

## Death and the Priest: Review of Alexander Schmemmann, *The Liturgy of Death*

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The title of this series of lectures by Protopresbyter Alexander Schmemmann, published as a book in English and Russian, may cause dismay and confusion. But I would like to warn the reader against getting into an argument about the title without opening the book.

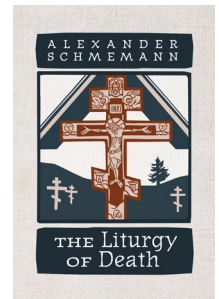
The “religion of the dead” remains a significant part of our culture whether or not we acknowledge it. In the twenty-first century, just as it did two or five thousand years ago, this religion permeates all the traditions and rituals associated with death and commemoration of the dead, both religious and secular.

In the Orthodox Church, the “religion of the dead” infused the liturgical rites and hymnography in the Byzantine period. In the early Church, there had been no interest in the “afterlife.” The confidence of these first Christian communities in complete victory over death was expressed in the petitions of the ancient prayer: “You Yourself, O Lord, give rest to the souls of your servants in a place of light, in a place of green pasture, in a place of refreshment, from where pain and sorrow and mourning are fled away.” Several centuries later, however, the

non-Christian world’s traditional experience of death as tragedy entered the Orthodox funeral service: “Come, descendants of Adam, let us look upon one laid low in the earth, made after our own image, all comeliness stripped away, consumed by worms in darkness, and concealed by the earth.”

What is the contradiction here, and how critical is it for the Church? This is one of those burning questions that Schmemmann raises in *The Liturgy of Death*. Like most of Father Alexander’s talks and writings, this is not only a historical and theological study. The author puts the problem of death in the broad context of church culture and Christian worldview, and at the same time the life of modern society, exploring the theme of death in post-Christian culture.

Death attracts and repels. It frightens and disturbs. We want to hide from it, or at least find a safe place from which we can look at the death of our neighbors and perhaps even our own without anxiety and sorrow. Secular society puts most of its hope in medicine. With medicine, it aims to conquer death, as it has in many ways conquered old age (and transhumanism—no matter how



Alexander Schmemmann, *The Liturgy of Death* (New York: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2016).

fanciful it sounds—already promises to achieve this). Speaking about our secularist society, Father Alexander observes that it is characterized by “an experience of life having its meaning and its value in life itself, without any reference to anything that could be termed ‘otherworldly.’” Hence, Schmemmann explains, “the meaning of death in our modern culture consists in its having *no* meaning.” (25)

It would seem that there is a completely different attitude towards death in the Church. And I must say that in our contemporary church practice, the “industry of death” is one of the main ones. It involves parishioners, visitors, and priests. For parishes in big cities, this is a significant source of income. Perhaps today only bishops are personally spared from the dictatorship of this death industry.

Let us recall how a typical meeting with death occurs in an Orthodox church. The morning service has already ended. The church is empty or almost empty, and the funeral home attendants bring in the coffin with the body of the deceased. The priest, usually gloomy and tired, gives orders where and how to place the coffin, its lid, flowers, and accessories. He explains when to light the candles. The family, relatives, and friends of the deceased behave obediently. Often they crowd in confusion at the entrance or huddle up near the walls, feeling extremely uncomfortable in the church but realizing that the funeral service is inescapable. This incomprehensible ritual on the way from the morgue to the cemetery demands a donation of time and space. Those gathered in the church around the coffin do not understand and do not seek to

understand the funeral service. For most of them, ritual is enough. It must be performed correctly, without abbreviation, and then everything is in order. It is like sending the soul of the deceased to the river Styx and handing over to Charon, who transports it to the kingdom of the dead.

The priest, too, has long resigned himself to this situation. He performs funeral services for many people unfamiliar to him, who have found themselves in his church by chance, *not of their own free will*, when the soul is already separated from the body. At best, he will give words of advice and provide emotional support to the bereaved. At worst, he will try to conduct catechesis, involuntarily mixing the faith of the Church and those everyday traditions that belong to the “religion of the dead.”

Many have encountered this attitude toward death. Is it the only one possible? Is it in line with the good news of the gospel? Intuitively, the hearts of those who have prayed or even those who have simply been present at such a service will answer: “No, I was expecting something else! My expectations are vague, but they are deeper and more serious than what I was offered in the church funeral service.” The heart feels the incompleteness of the prayerful parting words of the departed in church. Yet it can hardly be otherwise when the Church sanctifies with her prayer those who did not need it and were not interested in it.

Father Alexander shows us a different way. In choosing God, affirming by holy baptism our desire to be with him, we choose eternal life. Sanctified by grace, we begin to see

our life—and our death—in a new way. Father Alexander sets himself the radical challenge of rediscovering what death is, and offers a plan of action based on culture, faith, hope, and liturgical tradition. In doing this, he carries the reader on a difficult path: to be with God, with the risen Christ. He does this with such strength and such confidence that it is impossible not to be borne along with him.

It seems to me highly significant, even providential, that these four lectures have come out now, in a separate edition, well after the publication of the entire legacy of Father Alexander. They serve as a kind of spiritual testament. This little book is a fiery call to put death at the

center of our lives, as it was in the early Christian communities. And we are not talking about pious reconstruction, but about a change of mind: “For the early Christians, the general resurrection was indeed *general*: a cosmic event, the fulfillment of all things at the end of time, the fulfillment of Christ. . . . Christ is alive. Death has no power over him. Thus, whether we are alive or dead, whether we are in this world, whose form is passing away, or have gone from it, we are alive in Christ, for we are united to him, and in him we have our life.” (51) The good news of the gospel conveys to us the Paschal mystery: there is no separation between life and death. Death no longer rules over those who live in Christ.✱



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