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THE SOUL, THE BODY, OR THE WHOLE PERSON? CHRISTIAN ANTHROPOLOGY’S MAJOR MAKEOVER

Lucy Bregman

The Introduction to the Episcopal Church’s new burial liturgy, Enriching Our Worship 3: Burial Rites for Adults, Together with a Rite for the Burial of a Child, insists that the body or the ashes of the dead ought to be present at the funeral based on Christian belief in the incarnation and the bodily resurrection of the dead. Above all, “the Christian liturgy for the dead is an Easter liturgy,” patterned directly on Jesus’ death and resurrection.1 These ideas are commonplace today. Christians’ objections to other patterns, particularly bodiless memorial services, are based on these norms. Indeed, the editors of Enriching Our Worship 3 desire to banish memorials and personal “celebrations of life” to non-Christian, secular spaces and times.

For the past decades, undergirding these norms, discussions of Christian understandings of the person have emphasized that Christians are holists, not dualists, when it comes to incarnation and embodiment. That is the primary reason for the preference for whole-body burial and for the presence of the dead at his or her own funeral. These assertions arise from stress on death as disruption, loss for the mourners, and attention to the presence of God in the mourners’ sorrow. While these ideas and practices may seem uncontroversial today, they were not previously emphasized. In fact, based on funeral sermons and advice manuals for pastors until the middle of the twentieth century, some of these themes would have seemed foreign and even offensive. It was unquestioned that a person consists of soul and body such that the funeral director dealt with the body; the preacher, the soul. Too much emphasis on the body in American society’s practices was castigated as pagan. The soul was the real person, the person who mattered to God. Funerals sermons did not argue for this understanding; they assumed it. It was conveyed by the pastor’s words, the poems that supplemented sermons, and the messages in songs. To support this theme, preachers had a rich emotional imagery of natural transitions, so that the soul was actually part of a regular, expected, and universal order ordained by God. The universality of attention to the soul overshadowed the connection to Easter, especially since “bodily resurrection” would have distracted worshipers from the focus...
on the soul’s immediate after-death destiny. Significantly, when the preacher’s sermon directly addressed the dead, it was with regard to the heavenly abode, never to the body lying in the church.

This view is now dismissed as Platonism by those who find its dualism unbiblical or sub-Christian. Recent writers on funerals, especially Thomas Long, would be mystified or offended by such dualism, not to mention the content of most of the sermons that supported it. They are outraged by memorial services that under the guise of “celebrating a life” substitute disembodiment of memories and images instead of the physical presence of the dead. “We are no longer persuaded that funerals are about the embodied person who has died...they are disembodied souls floating in the gnostic ether.” How did we get to the point at which a previously denigrated understanding of persons became the accepted view?

In this essay, I examine the older view, then turn to a vigorous and famous challenge based on theological opposition to it, an attempt to claim that a more holistic view of the person is the more authentically biblical understanding. In this essay, I will be agreeing with Long, who, with Thomas Lynch, emphasizes that the dead ought to be present as a participant in his or her own funeral. While Long and Lynch, building on the earlier work of Oscar Cullmann, want a return to embodied funerals, I also look at the messages sent by the sermons, songs, and poems of such traditional funerals. These sources tell a different story, because, in spite of the presence of the corpse, they proclaim that the real person was always the soul. Anthropological dualism reigned supreme.

Earlier Notions of the Person

Were you to have asked any Christian clergy or layperson what happens at death, up through the mid-twentieth century the initial answer would have been very predictable: the soul separates from the body and leaves it behind. Death was a transition, but not a loss, and in the dying of Christians, it was to be a smooth and hopeful transition into a new mode of being. Again and again, Christians stressed the hopeful quality of death, although by our standards the messages and atmosphere sound gloomy. Preachers who presided at funerals where the death had been expected, and the life of the deceased unproblematic in his or her faith, could rely on this smooth transition model and elaborate by intense use of certain imageries. For example, the separation of soul from body was, in reality, a homecoming. Pictures of peace, protective maternal presence, and simple piety bound this image into sermons at funerals. For the dead, the soul was Home at last, for “Heaven is a HOME and death a Homegoing.” Jesus, whose original home was Heaven, could have been homesick most of his life on earth; he was eager to return to his Father’s house. Images for peaceful, expected transition were drawn from nature: the caterpillar goes into its cocoon and emerges a butterfly, birds migrate, flowers grow out of shade into light. Popular in sermons, these images of natural immortality depict death followed by afterlife as the final stage of growth rather than an ending. The poem “The Rose Still Grows
Beyond the Wall,” once read at funerals and still treasured as among America’s 100 favorite poems, tells of a rose bush that grew from the shady side, up through a crack in the wall, and into sunlight on the other side: “Shall claim of death cause us to grieve/And make our courage faith and fall?/Nay! Let us faith and hope receive—/The rose still grows beyond the wall.” Adherents of this idea claimed that natural immortality of this kind has been the hope of humans everywhere and at all times, maintaining it to be a truth that Christianity supports but did not discover.

Motifs such as these were the mainstay of funeral sermons into the 1950s, buttressed philosophically by the Ingersoll Lectures on “The Immortality of Man” at Harvard, begun in 1896, and the Gifford Lectures in Edinburgh. In 1921–1922, philosopher of religion A. Seth Pringle-Pattison expounded his version of dualism in his Gifford Lecture, on “The Idea of Immortality.” He viewed himself as a Christian philosopher of religion, although he included ideas from the ancient Hebrews and Asian religions, concluding that, to the spiritually attuned mind, “physical death ought to appear no more than an incident in life, an event to be accepted as naturally as sleep. It should bring with it no depressing suggestion of finality.” While mourning the dead might be a natural human response, it had no religious value for Pringle-Pattison: “Unbelief in death … seems to be the necessary characteristic or concomitant of true spiritual life.” This was translated and appropriated in endless sermons that sometimes went so far as to maintain that Jesus’ death on the cross was nothing more than this same natural transition. To an extent that seems outrageous to many of us, this form of “unbelief in death” was extolled as an ideal. The body might have been present at the funeral, but what the worshipers heard and sang was an utter contradiction to the lesson Thomas Long, Thomas Lynch, and the Enriching Our Worship editors hope it taught.

What disrupted this body–soul dualism? How did it get labeled as Platonism and contrasted rhetorically with the authentic Christian understanding of persons as holistic? What killed natural immortality both in theological training and in funeral sermons? Reading through anthologies of funeral sermons dating from the 1970s on, and in a few cases even earlier, one finds little room for caterpillars turning into butterflies. None upholds “unbelief in death” in the positive sense Pringle-Pattison meant. Today’s funeral sermons center on the experience of loss and grief, from the perspective of the bereaved. Post-1970s anthologies of sermons and pastoral manuals for funerals show that mourning was no longer considered irrelevant or devalued, for at death a real transition had occurred in the lives of those who survive.

Cullman: Resurrection Versus Immortality

A dramatic shift in Christian anthropology preceded the current focus on mourners. This change started at the highest level of theological sophistication, proclaimed at the Harvard Ingersoll Lectures. Oscar Cullmann delivered his famous essay, “Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead?” in 1955. In the 1965 edition of the published lecture, along with others on Immortality and Resurrection, Cullmann responded to his outraged hearers
and readers in an Afterward, saying essentially: I'm telling you what the Bible says, not asking you to believe it, and I'm not soft-pedaling the biblical message so as to console or comfort you in your traditional beliefs.8

Cullmann argued that dualism is simply not in the Bible. Biblical authors were holists. They took death not as a transition to natural immortality, but as an enemy of God and an enemy to themselves. They hated death, they feared it, they felt about it the way many cancer sufferers today hate cancer. To die was to be lost to God, and to be swallowed up by God's enemy. Cullmann countered not just Pringle-Pattison, and not just Plato, but Socrates himself—the icon of heroic, wise dying revered by Christians and non-Christians alike. “Can there be a greater contrast than that between Socrates and Jesus?” asks Cullmann, focused on their dying. Socrates, calm and assured, drinks the hemlock in sure and certain hope of his soul’s immortality. Jesus prays to be spared his impending death. Jesus “turns to God with all his human fear of this great enemy, death. He was really afraid.” He accepts his Father’s will, but means: “If this greatest of all terrors, death, must befall me according to thy will, then I submit to this horror.” Jesus knows that “whoever is in the hands of death is no longer in the hands of God, but in the hands of God’s enemy.” This is the meaning of Jesus’ forsaken cry in the Gospels. “He is now actually in the hands of God’s great enemy.”9

I lay out these repetitive Cullmann quotes in order to give a sense of their shock value. Jesus is not afraid of Pilate or his human enemies; he is afraid of death. Cullman’s use of “enemy,” “horror,” and “terror” are his words, not literally the New Testament’s. They are Cullman’s “hype,” and it worked because it cut through many generations of Pringle-Pattison assurances that death was as “natural” as sleep and was, for Christians, a nonevent. His exaggerated rhetoric had immense power to disrupt expectations about Christians and death. Cullmann’s antidualism was and continues to be taken up by many Christian writers. In the words of Henri Nouwen, “Death does not belong to God. God did not create death. God does not want death for us. In God there is no death.”10 And this means exactly the opposite of what Seth Pringle-Pattison would have thought it did.

Death Post-Cullman

Cullmann is still with us in a very positive way. Long and Lynch’s criticism of memorial services devoid of bodies depends on the critique of Platonism that Cullmann led more than sixty years ago. To these contemporary experts on funerals, a memorial service has a contrived “unbearable lightness.”11 It spiritualizes and makes death less real than our memories of the person we try to memorialize.12 Another way to see this is to say, after Cullmann, natural immortality started to sound New Age. This may be an anachronism, as Cullmann gave his lecture about thirty years in advance of what became identified as the New Age movement.13 But while all those analogies of caterpillars into butterflies, migrating birds, and growing plants looked too smooth, peaceful, and natural for Christian funerals, they retained their appeal elsewhere. Both natural immortality and “homesick Jesus”
belonged to an era when dualism was unquestioned. Once questioned, the borders of what counted as appropriate Christian imagery for death shifted. Quietly, the use of these and especially of poems that endorsed them, dropped out of Christian funerals. New Age, as an explicit designated alternative to conventional Christianity, appropriated them. While most advocates of what became New Age ideas and practices would insist that they were holistic in their approach to mind–body integration, when it came to ideas and images for death, they could sound just like Pringle-Pattison.

“There is no death,” announced Elisabeth Kübler-Ross at a public lecture and in her writings after her initial work, *On Death and Dying*. There is no loss, there is only a transition from caterpillar to butterfly. Exiled from post-Cullmann Christianity, this view has found a home. The advantages of natural immortality are not just in its long philosophical pedigree, but because it can be illustrated. Kübler-Ross displayed a children’s stuffed caterpillar that, when turned inside out, became a butterfly! When Cullmann wanted to cut “resurrection” from such universal longings for a soulish transition, he may have hoped to exclude all themes and images from the authentic Christian message. What God did for Jesus is truly outside nature, a unique divine act. This may have set a Christological norm for funerals, but it also intentionally excluded the favored images and analogies that had given sermons their emotional weight. With the end of natural immortality, Christians lost a lot of imagery that had worked and continues to work to suggest transitions.

This changeover has also highlighted another purported strategic feature of New Age natural immortality, namely that none of these images and ideas are Christocentric the way Cullmann insists is essential for Christians. Indeed, once alerted to this criterion, we can see how few of the older funeral sermons’ ideas and images are focused on Christ, his death, and resurrection. The Easter liturgy does not appear to be a model for the funeral. Even from denominations with the most formal patterns for worship, such an association is simply missing. Why should Easter be there, when universal natural immortality of the soul is the underlying message? Christ may have provided a historical proof of this in a special way, but he came to prove what people had always known by intuition. This argument appeared in older sermons, and there would be little incentive to dwell on Jesus’ own death when one held this conviction.

For pre-Cullmann preachers, this was not a betrayal of the cross or an embrace of Platonism. For a good proportion of contemporary participants at a memorial service, too much focus on Christ might seem narrow and exclusivist. For that reason, celebrations of life look back to the deceased’s life and the mourners’ memories. Cullmann’s heavy-handedness when it came to presenting death was almost (but not quite) matched by his insistence on resurrection, a miraculous act of God, as the sole biblical teaching. Did he believe in an embodied resurrection at the end of history? Remember his “Afterword”: this is what the Bible says; take it or leave it. Some left the biblical witness and in doing so embraced either New Age or religiously vacuous contemporary memorials.

Even for those who might take issue with Cullmann, there are certain deaths—funerals and memorials for children—for which his message seems appropriate. At one time, these funerals were considered easy to preach
because people assumed that the dead child had been free from serious sin and was at play with Jesus and other children in heaven. Today, however, because there is nothing good to say about the death of a child, death as enemy becomes most real. A well-known poem, “On a Child Who Lived One Minute,” reflects the post-Cullmann understanding:

Into a world where children shriek like suns  
Sundered from other suns on their arrival,  
She saw the waiting face of evil,  
But couldn’t take its meaning in at once,  
So fresh her understanding, and so fragile …  
A blackness tiptoed in her  
And snuffed the only candle of her castle.15

A memorial service for a newborn, written by a friend: “There is evil in the world, and temporarily, it has won a battle against us.”16 The liturgy affirms Jesus’ victory over death, but the tone of this lament memorial is utterly different from that of a natural immortality sermon. Overall, it is very like Cullmann in its insistence on death as enemy.

Why do these examples seem so powerfully Cullmannesque? Whatever Seth Pringle-Pattison upheld as the truly spiritual disbelief in death, lives cut short suddenly and horribly challenge that benign view. Even as Pringle-Pattison gave his lectures in 1921, the churches of Great Britain hung plaques of the local persons killed in the Great War. The lists of names are appallingly long; the ages of the dead, from seventeen years to the late thirties. The reality of these deaths hung heavy over the countryside. It may have been these deaths, rather than Cullmann or any other theological insiders, that tilted the scales against dualism and natural immortality. You wish that the families and friends of all those dead young men could have come to the Gifford Lectures. Would they have found hope and understanding? Or, would they stood and with one voice protested: “No, we believe in death! It is all too real for us!”

Conclusion

We have said almost nothing about the “whole person” view that supposedly replaces dualism. It is easy to find diatribes against Platonism. This is linked to a celebration of the goodness of creation, the material, embodied, time-bound, and limited world that for a card-carrying Platonist is second-rate. But the celebration of natural embodied life has a cost. An eloquent and succinct expression comes from Nicholas Wolterstorff, grieving the death of his adult son. “In our day we have come to see again some dimensions of the Bible overlooked for centuries. We have come to see its affirmation of the goodness of creation. God made us embodied and historical creatures and affirmed the goodness of that. We are not to yearn for timeless disembodiment …. But this makes death all the more difficult to live with.”11
This, one can say, is the shadow side of Cullmann's makeover. Although there was precious little in his own essay that affirmed "the goodness of creation" or that even mentioned Jesus' enjoyment of friends, parties, and daily activities, this affirmation implies something is off the mark in the indifference of Pringle-Pattison to nature as the realm of human growth. Perhaps, in practical Christian worship, natural immortality's poetic images of butterflies made up for this. But without these, with resurrection alone as a unique miraculous act of God against Death, God's worst enemy, ordinary deaths may be indeed "all the more difficult to live with."

I have in the past written critiques of Cullmann, following the footsteps of many biblical scholars, church historians, and theologians in deconstructing his rhetoric. But to read older funeral sermons, unabashedly dualist and unmindful of the presence of the body while the message was of the soul's homecoming, I cannot help but wish, "Oscar Cullmann, where were you when you were needed? Wasn't your message what those bereaved people in the pews really needed to hear?" The story of funeral liturgies and preaching cannot be simplified into nostalgia for the good old days when bodies were present but when Christians were told to disbelieve in death. But hopefully we are witnessing a return to the unity of embodied Christian faith professed in Christian funerals, professed in the gathering around the body of the deceased as well as in the prayers and preaching of the funeral liturgy itself; real death and real life.


Notes

4. H. Reed Shepfer, When Death Speaks (Burlington, IA: Lutheran Literary Board, 1937), 43.
5. Ibid., 42.
9. Ibid., 15-17.
14. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, "Death and the Afterlife" (lecture, Bright Hope Baptist Church, Philadelphia, c. 1983).
16. Greg Schneider, "A Responsive Reading for Hans Peterson" (memorial service for a child, date unknown), personal communication with Lucy Bregman.