Little Apocalypse: How Green Funeral Practitioners Reconfigure the Iconography of Climate Catastrophe

Benjamin M. Stewart

Gordon A. Braatz Associate Professor of Worship, Director of Advanced Studies
Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, Chicago, Illinois

Introduction[1]

Stefan Skrimshire provocatively suggests that "climate science has always been, by definition, an apocalyptic art."[2] In addition to the popular sense of apocalypse being a catastrophic rupture with the past, a more nuanced religious studies sense also holds true: both climate science and apocalyptic discourse are ways of knowing that use special information shared by an extraordinary source (e.g., prophet or scientist) to perceive evidence of future events of life-and-death global impact.

A recent online video drew on this similarity for both comic and political effect. The video featured popular science communicator Bill Nye the Science Guy switching between the roles of scientific authority and apocalyptic seer.[3] Dressed in a scientist's lab coat and safety glasses, Nye points to catastrophic images of climate impacts pinned neatly to a classroom corkboard. The six images depict catastrophic flood, fire, and barren ground. Nye initially interprets the images using dispassionate scientific discourse before abruptly shifting tone and timbre: "by the end of this century, if emissions keep rising, the average temperature on Earth could go up another four to eight degrees. What I'm saying is the planet's on f---ing fire!" With this final phrase, Nye, voice rising and eyes wild, uses a large laboratory-style blowtorch to ignite a classroom globe. Nye explicitly describes his apocalyptic profanity as a clearer translation ("what I'm saying is…") of the science. The apocalyptic spectacle of the torched classroom globe illustrates the translation.

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Indeed, wider media discourse of climate apocalyptic employs a particular iconography, with three of its most common motifs being dramatic images of life-threatening fire, flood, and barren ground. Studies in climate communication have identified a perplexing result of exposure to these images: they *increase* subjects' sense of the *salience* of climate change, but *decrease* their sense of *efficacy* (i.e., the apocalyptic images increase belief that climate change is important but decrease belief that there is anything we can do about it, contributing to what we might call apocalyptic paralysis).[4]

The icons of climate apocalypse appeared unexpectedly in my research on green funeral practitioners.[5] While green funeral practices are often portrayed in media sources through romantic, pastoral, and consumer-choice motifs, practitioners described passing through what I have called "little apocalyptic thresholds" that directly or indirectly engage the three motifs of catastrophic climate iconography named above (fire, flood, barren ground). Many practitioners identify their passage through these thresholds as beginning a new era in their lives. In this article I show how

1. This article is adapted from a paper originally presented at the 2019 biennial conference of the International Society for the Study of Religion, Nature, and Culture, held at University College, Cork, Ireland, June 13-16, 2019. I am grateful for the feedback from conference participants as well as colleagues at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago who responded generatively to the paper in a faculty colloquy in April 2020.

2. Stefan Skrimshire, "Eternal Return of Apocalypse," in *Future Ethics: Climate Change and Apocalyptic Imagination*, ed. Stefan Skrimshire (New York: Continuum, 2010), 232.

3. Ryan Reed, "John Oliver, Bill Nye Explain Climate Change: 'The Planet's on F-cking Fire,'" May 13, 2019, https://www.rollingstone.com/tv/tv-news/john-oliver-bill-nye-climate-change-green-new-deal-834582/.

4. Saffron J. O'Neill et al., "On the Use of Imagery for Climate Change Engagement," *Global Environmental Change* 23, no. 2 (April 1, 2013): 413–421, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2012.11.006.

5. The green funeral movement seeks to make death practices more ecologically sound. The part of the movement I have studied is largely in the United States and Northern Europe, with my focus being more on the deep green wing of the movement that seeks to re-wild death, and less on the green consumer wing that emphasizes lower-impact purchasing options as a form of individualized identity expression in death.

practitioners pass through apocalyptic thresholds toward ecological efficacy by way of three practices: burning bodies in open air cremation, securing bodies through inhumation, and experiencing seasons of barrenness in conservation burial grounds.

An introductory connection with baptism

While the correlation between the little apocalypses of green funerals and the larger apocalypses of climate catastrophe is noteworthy on its own, it may also offer some insight into the contemporary relevance of Christian baptism. Baptism is itself a "little apocalypse" in both the catastrophic and revelatory sense: it is portrayed as being joined to the death of Christ, and as revealing the baptized as being filled with the agency (*dynamis*) of the spirit. These baptismal motifs are repeatedly invoked through Christian rites of passage that occur during times of sickness and healing, marriage, changes in vocation, personal struggles, and death. In other words, baptism has long offered a sense of agency in negotiating little apocalyptic thresholds throughout life and into death. Therefore, the little apocalypses of green funerals and Christian baptism may be mutually illuminating in an era of ecological emergency—a possibility explored briefly below in the conclusion. This article, however, remains largely focused on what can be discovered about ecological agency and apocalypse within the highly specific ritual theater of green burial.

Open air cremation: Crestone End of Life Project, Crestone, Colorado, USA

The volunteer torch bearers—usually loved ones, in a role much like pall bearers—suddenly become nervous and confused when it is time to light the open air funeral pyre, according to Paul Kloppenburg, fire master at the Crestone End of Life Project (CEOLP), the only public open-air cremation site in the United States.[6] It is a reaction he attributes to the decisive nature of lighting the fire. "This is the moment," he explained. "We're setting something in motion. There is no reversal." There is "tension, consternation, adrenaline."[7] Stephanie Gaines, one of the founders of CEOLP, says that members of the funeral party who are not familiar with the practice commonly arrive "horrified" by the idea of burning a body and "afraid that [the fire] will be too violent, too raw."[8]

The ignition of the pyre may initially be a paralyzing threshold to contemplate, a horrifying point of no return. Yet the power of the fire itself—once ignited—contributes to a sense of the efficacy of the participants.

But the fire becomes a threshold experience, which, when navigated by the funeral party, contributes to a sense of efficacy. Some volunteers spoke of the fire—with its rising smoke and ascending flames—as lifting and carrying away "burdens" and the "heavy" feelings of loss.[9] Kloppenburg contrasts cremation to the longer process of decomposition in earth burial. At the end of the three-hour burn, he said, "there's nothing on the grate. Nothing! That is extremely final. That creates a tremendous sense of relief, even joy, in people. People arrive with deep grief. But they leave with a sense of accomplishment. It's done. It's a release."[10] The ignition of the pyre may initially be a paralyzing threshold to contemplate, a horrifying point of no return. Yet the power of the fire itself—once ignited—contributes to a sense of the efficacy of the participants.

Each cremation at CEOLP involves 20-25 volunteers, guided by a 44-page manual.[11] A number of leaders said that it is important for the volunteers to perform agency for the bereaved in order to invite the bereaved into a sense of efficacy. One leader articulated what they want the bereaved to observe: "Here are people who can confidently and smoothly know how to do this."[12] At least two volunteers described the curated cremation ritual as offering a "container" that can hold a diversity of emotions and a space in which to generate agency. Kloppenburg explained to a

6. CEOLP figures prominently in the deep green wing of the natural burial movement, and has been featured in *The New Yorker,* numerous books and articles on natural funeral practices, and an HBO documentary. CEOLP uses one third of a cord of local juniper for each cremation. Author interview with Stephanie Gaines, 9 May 2019. For perspective, one third of a cord is a stack of 16-inch pieces that is eight feet long and four feet high (16 in. x 4 ft. x 8 ft.).

7. Author interview with Paul Kloppenburg, 20 May 2019. I note in this and other green funeral thresholds the structural similarity to climate tipping points: there is a decisive rupture with the past.

8. Author interview with Stephanie Gaines, 9 May 2019. Another described the lighting of the pyre as "an incredibly moving and powerful moment." Author interview with Gussie Fauntleroy, 16 May 2019. Volunteers emphasized that the meaningfulness of the cremation was especially possible because it was preceded by a grief process that unfolded through various stages of participation in the 72-hour preparation for the cremation often including washing the body and a wake at the home.

9. Author interview with Stephanie Gaines, 9 May 2019. Remark shared with author by Gussie Fauntleroy, 5 Sept 2019.

10. Author interview with Paul Kloppenburg, 20 May 2019.

11. Undergirding many of their practices is a conviction that the bereaved benefit from communal support as they navigate the intimidating threshold of burning the body. Some practices include washing and clothing the body for repose usually in the home (volunteers say it is psychologically stabilizing to allow time and to undertake this bodily care before the body is burned); visiting the pyre on the day before the cremation; giving everyone attending the cremation juniper boughs to hold and then place on the body; forming two lines leading to the pyre through which the shrouded body is carried; burning three types of incense (palo santo, juniper, and frankincense) before the cremation; stationing a volunteer support-person for each of the four members of the funeral party who light the fire; volunteers adding juniper and adjusting the fire at key moments to mask smells and avoid exposing body parts; asking the bereaved how they would like to receive the ashes and bone fragments (most want the larger bones left intact).

12. She mentioned that this is especially true at "the moment" of igniting the fire. Author interview with Gussie Fauntleroy, 16 May 2019.

group of visiting students that the volunteers are "really providing a container of confidence" so that everyone in the funeral party can say "yes, we can do this."[13]

The fire itself involves negotiation of agency. A first example is sonic: within a few minutes of lighting the fire, the sound becomes overwhelming. Participants describe it as a "roar" that is "majestic" making spoken communication "impossible."[14] Within 10-15 minutes, the roar settles, allowing participants to begin readings, prayers, song, and eulogies.

Second, tending the fire requires navigating a number of hazards. Perhaps most obviously the danger of wildfires demands attention to the local desert ecology. All cremations are scheduled for the early morning to avoid the strong winds that sometimes develop at midmorning and could carry the sparks and embers too widely. (A prominent—and frequently commented on—benefit of this timing is the morning sun dawning on the gathered funeral party from over the Sangre de Christo mountains to the east of Crestone.) Each cremation is conducted in conversation with local fire officials, and funeral parties are informed that the cremation may need to be cancelled in case of hazardous fire conditions, in which case a green burial is offered nearby. The intensity of the fire is also registered bodily by the fire-tenders. Kloppenburg describes the fire-tending as awe-inspiring and dangerous: "you see these corkscrews, the tornadoes, they come out of the side openings. There's a rhythmic quality, a bit of wind comes, and whoosh! And you better not be there, it will set your hair on fire. It's very rhythmic… It's scary, actually. It's getting the attention of people."[15] When I asked a volunteer if open-air cremation had made fire more or less scary to her, she said it "expands" her relationship to fire. She says she still feels afraid of wildfires, but cremation has helped her see that fire "has power to transform and release in a pure way, in an intense way… It has a huge amount of beauty as it's harnessed in [cremation]. It doesn't make me any less scared of a wildfire. It's like seeing another side of a person. It opens up another door—it's like seeing another side of them."[16]

Tucking in: resting securely in the earth

One particularly arresting motif in climate-driven apocalyptic flood iconography is the unearthed coffin floating in floodwaters. Ironically, burial products marketed as "the last line of defense against mother nature"[17] allow floodwaters to penetrate burial vaults and make sealed coffins buoyant enough to spring free of the grave and float along roadways and through neighborhoods. The green funeral practice I describe below is not a direct engagement with floating coffins but rather the securing of the body through inhumation—the green burial practice that may be most frequently described as meaningful by practitioners.

But this type of inhumation is, first, often encountered as a terrible threshold. People describe the roughly cut grave as a "gash in the earth," as "raw," a "gaping hole," and as "shocking." One participant described the sound of the first shovel-full of earth on a pine coffin as the "worst sound in the world."[18]

Nevertheless, for many participants, crossing this shocking threshold eventually leads to a welcome sense of "tucking in" the body to the earth.[19] One minister who found much of the event unpleasant described the inhumation as "actually kind of beautiful" and the "high point" of the burial for her. At the invitation of the burial ground manager, participants took pine boughs and cast them onto the casket in the grave:

> There was something about those pine boughs that felt like she was being tucked in. It was gentle. The family was very emotional as they did it. It almost felt like arms holding her. Like it was reclaiming her, this sense of her being tucked in.[20]

Participants tend to stay until the grave is completely filled in again with dirt, with participants often choosing to do some or all of the work themselves. A mother who buried her husband on a "very cold winter day" described how her "kids didn't want to leave until it was all done… we were there for the whole thing…

13. Presentation to visiting group from Colorado College and the author at the funeral pyre, 5 September 2019.

14. One volunteer described participants' reaction: "when [the fire is] huge like that they become incredibly silent, and stare and take it all in… people say it was amazing, comforting, healing, transformative." Author interview with Gussie Fauntleroy, 16 May 2019.

15. While the roar of the fire forms a threshold at which the funeral party must wait before passing through, it is not only a sonic boundary. This intense sonic assertion by the fire coincides with its most spectacular visual and thermic intensity, described by Author interview with Paul Kloppenburg, 20 May 2019.

16. Author interview with Gussie Fauntleroy, 16 May 2019.

17. Advertisement cited in Mark Harris, *Grave Matters : A Journey through the Modern Funeral Industry to a Natural Way of Burial* (New York: Scribner, 2007), Kindle location 595.

18. A priest described a cold-weather natural burial in which the dirt stayed in large clumps that she could not break apart: "And so I dropped it, and said ashes to ashes, and it was like a drum—boom!—on the casket. It was hilarious but I didn't laugh… It made this enormous tympanic noise…I thought 'O my God, I hope this doesn't break through'… [I experienced] anxiety about the coffin being tipped over or being exposed by us throwing clods of dirt on it." Author interview with Robin Cooper, 16 December 2013. The pine boughs that a minister named as "like arms holding" the deceased are beautiful, and are helpful for decomposition, but also used by some to blunt the shock and force of the earth cast on the coffin or shrouded body.

19. This motif sometimes appears before burial. When choosing a burial site in the forest or meadow for later burial ("pre-need") some people bring blankets to lay down and cheerfully "try out" spots where they will be laid down after death.

20. Author interview with Robin Cooper, 16 December 2013. A manager of a woodland burial ground noticed the way people looked for sites at which loved ones could be "nestled" into protected areas: "The smaller glades would shadow over earlier, which might appeal to some people… [P]eople like their loved ones to be buried in the little niches, the little bays and alcoves that have been created by the wavy edge of the woodland. We hadn't anticipated that but again there's just this feeling of comfort and nestling into the wood. Those have been really popular, so we've exaggerated that in the second phase's planting, more than we have done in the first one." Quoted in Hannah Jane Rumble, "'Giving Something Back': A Case Study of Woodland Burial and Human Experience at Barton Glebe." (PhD dissertation, Durham University, 2010), 85, http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/679/.

putting the dirt back on."[21] Suzanne Kelly found a pattern of appreciation for the opportunity to do this work:

> One of the more surprising aspects of these grave-closing experiences for [one conservation burial ground director in Ohio] has been the sheer number of people who've walked up to him afterward to shake his hand in gratitude. "That's the reaction we get," he said. "People actually thank us." [Another grave tender] told me the same. After the grieving father of the nineteen-year-old boy completed the mound... he walked up… and said, "I know this is going to sound really strange, but thank you. This was a pleasure."[22]

In conservation burial grounds, the final act sometimes includes planting indigenous shrubs and trees on the burial mound. Hannah Rumble notes that for natural burial grounds the phrase "rest in peace" has real-world reference as "a sleeping place for the dead located in nature amongst flowers and birds where one can lie in this land forever in a natural woodland setting.[23]

The practice thus can accomplish passage through an intimidating threshold to secure the body, "tuck them in,"—flood proof—while generating a sense of efficacy.

Barren ground and a deeper springtime[24]

Some people visit a woodland burial ground during a bucolic spring or summer day, so when death comes in late fall or winter the barren landscape can for some be so bleak and strongly marked by the imagery of death as to be repellent. Hannah Rumble writes, "a field or newly planted woodland can be extremely barren when exposed by the seasonality of the landscape. For bereaved visitors to these landscapes, it is sometimes too much to bear in their grief and it feels heartless and disrespectful to bury the person they are mourning in a landscape that suggests the deceased has been abandoned or isolated by the living."[25]

However, over time, a different disposition frequently emerges for many: an increasing appreciation for seasons and for the natural cycles of death, decay, and renewal. Mary, describing her husband's grave, reflected on her experience: "I went there last November and it was covered with all these bramble things, and I thought: well, it's not what I wanted! But I think my views are gradually changing so that I can see that the seasons are part of life and death; and they're illustrated at [the burial ground] in a beautiful way."[26] After a premature and difficult death for her son, one woman reflected on the evolution of her own anger and grief over years, describing a tree planted at the grave at the time of burial: "My son was just 22 years. He loved life. I cried and screamed after the funeral that I didn't want to hug a f---ing tree. I felt very angry, still do, but I do like seeing the tree taller now and representing beauty and life and I hope when his daughter, now 6 years old, one day stands beside the thick trunk of this tree, she will receive some pleasure and comfort from touching it."[27] The initially shocking barren landscape can thus become a threshold, with ecological cycles and human conservation efforts synergistically expressing efficacy. Thus, one of the outcomes of burying in a conservation burial ground is that the raw paralyzing grief of the participants is joined to longer natural cycles of transformation: patterns of barrenness and growth and seasons and years, and long-term efforts toward ecological healing and re-wilding. This phenomenon may be especially powerful in the presence of trees that grow larger and over longer periods of time than the more transient humans who are buried among them.

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Conclusion

Climate impacts are frequently represented by apocalyptic images of life-threatening fire, flood, and barren ground—images that have been shown to contribute to a sort of apocalyptic paralysis: high salience, low efficacy. In this paper I have shown that the raw materials behind the apocalyptic iconography of climate change are directly and indirectly engaged by three green funeral practices. While all green funeral practices are, by definition, a ritual theater in which human limits interact with ecological agency, in the three examples of green funeral practices I have explored here, I have shown how practitioners experience themselves passing through little apocalyptic thresholds toward a mortality-chastened but highly salient sense of ecological agency beyond apocalyptic paralysis. These green funeral practitioners ritually encounter eco-apocalyptic terror but also experience (as a supplement to and as part of the threshold structure) beauty and ecological efficacy, in what practitioners describe as a world-orienting practice. Thus,

21. Author interview with Sarah Park, 17 December 2013.
22. Suzanne Kelly, *Greening Death: Reclaiming Burial Practices and Restoring Our Tie to the Earth* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2015), 81.
23. Rumble, "'Giving Something Back,'" 125.
24. Parts of this section build on my paper presented at the 2018 Yale University Liturgy Conference, published as Benjamin M. Stewart, "Wisdom's Buried Treasure: Ecological Cosmology in Funeral Rites," in *Full of Your Glory: Liturgy, Cosmos, Creation*, ed. Teresa Berger (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press Academic, 2019), 353-376.
25. Rumble, "'Giving Something Back,'" 126.
26. Ibid., 136.
27. Quoted in Andrew Clayden and Katie Dixon, "Woodland Burial: Memorial Arboretum versus Natural Native Woodland?" *Mortality* 12, no. 3 (2007): 257, https://doi.org/10.1080/13576270701430700.

among the many communities that are learning to cultivate a post-apocalyptic ecological efficacy, green funeral practitioners represent a promising subject for attention.

Christian liturgical and ecological theologians especially may be interested in these patterns of ritual formation among green funeral practitioners. The ritual experiences they describe are rich in symbols related to baptism—fire, burial, flood, barrenness—yet these symbols have seldom been explored for their significance within baptismal ecotheology. Indeed, much of the scholarship related to the ecologically formative dimensions of baptism has focused on Edenic imagery, the life-giving characteristics of water, and the cosmic scope of baptism in the context of the springtime Easter Vigil.[28] This is the archetype of new birth: the font as womb birthing a new creation. This article has demonstrated that there is also ecological significance and efficacy in that other most prominent image of baptism: the font as tomb, where the baptized are buried with Christ, passing through, in the language of the Johannine Apocalypse, "the great ordeal" on the other side of which they join the hymn of all creation.

Thus, today's green funeral practitioners may function unintentionally as extra-ecclesial proponents of a renewed baptismal ecotheology. Having passed through wrenching ritual encounters with death, they bear witness to the discovery of a deeper sense of ecological efficacy. The significance of baptism in this era of ecological emergency certainly includes the imagery of Eden, life-giving water, cosmic springtime, and new birth. But in the experience of green funeral practitioners we can discern ecological promise also in baptismal images related to mortality: dying and rising with Christ through apocalypses great and small.

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28. On the imagery of baptism as a return to paradise, see Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, "The Portal to Paradise," in *Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love of This World for Crucifixion and Empire* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2008), 115-140; as participation in the new creation, see Robin Margaret Jensen, "Baptism as the Beginning of the New Creation," *Baptismal Imagery in Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Academic, 2012), 177-214; on the life-giving nature of baptismal water, see Linda Gibler, *From the Beginning to Baptism: Scientific and Sacred Stories of Water, Oil, and Fire* (Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 2010); on the cosmic dimensions of baptism at the Easter vigil, see dan Kavanagh, *The Shape of Baptism: The Rite of Christian Initiation*, Studies in the Reformed Rites of the Catholic Church, (New York: Pueblo, 1978) and Gordon Lathrop, "Baptism and the Cosmic Map," in *Holy Ground: A Liturgical Cosmology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 97-124.