

## A Comparison of Death Imagery in Gregory of Nyssa's *Vita Macrinae* and the Byzantine Funeral Hymnography<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

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Fr. Alexander Schmemmann proposed the thesis that the existing Byzantine funeral service represents a fusion of two separate theological strata, in tension with one another: one sees the believer's death as a passage to new life in Christ, the other returns to pre-Christian antiquity in seeing death as a tragic separation. However, it can be shown that elements of both these strata are already present in pre-Byzantine patristic Greek literature. Analysis of two Christian Greek texts is carried out in order to demonstrate the presence in them of both strata: Gregory's *Vita Macrinae* (fourth century), and the much later Byzantine Funeral service (originating from the eighth century onwards). The two works are analyzed to show their use of positive theologies and images of death, in four categories; and of negative theologies and images of death, also in four categories. The presence of both positive and negative imagery suggests that the negative as well as the positive stratum is a venerable, legitimate element in the Christian liturgical contemplation of death.



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<sup>1</sup>Originally a paper presented to The Canadian Association of Eastern Christian Studies, Bishop's University, Lennoxville Quebec, 3 June 1999. This paper evolved out of research for my doctoral dissertation, which examines the theology and spirituality of the Byzantine Funeral Service, a topic on which very little has been written.

### *Introduction*

Most studies of the Byzantine funeral have tended to concentrate on its historical evolution. My ongoing research, however, focuses on the concept of "liturgy as pastoral care," examining how the funeral service's "theological vision" of suffering and death does, or does not, address the spiritual and psychological needs of newly bereaved persons.

One of the only extensive treatments of the liturgical theology of the Byzantine Funeral is a series of four unpublished lectures on the "liturgies of death," delivered in 1979 at St. Vladimir's Seminary in New York by the eminent Orthodox liturgical theologian, the late Alexander Schmemmann.<sup>2</sup> In these talks, Fr. Schmemmann proposed the thesis that the existing Byzantine funeral service represents a fusion of two separate theological strata which are in tension with one another. On the one hand, there is a "paleo-Christian stratum," comprised mostly of psalmody and scripture readings, which represents the death of the believer as a passage to new life in Christ, made possible by Christ's own victory over death. In contrast, there is a "lamentation stratum," largely hymnographic, which seems at times to return to pre-Christian antiquity in depicting death primarily as a tragic separation, the prospect of which overshadows life and renders it virtually meaningless.

Fr. Schmemmann's analysis tends to "blame" middle Byzantine liturgical poets, writing from the eighth to twelfth centuries, for having "corrupted" the hope-filled vision of the paleo-Christian stratum. However, based on preliminary research, I have begun to wonder if Schmemmann was being entirely fair in implying that these Byzantine poets were responsible for re-introducing a pagan vision of death into the

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<sup>2</sup>I have transcribed these as yet unpublished lectures from audio-cassette recordings which may be obtained from: Fr. Alexander Schmemmann Books, P.O. Box 1390, Place Bonaventure, Montreal QC H5A 1H3. A copy of my transcriptions is in the possession of Prof. Peter Galadza of the Sheptytsky Institute of Eastern Christian Studies (Ottawa: Saint Paul University, 1998). Any references to material from these transcribed lectures will be cited as: Schmemmann, "Funeral."

Church's funeral liturgy. Rather, I believe that elements of Fr. Schmemmann's two strata are already present in pre-Byzantine Greek patristic literature. One such document is *The Life of Saint Macrina* by Gregory of Nyssa (ca. A.D. 335–394).<sup>3</sup> My analysis of those passages of this work that describe Macrina's death and burial when compared with hymnographic material from the Orthodox funeral service (originating from the eighth century onwards)<sup>4</sup> will show that both sets of texts contain elements whose tonality is representative of each of Schmemmann's two strata. If such proves to be the case, then Schmemmann's assertion that the "lamentation stratum" in the present-day funeral is a "Byzantine creation" can be challenged. It also suggests that the "lamentation stratum" is a venerable and legitimate element in the Christian liturgical contemplation of death, which must be accepted and integrated into any study of the Funeral's theology and spirituality.

In my analysis, I shall compare poetic images of death from two Christian Greek texts: Gregory's *Life of Saint Macrina* by Gregory of Nyssa (chapters 23–27 and 32–35, which deal with Macrina's death and burial); and the hymnographic portions of the "*Akolouthía nekrōsimos eis kosmikōús*," the ordinary Byzantine-rite funeral service for

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<sup>3</sup>Gregory of Nyssa, *Vie de sainte Macrine* [Greek critical text with French translation], trans. Pierre Maraval, *Sources chrétiennes* 178 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1971), 216–235 and 246–257 (PG 46: 984B–988C and 992C–996B). These chapters deal with the death and burial of Macrina.

<sup>4</sup>Historically verifiable authorship and dates of composition do not exist for most of the hymnographic texts which comprise the bulk of the contemporary Funeral Service in the Byzantine tradition. However, the important elements in today's funeral liturgy can already be found in various manuscript euchologies dating from the tenth to the twelfth centuries; see Themistoklis Christodoulou, *L'ufficio funebre nei manoscritti greci del secolo X–XII: Excerpta ex Dissertatione ad Doctoratum* (Rome: Pontifical Oriental Institute, 1996). The major parts of the Office have been ascribed by tradition to various Byzantine monastic authors writing in Greek some time prior to the tenth century; of these, it does seem probable that St. John of Damascus (A.D. ca. 675–749) is the author of the so-called *Idiomela eis oktō ēchous* which the textual rubrics themselves ascribe to him. The oldest extant part of the service is probably the prayer "*Theōs iōn pneumatōn*" for which documentation exists going back to about A.D. 600; see Vitaliano Bruni, *I funerali di un sacerdote nel rito bizantino* (Jerusalem: Franciscan Printing Press, 1972), 148.