

# Rituals of the Last Farewell in Contemporary Czech Society<sup>1</sup>

Petr Macek, Tereza Lásková

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## Abstract:

The article is focused on a sub-aspect of the broad topic of the accompaniment of the dying and the bereaved. It presents results of the research into the current ritual practices of the rites of the last farewell. The main aim of the research was to combine methodological perspectives of the anthropological study of rituals with the studies of contemporary (post)modern spirituality. The key research question was aimed at the influence of spirituality on the current ritual praxis. A qualitative probe into the experience of participants for whom accompanying is part of their profession showed strong link between conviction about the importance of rituals and their spiritual background. The research also confirmed the hypothesis about the basic characteristic of postmodern spirituality of participants, primarily its individualisation and deinstitutionalisation.

**Keywords:** rites of passage, rituals of the last farewell, contemporary spirituality, liminality, accompaniment of the dying and the bereaved.

## 1. Introduction

The issue of dying with dignity and the accompaniment of the dying and the bereaved is increasingly coming to the forefront not only of professional discussion but also of public interest. This is indicated not only by the development of palliative care and public interest in it but also by a number of professional and popular publications devoted to this topic.<sup>2</sup> In the following article, we want to focus on a sub-aspect entering into the drama of the death of a loved one. Our aim is to analyse the ritual aspect of the accompaniment of the bereaved and make an attempt to capture and interpret the contemporary form of the rituals of the last farewell.

Therefore, the main goal of the text is to map possible approaches to the conceptualisation and implementation of last farewell rituals and to answer the basic research question: What are the

1 This work has been supported by the programme of the specific research at the University of Hradec Králové (Projekt specifického výzkumu 2124/2022 – Rituály truchlení v České republice).

2 The most comprehensive ones dealing with the situation in the Czech Republic are: Naděžda Špatenková et al. *O posledních věcech člověka: vybrané kapitoly z thanatologie* (Praha: Galén, 2014); and Olga Nešporová, *O smrti a pohřbívání* (Brno: Centrum pro studium demokracie a kultury, 2014).

main factors influencing an approach of the accompanying persons to last farewell rituals in the Czech Republic? Methodologically, the text is based on the cultural-anthropological study of ritual, which we link with the religiological study of contemporary spirituality. The question of the influence of spirituality and the possible absence of a spiritual dimension as regards the form of a ritual is a key part of our inquiry. An important context of the whole topic is the transformation of the spiritual situation in postmodern society, which is a basic assumed factor for the formation of ritual events connected with the death of a loved one.

In the text, we first introduce the basic theoretical background and concepts. In particular, we focus on the study of contemporary spirituality, rites of passage and the cultural-anthropological concept of liminality. The theoretical part is followed by the presentation of qualitative research conducted among participants involved in bereavement accompaniment within their profession (in health care, social services, psychological counselling or as professional accompaniers). The focus of our research was the search for the forms of contemporary ritual practice and their relationship to the spiritual profile of the participants. In the presentation of the results of the research we proceed in five steps: first we present characteristics of the accompanying persons who participated in the research, then general features of contemporary rituals and the typology of funerals. In the third step we focus on connection between rituals of the last farewell and the liminality of humans existence. Links between human corporeality and spirituality and rituals of the last farewell are presented in the final sections of the article.

## 2. Theoretical Anchoring of the Topic

The topic under study is viewed from the perspective of an interdisciplinary dialogue between the approach of cultural and social anthropology on the one hand and theological and religious studies of contemporary spirituality on the other. Our primary interest is not a reflection on psychological assistance to the bereaved but a study of the relationship between rituals and spirituality in contemporary man in relation to the phenomenon of dying. Therefore, we will focus on the analysis and conceptualisation of ritual as a process that enables, especially in the case of so-called rites of passage, not only the individual but also the entire community that surrounds the individual to pass through these crucial turning points and often traumatic life moments.<sup>3</sup>

The anthropological theory of ritual works, among other things, with the concept of liminality, the analysis of extreme and liminal phases of human existence. It is in the zone of liminality and in connection with rites of passage that the deepest roots of humanity and the inner sources of human spirituality are shown and revealed. From this perspective, it is clear that the moment of death and the need of the bereaved to cope with this situation represents one of the most significant liminal moments of human life. If the contemporary (post)modern society has deprived such a crucial liminal phase of human life of its ritual anchorage, this should inevitably trigger our interest and our search for possible ways out of the situation.<sup>4</sup>

### 2.1 Death and Contemporary Spirituality

In the following pages, we present a research probe into the relationship between contemporary spirituality and bereavement after the death of a loved one. As the first step, therefore, we want to

3 Robert F. Murphy, *Cultural and Social Anthropology, An overture* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1979), 184-189.

4 Cf. Bjørn Thomassen, *Liminality and the Modern, Living Through the In-Between* (London, New York: Routledge, 2014), 189-190.

outline at least briefly the basic contours of today's spiritual situation. This topic has received extensive research attention, and a considerable amount of scholarly literature has been devoted to it.<sup>5</sup> From the perspective of the sociology of religion, the defining elements of contemporary spirituality include the syncretisation of different religious traditions and the interconnection of seemingly divergent spiritual inspirations;<sup>6</sup> the individualisation of religious experience with an emphasis on detachment from large religious systems;<sup>7</sup> distrust of religious institutions; the understanding of spirituality as primarily a matter of personal, individual choice;<sup>8</sup> the individualisation of religious experience is then linked to the consumerisation of spirituality, i.e., the subordination of religious and spiritual life to market laws and the transformation of elements of spiritual life into commodities. As a consequence of the dislocation of society in relation to the series of crises of recent years, the element of the search for one's own identity enters intensively into contemporary spirituality. How can and should we even understand death in this (post)modern spiritual situation?<sup>9</sup> It is probably not possible to establish only one possible meaning of death or one possible definition. Rather, it is a matter of multiple related meanings that one attaches to death.<sup>10</sup> If we look at death from a medical perspective, death for us is likely to be physical death. But even this, as Tomas Hříbek points out, has several criteria, for example, the cardiopulmonary criterion of death, according to which death occurs when a person stops breathing and his heart stops beating.<sup>11</sup> Another criterion is the neurological criterion of death, i.e., the irreversible loss of brain function. In addition to the biological, medical view of death, there is also the psychological view, which distinguishes between personal and biological death.

However, for our topic and for our chosen perspective, the spiritual contextualisation of the phenomenon of death is crucial. Of course, the outlined elements that shape the profile of contemporary spirituality do not constitute the only possible framework for experiencing death and the passing of a loved one. Alongside new, syncretic spiritual currents, the existence of more traditional forms of belief still persists. We, therefore, identify three basic model possibilities for addressing the question of life and death: first, by situating death within the interpretive framework of traditional religion; second, through the prism of the Enlightenment tradition and modern natural science; and third, in the form of a syncretic mode of belief that breaks out of the European Christian tradition, whether in the form of esoteric, alternative lifestyles or eclectic borrowings from various religious traditions. Our research will then look at how different spiritual frameworks influence the course of rituals associated with death and how they imprint themselves on the spiritual situation of the bereaved.

5 Cf. Grace Davie, *Europe: The Exceptional Case, Parameters of Faith in the Modern World* (London: Darton Longmann and Todd, 2010); Grace Davie, *The Sociology of Religion: A Critical Agenda* (London, Los Angeles: SAGE, 2013); David Lyon, *Jesus in Disneyland: Religion in Postmodern Times* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000).

6 Cf. Pavel Hošek, *A bohové se vracejí: proměny náboženství v postmoderní době* (Jihlava: Mlýn, 2012), 76-78; Olga Nešporová 'Českolipská necírkevní spirituální scéna', in *Náboženství v menšině: religiozita a spiritualita v současné české společnosti*, eds. Dušan Lužný and Zdeněk R. Nešpor (Praha: Malvern, 2008), 146.

7 By the concept of individualisation of religious experience, we mean an emphasis on personal experience, an internal and subjective experience of spirituality. Cf. Dominka Motak, 'Postmodern Spirituality and the Culture of Individualism', *Scripta Instituti Donneriani Aboensis* 21 (2009): 146-161.

8 The differentiation of religion and spirituality is a subject of great debate in religious studies. We use these terms to differentiate between the subjective side of spiritual experience (spirituality) and its objective dimensions (religion). Cf. Wade Clark Roof, 'Religion and Spirituality, Toward an Integrated Analysis', in *Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*, ed. Michele Dillon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 137-148. Cf. Dušan Lužný and David Václavík, *Individualizace náboženství a identita: poznámky k současné sociologii náboženství* (Praha: Malvern, 2010); David Václavík, *Náboženství a moderní česká společnost* (Praha: Grada, 2010).

9 Aware of all limits of the category of 'postmodern', we use this concept to distinguish the modern age of classical metanarratives and ideologies and the era of their postmodern deconstruction and demythologisation.

10 Cf. Nešporová, *O smrti a pohřbívání*, 48.

11 Cf. Tomáš Hříbek, *Obrana asistované smrti* (Praha: Academia, 2021) 37-62.

## 2.2 Rite of Passage

Rituals associated with the accompaniment of the bereaved can be described as a typical part of rites of passage. We will, therefore, briefly discuss their basic characteristics. A rite of passage is a type of ritual that has been designed and structured to enable the transition from one life stage to another. It thus creates an imaginary bridge between two worlds, between the world that is being left and is irretrievably lost and the new, incoming situation. Rites of passage can be further divided according to the occasion in which they take place. Typical examples of rites of passage are initiation ceremonies, rituals relating to pregnancy and conception, wedding rituals and funeral rituals. According to Arnold van Gennep, one of the founder of the study of rites of passage, these are the rituals that accompany every change of place, status, social position and age.<sup>12</sup> In our study, we proceed from the Van Gennep's classification of the rites of passage into three basic categories of separation (preliminary), liminal (threshold) and acceptance (postliminal) rituals.<sup>13</sup> In all cases, what is important is that the rite of passage is intended to provide support, stability and continuity throughout the time of change.<sup>14</sup> In most cultures, rites of passage contain identical parts composed of elements that serve a specific purpose. For example, the main components of a rite of passage include the psychological symbolism of death and rebirth.<sup>15</sup> One of the main purposes of a rite of passage is the change of the social status of the central individuals or actors in the ritual.<sup>16</sup>

## 2.3 Liminality

Anthropological study of rites of passage is closely related to the concept of liminality. Origins of this concept stem from Victor Turner's reading of van Gennep's works on this topic. Despite certain limitations of Turner's approach to liminality it still represents a useful concept for our understanding of liminal experiences of human existence. In van Gennep's analysis, liminality emerges as a state that 'has to do with transition, the ritual forms such transition take, and the way in which transitions shape both persons and communities.'<sup>17</sup> Thomassen distinguishes between three different levels of subjecthood (single individuals, social groups and whole societies) and three temporal dimensions of liminality (moments, periods and epochs).<sup>18</sup> In our research, we focus on individual and group aspect of momental temporal dimension of liminality, that is sudden event affecting one's life – e.g., death as the individual liminal dimension and ritual passage as group liminal experience.

What are the main characteristics of liminal experience? Liminality, liminal space, and the liminal person fall outside the web of classifications that would locate persons or places in cultural space. 'Liminal beings are neither here nor there, situated between positions determined and ordered by laws, customs, conventions and rituals. Liminality is often likened to death, to being in the womb,

12 Cf. Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1960) 1-14; for a general overview: Fiona Bowie, *The Anthropology of Religion* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2000) 147-160.

13 Cf. Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process, Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine, 1969) 94-97.

14 Cf. Murphy, *Cultural and Social Anthropology*, 189

15 Cf. Ronald L. Grimes, *Deeply into the Bone, Re-inventing Rites of Passage* (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002) 219-220.

16 Cf. Grimes, *Deeply into the Bone*, 5-6. For discussion of rituality cf. Jens Kreinath, J. A. M. Snoek, and Michael Stausberg (ed.) *Theorizing Rituals, Volume I: Issues, Topics, Approaches, Concepts* (Leiden: Brill, 2008).

17 Thomassen, *Liminality and the Modern*, 85.

18 Thomassen, *Liminality and the Modern*, 89.



to invisibility, darkness, bisexuality, wilderness, or an eclipse of the sun or moon.<sup>19</sup> And if the basic model of society is a 'structure of positions', then liminality is an interstructural situation.<sup>20</sup> From a transcultural perspective, the liminal situation of transition can be also seen as an opening of space for authentic spirituality.<sup>21</sup> In our research we strove to identify liminal horizon in the contemporary rituals of farewell, which might help to analyse basic spiritual presupposition of the accompanying persons.

## 2.4 The Current State of the Rituals of Last Farewell

The term 'rituals of the last farewell' might refer to several methodologically distinct areas. In the context of the Christian, and more specifically Catholic, tradition, it usually means the very last phase of the funeral service, which enables local parish community to say farewell to the deceased.<sup>22</sup> However, in the present text, we use it in the broad meaning of the final rite of passage, which should enable the people close to the deceased to cope with the radically new situation.

The form of funeral rite has always reflected the wider cultural and social context. Currently, we can observe in the Czech society further moving away from traditional religious patterns, which used to shape basic framework of funeral rites, yet in the same time emergence of an effort to restore the ritual framework, particularly with emphasis on sensitivity to the ecological aspects of ritual events.

The traditional form of funeral rites shaped by the Christian, church tradition and partly incorporated even older strata of religious-magical rituals still influences broader cultural and social imagination. To certain extent, we can claim that despite all historical transformations and discontinuities our society is still culturally Christian.<sup>23</sup> The traditional way of burial puts an emphasis on a community dimension of the whole event, involving a farewell to more or less all members of the wider community in which the deceased lived his or her life. It thus represent an important element in the maintaining cohesion of families, local communities and wider society.<sup>24</sup> Yet, the importance of this type of funeral rites is in the reality of contemporary Czech society ever more diminishing: statistically, church funerals organised within Catholic church represented only 18% of funeral, further, only 27% of those, who are baptised get Church funeral.<sup>25</sup> These findings represent a major challenge for our research into a contemporary rituals of the last farewell: Is our society able to completely separate itself from deeper sources of its cultural tradition and come up with new form of rites or are we still tied, in one way or another, with our heritage? The interviews with our participants suggest that the influence of the older spiritual and religious heritage still have an utmost importance.

Prevailing forms of the rituals of the last farewell in the contemporary Czech society are the secular ones. It usually takes place in the halls of the crematorium.<sup>26</sup> It is typically a ceremony in

19 Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 96.

20 Cf. Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols, Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1970) 93.

21 For discussion on a transcultural perspective, cf. František Burda, *Za hranice kultur, transkulturní perspektiva* (Brno: Centrum pro studium demokracie a kultury, 2016), for liminal experience pp. 111-127.

22 For the details on the Catholic tradition see Tomáš Kotrlý, 'Právně-pastorační aspekty pohřbívání', *Studia Theologica* 13, no. 1 (2011): 122-147.

23 For the Christian sources of bereavement care see Tomáš Kotrlý, *Pohřebnictví, právní zajištění piety a důstojnosti lidských pozůstatků a ostatků*. (Praha: Linde Praha, 2013), 211-213.

24 Cf. Tomáš Kotrlý, 'Církevní pohřeb', in *O posledních věcech člověka*, 197-208. Cf. Nešporová, *O smrti a pohřbívání*, 171.

25 Daniel Chytil, 'Poslední rozloučení a památka zesnulých v době COVIDu', 2<sup>nd</sup> November 2023, <https://www.cirkev.cz/cs/aktuality/201101posledni-rozlouceni-a-pamatka-zesnulych-v-dobe-covidu>.

26 Cf. Nešporová, *O smrti a pohřbívání*, 159; Jaroslav Šejvl and Naděžda Špatenková, 'Pohřeb žehem', in *O posledních věcech člověka*, 171-176; for a description of such a ritual cf. Ondřej Nezbeda, *Průvodce smrtelníka, prakticky o posledních věcech člověka* (Praha: Paseka, 2016), 250-251.

the circle of the immediate family and includes a few mournful songs and a final farewell to the deceased. The current trend is a reduction in the number of eulogies and a general decline in the number of this type of ceremony. This could be interpreted as a (post)modern attempt to speed up the mourning phase of the farewell to the deceased.<sup>27</sup> Currently, we can also observe a steep rise in the number of funerals with minimal or no ritual framework. The so called 'farewell without a funeral ceremony' is one of the most prevailing types of the funerals, mainly due to the economic pressures and an effort to save financial means.<sup>28</sup> Apart from a farewell without a funeral ceremony, we should also mention 'social funeral', a type of funeral ceremony for deceased, who have no one to bury them. Social funerals are organised by local authorities and currently we can observe a significant increase in their number, most probably due to restrictions on financial support for burials and also due to the Covid-19 pandemic.<sup>29</sup> All these facts show that although a certain sensitivity for spirituality remains in some parts of Czech society, the economic factors and materialistic, secular mentality has a huge impact on the ritual of last farewell.

The third way, how to approach contemporary rituals of last farewell is through the effort for finding alternative expression of mourning, which would be able to keep spiritual and liminal dimension of traditional rituals, yet would express current mentality and cultural milieu. Alternative rituals are based on the context of the postmodern age, its lifestyle and its approach to spirituality. They can be defined as highly individualised, based on the specific, personal needs of the bereaved rather than on a more deeply rooted tradition. At the same time, what is significant for them is the effort to transcend the determinations perceived as social conventions and stereotypes. In the context of global climate change and its impact on social life, we can observe an increase in interest in ecologically sustainable funerals. In the Czech Republic it is represented by the association Poslední stopa (The Last Footprint), which strive to promote the new approaches to burial rites, that would be more ecological (e.g., resonation, composting, cryonisation), and through this effort increase interest in a dignified farewell with deceased ones.<sup>30</sup>

In today's modern society, some groups of rituals and ritualised kinds of behaviour are slowly disappearing from our lives, while others are being transformed into new forms and meanings, but their original meaning, connected with socialising and stabilising functions and with the relationship of man to the sacred, remains.<sup>31</sup>

### 3. Research Part

#### 3.1. Chosen Methods

The main aim of the research investigation was to make a probe into the reflection of the attendants of bereaved on the spiritual level of the rites of passage associated with death of a loved one. The research strove to analyse a connection between the sources of spiritual life of the attendants and their approach towards the rites accompanying dying. The effort to capture the inner attitude of the attendants and their value bases led us to choose a qualitative method that allows for better

27 Cf. Grimes, *Deeply*, 278.

28 Olga Nešporová, 'Kremace bez obřadu – česká specialita a její zdroje', 23rd March 2023, <https://gacr.cz/kremace-bez-obradu-ceska-specialita-a-její-zdroje/>.

29 'Pohřebnictví, Vývoj počtu sociálních pohřbů 2009-2021', presentation from the consultation day for funeral services, Ministry of regional development, accessed 30 October 2023, [https://mmr.gov.cz/cs/ministerstvo/pohrebnictvi/aktuality/z-konzultacniho-dne-k-pohrebnictvi-\(1\)](https://mmr.gov.cz/cs/ministerstvo/pohrebnictvi/aktuality/z-konzultacniho-dne-k-pohrebnictvi-(1)).

30 'Začal jsem zkouškou na hrobníka, říká Adam Vokáč', Ministry of regional development, accessed 30th October, <https://mmr.gov.cz/cs/ministerstvo/pohrebnictvi/aktuality/zacal-jsem-zkouskou-na-hrobnika,-rika-adam-vokac>.

31 Cf. Grimes, *Deeply*, 275-282.

access and collection of the above-required data.

The data were collected through semi-structured interviews with a small group of participants. The possibility of generalising them is thus limited to some extent, but on the other hand, it allows for an in-depth view of the participants' way of thinking. At the same time, the chosen form of the semi-structured interview gives sufficient flexibility to open up new topics that will inevitably emerge in the course of the study designed as an introductory research probe. Our approach was based on the hypothetico-deductivist methodology. Its aim was to test the theoretical framework and presuppositions (primarily following on from the research in the contemporary spirituality and anthropological research in liminality and rites of passage) in the specific group of research participants.

### 3.2 Research Sample and Location

The research sample consisted of 15 participants, with whom the semi-structured interviews were conducted. The selection of participants was determined by the main goals of the research project – the intersection of spirituality and rituals. Our aim was not to analyse an institutional culture within one specific institution or one specific way of treatment of bereaved. We rather wanted to focus on the spiritual background of the group of people sharing the same experience with the liminal phase of human life and their approach to the rituality.

The research sample of our investigation consisted of participants for whom accompanying is part of their profession. We did not focus on the course of accompaniment in the immediate family circle but rather on the activities of people for whom it belongs to working life. Of the 15 participants, 6 respondents work in health care, 4 in social services, 2 as professional companions and 3 as psychologists. The aim of this choice was to capture as evenly as possible the wide range of professions that encounter the dying and bereaved. The participants came from different regions of the Czech Republic, the research was conducted in Prague, Brno, Olomouc, Hořice and several other smaller towns, and the interviews were usually conducted in hospitals and hospices. The time period of the research was June to August 2022.

The principal method for selection of participants was a snowball sampling, which despite being prone to several biases, enables the researcher to reach and reconstruct a network of a 'hidden' population of people sharing the same experience, while differ from the prevailing characteristics of general society.<sup>32</sup> This method was chosen, because we assume that it will be efficient in identifying participants, who will be able to connect their spiritual experience with the ritual accompaniment of dying and bereaved.

Both men and women were included in the research sample; the most common age group represented was between 40-50 years old. However, age was not a factor in the selection of participants; the most frequent inclusion of this age group is probably related to the need for a certain maturity that the activity under study requires. The interviews took place in the natural working environment of the participants. The anonymity of the participants was maintained throughout the research; the identity of the participants was known only to the researcher. The anonymity of the research participants was maintained in order to obtain more open answers and to allow the respondents to express themselves freely and safely on difficult and sensitive themes.

32 David Morgan, 'Snowball Sampling', in *SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods*, ed. L. Given (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2008), 816-817.

### 3.3 The Aim of the Research and Research Questions

In the introduction of the article, we pointed out the significant development of palliative care and the growing interest of the Czech public in this issue. The topic is not only related to medical, social and spiritual care for the dying but also to accompanying the bereaved and their coping with the passing of a loved one. It is the latter topic that is the focus of our research. Its main aim is to map out possible approaches to the rituals associated with accompanying the bereaved and their coping with the passing of a loved one.

In line with the aim of the research, the main research question is: What are the main factors influencing the approach of accompanying persons towards the contemporary rituals of the last farewell in the Czech Republic?

Within this main research question, the research focused on the following subtopics:

- The relationship between traditional religions and alternative spirituality in the field of accompanying the bereaved.
- Individual and community dimensions of ritual and traditional and modern inspirations of ritual forms.
- The relationship between spirituality and the anthropological notion of man and death.

The results of the research are presented in five sections, which proceed from the characteristics of the accompanying persons and the typology of funerals to the connection between rituals of the last farewell and the liminality of human existence, human corporeality and spirituality.

## 4 Data and Analysis

### 4.1 Characteristics of the Accompanying Persons

In the first thematic area, the research focused on identifying the characteristics of the accompanying persons. Accompanying persons can be considered those who attend to people at the end of life and who accompany both the dying and the bereaved in their difficult situations.<sup>33</sup> This companion, as research has shown, can be virtually anyone who spends time with the dying person and their family. Twelve of the fifteen participants said they believed that virtually anyone could be a companion. Of these, most respondents supplemented their answers with some condition, such as 'who feels a connection to it' or 'who feels open about it'. In our research, however, we focused on accompanying people for whom this activity is part of their profession.

The professions selected for the research were a nurse, social worker, psychologist and funeral attendant. Nevertheless, the category of 'the accompanying person' remains ambiguous and somewhat problematic even in connection with a more clearly defined profession. It reflects not only a person's education and professional career but, above all, their personality. In response to the question '*What education or experience is needed for accompanying?*' ten out of fifteen respondents answered that accompaniment requires a certain ability, skill or feeling, which does not come from formal education but from inner predispositions. In this context, respondents also mentioned the problematic and often misused term '*school of life*'.

From the perspective of the majority of respondents, too much professionalisation and

33 For a detailed discussion on bereavement counselling see Naděžda Špatenková, *Poradenství pro pozůstalé: principy, procesy, metody*. (Praha: Grada, 2023), 21-34.



formalisation of the procedures associated with accompanying the bereaved would lead to the 'technologisation' of the whole process. The mystery of journeying together with the dying person and the bereaved would turn into a solution to a clearly defined problem. According to the respondents, the situations in which the accompanying person is placed are as unique as each person's personality is unique and irreplaceable and, therefore, very difficult to typify. Related to this is the fact that eight out of fifteen respondents said that previous experience in previous jobs had led them to accompaniment. The experiences related to undignified deaths of people in hospitals were the reason why the respondents felt the need to react to this situation and give people the opportunity to die differently. Other respondents said that they had been led to accompaniment by the course of their life, whether through a pragmatic job search, volunteering or other experiences.

As part of the research focused on the search for the inner relationship between rituals accompanying the death of a loved one and spirituality, we were also interested in the respondents' spiritual backgrounds. Five respondents identified faith as an essential aspect of the bereavement process, with ten of the fifteen respondents identifying themselves as believers. Three respondents indicated that they were not religious but had some relationship with the sacred or believed in something, and two respondents indicated that they were non-believers. Seven of the fifteen respondents claim to be Christian. One respondent professes Hinduism, and two respondents do not feel the need to relate to a particular tradition or religion. According to fourteen respondents, religion or spirituality influences a person's approach to death, primarily because religion works with the idea of life after death, which can be comforting to people. However, perhaps even more importantly, religion simply reckons with death, knows about it and sees it as part of life as much as birth, which enables people to live with an awareness of their own finitude.

## 4.2 Rituals and the Typology of Funerals

Majority of respondents distinguished between traditional and typical funerals and rituals. A Christian funeral with a ceremony in a church is perceived as a traditional funeral. According to the respondents, what is characteristic of a traditional funeral is that it takes place in the village and involves the whole community participates. Another element of a traditional funeral is the procession and feast. Traditional funerals and ceremonies usually last for a longer period of time. In contrast, a typical funeral and ceremony is seen as a crematorium funeral, which usually includes a short, standardised speech about the dead and the playing of a few musical pieces to conclude the ceremony. However, some respondents also observe the fact that no ceremony takes place as a typical part of the current situation in Czech society. This fact is perceived very negatively.

Two respondents stated that they did not perceive a difference between a traditional and a typical funeral. For them, the church and the crematorium are both traditional and typical. All respondents were aware of alternative approaches to funerals and the last rites. Eight respondents identified the possibility of having an alternative way of saying goodbye as important. The main reason for this was that the alternative method meets the individual wishes and needs of the deceased and the bereaved. They can provide a meaningful ceremony for those who are not satisfied with a standardised and short ceremony in a crematorium but who also do not subscribe to a church, and so for them, a Christian burial in a church is not an ideal option either. *'In my opinion, there are alternatives, and I think it is important that there is something, some ritual. A ritual, whether it's in a church or somewhere outside, so people need to experience it. Then people can move on with their lives.'*<sup>34</sup>

34 Interview with a hospice nurse (palliative care nurse), 22<sup>nd</sup> June 2022.

An important advantage of alternative funerals is the space and time they provide, or rather the fact that the time limit for the ceremony is significantly less significant than in a typical funeral. For the majority of respondents, the positives of alternative burials were mainly related to the possibility of disposing of the body of the deceased. Particularly in relation to the disposal of the cremated body of the deceased offered by scattering gardens or burial at the roots of a tree.

### 4.3 The Rituals of the Last Farewell and the Liminality of Human Existence

At the core of our research, there is the question of the connection between ritual, liminality and the spirituality of human life. There are a number of rituals associated with the grieving process and coping with death that are performed during this period to help people more easily overcome the loss of a loved one. The majority, eleven participants, find these rituals very important for people to be able to move from one stage of life to another. Four participants perceive rituals more as an individual need of each person, which may not have general validity. They add that many people may often perform rituals simply because *'that's the way it's done'*, and it may not be meaningful to them as such. However, the typical response mostly corresponded to the following message: *'I'm trying to get people to do the goodbye themselves now. It's important that the goodbye is tailored. That's why I also tell the bereaved, "Say goodbye in a way that you can say goodbye". Some say goodbye by sitting by the dead body after death, some say goodbye by scattering the ashes.'*<sup>35</sup>

A few respondents mentioned that the ritual of the last farewell needs to have a certain choreography in order to say goodbye. The choreography determines the flow of the ritual, containing the basic points that should lead the bereaved through a journey, at the end of which they will be ready to gradually exit the grieving phase and let go of what is no longer in their lives. Thus, as part of the ceremony, the bereaved will perform a ritual gesture and pass through the boundary from which they continue their life without the deceased. One respondent gives an example of the choreography: *'We gather, we say why we came together for the ceremony, what is the intention of why we came together for the ceremony. We name why we came together by the fact that someone died, what their name was, and who they were to us (someone different to everyone). The moment when we say goodbye at the shore and give the person away is important. In Christianity, we give him over to the Lord God, praying for him to accept him, to forgive him, to protect him along the way. In alternative rituals, we surrender the deceased, and we can imagine that there are our other deceased there to welcome him, that he is not alone, that there are other deceased on the boat. Someone is handing him over to the universe, someone is handing him over to mother earth, but he is handing him over, and that is the moment that has to take place. The fact that we're handing him over and releasing him and actually sort of breaking the bond that might be holding him here, and we can continue on that journey. We are handing him over to something that is waiting for us, that is beyond us. And that's an important moment for us to be able to end it and to be able to move on without him. Whether it's in Christianity or in alternative ritual.'*<sup>36</sup>

The most common example of a ritual mentioned by the seven respondents as an example of the last farewell ritual was the ritual after-death care of the body of the deceased, which involves washing and dressing the body, combing the hair and tying the beard. Often people may not realise that they have the right to take final care of their loved one's body, and many people may be afraid of caring for a body of the deceased. However, caring for a body of the deceased can be

<sup>35</sup> Interview with a nurse from a hospice care at home, 28<sup>th</sup> June 2022.

<sup>36</sup> Interview with a professional companion, 8<sup>th</sup> June 2022.

seen as the last service to a loved one. The reason for caring for a body is also to make the deceased look nice, which can be comforting to the bereaved: *‘We have seen many times that people were in pain, and the pain tends to show on the face, but after death, when people are groomed, they have a satisfied expression. It helps the bereaved to see that mum has gone happy, beautiful. It’s important to them. It brings relief, and then they can cope with the death better.’*<sup>37</sup>

Another example mentioned by five respondents was that of an open window and a lit candle. Respondents also considered saying thank you and forgiveness to be important, either before or after death. Forgiveness is important for both the dying and the bereaved: *‘I think it’s very important that there is this part “I forgive you, you forgive me, I love you”. I think those are three important things that I urge people not to be afraid to say. I think they’re important for them and for the dying person. Quite often, the phrase, “You can go, I can do this”, quite often people are waiting for that. There’s a certain moment when the soul wins over the body. Often the body is failing, but the person is still there, then we wonder why? Often it is because the loved ones have not let them go.’*<sup>38</sup>

According to the six respondents, the Czech Republic does not lack traditions and rituals related to death compared to other countries. According to some, the absence of rituals is regionally conditioned, while at the same time, they observe a gradual withdrawal from rituals in Czech society. During the interview, it was also mentioned that in the Czech Republic, compared to other countries, death, coping with death and rituals related to it can often be burdened with fatalistic sadness, which was perceived as a clearly negative factor. The reason for this may be the strong secularisation of Czech society, which does not allow the joy and gratitude for the life of the dead person to be fully experienced due to the lack of belief in the afterlife.

The participants found it difficult to articulate clearly the liminal aspects of the last farewell rituals. They usually referred to this liminal state as highly individualised and intensely personal. They perceived their role primarily as accompanying. They enter the liminal state together with the dead or bereaved. However, the direction of the journey into the liminal space is not determined by the accompanying person but primarily by the dead and the bereaved. The professional attendants are only guests on this journey, providing companionship and sharing in its hardships. As a typical yet apt description of liminality, we can state the following: The liminal state is an imaginary journey taking place within the human being. At the end of this journey, the dead is released from the world of the living and taken somewhere. What the journey looks like, where the dead are taken and where they are handed over depends on the interior of the bereaved. The journey is liminal because it is different from everyday life – there are no rules or values. The person on the journey ceases to live the life they lived before; they don’t even return to it because the world is already changed by the fact that the dead is no longer there. Spirituality has an effect on the interior and it shows up in the interior.

#### 4.4 Human Corporeality as Part of the Last Farewell

Our interviews showed that the bodily aspect of human existence constitute a very important aspect that enters into the rites of last farewell. The rules for how to deal with the body after death, therefore, form an essential part of the ritual of the last farewell. The context of (post)modern culture and spirituality and its blurring of previously clear boundaries is also reflected in this area. How the body of the deceased is treated after death is largely determined by the cultural context

37 Interview with a nurse in the inpatient ward in a hospice, 12<sup>th</sup> July 2022.

38 Interview with a nurse from hospice care at home, 28<sup>th</sup> June 2022.



and values of a given culture.<sup>39</sup>

It is important, in this context, to point out the close mutual relationship between spirituality and human corporeality. It is precisely the spiritual horizon of human existence, that shapes and determines the perception of physicality in human cultures. We can depict this fact on different approaches to human corporeality and physicality, as they might be observed in different spiritual and religious traditions.<sup>40</sup> For the treatment of our research, it is specifically important to point out the complex and intricate relationship between spirituality and corporeality in the Christian tradition. Here we can observe on one hand tendencies to certain dualism of body and soul, on the other hand appreciation of the importance of the body even for the spiritual existence.<sup>41</sup>

How is the body of the deceased treated today? Is wrapping the body in a plastic bag a dignified way of dealing with the dead? Who takes care of the body of the deceased? Nowadays, as mentioned above, people have forgotten the art of dying and so have forgotten how to take care of the body after death. Thus, the body of the deceased is mostly taken care of by people in hospitals or funeral services.

The research shows that this topic is crucial for the participants. Despite the fact that most of the respondents mention that the body is a mere shell after death, it deserves respectful treatment. But what does dignified treatment of the body of the deceased look like? As we have already mentioned, the care of the body aims to make it look respectable even after death. One answer specifies that the body of the deceased should be cared for after death as if it were still alive. Some respondents described cremation as an undignified way of dealing with the body of the deceased. This belief may be related to the Christian faith, in which there is still some awareness that the proper way of burial involves placing the body of the deceased in a coffin in the ground.

The research participants were also dismissive of placing the body of the deceased in plastic bags after death, which is a common hospital practice. They perceived plastic bags as ambiguous and multipurpose. They serve, among other things, for waste disposal. The use of a plastic bag in this context may give the impression that it is considered waste.<sup>42</sup> On the other hand, plastic bags are used for protection from external elements, and their use can therefore be perceived as protection. The use of plastic bags in the hospital is linked to society's technical approach to the human being, which is insufficient on its own and needs to be supplemented by a humane and spiritual perspective.

#### 4.5 Rituals of the Last Farewell and Spirituality

The majority of respondents confirmed that spirituality greatly influences the form of rituals associated with death, especially the choice of venue and the elements that constitute the ritual. For a slight majority of the eight respondents, the rituals provided by traditional religions today are understandable. For three participants, the rituals may not always be understandable to everyone, and especially may not be understandable to people who do not subscribe to a particular church. Whether rituals are understandable or not depends not only on the participants in the ritual but especially on the moderators (priests, ritualists). The key factors are the feeling for the ritual, the sincerity with which the ritual is approached, the appropriate choice of words, the work

39 For a discussion on how to define the body of the deceased see Kotrlý, *Pohřebnictví*, 36-39.

40 Cf. Radek Chlup, *Pojetí duše v náboženských tradicích svět* (Praha: DharmaGaia, 2007).

41 Cf. Lenka Karfiková, *Látka, tělo, vzkříšení podle starokřesťanských autorů* (Praha: Karolinum, 2022).

42 On the sanitary aspects of the topic cf. Tomáš Kotrlý, 'Pohled na úkoly krajské hygienické stanice v pohřebnictví', *Hygiena* 67, no. 4 (2022): 134-150, <https://doi.org/10.21101/hygiena.a1823>.



with musical accompaniment, etc. One respondent commented that although not every funeral ceremony is a ritual, appropriate leadership can also make a funeral ceremony in a crematorium a dignified ritual.

In other questions, we focused on the participants' relationship to death itself and the influence of spirituality in shaping this relationship. Four respondents claimed that death shows how human beings are transient and finite. Another four respondents claim that death reflects the way a person's life was and that a person dies the way he or she lived. All respondents perceive a duality of body and soul, in the sense that the soul and the body are not one common principle but that they are two parts that are a condition for being a living human being. Most of the participants expressed their belief and faith in the afterlife existence of the soul. Thus, for most respondents, the soul is what lives on after the death of a person or, more precisely, after the death of the body. Therefore, immortality was also perceived by the respondents mostly as the immortality of the soul. Two respondents claimed that after the death of the body, the soul also dies. How the duality of soul and body is perceived is also reflected in how death itself is perceived.

Most respondents first stated that death is simply the end of human life. The two respondents who believed that both the body and the soul die with the death of a person perceived death negatively as a moment of the absolute end. Participants who were convinced of the existence of the soul after death added that death is not only an end but also a beginning, a transition or a meeting. Thus, from the perspective of these respondents, death is not only perceived negatively but also with hope. This shows the strong influence of faith or spirituality on our approach to death.

One of the key aspects of the connection between spirituality and the perception of death is the ability to make a difference between the concept of good and bad death. Majority of respondents were able to distinguish between good and bad death. A good death is then considered to be one for which one is 'prepared', before which one has cared for all levels of one's life (physical, social, spiritual). It is a death in which a reconciled person dies. A bad death is a death in which the person is not reconciled, a death that is long and painful, a premature death or a death caused by violence, for example, in war.

## 5. Conclusion

The main aim of the research was to make a probe into the relationship between rituality of the last farewell and the spirituality of the attendants, who work with dying and bereaved persons. Therefore, we have firstly focused on the profile of the attendants and their spiritual background. The group of participants consisted of fifteen people who work professionally in the field of accompanying people in the last stages of their life. Spirituality clearly forms an important part of the work of the attendants, who in majority consider spiritual and personal approach to their work to be of greater importance, than the approach based on clear technical guidelines. This characteristic is clearly imprinted in the approach of the attendants to the rituals of last farewell. The rituals do not represent only a mechanical performance of the conventions of the given ceremonies. In the context of the diversified postmodern spiritual situation, it is primarily a search for an authentic, personified and individualised expression of the need for a dignified farewell to the bereaved person.

Human corporeality emerged as perhaps the most prominent part of the rituals of last farewell for the attendants. Emphasis on preservation of the human dignity of the deceased requires dignified and sensitive treatment of the body of the deceased, which comes in as an important element into the rituals related to death of close ones. Although spirituality forms a main part of

their work with bereaved, it was rather difficult for most participants to clearly define connections between liminal phase of human existence and its spiritual horizon. We could observe, that most participants strive to express their notions of the relationship between body and soul and the ultimate mystery of human life in rather intuitive and vague way. Although it was tangibly inspired by the religious and cultural legacy, predominantly the Christian one, it was not a clear and articulated expression of any systematically defined doctrine.

Thus we can conclude that the rituality of the last farewell is for the majority of participants connected with the spiritual and liminal part of human life. This aspect is considered to be more important than the accompaniment based on the merely psychological approach to the bereaved ones. On the other hand the spiritual profile of participants confirms typical characteristics of post-modern spirituality of western societies. Although it is still to certain extent shaped by the legacy of Christian tradition, it does not represent any coherent and well-defined religious system, but rather intuitively formed system of spiritual ideas with tendency to dualistic perception of human person.

### **Contact**

#### ***Mgr. Petr Macek, Ph.D.***

Univerzita Hradec Králové  
Pedagogická fakulta  
Katedra kulturních a náboženských studií  
Rokitanského 62, 500 03, Hradec Králové  
petr.macek@uhk.cz

#### ***Mgr. Tereza Lásková***

Univerzita Hradec Králové  
Pedagogická fakulta  
Katedra kulturních a náboženských studií  
Rokitanského 62, 500 03, Hradec Králové