Christians must constantly prepare for death, for, as Bellarmine writes, “one who desires to die well should live well.”<sup>62</sup> Taylor tells his readers to “seize upon the present,”<sup>63</sup> start preparing for death today, and continue preparing throughout their lives. Erasmus placed so much emphasis on the need for a righteous life as preparation for death that his manual has been called an art of living, or *ars vivendi*, rather than of dying.<sup>64</sup>

The manuals list a number of precepts to be practiced throughout life. Bellarmine informs readers how to acquire the “three moral virtues”—sobriety, justice, and piety—and also discusses the importance of regular prayer, fasting,

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<sup>61</sup> Taylor, *The Rule and Exercises of Holy Dying*, 215.

<sup>62</sup> Bellarmine, *De arte bene moriendi*, 239.

<sup>63</sup> Taylor, *The Rule and Exercises of Holy Dying*, 22.

<sup>64</sup> John N. Grant, introductory note to *Preparing For Death*, CWE: 70, 390; O'Malley, introduction to CWE: 70, xxviii.

and almsgiving.<sup>65</sup> Erasmus writes that the key to living and dying well is the pursuit of piety and spirituality.<sup>66</sup> Taylor lists several virtues which must be practiced throughout one's life—charity being the chief among them—and offers practical advice and exercises for acquiring each.<sup>67</sup> Luther does not discuss virtues that ought to be developed, but he agrees that individuals should never cease preparing for death. In keeping with the doctrine of *sola fide*, he writes: “we should implore God and his dear saints our whole life long for true faith in the last hour.”<sup>68</sup>

The manuals agree that one of the most important methods of preparation for death is regular repentance. In fact they insist that man must repent of his sins and live God's commandments in order to die well. Bellarmine in particular stresses the need to repent and much of his treatise is taken up with a discussion of penance. The frequency and force with which he and other clergymen wrote about this topic clearly shows that they wanted Christians to take it seriously. On the importance of repentance, Bellarmine writes that

nothing more useful can be devised than that those concerned about their eternal salvation diligently examine their conscience twice every day, that is, in the morning and in the evening. ... If this examination is correctly made morning and evening, or at least once a day, it will be almost impossible to sin while dying or to die while sinning.<sup>69</sup>

Taylor likewise encourages daily self-examination and highlights the need for regular repentance. He explains that it will be easier for us in the end if we repent

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<sup>65</sup> Bellarmine, *De arte bene moriendi*, 257-79.

<sup>66</sup> Erasmus, *De praeparatione ad mortem*, 411.

<sup>67</sup> Taylor, *The Rule and Exercises of Holy Dying*, 55-81.

<sup>68</sup> Luther, *Sermon von Bereitung zum Sterben*, 114.

<sup>69</sup> Bellarmine, *De arte bene moriendi*, 253.

daily and as we commit each sin, so that we are not burdened upon our deathbeds with the daunting task of repenting for a lifetime's worth of sins.<sup>70</sup>

Preparation for a holy death also includes regular meditation on death. Although Delumeau uses this point as evidence in support of his thesis, Carlos Eire notes that it is wrong to assume that an interest in death, meditation on death, or even "devotion to the cult of death" necessarily indicates a negative, pathological attitude,<sup>71</sup> and we find that the *artes moriendi* do not try to instill such an attitude when they encourage meditation on death. The manuals teach that meditating on death will help individuals put earthly concerns and pursuits into perspective and inspire them to use their time effectively and live more righteously.<sup>72</sup>

The manuals discuss a number of devices which can help one meditate effectively on death. Erasmus suggests that it is helpful to witness a righteous man's death so that it will serve as a reminder of our own impending death and as an example of how to die well.<sup>73</sup> Taylor lists a number of daily practices that can serve as regular reminders of death, including thinking of sleep as an image of death.<sup>74</sup> Luther instructs that meditation on death should not be encouraged at times when it might cause undue fears, such as when a person is approaching death. This instruction is further evidence that the practice of meditating on

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<sup>70</sup> Taylor, *The Rule and Exercises of Holy Dying*, 62-3, 70.

<sup>71</sup> Carlos Eire, *From Madrid to Purgatory: The art and craft of dying in sixteenth-century Spain* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 531-2.

<sup>72</sup> Bellarmine, *De arte bene moriendi*, 367; Erasmus, *De praeparatione ad mortem*, 396-7; Taylor, *The Rule and Exercises of Holy Dying*, 56, 66; Luther, *Sermon von Bereitung zum Sterben*, 101-2.

<sup>73</sup> Erasmus, *De praeparatione ad mortem*, 412.

<sup>74</sup> Taylor, *The Rule and Exercises of Holy Dying*, 66.



death is meant to provide comfort rather than to provoke fear. Luther tells us that the proper time to meditate on death is when one is healthy and in good spirits for this is when the remembrance of death will be of greatest benefit.<sup>76</sup>

Closely associated with the advice to meditate on death is the admonition to meditate on the torments of hell and damnation. The manuals explain that the purpose of meditating on hell is to deter one from sinning and motivate one to live more righteously.<sup>76</sup> To this end, they sometimes provide a frightening picture of hell. Bellarmine and Erasmus in particular provide graphic details of the torments of hell. Bellarmine describes hell as a dark, cramped, and vicious place where “every power of the intelligent soul is tortured along with all the senses, whether internal or external, and not one after the other” but all at once and forever.<sup>77</sup> Erasmus provides a similar picture and adds that the sufferings of hell “are so severe that they cannot be grasped by the human intellect.”<sup>78</sup>

While meditating on the torments of hell is meant to instill a certain amount of fear, it is not meant to inspire an intense pathological attitude. The practice should inspire a healthy fear that will motivate one to work towards a positive end, namely heavenly reward. In his manual on death, Erasmus acknowledges that there are two types of fear. There is one type that leads to despair; this is of the devil and should be avoided. The other type is “the companion of righteousness”<sup>79</sup> for it motivates us to do good and guards us

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<sup>76</sup> Luther, *Sermon von Bereitung zum Sterben*, 102.

<sup>76</sup> Bellarmine, *De arte bene moriendi*, 330-4; Erasmus, *De praeparatione ad mortem*, 408; *The Craft of Dying*, 36.

<sup>77</sup> Bellarmine, *De arte bene moriendi*, 333.

<sup>78</sup> Erasmus, *De praeparatione ad mortem*, 408.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 424.

against doing evil: it “makes us have less confidence in our own strength, work more keenly with the help of the Spirit, and preserve more carefully the gifts of God.”<sup>80</sup> This is the type of fear that Erasmus and the other authors of the *artes moriendi* hope to instill, and their works reflect that hope. *The Craft of Dying* explains that it is better to inspire the unrepentant with a “wholesome fear” so that they might be saved than it is to flatter them with false assurances. To do the latter would be “contrary to Christian religion” and “devil-like”.<sup>81</sup>

It is significant that the manuals never discuss the torments of hell without immediately afterwards describing the joys of heaven. In fact, they treat the latter more extensively and encourage readers to meditate regularly on the joys of heaven and the rewards of a righteous life. *The Craft of Dying* assures Christians that great blessings wait for those who die in a state of holiness and that the reward is nothing less than “everlasting bliss”.<sup>82</sup> Taylor and Becon write that glorious and eternal blessings await the righteous.<sup>83</sup> Immediately following his graphic depiction of hell, Bellarmine presents an equally detailed description of heaven and of the joy that awaits the righteous there. He describes Heaven as being bright and spacious and wonderful and adds that “God has truly prepared in the heavenly fatherland joy, happiness, pleasure, delight, sweetness, and contentment, such as no mortal has ever tasted or has been able to attain in thought.”<sup>84</sup> Erasmus writes that whereas the thought of hell will discourage one

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<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> *The Craft of Dying*, 36.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>83</sup> Taylor, *The Rule and Exercises of Holy Dying*, 23-4, 32; Becon, *The Solace of the Soule*, 571, 580.

<sup>84</sup> Bellarmine, *De arte bene moriendi*, 337.

from sinning, regular meditation on Heaven and the fate of the righteous will encourage one to do good.<sup>85</sup>

While the manuals encourage preparation for judgment day and meditation on the fate of the wicked and righteous, they discourage people from wondering what their personal fate will be. Luther and Taylor, in particular, stress this point very strongly. Luther explains that thinking about one's fate will only cause anxiety and, he writes, "When man is assailed by thoughts regarding his election, he is being assailed by hell."<sup>86</sup> Taylor adds that one must not trouble oneself with thoughts of what his fate will be, but simply press forward in doing good and exercising faith in Christ.<sup>87</sup>

Another important practice in preparing for a holy death and blessed afterlife is developing an attitude of *contemptus mundi*, accompanied by a longing for death. Delumeau claims that this idea supports his thesis because he defines *contemptus mundi* as an attitude that "devalued sexuality, was disgusted by procreation and childbirth, laid heavy stress on our miseries and diseases, had a strong taste for the macabre, and pronounced the human mind incapable of any true knowledge."<sup>88</sup> However, the examples that he provides in *Sin and Fear* do not reflect such a pessimistic and fearful attitude. Both the examples that he provides and those that appear in other *artes moriendi* reflect a positive attitude. They express an attitude of hope and of striving for something better, namely a closer relationship with God. For example, the quotations Delumeau presents

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<sup>85</sup> Erasmus, *De praeparatione ad mortem*, 396-7.

<sup>86</sup> Luther, *Sermon von Bereitung zum Sterben*, 102.

<sup>87</sup> Taylor, *The Rule and Exercises of Holy Dying*, 282.

<sup>88</sup> Delumeau, *Sin and Fear*, 556.

speak of “renouncing the maxims and examples of the world” because “the way of the world [is] opposed to God’s way.” They tell Christians that they must not be preoccupied with worldly possessions and the trivial concerns of daily life, for the business of this world “is a great obstacle to the business of Jesus Christ.”<sup>89</sup> Christians should remember that life on earth is short and miserable compared to life in Heaven. They also must realize that the thoughts and designs of the natural man are base compared to the mind and will of God. Christians should therefore reject the things of this world and long to be one with Christ.<sup>90</sup>

*The Craft of Dying* teaches that too much concern for the things of this world, including human relationships and material possessions, causes anxiety and prevents one from uniting with Christ. We should not hate human relationships or material possessions, but we should be willing to abandon them if the Lord calls us to do so.<sup>91</sup> Taylor advises men and women that they should neglect the things of this world whenever they prudently may and instead concern themselves only with the things of God.<sup>92</sup> Those who do this will find it easier to face death without fear or reservation.<sup>93</sup> Delumeau chooses to see the idea of *contemptus mundi* in a negative light, but it should not be seen in this way. There is nothing to indicate that the authors of the *artes moriendi* did so or that they used this concept to instill fear and guilt.

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<sup>89</sup> These quotations are from Antoine Yvan’s *Trompette du ciel qui esveille les pécheurs et les excite a se convertir* (1661). Delumeau, *Sin and Fear*, 352.

<sup>90</sup> Delumeau, *Sin and Fear*, 352.

<sup>91</sup> *The Craft of Dying*, 20.

<sup>92</sup> Taylor, *The Rule and Exercises of Holy Dying*, 73.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 142, 161.

In connection with the concept of *contemptus mundi*, the manuals stress the idea that death is a welcome release from a troubled world. *The Craft of Dying* declares that death is desirable for good men<sup>94</sup> and that only those who do not understand the gospel, or do not truly love God, will despair at having to leave this world.<sup>95</sup> Erasmus and Bellarmine refer to death as a gateway to a better world and to eternal life.<sup>96</sup> Taylor similarly calls death a restful harbour for the righteous,<sup>97</sup> adding that good men are made happier for dying.<sup>98</sup> Luther calls death a new and blessed birth<sup>99</sup> while Becon writes that it is a joy to be “loosened from this wretched body, and be with Christ.”<sup>100</sup>

While the manuals teach that death is desirable, it is important to note that they do not encourage readers to bring about their deaths or wait expectantly for them. As noted above, they teach readers to “seize upon the present” and use their time on earth productively. Taylor writes that we must never “call violently for Death: you are not patient, unless you be content to live.”<sup>101</sup> We should simply accept death when it comes, for it is the will of God who determines when and how best we should die.

The manuals attempt to comfort the dying in a number of ways. First, they attempt to liberate the dying from obsession with guilt, which can lead to despair.

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<sup>94</sup> *The Craft of Dying*, 5-6.

<sup>95</sup> *The Craft of Dying*, 16.

<sup>96</sup> Bellarmine, *De arte bene moriendi*, 237; Erasmus, *De praeparatione ad mortem*, 393-5.

<sup>97</sup> Taylor, *The Rule and Exercises of Holy Dying*, 144.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.

<sup>99</sup> Luther, *Sermon von Bereitung zum Sterben*, 100.

<sup>100</sup> Becon, *The Solace of the Soule*, 571.

<sup>101</sup> Taylor, *The Rule and Exercises of Holy Dying*, 188.

They do this by urging Christians to have faith in the power of forgiveness and to forget their sins once they have repented of them. They also teach that it is unhealthy to be obsessed with guilt. Luther, for example, encourages Christians to be aware of their sins so that they might be able to repent of them, but he warns that they must not dwell on their sins and “brood over [them] too much.”<sup>102</sup> He writes that an over-active, fearful conscience “is the water that the devil has been seeking for his mill. He makes our sins seem large and numerous. He reminds us of all who have sinned and of the many who were damned for lesser sins than ours so as to make us despair or die reluctantly, thus forgetting God and being found disobedient in the hour of death.”<sup>103</sup> Luther teaches that we must not give in to these fears. Rather, we must believe in God’s promise that He forgives those who repent.

The other authors also urge their readers to overcome obsession with guilt and to resist the temptation to despair. Erasmus calls the temptation to despair “the gravest of all sins”<sup>104</sup> because it extinguishes “the spark of faith and hope” and torments the dying with thoughts of hell<sup>105</sup> and he provides a list of encouraging phrases that the dying should use to answer the Devil and all others who tempt them to despair. For example, when the Devil says “Your crimes exceed in number the grains of ‘sand that is on the seashore,’” the dying are to reply, “More plentiful is the compassion of the Lord.”<sup>106</sup> And when the Devil

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<sup>102</sup> Luther, *Sermon von Bereitung zum Sterben*, 102.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>104</sup> Erasmus, *De praeparatione ad mortem*, 439.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 440.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 442.

declares, “But God does not listen to sinners,” the dying are to answer, “But he listens to the repentant, and he died for sinners.”<sup>107</sup> Luther and Becon strongly urge their readers to ignore Satan’s lies and temptations and to strengthen themselves by offering prayers to God and exercising faith in Jesus.<sup>108</sup> Taylor gives words of encouragement when he writes that God and his angels stand ready to assist the dying overcome the Devil’s temptations and ease their troubled minds.<sup>109</sup>

The manuals teach Christians to love God and have faith in his forgiveness. This is perhaps the most comforting and important message that the *artes moriendi* deliver, and it is repeated frequently in each of the manuals. The manuals portray God as a merciful and loving Father who will care and provide for his children,<sup>110</sup> not as the “lynx-eyed” God that Delumeau mentions.<sup>111</sup> Erasmus writes with confidence that “those who do not know that God has infinite compassion do not know God.”<sup>112</sup> Bellarmine tells us repeatedly that God is just and good and “merciful beyond measure,” that He makes it possible for us to be forgiven, and that he wants to bless us with eternal life.<sup>113</sup> Taylor writes that God “offers us great kindness and entreats us to be happy.”<sup>114</sup> He also writes that God wants the best for His children, noting that God punishes the sinner only because

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<sup>107</sup>*Ibid.*, 443.

<sup>108</sup> Becon, *The Solace of the Soule*, 577; Luther, *Sermon von Bereitung zum Sterben*, 114.

<sup>109</sup> Taylor, *The Rule and Exercises of Holy Dying*, 58-9.

<sup>110</sup> Becon calls God the “most loving Father” (*The Solace of the Soule*, 572).

<sup>111</sup> Delumeau, *Sin and Fear*, 401.

<sup>112</sup> Erasmus, *De praeparatione ad mortem*, 394.

<sup>113</sup> Bellarmine, *De arte bene moriendi*, 282.

<sup>114</sup> Taylor, *The Rule and Exercises of Holy Dying*, 226.

He loves him: "it is certain that God in these cases is angry and loving, chastises the sin to amend the person, and smites that He may cure, and judges that He may absolve."<sup>116</sup> Above all, Taylor sees the Father as a God of peace and consolation<sup>116</sup> and adds that his gospel is comforting.<sup>117</sup> God will personally help the afflicted and will send his "Angels to keep us from violence and evil company, from temptations and surprises, and His Holy Spirit to guide us in holy ways."<sup>118</sup> Becon adds: "In afflictions and troubles therefore dost thou learn to conceive and nourish a good and undoubted hope of God, that even in the most grievous afflictions of all, where no help at all appeareth, thou mayest trust unto him, being now thoroughly taught his custom in delivering and saving his people."<sup>119</sup>

Luther insists that one has a duty to believe in a loving God. He writes that "the devil is determined to blast God's love from a man's mind and to arouse thoughts of God's wrath" but that man must not accept these thoughts. Rather, he must believe in the goodness of God.<sup>120</sup> Luther writes that "we ought to thank him with a joyful heart for showing us such wonderful, rich, and immeasurable grace and mercy against death, hell, and sin, and to laud and love his grace rather than fearing death so greatly."<sup>121</sup>

Perhaps the most common piece of advice for overcoming the temptation to despair is for Christians to think of the mercy and majesty of Christ and to

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<sup>116</sup>*Ibid.*, 291.

<sup>116</sup> Taylor, *The Rule and Exercises of Holy Dying*, 191.

<sup>117</sup>*Ibid.*, 204.

<sup>118</sup>*Ibid.*, 283.

<sup>119</sup> Becon, *The Solace of the Soule*, 573

<sup>120</sup> Luther, *Sermon von Bereitung zum Sterben*, 103.

<sup>121</sup>*Ibid.*, 115.



believe that His atonement is able to cleanse the sinner and make him worthy of heavenly blessings. Akerboom observes that “[t]he *ars moriendi* literature has a strong concentration on Christ.”<sup>122</sup> Pabel notes that “Faith in Christ lies at the very core of the life-long preparation for death advocated by Erasmus and is therefore central to his rhetoric of consolation.”<sup>123</sup>

The *artes moriendi* teach that the dying should look to Christ as their saviour, redeemer, and comforter. We are told repeatedly that Christ came to earth to save mankind from hell, that he overcame sin through his atonement and death through his resurrection and that he makes it possible for every person to overcome them as well. Because of Christ, we can live again after we die. Because of Christ, we can be forgiven of our sins and enter into Heaven.

We read in *The Craft of Dying* that the knowledge of what Christ has done for us should bring us peace and comfort:

What man is he that should not be ravished and drawn to hope, and have full confidence in God, and he take heed diligently of the disposition of Christ’s body in the cross. Take heed and see: His head is inclined to salve thee; His mouth to kiss thee; His arms spread to be-clip [embrace] thee; His hands thrilled to give thee; His side opened to love thee; His body along strait to give all Himself to thee.<sup>124</sup>

Luther states that our faith in Christ should remove all fear and guilt from our minds. Because of Christ, he writes, “you may view your sins in safety without tormenting your conscience. Here sins are never sins, for here they are overcome and swallowed up in Christ.”<sup>125</sup> For Luther, Christ is the key to overcoming all troubles and fears: “Christ, the picture of life and of grace over against the picture

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<sup>122</sup> Akerboom, “...Only the Image of Christ in Us,” 248.

<sup>123</sup> Pabel, “Humanism and Early Modern Catholicism,” 33.

<sup>124</sup> *The Craft of Dying*, 14.

<sup>125</sup> Luther, *Sermon von Bereitung zum Sterben*, 105.

of death and sin, is our consolation.”<sup>126</sup> Erasmus notes that just as Christ overcame sin and death for us, he will also help us overcome all our fears.<sup>127</sup> Even the very thought of Christ, he writes, should encourage us and remove our fears: “The contemplation of Christ crucified for us has such great force that despair is turned into hope, hope into exultation.”<sup>128</sup> Becon writes that Christ is our only hope for salvation<sup>129</sup> but that, if we trust in him, he will surely save us. He promises that if you call on Him, “Christ will hear thee, doubt not; he will have mercy on thee, he will forgive thy sins, yea, thou shalt be with him in paradise.” “[T]herefore,” he continues, “lay hand on this Christ, cleave to him with tooth and nail, commit thy soul unto him.”<sup>130</sup>

The *artes moriendi* teach that God and Christ are the most important sources of consolation for the dying. However, they also teach that friends and clergy can and should provide comfort to those approaching death. Roger Chartier notes that both the “faithful friend” and clergy have a prominent place in the *artes moriendi*. He observes that sometimes clergy are portrayed as the main consoler of the dying while at other times it is the faithful friend who provides the greatest comfort, but in most cases “the clerical presence is discernable but not dominant”.<sup>131</sup> Chartier also notes that the earliest manuals present the image of a large gathering of comforters as ideal but that, beginning in the sixteenth

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<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>127</sup> Erasmus, *De praeparatione ad mortem*, 408.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 438.

<sup>129</sup> Becon, *The Solace of the Soule*, 575.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>131</sup> Roger Chartier, “Texts and Images: The Art of Dying, 1450-1600,” in *The Cultural Uses of Print in Early Modern France*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1987), 65.

century, “there was a growing desire to bring order to the deathbed scene, which led to fewer people being present.”<sup>132</sup> However, he concludes that clergy and other comforters are always considered necessary and important.<sup>133</sup>

The manuals frequently address those who care for the sick and offer advice on how they can help the dying overcome temptations and fear. *The Craft of Dying* and the manuals by Erasmus, Becon, Bellarmine, and Taylor, have sections containing advice, interrogations, and prayers that clergy and caregivers should use when administering to the sick and dying. They all stress the importance of providing comfort. Erasmus writes that “We must provide the sick with all that will give them hope and strengthen their resolve.”<sup>134</sup>

The most common advice for consoling the sick is to remind them that God and Christ love them and will help them. Comforters are encouraged to present the sick with images of the holy cross and with other reminders of Christ’s sacrifice. Most of all, they are told to recite prayers that will remind the dying of the power and mercy of God and Christ.

Comforters should be aware that the devil will beset the dying with temptations to sin in the hope that he can win their soul at the final moment. These temptations are said to be the “greatest and most grievous temptations, and such as they [the dying] never had before in all their life.”<sup>135</sup> While the devil and his temptations present a fearful picture of death and dying, the manuals stress that these temptations can be overcome, especially with help of able

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<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>134</sup> Erasmus, *De praeparatione ad mortem*, 439.

<sup>135</sup> *The Craft of Dying*, 9-10.

comforters. Each manual provides advice to the dying and to their comforters on how to overcome the devil's temptations. *The Craft of Dying*, for example, lists a specific remedy for each of the five principal temptations, which are doubt, despair, impatience, complacency, and worldly concerns.

The manuals inform clergy that they may occasionally have to provide words of warning to the unrepentant, but otherwise they are to provide comfort to the dying in two important ways. First, they are to teach and question the dying so that they "may the better be informed and comforted."<sup>136</sup> *The Craft of Dying* lists a number of questions clergy should ask, including whether the dying person is glad that he shall die in the faith of Christ and whether he believes that Christ is able to save his soul.<sup>137</sup> Second, Catholic clergy are to provide comfort by administering the viaticum.

The Catholic authors of the *artes moriendi*, along with the young Luther, explain that the dying should confess their sins and receive the Sacraments of Extreme Unction and the Eucharist. They should do this for two important reasons. First, these are vehicles of God's grace and have the power to cleanse the dying person of his sins, thus enabling him to enter heaven, second, and consequently, the Sacraments strengthen and comfort the dying. Bellarmine, in particular, discusses all seven Sacraments at length, devoting a chapter to each one. He explains that the Sacraments are "helpful for happily mastering the art of dying well" and that those who receive them can "hope for a happy death."<sup>138</sup>

While the manuals stress the importance of the Last Rites, Erasmus and Luther assure their readers that there is no need to despair if circumstances

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<sup>136</sup> *The Craft of Dying*, 22.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 22-7.

<sup>138</sup> Bellarmine, *De arte bene moriendi*, 279.

prevent them from receiving any or all of them. Erasmus writes that it is a grave sin to neglect or reject these “visible rites” out of contempt, however, if

the services of a priest are by chance not at hand, let him not immediately be fearful and despondent, as some superstitious people are wont to be, but let him confess from his heart his unrighteousness to God himself. In his clemency God will deign to accept his thoughts as equivalent to actual confession and will supply from his own grace what is missing from the external signs of the sacraments. It is through him that all sacraments have their power, for they are in some way small signs of his divine kindness to us. Yet he also takes thought for our salvation without these signs when there is need ....<sup>139</sup>

Luther writes of the Sacraments that “If these can be had, one should devoutly desire them and receive them with great confidence. If they cannot be had, our longing and yearning for them should nevertheless be a comfort and we should not be too dismayed by this circumstance” for “Christ says, ‘All things are possible to him who believes’ [Mark 9.23].”<sup>140</sup>

Luther explains that the main purpose of the Last Rites is to provide comfort: “God wants the sacraments to be a sign and testimony that Christ’s life has taken your death, his obedience your sin, his love your hell, upon themselves and overcome them.”<sup>141</sup> The dying only has to do believe in the Last Rites for them to take effect: “The right use of the sacraments involves nothing more than believing that all will be as the sacraments promise and pledge through God’s Word.”<sup>142</sup> By way of comfort, Luther insists: “We must occupy ourselves much more with the sacraments and their virtues than with our sins.”<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> Erasmus, *De praeparatione ad mortem*, 432.

<sup>140</sup> Luther, *Sermon von Bereitung zum Sterben*, 108.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

The manuals discuss the importance of the final moments before death, explaining that the state of the dying person at the final moment determines his or her eternal fate. They warn that even one who has lived most of his life “faithfully and godly” can be lost to hell if he does not persevere “in that faith and godliness even unto the last breath” and thus, Becon writes, “all the labours, pains, and travails, that we have sustained in the former part of our life” would be “frustrated and vain.”<sup>144</sup> Erasmus explains that “death is the last act of human life, like the final act of a play, on which depends whether we shall either enjoy everlasting happiness or suffer everlasting damnation.”<sup>145</sup> While this message may cause some anxiety, the manuals present a positive and encouraging message about the final moments and attempt to diminish any fears that one might have about the moments before death. They stress that those who are prepared will have no reason to fear. They also teach that those who are truly repentant and who accept Christ as their saviour can be saved from hell at the last moment. Despite the warning that deathbed repentance is seldom sufficient, we read in *The Craft of Dying* that it is possible for even a criminal facing execution to be redeemed at the last moment if he is truly penitent.<sup>146</sup> The message of the *artes moriendi* about the final moments is clear: it is best to prepare for death throughout one’s life, but one must never give up hope for a happy death and a good afterlife.

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<sup>144</sup> Becon, *The Solace of the Soule*, 571.

<sup>145</sup> Erasmus, *De praeparatione ad mortem*, 392.

<sup>146</sup> *The Craft of Dying*, 5-6.

A passage in Bellarmine serves as a good example of how focusing on only one part of an author's message can result in a flawed interpretation of his entire work. He begins by stating that those who truly want forgiveness and reconciliation with God should meditate on the following thoughts, which he presents in the voice of the dying person:

Alas! What have I done, poor wretch that I am! I have committed this outrage and that. First, I have offended that sweetest Father, the author of every good, who has loved me so much, who has surrounded me on every side with his gifts. ... What shall I say of my Christ? He loved me when I was an enemy and handed himself over for me as 'an offering and a sacrifice to God to ascend in fragrant odor' (Eph 5:2). And am I so ungrateful and wretched that I do not cease from offending him? How great is my cruelty! ... Who will explain to me the greatness of the glory from which I fell when I committed this or that mortal sin? I was an heir of the kingdom of heaven, of blessed eternal life; from this great and splendid and immense happiness in every respect I fell wretchedly through that brief pleasure or through those words even of blasphemy against God which brought me no good. And from that great happiness to what fate have I descended? To captivity to the devil, my cruelest enemy! And as swiftly as that foul wall of my body, which every moment any remedy I shall descend into the eternal fire. Alas, wretched me!<sup>147</sup>

This passage is as pessimistic as any that Delumeau presents in *Sin and Fear*, and it appears to support the contention that early modern clergymen attempted to instill fear and guilt into other Christians. However, if we continue reading Bellarmine's work, we find just below this pessimistic passage one that presents a very different message:

A heart truly contrite and humble really arouses the mercy of God our Father in a marvelous way. For the sweetness and goodness of the Father cannot refrain from going forth to the prodigal but truly repentant son, and embracing and kissing him. He will give him the ring of peace, wipe away the tears of sorrow, and fill him with tears of joy sweeter than all honey.<sup>148</sup>

This passage offers the reader inspiration and hope, revealing the primary purpose of not only Bellarmine's work but of the *artes moriendi* in general.

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<sup>147</sup> Bellarmine, *De arte bene moriendi*, 290-1.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, 293.

In dealing with the subject of death, the authors of the *artes moriendi* sometimes write about topics that inspire fear and guilt, such as hell and the need for repentance. At times, they try to inspire a healthy fear and a certain amount of guilt in their readers, such as they do when they address those who show an unwillingness to repent or who think too lightly about death. The fear and guilt that they try to inspire, however, is nothing akin to the intense pathological attitude that Delumeau mentions. Furthermore, they attempt to comfort and console far more often than they try to instill fear.

If the unknown author of the original *Ars moriendi* was a cleric, as O'Connor and others have speculated,<sup>149</sup> then all six authors of the *artes moriendi* we have studied were clergymen. The fact that they all attempt to liberate the dying from fear and guilt rather than burdening them with these indicates that the clergy were agents of consolation not *culpabilisation*, and thus powerfully contradicts Delumeau's thesis. The primary objective of those who wrote the *artes moriendi* is to offer practical advice that will prepare Christians for death, along with a message of hope and comfort that will assist the dying. To ignore the positive aspects of their message is to miss the point of the *artes moriendi* entirely.

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<sup>149</sup> O'Connor, *The Art of Dying Well*, 54-6.



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