

Wisdom's Buried Treasure: Ecological Cosmology in Funeral Rites

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Abstract

Scholars normally characterize wisdom literature's approach to mortality as essentially negative because it typically denies immortality, critiques human exceptionalism, and ignores the possibility of resurrection. This scholarly focus, however, overlooks the affirmative anthropology on which the negations depend: that humans come from and rightly return to the earth and that humans share a fundamental class identity with all other biological creatures. While Christian ritual has at times conserved this earthy dimension of the wisdom tradition, especially in Ash Wednesday and funeral committal rites, I argue that the tradition holds a precarious place in Christian ecological cosmology, given funerary trends that seem to exempt humans from the return to the earth in death and from pan-species solidarity. I demonstrate how the contemporary recovery of natural burial practices within Christian ritual remedies this exemption by embodying ecological dimensions of the wisdom tradition, complementing funerary motifs of resurrection.

Dust Wisdom: a name and a conceptual frame

the ground of dust wisdom

After a lifespan measured by transient earthly phenomena...
all plant and animal creatures die...
and return to the dust.

examples of the fruit of dust wisdom

seeking wisdom
critiquing riches and power
contemplating the nature of the divine dust-artist-mother
contemplating our nature as dust creatures
contrast: the eternity of God
championing peace and equality
questioning accounts of justice

Christian liturgical engagement with dust wisdom

Ash Wednesday – from penitence to dusty mortality
Committal – the fruitfulness of eastern approaches
Eastern funeral hymns – old patterns in a new day

Natural Burial

no chemical embalming
biodegradable vessels
natural return to the earth

Foregrounding the ground

natural burial as liturgical renewal: recovering bodies and the earth
the complications of consumer culture

the fruit of natural burial

giving something back: the body as gift
toward paradise
blessed simplicity
receptivity to the others: ask the animals, and they will teach you
seasons and cycles

Conclusions

not negativity but fecundity
not incoherence but diversity growing from common ground
dust wisdom "grounds" Christian cosmologies
committal is the chief embodiment of dust wisdom
eastern funeral hymn tradition is fertile, and shows a possible model for new growth
natural burial is liturgical renewal, with death as a restored path toward Eden



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