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The Eclipse of “Natural Immortality”

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Abstract

North American Protestants up until mid-20th century relied on imagery from nature and home to evoke pictures of the afterlife that would resonate with everyday experience. Protestant funeral sermons were an ideal occasion for these. “Natural immortality” rests on the assumption that people everywhere at all times believed in the immortality of the soul; it makes death a smooth transition and departure, not annihilation. Which images made this belief more real? Because Jesus’ resurrection was merely an historical example of a universal process, it did not dominate even the most orthodox and traditional funeral sermons. Instead, imagery of natural transitions appear again and again: caterpillar into butterfly, birds that migrate, journeys from one place to the next. Even when nature is assisted, the imagery is familiar: a rose grows in a greenhouse, but then is transplanted by order or the master gardener. In addition, the equation of “Heaven our home” with one’s earthly first home appears in these sermons, to make death a homecoming. Natural immortality de-emphasizes surprises, disjunctions and discontinuities between this life and the afterlife, as well as minimizing loss and mutilation.

This imagery suffered challenges from theology for its Platonism, then from the death awareness movement, and from the medicalization of dying during the twentieth century. It has disappeared from Protestant funerals, supplanted by a focus on mourners, and celebrating the life of the deceased.

Introduction

It is sometimes hard to track the quiet disappearance or shrinking of images and ideas. The sudden appearance of new ones is more noticeable, but the fading out of older motifs is a story that happens under the radar. This is the case with the images discussed in this paper, which were once the central themes of most Protestant funeral sermons right up through the 1960s in North America. They did not disappear with a bang, but faded and lost their power. “Like butter scraped over too much bread,” in the words of Bilbo the hobbit in *The Lord of the Rings*, these images grew tired. When the death awareness movement of the 1970s (which publicized the phrase death and dying) burst on the American cultural scene, it offered new, replacement images for death and grieving. The older ones were by then not missed, and certainly nobody protested in the streets or in front of churches to bring them back. The death awareness movement claimed that American society had nothing but denial and silence with which to encounter death. The reality was more

complex, but the imagery we discuss here had lost its prominence and power, gone into eclipse already for public occasions of death rituals.

The material for this study comes from funeral sermons, preached by Protestants in the United States from the beginning of the twentieth century until the present. Not just any sermons; these sermons were considered worthy to be anthologized and published, selected as samples in pastors' manuals such as *Cyclopedia of Funeral Sermons and Sketches*. (Hallock 1926; also Blackwood 1942; Christensen 1967; Daniels 1937; Ketcham 1899; Mansell 1998 and Richmond 1990) While not all Protestants in the United States wrote out sermons in advance (some groups, such as Pentecostals, may have valued spontaneous preaching over written texts) the anthologies represent a wide range of mainline denominations and geographic regions. They include what look, from hindsight, both conservative and liberal voices, although current use of such labels may be anachronistic, as we will see. These sermons come from Christian funerals presided over by pastors, who saw themselves as legitimate providers of the meanings of death and afterlife to their congregations and often to the wider civic community. They saw themselves as the center of Christian American culture, on hand to awaken thoughts of death when something needed to be said. This is especially true of anthologies and manuals from the first half of the twentieth century, the era in which natural immortality imagery reigned uncontested in Christian imagination. So while we cannot claim that in all ways they express Americans' meanings of death, they were given center stage when other voices – especially Roman Catholics and ethnic minorities – were not. Whatever changes occurred, Protestants continue to anthologize funeral sermons and write pastors' manuals, genres that remain helpful for clergy although the contents have shifted (earlier collections included sections of suitable poems to be read at the funeral, for instance).

Natural Immortality Imagery

The images we speak of here are those which depend upon natural immortality, the belief that the soul moves without trauma out of this life and into another realm in the same manner as other natural transitions easily observed and understood. Advocates of natural immortality assumed that always and everywhere human beings had accepted the soul/body duality, and the idea of death as hopeful transition rather than complete annihilation. This belief implied that images drawn from the natural world – birds migrate, caterpillars become butterflies, plants grow – were entirely fitting, and capture exactly the sense that an afterlife is really another stage of the human life-cycle. Or, to put this another way, there is nothing absolutely supernatural in the transition from this life to another; it is an expected, regular event analogous to growth of plants from seeds, and the return of birds every spring. Even images that seem to imply disruption – the transplanting of vegetation – are smooth, expected and domesticated within this ideal of natural immortality. These images and their fading out from Protestant preaching are the topic of this paper.

Let us take one clear example. One popular poem, “The Rose Still Grows beyond the Wall” expresses this exactly.

A rose grew on the shady side of a wall.
 As it grew and blossomed fair and tall,
 Slowly rising to loftier height
 Through which there shone a beam of light.
 And it followed the light through the crevice length,
 And unfolded itself on the other side.
 Shall claim of death cause us to grieve,
 And make our courage faint or fall;
 Nay, let faith and hope receive,
 The rose still grows beyond the wall. (Hallock 1926, 213)

Although this appears not only in a collection of materials suitable for funeral sermons, but also in an anthology of *America's 100 Favorite Poems*, we focus upon its use to support a funeral message here. It and many similar poems were recited by the preacher within the funeral sermon, and expressed his overall message of hope. This was the doctrinal content on a huge number of funeral sermons up through the 1950s. Heaven, very real, was also very imaginable; the realm "beyond the wall" was enough like this world so that natural images and familiar situations could easily be used to depict it.

Heaven's Nearness
 It seemeth such a little way to me,
 Across to that strange country, the Beyond.
 And yet not strange, for it has grown to be
 The home of those of whom I am so fond.
 They make it seem familiar and more dear,
 As journeying friends bring distant countries near. (Hallock 1926, 182)

Images of natural immortality accomplish this basic task to make the Beyond, the Other, seem close and familiar, and to turn death into a next stage of natural growth. So, too, as in these two poems, spatial and place analogies are entirely appropriate; no preacher had any qualms about them. While a phrase such as "the Beyond" might sound otherworldly, natural immortality domesticated this otherness. Heaven was near, familiar, and could be imagined using the most familiar images of all: as one's first home, and as a natural rather than alien place.

Now this belief in natural immortality fit entirely within the underlying purpose of funeral sermons for Protestant Americans up until recent decades. This purpose goes back as far as anyone can trace within Christianity. The funeral was the occasion for the preacher to remind his congregation of their ultimate destiny and destination. "Last week he was in his office; today we bury him. Are you living under the power of the world to come?" (Ketcham 1899, 18) In short, the funeral-goers were the future dead. (See Bregman 2012, 17ff.) Their situation as current mourners was trivial and temporary by comparison. This is probably the most basic difference between these messages from the relatively recent past, and those heard today.

The domestication of the Beyond was not entirely one-sided. To balance the small-scale coziness of home as an image for Heaven, there were equally-natural motifs of travel and voyages. The most frequently-recited funeral poem was "Crossing the Bar," by Alfred Lord Tennyson. If you went to enough funerals prior to 1950, you could have memorized this poem, just from hearing it recited within sermons. In the poem, the voyage from the harbor's protection into the open ocean ("crossing the bar") evokes and retains a sense of mystery and adventure which many of the natural immortality images suppress.

Sunset and evening star
 And one clear call for me!
 And may there be no moaning at the bar
 When I put out to sea.

Twilight and evening bells
 And after that the dark!
 And may there be no sadness of farewell
 When I embark.

For though from out our bourne of time and Place
 The flood may bear me far,
 I hope to see my Pilot face to face,
 When I have crost the bar. (Wallis 1953, 27)

Note, by the way, that this poem shares with the (far inferior) growing rose poem, the injunction not to mourn. Natural immortality makes grieving a short-sighted and inferior response to death, an attitude by now banned from most funeral sermons, and incomprehensible to those of us raised on post-death awareness movement ideals. This same theme appears in the brief poetic allegory which returns us to plants and domestic settings:

Gathered Lillies
 And he asked, Who gathered this
 Flower? And the gardener answered,
 "The Master!" and his fellow
 Servant held his peace. (Hallock 1926, 64)

Gardening may not be strictly "natural," but it was a suitable site for expected growth, transplantations and harvests, and therefore unsuitable to convey deep grief and loss.

Natural Immortality and Christian Belief

Natural immortality according to these sermons, was a universal belief, shared by humans everywhere. It was not a product of distinctive Western philosophies, nor of Biblical revelation, and no cultural variations were acknowledged. Every preacher assumed the Bible taught natural immortality – but as a reflection of the common consensus of humankind, not as a special doctrine shown only to the people of Israel and to Christians. While Protestants disagreed over many doctrinal issues, on this belief they did not. Given this assumption, the resurrection of Jesus Christ becomes a special case of an already-present expectation, for Jesus is the historical example who confirms the universal truth. There was thus no need to focus funeral preaching centrally on Jesus' resurrection, and by later theological standards these early twentieth-century sermons are woefully un-Christocentric. What Christians needed to know about death and afterlife was actually given already, not only in the Hebrew Scriptures but indeed everywhere that birds and bugs demonstrated how natural immortality was the universal law.

Does the Bible actually support natural immortality? While today one might wonder at the lack of Biblical deathbed scenes explicitly illustrating such an idea (people in the Bible die and "slept with their fathers," or die like Stephen with a miraculous vision of Christ in Heaven), this absence did not trouble preachers in the least. It was instead absolutely conventional to read all Scripture references to the restoration of Jerusalem as references to Heaven, where everyone is alive and happy and children play in the streets. (Bregman 2012, 31ff.) This added to the sense of Heaven as a yearned-for homeland. Yet one may also look back on this imagery and say that the profusion of Victorian-era poems supplied what the Bible itself did not when it came to specific natural immortality imagery.

Within this framework of belief, Jesus, as the man whose true home was Heaven, his Father's house, was important in support of natural immortality, not as a resurrected initiator of it. Jesus as "homesick" was depicted as a role model in some sermons. (Shepfer 1937, 42) Most of all, his teaching that "In my Father's house there are many mansions" (John 14:1-2, King James Version) was and still remains one of the most popular funeral texts. Not only was Heaven Jesus' home, it was ours as well. Under the sway of natural immortality, this conflation of Home and home overcame the strangeness of the open ocean in "Crossing the Bar." It allowed for a vivid sense of Heaven's nearness such as in this example, from the sermon preached at the funeral of the pastor's brother:

Brother, farewell! We have lived many years together in our earthly father's house. Here are the rooms where the loved ones used to gather. I see the trees under whose shade we sat... Today thou art in thy Father's house above. I am still on earth. Someday I will meet thee there. (Schuh 1925, 185)

Note that this funeral must have been held at the dead man's own family home – no longer at all likely in the USA – and this would add immensely to the sense of familiarity and continuity. We can clearly picture that the dead brother's new environment will be one of trees and rooms and familiar faces, only marginally different from what the surviving brother can see out the window. So support for natural immortality came through countless anecdotes that focus on Heaven as home, vivid depictions of the first home in this world, especially featuring pious mothers. Some appeal to a sense of nostalgia for simple rural lives, although balanced by the real memories of hardships.

It is true that all these images come from funerals, where the sermons, hymns and appropriate poetry (older Protestant funerals always included poems, recited by the preacher as part of the sermon) emphasized natural immortality and the non-traumatic, non-disruptive transition to move toward that other place. Those who died violently or unnaturally (for example, in mine disasters) were funeralized using this imagery of natural immortality, for the doctrinal principles of Christianity outweighed the individual biographical situations.

As a contrast, some persons who look back on the old days with intense ambivalence recall a more violent and troubling portrayal of the afterlife. For example, philosopher John Casey gravitates to the old-fashioned Irish Hellfire sermon he remembers delivered to teen-agers at revivals (Casey 2009, 1–10). These are truly otherworldly, filled with supernatural horrors, and were intended to frighten young men into faith and chastity. He felt even at the time he heard them that these ideas were absurd and unreal, but they were vivid and memorable. Protestants too, in their own revival meetings might have invoked scarier and more dramatic pictures of the world to come. But not at funerals. Even the few examples of funerals for suicides avoided pictures of Hell, although all could agree in public that suicide was a terrible sin. (For example, Schuh 1918, 129) Perhaps some of us share with Casey a fascination with Gustav Doré's famous illustrations for Dante. These enhance the sense of the three transcendent realms as unnatural, dreadful and sublime. I cannot stress enough that natural immortality goes in exactly the opposite direction. It makes the otherworld not strange, but near and dear. To think in Philip Ariès' categories, the popular images from early 20th-century funeral sermons try to evoke the ideal of tamed death (Ariès 1974, 13–14) while what may fascinate today are variants of wild death, focused on mutilation, loss and destruction. But remember that natural immortality was deeply believed in and trusted by Christians. It was not a weird idea to ponder as Casey does its alternative. It was assumed as true, as a basic reality of the human condition.

Natural Immortality Challenged by Theology

Today, in parallel anthologies of funeral sermons and in manuals, natural immortality will not be found at all. There is no trace of it, and funeral sermons cover entirely different themes and have a different underlying purpose. Even by the 1950s, you can tell that natural immortality has faded; the anecdotes are weaker, the images pallid, the confidence that marked sermons from 30 years earlier is more strained. Moreover, the caliber of the poetry deteriorated dramatically, in part because most twentieth-century literature cannot be invoked to support natural immortality. Yet nothing new appears in these collections. It was not until the 1970s, that something radically new was introduced, replacing worn and faded materials with what now seemed contemporary and relevant and real.

We speak here about funeral sermons, what gets said in the most solemn and official situations of public Protestant worship. It is one of the differences between past and present that there is a real split between these public messages, and what to many people is still their favored imagery for an afterlife. In greeting cards and private memorials, natural immortality does survive. I counted 75 hits on the internet for “The Rose Still Grows,” all but one for private memorial sites by friends and families to honor a deceased loved one. (The one exception was posted by the Marin County Rose-Growers Society.) But what gets heard publically at a religious occasion is very different. Moreover, the increasingly popular less religious memorial services, organized by family or held at the funeral home, are even less likely to focus attention on the world to come. These have become celebrations of the life of the deceased, looking back on the past, and addressed to current mourners not to the future dead. Moreover, the entire imagery of caterpillar-into-butterfly, particularly, has become contested as no one could have imagined 100 years ago. Put bluntly, it has become New Age, part of a message that seems to deny death’s reality altogether, and is no longer fully and unsuspectingly Christian. It is not that bugs no longer turn into butterflies – but this natural phenomenon is no longer an automatic source for inspiration regarding Christian understandings of death. What happened, and why would not one of these older sermons be preached today?

Let us avoid using secularization as an answer to this question, as if that alone explained such a quiet but basic change. If Marx, Nietzsche and Freud had all sat in the pews listening to sermons proclaiming natural immortality, they would have silently squirmed and inwardly revolted against a belief they believed to be illusion. But they would not have doubted that natural immortality was what Christianity – and indeed all religion – truly taught. It was a pillar of all faith everywhere, as universal a belief as the preachers insisted. One can imagine silent squirmers present at these sermons, although there is no direct evidence for them in the published texts. While the congregation needs to be reminded of where each may be next week and all will certainly be one day, they do not need to be rationally convinced of natural immortality vs. Enlightenment sceptics.

Indeed, the challenge to natural immortality on religious grounds came from an entirely different quarter. In early twentieth-century Protestant theology, a movement to recapture the prophetic stance of the Reformation, a movement that became known in the U.S. as Neo-Orthodoxy, reinvigorated theology. This movement, associated with the names of theological giants Karl Barth and Emil Brunner, was promulgated in the U.S. by the Niebuhr brothers, Reinhold and Richard, and by Paul Tillich who emigrated to the U.S. during the 1930s. This movement perceived itself as a response to the crisis of European history, World War I and the rise of totalitarian ideologies – in short, to events seemingly far from the placid ordinary individual deaths ritualized by most funerals. With vigor and intellectual depth, Neo-Orthodox thinkers presented Christian faith in opposition against its cultural domestication, responding to large-scale historical issues that challenged Western ideals and assumptions. Neo-Orthodoxy encouraged theologians, church leaders and those they trained as future leaders to focus attention away from personal death, Heaven and the world to come as the earlier generations had understood these. The agenda of Neo-Orthodox theology did not exclude personal death, but focused on eschatology as the ultimate dimension of salvation history. The return of exiles to Jerusalem was one stage in this large-scale history, and not an allegory of individual transition to Heaven. Very quickly in the American seminaries that trained mainline Protestant pastors, this movement became the dominant style of religious thought. Reinhold Niebuhr’s writings may have evoked disagreement over his political agenda, but its central theme of how faith, history and society interrelate took pastors very far from the concerns of natural immortality. Niebuhr and others could write on Christian views of human beings without invoking any of the ideas and images we discussed earlier.

One theme of this movement was a vigorous rejection of Platonism in favor of what thinkers such as Niebuhr called “the Biblical view of man,” or “Biblical anthropology.” For a really eloquent presentation of this kind of argument, the

opening section of Niebuhr's *The Nature and Destiny of Man* is an exemplary source. (Niebuhr 1941, 12–18) Here we do have a direct challenge to natural immortality as we have portrayed it. Newer theologies set up a direct opposition between Greek and Hebraic, platonic philosophy and the doctrine of man which was authentically part of Biblical thought. While platonic thought was dualist, dividing humans into body and soul, the Bible was holist, where human historical embodiment always mattered. God is not the savior of disembodied, timeless entities, but of real peoples embedded in their own conflicts and triumphs over enemies, their own visions of national destiny and transcendent power. Read this way, it is understandable how Biblical passages about the return to Jerusalem simply do not translate into statements about Heaven our home. Even if the belief in the soul's undying transcendent existence had been and still was widespread, it was not necessarily authentically Christian. The easy analogies between growing plants and the life everlasting were rejected, not because of scientific materialism but because Biblical thought did not support them. Here, in this essay, I will not debate the validity or plausibility of this claim. It is still argued over; is the Hebrew Bible really so committed to holism as these thinkers wanted it to be? Is Platonism a disastrous mistake, or the most appropriate philosophical framework for the ancient Church to have used for its message? (For an extended discussion of this question, see Cooper 1989) I can only insist that a generation of pastors trained in these newer theologies were unlikely to recite "The Rose Still Grows" at funerals, even if their congregations would have found its message comforting.

The sharpest and most infamous attack on Platonism and natural immortality came from Biblical scholar Oscar Cullman, in an essay on "Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Body?" first published in America in 1956, and then placed in a short edited volume that included rebuttals. Cullman began with a vivid contrast between the peaceful, non-traumatic dying of Socrates, and the horrifying and painful dying of Jesus. Jesus in Gethsemane is anguished and terrified; death is "God's enemy," not a friend nor something to be welcomed. Cullman's contrast might have targeted almost every funeral sermon in the older anthologies; *all* look more like Socrates than Jesus! Jesus is not afraid of death "as a coward is afraid," but because death is genuinely to be feared as a personified cosmic negative and evil power. (Cullman 1965, 14–20) While the figure of Satan makes no appearance in Cullman's essay, we may say that the portrayal of death, particularly its personification as an enemy, takes some satanic qualities and conflates these into death as a power that stands against God. So, Jesus' resurrection is not a completion of a normal universal pattern; it is a giant victory, a once-and-for-all inbreaking of divine power to smash death-as-enemy. Death is now defeated, although not entirely. Cullman compares the post-resurrection situation to D-Day¹; it is not yet V-E Day², the end of the European war, but the decisive battle has been won. (Cullman 1965, 53) The military imagery here, very deliberately relied upon by Cullman and many who followed him, is entirely at odds with the peaceful transitions of natural immortality. It will also be contested by the post-death awareness rejection of death as an evil personified force. Regardless of the accuracy of Cullman's portraits of Socrates vs. Jesus, or of any of his other historical claims about the Biblical view of man, this dramatic account carried the day for enough pastors so that numerous fairly recent sermons depend upon its. Nor has the accusation of Platonism faded out of theological writing as a criticism of popular ideas, ancient or modern, as we will see.

Did Neo-Orthodox theology, and Cullman in particular, really succeed in squelching natural immortality? In shifting Christians' hopes away from immortality and toward resurrection? Surveys show that ordinary persons do not resonate to these nuances, do not separate what theologians want to keep distinct. But funeral sermons introduced the theme of death as enemy and Jesus' resurrection as death's defeat, and became far more Christocentric than in earlier decades.

¹ The starting date of the Battle of Normandy (June 6, 1944).

² Victory in Europe Day.

Indeed, the big story of Christ's death and resurrection is now the theological core proclamation of the Gospel at a Christian funeral, at least in the ideal. (Krieg 1984 states this really well, although he wants some space for the little story of the individual now funeralized). Gone is homesick Jesus, in other words, along with bugs and growing rose bushes. At this level, then, based on anthologies of funeral sermons, there is no doubt that the theological vision of Neo-Orthodoxy succeeded in its challenge to what had come before.

And yet, there are limits to this, and areas where Cullman failed to carry the day. It is much harder to relate D-Day and V-E Day to the quiet peaceful death of an elderly parishioner, for whom death did not appear to be an enemy, than it was to use natural immortality imagery. The latter might still have had power to express such a death's meaning for family and friends of the deceased; but these sentiments just no longer appear at the funeral sermon. Website memorials continue with "The Rose Still Grows beyond the Wall," as if to spite Cullman. Sympathy cards also do not sport military meanings, but rely on flowers and butterflies. Even very Christ-centered sympathy cards in the religious section of American card shops do so. More than 50 years after Cullman, this is probably more than cultural foot-dragging. But our discussion assumes that theology matters – at least for pastors educated at seminaries. Was that the only cause of natural immortality's eclipse?

The Triumph of Medicalized Death

When reading the texts of older funeral sermons by mainline Protestants, one senses already a challenge from cultural changes in the background. While the views of Enlightenment skeptics (our silent squirmers) are never mentioned, other challenges to the dominance of religious perspectives are. The funeral industry begins to come into its own as a profession in the late nineteenth century, and by the first half of the twentieth, there are complaints by pastors about the pagan and ostentatious funerals in vogue. These are decried as pagan because they focus on the body and display, rather than the soul – an ironic criticism in the light of later Neo-Orthodox suspicion of Platonism. In a perceptive analysis by Paul Irion (Irion 1966) he diagnosed the problem not as paganism or secularization, but instead showed how funerals by 50 years ago already served several constituencies. Clergy are no longer fully in charge of their meanings. Families and funeral directors and factions in the wider community all count by mid-twentieth century; each weighs in on what they want from the funeral. In this setting, the religious purpose and message of funerals gets diluted, and the result is what Irion called a "pseudo-religious funeral." (Irion 1966, 86) "Pseudo" means here that vaguer and fuzzier messages and meanings triumph, and no one is entirely satisfied. Manuals for pastors on how to conduct funerals vividly reflect this process of negotiation and accommodation among various interested parties, although by all accounts the professional relations between pastor and funeral director are usually very good. Note that by Irion's day, this process was normal; it did not only apply to quirky or unconventional funerals such as often grab the attention of the media.

Is this sociological process enough to account for the eclipse of natural immortality imagery in funerals? Are there not still other forces at work? If we say secularization, and mean by this that people have ceased to believe in Heaven, or any afterlife, the answer for Americans at least, is no. Recent surveys show that 80% of Americans say yes on this matter, up from 75% a few decades ago. The exact content of the afterlife believed in may be more variable, but the assent to this is definitely still very high.

But the same loss of complete dominance over funerals by clergy has its parallel in a much more dramatic and complete loss of control over the process of dying itself. This is the rise to power, early in the last century, of what we may call medicalized dying. To illustrate, Cullman's military imagery of death as defeated enemy may not show up in

sympathy cards, but how are the deaths of important persons in America announced in public? “X lost his battle with cancer today,” is now the normal American wording, with the medical cause so prominent that any idea of transition beyond the hospital is suppressed. The disease must be named, and death is above all a medical fact expressed via military imagery. Not only do a large majority of deaths happen in hospitals and nursing homes, but the medicalization of dying and death has permeated everywhere in our thinking. (For a recent indictment of this medicalization, noticed by every advocate of the death awareness movement and by theological and philosophical writers, see Verhey 2011, 11–67) While in the early part of the last century, funeral sermons were light on biographical details and never dwelt on the medical causes of the death (some of these were unknown, but all were irrelevant) now funeral and memorial sermons require mention of the circumstances and often the medical diagnosis is an important element. Although there have been valiant attempts to reclaim dying as human experience away from total medicalization, these did not succeed. When we think death and dying, we think hospitals, diagnoses, prognoses and all the difficult biomedical ethics dilemmas that come with them. This is absolutely obvious when teaching American college students; this is their first language for apprehending death’s meaning. Unfortunately, it has in most cases become our only language.

Medicalization permeates everywhere, and this certainly includes basic assumptions about what is natural. For the medical/biological model of the life-span, the cycle of life goes from birth through growth, then decay and death. This makes many deaths premature, and in that sense unnatural, such as when children die of cancer while their parents survive them. Absolutely no one prior to the contemporary era would have thought this way, as infancy and childhood were the times of the highest death rate from the beginning of human history. Shifts in demography, and the medical ideal of a full life-span, have radically impacted all of us. When we hear “There is a time to be born and a time to die,” (Ecclesiastes 3:2) we assume that the latter comes at the end of a long, full life, not just whenever God decides we’ve lived long enough. Older sermons assumed the latter. A long life or a short one, one’s length of days was determined by God’s will, and his will is always just and holy.

Equally relevant to the topic of this essay, within this picture of the natural life-span, there is little or no room for natural immortality. The butterfly emerges from the cocoon, and the rose bush grows – but we today assimilate these into our medical model of this-life transitions. It becomes hard to tack on an extra life-state or transition, completely outside this medical and organic image of full and completed life. The full impact of death’s medicalization on theology and the practice of religion has been hard to measure. It may be that this is the underlying source of Cullman’s and others’ enthusiasm for holism over Platonism.

In the light of this connection, we may speculate that what went on in sermons from the earlier half of the twentieth century, with their abundant use of natural immortality images, is that they resonated with the experiences of persons from yet an earlier generation. These would be the middle-aged and elderly who grew up without the medical model so dominant, and also when deaths of the very young were frequent and normal for families. The transition in demography occurred in North America between 1870 and 1920, roughly. By the 1950s, the persons born into a high infant mortality situation but who had survived to old age, were the ones most likely funeralized. And by the 1950s, about 80% of Americans died in hospitals, where the medical framework was the only official language available. Funerals may have preserved older images, suitable for those who survived into the newer era of medical triumphs, yet still unfamiliar with the newer, more medically-oriented way to talk and think about death in public. It is important to realize how that medical language and framework was already in place by the 1920s and 1930s. What we now think of as high-tech medicine followed from it, rather than being its cause. By this time, the cultural era later perceived as filled with silence and denial of death, was in full sway. Medical facts were what people could talk about and think about, to the extent that they could say anything public about death. The religious message, while privately believed, was also far

more isolated and disconnected from everything else in the environment for dying. In a short time, it would be replaced by a new message far more in tune with the newer experiences of dying and death.

Impact of the Death Awareness Movement: Death as Current Loss

The death awareness movement's dramatic impact on American imagery for death and dying is very evident in the new model of funerals and funeral sermons, showing up suddenly in the 1970s. (Bregman 1999) Now, *Preaching to Mourners* (the subtitle of one pastor's manual) is what the latter are about; those present are no longer addressed as the future dead. The current grief and loss of the congregation matters, and the message of hope is addressed to them. The dead person, safely in the hands of God, is less needy than those stunned and stricken by loss. For in this model, death is a loss, and images of rupture, shock and abandonment are appropriate to express that loss. (Bregman 1999, 99–131) Within this experience, the word of the Gospel sounds like *A Trumpet in Darkness* (Hughes' 1985 vivid title) a sign of courage and presence to overcome despair. At its best, this led to a theological focus on loss and grieving as categories worthy in themselves, as they had not been earlier. It also meant that a Cullmanian message totally based on the resurrection of Jesus was pastorally misplaced, to put it mildly. Funeral liturgies revised once to reflect Cullman had to be revised again in the light of this focus on grief as religiously significant. Although this collision is interesting in itself, neither side relied upon older imagery of natural immortality.

Indeed, the latter was singularly unhelpful to capture the loss dimension of all transitions. We have already noted poetic injunctions not to mourn, a subtheme of natural immortality. In the brief poem about "Gathered Lillies," taken as signs of natural immortality, the servant who holds his peace knows and accepts this message. A newer post-death-awareness version of such a poem, could one be found at all, would have the first servant wail and grieve that the lilly was no longer in the garden spot where it had grown. There was an empty place for it, a sign of lost beauty. It would not truly compensate for this that the flower gave pleasure to others elsewhere. Such a revised poem is, to put it bluntly, unimaginable; we simply do not find this kind of imagery anywhere in today's anthologies of funeral sermons.

Instead, when spokespersons for death awareness ideas want to stress that death is natural, and therefore we should accept it, they mean death as loss and ending. "There is a time to be born, and a time to die," and this is the framework for natural today. Natural no longer includes immortality, as it would have for all the preachers in the earlier era, and before. Nature now refers to the organic life-cycle, which comes to an expected and appropriate close for all living beings. At a funeral, people gather to celebrate a life, to look backward at the person whose times to be born and to die are over. While natural immortality, with its caterpillars into butterflies and transplanted flowers, saw a next stage as completion, normal and universal, it is difficult to fit in an extra stage or state beyond "a time to die." Nothing in what has come before will have prepared us for it, which was the deepest function of natural immortality imagery.

It is ironic that the most recent critique of these contemporary mourners-centered death rituals comes as a renewed attack on Platonism. Two heavyweights in American funeral theology, Thomas Long and Thomas Lynch, launch a diatribe against bodiless memorials where mourners' etherealized memories take center-stage over the real, material remains of the deceased. They jibe that American religion "majors in spirituality, and minors in materiality" (Long and Lynch 2013, 99) and call for a return of bodies to remind us of our connections to earth and community. They hate the fact that the dead person is often no longer present at his/her own funeral. Long and Lynch want the bodies back, they want the dead once more invited to their own funerals. (Ibid., 53ff.) What they barely mention is the destination of the dead and eventually the living, beyond the grave. What they would never want is reappearance of Heaven our home, or

homesick Jesus, or any of the growth and migration images that once supplied the emotional richness of older funerals. Natural immortality, with its growing roses and nearby Heaven, cannot function as a valid religious resource for Long and Lynch, let alone for death awareness influenced pastors and preachers whose focus on mourners' memories is now the norm for American death rituals. Ironically, the preachers of 100 years ago who loved such messages, would have been shocked at what they would view as the pagan focus of these two contemporary Christian authors. For those who preached natural immortality, it was intrinsic to the authentic Christian message to exalt the soul over the body, and the platonic language was necessary to protect the vision of the Gospel, rather than being an impediment to it.

As the current debates initiated by influential critics reveal, natural immortality is among the forgotten ingredients of the past. It is forgotten by advocates of memorials aimed at mourners, it is forgotten by critics of these. Long and Lynch may be nostalgic on other points, just as the death awareness movement is when it comes to the good old days when they claim death was a natural event. But natural immortality is not a potential resource today. While the dead person may have once been present during the funeral, he or she and the whole congregation heard the otherworldly and very dualistic message that accompanied the dead, the message of an otherworld near to this one in analogies and experience. "Last week he was in his office. Today we bury him. Are you living under the power of the world to come?" What once filled sermons and was held by all to be the central Christian teaching about death, is now truly in eclipse.

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Abstrakti

"Luonnollisen kuolemattomuuden" katoaminen

Aina 1900-luvun puoliväliin saakka Pohjois-Amerikan protestantit turvautuivat luonnosta ja kodista ammennettuun kuvastoon luodessaan kuolemanjälkeisestä elämästä kuvia, jotka jokapäiväisessä kokemuksessa saivat aikaan vastakaikua. Protestanttiset hautajaisseremoniat olivat näille ihanteellinen tilaisuus. "Luonnollinen kuolemattomuus" käsityksenä perustuu oletukselle, että ihmiset kaikkialla kaikkina aikoina ovat uskoneet sielun kuolemattomuuteen; käsitys tekee kuolemasta kitkattoman siirtymisen ja lähtemisen, ei tuhoutumista. Millaiset kuvat tekivät tästä uskomuksesta todellisemman? Koska Jeesuksen ylösnousemus oli vain historiallinen esimerkki universaalista prosessista, se ei hallinnut edes kaikkein puhdasoppisimpia ja perinteisimpiä hautajaissaarvoja. Sen sijaan luonnollisen siirtymisen kuvastot ilmenevät niissä yhä uudelleen: toukkana, josta tulee perhonen, muuttolintuina, matkana yhdestä paikasta seuraavaan. Jopa silloin kun luontoa avustetaan, kuvasto on tuttua: ruusu kasvaa kasvihuoneessa, mutta siirretään sitten pääpuutarhurin käskystä. Lisäksi saarvoissa rinnastetaan taivaallinen koti yksilön synnyinkotiin, mikä tekee kuolemasta kotiinpaluun. Luonnollinen kuolemattomuus tekee yllätyksestä, erosta ja tämän ja kuolemanjälkeisen elämän välisestä jatkumattomuudesta vähemmän todennäköisen, ja myös lieventää menetystä.

Tämä kuvaston haastoivat myöhemmin teologian esittämät epäilykset sen platonistisuudesta, kuolematietoisuus-liike ja 1900-luvulla tapahtunut kuoleman lääketieteellistyminen. Kuvasto on kadonnut protestanttisista hautajaisista ja korvautunut keskittymisellä surijoihin ja edesmenneen elämän ylistämiseen.