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Eschatology and Funerary Practices Today: *Byzance après Byzance*?[1]

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Introduction

Christian eschatology seems to have had a rapidly changing fate in the past 150 years. In the preface to the paperback version of his book on Patristic eschatology, Brian Daley quotes Hans Urs von Balthasar, who notes the ricochet between nineteenth-century views, where the "'eschatology office is usually closed," to the first half of the twentieth century, where it is "working overtime."[2] But as the twentieth century ebbed on, overtime work gave way to no work at all, if the eminent moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre is to be believed. In his 1964 Riddell Memorial Lecture at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne, later published as *Secularization and Moral Change*, MacIntyre lamented not only the general contemporary "inability to respond to the facts of death"[3] but also zeroed in on Christian inability to face this issue: "the fact is that contemporary Christianity says *nothing* about death…. The concepts of judgement, heaven, and hell are unreal to us not just because of their metaphysical content but because they are part of a moral scheme with a clear view of good and evil,"[4] a view that MacIntyre here and more trenchantly else-

[1] This paper originated as a keynote lecture at the Robert Louis Wilken Colloquium at Baylor University in 2015.
[2] Brian Daley, *Hope of the Early Church: A Handbook of Patristic Eschatology* (Peabody, MA: Baker Academic, 2002), ix.
[3] *Secularization and Moral Change* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 69.
[4] Ibid., 70; emphasis in original.

where says Christians have abandoned and replaced with an ethic of communal love, which MacIntyre regards with withering scorn as being intellectually vacuous and incoherent.[5]

From the end of the 1970s through the early 1990s, eschatological thinking, if such it was, seems to have become even more deeply conflicted, requiring, on the Catholic side, an official if very lapidary intervention in 1979 by the Roman Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith,[6] and a longer and more fulsome reflection in 1992 by the International Theological Commission, again under the aegis of the CDF.[7]

And today? Has anything changed between the early 1990s and the early years of the twenty-first century? Perhaps I may borrow a common cultural theme of our time and say that eschatology is like a zombie, largely but not quite dead, stumbling around in a dazed and confused, and confusing, fashion. Not all the fault for this can be laid at the feet of various cultural developments. We Christians ourselves have too often been guilty of going along to get along, or even of actively acquiescing in practices of dubious merit and beliefs of doubtful orthodoxy. This broad movement over many decades is perhaps best summed up in the famous phrase adapted from the non-Christian political philosopher Eric Voegelin: the

[5] See his "Theology, Ethics, and the Ethics of Medicine and Healthcare: Comments on Papers by Novak, Mouw, Roach, Cahill, and Hartt," *The Journal of Medicine and Philosophy* 4 (1979): 435–443. MacIntyre begins with the ringing declaration "If I were God, I do not think that I would want to be studied by most contemporary theologians. This is not only because the general intellectual level of theological argument is perhaps lower than at any time since the tenth century." It is also because, as he continues a little later on, "liberal Protestantism … obliterated stage by stage all that was distinctive in Christianity, making it increasingly banal, uninteresting, and vacuous" while "modern Roman Catholic theologians have been to an alarming degree narcissistic…. [They] all too often give the impression of being only mildly interested in either God or the world; what they are passionately interested in are other Roman Catholic theologians"! (Ibid., 435, 440).

[6] "Letter on Certain Questions Concerning Eschatology," promulgated on 17 May 1979 and available at: http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19790517_escatologia_en.html.

[7] "Some Current Questions in Eschatology," published in 1992 and available at: http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_1990_problemi-attuali-escatologia_en.html.

temptation to "immanentize the eschaton."[8] Though Voegelin was speaking of the temptations of politics, this phrase is also abundantly illustrated in contemporary attitudes towards and practices surrounding death, as we shall see. As a result, many Christians themselves, to say nothing of the wider culture, do not properly understand what happens at and beyond death.[9] Our eschatological vision, in other words, is often as confused and incoherent as that of our wider culture.

"Orthodox" Eschatology

When I speak of this incoherent or confused eschatology, what do I have in mind as being the ideal or, if you will, the magisterial standard against which to compare the garbled vision of contemporary culture? Is there a clearly defined and ecumenically recognized statement of eschatology comparable, say, to the Chalcedonian "consensus" on Christology?[10] The short answer to that question is "no." Nevertheless, respecting the diversity of sources and exigencies of historical development – both well detailed in Daley's book[11] – I would argue that today there is a consensus[12] at least between Catholics and Orthodox,[13] and very likely also including many if not most

[8] Voegelin was using the phrase with reference to historiographic and political trends when he wrote, "the problem of an *eidos* in history, hence, arises only when a Christian transcendental fulfillment becomes immanentized. Such an immanentist hypostasis of the eschaton, however, is a theoretical fallacy": Id., *The New Science of Politics: An Introduction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 170. But Voegelin's caution has been taken more widely and was popularized by the late William F. Buckley.

[9] There seems, for example, to be a fairly common belief, even among Christians, that human beings turn into "angels" upon their death. I have lost track of the number of times I have seen such nostrums posted in on-line obituaries, Facebook pages, etc.

[10] Cf. Kenneth Yossa, *Common Heritage, Divided Communion: The Declines and Advances of Inter-Orthodox Relations from Chalcedon to Chambésy* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2009).

[11] See note 1 above.

[12] Jerry Walls, *The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

[13] For Eastern Orthodox treatments, see, e.g., Hilarion Alfeyev, "Eschatology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Orthodox Christian Theology*, ed. M.B. Cunningham and E. Theokritoff (Cambridge: CUP, 2008), 107–20. See

Protestants (though I have not surveyed them all) to say that the broad Christian tradition, both East and West, would insist on the following six points as the minimal basis of any orthodox eschatology:

- the resurrection of the dead or of the *flesh*
- the resurrection of the whole person
- the survival post-mortem of what is usually called the soul
- the importance of funeral rites and prayers as *loci theologici*
- the happiness of heaven and
- the horrors of hell.[14]

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also Andrew Louth's article on eschatology in *The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology* noted above.

[14] I borrow, slightly amend, and abbreviate this list from the CDF's "Letter on Certain Questions Concerning Eschatology," noted above. I left off the CDF's seventh point, namely the fact that the resurrection can be seen already in the Assumption of the Mother of God, a point that some Christians would dispute – mainly some Protestants (nervous, perhaps, about the Scriptural warrant for this feast), as the Orthodox East has long celebrated the Dormition of Mary on the same day as the West (Aug. 15th), believing that after her death she was taken fully, *bodily* to be with Christ after 3 days. Though Orthodoxy might object – and not without good reason – to the Roman pope feeling empowered to define doctrine outside an ecumenical council properly so-called, I do not think that the doctrine of the Assumption as Pius XII defined it in 1950 poses doctrinal hurdles for the East. There are innumerable Orthodox churches around the world dedicated to the Dormition of the Theotokos, some in North America even under the title of her Assumption (admittedly, through Western influence) and major Orthodox theologians agree in essence with the Catholic understanding: see, e.g., Sergius Bulgakov, *The Burning Bush: On the Orthodox Veneration of the Mother of God*, trans. T.A. Smith (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2009), 74. See also Brian Daley, trans., *On the Dormition of Mary: Early Patristic Homilies* (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 1997). John McGuckin notes the Orthodox belief: Mary died, and her soul was immediately received by Christ; after three days in the grave, her body was also taken by Christ to be with her soul in heaven: "Dormition" in *The Encyclopedia of Eastern Orthodox Christianity*, 2 vols., ed. J.A. McGuckin (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), I: 196.

As for Western objections, there has been considerable ecumenical discussion on the place of Mary in recent decades, and considerable advances here too. See, e.g., the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commis-

A healthy, orthodox eschatology must hold at least these elements together in an antinomic tension encompassing "two … essential points: on the one hand … the fundamental continuity, thanks to the power of the Holy Spirit, between our present life in Christ and the future life…; on the other hand … the radical break between the present life and the future one due to the fact that the economy of faith will be replaced by the … fullness of life" in which we see God.[15]

Contemporary Funerals: Attitudes and Practices and Their Challenges to Eschatology

Do contemporary Christian, especially Roman Catholic, funerary attitudes and practices work in support of such an eschatology or work against it – or do they accomplish some combination of both? For it is at funerals, more uniquely than anywhere else, that people, the churched and unchurched alike, are most probably going to hear an eschatological message *through the liturgical texts themselves*.[16] For otherwise there is very little likelihood they will ever hear one in church, least of all in a homily.[17] Funerals, then, are uniquely – *potentially* –

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sion's 2004 agreed statement, "Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ," which argues that "given the understanding we have reached concerning the place of Mary in the economy of hope and grace, we can affirm together the teaching that God has taken the Blessed Virgin Mary in the fullness of her person into his glory as consonant with Scripture and that it can, indeed, only be understood in the light of Scripture" (no.58). The document is available at: http://www.anglicancommunion.org/ministry/ecumenical/dialogues/catholic/arcic/docs/mary_grace%20_and_hope.cfm#sthash.X1F1pDBD.dpuf.

[15] CDF, "Some Current Questions," no. 7.

[16] A brief general introduction to the Byzantine liturgy's eschatology may be found in David Petras, "Eschatology and the Byzantine Liturgy," *Liturgical Ministry* 19 (2010): 29–35. A more detailed treatment may be found in Stelyios Muksuris, *Economia and Eschatology: Liturgical Mystagogy in the Byzantine Prothesis Rite* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Press, 2013).

[17] Victor Lee Austin's recent article "Preaching Heaven and Hell," *Pro Ecclesia* 22 (2014): 367–377 notes the near-total disappearance of any homiletical commentary on hell, and judgment especially. So too does Thomas G. Long, "Imagine There's No Heaven: The Loss of Eschatology in American Preaching," *Journal for Preachers* 30 (2006): 21–28. Long notes that this is a recent development: nineteenth-century American preaching often focused

graced moments where people may be more open to (because more in need of) the gospel, helping them understand not merely the past life of the one who is dead (or their own past), but the future promise[18] and prospect that opened to all of us at the Incarnation and continues to open to us in the Eucharist.[19]

Recent scholarship would seem to suggest that contemporary Roman Catholic funeral rites (those reformed after Vatican II, which in turn influenced the reform of liturgical rites in Lutheranism, Anglicanism, and other traditions[20]) are not in fact useful in challenging eschatological confusion today and in clearly supporting the eschatology sketched out by the 1979 CDF statement. In fact, certain liturgical critics have argued that the reformed rites may reinforce certain aspects of an unhealthy or downright incorrect eschatology, to say nothing of the rather shoddy psychology present in many of those rites.[21] The rites seem to many scholars to have been a failure in both sociological[22] and theological terms, undermining not

on eschatology; but today talk about eschatology "chills the blood" (Ibid., 22).

[18] John Panteleimon Manoussakis's "The Anarchic Principle of Christian Eschatology in the Eucharistic Tradition of the Eastern Church," *Harvard Theological Review* 100 (2007): 29–46 is especially insightful here in arguing that eschatology is not teaching about the past but about the future: "Eschatology … reverses naturalistic, essentialist, and historistic models by making the seemingly improbable claim that I am not who I am, let alone who I was and have been, but rather, like the theophanic Name of Exodus (3:14), I am who I *will* be." Manoussakis, "Christian Eschatology," 32.

[19] The Byzantine Liturgy always opens with the proclamation "Blessed is the kingdom of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."

[20] John Gibaut, "Liturgy and the Ecumenical Movement," *Ecumenism* 122 (1996): 29–37.

[21] These rites were promulgated in 1969 in Latin and published in an authorized English translation in the United States: International Commission on English in the Liturgy, *Order of Christian Funerals Including Appendix 2: Cremation* (New Jersey: Catholic Book Publishing Co., 1998).

[22] See, inter alia, T. Quartier et al, "Remembrance and Hope in Roman Catholic Funeral Rites: Attitudes of Participants Towards Past and Future of the Deceased," *Journal of Empirical Theology* 17 (2004): 252–280, which concludes that "one of the major functions of funeral rites, namely to build a hermeneutical bridge between people's experience with the death of the deceased and the tradition of the church, is not effectively being carried out" (274). See also Brenda Mathijssen, "Pastors and Relatives: Enacting Protestant and Catholic Funeral Liturgies in the Netherlands" in E. Venbrux et al.,

only a solid eschatology but also solid pastoral psychology as well. The reformed rites are far from efficacious in conveying the eschatological faith of the Church or in challenging countervailing ideas about death and post-mortem life.[23] Indeed, in too many cases, the rites fail to challenge prevailing cultural notions – especially an individualized eschatology, an almost Gnostic disdain for the body, and a total evacuation of any place for the dead being judged and the living being allowed openly to grieve. [24] The reformed rites suffer, as it

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eds., *Changing European Death Ways* (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2013), 213–238.

[23] For more directly theological analysis, see, inter alia, R. Sparkes and R. Rutherford, "The Order of Christian Funerals: A Study in Bereavement and Lament," *Worship* 60 (1986): 499–510. The authors demonstrate that "the *Rite of Funerals* has failed to fulfill expectations in its apparent inability to express sufficiently the pain and suffering of human loss in the face of death" (a point also underscored in the T. Quartier article referenced in the preceding note), and they assert this cannot be blamed solely or entirely on a "death-denying culture" but that responsibility lies also with the liturgical evacuation of the biblical notion and practice of "lament."

Also critically evaluating the eschatological implications of the revised funeral rites of the Latin Church are two Jesuit theologians: Bruce T. Morrill, "The Significance of Body and Resurrection in the Roman Catholic Order of Funerals," *Studia Liturgica* 39 (2009): 99–121; and Thomas Rausch, *Eschatology, Liturgy, and Christology: Toward Recovering an Eschatological Imagination* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2012).

Perhaps the sharpest analysis comes in Robert J. Hoeffner, "A Pastoral Evaluation of the Rite of Funerals," *Worship* 55 (1981): 482–499. Hoeffner argues, inter alia, that the rite has abandoned a "communal or corporate eschatology" (484) for an "individualized eschatology" (488) and thereby opened up a "void in establishing a relationship between the living and the dead" (482) and also reinforced the popular if misguided notion that the "dead person passes … to heaven immediately" (489). As a result, "the expectation, the waiting, the incompleteness of paradise is lost" (489). Hoeffner goes on to denounce the new rite's "terribly confusing … symbols and eschatologies," some of which are "just terribly vague" while others "say nothing about the dead" and still others leap to a happy-faced and near-total emphasis on the resurrection, removing all chance for legitimate human grief and sorrow (493ff). He calls for a reform of the ritual to include a renewed emphasis on liturgical procession (from home to church to cemetery) and especially on bodily preparation: "the ritual, it seems, needs concrete acts of separation such as closing eyes, washing, vesting and preparation of the body for burial" (495). I will have more to say about these ideas later in this paper.

[24] See Candi Cann's recent scholarship, below, for evidence of all this.

were, from an overly hasty race to resurrectional emphasis (seen, e.g., in the near-universal use of white vestments) at the near-total expense of any place for lament. These and other ideas are left intact by contemporary rites and in some cases are insidiously reinforced by them.[25] Modern Western rites, then, are too closely aligned with modern Western culture for the latter to be effectively challenged by the former.[26]

But that is not all. The problems are wider than just Christian rituals. We are witnessing today a profoundly troubling series of developments surrounding funerals and death rituals across our culture. Though it has been a commonplace since Ernest Becker's 1973 book *The Denial of Death* to lament the hidden place of death in our culture, and it has been equally common, since the publication in 1963 of Jessica Mitford's scathing polemic *The American Way of Death*,[27] to lament our culture's funerary and burial practices, neither work anticipated current developments where, increasingly, death is not acknowledged with any public *ritual* whatsoever. What we are seeing increasingly today is the recognition that *any* and *all* funerals are themselves in trouble, a vanishing species of ritual supplanted by quick cremations, "celebration of life" or memorial services (held, as often as not, in a pub, private home, or community hall rather than a church), or, increasingly, nothing at all.[28] Today it is not uncommon for the dead,

[25] This point was made more widely about the overall liturgical reforms of Vatican II by Catherine Pickstock in her sweeping book *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 170–76.

[26] Pickstock again: "the Vatican II reforms … participated in an entirely more sinister conservatism. For they failed to challenge those structures of the modern secular world which are wholly inimical to liturgical purpose." Pickstock, *After Writing*, 171.

[27] Cf. Thomas G. Long, "Why Jessica Mitford Was Wrong," *Theology Today* 55, no. 4 (1999): 496–509. Mitford was in turn influenced by her family friend, the Catholic writer Evelyn Waugh and his 1948 satire of American funerary and burial practices published as a short novel, *The Loved One: An Anglo-American Tragedy* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 1948).

[28] Candi Cann's recent survey notes the increasing disappearance of the traditional funeral in the United States: *Virtual Afterlives: Grieving the Dead in the Twenty-First Century* (Lexington, Kentucky: University of Kentucky

including at least nominally Christian dead,[29] to be bundled from nursing home or hospital to the earth or the oven[30] without any kind of public[31] ritual commemoration of their life or death.[32] If, as I argued above, funerals are perhaps the only place where an eschatological message will be encountered by people, then dispensing with funerals can only be regarded with deep regret because of lost evangelical opportunity and also lost psychological opportunities.[33] Suffice it to say, as a general matter of course, that we are living through a period that the Cambridge Anglican scholar Catherine Pickstock has correctly called "anti-ritual modernity."[34]

Press, 2014). Her work is confirmed by similar surveys of West-European practices. See, e.g., E. Venbrux et al., eds., *Changing European Death Ways* (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2013).

[29] See, e.g., Michael P. Orsi, "The Drama of the Christian Funeral," *First Things* (18 Feb. 2010, online); Ashley McKinless, "Why Are Catholic Funerals on the Decline?" *America* (9 Dec. 2014, online).

[30] See, e.g., Jim Graves, "Changing Catholic Attitudes about Cremation," *Catholic World Report* (3 November 2012, online).

[31] We have, however, seen the rise of private practices, as noted in a recent article by Lex Berko, "Death on the Internet: The Rise of Livestreaming Funerals," *The Atlantic Monthly* (15 December 2014): http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2014/12/death-on-the-internet-the-rise-of-livestreaming-funerals/383646/.

[32] I document the pastoral problems of having no funeral service at all in my article "The Selfish Dead," *Homiletic and Pastoral Review* 108 (March 2008): 68–71.

[33] I adhere to the truth of the Freudian insight that to not deal with a trauma is most often to run the very real risk of prolonging it and rendering it susceptible to unhealthy and neurotic manifestations. See, inter alia, Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia" in James Strachey, ed., *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud,* 24 vols. (London: Hogarth Press, 1957), XIV: 243–258; and "Remembering, Repeating, and Working Through" in *The Standard Edition* XII: 145–56.

[34] A lack of ritual must be filled by something, even if it is a vague appeal to "spirituality," which seems to be the case today according to some early research: Margaret Holloway, Susan Adamson, Vassos Argyrou, Peter Draper, and Daniel Mariau, "'Funerals Aren't Nice but It Couldn't Have Been Nicer': The Makings of a Good Funeral," *Mortality* 18 (2013): 30–53.

Byzance après Byzance?

In such a context what are Christians to do? Reforming rites to appeal to modernity has proven a failure in many ways – both theological and anthropological.[35] How then are we to proceed? Here again I think Pickstock, more than just about any Anglophone critic of liturgical reforms, has offered a way forward. She argues that "a genuine liturgical reform … would either have to overthrow our anti-ritual modernity or, that being impossible, devise a liturgy that *refused* to be enculturated in our modern habits of thought and speech…. It would have more actively to challenge us through the shock of a *defamiliarizing* language."[36] Where can we find such shocking, defamiliarizing language that cannot be enculturated in Western culture today? In the remainder of my essay – and I use that word deliberately here in its original French meaning, *essayer*: an attempt to *try out* new ideas; a "test-drive"[37] if you will – I want to follow Pickstock's logic and turn our attention Eastward to the Byzantine tradition.

Before doing that, however, let me insert here a very strong caution: I proceed down this path *not* out of a spirit of triumphalism or smug apologetics. Unlike some who write today about the East, and Orthodoxy in particular, I am acutely aware of the problems and struggles of the Christian East – as

[35] The literature on these reforms is of course rather considerable. A good place to begin would be with the works of Joseph Ratzinger, including but not limited to his *The Spirit of the Liturgy* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2000). See also Aidan Nichols, *Looking at the Liturgy* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1996). In an indirect way, the anthropologist Mary Douglas, in her landmark work *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology* (New York: Pantheon, 1970), shows why the Vatican II reforms proved to be ineffective.

[36] Pickstock, *After Writing*, 176.

[37] As the historian of Byzantine liturgy, Robert Taft, has memorably put it: "With an admirable boldness Francophone authors will throw into the agora an inchoative theory to be gnawed on by the critics before retrieving what remains and polishing it up for a second edition. They cover their flank by calling their sallies *esquisses, jalons, essais.*" Id., *Beyond East and West: Problems in Liturgical Understanding*, 2nd ed. (Rome: PIO, 2001), 187. My present essay should be received in precisely these terms, and I look forward to the gnawing over of its ideas by my fellow Wilken colloquists and to benefiting from their wisdom.

of the West – and do not romantically or nostalgically pine for a past that never truly was, nor imagine a future that never will be in which all the supposed errors and problems of the West are magically solved by adopting some version of *Byzance après Byzance*.[38] Instead, in what remains of my presentation, I lay out two possible directions Western Christians might wish to consider today. I do so precisely because I am convinced that the Church in the West today is missing out on a singular opportunity to proclaim the good news that death has been conquered, and when one part of the Body of Christ suffers, we all suffer; if another part of the Body of Christ has means possibly to ameliorate that suffering, then it would be churlish not to offer such means as a gift.[39] In suggesting this eastward path, I follow the direction set by England's leading Dominican theologian today, Aidan Nichols, who, more than fifteen years ago, in an unsparing diagnosis of problems besetting the Western Church, also counseled looking *ad orientem* when he wrote:

> At the present time, the Catholic Church, in many parts of the world, is undergoing one of the most serious crises in its history, a crisis resulting from a disorienting encounter with secular culture and compounded by a failure of Christian discernment on the part of many people over the last quarter century from the highest office-holders to the ordinary faithful. This crisis touches many aspects of Church life but notably theology and catechesis, liturgy and spirituality, Religious life [sic] and Christian ethics at large. Orthodoxy is well placed to stabilise Catholicism in most if not all these areas.[40]

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[38] George Demacopoulos and Aristotle Papanikalaou, eds. *Orthodox Constructions of the West* (New York: Fordham UP, 2013).

[39] Cf. Pope John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint* no. 28; and Margaret O'Gara, *The Ecumenical Gift Exchange* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1998).

[40] Aidan Nichols, *Christendom Awake: On Reenergizing the Church in Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmands, 1999), 186. Looking Eastward was also, of course, the tactic adopted by many of the reformers at Vatican II, as Taft has documented: "Eastern Presuppositions and Western Liturgical Renewal," *Antiphon* 5 (2000): 10–22. Further details on this may be found in

Byzantine Funerals[41]

If we look East – and here I mean the near-East rather than further afield into the Armenian or Syriac traditions, among others – and to the Byzantine liturgical tradition,[42] we discover funerary practices that do indeed provide a shock of not just defamiliarizing language but also very unfamiliar and frankly uncomfortable practices for many of our contemporaries. There is much diversity in Eastern practice, and not every custom is followed everywhere.[43] I will concentrate on practices

L'église grecque melkite au Concile: discours et notes du patriarche Maximos IV et des prélats de son église au Concile oecuménique Vatican II (Beirut: Dar al-Kalima, 1976) and Gerasimos T. Murphy, *Maximos IV at Vatican II: A Quest for Autonomy* (Newton, MA: Sophia Press, 2011).

[41] Some good general background, including pre-Christian and early Christian, may be had in James Kyriakakis, "Byzantine Burial Customs: Care of the Deceased from Death to the Prothesis," *GOTR* 19 (1974): 37–72. See also in this regard Dorothy Abrahamse, "Rituals of Death in the Middle Byzantine Period," *GOTR* 29 (1984): 125–34.

For historical development of the Byzantine funeral rites as practiced today, see Elena Velkovska, "Funeral Rites According to the Byzantine Liturgical Sources," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 55 (2001): 21–51.

For reflections on the pastoral uses of the funeral, see Frank Marangos, "Shared Christian Praxis: Approaching the Orthodox Funeral Service," *GOTR* 29 (1984): 195–206; and Peter Galadza, "Lost and Displaced Elements of the Byzantine Funeral Rites: Towards a Pastoral Re-Appropriation," *Studia Liturgica* 33 (2003): 62–74.

Finally, for use of the funeral as a *loci theologici*, see Jonathan L. Zecher, "Death's Spiraling Narrative: On 'Reading' the Orthodox Funeral," *Studia Liturgica* 41 (2011): 274–92. This is an especially valuable article, attentive to the actual pastoral-ritual celebration of real funerals rather than merely assuming that texts reveal everything. It also analyzes the theology and eschatology present, or not present, in the funeral service.

[42] Which tradition, let us remind ourselves, is *already part of the Catholic Church* through those Eastern Catholic Churches which have the Byzantine patrimony as their own. Thus nothing that I propose here is extraneous to the Catholic Church – nor, as it happens, to other traditions, including the Anglican: see their Society for Eastern Rite Anglicanism at http://www.eastern-anglicanism.org/.

[43] I conducted an informal and unscientific poll of my friends who are priests and deacons in several Orthodox Churches in North America as well as among Byzantine Catholics, and none reported ever seeing the full rite of washing, vesting, vigil, and funeral observed. Given this widespread lack of use of resources from within their own tradition, Eastern Christians have no ground for smugness.

right after a person has died, and then three select texts from the contemporary Byzantine funeral liturgy, all of which convey more clearly the important eschatological themes noted above.

Traditionally in North America, at least until the American Civil War, it was customary for death to take place at home, and once this had happened, for the family to take charge of preparing the body. The war occasioned the widespread use of embalming and the increasing professionalization of North American funerary practices.[44]

Among Eastern Christians, death at home would traditionally be followed by the family washing the body[45] with water or rose water, perhaps also in some places followed by anointing with olive oil, not unlike the practice the three myrrh-bearing women were about to undertake that first Easter morning. After this the body would be dressed in regular clothes, or sometimes in white garments reminiscent of baptismal garments.[46] As this is taking place, a reader chants the Psalter.[47] The body would then sometimes be placed in a coffin, though this is not required and some are buried in a simple winding sheet or shroud.

After this preparation, the body would then be left at least overnight at home as mourners come to pay their respects and visit with the family; or it might be taken to the church for an all-night vigil during which various friends, family members,

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[44] See, inter alia, *Death in Early America: The History and Folklore of Customs and Superstitions of Early Medicine, Funerals, Burials, and Mourning* by the splendidly named Margaret Coffin (Nashville, TN: T.A. Nelson, 1975); and more recently Gary Laderman, *Rest in Peace: A Cultural History of Death and the Funeral Home in Twentieth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

[45] Except in the case of bishops and presbyters, whose bodies are anointed with oil by other priests and then vested according to their rank. The gospels, rather than the psalter, are read over their bodies. Deacons bodies are washed with water, vested and then the Psalter is read.

[46] These white garments were unique and still in use in Greek villages into the 1970s, as Julit du Boulay describes in her haunting and beautiful book, *Cosmos, Life and Liturgy in a Greek Orthodox Village* (Limini, Greece: Denise Harvey Publisher, 2009), 223–301.

[47] One recent example of an Orthodox priest doing this was described by Rod Dreher at: http://www.theamericanconservative.com/dreher/happy-jack.

and parishioners could visit while also taking turns reading the Psalter aloud.[48]

The next day, the funeral liturgy itself takes place. The body is now set (if it was not the night before) before the solea in the central aisle, feet closest to the iconostasis and altar, although the body can also be set in the narthex and the funeral taken from there.[49] The funeral then continues (it having been started, ideally, with the vigil at church or, more rarely, in the home, the night before; in the latter case, the body is greeted at the doors of the church by the singing of the so-called Trisagion prayers, often with the reading of the gospel, and then processed into the church). I will not enter here into the whole liturgy, but instead provide three samples of language that are, I think, defamiliarizing and shocking for many of our cultural contemporaries.

The first is a prayer, repeated several times throughout the funeral services,[50] and found in some of the earliest extant manuscripts of the liturgy, including in non-Byzantine traditions (e.g., the Coptic and Armenian[51]). My second example seems to be confined to the funeral for priests: the *ikoi*. The third example is the stichera for the final kiss, observed in all Byzantine funerals.

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[48] Those who follow the full tradition strictly in my experience, and among those priests and others I have surveyed, constitute a vanishingly small number today in North America. Most prefer to have morticians follow "standard procedure," as it were – embalming the body for display in a funeral home with, perhaps, a funeral at the church. A good handbook describing how these practices are to be done for those who want to follow them may be found in "Resources for Dying, Death, and Burial" published on the official website of the Orthodox Church in America: https://oca.org/cdn/PDFs/christianwitness/2004SaintNicholasChurchResourcesBooklet.pdf.

[49] This, excepting for the oddity among some Galicians where the opposite is done, is so that the deceased is facing East, as all members of the congregation normally do.

[50] Some versions (there being no standard *editio typica* of liturgical texts in the East) have this prayer recited no less than seven times from the end of the vigil through the funeral to the burial. See, e.g., Ephrem Lash's translation at http://www.anastasis.org.uk/funeral.htm. Other English versions repeat the prayer 2–4 times.

[51] Elena Velkovska, "Funeral Rites," 23–24.

I include the prayer here because I think it highlights crucial elements of a proper eschatology of which we need reminding today, including, as noted above, the resurrection of the flesh, the reality of the soul, the power of evil and the reality of hell, and the importance of interceding for the merciful judgment of the deceased (so necessary in a time where the homiletical temptation towards instant canonization seems especially strong):

> God of spirits and of all flesh, You trampled death, You made the devil powerless, and you gave life to Your world. Now, O Lord, to the soul of your servant N., who has fallen asleep, grant rest in a place of light, a place of verdure, and a place of tranquility from which pain, sorrow and mourning have fled. As the good and loving God, forgive every sin of thought, word or deed he has committed. There is no one who will live and not sin, for You alone are sinless, Your justice is an everlasting justice, and Your word is truth.
>
> For you, O Christ our God, are the resurrection, the life and the repose of your servant N., who has fallen asleep; and we give glory to you, together with your eternal Father, and your most holy, good and life-giving Spirit, now and for ever and ever. Amen.[52]

In the funeral for a priest, which has notable features not found in the funerals for small children and lay people, we find the *ikoi*:[53] these hymns are a beautiful example of the antinomic tension spoken of earlier – the need to both grieve and yet also have hope in the resurrection:

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[52] Translation from *The Divine Liturgy: An Anthology for Worship*, ed. Peter Galadza (Ottawa: Sheptytsky Institute, 2004), 1045.

[53] As Peter Galadza has demonstrated, the Byzantine tradition has gradually developed different versions of the funeral for different ranks – for young children, for laymen (including, oddly, deacons), and then for priests and bishops. See his "The Evolution of Funerals for Monks in the Byzantine Realm: From the Tenth to the Sixteenth Century," *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 70 (2004): 225–257.

Why these bitter words of the dying, O brethren,
which they utter as they go hence?
I am parted from my brethren.
All my friends do I abandon and go hence.
But whither I go, that understand I not,
neither what shall become of me yonder;
only God who hath summoned me knoweth.
But make commemoration of me with the song:
Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!

But whither now go the souls?
How dwell they now together there?
This mystery have I desired to learn; but none can impart aright.
Do they call to mind their own people, as we do them?
Or have they forgotten all those who mourn them and make the song:
Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!

We go forth on the path eternal, and as condemned,
with downcast faces, present ourselves before the only God eternal.
Where then is comeliness? Where then is wealth?
Where then is the glory of this world?
There shall none of these things aid us, but only to say oft the psalm:
Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!

If thou hast shown mercy unto man, O man,
that same mercy shall be shown thee there;
and if on an orphan thou hast shown compassion,
the same shall there deliver thee from want.
If in this life the naked thou hast clothed,
the same shall give thee shelter there, and sing the psalm:
Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!

Youth and the beauty of the body fade at the hour of death,

> and the tongue then burneth fiercely, and the parched throat is inflamed.
> The beauty of the eyes is quenched then, the comeliness of the face all altered,
> the shapeliness of the neck destroyed; and the other parts have become numb,
> nor often say: Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!
>
> With ecstasy are we inflamed if we but hear that there is light eternal yonder;
> that there is Paradise, wherein every soul of Righteous Ones rejoiceth.
> Let us all, also, enter into Christ, that we may cry aloud thus unto God:
> Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia![54]

At the end of the funeral comes the rite of the Last Kiss. Here, as I have argued elsewhere,[55] is one of the most deeply moving, deeply necessary, but also deeply disconcerting practices found anywhere in Christian funerary practice today. The body, which has been lying in an open coffin the whole time, is approached by the whole congregation, beginning usually with the family of the deceased. Each person files past and kisses the hand or the head of the deceased, and/or an icon often placed in the coffin. As this is going on, the following stichera are sung[56]:

> Come, let us give the final kiss, brethren, to the dead, as we give thanks to God; because he/she has left his/her family and is hastening to the grave, he/she has no

[54] The recently deceased Orthodox composer John Tavener set these *ikoi* to music in a deeply haunting melody you may access here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XP0VF9SYtIE.

[55] See my "The Kiss of Death," *Progress* (20 March 2011): 16.

[56] As Ephrem Lash notes in his introduction (http://www.anastasis.org.uk/funeral.htm), it is "almost certainly intentional" that these stichera for the last kiss are sung to the same melody used on Good Friday when the *epitaphios* (a large shroud with an image of the dead Christ on it) is brought out and the faithful kiss the body of Christ during Vespers, which is in effect the funeral service of Christ Himself.

further care for things of no moment, affairs of the much-wearied flesh. Where now are his/her relatives and friends? Now as we are parted let us pray that the Lord will give him/her rest.

What is this parting, O brethren? What the grieving, what the lamentation in this present instant? Come then, kiss him/her who a moment ago was with us; he/she is being entrusted to a grave, covered by a stone, left to dwell in darkness, buried with the dead; all we his/her relatives and friends as we are now being parted, let us pray that the Lord will give him/her rest.

Now the whole wretched festival of life's vanity is being dissolved; for the spirit has left its dwelling, the clay has turned black, the vessel has been broken, without voice, without sensation, without movement; as we escort him/her to the grave. Let us pray that the Lord will give him/her rest for ever.

What is our life? Merely a flower, a vapour and morning dew. Come then, let us look closely at the graves; where is the body's beauty? Where its youth? Where are the eyes and the form of the flesh? All have withered like grass, all have vanished; come, let us fall down before Christ with tears.

Great the weeping and lamentation, great the sighing and constraint at the parting of the soul; Hell and destruction, the life of transitory things, the insubstantial shadow, the sleep of error, the untimely fancied toil of earthly life. Let us fly far from every worldly sin that we may inherit the things of heaven.

As we look on one who lies dead let us accept this expression of the final moment; for he/she passes like smoke from the earth, he/she blossomed like a flower, was cut down like grass, is wrapped in a winding

sheet, hidden in earth. When we have left him/her out of sight, let us pray to Christ to give him/her rest for ever.

Come, offspring of Adam, let us look at one in our image who has been laid in earth, who has discarded all his/her beauty, been dissolved in a grave by the rottenness of worms, wasted by darkness, hidden in earth. When we have left him/her out of sight, let us pray to Christ to give him/her rest for ever.

When the soul is about to be snatched by force from the body by fearsome Angels, it forgets relatives and friends and its concern is for its stand at the coming trial of vanity and much wearied flesh. Come, let us all beseech the Judge and pray that the Lord pardon all that he/she has done.

Come, brethren, let us look in the tomb at the ashes and dust, from which we were fashioned. Where are we now going? What have we become? What is a poor person, what a rich? What a master, what a free? Are they not all ashes? The beauty of the face has rotted and death has withered all the flower of youth.

Truly all the pleasant and glorious things of life are vanity and corruption! For we all depart, we shall all die, monarchs and rulers, judges and potentates, rich and poor and every mortal being. For now those that were once in life have been cast into tombs. May the Lord give them rest we pray.

Now all the body's organs are idle, that a little while ago were active; all useless, dead, insensible; for eyes are dimmed, feet bound, hands lie still and hearing with them, tongue is locked in silence, is entrusted to a grave; truly everything human is vanity.[57]

[57] Translations of these hymns by Archimandrite Ephrem Lash.

After this, the funeral concludes with the procession to the place of burial. Traditionally this would have been done on foot, and the grave dug in advance by hand.[58]

In these unsparing and blunt texts, the reality of grief and pain at our separation, and the unnatural horror of death, directly confront us. And yet, in both the first prayer and the *ikoi*, there is maintained the necessary eschatological tension discussed earlier: *both* the fundamental continuity of our life in Christ here and now, *and* the radical break between the present and our future resurrection.

There is no hiding here – no cozy euphemism, no closed coffin keeping us from staring death in the face and seeing what it has done. Here we are confronted with the way of all flesh, and here we see the work that God has fashioned and will again one day re-fashion. The comeliness that once was is gone, but we are promised it will one day be restored to us, just as our loved one, now cold and dead before us, will one day be restored to us and we to them if we but follow Christ. Sorrow is deeply felt and powerfully expressed even as hope abounds in these texts, keeping a tension that many find lost in Western rites[59] which tend towards an almost forced hopefulness and an overly hasty rush to talk about the resurrection.[60]

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[58] In August 2014 I buried a friend of mine who died too young of cancer, and six of us carried her from the church to the cemetery on the church grounds to a hand-dug grave where, after the prayers, all the men in the assembly took turns filling in the grave – hot, heavy, dirty work that was nonetheless deeply edifying in wholly unexpected ways.

[59] Robert J. Hoeffner, "A Pastoral Evaluation of the Rite of Funerals" makes this criticism repeatedly, and in my experience of Roman Catholic funerals I think he is exactly right to do so.

[60] A contrary criticism of these rites was advanced from within the East by the great Orthodox liturgical theologian Alexander Schmemann (see his recently published essay *The Liturgy of Death* (Yonkers, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2016), who felt that the emphasis on lament in the Byzantine tradition overshadowed the hope of resurrection. But with others who have commented on this (including, as noted above, Peter Galadza and Jonathan Zecher), I do not find Schmemann persuasive on this point at all – *a fortiori* in a culture where, as Candi Cann has documented (see the next note), people are forced back to work after less than a week and expected to pretend that everything is fine without the necessarily lengthy time to fully mourn and lament.

Confronting death like this is, I would argue, a deeply disconcerting practice for many North Americans today and precisely for that reason, a deeply necessary one. In a death-denying culture, this is not the sort of ritual that can be enculturated, and its very strangeness vis-à-vis our culture is a necessary corrective to our avoidance, our euphemism, and our faulty eschatology. It is healthy to look at things face-on, without avoidance or denial. There are, as I have tried to suggest, many benefits – psychological and eschatological – that accrue to facing death directly rather than racing past it in a desperately misguided effort to return to "normality" or to find "closure," that fraudulent and fatuous notion.[61]

Though this rite has its origins in the Byzantine tradition, there is nothing here that would prevent others from adopting some or all of these parts in Western Christian funerary practices, as earlier parts of Byzantine funeral texts were adopted not long ago by, e.g., some Anglicans[62]; as Byzantine Chrismation practices were adopted by Pope Paul VI in his reform of Roman Catholic confirmation rites after Vatican II[63]; and as wider Eastern influences came to occupy prominent places in Western liturgy after Vatican II.[64]

[61] Candi Cann's fascinating book documents the rise of various new forms of public grieving – memorial tattoos, memorial decals on cars, websites and Facebook pages dedicated to the dead, and other practices – that have arisen in North American culture in the last decade as public periods of mourning have continued to shrink under pressure of instant "closure" and immediate return to "normality." As she shows, most places of employment, both public and private, now allow no more than 3–5 days off for death of one's most intimate relations – parent, spouse, child; and often fewer or no days for more distant relations or friends.

[62] See John Gibaut, "Gifts from the Orient: Eastern Textual Influence in the Development of Anglican Liturgy," *Logos: A Journal of Eastern Christian Studies* 41–42 (2000–2001): 269–314, esp. 306–307.

[63] Nicholas Denysenko discusses this in detail in his *Chrismation: A Primer for Catholics* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2014).

[64] See the Taft article mentioned above.

Christian Burial Societies

Let me conclude by dealing with two significant objections.

First, as noted above, revised liturgical rites in the West have not been terribly effective in correcting questionable ideas of eschatology. Why should we assume that merely by their strangeness Byzantine rites would be any more effective – or, indeed, effective at all? Perhaps their very strangeness might serve only to further alienate and confuse people not accustomed at all to the habits of mind and practices of Byzantine Christianity, which was originally embedded in a culture very different from our own.[65] I concede that this is a very real risk, and as I noted above I do not think that Eastern Christianity has any magical solutions to the problems bedeviling *all* Christians today. But perhaps Byzantine funeral texts, embedded in a larger context, might yet prove to be of some use as part of a larger movement. Let us look at that context and larger movement now in anticipating our second objection.

The likely second objection here is that recovery of ancient practices of bathing, shrouding, kissing, and burying bodies is not practical today in North America. Given current cultural expectations, indeed they are not. We live in a fast-food culture and expect death to be offered at the drive-through as, indeed, in some funeral homes it is.[66] But perhaps we too easily throw in the towel here rather than look to the larger picture and the harder work we might have to do if we are to recover and again evangelically offer to the world a proper eschatology, a proper funeral, and a proper care for our beloved dead whom "we have loved long since but lost awhile" (in Cardinal Newman's felicitous phrase). I am acutely aware that my

[65] The literature on Byzantium is vast and shows no signs of letting up. Studies on Byzantine Christianity likewise continue to pour forth today. A good starting place to get a sense of Byzantine Christian culture may be found in Derek Krueger, *Byzantine Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010).

[66] A story of a new drive-through option at a funeral home, opened in late 2014, in Saginaw, Michigan is noted here: http://news.yahoo.com/michigan-funeral-home-provides-drive-thru-option-064247396.html.

proposals here may easily be dismissed as wholly impractical and romantic desires.

These practices were, however, recently common and widely practiced in Greece as the anthropologist Juliet du Boulay has documented at length in her haunting and beautiful book, *Cosmos, Life, and Liturgy in a Greek Orthodox Village*.[67] There death was handled entirely by the family at home – the bathing, clothing, laying out, and keeping vigil – until the body was carried to the church, and thence to the graveyard. Villagers in the Greek islands maintained such practices in small, intimate, and rather isolated forms as late as the 1970s. But in the large urban centres of North America especially, are they possible today? Is there a way of reviving important Christian practices in a culture of convenience? I think there is: Christian burial societies.

At the end of his seminal work *After Virtue*, Alasdair MacIntyre famously noted that what was required today was the "construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the new dark ages which are already upon us."[68] MacIntyre, of course, was referring to the larger metaphysical and moral context in which he saw the total collapse of any practice of the virtues. But I take his point in a more precise and directed way here: that if a robust eschatology is again to be offered and clearly conveyed, it will come about in large measure through local communities enacting Christian burial practices, from final decline and death through to preparation of the body, funeral, burial, and memorial services on significant anniversaries.

Burial societies once existed in several places among Christians, including in England. They still exist today in New York among Jews.[69] In an age where funerary practices are rapidly changing, and there is greater and greater experimenta-

[67] See footnote 45, above.
[68] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 263.
[69] See one such benevolent society, Misaskim, at http://www.misaskim.org/index.php.

tion with "alternative" forms[70] apart from the standard visitation at a funeral home with an embalmed corpse that is then buried in an expensive and superfluous coffin inside a concrete vault in a cemetery, now would seem to be an ideal time for Christians to begin to reclaim their responsibility for caring for the dead instead of leaving this up to "professionals," no matter how competent and caring these figures may be. Such renewed practices would help offer not only a charitable service but also an evangelical witness to an orthodox eschatology as described above.

Can we not imagine the creation of Christian burial societies for those families who cannot, for whatever reason, take care of the body from the time of death to the time of burial? Could we not have even one parish in a city designated as the one to call at the time of death to assemble their burial society to go and prepare the deceased? Ideally many parishes might have such volunteer societies, but if there were even one in a city, town, or region, this would be a start. With skilled guidance and training from pioneers such as the Orthodox Christians Mark and Elizabeth Barna, authors of the recent manual *A Christian Ending*,[71] these new Christian burial societies would be a welcome form of ecumenical co-operation at death, much as evangelicals and Catholics, and many other Christians, today co-operate on so-called life issues such as abortion. They would allow Christians to reclaim practices that, as recently as a century ago, were still commonplace and widespread across all Christian cultures, both East and West. Their recovery today will be but one piece of an ongoing and much

[70] The young and refreshingly self-critical funeral director Caleb Wilde discusses ever changing practices at his wildly popular and very interesting website: www.calebwilde.com. In his recent TED Talk, Wilde notes that the journey towards a death-denying culture dependent on funeral homes was one of "small steps" and equally small steps in another direction could help Christians (of which Wilde is one) reclaim their duty towards the dead and their own unique funerary and burial practices: http://www.calebwilde.com/2014/10/my-tedx-talk-embracing-death/.

[71] J. Mark and Elizabeth J. Barna, *A Christian Ending: A Handbook for Burial in the Ancient Christian Tradition* (Divine Ascent Press, 2011). I discuss the book and interview the authors here: http://easternchristianbooks.blogspot.com/2012/03/mark-and-elizabeth-barna-on-dying-and.html.

larger project of evangelization across post-Christian cultures whose need to hear the *evangelion*, the central proclamation of which is that Christ is risen and death has been destroyed, remains as great as ever.