

# On Personal Ways of Dying: New Troubles, Old Means

ADELA TOPLEAN

*Adela Toplean is presently studying the connections between various forms of loneliness and the aged people's personal ways of coping with their mortal destiny, from a socio-anthropological perspective. She has published a book about the symbolic divergences between our modern dying manners and our religious resources: Pragul și neantul. Încercări de circumscriere a morții (The Threshold and the Void. Attempts to Circumscribe Death) (Iași: Polirom, 2006), 303p. The book won the «I. P. Couliano» prize for the best debut, awarded by the Romanian Publishing House «Polirom». It will soon be available in German translation.*

The present article<sup>1</sup> exposes a small fragment from a bigger fragment; in other words, it is part of a study-in-progress. Its aim is to highlight a number of significant connections between the feeling of loneliness and the personal ways of negotiating the meanings of death in modernity. I believe that, in the process of aging, the awareness of a nearer death may constrain modern people to rely more on the weak, fragmented or broken religious symbolic resources to be found at their hand. However, in the following pages I will only expose a number of *principle problems* in connection with the above premise.

## The Private Ways: a Prelude and a Distinction

As we all know, death, dying and illness have become taboo topics in modernity. They are approached somehow secretly and they are kept away from the public scene. The irrelevance of death in the public contexts and its inherent visibility in private contexts led to a word string: «subjective death».<sup>2</sup> All researchers who attempted to approach modern death could notice<sup>3</sup>

its increasingly private features. In all brevity, I will stress a nuance that could prove its utility later on: I would assume that, *in today's context, privatizing death does not necessarily refer to closing the funeral and the related experiences within the four walls and transforming them in primarily intimate occurrences.* This could be a

<sup>2</sup> Especially Philip Mellor, «Death in High Modernity: the Contemporary Presence and Absence of Death», 11–30, and Janet Finch, Lorraine Wallis, «Death, Inheritance and the Life Course», 50–68 in *The Sociology of Death* (ed. David Clark; Oxford: Blackwell, 1993). See also Jean-Hugues Déchaux, «La mort dans les sociétés modernes: la thèse de Norbert Elias à l'épreuve», 161–183 in *L'année sociologique — Études* 51:1 (2001), 161.

<sup>3</sup> As background readings, see Göran Gustafsson, *När det sociala kapitalet växlas in. Om begravningar och deltagandet i begravningar*. Lund Studies Sociology of Religion 4 (Lund: Lund University, 2003), Göran Gustafsson, *Tro, samfund och samhälle. Sociologiska perspektiv* (Örebro: Libris, 1997), especially the chapter «Individualiserad religiositet». The Romanian side: Otilia Hedeșan, *Folclorul. Ce facem cu el?* (Timișoara: Editura de Vest, 2001) contains a rich account on subjective views on dying rituals in Transylvania. See also two classical references: Gail Kligman, *Nunta mortului. Ritual, poetică și cultură populară în Transilvania* (Iași: Polirom, 1998), and Simion F. Marian, *Înmormântarea la români* (Bucharest: Grai și suflet, 1995). See also my own book, *Adela Toplean, Pragul și neantul. Încercări de circumscriere a morții* (Iași: Polirom, 2006).

<sup>1</sup> I am very grateful to Per Månsson who corrected my English, and to Jesper Svartvik who patiently eliminated the editing mistakes. My deep gratitude also goes to Anna and Curt, who read this article beforehand and made priceless suggestions.

case; but not the only one. I would rather consider that a «private way of dying» basically refers to the disconnections — in form and/or meaning and/or location and/or regulations — with the traditional, presumably public and presumably agreed-upon ways of dying and bereavement. Perhaps the most recent and tangible example sustaining the above remark is to be found in a text issued by the Lutheran bishops in Sweden: «användningen av ‹funeral homes› och andra privata lokaler och platser riskerar att förstärka en tendens till privatisering av begravningsgudstjänster och ökar dessutom begravningskostnaderna för dem som tillhör Svenska kyrkan».<sup>4</sup>

To my guess, «private/subjective death» is on its way of becoming an ambiguous concept, seldom if ever connoting the same thing; for instance, one could call «private» a public traditional funeral held in a church of a small Swedish town, with 20 attendants that «have no clue what to do next, just waiting for the guy to tell us» (a young Swedish woman talking about the funeral of her grandfather). Taking into account the above reasons and keeping in mind the yet-to-come ones, I would sustain that removing death from the public space mainly refers to *reducing its public relevance* and blocking the access to any kind of *shared knowledge* that could make the experience of dying *more meaningful for the community* as a whole. However, none of these statements can justify a fair connection between loneliness and dying, or a fair disconnection between traditional death and modern death. More theoretic observations have to be taken into account.

## From Absence to Truism, from Truism to Loneliness

In fact, it is not easy to link appropriately the absence of death at the public level to its terrifying presence at the individual level. From a scientific point of view, it is even harder to relate appropriately loneliness to dying. As we know, loneliness is considered to be the most prevalent

emotional state of modern man. If Norbert Elias<sup>5</sup> was the first to explicitly write about the inherent loneliness of the dying persons, or if the connection has been considered by the scholars ever since the «excommunication» of death from the public space has become an obvious social (and theoretical) fact, it is neither an easy nor, I believe, an essential question. Today, many researchers think that Elias's conclusions have been excessively dramatic. The French sociologist Jean-Hugues Déchaux is among those doubting the relevance of the word «loneliness». In his mentioned article as well as in «Comment les familles entourent leur morts»,<sup>6</sup> he insists that the term «loneliness» should be replaced with a more flattering one: «subjectivity». Clive Seale's study «Dying Alone»,<sup>7</sup> based on the accounts of 149 relatives of people who died with no company, also seems to display an acceptable conclusion: the speakers make considerable efforts to sustain the ideal of a caring community. However, the «professional management of love»<sup>8</sup> providing well-trained specialists in the arts of accompaniment within hospitals and hospices invites us to pay a consistent attention to many valuable uses of what Déchaux calls «the new kind of agreements» between individuals,<sup>9</sup> perhaps, the French sociologist notes, new affinities and new accords based on the premises of our modern society could, to a certain degree, reinvent the classic concept of *la bonne mort*.

However, it is more reasonable to say that the interrelation between loneliness and dying has probably reached us through various, innumerable ways<sup>10</sup> suggested or exposed by an extremely rich literature. In the last fifty years,<sup>11</sup> the bibliography on death and dying has constantly grown. Moreover, the last twenty years

<sup>5</sup> Norbert Elias, *La solitude des mourants* (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1998).

<sup>6</sup> Jean-Hugues Déchaux, Michel Hanus, Jesu Frédéric, « Comment les familles entourent leurs morts », 81–102 in *Esprit* 247 (1998), 81.

<sup>7</sup> Clive Seale, «Dying Alone», 376–392 in *Sociology of Health and Illness* 17:3 (1995), 376.

<sup>8</sup> Seale, 377.

<sup>9</sup> Déchaux, « La mort dans ... », 171.

<sup>4</sup> *Begravningen — ett brev från Svenska kyrkans biskopar* (Uppsala: Svenska Kyrkan, 2006), 28.

have brought something discouraging for a newcomer: the very reasonable conviction that the decisive statements on death and dying, once innovatory and devastating, have become commonsensical truths;<sup>12</sup> they have been crystalized and refined, they have been enforced with thousands of case-studies, they have been commented upon with excellence, mediocrity, ambition, easiness or fervor. Using a metaphor, one could say that these days we have access to an updated and revised «edition» of death. Therefore, a new study that does not bring enough distinct and fresh data will be condemned to display the same predictable, general truths; and so these truths are meant to remind us — researchers and readers alike — that death is the most offensive, yet crucial platitude we have to deal with.

On the other hand, regardless of the manner in which we organize our attempt of studying death or dying experiences, it seems unlikely that we achieve a new «intuition». One can easily notice numerous paths leading to the same Rome: for instance, we may be scientifically concerned with the decreasing role of collective rites in modern society; or we may formulate our research question in relation to the degree of professionalization among the staff taking care

of terminally-ill patients within a certain hospital; in both cases, our conclusions will have to mention the fact that death has become a primarily *personal* responsibility; and thus, as Zygmunt Bauman wrote, we are all aware of the fact that «death is now the thoroughly private ending of that thoroughly private affair called life».<sup>13</sup>

These undeniable and largely recognized truths about death that have been formulated ever since the early 50's have also led to an atmosphere of relative accord in this academic field. We owe these very comforting interpreting keys to: a) the fact that the problem of death is a very «rigid» matter hardly validating a new interpretation and almost never entirely leaving an earlier explanatory pattern;<sup>14</sup> and b) the specificity of our modern society that, even though encompassing many existential modalities, still has an over-simplified manner of dealing with death: by negation, avoidance and «other life strategies» to quote Bauman and to paraphrase Giddens's and Mellor's fashion of looking at this relationship.<sup>15</sup>

The majority of today's studies on death are concerned with the *concrete consequences of the absence of death in the public space*: for instance, with the efficiency provided by death professionals who silently and carefully deal with these impending and unpleasant situations, or with the new «regulations» for a private bereavement, or with remedy methods to recover, socially and psychologically, the individuals after suffering a loss etc. As long as these concrete consequences prompt perfectly conceiv-

<sup>10</sup> Or directly from the classic works on death and dying: see Phillipe Ariès, *Essais sur l'histoire de la mort en Occident au moyen âge à nos jours* (Paris: Seuil, 1975) and *L'homme devant la mort* (Paris: Seuil, 1977), Michel Vovelle, *La mort en Occident de 1300 à nos jours* (Paris: Gallimard, 1983), Louis-Vincent Thomas, *L'anthropologie de la mort* (Paris: Payot, 1975) and *Les rites de mort. Pour la paix des vivants* (Paris: Fayard, 1985).

<sup>11</sup> During the 50s, the pioneer Herman Feifel has started for the first time a systematic approach of death; see Herman Feifel, *The Meaning of Death* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1959). See also the comprehensive handbook Lewis R. Aiken (ed.), *Dying, Death and Bereavement* (Mahwah, London: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2001).

<sup>12</sup> Examples: the well-known professionalization of death, the already mentioned removal of death from the public space, the «taboo-character» of modern death, the decreasing relevance of the funeral rites, etc. See for further details Thomas, *L'Anthropologie de la mort*, especially 65.

<sup>13</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Mortality, Immortality and Other Life Strategies* (Oxford: Polity, 1992), 130.

<sup>14</sup> Ariès was among the first to notice the «inertia» of the death representations. See *L'homme devant la mort*, in Romanian translation (Bucharest: Meridiane, I, 1996), 66. See also Georges Minois, *L'histoire de l'athéisme* (Paris: Fayard, 1998), especially 79, and Henri I. Marrou, *Théologie de l'histoire* (Paris: Seuil, 1968), in Romanian translation (Iași: Institutul European, 1995), 169.

<sup>15</sup> Mellor, 11–30, and Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 1990).

able solutions,<sup>16</sup> they will also be treated as convincing research problems.

Zygmunt Bauman's interesting book on death is however constructed on totally different premises. He assumes that our modern cultural solutions «are sediments of the processes which have been set in motion by the fact of human mortality and motivated by the need to cope with the issues that fact posits; as well as by the parallel need to repress the awareness of the true motives of such arrangements».<sup>17</sup> In shorter words, our institutions are built as fortresses against death and our life strategies are «elaborate subterfuges»<sup>18</sup> that help us to forget our mortal destiny. Therefore, it is *the sequestration of death* in modernity that Bauman, unlike most of the authoritative studies, does not take for granted.

Even though the *concrete social consequences* of death's removal from the public space receive the required attention from both media and researchers, Bauman denounces it as being nothing but a living trick meant, once again, to conceal our fear of dealing with death. As for me, I would rather «denounce» modernity's obsession with social problems, regardless of their form, their content and the legitimacy of their label. It is your duty as a citizen and as a researcher to respond through your work to the latest social concerns of the world you live in;<sup>19</sup> it is, again, your duty to provide useful solutions for maintaining the successful project of modernity and thus feeling entitled to receive the required funds for cultivating your research interest. All these inherent duties will inherently lead to an amplified devotion towards punctual, «current» consequences, and to a deliberate neglect of the perennial and «context-free» problems. Bauman's approach is, I believe, an

attempt to go beyond the punctual troubles we have with today's death and dying. His originality consists in *looking for less obvious «hiding places» of death*, considering them as being problematic and mentioning them among the symptoms of a culture that suppresses its «mortality connections»<sup>20</sup> as approved and extensively practiced life strategies.

I also ought to mention that the tendency to conceal death through different life strategies is not exclusively specific to our society. At the middle of the twentieth century, in *Le Mythe de l'éternel retour*,<sup>21</sup> Eliade provided a thesis that has become classic among anthropologists and historians of religion: the necessity of *repetition*, the re-creation of the world, periodically, with the desire to perpetuate life *ad infinitum*. We already know that this is a common feature of archaic rituals, so I have tried to demonstrate in a chapter of my book<sup>22</sup> that it was also one of the first archaic «life strategies». But our modern life tricks are «better» structured. In his obsessive search for the most subtle forms of power in modernity, Baudrillard has shown that our strategies, unlike those available in traditional societies, are «controlled by a very different system of representations»; that is, by the machine and the function.<sup>23</sup> It is not difficult to notice that they could provide even more qualified tools for

<sup>19</sup> Two relevant examples: one of them is the historian of religion Mircea Eliade; he wrote more than fifty years ago that «today we are dominated by the social problem (...) You must, therefore, respond through your work, in one way or another, to the historical moment in which you live.», in Mircea Eliade, *Journal I* (Chicago/ London: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 61. The other example is the late Professor Roy Rappaport; he referred to anthropology as being a very ambitious intellectual project that could re-animate (post)modernity by setting new rituals and «a new Logos grounded in the concept of ecosystem», in Roy Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999), 460.

<sup>20</sup> Bauman, 9.

<sup>21</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Le Mythe de l'éternel retour* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949).

<sup>22</sup> Toplean, 47–158. See also the chapter «Intervals, eternity and communitas» in Rappaport, 217–236, especially 230–233.

<sup>16</sup> An example: our being primarily concerned with the caretakers' behaviour in the hospices and not with the experiences of the dying patients. See the remark of Allan Kellehear, *Dying of Cancer: The Final Year of Life* (London: Harwood, 1990) as mentioned by Jane Littlewood, «The Denial of Death and Rites of Passage in Contemporary Societies», in *The Sociology of Death*, 73.

<sup>17</sup> Bauman, 8.

<sup>18</sup> Bauman, 14.

successfully transforming life into an objective afterlife<sup>24</sup> and, thus, impending death from reaching an alarming degree of awareness; the benefits of science and medicine leading to low infant mortality rate, health and longevity, profitable economic structures leading to welfare and a relatively care-free citizen, proliferation of the show-business industry encouraging entertainment, the cult for spare time and eternal youth, and the professionalization of death itself leading to qualified personnel in funeral houses, hospitals and hospices — they all directly and indirectly contribute to keeping the public solutions for death and dying unavailable; it is up to each of us, as human beings, to fight, solve and finally surrender to our mortal destiny; and to each of us, as researchers, to accept the following paradox: we research death, but we take for granted its absence.

## A Religious Grounding. Why?

When approaching death, the religious aspects cannot be neglected. All religious gestures could be seen as — theological, literary, social, historical or psychological — languages; and each *explicit cultic act* is organically connected to the *implicitness of the religious phenomenon*<sup>25</sup> and, consequently, to the *implicitness of «organizing» our own death*. The consequence I have just mentioned may look abusive. I will therefore make an attempt to explain the theoretical benefit of placing the problem of death within a religious framing.

As we all know, the area of human and social sciences has been decisively reshaped throughout the last forty-fifty years. The majority of contradictions between the «hard» sciences and

the «soft» sciences, apparently impossible to be solved, have been surpassed, quieted down or successfully blacked out. Anthropology of religion, history of religion, psychology of religion, and sociology of religion make no exceptions to this rule. We could hardly speak today about a «specificity» of religious sciences. They have «nothing special» to singularize them among the human sciences studying profane matters, and when the problem of «sacred» still stands, we always refer to its dispersed forms. Still, as I could recently see in one of Demerath's studies,<sup>26</sup> the attempts of circumscribing indefinite, composite forms of sacred may lead to great methodological trouble. All in all, *the implicitness of religion* indicated above surely exists, but its explicit theoretical covering is more approximate and more fragile than ever. Any religious modification — in representations, in rites, in doctrines — is treated as a *symptom* of a certain psychological or social mutation; therefore, in a subtle, but meaningful way, one may notice that «pure» theology loses the field to a more or less explicit sociology of religion. The theoretical approach of a certain religious paradigm does not appeal to any kind of «truth» that it might carry, and even less to the «irreducibility of sacred phenomena», totally indispensable to Rudolf Otto, always important to Étienne Gilson. The apologetic times are, of course, gone for at least half a century. Religion, as a research object, does not rejoice anymore in the privilege of irreducibility — neither at the procedures level, nor at the epistemological level. Religion is, just like any other product of society, a cultural product; that is, again, a *language*. And what is organized as a social, literary, psychological, historical language would instantly lose its aspirations to an irreducible «reality», but would definitively gain the right of being studied with the tools found at humanist's hand.

<sup>23</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (London: Sage, 1993), 159.

<sup>24</sup> Baudrillard, 144.

<sup>25</sup> Such implicitness of religion *does* exist, in spite of the blurred scientific relevance of terms like «religiousness» or «religious feeling» or «religious consciousness». In today's academic fields, they raise scientific suspicions. Bryan Wilson, *Religion in Sociological Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1981) is still a good handbook.

<sup>26</sup> N. J. Demerath III, «The Varieties of Sacred Experience: Finding The Sacred In A Secular Grove», 1–11 in *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 39:1 (2000).

The historian of religion Ioan P. Couliano<sup>27</sup> sought to prove that the suppositions founding a society are purely mythical; and therefore, the basic significances of that society can be re-captured from the myths that circulate within. And so, for a better understanding of a society, one should try to detect as many mythical suppositions as possible. It will not be difficult to notice, he continued, that the system which accumulated, through times, the greatest number of such «suppositions» is no other than religion. Religion, he added, works as a kind of privileged computer program rolled by the «society's computer».

Culiano's computational metaphors may seem weird and extravagant. But his assertions are essentially the same with other statements made by very steady historians like René Rémond,<sup>28</sup> Henri Marrou<sup>29</sup> or Alain Besançon: they were always ready to resort to religion for solving historical matters. There is no other system of ideas, Besançon believes, that can rival religion (or theology), in terms of *explanatory force*.<sup>30</sup> If we would restrict our discussion to Christianity, its cultural impact would be more starkly noticeable: Tillich used to affirm that nothing is essentially secular; Rémond, in his turn, noticed that, even though religion has

become a matter of personal taste, we cannot deny the fact of having two thousand years of Christianity behind us. Christianity has become an undeniable ingredient of our (Western) identity and one may even say that our numerous traditional and modern cultural styles have mirrored our numerous ways of connecting with Divinity.

Religion and the various degrees of realizing the imminence of one's death always operate alongside each other; therefore, anticipating the mainstay of my study, I would say that *a crisis of legitimacy of religion would put in peril the «legitimacy» of the fact of dying itself*.

The rich discourse about death and dying available in every culture is closely connected to the very concern of each religion to suggest its believers a number of *prescriptions for «good death»* meant to ensure a comfortable installation within an otherworldly place. A religious paradigm completely neglecting the «problem of death» would be a paradox. Religion, by definition, propounds a way of redemption that has to take place in an *otherworldly milieu*<sup>31</sup> and therefore to provide a *positive meaning* to the traumatic experience of dying.

Even though their functionalistic and existentialist echoes are not welcomed by everybody, we cannot avoid taking into account terms like *ontological security* on behalf of Giddens, *dread* on behalf of Kierkegaard and *death, as traumatic experience* on behalf of Bauman. Berger and Mellor, for instance, shaped their theories on modern death by placing the problem of our finitude in the responsibility of the society we live in;<sup>32</sup> still, the quoted studies do not tell us exactly how a social mechanism should temper our fear of death and dying. My supposition is that a social mechanism of any kind (be it the social security system or the self-limitations of the media in liberal democracies) may be seen as an ordering tool only for *the average* chaotic experiences<sup>33</sup> one encounters in daily life. Concomitantly, I believe that religion alone is able to provide a proper help for facing the chaotic experience of death, since it is the only one trying to relativise mortality by *promoting and justifying* our need for immortality. Even if the problem of death is *not* a religious problem in itself, *its loyal mentioning in religious sets of*

<sup>27</sup> Ioan P. Couliano, *Out of This World: Otherworldly Journeys from Gilgamesh to Albert Einstein* (Boston: Shambhala, 1991) especially the introduction. See also Ioan P. Couliano, *The Tree of Gnosis: Gnostic Mythology from Early Christianity to Modern Nihilism* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1992), and Horia R. Patapievici, the chapter «Ultimul Culianu», in *Ioan Petru Culianu. Omul și opera* (ed. Sorin Antohi; Iași: Polirom, 2003), 637. 638.

<sup>28</sup> René Rémond, *Religion et société en Europe aux XIXe et XXe siècles. Essai sur la sécularisation (1789–1998)* (Paris: Seuil, 1998).

<sup>29</sup> His collection of works, Henri I. Marrou, *Patristique et humanisme* (Paris: Seuil, 1976) and the excellent study on Saint Augustine, Henri I. Marrou, *Saint Augustin et la fin de la culture antique* (Paris: E. de Boccard, 1983) have been very helpful in understanding the nature of early Christian representations of death.

<sup>30</sup> Alain Besançon, *Trois tentations dans l'église* (Paris: Calmann Lévy, 1996), in Romanian translation (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2001), 6f.

*circumstances is, by far, the most frequent, and often the most comfortable. The religious paradigms are the only ones that have succeeded to turn death to good account by solving it in a plausible manner. As stated above, the crisis of legitimacy of religion would lead to a crisis of «legitimacy» of the dying experience itself.*

A priest has recently complained on a forum: «Christianity is founded on the death of Christ. If no one is interested in death, how do you sell the message of life?» (<http://opensource theology.net>). I would not question at this moment the reasonability of his statement; I only notice the striking legitimacy of an interrogation as such; and, therefore, the need for a theoretical coverage of death in modernity *in relation to religion*. Recently, Douglas Davies has announced his working on a new book referring to theology of death. His yet-to-come work is certainly welcomed. Reconsidering modern death in the light of modern religious (un)concerns

<sup>31</sup> It is known that, at least from the tenth century until late in the Renaissance, the otherworldly-affair was very profitable for the churches, in both pragmatic and symbolic terms. The fact that most of today's Western believers tend to narrow down the divine blessings to here-and-now rewards may refer to the general need for an immediate efficaciousness that has been noticeable since Weber's times until our very own days. It is true that within the preeminently Catholic and Orthodox countries people are still — at least officially — concerned with the Doomsday; however, one could still note that restricting God's power to earthly matters and therefore annihilating the very meaning of any religion naturally concerned with salvation is probably one of the most frequent aberrances of today's religious behaviors that, however, cannot erase the objective dogmatic facts. Nevertheless, since Afterlife has ceased to be a «profitable business» to be found on modern religions' agenda, an interesting and quite unexpected side-effect could be noticed: unlike the gregarious religiosity of the previous centuries, every modern effort of following a religion is necessarily active, responsible and viable, demanding more conscious involvement. «The little flock» could be more actively engaged in a proper way of dying. Relevant references: Ariès's, Minois's and Marrou's already quoted works and Michel Vovelle, «Histoire et représentations», 41–51 in *L'Histoire Aujourd'hui* (ed. Jean-Claude Ruano-Borbalan; Paris: Édition Sciences Humaines, 1999), 41.

could be *the missing link* between a correctly updated repertory of death and dying social consequences and an insufficiently inquired «uniqueness» that force individuals to improvise, on their own, a *still meaningful* approach of death, far away from any religious contexts.

The fact that humans always looked for a coherent approach to death cannot be a simple existentialist statement, it tends to be one of the most important human truths. Inquiries concerning the relationship of the human with nature and with the cosmos, the reality of suffering and the reality of evil, the meaning of life and the meaning of the universe have all taken benefit of the symbolic resources provided by different religious traditions.<sup>34</sup> Organizing one's world in

<sup>32</sup> «Death is therefore *always* a problem for all societies, since every social system must in some ways accept death, because human beings inevitably die, but at the same time social systems must to a certain extent deny death to allow people to go on in day-to-day life with some sense of commitment», Mellor, 13. And further on, exposing Berger's idea: «If particular societies fail to deal with death adequately, then not only will individuals have to face extreme terrors of personal meaninglessness, but the social order as a whole becomes vulnerable to the collapse into chaos with a more widespread attendant loss of meaning and order», Mellor, 14. And finally, in a critical note, «for Berger and Luckmann *all* societies, including modern ones, are *essentially* ordering systems», 16. See also the meaningful book of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality. A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (London: Penguin, 1966), 110–122.

<sup>33</sup> The modern risk is visibly diminished since most of our daily experiences are highly secured by social, technological and medical systems; this very fact has significantly increased the trust in a social order; as a subsequent consequence, taking risks has become a matter of taste, an entertaining experience of bungee jumping-type. Still, the «chaotic» experience of death is hardly believed to be regulated exclusively through social tools.

<sup>34</sup> See also George Rupp, «The Critical Appropriation of Traditions: Theology and The Comparative History of Religion», 165–180 in *The World's Religious Traditions. Current Perspectives in Religious Studies — Essays in honor of Wilfred Cantwell Smith* (ed. Frank Whaling; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1984), especially 176, 177.

a meaningful manner and being afraid of too many uncontrollable variables is neither a «narrow» psychological fact, nor a human case invented by Kierkegaard. It is a natural adherence to sense and direction. In a strict way, using a strict metaphor coming from classical physics, one might say that *we are vectorial beings*. In spite of that, as Giddens brilliantly noted, *the problem of meaning itself* has been withdrawn from the public space. Therefore, one may conclude that the sense and direction are also *privately* looked for. Under the above circumstances, we do not have a problem of death anymore, but a problem *with* death; that is, a problem *with assembling a meaningful way of coping with the uniqueness of our dying fashion*. I believe that the lack of a «mainstream death» or, in other words, *the lack of a largely agreed-upon system* that could encompass this simple but traumatic fact, contributes to the modern anxiety; and, in the long run, leads to different forms of loneliness and to «empty» religious patterns that are not «frequented» anymore for their qualification to provide the comfort of a coherent death.

## Handling the Absence

As we could see, death and/or dying in modernity are not very comfortable research topics. Rigorously (and fairly) speaking, no scientific perspective could be legitimate enough for reasonably circumscribing it. Death is, at the same time, thanatology, platitude, biological fact, subtext for our life course and «cultural artifact»<sup>35</sup> that has been in the permanent or temporary interest of religion, anthropology, history, demography, geography, bioethics, sociology, psychology, philosophy, medicine and art. However, the symptoms of a society that is threatened by its own strategies of handling mortality are even more alarming when stressing the general human dimension of this problem. When seen from a strictly theoretical perspective, our research matter becomes even more opaque: the common fact of death links to cultural, social

and religious areas in innumerable, discrete ways<sup>36</sup> that are almost impossible to describe and analyze. My own attempt to disentangle the problematic will be briefly described below, as it has grounded my present research study and my previous book «The Threshold and the Void».

The two ambiguous words that have given the title of my earlier study refer to two completely distinct manners of approaching death: the first one, death that is thought to be a *threshold*, would involve any kind of belief in an afterlife; the second, death that is simply thought to be non-existence or *void*, refers to a definite, irreversible end of living.

Each of these two perspectives on death involves specific palettes of images, discourses, gestures and representations. My main attempt consists in finding a suitable ordering tool that could filter the heterogeneous amount of data regarding death in a meaningful, yet less restrictive way. Regardless of the affiliation to a certain methodology, a general and logical approach to death could be the following one: *some people believe that dying involves a **threshold** that opens on to the Beyond, whilst other people believe that dying is the definite end of living, therefore nothing «waits» out there, except **the void***. In other words, I have chosen an approach centered on *death as an opening/closing act*. It is important to note that opening/closing «something» through the act of dying is not necessarily (and directly) connected with a religious or a non-religious worldview.<sup>37</sup> A perspective as such primarily appeals to the personal sense one attaches to the experience of death, and less to its cultural or religious general dimensions.

## Assimilating the Logic

«*Death-as-threshold*» may be seen as the *pre-eminently affirmative, discursive death*. It

<sup>35</sup> Bauman, 7.

<sup>36</sup> Approaching a multidetermined matter involves terms like «incertitude», «undecidability», «contradiction». See Edgar Morin, *Le Paradigme perdu: la nature humaine* (Paris: Seuil, 1973), 63, 64, and Ioan P. Couliano, *Jocurile minții. Istoria ideilor, teoria culturii, epistemologie* (Iași: Polirom, 2002), 194.



«talks» about a dissociable soul leaving the body, about paths leading to other worlds, about customs of the skies, trip tickets and many heavenly or subterranean places (ordeal places, resting places, purification places, transit places) as much as about a number of practices securing a safe journey and a successful installation within a certain kind of Beyond. Every «threshold» has a story of its own.

As it is expected, «*death-as-void*» is the «*undiscursive*» death. Because there is no afterlife to talk about, the story of human existence is supposed to come to an end a chapter earlier. Even though it is not counted among the preferences of religions, «*death-as-void*» was often promoted by other paradigms (the Enlightenment, Nihilism, Marxism). Moreover, these paradigms were, in fact, elaborated around this particular element: death that leads nowhere; elegantly speaking, they were founded on a vehement denial of any kind of transcendence. One has to notice that such systems of thinking do provide death with a meaning, although a «negative» one.

A first conclusion implied by the theses above: «*death-as-threshold*» or «*death-as-void*» makes sense only within a framework that is able to sustain it and justify it. The convenient or the inconvenient character of death that a certain paradigm offers to its followers may be, in the long run, a secondary problem. However, because the facts of death and dying are most often invoked in religious contexts, we may be led to the conclusion that *people would rather look for convenient ways of passing away.*

<sup>37</sup> The existence or the lack of an afterlife implies two totally different modes of representing and approaching death, but does not necessarily divide our to-be-researched material into, for instance, religious commitment and the lack of a religious commitment. Modernity has already known many forms of transcendence without God; moreover, the traditional funeral rites that, theoretically (and dogmatically), should display a clear prospective dimension, are less believed to assure a smooth journey to the Great Beyond. See for interesting remarks in Jean Delumeau, *Guetter l'aurore: un christianisme pour demain* (Paris: Grasset, 2003), especially the introductory chapter.

The above ideas can be summarized as follows: a). problematizing death *necessarily* takes place within a justifying paradigm, and b). the problem of death is the «element» that gives that particular paradigm a *decisive direction*. Therefore, we will conclude that today's and yesterday's people are inevitably concerned with finding *coherent* ways of dying.<sup>38</sup> In spite of the fact that we are able to cope with a certain degree of incertitude,<sup>39</sup> the problem of death is still among the very few asking for an urgent coherence; an incoherent approach, a «don't-know-how»<sup>40</sup> when directly or indirectly confronted with death leads to an existential disturbance that exceeds the limits of a mere psychological problem of human insecurity.

Another important consequence of the above theses is the following one: the fact that we are going to die *is the «hard» truth par excellence*; in shorter words, death is not negotiable. God himself could be «negotiated» or ignored; *Gott ist tot* proclamation, or a de-construction and relativization of Divinity together with Nature and Culture are rather commonplaces within the postmodern multi (and meta-)cultural philosophy. We are, indeed, able to decide our position towards Divinity, but we can do nothing for erasing or at least relativizing the imperative of our death.

Consequently, I would affirm that *the problem of death is the most rigid «element» of any paradigm*, regardless of the nature of that paradigm (be it religious, social, cultural etc.). From this standpoint, we might assume that people *tend to place themselves within a paradigm and to invalidate all the others* that propose alternative solutions, specifically because they insist upon solving the problem of death in the most coherent manner available; that is, *refusing to refer to their own way of understanding death as being a «variant» among others* implied by different paradigms.

<sup>38</sup> In my already quoted book, each statement of my reasoning has been sustained with relevant examples.

<sup>39</sup> Mellor: «human beings can tolerate a good deal of uncertainty and can even benefit from a measure of uncertainty and risk», Mellor, 16.

<sup>40</sup> More exactly, conflicting practices not properly sustained by a suitable palette of representations.

Having said that, I will further on make an attempt to expose the two concepts («threshold» and «void») within a merely general and chronological course of death as reflected by the Western cultural (and spiritual) paradigms.

1. The first phase of *death-as-threshold* could be called «*declarative*». As I have tried to demonstrate throughout the second chapter of my book,<sup>41</sup> it began more than 40,000 years ago, when humans probably tried for the first time to make sense of death and to «imagine» a number of otherworldly lifestyles. The «*declarative*» death will be prevalent for thousands of years, until later on, at the beginning of modernism.

1.1. The moment of an «*adversative*» relation: The subtle weakening of the Christian paradigm within the period of lay theology (the seventeenth century) and consequently, a *progressive losing of trust in the religious discourse of death*.

1.2. The moment of a hardly discernable «*disjunction*»: In accordance with Amos Funkenstein,<sup>42</sup> this stage might have followed the period of lay theology when, unlike Descartes, Spinoza or Leibniz, the scholars of the eighteenth century already have well-defined anti-theological (not necessarily anti-religious) stands. *Death-as-void enters the stage*.

2. The definite «*disjunctive*» phase: Modernism is born directly «*committed*» as professed enemy of the obsolescent Platonic-Judaic-Christian pattern. Its mission is «*militant*», using metaphysics, science and techniques to commit the Deicide. *The triumph of Reason implies subscribing to the one-sided biological reality of death*. An extravagant discourse on death cannot be tolerated anymore. The Afterlife is intended to be a word with no semantic coverage.

3. The disjunctive relation is left behind; it is time for a *comfortable installation of Positivism in its own «declarative» phase*. In many ways (that I have discussed in my previous book), *death-as-threshold* becomes ridiculed.

<sup>41</sup> Toplean, 47–158.

<sup>42</sup> Amos Funkenstein, *Theology and the Scientific Imagination from the Middle Ages to the Seventeenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1989) in Romanian translation (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1998), especially 313–317.

4. The «*coordination*» relation is specific to our late modernity and it outlines its own phase. Out of respect for the local values of each cultural group, the modern political correctness imposes «*alternative*» ways of dealing with death. As mentioned before, the fact of death needs to be approached in a coherent manner. Therefore, promoting the plurality of paradigms and denouncing every disjunctive tendency as being fundamentalist,<sup>43</sup> one may note that such modern solutions are only intended for harmoniously living; they, however lead to a chaotic approach of death. *Death has to be part of a paradigm that is able to provide a (positive/negative) meaning, but a plurality of paradigms that are valid in the same manner and to the same extent creates an unprecedented situation: modern people do not believe anymore in their own manner of dying*. If — acting from conviction — someone joins a paradigm (Christianity, for instance), he or she will find it hard to believe that a Hell would be especially prepared for him or her, whilst there will be no need for his or her progressive neighbor — also very loyal to his or her progression ideas — to worry about the flames of the Lower World: the neighbour will surely pass away and vanish in the void without being tortured by demons. In short, when confronted with the imperative of death, one cannot easily believe that one will «go», at one's will, nowhere, in Hell, in Paradise, in a wolf hound's body or on Mars. *Therefore, the authority of the «how-to-die»-receipts is in decline since the general rule is the very relativity of the paradigms that have once prescribed these particular receipts. The coordination relation between these different paradigms that used to «solve» the problem of death has contributed to the modern incomprehensibility of mortality and transformed it into an experience that cannot be approached in a logical, coherent manner*.

If the previous paragraphs are correct, we could further on say that *death has made its exit not only from the religious paradigm, but also from any other paradigm*. Since no modern paradigm can justify it anymore, death was offi-

<sup>43</sup> Today, an adjective with frightful echoes.

cially given up. The only possible approaches have become the personal, unsystematic ones. On the other hand, presuming that the problem of death has been the «hardest» element of our paradigms, we may wonder what their major stake in today's societies is. What is their centre of gravity? For instance, what is a modern funerary rite — be it traditional or secular — good for? Do these paradigms still have a «hard» element? Do they prove more than their political correctness when exposing their relatively valid and locally-produced palette of discourses and representations? *Do they all become «soft» paradigms and, for this reason, not being «frequented» anymore for their qualification to provide the comfort of a coherent death?*

After removing death from different paradigms that are valid in the same manner and to the same extent, no other room has been made for it. On the contrary, as we know, death could not find its own niche in the modern public space *since no agreed-upon meanings were possible*. What if *one's natural tendency is that of resorting to the disjunctive relation as being the only one able to preserve the coherence of one's death?* The militancy for establishing the coexistence of paradigms in a «coordinative» plan led to their ceasing to answer the only question that terrorized humanity since the beginning of time: «What is going to happen when I die?»

## Toward a Temporary Conclusion

There is not enough space left for opening a discussion about loneliness which is, just as death, a «residual matter» of the project of modernity. However, my main idea could be resumed in a sentence: loneliness is not primarily about people dying alone in hospices and unvisited apartments, but about people *dying on their own*, with the awareness of the relativity of their solution for coping with a mortal destiny. As Bauman noticed, the «void» behind one's death is also private<sup>44</sup>; that is, *unshared, relative, problematic*. On the other hand, talking in one's dreams with the dead spouse as a certifi-

ing, but still personal, experience of an afterlife is one of the very few ways of «objectivizing» the «threshold» that can be also counted among the common loneliness-relievers of the old people.

In a way, every man dying completely on his own is a lonesome, anxious man. The need for a shared knowledge on death could be a more practical (and reserved) way of talking about the need for a common (cultural? spiritual?) project able to guarantee a more secure link to both temporal and a-temporal matters.

I would dare say that the infinite body of knowledge on death and dying is left without a container, not inviting to any further meaning, not opening any perspective, just solving a «social problem» and enforcing an already known truth. As we research (and live into) the project of modernity, our research (and life) projects are too often indices of our not looking for meanings, but for punctual antidotes; the denial of death in contemporary societies is not to be followed exclusively in social organization of dying and the socio-psychological consequences occurred by such an organization<sup>45</sup>, but also in the entire range of gestures through which we relate to ourselves and to ultimate realities; that is in our — today, strictly personal — *organization of Transcendence* and, in the last resort, *of eternity*.

Maybe more than ever, death asks for special — both theoretical and existential — treatment. The churches here in Sweden as well as in my own country, are still struggling for keeping the monopoly on death and dying-related corpus of rituals and representations. Since 91 percent of the Swedish people<sup>46</sup> and every single Romanian choose a religious funeral, one could not say, at least at a first sight, that the programmatic resistance of the churches to the new secular rituals is a lost cause; on the contrary, it validates once again one of the most penetrating remarks of Philippe Ariès: people are never ready to give up their beliefs, practices and images of death

<sup>45</sup> Littlewood, 70, 71.

<sup>46</sup> *Begravningen — ett brev från Svenska kyrkans biskopar*, 9. Curt Dahlgren (professor of sociology of religion at Lund University) thinks that the percentage is even higher.

<sup>44</sup> Bauman, 50.

and dying; and even after giving up all the other elements of the paradigm they once placed themselves in, they will still continue to refer to death through the stereotyped behavior implied by *this* and no other paradigm.

«Practical death» involving rites, official approaches and classic representations may have clear limits of elasticity, but the «meaningful death» is just as convertible to other paradigms as we ourselves are. We take the meanings along with us. And therefore, the irrelevance of death in our society is to be connected with our lacking its basic meanings. The traditional practices connected with death that have survived today are, however, dislocated from their natural context and simply parallel our modern approach of mortality: no reflexive change and no suitable criteria for assessing their adequacy. This is why I find Douglas Davies's yet-to-come book one of the very few reasonable attempts of recapturing, unifying and re-signifying our death — in both practice and meaning — in a perspective that naturally encompasses the problem: religion.

Our ability to reinsert and then revalidate the meanings of death in both personal and public

spheres is, of course, a rather ridiculous utopia that is beyond any form of modern acceptance; the modern «self-management» of life remains successful as long as it does not publicly admit that a clear-cut dissociation between life and death is impracticable. Behind closed doors, at the individual level, a thick «black market» of manufactured dying receipts is constantly growing.<sup>47</sup> However, we should be able to track some of them down, ask for meanings and properly integrate those meanings in an explanatory pattern. The closely-argued works on universal themes<sup>48</sup> are, in (all) reason, feared and actively forgotten; but the human propensity to sense and direction is certainly manifest in intellectual striving just as it is in any other life project, be it traditional, modern, highly modern or a-temporal.

<sup>47</sup> Visit, for instance this site: <http://www.blogofdeath.com/> and then follow the suggested links.

<sup>48</sup> See Keith Hart's foreword to Rappaport, xviii.

