"Another View"

Op-Ed essays

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Deluding the Afterlife

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CENTER VALLEY – Richard Dawkins, a master scientist at Oxford University, would have us believe that God is but a grand delusion. A specialist in evolutionary biology, Dawkins’ most recent book seeks “to raise consciousness” by building a natural history on Darwinian laws of complexity and probability; more traditional arguments, like those from cosmology or design, he vilifies as intellectually dishonest.

But, as a New York Times reviewer notes, “Darwinian processes can take you from simple to complex, but they can’t take you from Nothing to Something.” For all our scientific knowledge, human life remains contingent and perishable, and even smart people go on believing. They also go on dying.

The fact of our mortality, even more pointedly than any philosophical speculation, provokes the very question that science cannot answer and for which faith provides a plausible explanation. Religions vary in their understanding of what lies beyond, but for each of them “the end” holds the power to draw adherents to a particular way of life in the here and now.

Today, though, death is losing its sting in ways less cerebral. While the afterlife draws the attention of preachers and pray-ers, morticians and mourners are focusing on new possibilities for after-life.

At their annual convention last month in Philadelphia, members of the National Funeral Directors Association explored a variety of options in their $11 billion-a-year industry. In addition to introducing special-dimension caskets with which to inter heavier clients, trade
representatives marketed other new wares, several of which signal that the end of life need no longer be a hole in the ground or a niche in a wall.

For those who can afford it, LifeGem turns death into a colorful accessory. Through a chemical conversion process, carbon is extracted from cremated remains and made into graphite; then, after exposure to heat and pressure, a DNA diamond is produced. Thus can the dead continue to shine, now more than just metaphorically.

A less expensive option is FloraMorial, which gives the dead an ongoing use. Mixed with other organic ingredients, the ashes of the deceased are engineered to serve as a homegrown fertilizer for plants. Thus can the dead continue to flourish, at least in your garden.

And the Eternal Image company is turning death into devotion for sports fans. Those who henceforth will miss seeing their team play can still be seen, their ashes on display in a container emblazoned with their team’s colors and insignia. Said a spokesman for the funeral association, these and other designer urns seek to preserve “the life and the passion of the person that has passed away.” Thus can the dead continue to be supportive, with official recognition from MLB “as a lifelong fan.” (Whether on account of the convention site or perhaps as a morbid reference to how they perennially play, a Philadelphia Phillies’ urn was the first to be manufactured!)

These funerary novelties seek to give solace to those who wish to keep their deceased loved ones nearby. In jewelry that we wear, in flowers that we grow, or in a place of honor on the mantelpiece, family members or friends who “go on” ahead of us need not be forgotten in their crossing of the great divide.

But these developments also shift our sensibilities from the eternal to the immediate. Investing in them, whether financially or emotionally, risks turning a defining existential event into a secular fad. These and similar trends in cremation preserve those who perish not for their own good but for the posterity of those who are left behind.

Religious rituals, on the other hand, focus attention on the deceased and strive to inculcate a continuing sense of communion with the beloved in a life beyond death, an existence which one day shall beckon us all. In this yearning for the hereafter, the idea of God as a delusion does not square at all with the life and death experiences of the vast majority of people. Thus, to reduce our remains to memorial mementos is to risk trivializing the afterlife, treating it as no more than a mythology to be displaced by technology.

November is the month in which some religions traditionally remember the deceased. Perhaps that is why Pope Benedict XVI recently reminded worldwide visitors that “our ultimate and definitive destination … gives meaning to daily life.” While the “ashes” may or may not turn out to be a more appropriate moniker than “iron pigs” for a Phillies’ franchise, let’s at least hope that being human means more than an eternity as diamonds or dandelions.