Funerals, Liturgy, Culture Shifts, Global Warming and Corpse Disposal

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In two interlinked parts, this paper first considers some practical and theoretical issues concerning funerals and the likely imminent practice of alkaline hydrolysis or dissolving the dead, then — second — some theoretical aspects of liturgy and ritual at large drawn from social anthropology.

Liturgy, as with ritual at large, usually expresses in word and action undergirding theological or value schemes. While time often fixes these in relatively stable forms, both slow and rapid social changes influence or challenge them, sometimes for the better but sometimes with negative dissonances. The Protestant Reformation was but one major example. Today new pressures invite change, and with broad brush strokes this essay depicts some of these, all focused on funerals and inviting an alertness to liturgical and pastoral possibilities. More questions are raised than answered, but this is as it should be because corporate thinking and a sharing of tradition and innovation is of the essence at moments of change. This essay offers only minimal references as signposts to other studies while marking a sense of urgency and a desire to prompt discussion and share practical experiences.

Vile bodies, love, and salvation

Much of what follows recognises that traditional Christian funerary liturgy is rooted in a worldview of fall and salvation where notions of death as the sting of sin circles around the dead believer who is to be resurrected by the risen Christ in God's good time; the phrase 'vile bodies' captures something of this image to which we return later. This contrasts with much current Christian attitudes where God's care of the dead overtakes the 'vile body' motif. The pastoral care of the bereaved follows suit, as does the theology of creation-fall-redemption. Concurrently, thousands of non-church funerals focus on a 'celebration of the life' of the deceased and the many positive memories of surviving kin. More recently still, the radical new grand narrative of global warming has emerged as its own form of secular-salvation ideology. This raises the issue of environmentalism and the dead, not least the Christian dead. What, then, are the internal dynamics of vile bodies, celebrated lives, and the ecological cost-benefit analyses of funerals?

Dissolving the dead: warming the world

With that in mind much of this essay concerns a practice that is likely to impact upon the British funerary trade from 2023 or so — the dissolving of human corpses rather than cremating or burying them, a process with the trademark — Resomation, a neologism simply devised apart from any classical etymology of *soma* as 'body'. This reckons to yield a much lower carbon footprint than cremation, and less land use than burial, issues that become increasingly important as churches become increasingly self-conscious of their ethical-ecological positions. When priests press a button to commit their (less than half) proportion of the 80% of Britons who choose cremation, they are — whether conscious or not — making an ethical decision regarding the atmosphere, its purity, its global warming, and its material destiny as a human habitation. What then, in liturgical terms might be the most appropriate form of words, ideas, and theology with which to express this complex interplay of disposal, identity, and the destiny of individual and planet?

Many other issues currently surrounding death and funerals will be touched on below, more as a discussion starter than as a solutions' paper. What, then, might or should be said when Christians in particular, a mixed Christian-heritage population at large, or — more specific still — when environmentally alert people mark the funerals of their dead today? What consideration needs to be given — in shorthand terms — to the carbon footprint of the dead? While international flight has its own cost-benefit analysis of travel what of our journey into death? To deal with some of these issues this paper is divided into two parts, the first deals briefly with specific forms of change in funeral behaviour and the second with aspects of ritual-symbolism, theology, and liturgy, albeit with some considerable overlap.

PART ONE

Funerary shifts

One feature of British funerary life from the 1990s is the rapid growth of a diversity of provision. This is partly associated with consumerism and a sense of personal choice, partly with that generalised form of secularisation that no longer involves ecclesiastical or clerical dominance, partly with an increasingly unchurched population and partly with a resurgent funeral sector in which the funeral director has increasingly become the gatekeeper of options. Moreover, death itself, thoughts on death, euthanasia, and assisted dying, as well as media entry into this emotive area has made 'funerals' a focus of multiple interest. Television adverts on personalised funerals mark the shift. The Co-Operative Funeral Care advert of a motorcycle with a sidecar as hearse is but one familiar example. This interest

is likely to be intensified as 2023 advances, and several specific issues are worth highlighting here, not least because each possesses trigger points for theological thought, and not least for liturgical considerations around the ritual-symbolism of the dead and their kin and social circles. The dissolving of the dead (Resomation), the role of civil celebrants, the sense of personal choice of funeral, the rise of woodland burial, and the practice of 'no ceremony' funerals stand out for comment, as does the place of sex-gender in the funeral professions.

Dissolving — resomation — 'water-cremation'

By 2023 Britain is likely to have a new and innovative addition to its funeral options of cremation, cemetery burial, and woodland-green burial. Under the trade name of 'resomation', and other descriptors of various appropriate and inappropriateness including water-cremation, this involves dissolving human corpses in a pressurised container of a light-alkaline and water solution. After two to three hours, white skeletal and highly friable bones can be dried and rendered into flour-like, powdery remains. These can be returned to relatives in much the same way as are cremated remains, the main difference being that there is a slightly greater volume of this pure white substance than of the granular grey remains of cremation. Whether or not this colour difference needs to be considered in symbolic-ritual contexts remains to be seen.

This process of decomposing a body involves the precision engineering and computerised control of the equipment needed. The Leeds and Bradford Boiler Company (LBBC, dating from 1876) produces the necessary equipment, fostering the process previously advocated by Scotland's Sandy Sullivan. The process is marketed — especially in the USA — under the description of water-cremation or even aquamation. To reiterate the earlier point, despite the obvious contradiction of 'water-cremation' and 'flame-cremation' this nomenclature is favoured as speaking to an emotional sensitivity depicting a 'gentler' process than that of 'flame-cremation', and it is precisely such emotional tones that play a deeply significant role in funeral rites, whether in theological or commercial advertising. Words trigger emotion and enter strongly into the place of values, beliefs, and identity as addressed later in the section on Narrative. This is apparent in yet other modes of dealing with corpses likely to emerge soon in the UK, involving variations of body-decomposition aligned with organic decay. Here words such as 'compost' or 'composting' are likely to be avoided despite the popular idiom of some folk reckoning to be happy to be put on the compost heap. But words are modifiable and modifiable depending on their wider cultural context, and one of the most increasingly influential lies in 'ecological-environmental and 'carbon-footprint' factors.

An historic moment

Let me now set the scene for this eventuality through a remarkable week in April 2019, that witnessed the resomation — I will retain this term here — of five Britons. One reason for doing this was to allow water authorities, along with some university scientists, to analyse the output of the overall process into the sewage system: all with a positive result. I dwell on this event because I was an invited presence at the first of these resomations, the only academic amongst the small group of funeral professionals who had organised the process. Since there was at that time — and this remains the case — no formal legislation in England authorising resomation the parties concerned made full and careful use of the existing legal certification available for death and cremation. Appropriate liaison with Government bodies as well as, inevitably for certification purposes, medical authorities had taken place. Rather as with the earliest cremations in England these resomations preceded what will, eventually, be formal legislation. While there was no ritual or liturgical behaviour at the facility the respective families had been able to hold prior funeral services as they wished. My experience of the first of these events was, however, of a certain solemnity and dignified treatment of the arrival of the body, its transmission to the resomation container, and of the outcoming remains. The scientific analyses of the ensuing materials of resomations have resulted in the permission for the liquid output to be acceptable for the sewerage system. The scientific-engineering aspects of resomation and of permission for liquid output to be acceptable to water authorities is one thing, though not the main feature of this essay whose focus is more on the personal and wider cultural and theological-liturgical dimensions framing the process in a world of global warming.

Words and ideas

Thinking in terms of liturgical formulae, how might the dissolving the dead — 'in sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life, through our Lord Jesus Christ' — sound to you in a ritual context? This question is framed by the familiar fact mentioned above that in Britain today some 80% of funerals follow cremation with the remaining 20% focused not only on traditional cemetery and churchyard burials but also on a growing number of variously named natural-ecological-green-woodland burials first initiated at Carlisle in the mid-1990s.[1]

Just how might the resurrection language of traditional burials and of many forms of cremation that accommodate to cremation by simply adding

[1] Douglas Davies and Hannah Rumble *Natural Burial: Traditional-Secular Spiritualities and Funeral Innovation* (London: Continuum, 2012).

a reference to the body being committed for cremation, relate to resomation? To bury, or cremate, 'in sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life', as the well-known quotation from the *Book of Common Prayer* 1662 has it, has served well for some centuries. In strictly theological terms the resurrection of the dead does not depend on the 'holding' medium, whether earth, fire, or water, for divine power will achieve its goal despite all. However, the more immediate process of body disposal exists in the proximate world of the bereaved and of a kind of cause and effect underlying the human imagination that ponders it all. This raises the question of resomation as a liturgical opportunity or constraint? Certainly, it invites some theological consideration and excitement when a new form of body disposal enters the cultural scene at the moment when global warming is a dominant concern and various forms of body disposal carry their own environmental consequences, and in which resomation claims a lower carbon footprint than cremation.

Liturgical shifts are not new as forms of the Eucharist have shown, nor indeed are revised forms of Christian baptism that have sought and applied the many biblical references to water as part of a grand liturgical-theological narrative of identity within salvation-history. There are water-texts from the Genesis accounts of creation and flood, through the wilderness wanderings and deliverance of ancient Israel, to John the Baptist, and to Jesus's own use of water, and to early Christian insights into water in His own life. Might it not be good stewardship of ecclesiastical resources simply to extend this to resomation?

Historically speaking, traditional Indian forms of cremation set the practice within an extensive ideology of existence, where the entry of the life-force to the foetal person is matched by the cracking of the corpse's skull, the freeing of that force, and the placement of ashes in theologically potent rivers.[2] Christianity — at the moment — has no such theology of water, death, and destiny, but it does possess textual and theological resources for such an approach. Similarly, cremation has never had a Christian theological rationale devoted to it.

Such issues underlie this broad-ranging paper, wondering whether a note of resonance or dissonance over 'dissolving the dead' and the 'hope of the resurrection' might be occasioned in contemporary funerals. It is now some two thousand years after 1 Corinthians 15 pondered the destiny of Christians dying before the anticipated second coming of Jesus as Saviour. For, the frame of this discussion lies less with the Second Coming and a theology of eschatology than with the ecological last things in relation to an

[2] Jonathan Parry, *Death in Banaras* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

earth habitable by human beings. Christian theology, indeed, the reflection of most religious traditions, is ever subject to changing life and world circumstances, and the current global warming crisis is amongst the most serious of all. And it is precisely this crisis that adds additional motivation to resomation rites. The dead have their carbon footprints, the churches are party to them, and this prompts the question: what prayer or liturgical formula might you see as appropriate for Resomation Rites? The challenge is considerable.

Civil Celebrants

As for the personnel, clerical officiants are likely to be one resource, but so too will be civil celebrants who mark a significant change in contemporary funerals in the UK. For civil celebrants now match or outnumber ecclesiastical ritual leaders in many a crematorium. While the British Humanist Association has provided funeral ceremony leaders for decades, they come with an ideological tradition of non-religious convictions, and an attitude that some might see as contrary to religious sensibilities. The rise of civil celebrants, however, is different, and while the history of this somewhat amorphous constituency has still to be written we can say that it has been roughly over the last twenty-five years or so that women and men have come forward as individuals and either engaged in a form of informal training by evolving specialists or have simply set themselves up as ceremony leaders. Most often they have been bereaved themselves and partly because of that, and partly because the church-led funerals they experienced had not satisfied them, they now advertise their services. Some have become loosely allied with funeral directors in their region and been increasingly called upon compared with clergy because they have time to engage with the funeral director and the bereaved in ways that are more loose than with the clergy. It is not uncommon to hear some funeral directors speak of the difficulty in contacting some clergy for funeral services.

Free-market in funerals — the real 'secularisation' of action

Cultural shifts in social practice, whether of a slow continental-drift form, or in rapid breaks or volcanic eruptions, carry visible markers. Certainly, from the turn of the twenty-first century, and especially over the last ten years or so, the UK has witnessed dramatic shifts in forms of funeral, not just in ecclesial changes but most especially in the rise of non-ecclesial funeral celebrants. Whether in terms of celebrants provided by The Humanist Association or by a variety of freelance and loosely aggregated civil celebrants, funeral provision is now roughly split between them and ecclesial ministers. This is a dramatic cultural and religious change whose complexity involves shifts in churchgoing, secular identities, and the desire

for personal and family expression of ideas regarding their relationship with the dead. The lifestyle of the deceased has come increasingly to the fore as a retrospective emphasis on the character and life of the deceased assumes primacy of place in the funeral narrative. To this should be added the aptitude of funeral directors in discussion with bereaved families on the options available to them.

The growing availability of civil celebrants is of especial importance, not least amongst retired or other people for whom funerals generate a distinctive sense of life-worth through the ritual performance and engagement with bereaved people. Moreover, it is not uncommon to hear some funeral directors expressing a dislike for some clergy as unresponsive or slow in response to requests to take a funeral. This is a complex issue of its own and I simply mention it here to note that the public performance of ritual seems to confer a sense of achievement for many, and for some celebrants who have not, perhaps, experienced such social limelight this is a pleasurable experience. For clergy who have many opportunities for public appearance the attraction of the funeral may be significantly less. The issue of a psychological and economic cost-benefit analysis of the single-rite celebrant and the plural-rite cleric is one worthy of extensive research — but not in this paper.

What is significant, liturgically speaking, is the degree of freedom that may be associated with civil celebrants, allowing a bereaved family to speak, behave, and frame their deceased kin in ways they may think impossible with services provided by clergy and church. This is where ideas of 'traditional ways' of doing things can be a negative feature, especially if allied with a funeral director's advice on civil celebrants. For, in many ways and more than ever, the funeral director is the gatekeeper of the modern funeral and may have personal-professional reasons to prefer the civil option, knowing appropriate civil celebrants, and not being so much restricted by the availability of clergy. In this sense, funeral directors can both enhance or, indeed, restrict choice of ritual leader, depending on how they present options of funeral leader to bereaved families.

Personal choice

Alongside the place of commercial-led consumerism the notion of choice and individualism has been much advertised, to the point where it is taken for granted. 'Your funeral — your way' seems sensible alongside all sorts of other purchasing. For many this makes sense, even though in practice families and local tradition play an enormous role in matters of choice. This realm has fostered the role of family and friends in contributing to funeral events, with a strong aspect of the 'celebration of life', it includes the choice of music, songs, and readings relevant to the deceased. Insurance and

funeral companies encourage folk to ponder their funerals and even write a plan of it before the event. In theological terms the question is whether this contributes to a sense of control over a funeral if not over death. Death conquest takes many forms and its place in a religious and secular and mixed ideas world is complex. Though I cannot describe this fully here, I am one who questions the overemphasis upon 'the individual', preferring to think of complex personhood that acknowledges that each of us is composed of many 'others', whose influence strongly affects us.[3] Still, 'personal choice' rules as an implicit social assumption.

Woodland Burial

One significant example of personal choice began in the UK from the mid-1990s in the almost accidental practice of what came to be called woodland, natural, or green burial. I have researched this along with my former doctoral student Hannah Rumble.[4] It is a complex issue but involves people wishing to be buried, not in 'dry as dust' cemeteries but in 'natural' environments. The very rapid rise of such 'woodland' sites across the UK is witness to a popular demand. This includes folk who wish to 'give something back' to nature and who may well have been gardeners and lovers of nature throughout their lives. Such sites often rule out the use of headstones and other 'artificial' items to let plants overrun graves whose actual location is well recorded, whether in map or electronically. Any kind of funeral service is used at these sites, including the 'standard' Christian burial service, and it would be extremely rare for it to be unattended. Here personal choice is key. What is more, this 1990s inauguration already constituted a pre-adaption for the ecological-environmental interests that became increasingly dominant in the opening decades of the twenty-first century.

No ceremony — 'direct' — 'pure' cremations

From the 'no headstone' of woodland burial there is a telling side-step to the much more recent 'no ceremony' collection of the corpse and the return of its ashes. For, over the last six or so years it has become increasingly feasible, and commercially possible, to dispose of the human corpse without any formal ceremony or 'funeral service'. This innovation was considerably enhanced over the Covid-19 crisis period. There are companies and funeral directors that will simply collect the corpse from hospital or home, take it away for cremation without any formal ceremony, and return the remains to the family. The family can then do with the remains whatever they will,

[3] Douglas Davies, 'Dividual identity in grief theories, palliative and bereavement care', *Palliative Care and Social Practice*, 14 (July 2020).

[4] Davies and Rumble, *Natural Burial.*

much as in cremation at large, and this can include a memorial service, religious or secular, or mixed. One of the major companies engaged in this practice does have a fine establishment with chapel that can operate as normal, with family and friends present, but it is likely to be a hundred or more miles away from the deceased person's home and family, something that carries its own ecological tariff. Just how such 'no funeral' events affect issues of grief and the life-story of the dead amongst the living remains to be seen. It appears that issues of cost are not prime in this practice which may well be a more middle-class than working-class option.

The words used around these shifting practices by groups offering the service are interesting. For example, while the term 'direct cremation' marks a pragmatic attitude, that of 'pure cremation' touches a more emotional domain, aligning something of the technology of fire and the corpse with an aesthetic sense of ending a human life. So, too, with 'water cremation' used, especially in the USA, and likely to become a motif in the UK as well, is often reckoned by funeral professionals involved with it as engendering a gentler way of dealing with the dead than is the case with the more aggressive sense of 'fire-cremation'. One UK company that will almost certainly occupy this resomation option has recently been formed under the tradename of 'Kindly'.

As for the no-funeral option, I can say from personal research and field experience that while such 'no-funeral' options usually do not have a family presence there are staff who manage the event who treat the deceased with all due respect and dignity and may mark, in small ways, their own sense of the worth and dignity of the deceased. Indeed 'ritual' is a strange and many-shaped entity covering behaviours that mark the social relationships of the living and dead, even when the living is the staff 'processing' the deceased. A simple act of bowing as and when the coffin enters the cremator can speak volumes as to the nature of the dead, their 'disposal', and the staff overseeing the event.

In terms of the funeral itself, coffin collection and cremation devoid of any formal ceremony and with an absence of mourners has become one innovation, widely advertised on British television and elsewhere under those notions of 'Pure Cremation' and 'Direct Cremation'. Television and other advertising often delivered as free-mail in house-to-house adverts, have also spoken of a 'no-fuss' form of funeral. There is, currently, something of a cultural paradox between the idioms of the 'no-fuss' and 'celebrating the life' forms of funeral. Each of these directions of ritual travel provide grist for the theological-liturgical mill, for they each reflect something of a person's personal sense of identity and destiny and of a family or community's response. There is a sense that the 'no-fuss' option enhances the sequestration of death, or at least of the corpse as a symbolic vehicle of death, in ways that a Christian perspective might decide ignores the very

value of a human being within the Christian community, or as a creature before God.

As I am finding in current research on crematoria and Covid-19, some crematorium managers seek to ensure that some staff and colleagues be present, albeit minimally, at the reception of 'direct-cremation' style coffins to their premises. As in those brief but definite moments 'acknowledging' the coffin when placed into the cremator, we witness something of a long-inbuilt respect for the dead and their cremation in British crematoria irrespective of a congregation of family and friends, and quite apart from the presence of either clergy or civil celebrants. Indeed, the whole nature of a 'funeral' in the UK is much wider than often assumed. Here we encounter a multiplicity of issues over funeral provision, one pressing topic concerns the potential liturgical framing of resomation.

PART TWO

Whether in such a simple act as gently bowing while the coffin is placed into a cremator after its non-service event — an act usually described in the very pragmatic phrase of 'charging' the cremator — or in an elaborate funeral service preceding the 'committal' of the body for cremation we see some formalised behaviour of 'ritual' framing what is deemed a significant event. A significance that marks the dignity of human life in which we all share and in a death we all know we will also share. To be at a funeral is to be amidst our own sense of mortality. While all religious traditions possess their own form, ideology-theology, and sense of these moments, here I explore a wide mapping of ideas that inform and direct changes in more Christian forms of ritual action, starting with some biblical and early Christian contexts and ending with theological issues appropriate for a global warming frame of Christian life.

Christian bodies

One way of understanding the early Christian sect of Judaism is to see Christ's death on a cross, his entombment-burial, and an eager expectation of a return in glory, as framing a sense of salvation from a sinful and trial-filled world. While early Christians' faith-filled anticipation of their Saviour appearing amidst the clouds of heaven simply did not occur, they were all too directly confronted by the fact that some of their number were now dying. This was, perhaps, also contrary to their basic expectation, posing the question of how the death-conquest of Christ's resurrection might resonate with the apparent negativity of deceased devotees? In a sense, Christian corpses were a contradiction in the terms of belief and needed theological attention. One theological-pastoral response to this radically transitional

moment is retained in St Paul's idioms of burial and resurrection, earth-originated bodies and new spiritual bodies, but all in God's good time (1 Corinthians 15). And while that timing continues to expand more immediate ways of dealing with the dead needed, and continues to need, resolution. Over the ensuing two millennia Christian bodies became 'processed bodies', where the overall processing expressed the sacramental rites, variously restricted to baptism and eucharist in more Protestant traditions, but also including Confirmation, Penance, Orders, Matrimony, and Extreme Unction in Roman Catholic belief and practice. The responses of the faithful went on to frame funerals of the Christian dead that embraced various forms of disposal in catacomb, tomb, crypt, ossuary, earth as well as sea burial — all in tandem with various beliefs in an ongoing soul. Many Christians prayed for their departed kin while some, especially amongst more Protestant traditions vigorously avoided such intercessory prayer, believing that each person's destiny already lay in God's hands and omniscient will.

Fire

As for fire, its pagan associations soon had it an abhorrence for Christians, while images of fire as punishment for heretics and the like soon set up a binary opposition between interment and incineration. This did not bode well for the sanitary-driven and free-thinking innovations of modern cremation in the late nineteenth and early to mid-twentieth century. Yet, despite some early and partially enduring opposition from Christian leaders, and especially from the Orthodox to this day, mainstream Protestant and, more slowly, Roman Catholic authorities, cremation became the dominant mode of funeral in Britain and most western and northern societies of Christian culture heritage. Many of these issues are covered by a multiplicity of authors in *The Encyclopaedia of Cremation*.[5]

Despite this pragmatic shift from grave to cremator, the theological language of Christian destiny and its transitional phase of housing the dead, largely remained burial-resurrection in form. The 'earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust' idiom proved useful as funerary language, with very little theological or pastoral work dedicated to the actual processes and fact of cremation with its active destruction of the body in a short burst of flame. Despite the 'ashes to ashes' motif, the ensuing cremated remains, ashes — or 'cremains' in USA usage, provided symbolic materials that could largely be treated as a corpse and buried, indeed this has been the general ecclesiastical preference. Meanwhile, the secular or mixed values of the UK

[5] *The Encyclopaedia of Cremation*, ed. by Douglas J. Davies and Lewis H. Mates (London: Routledge, 2005).

public at large increasingly took these remains and used them for a great variety of purposes. Indeed, cremated remains generated their own opportunity for private rites and proto ceremonies that had not previously existed. In this sense, ashes became a medium of secularisation, in the sense that many people used and dealt with them quite apart from any help or assistance from ecclesial agencies. This prompted me, some thirty years ago, to consider a possible form of cremation liturgy; I will not repeat it here, despite the fact that I think there has been very little response or take-up from institutional church groups.[6] Despite, and partly because of that, I am now keen that churches should think about the process and remains of resomation alongside its innovative introduction to the UK.

Destiny revisited

Today, changes in British funerary practices invite some contemporary theological and liturgical thinking especially as issues of secular, religious, and mixed identities interplay with enormous global concerns over ecology and the environment. Of the many potential avenues of approach one worth discussing is that of the relatively unfashionable yet increasingly apposite notion of destiny. This is a feature within human meaning-making and is an established, though now seldom espoused, theological perspective of predestination or, more loosely, of the coming Kingdom of God. In present contexts, destiny-revisited will serve well as a backdrop for the much more specific funeral-related notion of the 'carbon footprint' of corpses and the pressure of global warming on ecclesiastical ethics. It so happens that forms of funeral and body disposal bring to focus several key issues that have occupied Christian churches for millennia and now reappear in theological–ecclesial-personal, and political–ecological narratives framing the near-future of the earth and human habitation.

Five scenarios exemplify these topics, glossing what has already been said and adding new topics. First is the very theme of destiny as part of human meaning-making, whether as the driver of much theological thought or increasingly of the more world-focused concern with global warming and the place of humanity amidst it. Second, the anticipated and imminent changes concerning the dissolving of human bodies in alkaline solution, and perhaps a little later, other methods of treating bodies with materials that enhance rapid decay, all related to environmental factors. Might such events and factors demand different ritual words from those used at earth-burial or cremation in a pre-global warming world? Third, the recently introduced schemes for funerals that pick up a coffined corpse, deliver it for cremation,

[6] Douglas Davies, *Cremation Today and Tomorrow* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 1990).

and return the remains without any substantial ceremony or presence of mourners pose a re-think of the social focus of funerals. Fourth, the existing fact of celebrants-at-large now overtaking Christian clergy in the performance of funerals. Fifth, the power of narrative interwoven with all these scenes, especially as Christian derived narratives are in a sense paralleled by the family narratives of secular or semi-secular funerals. These five topics, embracing personalised words celebrating the life of a person or, indeed, of absent words, not to mention the fate of the planet, all present their own scenes of ecclesial life intersecting with secular dimensions and invite responses alert to the potential benefit to be gained from theological, anthropological, sociological, cultural and cognitive psychological studies.

Formulating values, identity and destiny

Here the power of words holds high profile. The world is full of 'ideas', often nouns and the names of things acquired as life progresses, but some words also come to be associated with emotions, and when that happens a 'word' becomes a 'value' — values are emotional-laden words. However, some of these values go on to shape our sense of identity and can conveniently be designated as constituting 'beliefs'. These beliefs may have strong family, community, political, religious, or even sporting roots, and for many in contemporary British society that is sufficient for ordinary life. There is, however, a final aspect or step in this 'ideas-emotions-values-identity' formula, that of destiny.[7]

Destiny has been traditionally documented in religious traditions as part of God's knowledge of and plan for people including their afterlife identity. We may think of destiny as the summation of meaning-making in which emotional dynamics interplay with our more rational perspectives. In traditional Christian theology, then, destiny can be aligned with the divine will, not only in the doctrinal terms of predestination but also in the love-engendered sense of a time when a person's identity is fulfilled in the eternal beatific vision of God, when we no longer see dimly in a mirror 'but then face to face', knowing no longer in part but fully (1 Corinthians 13.12). That culminating sense of transformed identity is in some ways strong medicine for many today, yet the sense of believers coming to an understanding of things that mirror to some degree the way they have been fully understood by God holds an attraction for those desiring to be 'heard', seen, or recognised for what they are.

Similarly, destiny frames Paul's theology as he engages 'faith, hope, and love' in his summation of the 'higher gifts' of Christian living, while

[7] Douglas Davies, *Worldview Religious Studies* (London: Routledge, 2022), pp. 33–36.

highlighting 'love' as he moves to the core gospel themes of Christ's death and resurrection, and of God's grace (1 Corinthians 15.3–11). Moreover, his grasp of destiny embraces the integral shared identity of each believer as an individual member of the body of Christ whose sustaining elements are those of faith, hope, and especially of love (1 Corinthians 12.27). And it is that 'body' that meets for worship, for the bread and wine meal, and embraces the dead. Indeed, it seems that the very fact of the death of early members of the Corinthian Christian groups prompted Paul's extensive theological propositions on death and eschatology, fostered by his own sense of belated apostolic status.

Eschatological and retrospective fulfilments of identity

It was precisely the traditional eschatological fulfilment of identity that I once contrasted with the 'retrospective fulfilment of identity' evident in many of today's funeral and memorial services that are characterised as a celebration of life, something that has only grown in significance over time.[8] The looking back in love that tends to frame memorial services of more middle-class people that follow sometime after the actual funeral service, or that fills out the funeral service when no separate memorial event is anticipated, as in the great majority of working-class funerals, dwells upon the life that is past, and which now pervades the memory of the living. Any forward looking, destiny-like dynamic is abbreviated and, if present at all, is lodged in a generalised hope that all is well with the deceased wherever they may be. Likewise, when people take the cremated remains of their kin to places of personal significance it is because of past experiences associated with those locations. Ideas of heaven and, not least, of some associations with angels or afterlife caretakers, especially of infants and the neonatal dead, reflect a personalised emotional dynamic rather than traditional ideas of destiny. This is markedly different from the cemetery and churchyard as transitional venues of traditional Christian destiny. One notable difference in today's UK lies in Islamic notions of destiny, strongly under the divine will, and aligned with the judged outcome of a believer's ethical life of obedience to religious edicts, all aligned with burial and specially conceived grave-spaces.[9]

Secularisation

Today's question of secularisation involves the distancing of folk from such theological understandings and from the liturgical formats expressing them,

[8] Davies, *Worldview Religious Studies*, pp. 117–26.

[9] Nerina Rustomji, *The Garden and the Fire: Heaven and Hell in Islamic Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

notably lengthy texts drawn from 1 Corinthians 15 traditionally read at funerals. It is the distancing of people from the church contexts and church-funeral contexts of these texts that fosters secularisation. Secularisation is often experienced as a decreasing frequency of 'religious' words used, of familiarity with them, and especially of a withdrawal of emotional attachment from them. The poetic allusion to secularised life marked by the 'long with drawing roar' of Matthew Arnold's mid-nineteenth century *Dover Beach* can, today, also be recognised in an ongoing withdrawal of emotional affinity from the language of faith and liturgy. Secularisation involves the demise of those religious values that once sustained a person and community's identity. As for the idea of a category of those who self-describe as 'spiritual but not religious', they might well be interpreted as those possessing values that sustain a sense of identity but who have no need of a sense of destiny. Theologically infused words — the emotion-pervade values that sustain a destiny-framing identity — lose those emotional affinities and become 'mere' words again.

Ecological fulfilment of identity

But this transition is far from occurring in anything like a cultural vacuum, indeed, 'ecological immortality' and the 'ecological fulfilment of identity' which I once aligned with woodland or 'natural' burial[10] has, since then, been intensified through issues of global warming and an increasing emotional dynamic to issues of environmentalism. These are new values that, at one and the same time, inform an increasing sense of personal identity and, in an unexpected way, also of the destiny of the human species. Here the traditional theological portrayals of destiny rooted in the grand narrative of nineteenth century 'salvation history' deploying doctrines of creation, salvation, sin, fall, redemption, and the last things preluding the divine new creation, are challenged by eco-environmental destiny.

Tonal resonance, liturgy and society

One issue that is, surprisingly perhaps, seldom discussed over matters of identity and destiny, and not least how these are treated in ritual and liturgy is that of tone. Tone or tonality, as the quality and nature of speech that frames a ritual act, as well as relationships preceding and following it is of radical importance not only in daily life but in the ritual-liturgical contexts that frequently intensify 'ordinariness'. Tonality and pastoral concern are issues worth a great deal of thought, it is a notion hardly ever touched upon, for example, in the sociology of religion. Yet it is a feature that the anthropologist Clifford Geertz once expressed very well indeed:

[10] Davies, *Brief History of Death*, pp. 86–88.

> A people's ethos is the tone, character, and quality of life, its moral and aesthetic style and mood: it is the underlying attitude towards themselves and their world that life reflects. Their world-view is the picture of the way things, in sheer actuality are, their concepts of nature, of self, of society.[11]

This quotation, one that I have retrieved for the study of worldviews at large,[12] can obviously also be applied to both church groups and wider segments of the general population. In theoretical terms it reflects the notion of clerical 'formation', of what is often called the *habitus,* or the way people appropriate patterns of behaviour, bodily posture, and speech. This is too large a topic to explore here and must be left for readers to consider as clerical and ecclesial habits correlate with churched and unchurched groups in contemporary society.[13] For the former there can be considerable comfort when moving into familiar ceremonial events grounded in such an ethos, with all its surrounding elements of place. For the latter, further removed form church life, it may be that only islands of a Christian and church-linked styles exist, as in singing 'The Lord's my Shepherd' to 'Crimond' the right 'traditional' tune. For increasing numbers, Christian liturgical styles and the tones undergirding them are now a real foreign country, with the choice of songs, readings, and personal reflections having moved to 'the ways things, in sheer actuality, are' for the deceased, family, and friend. When funeral companies publish lists of favourite songs and music used at crematoria they are, in effect, mapping the sacred, the secular, and the mixed domains of a country's lifestyles. Yet, while the very idiom of a song such as 'I did it my way' apparently touches more on some sense of individualism than on widely shared values it still marks a deeply conventional perspective.

In all of this there is a considerable liturgical–ceremonial challenge for the clergy, one that is not always easy to meet. One cannot assume that the acceptance of any particular vernacular form will bridge gaps between clergy and non-church people, or even with some churchgoers. Here I can simply allude to the tonal qualities of sympathy or their absence that can pervade any form of language and behaviour, not least funerals. Still, some people have a natural capacity for sympathy that can pervade any form of language, while some can use the most caring of verbal expressions and

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[11] Clifford Geertz, 'Ethos, world-view and the analysis of sacred symbols', *The Antioch Review*, 17.4 (1957), 421–37 (p. 421).

[12] Davies, *Worldview Religious Studies*, p. 121.

[13] Douglas Davies*, Anthropology and Theology* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2002).

leave the sense of not being very sympathetic at all. These are points for all to ponder as we think about shifting forms of funerals, not least under the influence of the radical theme of global warming. This is not the place to trace evidence and authorities for global warming, I take it for granted. We have already said much about resomation it simply remains to accentuate the interplay of emotion-filled values, their framing of identity, and the very notion of destiny encompassed by funerary liturgies, not least under the impact of global warming. For people to have a sense that this particular funeral has its place in the wider scheme of things might well have its part to play in their bereavement and sense of grief.

Narrative and tradition

All of this highlights the topic of narrative as old and new accounts, stories, and even advertisements, vie to tell convincing stories of the dead and what we do with them. Narrative, as such, expresses the deep-rooted nature of language as the outcome of human social relationships and of the cognitive and neural systems generating what we say and the stories we tell, something aptly and magisterially documented by Angus Fletcher in his *Wonderworks: Literary Invention and the Science of Stories*.[14]

Christianity is, itself, as narrative-rich a tradition as the very notion of gospel is replete with the proclamation of salvation. The historical narratives behind the emergence of Christian traditions are grounded in theological accounts of the life and death of Jesus springing from the faith-based testimonies of his early disciples that he had overcome death. This death-defying gospel fostered the faith of successive generations of believers in that they, too, would not be slaves to mortality. The profound power of belief that death would have no dominion lies less in any abstract notion of survival than in the person-focused centrality of Jesus and the community energised by its assertion that 'the Lord has risen', or 'Christ is risen', and behind that a sense of God as the ultimate source of all things. The well-known Greek Orthodox response — 'He is risen indeed, alleluia' — marks the intimacy of hope between devotee and community within God's embrace. The history of this perspective and practice is extensive and complex, with some key theological, liturgical, and pastoral aspects of Christian funeral rites having been clearly and judiciously discussed by Paul Sheppy and many others.[15]

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[14] Angus Fletcher, *Wonderworks: Literary Invention and the Science of Stories* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2021).

[15] Paul Sheppy, *Death Liturgy and Ritual, Vol. 1*: *A Pastoral and Liturgical Theology* (London; Routledge, 2003); *Death, Liturgy and Ritual,*

Narrative and global warming

The issue of narrative leads back to the topic of global warming because of the way ecology and environmentalism have shot to prominence in political and some religious domains, not least in the 2020s. Some devastating weather events have brought the erstwhile and rather abstract notion of global warming into the most concrete and emotion-engaging lives of millions of people across many countries. Just how the science-based realities of climate change can best be rendered in narrative is one of the challenges of the day, both the youthful Swede Greta Thunberg and the much older Briton David Attenborough have served well as narrative agents of the scientific cause, and with some political effect. For the first time since The Cremation Society of Great Britain — established in 1874 — took as its motto 'Save the land for the living', environmental issues are now making an impact on the funeral world in a new way.

This has, for example, been exemplified by David Charles Sloane, an American historian, heir to a line of US funeral directors, who has addressed many of these issues in his *Is the Cemetery Dead?*, [16] which deals with the economics of funerals as well as the pressing issues of ecology and global warming. His listing of millions of feet of hardboard, a hundred thousand tonnes of steel and half a million tonnes of concrete, and eight hundred thousand gallons of embalming fluid, going into USA graves has its own shock effect. As for cremation, itself a minority practice in the USA at large, though growing rapidly, he cites each one as generating 245 kg of carbon dioxide. He commends the Englishman Ken West, the originator of woodland burial in the UK, and who was given an honorary degree by Durham University for his work for this and in the funeral world at large.[17] Sloane acknowledges the importance of cultural hybridity in different forms of funeral and body disposal at different times and places, but the drift of his concerns is clear — it is ecologically minded. One of my own doctoral students, Georgina Robinson, also expresses these concerns in her focused researches on resomation that can be consulted for appropriate data,

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Vol. 2: *A Commentary on Liturgical Texts* (London: Routledge, 2004); Douglas Davies, *Theology of Death* (London: T&T Clark, 2008); John Dunhill, *Sacrifice and the Body: Biblical Anthropology and Christian Self-Understanding* (London: Routledge, 2013); Henry Novello, *Death as Transformation: A Contemporary Theology of Death* (London: Routledge, 2016).

[16] David Charles Sloane, *Is the Cemetery Dead?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019).

[17] Ken West, *R. I. P. Off! Or the British Way of Death* (Leicester: Matador Press, 2013).

including some scientific analyses of issues involved.[18] Both Sloan and Robinson add to the emerging narrative of death and ecology.

Churches and change

But responses to change often take much longer, with the mainstream churches, with their long tradition of earth-burial, taking nigh on eighty years to even begin to think liturgically, let alone theologically, about cremation.[19] And now resomation presents itself. Some American Catholics have already begun to address alkaline hydrolysis with a generally negative evaluation and with an emphasis upon the dignity of the human body. One publication speaks of the process in terms of its not being 'intrinsically evil' but as 'not a prudent choice' at present.[20] The discussion is reminiscent of previous Catholic reserve over cremation, one that became more accommodating with time, albeit with strong reminders that cremated remains should certainly be buried. I anticipate that this will also be the case here, especially as the ecological argument intensifies.

Tradition and change frame our lives. Familiarity and novelty, settled states and shake-ups, mark our personal experience as we seek to make some combined emotional and rational sense of things. They also typify the ongoing life of churches, not least in their liturgies and theologies that foster faith in regular church members and sometimes challenge occasional attenders.

In this, the powerful biological drive to survive is echoed and paralleled at the cultural level of existence by the sense of hope. Hope captures human complexity, whether in encountering others, anticipating loving partners, raising families, finding occupation to sustain livelihood, or engaging in activities that stimulate imagination and play. While ever alert to perils from sickness, accident or the malice of others, hope's energising vitality often transcends dismay and despair and, when mediated through the person of Jesus and friends who understand, provides the theological basis for this present account of mortality and funerals. For some, however, hope dwindles and can be lost, not least in a culture where loneliness so easily allows individuals to turn in on themselves and perish.

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[18] Georgina Robinson, 'Dying to Go Green: The Introduction of Resomation in the United Kingdom, *Religions*, 12.2 (2021).

[19] Peter Jupp, *From Dust to Ashes: Cremation and the British Way of Death* (Hampshire: Palgrave, 2005). See also Stephen Prothero, *Purified by Fire: A History of Cremation in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

[20] Peter Fonseca, 'Alkaline Hydrolysis: imprudent in its current context', *Homiletic and Pastoral Review* (30 September 2019).

It is not surprising, then, to find 'hope' partnered by 'faith' and 'love' at the core of Paul's prime Christian values as he helped forge the worldview of the early Christian sect of Judaism (1 Corinthians 13.13). The message of salvation became embodied in this growing community of the saved that — quite remarkably — conceived of itself in the Pauline idiom of the 'body of Christ' (Romans 12.5). This very phrase has almost assumed the status of a creed when affirmed today in liturgical settings: 'we are the body of Christ'. Indeed, there is a very real sense in which stating it makes it so, and this is part of the force of liturgy within personal piety.

Cognitive science and liturgy

The 'personal' dynamics that drive human existence are not only shaped by socialisation but by the pre-existing capacity to respond to 'persons', and here the emerging significance of cognitive and brain science has much to contribute to our understanding of life. As Todd Tremlin describes it, 'one of the most basic and powerful activities of the brain involves the capacity to quickly detect other agents in the environment'; some cognitive psychologists describe this complex process as the 'Agency Detection Device, or ADD'.[21] This human perception of agency in the world around us is a fact of deep significance for ongoing theological consideration of God, let alone the community-focused behaviour typified as liturgy. Still, the cognitive science of liturgy has yet to be developed, seminal ideas are already evident in cognitive anthropology and psychology that draw us into the attractive appeal of narratives of people and their lives.

The grand narratives of Jesus, the disciples, apostles, and believers galore down the years, furnish the trajectories of regional and local variants depicted in more accessible forms whose appropriation by individuals is catalysed by inevitable life experiences, not least that of grief. Death ever energises and draws the grand narrative of faith down into the particular accounts of your life and mine where liturgies of all kinds find their force. Indeed, the co-incidence of those narrative dimensions strongly underlies the attractiveness of faith and the emotional flow of theological ideas. Theologies succeed when there is a strong affinity between life experience and doctrinal formulations, they fail when elite-style theologising finds little or no traction with ordinary believers or people at large.

Here the notions of 'force', 'energy', 'dynamism', and the like, are important for the study of liturgy, and not least for funeral liturgies whose context is one where a wide spectrum of emotion reaches from the deep negativity of despair to a profound positivity of hope. It would, in fact, be

[21] Todd Tremlin, *Minds and Gods: The Cognitive Foundations of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 76–77.

easy to subtitle Liturgical Studies as the emotion-studies of the faithful, something that benefits from seeing the success of liturgy as depending upon the interplay of what the historian of religion Wilfred Cantwell Smith once called 'cumulative tradition' and 'personal faith', terms he wished to use to replace the notion of 'religion'.[22] One way of thinking of contemporary secularisation is to see something of that 'personal faith' separating from established 'cumulative traditions', especially for those who self-describe as being 'spiritual but not religious'.

Secularisation, Liturgy, and Society

This distinction is worth re-asserting today, and especially in funerary contexts, to emphasise the importance of an individual's personal appropriation of doctrine within contexts of practice, something that many in previous generations experienced in day and Sunday schools. While the bond between tradition and faith typically plays its part in liturgy's ritual-symbolic experience of longstanding members of a church, it can become a barrier for those now distanced from and unfamiliar with ecclesial practices. Their very infrequent church attendance — not least at funerals — prompts uncertainty when faced by forms of service, not least funerary forms, that leave them uncertain of what to do or say next, one factor that probably makes bespoke funerals and civil celebrants appealing as we see in a moment, but for now it is worth considering how processes of secularisation within British societies involve the separation of personal and group beliefs from those of established religious traditions: secularisation witnesses the growing gap between cumulative tradition and personal faith. From somewhere later in the twentieth century the continental drift separating churches and large UK populations became increasingly obvious. Bridges sustained in baptism and marriage began to be lost before the early twenty-first century witnessed something similar for funerals.

Liturgy and ritual

While this present section could easily have been placed at the very start of this essay it has been retained for this later inclusion due to its more theoretical nature. In what might well be regarded as the fullest more recent study of ritual the anthropologist Roy Rappaport (1926 to 1997) provided an extended account of the subject in *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity*.[23] Though published posthumously it includes a 'Preface' by

[22] Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1963).

[23] Roy Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

Rappaport where he tells us of his terminal lung cancer, thanks those caring for him, and marks his 'ever-growing sense of the need for closure' in getting the book 'done'.[24] Thankfully it was published, assisted by his colleagues and friends, not least by Keith Hart whose brief but insightful Foreword speaks of and to us as 'individuals trapped in a sort of private busy-ness' while also being alert to 'larger forces whose origin we do not know' but with which 'we would like to establish a connection'.[25] Even more than that he alludes to Rappaport's concern with ecology, damage done to the environment, and a sense of human life as being 'inside rather than outside life on this planet', to the way he draws from the work of 'theologians, psychologists, ethologists, and philosophers', and to Kant's coining of 'anthropology' as a frame for 'community and common sense […] generated through interaction'.[26]

Ultimate sacred postulates

One of Rappaport's seminal ideas is that of the 'ultimate sacred postulate', by which he refers to utterances embedded in ritual, such as the Jewish *Shema*, 'Hear O Israel the Lord Our God the Lord is One', and which when uttered in a liturgical context become 'not merely unfalsifiable but undeniable'.[27] The undeniable feature lies in his concern with aspects of religious experience that pervade such ritual, or liturgical, utterances, and not in logical propriety. This brings him to what he calls a 'remarkable spectacle', viz.

> The unfalsifiable supported by the undeniable yields the unquestionable, which transforms the dubious, the arbitrary, and the conventional into the correct, the necessary, and the natural.[28]

It is seldom difficult to pinpoint such postulates in liturgical contexts. 'This is the Body of Christ', marks one such in the Eucharist, or 'I baptise you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit', at baptism. The words of the Creeds function similarly.

And what of funerals? This key question has pervaded the preceding discussion. For this paper the ultimate sacred postulate is, in one sense, most easily identified given that many funerals begin with some biblical sentence, notably one of the Johannine 'I am sayings' — 'I am the resurrection and the life says the Lord […]'. (John 11.25). For liturgical thinkers at large such an

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[24] Rappaport, 'Preface', *Ritual and Religion*.

[25] Keith Hart, 'Foreword', in Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion*, p. xv.

[26] Hart, in Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion*, pp. xvi–xvii.

[27] Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion*, pp. 277, 405.

[28] Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion*, p. 405.

utterance, as also in the later familiar formula already discussed, when the minister commits the body to the earth, 'earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust: in sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ'. The ritual-symbolic balance between the Lord as the resurrection and the life, and the committal of the body 'in sure and certain hope of the resurrection' sets the funeral event under the sacred canopy of resurrection.

But here we encounter a key feature that some will raise in terms of many a contemporary funeral, and which pinpoints the issue of belief. Some will say that most people do not 'believe' in resurrection, and even if they believe that Jesus rose from the dead and made possible eternal life for others, those others will not be 'resurrected', but their souls will 'pass' to be with God.[29] While part of the problem here lies in the mixed beliefs of modern life, even within Christian churches, an even greater issue lies in the very notion of 'belief' itself as some kind of propositional statement.

One response to this, and it is expansively discussed by Rappaport, lies in the nature of an ultimate sacred postulate set within ritual. We might say that it is as though the very nature of 'belief' shifts from being a logical proposition to being one that carries existential desire. One criticism of such a suggestion would be that words lose their meaning, and doctrine dissolves in emotionality, and in terms of systematic theology that is a weighty point. But, to what extent is systematic theology like liturgical language and action? Systematic theology does not throw soil into a grave, priests and people do.

CONCLUSION

What then of what we might call Resomation Rites? Throughout this paper I have resolutely avoided proposing liturgical formulae for such rites, seeing this piece as a call to collaborate not only in recognising current social changes surrounding death rites, but also to see them framed by the environmental factors of global warming. For here, uniquely, we find a strong intersection of two existential fields —mortality and ecology; two domains that rightfully invite theological reflection and liturgical implementation.

The nineteenth century created conditions for a new worldview in which evolutionary theories reframed human self-understanding. It fostered modern cremation as a 'green' option of the day. The twentieth and twenty-first centuries substantiated new knowledge through genetic knowledge, and now through evolutionary and cognitive sciences. Cremation that was once deemed environmentally beneficial now has its own questions over

[29] Davies, *Theology of Death*.

cremation products. Theology, too, has its own accounts of the world and of human and other beings within it. Theology and liturgy, together, have their own interactive contributions to make towards mortality. So, how might Resomation Rites commence: that is the question?