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"Formation and the Custodians of Death"

Michael Budde, *DePaul University*

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FORMATION AND THE CUSTODIANS OF DEATH

Michael L. Budde

For a long time I used to think that only old Trotskyites called people “comrade” any more. Then my father died. A well-known business and political figure in our home town, my father drew a crowd even in death. More than a thousand people filed past his casket, many standing for hours in a line a block long. The procession of friends, relatives, and well-wishers seemed relentless; a six-hour parade of consolations, encouragement, and reminiscences. Despite the solemnity of it all, it was a fairly noisy affair; and unavoidably so, given the size of the room and the numbers of people.

The noise stopped and the line froze late in the day as a group of men from the local American Legion post assembled at my father’s side. These had been his friends and cronies as young men; as old men now charged with witnessing to one another’s passings, they adopted a military bearing once second nature to each of them as their leader led a mini-liturgy of patriotism, service, and farewell.

The group’s leader read a tribute to “Comrade Budde,” the title deliberately repeated at the start of each step of the litany of accolades and accomplishments—Korean War-era veteran, elected official, husband and father, and more. With a final salute to “Comrade Budde,” the group of veterans marched out, some of whose uncooperative knees or joints were willed into a dignified compliance yet one more time.

I have had occasion to think of this military liturgy often in the past year. It has been hard not to, given the launching of new wars and commemoration of old ones following my father’s death. I am struck by how very important the control of death—its presentation, its invocation, its commemoration—is to the ongoing legitimization of the American empire and the stories it tells about itself. These stories have a sacred quality to them, necessary to infuse the role of citizen with divine purpose and sanction sufficient to legitimate the body politic and the sacrifices demanded in its name.

Civil religion in its varied manifestations claims for itself the right to determine the meaning of death. Yet in so doing it collides with the Christian tradition—at least the self-aware and reflective aspects of the tradition—insofar as Christians claim that the meaning of death, and its purchase on present and future priorities and commitments, has been irrevocably and definitively claimed by the death and resurrection of Jesus. The interpretation of death held by Pilate and the early church could not both be correct: no Caesar, past or present, may

claim for Christians the meaning and power of death. As part of its birthright, the church claims death as part of the ongoing process of making and delivering disciples, martyrs, and the communion of saints.

Yet the church's stake in relating death to life and allegiance is all too easily obscured. My father's Mass of Christian Burial, while done with seriousness and respect, lacked something of the emphatic claims made to his life and death by his American Legion comrades. And despite the words of the liturgy, which dutifully connected death with baptism and resurrection, I suspect persons participating in both observances would have been persuaded that citizenship was the more powerful and formative category on display, eclipsing the more "private" role of being a lifelong Catholic Christian.

Ironically, both the church and the state have a stake in how death is interpreted and internalized. Death has a formative role in making citizens and in making Christians, although in recent times state-centered control of death seems more intentional, systematic, and strategic. Churches have seemed content to affirm patriotic rituals even as their own practices regarding death become thinner, more therapeutic, and more thoroughly enfeebled as opportunities for building up the body of Christ.¹

Politicizing the Dead

Governmental and media sources worked a curious transformation upon the nearly 3,000 people killed on September 11, 2001. While the overwhelming majority of victims were civilians, in many ways all seemed to be accorded a status comparable to persons killed in combat. They did not just die, they died "for America"—as part of the American war against terrorism—even if relatively few were formally in service to America at the time (with the exception of many who died at the Pentagon).

Capitalism became even more closely tied with Americanism in commemorations for the dead at the World Trade Center. Inasmuch as terrorists attacked the towers as symbolic of American capitalism and economic might, the dead therein died nobly in the name of freedom—free mobility of capital, free trade in goods and services, free convertibility of currencies and various types of investment products.

The September 11 dead merited individualized eulogies and tributes in the established newspaper of record, as the *New York Times* ran biographies on every identified casualty. This individualized memorialization of "war-related" deaths—a distinctively modern practice mostly unknown in earlier times—worked both to sanctify the creed of individualism in American life while simultaneously bundling the deaths of each into a single package of nationalist outrage for which retribution seemed the only response capable of honoring the dead. Those families who spoke against retribution visited upon Afghanistan were marginalized and ignored, their individual attempts to reinterpret the meaning of their loved ones' deaths overwhelmed by the unifying commemorations that controlled the meaning of those deaths and that continue into the present.

In addition, September 11 produced a class of bona fide martyrs in service to America. New York City police and fire units, having lost hundreds of people

son in political circles), and a more general insistence that only the state—not the media, not the church, not anyone else—must be in control of death's presentation and management in our time. The latter anxiety, of death without a controlling political interpretation, comes through in the statement of Bush apologist Senator Lindsey Graham (R-SC), who defended banning the photos because "there is no ceremony held."³ Without the narrative control of military commemoration, the meaning of death threatens to slip its harness and risks working at cross-purposes to those of state.

The April 30, 2004, episode of "Nightline" offered a forty-minute reading of the names (and display of pictures) of all Americans killed in the Iraq war (no names or pictures of Iraqi dead were offered). While the Bush administration official refrained from condemning the exercise, described by ABC News as "an expression of respect which simply seeks to honor those who have laid down their lives for their country," the Sinclair Broadcasting Group refused to air the program. Sinclair owns sixty-two television stations in thirty-nine markets, and claimed the program was an overt criticism of the war that risked undermining support for the conflict. Such an exercise "will have no proportionality" because it ignores other aspects of the U.S. war in Iraq, according to Sinclair vice-president Mark Hyman.⁴

In all of this, the control of death's presentation and meaning remains central to reinforcing the claims of modern citizenship above all other allegiances and identities. It also illustrates the extensive powers of death across time. Memorialization of those fallen in a noble cause can be used to legitimate contemporary killing and dying, even (or especially) in more morally ambiguous situations. In this respect, the completion of the official World War II Memorial comes as a godsend to the Bush regime as it struggles to consolidate its gains in Iraq.

Set on 7.4 acres of the mall in Washington, D.C., between the Washington Monument and the Lincoln Memorial, the formal dedication of the World War II Memorial on May 29, 2004, celebrated the heroism and patriotism of the "Good War" as the quintessence of American virtue. Like all official war monuments, the World War II Memorial is unambiguously a temple of civil religion. The most forthright expression of this comes from the *USA Weekend* magazine of April 30–May 2, 2004. This publication, an insert into hundreds of Sunday newspapers across the country, in addition to its usual celebrity news, recipes, and word puzzles, offered a lavish center article by Colin Powell on the World War II Memorial.⁵ While emphasizing that war memorials "do not glorify war," he nonetheless highlighted their sacred status in affirming the ties of loyalty needed to prevail in war and peace.

Not content merely to reflect on how the new memorial honors those killed in combat sixty years ago, Powell put their sacrifice to work in affirming the contemporary martial needs of state: "Today, their descendants are fighting the global war against terrorism, serving and sacrificing in Afghanistan and Iraq and at other outposts on the front lines of freedom. The life of each and every one of them is precious to their loved ones and to our nation. And each life given in the name of liberty is a life that has not been lost in vain."⁶

In its design, the World War II Memorial was constructed as "a contemplative space" according to the *New York Times*.⁷ It features a Rainbow Pool, with

in the line of duty, became overnight objects of veneration. Across the country, local and regional prayer services and public commemorations sought a representative of the New York police and fire departments. NYFD hats took on the qualities of sacramentals and holy relics, and Mayor Rudy Giuliani for a time became the nation's new Moses; a calm, steady presence leading us through travails to the promised land of business-as-usual on the other side. Firefighters substituted for military heroes after September 11, and were valorized at sporting events, an important substitution given the limited ability of long-range bombing and ugly special-forces war in Afghanistan to produce properly sanitized icons capable of sustaining newly kindled patriotism and love of state.

Having rolled into and over (but as yet not out of) Afghanistan, the Bush administration sought to press the fallen heroes of September 11 into service justifying war against Iraq. Alongside fabricated claims of horrific weapons at the ready, the Bush administration repeatedly sought to link the noble sacrifice of American life on September 11 (it being noble to go to work) to the diabolical designs of Saddam Hussein.

As the campaign in Iraq has evolved from farcical mismatch to a war of attrition and occupation, the control of death's presentation remains central to state attempts to manage meaning and sacred devotion. The twin advances in bureaucratic personnel management and high-tech killing allow both for low U.S. casualties and the individual identification of those soldiers; no such precision is sought in counting and personifying the thousands of Iraqis killed, a continuation of Colin Powell's remark during the first Gulf War that the number of dead Iraqis was not a question he felt necessary to raise. As with September 11 casualties, each fallen soldier merits a reverential biography in the nation's newspapers, the full powers of journalistic human interest writing focused on making the losses seem personal, the sacrifices even more poignant, with a select few (former NFL player Pat Tillman, for example) given a secular hagiography of privilege abandoned, asceticism embraced, and death assumed for the sake of others.

One can sometimes manage a glimpse at the larger imperatives when a momentary hitch causes the imperial management of death's presentation to stumble. Consider the official reaction to two such episodes in the past year: the unauthorized release of photos of a U.S. military mortuary, a room with several rows of caskets draped with American flags; and an episode of ABC's "Nightline" program, which read without comment the names of all U.S. personnel killed to date in the Iraq invasion and occupation. Ironically, in both cases, reactions dramatized the political nature of death management more than did the original events in question. The Bush administration criticized the coffin photos as an intrusion on family privacy, citing a Pentagon policy that claims that "the sensitivity and privacy of families of the fallen must be the first priority."⁸ No one seemed to question how rows of anonymous coffins violated the privacy of any particular family, nor that such concerns seemed remote from the Pentagon's media relations officers who daily provided biographical information to reporters charged with writing patriotic tributes to the dead. No, what was at stake was something else: a specific anxiety that journalistic depictions of dead Americans in a deregulated fashion might undermine domestic support ("pictures of body bags from Vietnam" being the horrific of compari-

fountains between two arches that symbolize the European and Asian theaters of battle. On either side of the arches are fifty-four granite pillars, representing the American States, the District of Columbia, and nonstate American territories. Finally, visitors encounter a wall of 4,000 gold stars, each representing 100 Americans killed during the war. The intent is to represent national unity, "the country's spirit and sacrifice in the war, [and] the triumph of democracy."⁸

Not even this exercise in public sacralizing of war and death is sufficient for some nationalists. Conservative columnist Charles Krauthammer calls the World War II Monument's design a "disaster," complaining that it fails to inspire love of country over all amidst an array of misplaced symbols. He wonders why the monument pays tribute to the states and territories ("The Civil War was very much a war of states," he notes, but World War II was emphatically a national crusade). The "glory" of World War II, to Krauthammer, "was in its transcendence of geography—and class and ethnicity. Its fighting units mixed young men from every corner of America. Your classic World War II movie features the now-clichéd platoon of the Polish millworker from Chicago, the Jewish kid from Brooklyn, the Appalachian woodsman and the Iowa farm boy bonding and fighting and dying for each other as a band of brothers." If the states—represented by granite pillars—are the wrong focus, "the ultimate banality" is the wall of 4,000 gold stars, according to Krauthammer. Noting that gold stars were issued to families who lose a son in the war, Krauthammer assails the sheer arbitrariness of the number ("Why a hundred? Did they die in units of a hundred? Did they fight as centurions?"). "Four thousand stars are both too few and too many. Too few to represent the sheer mass, the unbearable weight of 400,000 dead. And too many—and too abstract—to represent the suffering of the mother of a single fallen hero."⁹

This sort of internal dispute, whatever else it does, highlights the perceived stakes in how death is controlled, presented, remembered, and enlisted for purposes of state. What is less obvious is that deaths claimed by and for America are (at least when the deceased are Christians) deaths taken from the beloved community of the church, a down payment on allegiances needed for the next war instead of persons marching before us in the family of faith toward the promised kingdom of God.

Christianity and Political Control of Death

In retrospect, perhaps the single greatest failure of public policy implementation was Pilate's inability to secure the tomb of Jesus. He recognized the need to control the death of Jesus, even down to imposing the imperial seal on the tomb (the breaking of which constituted a criminal offense, hence making the resurrection a crime against the state), and dispatching a handful of soldiers to stand guard. Underestimating the personnel needs of a given job is a classic policy error, although given what happened (at least according to Christian accounts) dispatching the entire garrison might not have been enough.

The empty tomb represents the first—and by no means final—instance of Christ and his followers thwarting attempts to write death into a system-supporting script of state. Death on a cross, intended as a scandal and embarrassment, becomes a symbol of love conquering death; a sealed tomb intending to

prove the empire's power to terminate a subversive story lived in a subversive fashion, instead becomes an unsealed doorway into the future, an ongoing story against which the greatest of powers have yet to prevail. Catacombs and coliseum, public executions and quiet, ordinary deaths—the church has sought to understand all of these as part of a longer, richer drama of allegiances and promises in which death is not the last word and sectarian political loyalties do not substitute for the universal body of Christ.

A full exposition of a proper church-centered understanding of the dead and their role in the unfolding kingdom of God lies beyond this essay. At a minimum, however, a glimpse of a Christian appreciation of death and its role in the church might help in understanding the significance of the state's attempt to roll death into the fabric of civil religion. One useful voice belongs to theologian Thomas G. Long, whose reminders on how Christians think about death and commemoration seem both timely and worthwhile. As he notes (in reference to tawdry, tacky trends in funerals explored by Jessica Mitford and others): "Obviously, a genuine Christian funeral is not about the evils that Mitford found so easy to satirize—the vulgar, conspicuous consumption, the mawkish sentiment—but, strangely, a Christian funeral is also not primarily about many of the good things that its friends claim for it: the facilitation of grief, helping people to hold on to memories of the deceased, or even to supply pastoral care and comfort to the bereaved. A Christian funeral often provides these things, of course, but none of these is its central purpose. A Christian funeral is nothing less than a bold and dramatic worship of the living God done attentively to and in the face of an apparent victory at the hands of the last enemy. Though the liturgy may be gently worded, there is no hiding the fact that, in a funeral, Christians raise a fist at death; recount the story of the Christ who suffered death, battled death, and triumphed over it; offer laments and thanksgiving to the God who raised Jesus from the grave; sing hymns of defiance; and honor the body and life of the saint who has died."¹⁰

Rather than being a place for the state to narrate the meaning of the deceased's life, or even for his family and friends to reminisce about his or her fine qualities, "the most important measure of a Christian funeral is its capacity to place the event of a person's death in the larger context of the Christian gospel. . . . The Christian funeral is a liturgical drama, a piece of gospel theater, with roles to play and a time honored, if flexible and culturally varied, script. . . . (T)hey are community enactments of a formative narrative." Christian funeral rituals, properly understood, cannot be enlisted in the projects of empire; to the contrary, they can and should be opportunities of forming new disciples, of fashioning a continuity between the now-dead follower of Jesus and those on earth still on pilgrimage.

We have seen recently the coordinated powers of state funeral liturgy at their fullest in the weeklong, coast-to-coast adoration of Ronald Reagan (itself the product of a 130-plus-page rubric administered by the armed forces). One would hope that some Christians would have noticed how utterly marginal and circumscribed were the distinctively ecclesial aspects of the Reagan events. The powers of state were on display, overwhelming matters religious (and remember, Reagan was a Christian, albeit a largely "unchurched" one) with a nationalist narration unrestrained in its self-exultation and overt in its desire to shape hearts and dispositions.

When Christians take more seriously the formative powers—for the living, on The Way—of ecclesial death practices and the power attendant to telling the story properly, perhaps they will be less willing to hand their dead over to managers and architects of civil religion and love of state. The latter will not willingly surrender so powerful a set of associations in our culture. Yet if and when the liberation of Christian death from the hands of empire arrives, perhaps the dead may rest in peace with our Lord instead of being conscripted into the next war on earth.

Michael L. Budde is a professor of political science at DePaul University, in Chicago, Illinois. His recent work, including Christianity Incorporated and The Magic Kingdom of God, explores the interactions of political economy, culture, and transnational Christianity.

Notes

1. See Michael L. Budde and Robert W. Brimlow, *Christianity Incorporated: How Big Business Is Buying the Church* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2002), chapter 4.
2. Randall Chase, "Bush: Privacy of Coffin Photos First Priority," *Chicago Tribune*, April 24, 2004, p. 13.
3. Ibid.
4. Bill Carter, "Some Stations to Block 'Nightline' War Tribute," *New York Times*, April 30, 2004.
5. Colin Powell, "Of Memory and Our Democracy," *USA Weekend*, April 30-May 2, 2004, pp. 8-9.
6. Ibid., p. 9.
7. Michael Janofsky, "59 Years Later, Memorial to World War II Veterans Opens on Mall," *New York Times*, April 30, 2004.
8. Ibid.
9. Charles Krauthammer, "WWII Memorial a lemon," *Chicago Tribune*, May 31, 2004, p. 23.
10. Thomas G. Long, "Why Jessica Mitford Was Wrong," *Theology Today* (1999) 53: 4.