



**University of
Zurich**^{UZH}

**Zurich Open Repository and
Archive**

University of Zurich
University Library
Strickhofstrasse 39
CH-8057 Zurich
www.zora.uzh.ch

Year: 2018

**Alternative death rituals in Switzerland : building a community of shared emotions
and practices**

Lüddeckens, Dorothea

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13537903.2018.1408284>

Posted at the Zurich Open Repository and Archive, University of Zurich

ZORA URL: <https://doi.org/10.5167/uzh-149208>

Journal Article

Published Version

Originally published at:

Lüddeckens, Dorothea (2018). Alternative death rituals in Switzerland : building a community of shared emotions and practices. *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 33(1):107-121.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13537903.2018.1408284>



Alternative death rituals in Switzerland: building a community of shared emotions and practices

Dorothea Lüddeckens

ABSTRACT

New alternative death rituals are gaining significance in Switzerland, like in other contemporary Western societies. This article discusses how celebrants who are independent of any religious community shape alternative funerals and why such rituals may be able to function as a coping resource for a certain kind of participants. I argue that these rituals, co-produced by celebrants and the bereaved and including actively involved participants, can be seen as a re-conquest of ritual agency for lay people. By encouraging physical and mental contact with the deceased, the celebrants try to enable emotional arousal and create a temporary community of shared experiences and emotions and of the living and the dead. Elements of an individually crafted spirituality and a kind of nature religion represent both separation and continuing bonds between the living and the dead. As a consequence, such funerals serve as a resource in the face of death by integrating a singular death with the wider context.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 12 February 2016
Accepted 13 August 2016

KEYWORDS

Spirituality; celebrants;
death rites; last rites;
funeral; funeration; burial;
ceremonies; ritual transfer;
religious innovation

Introduction

In recent decades, a growing presence of new death rituals that function as alternatives to ecclesial rituals has been observed in Switzerland as well as in other European countries. At the same time, the demand for traditional Christian funerals has declined. Church members, too, increasingly opt for alternatives.¹ In Switzerland, the new non-ecclesial rituals are still the exception and the ecclesial rituals remain the norm. Yet the trend is obvious (e.g. Grimes 2000; Wouters 2002); what we can learn from the alternative ritual forms is relevant beyond their as yet relatively small numbers. Firstly, church agents observe that people increasingly ask for particular non-traditional aspects to be introduced in church rituals (Morgenthaler 2015)—aspects we can observe in the new rituals in ‘pure’ form. Secondly, the clients of non-ecclesial celebrants are no longer mainly from a counter-culture milieu, but reflect many different milieus.

In recent years, there has been a growing number of publications about new alternative rituals (Myerhoff 1982; Grimes 2000), ‘ritual design’ (Handelman 2004; Radde-Antweiler 2006; Ahn 2011; Frenz 2011), and the aspect of ritual creativity (Venbrux and Peelen 2008; Fedele 2014), with some focusing explicitly on new death rituals (Sörries 2008; Quartier 2009, 2011; Lüddeckens 2015). This article asks why and how celebrants of new alternative funerals form

their rituals and how they try to create rituals that may serve as coping strategies for the bereaved in a way church rituals may not.

What is meant by the term ‘new’? Most cases of ‘new’ ritual forms are about ‘ritual transfer’: a “transfer of a ritual from one context *to* another, or—more generally—a change of the context surrounding the ritual” (Langer et al. 2006, 1, emphasis added). Rituals change constantly, although smaller changes, so-called ‘modifications’, are not recognized or acknowledged by the participants. ‘Transformations’ question the identity of the rituals (Kreinath 2004) as it can no longer be perceived in the same way as their predecessors, both from the perspective of the practitioners and that of the observers. These rituals can thus be received as ‘new rituals’, even if their ritual structure and many of their sequences are not new creations at all or are legitimized by references to old traditions. In this article, the discussion focuses on rituals where a ritual transfer can be observed because of changes within the social and religious context in Western Europe. Rituals have to be seen in the context of secularisation, being “accompanied by religious innovation” (Aupers and Houtman 2006, 218). It is a transformation that is understood as a decisive shift by the participants themselves: a transfer from a context which is seen as traditionally Christian and traditionally clerical to a context which is seen as different to the former context to such an extent that new demands on changes of death rituals develop. At the same time, there is a shift from ‘churched religion’ to ‘unchurched religion’ (Stark, Hamberg, and Miller 2005).

Such rituals can be considered ‘religious’, but they do not belong to a specific religious tradition and community. They can be seen as ‘religious’ in so far as they are meant by celebrants and participants to support the living and the dead with respect to an afterlife or an assumed reality beyond empirical standards. The celebrants as well as the church actors see new rituals conducted outside the church as an alternative to the ecclesiastical rituals. Hence the term ‘alternative’ may be applied in this context when referring to the ‘alternative choice’ that is available.

Material and methods

The following are initial results from a qualitative research project which I conducted together with Lilo Ruther. Our project focuses on death rituals which are provided and conducted by celebrants who do not offer their services as agents of a religious community. A further decisive criterion is the observation that the celebrants do not merely offer eulogies but complex rituals. Our data consist of participant observation at funerals, popular German and Swiss self-help literature written by celebrants, informal conversations with participants, and interviews with celebrants.² The focus of this article is on the analysis of the narrative semi-structured interviews carried out with 15 Swiss funeral celebrants, 3 of them male, all of them between the ages of 45 and 65.³ All the celebrants have some Christian family background, with many having religious experiences in different traditions which they call ‘shamanistic’ or ‘pagan’. Some studied theology, others have a pedagogical or therapeutic background. All of them started their *Ritualarbeit* (ritual work) in their forties or later and only two can make a living from this work. The theologians among them link their motivation to their alienation from the church, others refer to idealistic motivations, such as the wish to change the way society deals with death. All the celebrants advertise their services on the internet and most of them are connected with ritualnetz.ch (a web site maintained by celebrants for potential customers and the general public). Most of the interviews were collected by Lilo Ruther in 2014 and 2015. The transcripts were analysed

by first coding and then constructing networks based on concepts and categories, using AtlasTi. Using these data, we want to include the explicit and implicit interpretations of the celebrants as protagonists in our understanding of the rituals themselves (P. Collins 2005; Lüddeckens and Karanjia 2011, 16). The next steps will incorporate the perspectives of the participants and a focus on gender-related aspects (Utriainen 2010).

Traditional rituals as resources in the face of death

Death deprives humans of agency insofar as death can be brought about, but only to some extent prevented. Given the modern demand of people being able to take responsibility, to be active, and to be able to change their circumstances, death means experiencing the loss of the capacity to act. Rituals offer the opportunity to regain agency in the face of death as participants deal with death through action. Thereby, helplessness in the face of death can be confronted and ‘being active’ can reassure the living of their viability.

Furthermore, after a death has occurred, the bereaved have to deal with a new social situation. Death means a fracture between the former person, perceived as a living being, and the present corpse, perceived as dead. Even if this may be seen as a process and even if the dead are granted agency as acting partners in social relationships, they are subject to irreversible change: social action is fundamentally broken off by death with regard to the capability of bodily action of the deceased. Through death rituals, interaction can be restored on a different level. The dead body is of particular importance for the ritual farewell, it is the “object of the rites” (Hertz 1960, 83). Through action with the dead body, the deceased is regained as an interaction partner, although the nature of the relationship might have changed. Following philosopher Edmund Husserl, sociologist Alois Hahn writes: “when facing a dead body the personality of him/her, whom this body has once belonged, is still ‘appresent’” (Hahn 1968, 104). The corpse might be perceived as absolutely ‘different’, but only as different compared to the former living person. In the view of the living, the corpse of a human being is always connected with the person who belonged to this body.

Many ritual theories see repetition as the most essential feature of ritual, as with performances and utterances the participants do not code themselves (Rappaport 1979, 175; 1999, 24–31). Through repetition, traditional rituals first integrate the participants into the community of all other participants of past, present, and future. Moreover, what is repeated does not need to be freshly developed and frees people from the need of choice, reflection, and justification: “In ritual you both are and are not the author of your acts” (Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994, 99). This can be experienced as a relief in emotionally stressful situations.

Furthermore, traditional rituals are integrated in the *broader* context of a tradition—they may, for example, refer to other life-cycle rituals. Death can be experienced as part of one’s own life and as belonging to something more comprehensive than the uniqueness of the present situation. Thus, traditional rituals cancel the singularity of death through repetition and integration. Rituals thus offer action patterns with regard to death, the deceased, and the living, sometimes explicitly on a semantic level. Death rituals thereby integrate the living as well as the dead in a jointly ritualised horizon of meaning that brings the dead into relation with life.

There are no studies to date on why a growing number of contemporary participants experience traditional Christian rituals as unsatisfactory. There are two possible reasons: firstly, the acceptance of traditional Christian concepts is declining. This does not mean

that there are no other afterlife concepts any more (Singleton 2012). Often, however, they entail “the possibility of conceptualizing death as a transformation of consciousness rather than its termination” (Lee 2007, 224). This leads to a situation where a funeral within the church may become “problematic, because it necessarily involves public proclamation of a faith that some of those present [...] may not share” (Walter 2015, 141). Yet, why is this a problem at all? In most cases, rituals are practices in which participants are not consciously acting reflectively and only need to know about the rules of action to be able to participate. When participants accept rituals the way they are, as part of a tradition or as a religious or social need, they feel no need to ‘understand’ them and they do not worry about the literally semantic meaning of ritual language. People alienated from the church, however, are more likely to question church rituals than accept them as they are.

Secondly, since increasing lack of religious socialisation involves decreasing knowledge of church rituals, the ritual competence of participants becomes so limited that they are no longer able to participate actively:

It is possible that here [at the funeral] more than in former times, the strangeness of ecclesial rituals, the inner distance to songs and texts becomes very noticeable and embarrassing—when nearly nobody joins the Lord’s Prayer or only the pastor joins the hymn! (Burg 2008, 7)

It is precisely the wish to renounce hymns “because they could not sing them” (Burg 2008, 7) and to make their own choices of music and decoration that underlines the bereaved persons’ interest to participate actively.

Thus, for a growing number of bereaved people, their lack of affirmation of Christian concepts and deficient ritual competence complicate active participation in ecclesial rituals and acceptance of them as their own. As a consequence, more and more people try to shape ecclesial rituals according to their preferences or reject them entirely in favour of alternatives.

Facets of alternative death rituals and their celebrants

Prior to discussing the results of our analysis I will offer an example of a possible ritual. This does not represent in its entirety a specific ritual we found in the field, rather we combined different typical elements of existing rituals in order to provide a concrete example.

The respective celebrant offers ritual support before the actual funeral and therefore visits the home of the deceased and encourages the bereaved to join her in dealing with the corpse: washing, anointing, dressing, and placing the deceased in the coffin. She proposes to attach letters and photographs or other items of symbolic value to the corpse and to leave the open coffin in the house for an extra night. On the subsequent day, the celebrant discusses the funeral ritual with the closest family members and the best friend of the deceased. After the body’s cremation, the urn is placed in an assembly room of a hotel.⁴ The celebrant starts the ritual by lighting a candle which is placed in a bowl filled with water and blossoms. She talks about certain characteristics of the deceased, her love of life, her difficulty in accepting the diagnosis of cancer, how much the illness changed the whole family. Now, she declares, it is her former liveliness, her energy, and her joy of life that will support the bereaved in their grief and will gradually lead them back to life. The celebrant invites everyone to come forward and speak a few words, light a candle, place the candle in the bowl, and take one of the blossoms. She also invites those present to take a stone from a plate and place it near the urn, explaining that each stone may symbolise difficult memories, sorrows, and disappointments. Friends play a favourite song of the deceased, a

granddaughter reads a poem by Rilke, and, at the end the song “Time to Say Good-bye” is played on a recording device. The celebrant takes the urn, explains the following procedure, and proposes that everyone should touch and feel the weight and shape of the urn and the softness and warmth of its wooden surface. She leads the procession of mourners out of the room and, as soon as she leaves the hotel, she hands the urn over to the person following behind her, the husband of the deceased. After a few minutes he passes the urn to his eldest daughter; she in turn passes it to her husband, he to his son, and so on until the end of the procession is reached. In the meantime, the group has arrived on the top of a hill where the celebrant lights another candle. The participants hold each other by their hands and form a circle. The celebrant, who is in the centre of the circle, opens the urn next to the burning candle and declares this spot to be a ‘powerspot’, a place of high energies. She invites all the participants to experience the healing energy of the place and says that the deceased will join nature and will be there in every raindrop, in every blossom, and in every snowflake. Slowly she walks to the precipice and, citing a farewell blessing, scatters some of the ashes into the deep. The husband and all the other participants follow her, while one of the grandsons is playing the flute.⁵ After the last participant has emptied the urn, the celebrant places the receptacle on the ground and reminds everyone to breathe in the fresh air of the forest nearby and to listen to the birds. The husband of the deceased invites all attendees to join the family at the reception and the participants start to return to the hotel.

‘Being free’: giving support as moderators

A central category in the interviews with the celebrants about their perceptions of their role turned out to be ‘being free’. This notion comprises the image of themselves as being free from religious institutions and from preconceived ideas about how things have to be done. Freedom is valued by the celebrants as a decisive resource for their work: “I feel much closer to mankind nowadays than during my time in the church [...] well, I feel—it was liberating [*befreierend*] for me” (P3, 53, female, 15 January 2015).⁶

‘Being free’ enables celebrants, as they see it, to focus on the specific situation and their specific clients and thus supports and empowers them. They compare themselves with pastors, who are restricted by their institutions as well as by their convictions about ritual scripts and their obligations, and wish to transmit a particular message by using specific symbols:⁷

What is great is that we are able to react to people, that we are not only tied to a Christian ritual where it is fixed how you have to do it [...] that everything is possible for people [celebrants] who work freely with rituals. (P9, 60, male, 23 January 2015)

I agree with Tony Walter’s argument that the contour of “most deathwork professions” is characterised by a “triadic relationship in which they act as mediators between the dead and the living” (Walter 2005, 383–384). In our field, we found the role of moderators that the celebrants have in mind for themselves. Here, the focus is not on the dead, but on the living: it is the triadic relationship between the living (instead of the dead), the moderator, and the public rite. In nearly all cases, our analysis shows that the priority is the living clients. The aim is to create a ritual fitting for the information about the dead, in most cases obtained by the living and for the benefit of the living, so that the living can make peace with the dead. During a workshop, one of our informants used the very term ‘moderator’ in reference to herself: “I serve, I am a moderator, I don’t tell people what to believe.” (A very similar quotation is in Brenda Mathijssen’s article [Mathijssen 2013, 164]).

Even in cases where our informants are convinced that the rituals support the deceased as well, or are crucial for their transition from this world to another world, this seems to be only a side effect, albeit a very important one. Our informants' arguments in favour of the ritual benefit for the deceased are closely linked to remarks about the benefit for the living or our informants imply that their clients are interested in the benefit for the deceased: "I wish that people will be able to give the deceased away, that they can let someone go; yes, without letting go, one has no hands free." (P2, 47, female, 19 January 2015) Given the psychological focus on the clients, celebrants conceptualise the rituals as mourning rituals for the living. While in a traditional Protestant funeral it is God who is meant to support the mourning, here, it is the ritual itself.

Furthermore, celebrants may be 'moderators' rather than 'mediators', as they actually design the rituals as 'diviners' and 'plumbers' (Grimes 2000, 12; cf. Quartier 2011, 647) for the mourners and actively assume leadership. In this respect, the celebrants are not, or not only, mediators who report to an audience "tales [which] need a teller" (Walter 2005, 386)—stories about someone (the dead person) who cannot tell it directly. They are moderators who preside over the design and performance of rituals, moderating between the different interests and needs of the bereaved and between the bereaved and their need or wish for ritual performance. Although they do not exclusively acquire authority, they assume dynamic as well as static leadership; Harvey Whitehouse puts "passive or absent leadership at the imagistic pole, static [leadership] to the doctrinal mode of religion" (Whitehouse 2004, 65–75, see also 161–163). The following quote exemplifies the typical understanding of leadership among the celebrants:

I always explain that they are allowed to do whatever they [the clients] want [sing a song, read a poem, etc.] and if they realise instantly that it isn't possible for them, that they are caught up in their emotions, I take over. So that they are totally free. (P3, 53, female, 15 January 2015)

As moderators, the celebrants are entrepreneurs, adopting a role that involves at least three different challenges: firstly, the tension between the role of an economically interested agent and a person who wants to get emotionally closely connected with his/her clients. The celebrants perform the ritual not because the bereaved are members of a shared community, but because they are paying clients. It is not about *Vergemeinschaftung*, but about *Vergesellschaftung*. Secondly, some clients have difficulties with accepting the combination of an economic relationship and a 'spiritual' service, something they see as the opposite to economic considerations. Thirdly, there is a conflict between being an entrepreneur and a person with an idealistic mission, which encourages a different kind of dealing with death and the dead and tries to change the modern technocratic materialistic and patriarchal society:

I am convinced that with our job we do a very political job in terms of—the fear of death being always a tool of oppression [...] and when we [...] dismantle our fear of death, we become freer [...] we are not controllable any more [...]. (P1, 58, female, 6 January 2015)

We can classify the celebrants within the field of religion called *spiritualities of life* (Heelas 2008), where we can observe a shift from community to society and a shift within the field of religious individualism with the regime of mutual validation as outlined by Danièle Hervieu-Léger (2004, 169–171; see also Wood 2007, 33).

Performing meaningful rituals by 'individualising' them

Analysing the celebrants' perspectives, it becomes quite obvious that being 'meaningful' is strongly linked to the conception of being 'individualised'. One of the celebrants' crucial

selling points is to offer rituals that are highly individualised with regard to the bereaved and the deceased. The academic literature often refers to this characteristic as ‘personalised rituals’ (van Tongeren 2004; Schäfer 2007). On closer investigation, it becomes clear that all celebrants have their own repertoire and favour specific ritual sequences and structures, which they use again and again (see also Schäfer 2007). Also, most of the new rituals are quite similar to church funerals with regard to their ritual structure, which is understandable because the design of a new ritual “takes place against the backdrop of preceding formations” (Frenz 2011, 663). The new alternative rituals are therefore neither absolutely individualised nor routinised (Quartier 2011). As it is ‘naïve’ to assume that “people develop their strictly personal and authentic spiritualities by themselves”, one has to understand that these rituals and their elements are “socially constructed, transmitted and reinforced” (Aupers and Houtman 2006, 218, 219). However, since certain sequences distinguish the rituals from traditional Christian church rituals and since the bereaved see these sequences as chosen by themselves and as an individual link to the deceased, the rituals are perceived as ‘individual’ and ‘creative’. One could see them as being ‘co-produced’.⁸

While the celebrants are very much aware that they cannot refer to a common religious symbol system, they communicate an overall understanding of life and death and offer a connection between the previously living person and the experienced reality of his or her present absence. They do this by establishing a connection through the memorisation of the individuality of the dead person as a (previously) living person: decoration, music, texts, and performative sequences are aimed to correspond to the individuality of the deceased during his/her life-time. (For a similar development within the churches, see Quartier 2007, 2009.) Experienced celebrants incorporate a mixture of highly personalised ritual elements, which may only be ‘understood’ by close friends or relatives. They mix them with elements and objects that are open to different readings, but are common enough to allow people with different cultural backgrounds to associate with them—objects such as candles, nature-inspired elements like stones or flowers (Quartier 2011). Therefore, a very important element for the celebrants as well as within the rituals is ‘silence’, the most ‘open’ element of a ritual, as a celebrant explained during a workshop:

Silence is the most important spiritual element that is lacking in churches. [...] I open a silence, in which everyone can fill his/her own things, where all of them can attach themselves to their own spiritual values. (70, female, 5 March 2015)

Empowering by action

During modern rationalisation processes, the practice of dealing with actual death and the deceased came under the control of medicine (‘medicalisation’), the law, bureaucracy, and professional undertakers. Thus not only the religious experts lost power and scope of action (Walter 2005), but also the lay people, because the deceased were taken away from the private space of the family. This led to a decrease in ritual involvement of the bereaved with the dead. It was, for instance, the funeral parlours that took over many activities, such as washing, anointing, and dressing the bodies and placing them into the coffins. In this sense, one can talk about the ‘de-privatisation’ of death,⁹ as Ronald Grimes described in relation to the North American context (Grimes 2000); however, this also applies to the Swiss context.

It can be seen as a re-conquest of ritual competence and agency from institutions and their agents when celebrants try to integrate all the participants, or at least their clients and very close relatives and friends, in the ritual enactment. Home-made or hand-made elements are often encouraged and highly valued, whether they are specially written poems or knitted straps for lowering the urn into the grave. The notion or concept of ‘home-made’ or ‘do it yourself’ and the respective keyword are therefore very important within our data. As a value and as a requirement, this notion is the underlying narrative in all the interviews. It is the narrative of the counter-culture that is opposed to foreign and hostile structures and institutions which claims authority. The celebrants do not want to be an authority that tells people what to do. They assume that the bereaved want to do quite a lot themselves, that they want to create their own individually fitting, ‘authentic’ ritual, and that they want to take an active role in the ritual. When analysing the interviews, we had the impression that, in many cases, the clients only discover that they are interested in playing an active part after having been encouraged to do so by the celebrants. One of them comments:

I try—it is my vision to empower people. They should do it themselves because only then it is internalised. Not letting someone else do it, but to do it yourself, to act on your own. (P12, 47, female, 19 January 2015)

The practically and physically active involvement is a tool to empower people who feel helpless in the face of death. The celebrants’ encouragement corresponds to testimonies of the bereaved who acknowledge the possibility ‘to do something for the deceased’. Unsurprisingly, the values of individuality and authenticity and the notion of ‘experience’ are closely linked to the concepts outlined here and have to be understood in the context of the idea of “authenticity as a cultural ideal” (Lewin and Williams 2009, 66, cf. Taylor 2015). To experience oneself as an agent, not simply as a victim or a passive mourner, can be experienced as a coping resource:

By actively engaging in the performance people rely on a framework larger than themselves and feel supported in this liminal, rather unstable period. [...] When you no longer have control over the situation yourself, the forms are so strong that you can immerse yourself in them. (Mathijssen 2013, 166)

Participants, who are familiar with these ‘forms’ of traditional rituals, can easily immerse themselves in them. In the case of novel rituals where new formats may be invented and introduced in the actual ritual for the first time or which are new for the participants, these forms have to be convincing and comprehensible so that people can immerse themselves in them without having specific ritual competences. This is only possible if the participants can attach themselves to the performances and the symbols because they are familiar to them to some extent. It is therefore typical that symbols and narratives are used which involve, for example, butterflies, boats and journeys, stones that are associated with an eternal ‘existence’, water which is associated with life, and stars and sky or heaven which are associated with the afterlife.

In most cases, it is not a kind of Nature Religion (Albanese 1991) which is explicitly outlined and which can be seen as an assumed common ground for the celebrants and for some participants. Both take common ground very much for granted and do not conceptualise their notions and practices as ‘religious’ or even, in most cases, as ‘spiritual’. The celebrants see them as objective observations of the nature of human beings and the characteristics of nature as a whole. In particular, a continuous natural circle, an analogy of the annual circle of the birth, death, and re-birth of nature, is often perceived as ‘naturally given’, but not as anything one would have to believe in.

There is virtually no emphasis on common beliefs or on a shared basis of convictions regarding death and the situation in which the deceased might find themselves. Therefore, the performative ritual aspects are strengthened. Meaning is derived from the ritual expression of the individual participants and from the continuing bonding (Klass, Silverman, and Nickman 1996) between the living and the dead, as expressed in the ritual. It is not so much about sharing an active faith or being a community of believers as about being a community of performers and people who share experiences.

Emotionalising

Empowering the participants to act by themselves and to be actively involved in the ritual practice seems to be a crucial tool for the celebrants to arouse emotions. From the celebrants' perspective, an important feature that differentiates them from pastors is that they accept the expression of emotions and are not afraid of emotions. In the celebrants' own perceptions of the ritual practice, one of the key words is *berührt*, meaning 'touched' or 'moved'. Whether the celebrants perceive a ritual as successful and satisfying depends on whether they and the participants feel 'touched'.¹⁰ For them, 'to be touched' means to be emotionally involved in the specific relationship with the deceased and with death. From the celebrants' perspective, whether this happens is shown through emotional arousal (R. Collins 2005) and expression. It is not relevant what kinds of emotions arise, whether the participants laugh, cry or shout aggressively; the importance lies in the release and expression of emotions by the participants during the ritual.¹¹ The emphasis on the experience and expression of emotions has to be understood in the context of the "therapeutic turn [...] in modern and late modern societies" and "the 'turn to the self' and personal emotions" that Ole Riis and Linda Woodhead have described as a narrative, referring to Ronald Inglehart and Charles Taylor: "Individuals are encouraged to probe their true, inner feelings and to express their emotions" (Riis and Woodhead 2012, 184). Riis and Woodhead explain this narrative and the contradictory narrative about rationalised modern societies as "cross-pressures towards warm expressivism and cool rationality in all spheres of society" (Riis and Woodhead 2012, 185). The celebrants are dealing with these very 'cross-pressures' by contrasting the ways they deal with death with the allegedly 'rationalised' way pastors deal with death and the even more 'rationalised' way of people in funeral parlours and of public officials who do not appreciate emotions or are even afraid of them.

We found a strong coherence between the keywords *berührt* and 'celebration of life'. 'To celebrate life' means 'to take time', to be 'mindful', to be more fully aware of the situation, and to be emotionally involved. The "framing rule" (Hochschild 1979, 566) is that the situation is about dealing with death as an existential experience. The "feeling rule" (Hochschild 1979, 566) is that all emotions are acceptable. The analysis by co-researcher Lilo Ruther showed that the ritual—and whatever emotions regarding the occurrence of the death and the deceased it engendered and were equally welcomed, ranging from joy to anger and sorrow—is seen as mapping life. Accepting emotions, whatever they might be, becomes a sign for accepting both life and death. The message is that 'death belongs to life'. The two notions are not conceptualised as counterparts—death is subordinated to life. It is of great importance that life is the overall frame in which death finds its place, as we can see paradigmatically in the following interview extract:

This is most important, that we stick to that for a period of time [time], until everyone present is smiling [acceptance, smile/emotion, life]

but it is not a must, they are allowed to cry, that's for sure, that's for sure [crying/emotion, sorrow/death],

but this quality of keeping at it until there are no more gritted teeth [relaxation, acceptance], this takes, hm, this takes, this takes time [time]. (P1, 58, female, 6 January 2015)

Furthermore, the key notions of 'to be touched' and 'to experience life' are often interlinked with the key notion of 'aesthetic enactment'. The importance of the latter can be seen in the emphasis on the 'beauty' of tangible and sensual elements compared to linguistic and 'rational' elements. For example, scented herbs are distributed and participants are encouraged to 'smell the intensity of life'. Music is appreciated:

we sung a lot during the ritual. This is something very beautiful. Ritual songs, English songs, and others from different traditions, which are quite easy, but rhythmic, and people are able to join in very easily. Thereby the people slowly came into contact with the deceased. (P9, 60, male, 23 January 2015)

Sensory perceptions induced by the environmental context of the ritual can be experienced as part of the ritual itself by linking them to the ritual process. Examples are the conscious listening to the 'liveliness' of bird song or the interpretation of rain as catalytically efficient for the release of emotions, as happened during this funeral:

With one family, their mourning was so dry, they were so intellectual and blocked, so emotionally blocked; you can't do anything in these cases, but the weather did, the weather helps us very often [...];

this family was, all of us were soaking wet and they cried and we laughed, and all the emotions were suddenly possible. (P1, 58, female, 6 January 2015)¹²

It can thus be said that, by participants communicating emotions, a ritual community of participants with shared emotions evolves.

The presence of the dead

The dead are very much included in the rituals: some celebrants address them directly and participants reading their last letters to the deceased is quite common. Prominent are ritual sequences and narratives that are meant to express separation, such as the intersection of ribbons and other symbols expressing continuing bonds (Klass, Silverman, and Nickman 1996) between the living and the dead and the continuity of life: placing objects in the grave that symbolise common experiences, such as photos or playing cards or the distribution of flower seeds to the participants.

A closer look at the data makes obvious that ritual performances which are linked to the presence of the dead, represented by the corpse or by the ashes, are of particular relevance: for instance, participants themselves carrying and lowering urns and coffins, lighting and placing candles close to open coffins, and anointing corpses. The data analysis showed that the keywords connected with emotional arousal¹³ and with the presence of the dead, ranging from memories to physical perceptions and visualisations, are very closely linked to the physical proximity of the bodies and the ashes and thus to the physical contact between the living and the dead. This also includes the notions of saying goodbye and of releasing the

dead and letting them go. This corresponds to a high value of dealing with the human body within the contemporary “somatic society”, where the body has become “the principal field of political and cultural activity” (Turner 1992, 12, 162). We observe “a particular tendency for the body to become increasingly central to the modern person’s sense of self-identity” (Shilling 2003, 1) and to be understood as capital (Baudrillard 1998), as something to be cherished, to be interested in, not to be afraid of, whether alive or dead. In contrast to death rituals, where corpses are seen as impure matter, proximity to the corpse in the context of our study is always meant to be an awe-inspiring or at least valuable experience. This fits with the normative concept of not being afraid of death and not making death a taboo.

Interestingly, the experience of the presence of the dead is also associated with the least sensory element of the rituals, the sequences of silence mentioned earlier:

It is not that we try to create any holiness, but when it arises, it arises because everyone is present with heart and soul and because we manage to produce the presence of the deceased and we are able to concentrate this presence so that simply everyone is involved, then silence is no longer embarrassing but it is whole. (P1, 58, female, 6 January 2015)

Making contact with the dead, physically and mentally, means dealing with the “paradox”, the “irreconcilable tension”: “The deceased are both present and not present at the same time” (Silverman, and Nickman 1996, 351). It is a tool both to affirm ‘continuing bonds’ and to establish separation.

Concluding remarks on the celebrants’ perspectives

The celebrants’ objective in creating new alternative rituals is to stage ‘co-produced’ rituals by actively and emotionally involving the bereaved. The celebrants have the flexibility to adapt ritual structures and contents to individual situations and participants and thereby offer manifold points of reference because of their self-perception as moderators. Instead of using specific religious metaphors, symbols, and narratives, they resort to symbols that are open to many different religious and non-religious readings. A comprehensive understanding of death and life is constructed by ritual sequences representing separation and continuity, by invitations to the bereaved to come into physical and/or mental contact with the deceased, and by embracing a kind of Nature Religion. Nature is communicated as the entity that encompasses the living and the dead, life and death.

The active ritual involvement of the bereaved can be seen as a re-conquest of ritual competence and agency for lay people. By actively involving the participants in the ritual performance and offering ‘empty spaces’ in inserting sequences of silence, the celebrants aim to enable participants to join the ritual process and to initiate emotional experiences that are related to the dead. They thus want to provide an opportunity for the bereaved to regain agency in the face of death and to experience continuing bonds as well as separation from the deceased. While the expression of emotions such as anger and, above all, sorrow is welcomed during the ritual process, the celebrants try to create a positive atmosphere of relaxation with at least some expressions of positive emotions, such as feelings of reconciliation or even joy.

The extent to which celebrants succeed in their goal to create rituals that function as coping resources requires further research which is focused on the participants. Informal interviews suggest that the rituals are on the whole a very positive experience for those among the bereaved who actually work with the celebrants, but a less positive experience

for the other participants. Focusing on the celebrants and the rituals themselves, we observe a ritual transfer in that secularisation processes are “accompanied by religious innovation” (Aupers and Houtman 2006, 218). The rituals fit the contemporary context of death rituals in Western Europe and the socially constructed and positively charged concepts of ‘the individual’, ‘emotion’, and ‘authenticity’. The celebrants of these religious innovations strive to establish a community of practitioners who share experiences and emotions and a community of the living and the dead; in so doing, they seek to lift death out of its singularity and isolation.

Notes

1. See e.g. the figures for members of the Protestant Church in Germany who had no ecclesial ritual: in 2008, 13.1%, in 2011, 18.3 % (Evangelische Kirche Deutschland n.d.).
2. In the cases where we conducted participant observation at funerals, the respective celebrant informed the families and asked for their permission. The researcher (Lilo Ruther) acted like a distant participant of the ritual, took an active part when she was invited or asked to do so. She did not start any conversations by herself and was aware of the special need to respect other participants’ state of emotional distress and behaved accordingly.
3. The sampling method involved an initial collection of interview partners by searching the web site of the most well-known network for ‘free’ celebrants, which was followed by an exponential non-discriminative snowball sampling.
4. In most cases, the urn is buried in a graveyard, in which case, the funeral chapel is used.
5. When the funeral is a cremation, the urn is handed over to the family. There are rules about the need to bury the urn. Families are allowed to scatter the ashes, albeit with some restrictions.
6. The identities of the interviewees were anonymised by being allocated a number. Interviews were translated from German or Swiss German into English by the author.
7. The self-image as ‘being free’ interestingly contrasts with a lot of stories in the interviews about restrictions the celebrants face because of their institutional independence. For example, they face problems when the rituals are to take place in a church, they encounter economic challenges, and sometimes they struggle with being taken seriously by funeral parlours or municipal institutions.
8. See the successful Nike concept to encourage customers to create their ‘own’ shoes or the main focus of the trading platform ZOW on the ‘individualisation of mass-produced furniture’ (ZOW n.d.).
9. Increasingly, death occurs in medical institutions instead of private homes; thus, instead of the corpse remaining in private spaces for some time, it has become more and more common to transfer it to the morgue as soon as possible. However, this does not necessarily mean a decrease of death rituals (Grimes 2000, 267).
10. Olav Hammer observes with regard to Reiki rituals: “Perhaps it is not even important whether the doctrines are plausible or the rituals effective, as long as warm and pleasant emotions are elicited” (Hammer 2001, 15).
11. Emotional arousal is especially linked to personal symbols. For ecclesiastical funerals, see Quartier 2009, 134.
12. See also the concept of collective effervescence (Durkheim 1968; R. Collins 2005).
13. For a similar result within Roman Catholic rituals in the Netherlands, see Quartier 2011, 26–28.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Lilo Ruther as well as the anonymous reviewers of the *Journal of Contemporary Religion* and Eric Venbrux for their helpful criticisms of this article.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on Contributor

Dorothea Lüddeckens is professor in the Study of Religions with a Social Scientific Orientation at the University of Zürich, Switzerland. Her research foci lie in the fields of contemporary religions in Western Europe and contemporary Zoroastrianism, ranging from alternative death rituals to research on medicine and religion. She has directed research projects on “Visible Markers of Religious Identity in Public Debate” and “Alternative Religiosity/Spirituality and its Consequences at the End of Life”. Among her publications on death rituals is *Days of Transition: The Parsi Death Rituals*, co-authored with Ramiyar Karanjia. CORRESPONDENCE: Department for Religious Studies, University of Zurich, Kantonsschulstrasse 1, CH-8001 Zürich, Switzerland.

References

- Ahn, Gregor. 2011. “Ritual Design: An Introduction.” In *Reflexivity, Media, and Visuality*, edited by Axel Michaels, 601–605. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.
- Albanese, Catherine L. 1991. *Nature Religion in America: From the Algonkian Indians to the New Age*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Aupers, Stef, and Dick Houtman. 2006. “Beyond the Spiritual Supermarket: The Social and Public Significance of New Age Spirituality.” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 21 (2): 201–222.
- Baudrillard, Jean. 1998. *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*. London: Sage.
- Burg, Regine. 2008. “‘Bettete ich mich bei den Toten, siehe, so bist du auch da.’ Psalm 139, 8b, Veränderungen, Probleme und Chancen kirchlicher Bestattungskultur.” Accessed 28 July 2015. http://johanneswerk.de/fileadmin/content/Download_JW/3_Fachthemen/b_Leben_deuten/Hospizarbeit/Hospiz_Vortrag_Burg.pdf
- Collins, Peter. 2005. “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a ‘Ritual.’” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 20 (3): 323–342.
- Collins, Randall. 2005. *Interaction Ritual Chains*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Durkheim, Emile. 1968. *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. 5th ed. London: George Allen.
- Evangelische Kirche Deutschland. n.d. “EKD-Statistik.” Accessed 15 October 2015. <http://www.ekd.de/statistik/>
- Fedele, Anna. 2014. “Creativity and Uncertainty in Contemporary Crafted Rituals.” Accessed 9 July 2015. <https://doi.org/10.13140/2.1.1190.8800>
- Frenz, Matthias. 2011. “The Common Practice of Ritual Design in Southern India.” In *Reflexivity, Media, and Visuality*, edited by Axel Michaels, 651–669. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.
- Grimes, Ronald L. 2000. *Deeply into the Bone: Re-inventing Rites of Passage*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Hahn, Alois. 1968. *Einstellungen zum Tod und ihre soziale Bedingtheit: Eine soziologische Untersuchung*. Stuttgart: Enke.
- Hammer, Olav. 2001. *Claiming Knowledge: Strategies of Epistemology from Theosophy to the New Age*. Leiden: Brill.
- Handelman, Don. 2004. “Introduction: Why Ritual in its Own Right? How So?” *Social Analysis* 48 (2): 1–32.
- Heelas, Paul. 2008. *Spiritualities of Life: New Age Romanticism and Consumptive Capitalism*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Hertz, Robert. 1960. *Death and the Right Hand*. London: Cohen & West.
- Hervieu-Léger, Danièle. 2004. *Pilger und Konvertiten: Religion in Bewegung*. Würzburg: Ergon.

- Hochschild, Arlie. 1979. "Emotion Work, Feeling Rules, and Social Structure." *American Journal of Sociology* 85 (3): 551–575.
- Humphrey, Caroline, and James Laidlaw. 1994. *The Archetypal Actions of Ritual: A Theory of Ritual Illustrated by the Jain Rite of Worship*. Oxford: Clarendon.
- Klass, Dennis, Phyllis R. Silverman, and Steven L. Nickman, eds. 1996. *Continuing Bonds: New Understandings of Grief*. New York: Routledge.
- Kreinath, Jens. 2004. "Theoretical Afterthoughts." In *The Dynamics of Changing Rituals: The Transformation of Religious Rituals within their Social and Cultural Context*, edited by Jens Kreinath, Constance Hartung, and Annette Deschner, 267–282. Frankfurt a.M.: Peter Lang.
- Langer, Robert, Dorothea Lüddeckens, Kerstin Radde, and Jan Snoek. 2006. "Transfer of Ritual." *Journal of Ritual Studies* 20 (1): 1–10.
- Lee, Raymond L. M. 2007. "Mortality and Re-enchantment: Conscious Dying as Individualized Spirituality." *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 22 (2): 221–234.
- Lewin, Philip, and J. Patrick Williams. 2009. "The Ideology and Practice of Authenticity in Punk Subculture." In *Authenticity in Culture, Self, and Society*, edited by Phillip Vannini and J. Patrick Williams, 65–83. Farnham: Ashgate.
- Lüddeckens, Dorothea. 2015. "Trauerrituale in der alternativen Trauer- und Bestattungskultur." In *Praktische Theologie der Bestattung*, edited by Thomas Klie, Martina Kumlehn, Ralph Kunz, and Thomas Schlag, 207–227. Berlin: de Gruyter.
- Lüddeckens, Dorothea, and Ramiyar Karanjia. 2011. *Days of Transition: The Parsi Death Rituals*. Göttingen: Wallstein.
- Mathijssen, Brenda. 2013. "Religiosity in Ecclesial and Non-ecclesial Funeral Rites Exploring Whitehouse's Modes of Religiosity." *Jaarboek voor liturgie-onderzoek* 29: 149–171.
- Morgenthaler, Christoph. 2015. "Welche rituelle Gestaltungskraft hat die Kirche? Praktisch-theologische Erwägungen." *Praktische Theologie* 3: 133–139.
- Myerhoff, Barbara. 1982. "Rites of Passage: Process and Paradox." In *Celebration: Studies in Festivity and Ritual*, edited by Victor Turner, 109–135. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- Quartier, Thomas. 2007. *Bridging the Gaps: An Empirical Study of Catholic Funeral Rites*. Münster: LIT-Verlag.
- Quartier, Thomas. 2009. "Personal Symbols in Roman Catholic Funerals in the Netherlands." *Mortality* 14 (2): 133–146.
- Quartier, Thomas. 2011. *Die Grenze des Todes: Ritualisierte Religiosität im Umgang mit den Toten*. Münster: LIT-Verlag.
- Quartier, Thomas. 2011. "Funeral Design in the Netherlands: Structures and Meanings of Non-ecclesiastic Funerals." In *Reflexivity, Media, and Visuality*, edited by Axel Michaels, 635–650. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.
- Radde-Antweiler, Kerstin. 2006. "Rituals Online: Transferring and Designing Rituals." *Online: Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 2 (1). Accessed 5 August 2015. <http://doi.org/10.11588/heidok.00006957>
- Rappaport, Roy A. 1979. *Ecology, Meaning, and Religion*. Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books.
- Rappaport, Roy A. 1999. *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Riis, Ole, and Linda Woodhead. 2012. *A Sociology of Religious Emotion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Schäfer, Cyril. 2007. "Post-mortem Personalization: Pastoral Power and the New Zealand Funeral Director." *Mortality* 12 (1): 4–21.
- Shilling, Chris. 2003. *The Body and Social Theory*. London: Sage.
- Silverman, Phyllis R., and Steven L. Nickman. 1996. "Concluding Thoughts." In *Continuing Bonds: New Understandings of Grief*, edited by Dennis Klass, Phyllis R. Silverman, and Steven L. Nickman, 349–355. New York: Routledge.
- Singleton, Andrew. 2012. "Beyond Heaven? Young People and the Afterlife." *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 27 (3): 453–468.
- Sörries, Reiner. 2008. *Alternative Bestattungen: Formen und Folgen. Ein Wegweiser*. Frankfurt a.M.: Fachhochschulverlag.

- Stark, Rodney, Eva Hamberg, and Alan S. Miller. 2005. "Exploring Spirituality and Unchurched Religions in America, Sweden, and Japan." *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 20 (1): 3–23.
- Taylor, Steve John. 2015. "The Complexity of Authenticity in Religious Innovation: 'Alternative Worship' and its Appropriation as 'Fresh Expressions.'" *M/C Journal* 18 (1). Accessed 28 October 2015. www.journal.media-culture.org.au
- Turner, Bryan S. 1992. *Regulating Bodies: Essays in Medical Sociology*. London: Routledge.
- Utriainen, Terhi. 2010. "Agents of De-differentiation: Women Care-givers for the Dying in Finland." *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 25 (3): 437–451.
- Van Tongeren, Louis. 2004. "Individualising Ritual." *Worship* 78 (2): 117–138.
- Venbrux, Eric, and Janneke Peelen. 2008. "Special Issue on Death and Ritual in the Netherlands." *Mortality* 13 (1): 97–97.
- Walter, Tony. 2005. "Mediator Deathwork." *Death Studies* 29 (5): 383–412.
- Walter, Tony. 2015. "Secularisation." In *Death and Bereavement across Cultures*, edited by Colin Murray Parkes, Pittu Laungani, and William Young, 133–148. London: Routledge.
- Whitehouse, Harvey. 2004. *Modes of Religiosity: A Cognitive Theory of Religious Transmission*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira.
- Wood, Matthew. 2007. *Possession, Power, and the New Age: Ambiguities of Authority in Neoliberal Societies*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Wouters, Cas. 2002. "The Quest for New Rituals in Dying and Mourning: Changes in the We–I Balance." *Body & Society* 8 (1): 1–27.
- ZOW. n.d. "Internationale Zulieferermesse für Möbelindustrie und Innenausbau." Accessed 16 October 2015. <http://www.orsiad.com.tr/en/orsiad-attends-the-21st-zow-in-germany.html>