

## **Grave as space for grace – “Come you sweet hour of death!” On seeing the beauty of aging and dying within an aesthetics of mortality and decay (human decomposition)**

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### **Abstract**

Within the ineluctable contingency of death and dying as horrifying and terrifying existential prospects, the notion of “grave” immediately corresponds with the natural facticity of human decomposition and the fear for death and dying. Decomposition is, in fact, a natural process beginning several minutes after death, with a process called autolysis, or self-digestion. From a pastoral and spiritual perspective, the following research questions surface: Could a Christian spirituality of grace and a theological aesthetics of brokenness contribute to start seeing in the loss of body physique and the exposure of life to the inevitable process of existential disintegration and eventual decay, a growth perspective (embodied spirituality) that contributes to the beautification of both living and dying? Rather than a nihilistic approach, it is argued that in a Christian meta-physics of resurrection hope, an eschatological approach discovers in decay, aging and deterioration, a “more” than dust-of-death-perspective. An aesthetics of immortality implies a “spirituality of more” transcending the death and funeral formula of “ashes for ashes, dust to dust”. It even surpasses an epistemology of empirical seeing and observational reasoning reducing human embodiment to the decomposition of a mortifying body, lying under the ground: “Stinking like a rotting carcass, and consumed by maggots and worms” (Martin Luther). According to Paul’s argument in 1 Corinthians 15:37–38, the natural body (ψυχικόν/psychikon), and the so called “soulless corpse”, are in fact not to be reduced to organic processes of decomposition. In an aesthetics of mortality, human embodiment is about a spiritual process of pneumatic germination bodies (πνευματικόν/pneumatikon). Perhaps, the reason why J. S Bach wrote a cantata with the challenging title “Come you sweet hour of death”.

### Keywords

*Aesthetics of mortality; corpse as germinating seed; eschatological perspective; natural body; spiritual body*

## Introduction

For most people death, dying, aging, and suffering are threatening existential phenomena and inhumane forms of dismantling and mortification. Life and the human body are constantly being exposed to severe forms of disintegration and decay.

In her publication *Verweerskrif* (2006 a), Antjie Krog uses the term *verweer*<sup>1</sup> to give an “existential grammar” and “emotional language” to her personal experience of aging. The term refers to a mode of defence against all forms of disintegration. It indicates processes of decay and perishing. The poet wrestles with physical decline and general deterioration and degeneration. Exposed to the loss of body physique, Krog forces the reader to face the factuality and trauma of mortality (Viljoen 2015; Guillot de Suduiraut 2006:505).

Eventually, life is framed by the bleak prospect of entombment and decomposition. “Far from being “dead,” however, a rotting corpse is teeming with life. A growing number of scientists view a rotting corpse as the cornerstone of a vast and complex ecosystem, which emerges soon after death and flourishes and evolves as decomposition proceeds” (Costandi 2015). When the human mind starts to disintegrate (dementia) and our bodies are falling apart (aging), the human “I” is faced with the crisis of irreversible loss and the fear of disconnectedness.

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1 See the English translation: Krog, A. 2006 b. *Body bereft, Sunday 22 June*. Lyrikline. [Online]. Available: <https://www.lyrikline.org/en/poems/body-bereft-5518>. [Accessed: 14 December 2021].



**Figure 1** (Left). Different stages of human decomposition. Decomposition is in fact a natural process beginning several minutes after death, with a process called autolysis, or self-digestion. (Costandi 2015).

**Figure 2.** (Middle). “Vanitas” by Gregor Erhart, Augsburg about 1500. Kunshistorisches Museum, Vienna. See the following explanation by Guillot de Suduiraut (2006:505) of the two sculptures depicting the contrast between the beauty of youth and the ravages of old age. “The glow of beauty and the youth of the body ineluctably yield to the ravages of old age; to sagging flesh, the prelude to death, as known by Gregor Erhart’s “Vanitas,” a coloured woodcarving which presents back-to-back a pair of young people and an emaciated old woman.” For academic purposes only, open domain. [Online] Available: [https://www.google.com/search?q=Gregor+Erhart+vanitas&rlz=1C1JJTC\\_enZA954ZA954&source=lnms&tbnm=isch&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwj62PWOrLn0AhVGecAKHfOOCLYQ\\_AU](https://www.google.com/search?q=Gregor+Erhart+vanitas&rlz=1C1JJTC_enZA954ZA954&source=lnms&tbnm=isch&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwj62PWOrLn0AhVGecAKHfOOCLYQ_AU). [Accessed: 27/11/2021].

**Figure 3.** (Right). Sculpture of the artist Günther Von Hagen (plastification of human corpses as sculptures) in Boles 2008:1. See the following remark: “As time passes and we age, the mind/body connection begins to decay.

Our minds are stronger and better able to dismiss ailments of the body as nothing when they are early indicators of dangers to come. Our mind may not be able to balance and control the body as it wishes and so instead of forcing the body to mind, the mind just gives up and dismisses the task as hopeless ... We live in two realities at all times: Our internet life where – we are beautiful and perfect – and then our real life where our minds are disintegrating, and our bodies are falling apart” (Boles 2008:1).

### **The refuge of embodied connectedness**

Awareness of human vulnerability and the irreversibility of mortality fuel the existential need to stay connected to the body as place of existential orientation and refuge against decaying mortality. Therefore, a sense of futility, even irritation mixed with an existential resistance, manifest itself in different forms of anger, especially when one has to deal with different signs of disintegration. The desperate plea to stay connected to one’s body so that your physicality must not leave you in the lurch, plummeting away and turning against the human I, could be called an ontic need in human behaviour, namely: “I am not I, without my body only through my body can I in-habit this earth. my soul is my body entire. My body embodies what I am” (Krog, Sunday 22 June 3/7, 2006b).

Therefore, human beings have to face the existential fact: Mortality overshadows every aspect of life and infiltrates the very core of being. It coils as nihilating factor within the very fibre of existence so that disgust and nausea set in (Sartre 1943). Part of being human is to be exposed to a gradual process of loss and decline and loneliness. Facing the factuality of mortality brings about a kind of dubious existential crisis: Being encapsulated by, on the one hand, the threat and cruelty of death and dying, and, on the other hand, the yearning for meaning in death and dying, the following aesthetic question arises: Can death and dying be also beautiful (Wiese 2019)? The same question is posed by Elsa Joubert in her publication *Spertyd* (2017:197).

Within many African spiritualities, death is viewed as an enemy of life. But the phenomenon of death as an enemy is not necessarily esteemed as the opposite of life. Like a lizard or a chameleon, it functions as a twin of life that can bring full understanding to life (Frank 1999:110–129). Only in old age is death considered to be normal, for example, amongst the Akamba

in Africa (Gehman 1989:62). Death is called *kiw'u*, taken from the verb *kwitwa* “to be called”. Death is therefore viewed not as a mere happening but a snatching away from life. Something comes to take away a person maliciously. Thus, death is an enemy that robs one from the beauty and preciousness of life and a comforting sense of interconnectedness. In this regard the notion of ancestors plays a pivotal role in how an aesthetics of life and death will be formulated.

### Research question and proposition

Could a Christian spirituality of grace and a theological aesthetics of brokenness contribute to start seeing in the loss of body physique during processes of aging, within the intersection between human vulnerability and the ineluctable contingency of death and dying, a growth perspective (embodied spirituality) that contributes to the beautification of both living and dying? Within this context, how can the Pauline paradigm shift from seeing mortality merely as fate (nothingness of death and dying), as a vivid process of germination, maturing into a pneumatic embodiment according to the eschatological perspective of the resurrection of the flesh?

I will apply the methodology of a pastoral hermeneutics, i.e., the attempt to link literature in philosophy as well as several existential depictions (portraying decay and aging) to Paul's view on mortality. In this regard, the notion of a pneumatic understanding of mortality as represented in 1 Corinthians 15:37–38, is revisited. With reference to a Christian understanding of a theological aesthetics on death and dying, the Pauline argument that, despite the factuality of mortality (the natural body as *ψυχικόν/psychikon*), the so called “corpse”, should be viewed as a pneumatic entity: *πνευματικόν/pneumatikon*. References to current discourses on mortality, death and dying in arts, literature and philosophy will be used to foster a paradigm shift from the mere threat of mortality to an aesthetics of death and dying.

In the light of the existentialistic and often nihilistic argument that human beings are merely victims of fate, exposed to the tragedy of despair, un-hope (*inespoir*) (Marcel 1935; Guinness 1973; Heidegger 1963), it will be argued that in a Christian meta-physics of resurrection hope, an eschatological approach discovers in decay, aging and deterioration, a “more” than dust-of-death-perspective. Therefore, the attempt to refer to current discourses on

mortality, death and dying in arts, literature, and philosophy, to eventually foster a paradigm shift from the mere nihilistic threat of mortality to an aesthetics of death and dying.

A pastoral anthropology of ensouled embodiment is proposed. Thus, the notion of a *meta*-perspective on human embodiment and the existential yearning for a spirituality of immortality: *désir métaphysique* (Levinas 1987:31; Van Rhijn, Meulink-Korf 2019:207).

### Like a scorched fly or ripened olive?

It seems as if life is a gradual process of decline: It becomes worse because the one that laughs last is *Skoppenboer* (Eugène Marais). In the historic novel *Donker Stroom*, C. Van der Merwe (2015) points out how the notion of a “scorched fly” becomes a dark undertone in Eugène Marais’ battle against substance dependency and his attempts to come to terms with mortality, decay, and disintegration.

The following poem from Coventry Patmore, reveals Marais’ inner struggle with meaninglessness, even his struggle with sinfulness and personal insult: “Like a scorch’d fly, that spins in vain/ Upon the axis of its pain / Then takes its doom, to limp and crawl / Blind and forgot, from fall to fall” (Van der Merwe 2015:108). In this regard, the Persian poet Omar Khajjam directed Marais’ thinking and spiritual turmoil as he refers in his notebook to a verse from one of Khajjam’s poems: “Come, fill the Cup, and in the fire of Spring / Your winter-garment of repentance fling” (Van der Merwe 2015:109). Life is, therefore, exposed to the fate of mortality and constant meaninglessness.

Within the context of the so-called post-apartheid dispensation in South Africa, despite radical political changes, human vulnerability, also threatens the human quest for identity and acknowledgement. Malvory Adams, in his book *Dark White Light Black* (2022), wrestles with his quest for identity. He even despairs of his own life due to the awareness of the

futility of life and the threat of death and dying<sup>2</sup>. The fact of mortality<sup>3</sup> even drove Karel Schoeman to the following decision, to deliberately put an end to his life. Thus the challenge to open anew a theological and pastoral discourse on how a spiritual aesthetics on the meaning of life, can bring about a healing, hopeful and comforting perspective, namely, to start seeing and discovering the beauty of aging and dying within an aesthetics of mortality and decay

### **Despair: Being encapsulated by mere nothingness** (*L'être et L'Neant*)

The fact that life has to be lived within the gnawing awareness of destruction, decay, death and dying, as well as the irreversibility of mortality, give rise to the following existential dilemma: Should one try to come to terms with mortality or start to resign and withdraw from life. Resignation then becomes a form negation ending up in total annihilation (spiritual suicide).

Due to the possible danger of disillusionment and the artificiality of false optimism, both Nietzsche (1961) and Kierkegaard (1954) were men who lived in passionate revolt against the smugness of the nineteenth century (Louw 2016:395), particularly against the cheapness of its religious faith (the urge for political power and the hierarchical clericalization of church polity), and the brash confidence of its secular reasoning or generally against its shallow optimism, worldly idealism, and tendency to conform (Guinness 1973:13). “So, then it is an infinite advantage to be able to despair; and yet it is not only the greatest misfortune and misery to be in despair, no, it is perdition” (Kierkegaard 1954:148). In this sense, despair leads to a kind of resignation, to faith framed by doubt and paralyzed and intoxicated by fear anxiety and acceptance of death as a kind of final resignation and an eventual exit point.

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- 2 His suicidal attempt had deep spiritual roots and can be linked to “ugliness of God” and the threat of meaninglessness. “There had to be something other than God. The God I grew up with had a stick in his hand instead of Moses’ staff” (Adam 2022:309).
  - 3 “Die ouderdom nader egter onkeerbaar en onverbiddelik, selfs al is jy nog hoegenaamd nie gereed daarvoor nie, en moet dus pragmaties hanteer word, terwyl die oorweging van en voorbereiding op die dood uitgestel kan word tot letterlik die einde” (Schoeman 2017:120).

“There is only one path out of the steamy dense jungle where the battle is fought over glory and power and advantage – one escape from the snares and obstacles you yourself have set up. And that is – to accept death” (Hammar skjöld 1993:7). The point is, that, for Hammar skjöld, the encounter with death is the most realistic challenge of life. “Tomorrow we shall meet / Death and I / And he shall thrust his sword / Into one who is wide awake” (Hammar skjöld 1993:2).

This remark correlates more or less with Shakespeare’s verdict: “Life’s but a walking shadow; a poor player / That struts and frets his hour upon the stage / And then is heard no more: it is a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury / Signifying nothing” (Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Act V, Scene IV, 1968a:942).

### The spiritual tension: mortification – vivification

But what about the option that life is a gradual process of becoming frail in order to be transformed into a spirituality of immortality (Paul in 1 Cor 15), and an eschatology of delight (*doksa*)? What about a Christian spiritual perspective that, due to God’s *hēsēd* (grace and pity), life displays a process of gradual growth founded by the trustworthiness and faithfulness of a divine promise?

From an eschatological perspective, is it not possible that life is not becoming worse due to aging, death and dying (mortification) but “beautified”? According to Calvin, life is framed by immortality so that a spirituality of life, implies a process of vivification<sup>4</sup> life becomes better, and better and better.<sup>5</sup> That what Marcus Aurelius (Roman emperor from

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4 In his catechism Calvin poses the fundamental question regarding the main purpose of human life (*la principale fin de la vie humaine*). Human life should be guided by a spiritual perspective on human vulnerability, namely faith and the fundamental knowledge about the overarching notion of the comforting *hēsēd* of God. Knowing God is an existential endeavour; it implies a new mode of living. His argument is that God should be glorified through human life (*pour estre glorifi, en nous*); i.e., a new mode of eschatological glorification rather than a nihilistic mode of God-denial (In Weber 1972:586).

5 With reference to Calvin, hope is based on God’s indubitable promises, on the covenant of grace, of which Christ is the Mediator. Calvin regarded hope as the consequence of faith - that link of communion with Christ, which enables humankind to receive grace, and which unlocks the future. Hope is the expectation of that which we already possess by faith (*spes est expectatio earum rerum, quas in fide habemus*). In faith, hope



161 to 180) during a time of peace called the *pax Romana* as programmed to enhance human well-being and processes of healing. According to Stoicism (Holiday and Hanselman 2016:26), mortality is not about decay, but a natural process of fruition wherein human existence has to find a final resting place in harmony with nature “... just as a ripened olive might drop, praising the earth that nourished it and grateful to the tree that gave it growth.” Because, according to a Stoic worldview, and in the words of Cicero (Rawson 1975:242–243), there is beauty in nature, the whole of the earth is bedecked by a great splendour, steered by divine reason.

### The spiritual aesthetics of “Grow Lovely, Growing Old”

Living the process of a meaningful life within the acute awareness of the existential challenge: Courage or resignation, implies that aging is not necessarily frightening and destructive. It all depends on space, place, and perspective. As Lawrence Green argues in his description of life within the setting of natural enjoyment, beauty, and tranquillity. With the challenging title *Grow Lovely, Growing Old* (Green 1983), one’s environment contributes to satisfaction, fulfilment and peace despite changes and disturbing experiences: “And there is healing in old trees / Old trees a glamour hold / Why may not I, as well as these / Grow lovely, growing old” (Karle Wilson Baker in Green 1983:3). As the retired Mr Barnard reflected on his decision to remain in Gansbaai for the rest of his life: “It is so peaceful, so healthy, ... no other place would agree with me now” (Green 1983:261).

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participates in the complete work of redemption (already); in hope, faith anticipates a future element (not yet). Eschatology opens up the future dimension of faith in the mode of hope. In his Institutes, Calvin speaks of those who have embarked on the pilgrimage of faith as having already had a foretaste of complete joy (*in hac quoque terrena perigrinatione*). However, there is also the assumption that the desire for this joy will increase daily in our hearts (*sui desiderio*) until it is ultimately satisfied (Calvin’s Institutes III, 25, 2:547; date not mentioned). The hope for eternal salvation thus is an inseparable part of a living faith (Inst III, 2, 42:68). Calvin continues by saying that in this life we begin to taste the beauty of God’s goodness in various acts of kindness (*divinae benignitatis suavitem deliberare*) in such a way that our hope and longing is increased while we desire to enjoy the full revelation (Inst III, 9, 3:214).

## The quest for a spirituality of *meta-well-being* (*désir métaphysique*)

This metaphysical desire and the quest for transcendence, (a form of meta-well-being) that can contribute to the beautification of life, is articulated, inter alia, by Johann Sebastian Bach.

### Johann Sebastian Bach: The yearning for death – come sweet hour of death

Death and dying was a real existential reality in the life of Johann Sebastian Bach. He had to face the loss of 10 children<sup>6</sup> within an acute awareness of finiteness and frailty. Keeping this background in mind, he composed the church cantata *Komm, du süße Todesstunde* (Come, you sweet hour of death),<sup>7</sup> in Weimar for the 16th Sunday after Trinity, probably first performed on 27 September 1716. The prescribed readings for that Sunday were from the Epistle to the Ephesians (Ephesians 3:13–21). The connection with the Gospel of Luke, about the raising from the dead of the young man from Nain (Lk 7:11–17) also play a role in the cantata. The cantata links human sorrow with a deep yearning for transcendence as expressed by Lutheran faith and the connection to the resurrected Christ (*theologia resurrectionis*): “I yearn from my heart / for a peaceful end / since here I am surrounded/ by sorrow and wretchedness / I wish to depart / from this

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6 Bach fathered 20 children over his lifetime. His first was born in 1708 when Bach was 23, with his last coming into the world in 1742, when the composer was 57. Only ten survived through to adulthood.

7 Ambroz Bajec-Lapajne wrote (October 17, 1999): “The conception of death in the Bach times (as indeed before and later) was a different one that we have nowadays. Today death is perceived as something that people fear and a death experience is for those close to the deceased something extremely sad. In those days death was a salvation from this (unperfect, sinful) world and the beginning of an eternal life in heaven – under a condition of course that you reached it. I do not mean people died gladly, or that they didn’t mourn over the deceased. This is what I meant by the saying that since Bach was a very religious person. He felt this perhaps even stronger than others (bearing in mind that he was an artist too) did. His funeral music is therefore written in somewhat different motion as we are used today. And if we consider this hypothesis of mine, perhaps we see that the funeral music needs not to be as dark and sad in order to translate it to the cultural language of today” (Bajec-Lapajne 1999:1). It is even possible to make a connection between the disposition and mood of the cantata and the current experience of human vulnerability due to COVID-19. See the remark of Aryeh Oron (28 March 2020): “The whole world is nothing but a hospital / where in numbers too great to count people/ and even children in their cradles / lie down in pain and sickness.”

evil world, / I long for heavenly joys / O Jesus, come quickly” (Bach 2021 Wikipedia).

The intriguing question to address is: How appropriate is this cantata within a more secularized society and new forms of piety that struggles with social issues like poverty, injustice, and inhumane forms of suppression?

Gunsell (2000) sums up the intriguing question of interpreting the text of Bach’s cantata:

Even many Christians find it mysterious that their faith, which preaches and celebrates the beauty of God’s creation (despite the problem of theodicy), should from time to time speak of longing to leave this life, if we are sustained in it by a good God ... Bach’s religious music was written to assist – to be – prayer, and of course it still fulfils this function for many people. The question is, how do religious people of today pray a prayer like this?... Sorrow for personal sin and longing for a sinless (and therefore entirely happy) existence was undoubtedly the dominant motif in the Lutheranism of Bach’s day, but it is not the only way to read these prayers. This must be so, because people of today for whom that theme is not dominant find these prayers quite valid. So, how?

The point is: The cantata does not express escapism from life. Nor is it about a fatalistic expression for death, merely a death-wish.

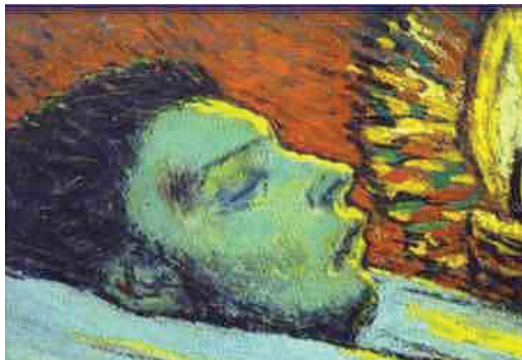
In the non-Lutheran Christian prayer tradition, as indeed in the specifically Lutheran, there is undoubtedly a longing to “run to God”, recognised as the Ultimate Good. This is reasonable, given that the ultimate destiny of every person is seen as union with – eternal experience of – absolute truth, beauty, and goodness. Bach certainly expresses this. There is, though, an imperative not to take this feeling too far, and so waste or undervalue life here and now, which is key to our experience of God both in its own terms and as our “formation for eternity (Gunsell 2000).

## ***Thanatos: The quintessence of dust?***

The core anthropological question has been formulated in a very apt way by Shakespeare in his play: *Hamlet*. “What a piece of work is man! How noble in reason! how infinite in faculties! in form and moving, how express and admirable! in action, how like an angel! in apprehension, how like a god! the beauty of the world! the paragon of animals! And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust?” (Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act iv, Scene III, 1968b:970).

The question: “What is this quintessence of dust?” is closely related to what Salvador Dalí called the interplay between *thanatos* and *eros*.

For Salvador Dalí the creativity of aesthetics is closely related to the awareness of death (See Louw 2014:9). The duality death (*thanatos*) and sensuality (*eros*) are the two companions of the poetic event. “The two motors that which drive the superfine artistic mind of Salvador Dalí are first, the libido or sexual instinct, and second, the fear of death. According to Dalí not a single minute of his life passes without the sublime, Catholic, apostolic, Roman spectra of death accompanying even the least of his highly subtle and capricious fantasies” (Néret 2007:47).



**Figure 4.** Pablo Picasso: *The Death of Casagemas* 1901.<sup>8</sup> The depiction captures the space of death with its total silence in a very poignant way.

8 [Online]. Available: [http://www.google.co.za/imgres?imgurl=http://www.join2day.net/abc/P/picasso/picasso7.JPG&imgrefurl=http://www.abcgallery.com/P/picasso/picasso7.html&usq=\\_\\_g08Ax7wyWG55c1grfITfK8cyvB0=&h=328&w=432&sz=17&hl=en&start=0&zoom=1&tbnid=aCXZxSjTdgrouOM:&tbnh=125&tbnw=176&ei=M2gRTumTBMOi-gb3qoX1Dw&prev=/search%3Fq%3Dpicasso%2Bthe%2Bdeath%2Bof%2](http://www.google.co.za/imgres?imgurl=http://www.join2day.net/abc/P/picasso/picasso7.JPG&imgrefurl=http://www.abcgallery.com/P/picasso/picasso7.html&usq=__g08Ax7wyWG55c1grfITfK8cyvB0=&h=328&w=432&sz=17&hl=en&start=0&zoom=1&tbnid=aCXZxSjTdgrouOM:&tbnh=125&tbnw=176&ei=M2gRTumTBMOi-gb3qoX1Dw&prev=/search%3Fq%3Dpicasso%2Bthe%2Bdeath%2Bof%2)

It is actually a kind of parody on Shakespeare's remark: "The way to dusty death. Out, out brief candle! Public domain. See Louw 2014:10.

### **The desacralization of the human body in a culture of commercialization and exploitation**

Unfortunately, the human body has become a commodity in our culture of healthism. Due to the playfulness of performance and the obsession with sports (sport morale), the perfect body image has become closely related to "bodyism" and the commercialisation of "instant health": healthism (Louw 2014:228–229). Thus, the reason why one can call the obsession with the body and health, through the processes of commercialisation and exploitation (marketing), "bodyism" and "healthism". Through the impact of the media the body as a social text becomes a symbolic stage upon which the drama of socialisation is enacted, and bodily adornment becomes the language through which the social self is expressed in its search for meaning (Doty 1996:268) and attempts to avoid reflection on death and mortality as inevitable ingredients of existential orientation.

When facing death at a funeral, nowadays we tend to rather talk about the celebration of life than the threat of death and the extinguishing of life.

### **The de-ritualization of death and dying: Funeral as happy celebration without grief and mourning**

In his doctoral research on rituals during a funeral, Lynn Gibson (Gibson & Louw 2018:521–551) found that increasingly many people are choosing to have their deceased loved ones removed from the place of their death and cremated with minimal or no ceremonies or buried without any traditional funeral services that accompany the dead. Therefore, deritualization is contributing to potential distress in processes of grieving and a very artificial approach to death and dying.<sup>9</sup>

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9 Deritualization broadly denotes the growing trend of a public openness to revise, replace, minimize the significance of, and even eliminate or avoid long-held funerary rituals to assist in the adaptation of loss.

Due to deritualization, the body becomes degraded to the nothingness of decaying flesh. The corpse is merely a worthless cask to be removed as soon as possible. A funeral becomes on the one hand a commercialized business and merely a place for a few yokes, a party, and the celebration of bygones. On the other hand, funeral rituals as artificial celebration of life with a glass of Champagne, tends to treat the body as a perishable functionary spoiled by death and dying not as a frail but beautiful cask for immortal life.

### **The frail body as aesthetics of the human soul: Michelangelo**

In his art and sculptures, Michelangelo Buonarroti used the classic form of the human body (image) as a sign of perfect beauty; as a kind of artistic interplay between mortality (vulnerability) and the yearning for immortality (fulfilment and beauty) by means of the aesthetics of the unseen (the embodiment of the unseen: The soulful realm of eternal immortality).

According to Bonfante (1989:550), it was the Greeks who brought into our culture the ideal of male nudity as the highest kind of beauty. Greek art and athletics exalted the beauty of the youthful male athlete. Nudity and the human body were actually a virtue and represented aristocracy and a spiritual aesthetics of divine beauty (Erez 2012:2).

One can say that it was Michelangelo who made the first authoritative statement in art that the human body – that body which, in Gothic times, had been the subject of shame and concealment – could be made the means of expressing noble sentiments, life-giving energy, presenting God-like perfection (Clark 1974:125), and portrays in the beauty of the naked human body, the spirit and soulfulness of what is meant by a meta-view on the aesthetics of human embodiment: Embodied soulfulness and soulful embodiment. “Out of this glorious physical specimen God has created a human soul” (Clark 1974:129). The body becomes a soul, and the soul embodied physicality.<sup>10</sup>

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10 According to Vasari (in Néret 2006:7), the perfect human body in Michelangelo's art reflects the beauty of God. The perfect proportions of the human body represent the human soul “Für Michelangelo war die menschliche Schönheit ein Abbild der

According to Néret (2006:32), Michelangelo was interested only in the people he painted because perfect bodies were the carriers and containers of the idea of eternity and immortality (Louw 2014:217).



**Figure 5.** David facing Goliath projecting noble courage (aesthetics of the human soul expressed in the beauty of male nudity) over against brutal violence (the ugliness violence and destruction). Michelangelo, copy in front of Royal Plaster Museum, Copenhagen. Photo: D. J. Louw. See also Louw 2014:210)

### **The mummification of the human corpse: Afterlife as spiritual link between embodiment and soulfulness**

The Hebrew customs of dealing with the dead do assimilate many rituals performed in the middle East. For example, the tradition of embalming is mentioned in the book of Genesis where it is written that when Jacob died, Joseph commanded his servants and physicians to embalm his father. There is a reference to forty days which is the time the body has to spent in the embalming place for drying out and the wrapping of the body. With reference to Genesis 50:2–3 (“So the physicians embalmed him, taking a full forty days, for that was the time required for embalming. And

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himmlischen Schönheit und führte folglich bei eingehender Betrachtung die Seele zum Göttlichen zurück” (Néret 2006:8).

the Egyptians mourned for him seventy days”), one can understand why Egyptian rituals for mummification and mourning impacted on Hebrew customs as well. The fact is that the corpse was treated with dignity because it contains and inhabits the *nēphēsh* of the deceased. On the other hand, due to rituals of cleansing, the corpse should not be touched so that one cannot become defiled (Haggai 2:13).

### Death rituals in biblical times

Three perspectives dominated the view on the dead and rituals regarding the body of the dead in biblical times.

- The status of the corpse was related to the kind of life the deceased lived. Therefore, how one has lived according to the law, determined the ritual and burial place (entombment) for lived was directed by the commandments of *Jahwē* (wisdom culture) and scrutinized by the teachings of the Lord. Thus, the reason why the notion of judgement determined the status of the body (Is 14:19).
- Due to hygiene and rituals for cleansing and purification, the body should be removed and not be touched (Num 19:16;18).
- The body (σῶμα) should be treated with respect, embalmed with oil (see figure 6), and buried in a place where the connection with the forefathers could be honoured. (See in this regard 1 Kgs 13:29).



**Figure 7.** Matthias Grünewald 2021. Lamentation and Entombment of Christ; (predella of the Isenheim Altarpiece), 1512–15, Musée d’Unterlinden, Colmar. [Online]. Available :[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Body\\_of\\_the\\_Dead\\_Christ\\_in\\_the\\_Tomb](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Body_of_the_Dead_Christ_in_the_Tomb). For academic purposes only. [Accessed: 25/11/2021].



## **Towards a sacramental anthropology of “sowing seed”: The grave as eucharistic space of grace**

### **A qualitative approach to soulfulness**

Central in what could be called an integrative biblical anthropology were to concepts: *nēphēsh* and *phronēsis*. According to Genesis 2:7, the word for “soul” is in fact a relational term referring to the quality of life and the intention of attitude as defined and directed by the commandments of *Jahwē*: “Then the Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being” (NIV). The equivalent of *nēphēsh* is *phronēsis*. In this regard, the Pauline vision on the interconnectedness between “soulfulness” and habitus is noteworthy. Philippians 2:5: “In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus” (NIV).

The word for attitude (*phronēsis*) is related to the Old Testament’s understanding of wisdom (Goetzman: 1976:616). The Hebrew equivalents are *hākom* and *bīn* with their respective derivations. What is of significant importance is the fact that *phronēsis* is related to God’s position. It denotes a creative understanding of God wherein wisdom (*sophia*), together with the notion of Christ’s incarnation, plays a fundamental role (Louw 20216:203).

### **Sapientia-thinking framed by the aesthetics of a “pneumatic body” (divine tabernacling in human flesh)**

The anthropology of the Bible does not promote a Platonic dualism between soul and body, spirit and life. The use of the term soul in Scripture refers to wholeness and not to a different substance as in the case of Hellenism and the dualistic split between “soul” and “body” (Louw 2016:201). One has to reckon with the unique hermeneutics to be applied to Old Testament terminology like “heart”, “soul” “pneuma” and “body”. Old Testament thinking correlates with sapientia thinking, namely stereometric thinking. Stereometric thinking “... pegs out the sphere of man’s existence by enumerating his characteristic organs, thus circumscribing man as a whole” (Janowski 2013:18). Concepts like heart, soul and spirit are often used alternately in Hebrew poetry to reveal certain aspects of the human being. One component of our being human, for example the “heart” or “mind”, represents the whole of life. Stereometric reasoning allows for

the Semitic view of a person as an integrated unit within the whole of the cosmos (Louw 2016:196).

One can conclude and say that soul is indeed an inherent part of a human person's existence and the daily occurrences in life. "Nephesh does not say what a person has, but who the person is who receives life" (Anderson 2003:30). A soul without a body is abstract and impossible; a body without a soul is merely a living "corpse". Duality thus refers to spirituality and embodiment as integral parts of a Christian anthropology and the happenstances of life. Thus, the reason why accomplishments (*epitédeumata*) and deeds (*praxis*) refer to body, soul, and the happenstances of life as an integrated whole.

In 1 Thessalonians 5:23 Paul speaks about the trichotomy of spirit, soul and body. The implication however is not a threefold division, but different perspectives within a unity. In some places in the New Testament, soul is connected to spirit (*pneuma*). For Paul there is interconnectedness between soul and spirit. In some texts, the meaning is actually more or less the same. When Paul indeed refers to spirit/*pneuma*, he wants to describe a unique relationship between God and human beings. With reference to Christology, soul then becomes an indication and expression of a very specific state of being due to justification (salvation). One can say that *pneuma* indicates the condition of the new person in Christ over against the condition of the old person, captured by death and sin (Louw 2016:201–202).

Our position can be summed up in the following quotation: "Soul is not a thing, but a quality or a dimension of experiencing life and ourselves. It has to do with depth, values, relatedness, heart, and personal substance" (Moore 1992:5). In this sense, "soul" is the representation of divine *hēsēd* and displayed in human embodiment so that the human body (σῶμα) is indeed a temple of the Holy Spirit (divine tabernacling) (1 Corinthians 6:19). Due to a pneumatological perspective on the human body (temple of the Holy spirit) one can conclude and say that the human body is holy and therefore the corpse is more than merely physicality. The corpse/body (σῶμα) is connected to immortality in terms of what Levinas calls the mystery of *désir métaphysique*. This mystery is formulated by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:42–44 in the symbol of seed/grain, sowing and germination. It is in this

context, that the link between resurrection and afterlife becomes the key to understanding why the grave is a space of grace and why an aesthetics of a “spiritual body” determined the notion of a sacred body/corpse.

### **The unanimated corpse consumed by maggots and worms within the notion “death as sleep”**

The challenge right now is to link the mystery of *désir métaphysique* to a theological interpretation. How “on earth” can a grave with a dead corpse become beautiful and a place of grace?

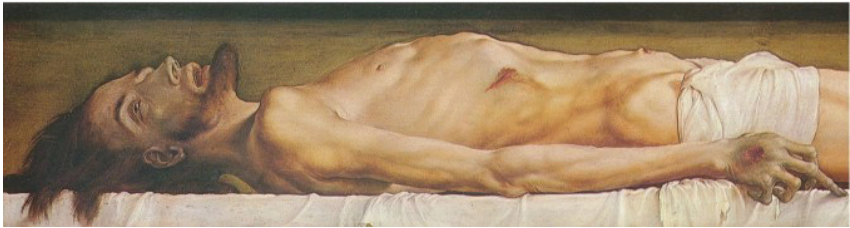


Figure 8. The Body of the Dead Christ (σῶμα) in the Tomb, depicts on the one hand lifelessness and decay. On the other hand, the expression and composition of the body of Christ points upwards to the meta-realm of more. Is death the final word on human embodiment? The painting is an oil and tempera on limewood depiction of “the grammar of death and dying” It is created by the German artist and printmaker Hans Holbein the Younger between 1520–22. The work shows a life-size, grotesque depiction of the stretched and unnaturally thin body of Jesus Christ lying in his tomb with sign of the wound in his side (he suffered under the tyranny of the Roman empire). Holbein shows the dead Son of God after he has suffered the fate of an ordinary human, entombed and surrounded by mystery. The meta-question surfaces: Is that all?

[Online]. Available: [https://www.google.com/search?q=the+body+of+the+dead+christ+in+the+tomb&rlz=1C1JJTC\\_enZA954ZA954&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwihovWR2rL0Ah](https://www.google.com/search?q=the+body+of+the+dead+christ+in+the+tomb&rlz=1C1JJTC_enZA954ZA954&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwihovWR2rL0Ah). For academic purposes only. [Accessed: 25/11/2021].

With reference to Martin Luther’s eschatological approach to death and dying, the corpse in a grave is not merely rotten flesh but an “inanimate

corpse”. “Of the latter we do not say that they are asleep but that they are inanimate corpses. Therefore, by that very word “asleep” Scriptures indicate the future resurrection” (Scaer 1983:222). The metaphor “death as sleep” indicates the promise of resurrection which already took place in Christ’s resurrection (Christ as Victor), and, therefore, changes the status of flesh from mere decay into “germinating seed”. Our misery and anguish (Luther: *Anfechtungen* – they are only God’s masks that terrify us (Scaer 1983:223) – does not determine our view on death and dying but the resurrected Christ as “First Fruit” (Scaer 1983:223).

According to Luther, at the grave, human reason only experiences the irreversible corruption of dead bodies. Due to the belief that God is the living, and existing God, Luther postulated his strong faith in the promise of a resurrected body “...even though present appearances belie this, with men lying under the ground, stinking like a rotting carcass, and consumed by maggots and worms” (Luther in Scaer 1983:217).

### **The death chamber as wedding chamber**

According to Dostoyevsky in the novel *The Brothers Karamazov* (1958), one’s belief in eternity and mortality determine a spiritual aesthetics of both living and dying. To live, implies to love. However, love is not a “natural ability” due to genetics and psychological capacities. Because, when love does exist on earth, “... it was not because of any natural law but solely because men believed in immortality ... and that if you were to destroy the belief in immortality in mankind, not only love but every living force on which the continuation of all life in the world depended, would dry up at once” (Dostoyevsky 1958:77).

This perspective of love and immortality opened up a new perspective on death and dying. When Alyosha entered the death chamber and saw the coffin before him with the corpse of the dead Father Zossima, he fell down before the coffin while hearing how Father Paisy proceeded with a reading from John 2:1: “And the third day there was a marriage in Cana of Galilee.” Suddenly the death chamber was transformed into a wedding chamber. Instead of a corpse and seeing “the little dried-up old man” (Dostoyevsky 1958:425), the coffin was gone while Zossima was sitting at the eucharist-table of the Lamb. “So he, too had been invited to the feast, to the wedding at Cana of Galilee” (Dostoyevsky 1958:425). The scenario changed due to

the notions of love, forgiveness, gladness, and immortality. In this sense, Zossima's body became immortal.

The point in this metaphysical and mysterious framework as explained by Dostoyevsky, life is not merely about physical deformation (Krog 2006 a). From a eucharist and eschatological perspective, dying and death could be reframed as the mystery of divine transformation so that a grave could be viewed as space for grace and the corpse as a germinating grain despite processes of decay (the eschatological mystery of a green cornstalk and eventual yellow corn sheaf).

### **Towards the beautification of the grave: A funeral as an act of sowing germinating seed**

The corpse/body (σῶμα) is connected to immortality within a mystical interplay between ensoulment (pneuma) and praxis (happenstances, *epitédeumata*) and mortality. Thus, the conceptual and hermeneutical framework vase with a stem and base, especially one used for storing the ashes of a cremated person, of *désir métaphysique* (Levinas). This mystery is formulated by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:42–44 in the symbol of seed/grain (σίτου, sitou).

Therefore, to my mind, there is a huge difference between a funeral as entombment and sowing of a sacred and germinating body and cremation as the instant extinction of decomposing substance. In entombment the ensouled body is given back to creation as mortal gift to the Creator trusting God with the promise of immortality (a burial process of holy reritualization – divine undertaking within the realm of *désir métaphysique*. In cremation the impression is to get rid of a “bereft body” by means of instant removal in a plastic bag ready for the functionalism of quick combustion. The funeral with a grave as dignifying place of grace is always *there* (memorial space of a cosmic place); cremation with the oven is to my mind an instant process of inhumane displacement leaving the impression of elsewhere with the embarrassment “what to do with the ashes afterwards”: on the sideboard, in a memorial wall or somewhere on a mountain or in the sea for the whales.

## Conclusion

The mystery of “spiritual growth” and human embodiment is connected to the interplay between divine intervention (*hēsēd*) and humane vulnerability, brokenness, and mortification. According to 1 Corinthians 15:37–38,<sup>11</sup> God determines the form of the eventual “Gestalt” (σῶμα) of the seeds/grain (σπερμάτων *spermatōn*) and that is why a funeral is holy, the body sacred, a “spirituality of embalming” and a ritual of entombing (dedicating the whole human being to the grace of a living God).

The notion of a pneumatic body and an aesthetics of death and dying, are decisive for a Christian spirituality of sacralization of death and dying. Because what you sow at a funeral (σπείρεις, *speireis*) is not merely dust but the metaphysical mystery of *nēphēsh* and *phronesis*, represented in the form of a germinating σῶμα. From an eschatological point of view, the grave contains a spiritual body ((πνευματικόν/*pneumatikon*) despite the sowing of a natural body (ψυχικόν/*psychikon*) (1 Cor 15:44).

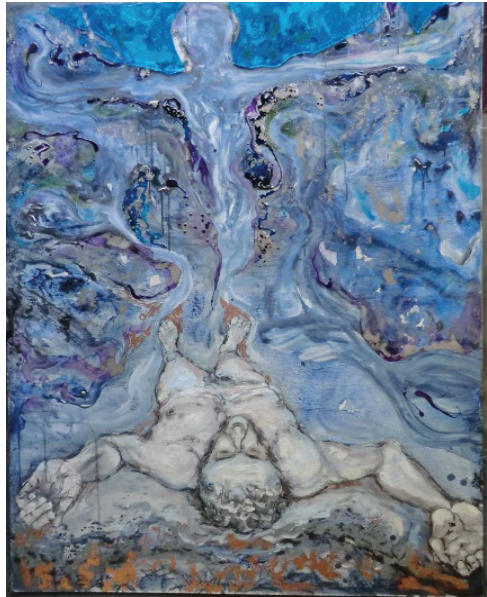
The following painting (figure 9) is an attempt of the author to capture the mystery of a metaphysics of death and dying. The whole of the painting is framed by blue greyish colours to portray the mystery of death and dying. Dying human being’s head rest on copper (symbol of poison and decay). The body (σῶμα) is framed by *nēphēsh* (movement of wind or breath) in search of Gestalt due to the process of germination. Thus, the impression of form/Gestalt/immortal soul emanating from the body. The mystical figure can also refer to the mystery of a divine presence, finding of a final resting place in harmony with nature “...just as a ripened olive might drop, praising the earth that nourished it and grateful to the tree that gave it growth” (Marcus Aurelius in Holiday and Hanselman 2016:26).

**Figure 9.** Painting in chapel, Faculty of Theology, University of Stellenbosch by D J Louw 2013 (Glass and acrylic on bord). Désir métaphysique within the aesthetics of a pneumatic body – beauty of mortality. Decomposition could also be viewed eschatologically from a pneumatic point of view: a

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11 1 Corinthians 15:37–38: “37 When you sow, you do not plant the body that will be, but just a seed, perhaps of wheat or of something else. 38 But God gives it a body as he has determined, and to each kind of seed he gives its own body.”

spiritual body (πνευματικόν/pneumatikon) – decomposition as fruition for resurrection hope.



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