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C'è una consolazione per gli estranei? Modellare le identità personali alle spese della memoria collettiva, in prossimità della morte

Is There a Comfort for Strangers? Shaping Personal Identities at the Expense of Collective Memory, in the Proximity of Death

In questo articolo, sostengo che gli ambienti tradizionali che regolano la morte non hanno più usi (sacri) complessi a causa di costanti rivalutazioni consapevoli e personali. La ricca cultura materiale europea, in particolare l'eredità religiosa tradizionale, non può "tenere il passo" con tali oscillazioni interiori implicite da una percezione circostanziale e costantemente negoziata di un'autorità divisa della morte.
La maggior parte degli europei si è "commutata" verso l'interiorità, verso una spiritualità personalizzata per salvare tutto ciò che può essere salvato dalla tradizione: lo spazio fisico statico di una chiesa. La memoria collettiva del passato diventa patrimonio quando non serve più come zona di comfort. Una percezione altamente soggettiva del tempo, dello spazio, della morte e dei morti, della vita e dell'aldilà rende l'impegno di una persona nel supporto reciproco dell'identità e nella memoria collettiva, rendendo molto più difficile il suo essere nel passato.
Forse salutariamente, l'idea stessa di "patrimonio" diventa uno strumento paradossale per l'amnesia collettiva sociale.

In this paper, I argue that traditional environments that regulate death do not have complex (sacred) uses anymore because of constant personal conscious re-evaluations. The rich European material culture, especially traditional religious heritage, cannot "keep up" with such inner swings implied by a circumstantial and constantly negotiated perception of a divided authority of death.
Most Europeans have "commuted" inwards, towards a personalized spirituality in order to save whatever can be saved from tradition: the physical static space of a church. Collective memory of the past becomes heritage when no longer serves as a comfortable zone. A highly subjective perception of time, space, death and the dead, life and the afterlife makes an individual's engagement in mutual identity support and collective memory-making a lot more difficult that it used to be in the past.
Perhaps salutarily, the very idea of "heritage" becomes a paradoxical tool for social collective amnesia.

Parole chiave: sociologia della morte, memoria collettiva, patrimonio, spazi post-laici, spiritualità

Keywords: sociology of death, collective memory, heritage, post-secular spaces, spirituality

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I. A theoretical context and a confession, followed by a hypothesis

The academic field of Death Studies is disturbingly rich and it is getting richer every day. With richness comes ambiguity and with ambiguity comes a very misleading redundancy.

People die pretty much all the time, pretty much everywhere, people grieve all the time and everywhere, people try to avoid danger all the time and everywhere, but when they cannot avoid it anymore, people respond to danger in innumerable ways, according to more and more eclectic cultural norms and personal affinities. A comprehensive research on death attitudes would mean, before anything else, extensive comparative work between various culturally determined death-styles, but also tremendously strong reasoning models, flexible, but yet clear theoretical frameworks and massive interdisciplinary knowledge.

The more complex a society is, the more complex and versatile its death system. Consequently, the more difficult it will be to pursue relevant research. Scientific preferences and methodological tools depend not only on academic priorities, but also on an inherently bureaucratic inertia and discordant agendas of various death industries. For better or for worse, both death professions and death-related research are inseparable from cultural and socio-political climates. What can be reasonably hoped to achieve through thanatologic knowledge is to bridge gaps between theories and practices within precise institutional or interpersonal contexts, in specific social and cultural settings.

All things considered, the "fiercest" way of understanding a society - politically, institutionally, spiritually, economically, aesthetically even - is by trying to make sense of its death system. By thinking and talking death and dying, we talk and think "big": the response to death is a social and cultural affair just as it is an intimate psychological and biological one.

The favoured (functional and aesthetical) *architectural solutions* to circumscribe death spatially, the favoured (dogmatic and non-dogmatic) *spiritual solutions* to cope with death psychologically and behaviourally, and, generally speaking, the most frequent *institutional* and *existential solutions* people develop to their very many life and death problems within a certain cultural space, are all part of the same "arrangement" made of finely interconnected written and unwritten rules, norms and sudden psycho-social twists.

Unlike, perhaps, other research fields within humanities and social sciences, Death Studies have never been "free" studies; there is a lot of institutional and social pressure urging the death scholar to remain efficient and relevant. Precisely because of this urgency, finding pertinent *and* useful links between causes and effects is tremendously difficult. There are always aspects of death that seem to resist all explanation.

From the recent Death Café Movement[1] going way back to the late '60s when Elisabeth Kübler-Ross published her book *On Death and Dying*[2], the debate around grief and human suffering has been recognized publicly as pressing and unavoidable at an interpersonal level.

During all this time, many doors for reflection have been opened. And many have closed. In palliative care[3] and in grief therapies[4] we can even talk about an *institutionalized reflection* of sorts. There is no common framework for approaching death matters and we have all contributed to this "democratization" of reflection on death and dying.

The constant debate often leaves us under the impression that death can be "talked through" successfully. This has been a notorious way of bending death theory to meet death practice that I have addressed in other papers[5]. When death becomes a social challenge among others, asking for social corrections and political interventions whenever death happens sounds like the right thing to do. However, something gets lost on the way. We gladly solve whatever we cannot explain…

Personally, I have realized a couple of years ago that the more I believe in what I write, the less I see the connection to my declared research topic. I was profoundly shaken by my own epistemological bias until I have heard a 78-year-old psychiatrist and theoretician saying that the older he gets, the less he understands his own theories. Existentially speaking, theory tends to slip outside the reach of those who are busy with living. Cynically speaking, intelligibility of theory seems to come precisely from the unintelligibility of death. In this sense, theory is essentially "young" and "optimistic". Growing old also means, among other things, that your theoretical horizons begin to close one by one. What I have learned in more than a decade of fieldwork across Europe is that the aged persons operate a simple, yet effective selection between that which is existentially certain (a sunny day, a beautiful melody, the lack of pain), and that which can be theoretically proven possible. Ultimately, living well in old age

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means *nothing* left to prove. I have thus come to the conclusion that theory may never *truly* meet practice within Death Studies: there are *chronic disciplinary insufficiencies* that make thanatology epistemologically vulnerable and every honest death scholar doubt her own answers. She knows very well that her own research topic does not meet peoples' "true", intimate death-interests.

Also, non-professionals rarely read thanatology. Therefore, at some point in your career, you inevitably realize it is next to impossible to find links between causes and effects and convince other people that your perspective is the "relevant" one. *If there is indeed a way to make death theory and death practice meet, it must be at a personal level.* Ultimately, we are all bound to look for ways *to take theory personally*, to make it *work* for us. If this does not happen, all theories of death become useless.

Of course, death scholars feel very discouraged by such prospects. There is a paralyzing sense of theoretical disappointment paired with an unceasing quest for meaning that I have tried to put to good use instead of disguising it. The paper you are reading right now illustrates this attempt, which is both implausible yet, to me, necessary.

The many death problems we all have can probably be successfully reduced to one (mostly rhetoric) question: *how do we address death, in fact, how do we address threat, vulnerability, suffering and evil in a so-called post-secular society?* A generally reliable answer is unconceivable. All good practitioners in the numerous death fields are reluctant to give answers that go beyond their area of expertise. Of course, there is no agreement over what "evil" or "vulnerability" or "threat" means; or if such problematic notions could indeed be part of the academic inquiry. This understandable prudence does not reduce the frequency with which such "big" questions are carried out by individuals and communities alike.

By overlapping scholarly and lay peoples' "research" agendas, we will get an eclectic mix of "objective" and systematic investigation of death information, of highly subjective family-centred or individual-centred death narratives, and of collectively shared, more or less dominant scripts that often take the form of what Peter Berger once called "theodicies"[6].

When it comes to death and dying, people cannot refrain themselves from producing "total" answers. Not only existential phenomenologists should take this propensity into account, but every death scholar that wants to better understand the approach of death within a group within a community or within society as a whole: *one's moral articulation in response to life-threatening situation plays an important role in community formation.* Engaging "the same moral space of the people they study"[7] is vital to understanding the community and individual's response to traumatic events.

The presupposition of this paper is the following one: by taking one's "religious instincts"[8] seriously we will be forced to address *an inherently moral and spiritual "discernment*" practiced by each person that faces death or dying[9]. As Edith Wyschogrod acknowledged, we need to engage more seriously in theological, ethical and aesthetical interpretations of all things that we cannot see, but we, however, cannot avoid[10], especially today, in a world that has well passed the entry level of secularity. The social and political contexts force us to do so. An increased ontological uncertainty, "man-made" mass death and therefore an ever growing sensitivity towards a violent Other[11] are constantly re-shaping our approach of death, regardless of the degree of perfection attained by institutional, socio-political or medical management of death and dying.

Many have started to find comfort and seek answers to their suffering in little expected places, away from the public debates, away from popular hashtags, away from the roofs of famous community buildings. I argue that such comfort zones are circumscribed by very conscious personal efforts. I also argue that such privileged comfort zones are held *sacred* by the ones that have found shelter in them.

II. Post-secular ways of retaining the sacred

What do we actually mean when we say that a society has post-secular features?

A question as such is hardly legitimate without properly defining secularity, but every reader that has taken the time to go through this text is probably familiar with the hottest issues in sociology of religion, and secularization has been one of these for decades. She is probably well aware of how difficult it is to capture in a paragraph or two the main features of secularity. However, the voices of David Martin, Steve Bruce, José Casanova, Peter Berger, Grace Davie and Charles Taylor are probably the ones that have successfully dominated this long and intricate debate[12].

In a synthetic attempt, Casanova[13] rightly insists on differentiating between three connotations: the decline of religious belief and religious practice (often

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Ricerche e progetti per il territorio, la città e l'architettura
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NUMERO 12 - dicembre 2017

saw as a strictly European process), the privatization of religion, and the emancipation from religious norms and institutions leading to numerous secular spheres. However, the ever-growing expansion of spirituality - "the free exercise of religion"[14] - and the many signs that religion is still politically relevant have all made Casanova courageously write that "an attempt to establish a wall of separation between 'religion' and 'politics' is both unjustified and probably counterproductive for democracy itself."[15] And with this reasoning we may have set foot on post-secular territory.

Was there a tectonic shift[16] or a slow, gradual process? Hard to tell. Maybe both hypotheses are incorrect or unevenly understood. The post-secularity turns out to be just as debatable as secularity once was. Secularity itself has become once more subject of controversy because it is now seen from the "outside", from a post-secular angle. And was the world ever really disenchanted[17], in the first place?

Charles Taylor admits that secular morality, supposedly replacing religious morality, puts the same kind of pressure on contemporary individuals[18]. Habermas[19], at his turn, notes that people are rarely dividing their personal moral convictions into secular and religious before making their contributions to the public sphere. The polyphonic complexity of the world we live in makes space for inward spirituality and lay knowledge alike, for religious, quasi-religious and civil rituals of all kinds which makes it very hard to understand whether the problem of legitimizing one's faith and one's moral principles has indeed led to a secular worldview or simply to a change of focus from public practices of faith to more personalized and expressivist religion[20].

Undoubtedly, for Berger[21], Habermas, Bellah[22], Taylor[23], and even for theologians like John Milbank, post-secularity remains a major scientific, philosophical, theological and political concern. Moreover, Milbank[24], the well-known founder of Radical Orthodoxy movement, often insists on the Christianity's role of "disenchanting" cosmologies and actually *helping* to demarcate various secular spheres: "So whereas historical Christianity has excessively tended to wreck all local 'magic', in such a way as to give rise to an abstractly formal secularity or 'enlightenment' as the only shared human discourse and practice, it might be argued that a genuine Christianity uniquely offers a shared theurgic carapace."[25] Charles Taylor, at his turn, re-enforces the des-enchantment-re-enchantment paradoxical game, writing about the counter-secularization trends that were born precisely from – and in reaction to - the secularization process[26], often by re-interpreting Christian themes in a more emotional key.

Since the aim of this article is not post-secularity *per se*, I will not go into details. I will, however, address what I believe to be of interest for the present paper: *the subjective dynamics of faith*, in more conventional terms, *the individualization of religious (and spiritual) practice.* This seems to be one of the least disputable features of present times.

Re-discovering spirituality *outside* traditional religious spaces is an issue extensively addressed by the above-mentioned scholars, Charles Taylor particularly insisting on the return of the Romantic ideal of authenticity and expressivity, *the authentic modes of being in the world* providing a sense of comfort and of personal relevance[27].

III. *The Comfort of Strangers*

I remember reading a novel, back at the turning of the century, on a hot summer night when everything was easier, mostly because I was very young, but also because it was before 9/11 and no one thought that planes could really crash into skyscrapers. Generally speaking, in the late '90s, most people were not *that* aware of their physical vulnerability.

This is not to say that the threat of violence was, back then, objectively smaller than it is these days. What I am trying to suggest is that, as media people suspected all the way, the human mind is not *that* concerned with facts, our response to reason has been, ever since Descartes times, constantly overrated[28].

We do not respond to reason in the first place, but we wholly respond to whatever endangers homeostasis. Conquering fear, however, is not just some basic "monkey business", but it is directly connected with *the quality* of surviving. As neurologist Antonio Damasio puts it, "The valuations we establish in everyday social and cultural activities have a direct or indirect connection with homeostasis (…) Value relates directly or indirectly to survival. In the case of humans in particular, value also relates to the quality of that survival in the form of well-being."[29] The relation between reason and emotion is tremendously complicated. Damasio shows how we lose sight of the main goal if the frontal lobe is damaged.

Decision-making is directly connected with our ability to experience feelings not with our ability to understand facts. When people have started to fear terrorist attacks, no one of them could discern anymore

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between facts, memes, and emotions. People were simply afraid and felt vulnerable. Mass death makes it difficult to remain open to nuances. Damasio shows that even when fear is *nothing but* false alarm induced by "a culture gone awry"[30], fear still becomes an agent of stress "and stress over time destroys life, mentally and physically."[31]

The threat of death stirs all our basic instincts and irrational patterns of behaviour and imagination. *The less we understand what it happens, the bigger our fear.*

The problem does not look less menacing from a philosophical perspective, because it is hard to make a distinction between justifying and understanding terrorism, which is why, both Habermas and Derrida believe there are three (not at all reassuring) answers when dealing with terror: patience, self-criticism and acknowledged vulnerability[32].

Strictly academically speaking, the 9/11 undeniable chaos has finally made *terror management theory* (TMT) famous. The authors, Tom Pyszczynski, Sheldon Solomon and Jeff Greenberg[33] were strongly influenced by psychoanalysis[34] and, more directly, by Ernest Becker's famous book *The Denial of Death*. They have proved empirically that *mortality salience produces worldview defense*. In other words, people tend to keep things as they were, in order for them to feel safe. The three social psychologists have also shown that raising self-esteem among members of a population *reduces* the worldview defense following a terror situation[35]. According to TMT, *self-esteem is an anxiety buffer.* When people feel better about themselves, they dread less.

Obviously, after 9/11, the Western world did not quite feel well about itself and about its values. In fact, nothing felt quite right. When fear takes over, it matters less if a terrorist group is furiously religious or just furious. When fear takes over, it matters less whether religion is the real cause of terrorism or just an excuse for it[36]. When one believes that religion does not save lives and does not redeem souls, but instead kills lives and takes souls, *traditional religious institutions become ambivalent physical and mental spaces*. To paraphrase Edith Wyschogrod, both terror and violence inhabit precisely the same semantic space[37]. When one believes that religion does not "solve" death problems and does not alleviate suffering, but *brings death* and makes people suffer, one does not want to get anywhere near religion. Therefore a new "religion" seems to emerge from the recent common experiences of terror: a *religion of dis-engagement. People feel a pressing moral obligation to refrain from religious commitment, and tell others to do the same, in the name of peace*. Religious commitment is perceived as suspicious and dangerous. Substantive, traditional religion is perceived as either completely useless or extremely menacing. A psychological ambivalence is unavoidable in this case; assessing a social danger has never been easy anyway[38]. *When violent (mass) death is more and more visible in the media and becomes part of the social experience for more and more city people, all decent communication breaks.* The psychological, social comfort itself breaks easily and it is tremendously difficult to restore. The response to stress after 9/11 was significant. Admission to rehabs (for drug and alcohol abuse and gambling) increased all over the United States from 10 % to 12 %, and prescriptions for sleeping pills were increased with 25% in the very dark and chaotic days following September 11[39].

The reader probably guessed from the title of this chapter what novel I was reading that summer night, before 9/11. Indeed, it was Ian McEwan's popular book *The Comfort of Strangers*. The action took place in an unnamed (probably Italian) city, presumably Venice. Two British lovers - like most vacationing lovers enjoying an Italian summer - become lightheaded, blind to all seriousness in the world, puerile, ridiculous even. Their social intelligence is temporarily shut down. Eventually, one of them gets killed and the other one gets severely injured, as they meet a local sadistic couple that enjoyed playing dangerous games.

I must confess I did not enjoy the novel. There was only one thing that I truly liked about it, something that stuck with me over the years: the title, the very idea of feeling comfortable as a tourist and as a stranger. From time to time, I think about the choice of words "*The Comfort of Strangers"* and I am endlessly surprised to always find new meanings in it.

Over the latest couple of years, I kept going back to the San Francisco Bay Area only to realize that video surveillance has become ubiquitous and that an increased number of armed police officers were to be seen on the main boulevards. In Europe, the situation is not much different[40]. More and more video cameras and trained people are watching over us, protecting us not only from the "usual suspects", but also from something far more menacing: the "sea of chaos"[41] which is often seen by psychotherapists as the true enemy of every individual struggling to control anxiety[42]. Every stranger could be a stalker. In a huge

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NUMERO 12 - dicembre 2017

city anything can happen to you. Coping with so many potential threats is impossible, therefore, in the terms of the TMT, your self-worth gets damaged and needs repair, but will you really be able to fix it in difficult, unpredictable times?
We are constantly looking to escape from *real and imagined threats*. The obsession with *safety* caused by extreme stress has deep consequences in every area of human life, from public and environmental policies to potentially embarrassing personal situation of having to "protect" your children from next-door strangers[43].
When an architect designs a space for living, she wants to bring some kind of physical and spiritual comfort to its future inhabitants. One does not design living spaces for people to feel vulnerable in. Wellbeing, security and safety are aesthetical and functional priorities when designing individual spaces and community spaces. *As pretentiously as it may sound, every architect is urged to address the problem of human frailty*.

IV. The unbearable heaviness of being vulnerable

It is not death that scares people in the first place, but vulnerability. Nothing is closer to chaos than vulnerability. *When you are vulnerable, you are a stranger* wondering in a sea of confusion and chaos. And this may be the definition of vulnerability: *a stranger in discomfort*.
When one is ill or when one is grieving and there is no one to turn to, one's self-integrity is compromised. Of course, this means many things that I do not intend to discuss in this paper. I will only mention the "spiritual distress" that one feels when extreme vulnerability becomes overwhelming. Doubt and resentment towards the world and transcendence and other dominant feelings of spiritual turmoil can be reported, measured and quantified[44]: dissatisfaction with fellowship and with religious and spiritual practices (if there are any) is notoriously mentioned in grief therapies studies.
The more severe the suffering, the more one needs a truly "supportive" roof over one's head, a sacred canopy[45] maybe, a friend, a landscape, a community that understands. Does one need all of the above at the same time or will one of them be enough? What is it that will make a particular individual feel less vulnerable? What can possibly boost one's self-esteem and make one less afraid, a little further from death?
Charles Taylor would probably note that within a culture of authenticity, given the wide range of affinities and the wide space of choice, no reasonable answer could be given. Every one feels the pressure to *not* surrender to conformity[46] and everyone resists the mainstream flow in her own way. Of course, both the personal resources and the social tools are limited. There might even be a *clash* between what one really needs and what a society can offer or impose on people.
In the last decade *the existential meaning-making framework* has been seriously reconsidered not only in grief therapies (in constructivist therapy in particular and in health psychology in general[47]), but also in Religious Studies[48].
Living in an individualized post-secular society also means *that conscious personal evaluation of spiritual affinities is not only possible, but mandatory*[49]. Meaning-making is not optional, it is a duty[50]. The social and existential construction of personal and group identities is actually the "deadly" serious task we all need to get done. As we are all "works in progress", we have complete responsibility for the provisional as well as for the final results of our self-projects. But success does not come easily, especially when one is in severe distress after losing a dear one. However, the task is non-negotiable: meaning-making is *something one has to do in order* ***to sustain loss***.
And this is *not merely a personal, but a very complex interpersonal process* involving permanent daily negotiations, re-crafting of values, of self-identities and of group-identities in specific social contexts[51]. In other words, *one needs to constantly set reasonable, group-approved limits to one's authentic impulses*. Sometimes, when the institutional regulations and norms are found insufficient, contradictory or unsatisfying, one *has* to go against the tide and bring personal improvements, finding those "biographical solutions to systemic contradictions"[52] which often puts one in a delicate position in relation to the rest of the group.
The bottom line is that (1) *one is responsible for circumscribing one's comfort zones* and (2) *one's comfort is not optional*. One needs to tear down the old walls, build new ones, bring personal improvements to insufficient institutional regulations and even design *a new sacred roof* if one would only know how.
Antonio Damasio reminds us that "sociocultural homeostasis" works together with the basic homeostasis: *seeking well-being and maintaining one's value system is, at the end of the day, a matter of sophisticated, typically human neurophysiology*[53].
No effort is therefore too great, because in very

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serious matters of life and death, *whatever is found "unacceptable" is actually perceived as threatening*, going deeper into the very foundation of one's scheme of things, of whatever one may hold as sacred or worthy of dedication[54].

V. The sacred matters

What I hold sacred may not be what you hold sacred. Religious Studies have constantly addressed this more and more pressing problem of circumscribing the sacred that is *not* traditionally "contained" within the limits of a certain substantial religion. The sacred can be found outside cathedrals and mosques, in civil religions, public rituals of all kinds, spiritual encounters and everyday human relationships. Most Westerners may have given up official religious commitment, but Westerners talk about spiritual experiences all the time. People got rid of *substantial religion*, but people could not get rid of the *functional sacred*.

It has become harder and harder to bring into theoretical discussion the "dedicated" sacred spaces because most sociologists of religion[55] agree that every space can be sacred if one has a strong, "empowering" relationship with it[56]. It is then all the more important to recognize that *designing, handling, circumscribing and maintaining the sacred in contemporary urban culture*[57] *is theoretically and existentially urgent*. It is therefore assumed that the sacred *could* have a true *spiritual* role in the life of communities, apart from its obvious *cultural* role, but it is virtually impossible to demarcate clearly between the two.

Now it is the right time to note that the problem of the sacred is directly connected to the awareness of death. I have written a lot about this in the previous years[58]: although you can find sacred opportunities all over the place, witnessing the actual death of the Other makes you dread[59]. Watching someone dying is not simply scary, it is *mysterious*. The incomprehensibility of terror was greatly addressed by Edith Wyschogrod[60], however, the incomprehensibility of the sacred emerging from a life-less body borders on awe. We are put in touch with something exceptional, considered to be, in every sense, beyond ourselves[61], it is, in Levinas' terms, a true encounter with the untouchable[62]. Because of an inherent normativity of a sacred order and because of the absolute urgency of all death-related matters, "toying" with personal death meanings is hardly an option. *One needs reliability.* One does not play with the death-related sacred, just as one does not play with fire.

Thus we find ourselves under the social, existential, cultural and psychological constraint of addressing the "value" and the "quality" of our (or anyone's) personal sacred journey, especially when death is inevitable or already occurred. Knowing from the sociology of religion that consensus is what actually backs-up our beliefs, we cannot refrain ourselves from *questioning the reliability of every bunch of custom-made death meanings*.

The very difficult question that needs to be asked is whether we are still able to find the normative standards we need for justifying, improving and even sharing with others our grieving way. *Our personal standards of hope still need to be shared because without consensus there is no self-esteem and if there is no self-esteem we cannot sustain loss*. And how do we tell others about the sacred shelter we have just found?

VI. Back to black

How do we sustain loss in a post-secular society, anyway? We know the standard answer: meaning-making and personal choices. But if we read reliable books on sociology of death[63] written by reliable thanatologists with reliable theoretical and empirical experience, we realize that people are rather reluctant to give up well-established death practices and incorporate something new. Tony Walter insightfully writes about *a divided authority* over death, dying and grieving issues in Western societies: "(…) dying, disposing and grieving according to personal choice, picking and choosing from tradition rather than being dictated by it, is indeed possible, but not without *encouragement, negotiation* and *legitimation*." [64]

In short, there may be a critical point where individualism *meets* but also *collides* with community[65]. It is hard *to ensure* a successful trajectory for a subjective pattern that wants to force its way out within *the objectifying limits* of a public horizon. Once the subjective pattern breaks through the shared social reality, it also enters *a ratification process for becoming a part of the collective memory* and producing some sense of social capital. If something goes wrong in this process of (strictly horizontal) sharing, people can no longer sustain loss.

However, divided authority (religion/tradition, medicine/science and the Self) over death issues often means no real authority, but a *little purposeful gliding from one mildly authoritative area to another*.

As the *authoritative language of religion* has weakened, preparing the soul for some big journey does not

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sound right to most contemporary grieving persons. What is left however, it is a habitual performance, a somewhat Durkheimian sense of conventional connectedness, noticeable in most traditional funeral rites throughout the Western world. Within a changing socio-cultural context, *the authority of expertise* has notoriously replaced religion[66] by offering a promise of never-ending life. Medical science, however, appears a lot more shaken today than ten years ago.

First discreetly, but later more and more openly, the *authority of the Self* has become more visible. Tony Walter wonderfully explains what it means to freestyle your death with little authority and little knowledge[67]. When both doctors and Gods have failed to meet one's expectations, one *has* to arrange some answers for one's self. Empty silence rooms and multi-faith rooms[68] become filled with personal meanings. One works with what one has: *one's sacred claims*. Paraphrasing Charles Taylor[69], today's spiritual meaning-makers are not very concerned with how their spiritual experiences affect society, consensus in general or the existing religious agendas. One simply tries to be "unhooked" from collective demands and pressures of all kinds without caring too much for "the big spiritual picture".

However, the case of a grieving fuzzy believer[70] remains a very complex one. We know very well from Grace Davie[71] that believing without officially belonging to a religion is, for at least two decades, the European "norm". Europe is indeed filled with fuzzy believers whose "faith" is impossible to assess or use in cross-comparisons.

Where should a grieving fuzzy believer look for comfort? In a multi-faith room that does not display symbols of any particular religion? Or should she enter a couple of centuries-old Catholic cathedral? Or should she be able to find some sacred meanings in both?

Are some places and deathscapes[72] better than others when it comes to bringing comfort to the grieving person? No one can answer such questions. Not even *I* know beforehand what is right for myself. In the meantime, religion "still speaks"[73] to me, but not on the official channels. I might enter a church on a Saturday evening, not on a Sunday morning. *Does that make me a…stranger?*

If I am *not* committed to a traditional, ritual-based way of grieving, whenever I deal with such sorrow I must try to mobilize every spiritual resource I might find within myself. When I count only on the experiential dimension of belief, I can become a believer simply because *anything spiritually* can happen to me as long as I am *on an open spiritual ground*. Anything can happen to me *except from convincing my child* that I have finally found the right solution to the right problem. Anything except from *convincing my Catholic grandmother* that it is all right to go to church on Saturday evenings instead of Sunday mornings. What do all these mean?

It means that the memory chain[74] breaks for no perceptible reasons. It also means that, *in spite of my spiritual openness, I cannot "secure" the sacred relevance of my present habit*.

Paul Ricœur[75] uses Husserl's theory of the Other[76] (the concept of "pairing") to analyze the transfer of the sense of selfhood from one person to another. An *associative chain* is formed, as Leichter writes[77], guided and propelled by an *affective* force: numerous egos will be brought together in associative chains that extend across time, eventually delimiting what Leichter called "a historical field of experience"[78].

This is the field that makes religion possible, Danièle Hervieu-Léger[79] thinks. Hervieu-Léger re-explains what we knew from Durkheim: we can only speak about religion *as long as we can speak about collective memory*. Religion is, rigorously speaking, a chain of memories: that "deadly serious stuff" we transmit from generation to generation because we keep on believing it is relevant to everybody. Through temporal distance, religion might even get stronger because new connections and meaningful possibilities are emphasized with every generation.

But something in the identity of the community gets distorted when that community lacks *credible common reference points*. This is often called *de-institutionalization of faith* which affects the believer in two ways: either forcing her to freestyle and feel responsible for the impact of her chosen way of improvising faith, or, as Bauman noted, using faith as an ephemeral currency[80] for whatever she wants to affectively relate to (an electronics brand, a piece of clothing, a person, a pop song). Either way, *being religiously "unhooked" means being unable to actually invest in the durability of one's spiritual habit*.

One may bring as a counterargument an obvious contemporary tendency to rely on public mourning and memorialization. Yet, "remembering and not forgetting" has become a cliché that can hardly be considered a *social* evidence of continuity. We are facing a very discernable lack of *symbolic investment* in such "contagious mourning". This particular lack could be part of a more general lack of trust in

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communal values, in institutions, in public (especially political) figures, in "truth"-holders of all kinds, in aesthetic codes and in one's own ability to recognize complex (and fixed) sacred orders for what they are or pretend to be. In fact, I think *that the sacred attributes are granted or refused on conjectural, often confusing, always rudimentary and mostly irrational premises*.

In this sense, *an empty multi-faith room is never completely empty.* It becomes an active statement of non-commitment that may even increase discomfort for some "lazy" meaning-makers.

The lack of trust in the possibility of *spatially grasping* some *durable* meanings and practices and, for that matter, the loss *not of spiritual ground*, but of *religious continuity* is obvious in contemporary Europe. In spite of taking up so much physical and cultural space[81], European religious institutions have remained physically and symbolically *static*. As Davie showed, such static institutions inherently have *compatibility problems* with a modern speed-oriented urban life and with ever-changing existential meanings.

In her seductive book about repetition, memory and identity, Catherine Pickstock writes that a cathedral is made of "stones, beliefs, rituals, and historical survival."[82].

However, the moment a beautiful church is seen as "heritage", it no longer plays by the inner rules of collective life that implies permanent mutual reinforcement of ties and values. It becomes *a non-working device* of sorts. Non-working, indeed, but nevertheless benign. A "good European" likes to see a traditional place of grief properly maintained not because one has a personal connection with it, but because this is how one negotiates terms with one's history in a post-secular, civilized, yet menacing world. *Corporeality may remain intact, the boundaries are intact, but the very sense of repetition is no longer considered relevant or secure.* If the space is old and beautiful enough, it may be full of visitors from all over the world, but it is hardly a space for creatures of strong habits.

Actually, the very idea of "heritage" becomes a paradoxical tool for a (salutary?) social collective amnesia: you do not have an ongoing attachment to those institutions, you broke the connection, but you have "commuted" inwards, towards a personalized spirituality in order to save whatever can be saved from tradition: the physical static space of a church. *Collective memory of the past becomes heritage when no longer serves as a comfortable zone*.

This breakage of memory chain will eventually reverberate on the production, on the processing and on the long-term maintenance of "comfortable" and largely sharable death meanings. However, even if we are reluctant to accept church authority, we *do* maintain horizontal sacred ties *because we still have to sustain loss somehow*. We end up doing it at very high psychological costs because we lack a reliable and extensive know-how.

Are we all strangers then?

VIII. Conclusions

Most European countries are uncomfortably stuck between three major death trends: traditional (religious), secular (expert-oriented) and post-secular (self-oriented). At times, depending on particular contexts, *at least one* of the three (if not all of them at once as it is happening now in Romania[83]) is perceived as unconvincing. This may have led to conflicting versions of grieving and coping with dying that have inherently created unstable comfort zones and completely unpredictable and non-purposive swings from meaningful to meaningless personal versions of death and bereavement.

The rich European material culture cannot "keep up" with such inner swings. It may therefore be important to build empty rooms for strangers, for seekers of comfort. These multi-faith rooms (of empty rooms of silence) may indeed become privileged sacred comfort zones. Or they may not.

If today we are able to identify new privileged sacred "comfort zones" for the dying and for those who grieve, such comfort zones are not primarily dependent upon purposefully designed landscapes and institutions. Of course, this is not to imply that traditional environments that regulate death do not or cannot have complex (sacred) uses, but that the personal conscious re-evaluations of death ways and, consequently, of all 'deathscapes' are more visible today than, say, ten years ago, and that they follow two categories of rules: (1) *inner rules* that are too complex and too intimate to be circumscribed and assessed, and (2) global, mainstream rules concerns with ecology, green spaces, personal meaning-making, self-reflective practices etc. The local institutional arrangements that officially regulate the material death culture and the usual death problems are often by-passed.

This is not without profound consequences: a highly subjective perception of time, space, death and the dead, life and the afterlife makes the individual's engagement in mutual identity support and collective

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memory-making a lot more difficult that it used to be in the past. We have all become partially amnesic, that is, to a certain extent, strangers to ourselves. We feel this is the only way we can preserve our right to look for some comfort.

Notes

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