

A Liminal Pedagogy: To Understand the Art of Living and Dying in an Interreligious Perspective

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To understand the art of living and dying in an interreligious perspective, one needs to enter the in-between of time and space, life and death. In this article, we reflect on death as a liminal experience, the attitudes believers of different religions assume in front of this inevitable reality, and how to accompany the dying with a well cared pedagogy of death. Death is a great liminal experience: Experiences such as grave illness, death etc. Are limiting experiences that remind us sharply of our powerlessness. Limiting experiences are liminal experiences.

“Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. As such their ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are expressed by a rich variety of symbols in the many societies that ritualize social and cultural transitions. Thus, liminality is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness and to an eclipse of the sun and the moon”¹

A sense of connectedness is attributed to liminality. Encounter with liminality prompts one to reflect. “Liminoid”² is the term that Victor Turner and Richard Schechner used to describe the self-reflecting strategy that strikes modern rituals. The funeral rites in various religious traditions undoubtedly call for an element of self-reflection too. “At certain moments we may choose to emphasize the gaps, the blank spots, an unknowing may seem mysterious. (Liminal space) becomes a method or approach that opens up new possibilities or turns into a valued state for its own sake (Eigne, 1993, 247).”

Life as an ongoing liminal experience

Any serious reflection on death involves a simultaneous reflection on life as an ongoing liminal experience. Texts that communicate stories of human experiences and by extension our own personal stories touch us deeply. These are stories of liminality, stories of being

taken to the threshold. In a liminal moment the person crosses the threshold. This is marked by a move from one's actual reality into a new one. To a great extent one moves from what was, to the fullness of what is yet to come. As Victor Turner has expressed it a liminal time is a fluid time. A glance into two scriptural texts³ from the Holy Bible, Isaiah 6:1-8 and Luke 5: 1-11 can offer us a complete picture of a liminal experience. A liminal time is a fluid time a bit like the point in birthing when the woman feels contractions and experiences her pelvic bones softening and shifting so that the baby can be born. Both the Isaiah and Luke texts present a liminal experience, when time is 'out of joint' and God births in them a new reality. Being taken to the deep is a liminal experience and it is precarious. The Latin root for 'precarious' is *prex*, to pray. So when we put ourselves entirely in the hands of God, we put ourselves in a precarious position; for in deep waters, in the liminal moment, the holy work of God changes everything it touches, including us. Certainly we don't know where God will encounter us or where we will find God. We only know that we float in deep waters and may find ourselves crossing the threshold from the ordinary to the sacred at any time and at any place.

Who doesn't question life? Who is not curious to know about his or her origins? St. Augustine's thought provoking question can very well be a synthesis of what many other persons desire to know. Augustine near the outset of his *Confessions* plainly asks God:

*"Answer my prayer and tell me whether my infancy followed upon some other stage of life that died before it. Was it the stage of life that I spent in my mother's womb? For I have learnt a little about that too, and I have myself seen women who were pregnant. But what came before that, O God my delight? Was I anywhere? Was I anybody? These are questions I must put to you, for I have no one else to answer them. Neither my father nor my mother could tell me, nor could I find out from the experience of other people or from my own memory"*⁴ (Augustine 1961,1.6).

Death - the great unanswerable mystery

Who is not aware of the problems that plague any inquiry related to grave illness and death? There is incongruence between the concept and event of death and the multiplicity of approaches that we bring to it. Zygmunt Bauman's thought

provoking observation that modernity did not conquer mortality, it “categorized the knowable techniques and practices of measurable efficacy and effectiveness”⁵ is worth quoting here. According to Bauman, we humanize mortality by viewing it as set of problems. We look for an “enemy” and kill it. We take shelter in “projects” that we are used to handle this is our way of assuring ourselves a sense of mastery over reality. “Without family and community, I had no social presence, I was among the unloving.”⁶ Is it not death an ongoing experience? Well, we can ask ourselves: after physical death what remains: Another phase of threshold – liminality?

“I cannot say much about the soul’s liminality in a possible afterlife existence, although there are ancient texts that speak of this (the Bardo state). I do know for a fact, however, that a liminal space opens up for people around the death experience. In this liminal space symbols appear that have an uncanniness about them”⁷.

Where death is concerned, no single person can provide answers and therefore any inquiry into its cultural, scientific and spiritual profile must be a plural one. Human persons turn to various religions for answers to the existential questions of life and death.⁸ Any committed study on the topic of death has no doubt to address a few currents of thinking that have been well disseminated in society today. One strong current of thinking is about reincarnation?

The idea of reincarnation

The Theosophical Society founded in 1875 by Helena Petrovna Blavatsky and Henry Steel Olcott, in its modern sense pretends to form the “essence and the nucleus, the fruit and the goal of all the religions.”⁹ In the writings of Helena Petrovna Blavatsky the preparation for eternity is articulated under the eternal progressive key. The elementary spirits are often exchanged for that of the death. The term reincarnation explicitly appears for the first time in 1882. Blavatsky explains reincarnation as the doctrine of rebirth and with a large mixing up of elements robbed from various currents of thinking, she puts across that reincarnation was a universal belief.

The World Parliament of Religions (Chicago 1893) offered some Oriental masters the first occasion to meet the Western audience. Reincarnation models genuinely

oriental began to be known in the United States and Europe.¹⁰ It is surprising that the author takes it for granted that the reincarnation models ‘genuinely oriental’ were known in the United States and Europe. Were they genuinely oriental or already diluted models? According to Walker, theosopho:

*“Reincarnation is an extremely simple doctrine rooted in the assurance of the soul’s indestructibility. It explains at once the descent and the destiny of the soul by so natural and forcible a method that it has not only dominated the ingenuous minds of all the primitive races, but has become the most widely spread and most permanently influential of all philosophies. Reincarnation teaches that the soul enters this life, not as a fresh creation, but after a long course of previous existences on this earth and elsewhere, in which it acquired its present inhering peculiarities, and that it is on the way to future transformations which the soul is now shaping.”*¹¹

An often-heard expression is that incarnation is the most ancient doctrine as the doctrine of resurrection has its origin only with Jesus. The question becomes a bit more delicate when one reflects further. In the ancient India, the discourse was focused on avoiding a possible reincarnation, the idea of reincarnation was considered in a negative sense. Today, the discourse on reincarnation takes on a positive note. At the heart of the discourse is the solemn advice to do everything possible that one may reincarnate. It is clear that in this context the argumentation on a historical continuity fades off. So what are we up to? Playing on words and feeding in new contents to the old words? Or is it not a diplomatic defensive mechanism making use of Oriental concepts to make them say what is in the subconscious of Occident? Professor Fuss offers a sharp rereading of this reality:

“”The central ideas of modern religious groups that refer their teaching to a mythical East’ are reincarnation and ‘karma.’ The author shows that both ideas are given a meaning that widely departs from the significance of the term in their original religious context. Actually, reincarnation has received the sense of a desirable and providential progress, in sharp opposition with the eastern perception of the concept as a terrible doom. Moreover, ‘karma’ has lost its original passive sense and has become the expression of the

ultimate freedom of man to master and improve his destiny. Therefore, these concepts of reincarnation and 'karma' must rather be considered as a development of merely western esoteric themes under an oriental guise mostly devised by the Theosophical Society during the last century".¹²

Reincarnation is the lens through which reality is read and the myth of reincarnation is inserted into a larger package of other truths. For the ancient people, myth was an expression of a scientific reality, just as today a thing is scientifically proved. Faith calls for a quality jump. When we focus on the resurrection of Jesus the Son of God and that of ours, we will never have a scientific proof. Here is the quality jump in faith. It is love that makes one believe in the resurrection. A religious belief can resemble a passionate commitment. It is truly a way of living. They are the experiences that promote this faith. There is no scientific proof about reincarnation. Both resurrection and reincarnation demands an act of faith. Both are so to say affirmations of faith.

“The social function of myths, in the traditional cultures as in the technological civilisation of post-modernity furnishes the frame within which all the connected data becomes significant.”¹³ Reality needs to be considered in its totality enveloping various dimensions.

“The myth model is, as Geertz puts it, a model of and for reality; but unlike Geertz, I include under the term 'reality' the personal reality of the afflicted individuals. The logical implication of this leads us to abolish the distinction between the private and the public nature of symbols; for, as I said earlier, the personal and the cultural are part of the same action as far as personal symbols are concerned”.¹⁴

Reincarnation speaks of Life after life and the possibility of dialogue with persons who are reincarnated. Multiple identity of life, one follows the other. Reincarnation – idea of evolution – future life is better, the ideal is to reach a divine life. Reincarnation speaks of progressive evolution.

In Christianity, the idea behind is ‘I will be in the presence and the glory of God. I will never be God’. The underlying concept in Christianity is the idea of

redemption and that of participation and not of evolution. Reincarnation pretends to exclude God. It is 'I' that counts, everything depend up on me. There is no recognition of a God who offers mercy and pardon. As I behave today, I will have the results. Resurrection implies a hope that is lived - a style of living according to a standard of morals which means the person associates self already with the life of Jesus Christ and live according to the values of Jesus. The professional secret is 'you are a child of God and so act in such a way worthy of your calling'.

A Common heritage

On our pilgrim journey, we become aware that we have several things in common and we do share a few questions like: How to prepare ourselves for death? How to prepare ourselves for death, giving a sense to our sufferings? What type of psychological and pastoral guidance to be offered in this direction? What praxis of life to suggest?

The provisory nature of life (nothing is fixed or certain in life in the professional world, private or married life) leads one to think of reincarnation. Personal and emotive life is provisory Science has lead even to the choice of allowing embryos to live or no. The general image people have of life is that life itself is provisory therefore why can't I have a new chance? In the present life in which why no one is completely happy is explained by the past, attributing it to the fault of a past life. For example if one is mentally challenged and soon the fault is attributed to his parents. In this way, every responsibility for fault is removed throwing the blemish on to others. Another important element is the theory that affirms that life is a game and that we need to enjoy, making the best for self and manipulate life according to personal preferences.

Various religions provide different concepts regarding life after death. Profound transformation/ purification are necessary. The general idea is about a better life. Three aspects of justice:

reincarnation: man is responsible

Resurrection: man depends on God

Teodicea: explanation for the why of evil. Evil men caused the roots of evil in the world which today we need to put up with. Reincarnation is seen as a response to this.

Different ways of viewing death

- For the ancient Egyptians - *Not a return but a regeneration* The concept of death and resurrection in the ancient Egypt understood as union with God especially with Osiris.
- Ancient Greek - return - Reincarnation of Thymos
- Ancient Romans - Di manes – spirit of the dead, the friend who accompanies to divine life – divinized heroes – the person who is dying associates self with the family of the heroes.
- Africa - Life in solidarity-(in space and time) the person during death enters in ujama (collectivity) solidarity is at the root of the strength of life. Life changes from one position to another. Solidarity implies a moral vision of life.
- Hinduism - In the Vedas, there isn't a reincarnation...the law of Karma of cause and effect is a law of life. Life is considered as a great sacrifice. Appeal to a moral life – a pedagogy of life. Reincarnation is viewed as a great punishment. The entire life is defined through action.
- Buddhism Bardo - Intermediary state – listening to the word – For Buddha each moment is of death and life - not material death but Bardo - life of connectedness - relatedness and moral commitment.

- Christianity - There isn't dualism between body and soul participation in divine life by faith and grace in an act of love and dialogue.

The Egyptian book of the dead

The title: 'Book of the dead' was for the first time applied to the Egyptian texts. Today, there are other such texts (Islam, Tibetan etc.). In no tradition there exists a book of the dead. These are modern compilations with commercial interest. In ancient Egypt there were various texts and not one book of the dead. There was belief in the existence of two worlds – another one very same like our world.¹⁵ The fundamental elements of Egyptian belief on man are:

Ka – divine substance – return to the divine sphere after death

Ba – a part of the soul – a visible element which acts as mediator between the body and ka. Ba – heart - symbol of bird.

The heart – the very being of the person is the seat of all good and evil. The heart is subject to judgement. If the heart is good it goes up, if not it falls down. For the ancient Egyptians, the central idea was regeneration on the same level or in a superior way. Not a return but regeneration. Like the great mother who regenerates (like one time the child) the terrible great mother who devours and gives life.

Departed brothers and sisters – communicators of memory

Considering the dead as communicators of memory within the Family Circle¹⁶ is a form of remembrance in various parts of the world. In Mesopotamia through various forms of collective memory in its various aspects such as public (national) private (family) the remembrance of dead was kept alive. When a person played a significant role in the public role of the city that person was remembered and the religious structure of the city guaranteed this tradition. In the public context:

“To remember means the recitation of songs in the presence of the god or goddess of the city. The place where memory was created was the city temple. [...] With the emergence of the Amorite dynasties, the religious context within

which names were recited changed. The place where they were recited shifted from the temple to the throne room and the private house. The form this collective memory took became the family ritual for the dead, the kispu. This included both offering at the burial and the periodically repeated ritual for the dead, in which the deceased members of a particular family were invoked by name and food and drink offered to them".¹⁷

The Christian perspective on life after death

The beauty of Christianity is that art of "looking at the history of Christianity as a history of loving respect of God for the sincere search of truth by man"¹⁸ specified in n° 11 of *Dignitatis Humanae*. Death and funeral is that liminal space – threshold – transport to the beyond. The sense of connectedness attributed to liminality reaches its climax at death in the Christian vision. The dialogical character of Christianity at death blossoms into a dialogical immortality.

Dialogical Immortality

At the heart of Christian revelation, there is that unique act of loving communication. God out of mere love takes the initiative to communicate with humanity. This communication becomes visible in the person of Jesus the Word made flesh and reaches its climax in His passion, death and resurrection. This liminal experience of Jesus opens wide a threshold for humanity. In and through Jesus, each person of good will on his own free will can become a partner in dialogue with God.

"We are called by God. With his word, God made us. Our life is a life of dialogue. It is at the end of life that we have to respond. Here is the core of the dialogical character of our life. This is the source from which every other dialogue is born. What is Christianity? How can we explain it, if we have to do so without using Jesus? Christianity is Word. We have to say that Christianity is a dialogical religion. Christ is the supreme expression of dialogue. Even at death he cried out with faith to God. Dialogical immortality not simply during life alone but a dialogical life eternal in the glory and presence of God"¹⁹.

The personal exploration of faith is this journey of dialogue that a person begins thanks to God's initiative.

[...] Christianity has always been a 'biographical religion' in which the persons have modelled their personal biographies on the salvific biography of Jesus Christ. In such a dense identification²⁰, the initial 'myth' of resurrection becomes the confident testimony that the fragmented dialogue of life of each one will have fulfilment in a 'dialogical immortality'²¹. In the practice of this existential dialogue emerges even today a renewed communitarian identity of Christianity".²²

The myth of resurrection speaks of one single life. The human person experiences God's personal love and God takes him/her to Himself after death. The entire concept of the human person is built around the myth of resurrection in Occident. The myth of resurrection in the profound sense of the word opens a frame of interpretation of the entire reality.

Dialogical immortality is the alternative vision that Christianity offers while reincarnation speaks of an individual life, the vision of resurrection speaks of an 'I' in relationship with God, others and self. It is the context of a community. The Christian vision highlights the sacredness of life. This vision looks at the person as free and responsible before God and others. Karl Rahner spoke about how at death man becomes one with all, with the entire Cosmos. Resurrection points to the new heaven and new earth. The wonderful perfection accomplished by God, this is the final moment - the last day. This perfection is called the New Event-Christ.

Apostle Paul had a special art in dealing with the topic of life after death. He was faced with the challenge of life after death.

"It is evident that the cults that, through initiation and purification ceremonies, promised people a better life after death were gaining ground [in Philippi in Paul's time]. The cults of Dionysos and the hero-horseman had a special place near those of the Kabiroi, the Egyptian gods, and the great goddess Cybele and her companion Attis" (Chaido Koukouli-Chrysantaki)²³

The evangelists Matthew, Mark, Luke and John through their writings, present Jesus Son of God and Son of man and his work, mission, passion, death and resurrection. Paul begins with the death and resurrection of Jesus. The Intention of Paul is to introduce the members of his community into a fuller life in Christ and what he narrates is his own personal interior experience, fruit of an emblematic encounter which goes much beyond every planned personal project. Therefore to capture the depth of his narration, it is necessary to meet him at that decisive moment of his life: the hour of Damascus. Beginning from that hour, we can see Paul on an in depth journey towards Jesus Christ to the point to say: "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2:20). For him the paradigm shift began from that hour of Damascus, as he himself would narrate in 1Cor 15:3-10.

"After having spoken many times and in many ways to our fathers through the prophets, has spoken to us in these latter days through the Son" (Heb 1, 1-2). For "if it is only for this life that we have set our hope in Christ, then we are of all men the most to be pitied" (1Cor 15, 19).

This rich interior experience with the Risen Lord gives a new meaning and profound sense to Paul's life. The experiences, writes Tonelli, are "elaborated with words"²⁴ to make it into objective and consistent message. It is precisely through the words that interpret, form, organize and codify; the profound and vital reason of an experience is formulated. This fact is verified in an exceptional manner in Paul, because going through his letters one sees in him a warm welcoming of the experience with the Risen Lord, and a re-elaboration of that experience which he places at the service of his Christians to make them relevant and efficacious. The revelation of God's love in Paul doesn't remain as a private property but becomes a common property and as many people are co-involved the better it turns out to be. While the evangelists gives us an account of the empty tomb and the apparitions of the Risen Lord (Mt.28, 1-8, Mk 16,1-10) and narrates the here and how, Paul leaves the dramatic character of the resurrection at the margin and makes his interiority to emerge. So much so he doesn't speak of his experience with a spectacular style, he always gives the first place to the mystery. Only in the letter to the Galatians, when his identity as an apostle and in particular his witness and the language of his confession

of faith were at risk he speaks in a different manner: A careful analysis of the following texts will offer further insights:

2Cor 6, 2 - "For he says, 'At the acceptable time I have listened to you and helped you on the day of salvation'. Behold now is the acceptable time; behold now is the day of salvation".

1Cor 1, 30 - "He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, whom God made our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption."

1Cor 2, 9. - "But, as it is written, 'what no eyes has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him'".

A rereading and reappropriation of Col 1, 15 -20 can offer us new insights for a radical Christian response: "He is the image of the invisible God... and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross." Christ is the new event for the Christians. "The general tendency is not to neglect these widely diffused beliefs; the author of the Christological hymn responds rather positively to this challenge applying the non-Christian terminology to the person of Christ".²⁵

The Buddhist perspective of death - a permanent liminal state

The Buddhist perspective of death helps to see the liminal space and more precisely the qualitative aspect of liminality. The Great Liberation through Listening (Tibetan book of the dead), is a collection of various texts. Nirvana, the liberation is attained through listening. This is something very profound. Human beings cannot conquer salvation; it is a gift to be received therefore the importance of listening. Shifting attention to the Christian perspective the vision of Karl Rahner '***Man listener of the Word***' – the person open to listen to Jesus. In the other religions there is listening in an existential way.

In the Buddhist tradition 'Bardo' is that intermediary state of listening, the state in which the person listens to the word. According to the vision of Buddha, each moment concludes with an act of dying and rebirth. It is not a material death but 'Bardo' – intermediary state. It is pure energy like an atom. Each cell of the body will be like

the many cells that are dying and reproducing. For the Buddhists, this happens at the end of death.

'Bardo' the between the interrelatedness

Buddhism considers life as an illusion. It speaks of the Great death, death of ego – nirvana. The experience of Great Death to which the Buddhist refers which Abe Masao considers in his book²⁶:

“The Great Death represents not just that day in the future when we die; nor even the little deaths along the way. Rather, the experience of the Great Death arises with an awareness of the emptiness and inner void we carry within self. It arises as we begin to appreciate that we do not exist within the secured and confining boundaries of self. What we usually consider as self is void, for we exist not within self, but within the world and the between of its interrelatedness. The experience of the Great Death is rooted in the truth of Sunyata and the awareness that there is nothing substantially we call the self. We exist as persons in terms of and along with all that is not one self, within the mutual and reciprocal offering of the world. We come to be and in turn pass away as part of the one living-dying process we share with one another and all that is nature. This reciprocal bond of the relatedness and emptiness of self manifests dying as forming the very core of relationship. Following in the direction of Abe’s reflections, we can say that it is not only living dying as one continuum; but the living dying –relatedness manifests the fullness of the continuum. The interdependencies of the world take place as dying and through dying.

*This focus on death and emptiness need not represent a life-negating or nihilistic interpretation. To the contrary, it could be understood to represent the manner in which we live within and out of our openness to one another participating in the mutual and reciprocal give and take, offering and receiving that ultimately is world”.*²⁷

‘Bardo’ the intermediary state is one of maturation. It is a state of living dying relatedness that is unique. It is a manner of living with openness to one another

engaged dynamically and whole heartedly in the process of mutual and reciprocal giving and receiving, becoming gifts to each other. The Great Liberation through Listening (Tibetan Book of the dead) is like a lifelong Catechesis. During life all the mysteries of death are considered. At the hour of death, the recitation of the book is done in the mission of accompanying the one who is to die.

The pedagogy of accompanying the dead in the Buddhist tradition

The pedagogy of accompanying the dead in the Buddhist tradition is characterized by the following: If the mortal remaining is present a friend reads these instructions repeatedly till the moment in which blood and pus comes out from the nostrils. The motif behind is the great liberation through listening. The atmosphere around is created in such a way that the departed is not disturbed in any way and the more possible positive actions are performed. The method of instruction too has a very personal and caring touch:

“Enter then into the state of intermediary existence bardo, in which will mature or receive the salvation or the rebirth. Precisely for this it is called intermediary existence because it is a temporary survival to death, a projection which has a double outcome: the nirvana or the samsâra, or the eternal peace or the tribulations of the continual birth and death”. ²⁸

Method of instruction

The purpose is to read before the dying person what will happen, Karma – positive and negative. The dying person is comforted with the very touching words which begins with Son of the noble family, ... the moment has come for you to search a way... you will enter into Bardo - light – at the end there is peace. According to the Tibetans, the first Bardo is for 49 days. A ‘Bardo’ moment in Tibetan Buddhist terms is a specially painful and meaningful threshold.

A special text is read before the tomb of the dead person. A passage through 6 phases:

First phase: birth after death. Death is birth. To wake up to attention. What will happen?

Second phase: the Bardo of dreams. The sleep of ignorance will be abandoned.

Third phase: the Bardo of meditation

Fourth phase: the Bardo of the moment that precedes death - moment of leaving all blocks and desires and attachments ... while leaving the body composed of flesh and blood it is recognized as transitory illusion.

Fifth phase: the Bardo of 'dharmata'- abandons all thought of fear and terror...

Sixth phase: Bardo of becoming– nirvana- salvation – final liberation.

The Judgement

The person himself or herself judges one's life. It is somewhat like the exam of conscience. 'I will look into the mirror of karma' as a self-judgement. The central point is one has to bear the consequences of one's own action. Meditation as preparation for death reaches knowledge and therefore doesn't need to be born again.

When we turn to the Zoroastrianism we get another view. A person can benefit from actions performed by others. The idea of the:

*“Individual who is responsible for his or her own actions only is not at the centre of the Zoroastrianism [...] this responsibility certainly exists, and it is of great importance, but the system is much more diverse. It shows how a person can benefit from actions performed by others, how sins can be annulled or multiplied, how virtue can increase without any virtuous deeds being performed and above all how one's actions influence, and are influenced by, those of others. In other words, the individual in these texts is part of an extensive network of links that embed him in the various groups of which he/she is member: the family, the Zoroastrian community of the living and the community of the dead”.*²⁹

In her article *Seeing the Difference a Project on Viewing Death and Dying in Interdisciplinary Perspective*, Cristina M. Gillis, writes:

“The ultimate purpose of Seeing the Difference was to produce, in video, print, and on-line formats, a record that could be used in other settings where practitioners are trained to work with the dying. Our project was in

*one sense about what cannot be figured: in the words of Dr. Frank Gonzalez Crussi, one of our speakers, it was about absence or 'negative space'; and it was about silence and the liminal. As the participants learned too, however, the institute was really about 'making meaning' of what all too often appears to be meaningless".*³⁰

Viewing death from an interreligious perspective

The brief journey made with a general look at the term liminality, and seeing death and life as an ongoing liminal act has offered us a bird's eye view of how believers of different religions consider death and various attitudes that are encouraged to be cultivated leading to a well cared pedagogy of death. Death as a common question addressed by believers of each religion can and will offer us that liminal space to explore new possibilities to build up a culture of love and solidarity. Certainly, a careful discerning is required, as the frame of reference is not always the same. With dialogical religions there is possibility of entering into dialogue. When the currents are esoteric, spiritistic, theosophic etc. there should be a wise discernment and courage to denounce if needed. It is sharply evident that there is incompatibility of the Christian and other visions which remains a challenge to faith and experience. What type of a dialogue is possible? The Christian response to these ideas "must follow the method of accepting every possible underlying truth, inserting it in the Christian climate through a work of focusing the 'new' ideas around the person of Christ, socialising them within the Church and placing them within the historical background of the incarnation."³¹

A Family of brothers and sisters

Buddhism, Christianity and other religious traditions have different paradigms shaped under commitment to service and solidarity to express brotherhood and sisterhood of the human family. Other-centeredness is at the core of such brotherhood or sisterhood expressed through commitment, dedication and humble service.

"Religious faith becomes relevant to such a political process because faith is not so much a set of propositions to which one adheres. Religious faith is, rather, an act in which one entrusts oneself to God. Such trust allows one to

make the most of the gifts that come from God: love, joy, peace, patience, generosity, and self-control. These gifts shape both the content and method of caring for the body politic. [...] Individuals are never called for themselves but are called for service to others. 'Other-centeredness' then becomes an ethical sensitivity that opens the policy-maker to the merits of issues as helpful to human well-being".³²

It is astonishing but real to meet persons at a funeral or after the death of a person whom we have never met or so to say somewhat strangers to us, gifted with such a spirit to make us feel so close. Everything seems as though we had been friends forever. A sense of connectedness is attributed to liminality and death has the capacity to connect persons.

"As the grieving relatives exited with the corpse I collided with a youngish looking Sikh, complete with turban, both of us bent on retrieving our baggage from the overhead lockers. I had noticed him last night with the mourners. I murmured my condolences. He smiled. 'Oh no, he wasn't a relative. I'm a doctor and I signed his death certificate', he said: 'Of course in a sense, all my patients are my family. He bowed his head slightly and disappeared into the opaqueness of the crowds outside her majesty's Passport Control.'" ³³

Pastoral challenges³⁴

There is great need to interpret the myths of today (New Age and others). Reincarnation today is the great myth (general vision of the world – the frame in which everything else is interpreted) that is opposed to the myth of resurrection. In the dialogical dimension we can see the liturgical rites. It is so true that the funerals are celebrated for the living and not for the dead. To ensure that funerals become privileged occasion to make known the richness of liturgical rites that are symbols of faith, hope, love and mercifulness of God.

To prepare small groups of persons who can assist at the death of someone. The key point is to prepare our communities to stand by persons and not to allow the family of the dead person to be alone. We need persons who can accompany the dying and to offer comfort and consolation to the bereaved family. It is wise to prepare persons

to face death in a dignified manner. Special attention needs to be shown to the growing demands of old age in certain parts of the world.

There is need to initiate a process to motivate people to donate organs. This indeed is a spiritual service which requires a spiritual preparation. Again this is a splendid opportunity to bring forth the community dimension of our lives. The truth is that besides my personal life, I can offer something more and in this spirit to prepare families and religious communities for the donation of organs.

In case of emergency, we need to train persons for pastoral care. The vision of death as a mirror of life (this happens in the Buddhist Tibetan tradition). Each moment of life stands on the horizon of eternity. For a faithful this becomes motive for great hope and thanksgiving far from desperation. In the religions, we have mediators. Like the angels of one time these mediators are members of the community who help. Recalling to mind the positive symbols of death have proved helpful to a vast number of people. The thought of Abraham father of faith who welcomes the dead – sign of communion and community and introduces them to God is indeed a very positive one. Heaven considered as a banqueting table and in the Eucharist this meal is anticipated. The fact remains that also for a believer everything is not clear.

A pedagogy of life and death towards a dialogical immortality

The Church in her pilgrim journey (FR 2) together with the human family, members of various religious beliefs (FR 1) believes that in the end there will be the final revelation. Daily life is the martyrdom that all of us are called to face. Daily living and dying as witnesses of truth, persons seriously committed to search for the truth and courageous enough to bear testimony to the rays of truth even at the cost of life.

“Murders are limits, but martyrdoms are liminal; they stand as witnesses to us, as living promises, that the limits we experience in our lives are not the last word. [...] Martyrdoms point to a vision of the world which celebrates death all the deaths, both small and large, that limit our lives and mysteriously mingles that death with birth a liminal threshold over which we pass into an unseen world made whole”.³⁵

In his play, "Murder in the Cathedral" T.S. Eliot recalled the Christmas morning sermon of Archbishop Thomas Beckett, himself martyred at Christmas, murdered by his government.

"Beloved says the Archbishop, at this same time of all the year we celebrate at once the Birth of Our Lord and His Passion and Death upon the Cross. As the world sees, this is to behave in a strange fashion. For who in the world will both mourn and rejoice at once and for the same reason? For either joy will be overborne by mourning, or mourning will be cast out by joy; so it is only in these our Christian mysteries that we can rejoice and mourn at once for the same reason..."

For one who loves the limiting experience of death becomes a liminal threshold experience: a loving encounter and the carrying on of a never ending dialogue. A beautiful weekend that never finishes...we shall then be face to face with God our loving Mother and Father.

Endnotes

- 1 Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process-Structure and Anti-structure*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969, 95.
- 2 Victor Turner, *The Anthropology of Performance*, PAJ Publications, 1986, 8.
- 3 The first text deals with Isaiah. At the end of the threshold experience he "heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' Then I said, 'Here am I! Send me'". The second text focuses on Peter. After a whole nights work that earned him and his friends nothing trusting on the word of Jesus: "Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch" he casts his net. Behold Peter is caught up in the threshold experience. The outcome of the experience envelops Peter in a mystic rapture, he recognizes his unworthiness. Jesus entrusts him with a new mission.
- 4 Augustine, *Confessions. A. D. 397-400* – Translated by R.S. Pine Coffin, Harmonds Worth, Penguin, 1961, 1.6.
- 5 Zygmunt Bauman, *Mortality, Immortality, and Other Life Strategies*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 152, 163.
- 6 Lim Shirley Geok Lin, *Among the White Moon Faces: An Asian-American Memoir of Homelands*, New York, he Feminist Press, 1996, 155.
- 7 Soulwork, *Interview with Murray Stein by John Powell* in <http://www.jungatlanta.com/stein2.html>

- 8 Cf. Second Vatican Council documents. The *Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (Nostra Aetate)* NA, 1.
- 9 Fuss Michael, *Una fenomenologia del sincretismo contemporaneo, la reinterpretazione delle idee orientali nei movimenti occidentali* in *Religioni E Sette Nel Mondo* 1/1997, 70.
- 10 Cf. Massimo Introvigne, *Reincarnazione e Nuove Religioni*, in *La Sfida delle Reincarnazione*, Massimo Introvigne (a cura) Milano, effedieffe, 1993, 44.
- 11 E. D. Walker, *A Study of Forgotten Truth*, London, Ward, 1888, 11.
- 12 Fuss Michael, *A Phenomenology of Contemporary syncretism the reinterpretation of oriental ideas in Western movements (Summary)* in *Religioni E Sette Nel Mondo* 1/1997, 225.
- 13 Fuss Michael, *Una fenomenologia del sincretismo contemporaneo, la reinterpretazione delle idee orientali nei movimenti occidentali* in *Religioni E Sette Nel Mondo* 1/1997, 66.
- 14 Gananath Obeyesekere, *Medusa's Hair; An Essay on Personal Symbols and Religious Experience*, London, The University of Chicago Press, 1981, 101.
- 15 Fuss Michael, *L'idea della Reincarnazione nella Storia delle Religioni*, Pontificia Università Gregoriana, Dispensa, 2003, 8, n°4 la 'mappa geografica' dell'aldilà.
- 16 Gerdien Jonker, *The Topography of Remembrance The Dead, Tradition & Collective Memory in Mesopotamia*, The Netherlands, Brill, 1995, 187-211.
- 17 Gerdien Jonker, *The Topography of Remembrance The Dead*, 87-88.
- 18 Fuss Michael, *Una fenomenologia del sincretismo contemporaneo*, 85.
- 19 Fuss Michael, Una 'Ars moriendi' cristiana? La sfida dell'evangelizzazione, from notes taken down in class
- 20 Cf. 1Cor 13,12
- 21 Ratzinger J, *Eschatologie- Tod un ewiges Leben*. Regensburg 1978, 127 ss; G. Nachtweil, *Dialogische unsterblichkeit*, Leipzig, 1986.
- 22 Fuss Michael, *Una fenomenologia del sincretismo contemporaneo*, 86-87.
- 23 Jack T. Sanders, *Charisma, Converts, Competitors, Social and Sociological Factors in the Success of Early Christianity*, London, SCM Press, 2000, 1.
- 24 Tonelli Riccardo, *Chiesa Locale, gruppi, movimenti e catechesi* in *Note di Pastorale Giovanile* XXII (1988) 4, 24.
- 25 Fuss Michael, *Una fenomenologia del sincretismo*, 81.
- 26 Abe Masao, *Zen and Comparative Studies*, ed. Steven Heine, Honolulu University of Hawaii Press 1997, 38-41; 178-79.