



## **The Missing:**

**Action to resolve the problem of people unaccounted for as a result of armed conflict or internal violence and to assist their families**

### **Mourning process and commemoration**

#### **Report and recommendations**

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**Drawn up under the direction of Yvan Droz, Doctor of Ethnology, associate professor at the Geneva Graduate Institute of Development Studies (IUED),**

**In cooperation with Sylvain Froidevaux, Doctor in Social Sciences, commissioned by the IUED**

#### **Mission statement**

**The aim** is to heighten awareness among governments, the military, international and national organizations – including the worldwide Red Cross and Red Crescent network – and the general public about the tragedy of people unaccounted for as a result of armed conflict or internal violence and about the anguish of their families

**by** creating and making available tools for action and communication

**in order to** ensure accountability on the part of the authorities responsible for resolving the problem of missing people, to better assist the families and to prevent further disappearances.



**ICRC**

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### 1. Executive summary

This report has three parts:

1. a consideration of funeral rites from the anthropological point of view;
2. the results of a survey conducted among the representatives of religious communities in Switzerland;
3. the results of a survey of humanitarian workers.

#### 1.1 The anthropological approach to funeral rites

Respect for the dead, compliance with the rites that are their due and the guarantee that mourning can take place without hindrance dictate whether or not peace and social order can be maintained or restored. The multitude of practices that mourning involves demonstrates why it is impossible to recommend only one kind of funeral rite. Certain things never vary, however, and they recall the essential points to bear in mind.

- Death is always understood from the point of view of a specific culture. No matter how the corpses are dealt with, funeral rites follow a ritual that often defines the post mortem destiny of the dead. Hence their crucial importance. Non-performance poses a threat to the living, to the dead and to the relationship that may exist between them.
- Although they follow a “cultural” matrix, funeral rituals vary widely from one (sub)group and one event to another. One culture may practice a broad variety of rituals. Familiarity with the customs of one group involves the risk that they will be stereotyped. Ethnographic knowledge therefore does not suffice; it must be associated with the immediate local reality.
- Failure to respect prescribed funeral rites – something that happens all too often in conflict situations – is tantamount to “killing” the dead by denying them a hypothetical afterlife. Often, the dead become evil spirits that haunt the living.

Social practices are grounded in a representation of the world in which they find support, justification and meaning. Understanding funeral rites requires knowledge – even if only superficial – of the symbolic universe in which those rites are encased.

Funeral rites are not just a means of appeasing the dead and soothing the living, or of classifying or honouring the dead. They are rites of passage that “serve” to reproduce the group and to establish a new status, but that is not their only function. While it is true that they express the value system of a specific society or group and renew an entire symbolic world, they also – above all? – represent the moment at which a set of social relations and networks is regenerated. They are the circumstance in which conflicts between families or groups break out and are sometimes resolved. In a situation of war, death can be used as a symbolic weapon, to provoke, humiliate and annihilate the enemy.

Funerals classify individuals according to the type of death they suffered and the lives they led. Establishing the cause of death is crucial for the deceased, the family and the group as a whole. In general, posterity will remember the dead as they are depicted by the funeral rites, which can crown a life of fulfilment, honour a personal sacrifice for the nation, cast opprobrium on a thief, stir hatred for a murderer or witch. Death is often a pivotal point in life.

#### 1.2 Survey among the representatives of religious communities in Switzerland

For the religious representatives consulted during the survey, death is not an end in itself. The eschatological concepts they mentioned speak of an eternal afterlife, the resurrection of the body (in monotheistic religions), reincarnation in Asian religions (Hinduism, Buddhism), and conversation with the spirits of the dead (Haitian Vodoo).

Although they are extremely diverse, the underlying meaning of funeral rites does not differ substantially from one religion to another. The idea is to accompany the dead, to bid them a final farewell, to show respect for those on the point of death and for their bodies, to enable them to move serenely on to the Beyond or to facilitate reincarnation. At the same time, the relatives mark the separation by starting to mourn, a process that will go through successive phases until everyday life is resumed. The circle of friends and relations, the next-of-kin, the community show their solidarity and gather round the dead to reaffirm the group’s ties and values. According to the religious figures consulted, the purpose of funeral rites and memorial services is to remind everyone that their presence on earth is passing, to underscore the primacy of spiritual over material concerns, and to recall everyone to their responsibilities as the members of a faith.

At the same time, funeral rites draw a line between the living and the dead. While all the religions surveyed affirm that there is a bond between the two, the funeral rites sometimes reflect the determination to preserve the living from the danger represented by the bodies of the dead, as though death were in some way impure. Hence the significance of how the body is laid out, the prohibitions imposed on the family, the requirement to incinerate or bury the body in a place set aside for that purpose. In addition, friends, relations and the clergy stand by those in

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mourning. They share their pain and remain with them during the mourning period, reiterating that physical death does not spell the absolute end. All the religions consulted hold that life is a victory over death.

### 1.3 Survey of humanitarian workers

The humanitarian workers to whom it falls to transmit information to the families of missing persons are faced with a number of problems and difficulties. They bring the news of death, with or without a body. Expatriates come up against reactions that are often virulent and sometimes hard to bear. It is not uncommon for the next-of-kin not to accept the news of death until they have seen the body. Humanitarian workers are faced with people suddenly deprived of all hope of ever seeing a loved one again. They must answer two questions:

- a) how can they transmit the information as smoothly as possible, in a manner that does not offend the people or families concerned;
- b) how can they make the information credible (in the absence of a corpse) on the basis of only an oral or written statement (death certificate)?

Moreover, it is a daunting task in time of conflict to mobilize the resources required and call on the solidarity of family and friends to organize a decent funeral (even for families in possession of the body).

Helping grieving families therefore implies:

- a) maintaining intact a social fabric worn thin by violence and war;
- b) contact with local associations;
- c) active cooperation with associations of the families of missing people or of war victims.

The relationship with other human beings and their suffering is often a major source of psychological stress for humanitarian workers: how are they to strike the balance between empathy for the victims – which means to some degree identifying with them – and maintaining the detachment required to cope with the atrocities of war while fulfilling the objectives of their humanitarian mission?

Based on the experience of humanitarian workers, it can be said that certain precautions must be taken to keep them from identifying unreservedly with the victims while remaining open to the victims' distress and understanding of their needs.

## 2. Recommendations

- Propose, do not impose help or assistance.
- Respect people's convictions and private sphere.
- Respect symbolic spaces (sacred or forbidden places).
- Between giver and recipient there is a relationship of power (domination by the former, dependency and submission for the latter).
- In all circumstances, stay calm.

### 2.1 Facilitating the mourning process

Because the mourning process is also a process of social reconstruction, humanitarian organizations must facilitate it by:

- cooperating with all the forces within a given society;
- supporting local associations, especially associations of wives or families of missing persons;
- helping the families organize the funerals of next-of-kin and enabling them to grieve;
- preventing psychological impediments to mourning that lead to despair, depression or withdrawal.

### 2.2 The political authorities and the belligerents

The political authorities and the belligerents must be required:

- to guarantee that the civilian population can perform funeral rites in keeping with religious and personal convictions;
- to acknowledge that the mutilation of human remains and failure to respect the dead is a grave matter;
- to do everything in their power to find, identify and return to the families the remains of those killed in combat;
- to recognize the specific rights of the families of missing persons and of the victims of unjust treatment.

### 2.3 Humanitarian workers

- Expatriates have an ambiguous image:
  - a) on the one hand, they represent wealth, power, exploitation, arrogance;
  - b) on the other, they embody progress, human rights, humanitarian aid;
  - c) they are part of the stakes in local power struggles and may be used as instruments.
- The symbols of the ICRC:
  - a) the red cross and the red crescent also have strong religious connotations;
  - b) the red and white car is a symbol of life but also at times a harbinger of death.
- Foster dialogue, exchange, transparency, cooperation with the local population, the victims, the families and the associations that represent them.
- Acknowledge the limits to humanitarian action and reaffirm its values and principles (tolerance, openness, equality, justice, etc.).

### 2.4 The representatives of what is sacred

- The role of those who represent what is sacred is to provide support to, stand by and counsel families in mourning.
- In some religions, the complexity or dangerous nature of funeral rites renders the presence of a religious official or someone conversant with those rites indispensable if they are to be performed properly.
- Sometimes, the clergy can be replaced by a laymen trained by the clergy or by a respected figure who has a sound knowledge of the prayers and sacred texts (Islam, Judaism).

### 2.5 Funeral rites and the mourning process

- Ask for support and advice from village or religious officials (clerics, village chiefs, police officers, teachers) who are not stakeholders in the conflict.
- Listen to local employees (field officers, nurses), local groups (the local authorities, associations, radio stations, etc.) while remaining alert to the possibility of manipulation.
- Do not be too quick to close the files on missing persons the families still hope to locate: closing a file is tantamount to "killing" the missing relative.

#### 2.5.1. The final moments

- Stay with the dying person during the final moments: dying alone is often considered the worst of fates.

#### 2.5.2. Announcing death

- Avoid any appearance of casualness or flippancy when announcing a death.
- Avoid any sudden announcement that a loved one has died.
- Get in touch with the persons concerned discreetly and avoid the presence of onlookers or children when announcing the death.
- Avoid speaking first with the deceased's mother or wife; first contact a man in the family, a not-too-distant relative or a person that has the family's trust.
- Listen to the families, reply to their demands even if they seem incongruous.
- Take along a nurse or a psychologist able to cope with the crises and trauma brought on by the announcement of death.
- Ask the representatives of associations of the families of missing persons to be present when the announcement is made.
- Debrief humanitarian workers on the spot.

#### 2.5.3. The funeral

- There are usually three parts to the funeral: removal of the body (from the home or from the morgue); the funeral service (at the church, mosque, etc.), and the burial or cremation (at the cemetery, the site of incineration).
- The procession for transporting the body to its final resting place (funeral procession) usually has a specific order that it would be unwise to change.

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- The funeral is an opportunity to bid a final farewell to the deceased, to say prayers or sing sacred songs, to read an eulogy.
- During the funeral, people are sometimes publicly accused of having brought about the death (witchcraft).
- The dead person's name is emotionally and symbolically charged. In some places it must be spoken, in others it is forbidden to do so.

### 2.5.4. Graves and cemeteries

- Graves and cemeteries are often places of quiet contemplation for those in mourning.
- The grave can be an imposing and ornately decorated tomb, but the religious figures consulted recommend simplicity. In some religions, it is not necessary and may even be ill-advised to write the person's name on the grave. The grave must always, however, be clearly recognizable as such.
- Certain religions underscore the importance of denominational cemeteries.
- The grave must sometimes be oriented in a specific direction.
- Coffin are in some cases obligatory, but they are not systematically recommended; in the absence of a coffin, the corpse is wrapped in a white or beige cotton shroud.
- The fact that someone has been buried away from home or did not receive a decent funeral can be considered a curse.

### 2.5.5. Death in exceptional circumstances

- Death in exceptional circumstances (in an accident, by murder, drowning, poisoning, suicide, as a result of a curse) is often considered a bad omen and can be the subject of special rites (incantations, a request for mercy).
- Sensational declarations and allusions to the scandalous nature of the deceased's death or life are to be avoided.

### 2.5.6. The corpse and mutilations

- Respect the remains; they are part of the deceased person and as such are in some way sacred. To mutilate them is desecrate them.
- Collect the parts of the body that make up the whole person. If the body has been seriously mutilated, call on a cleric to bear witness to the fact and perhaps to say a blessing or a prayer for mercy.
- The body is often laid out by specialists following specific requirements (concerning the products to be used, the number of ablutions, etc.).
- In some religions, the body is displayed: it must be carefully prepared and dressed.
- The body must never be presented naked.
- If the corpse has been mutilated, the mutilations must so far as possible be hidden.

### 2.5.7. Missing persons

- As a rule, no funeral services are held for missing persons; at the family's request, however, a ceremony may be held or prayers said.
- In some cases, a funeral is held even if there is no body. In such cases, the deceased is represented symbolically.
- In most of the religions surveyed, ceremonies are held or prayers said to commemorate the missing person.
- In the absence of the body, the families can sometimes be convinced that death has occurred – and start the mourning process – by witness accounts or death certificates.
- The spouse's remarriage is in some cases governed by religious jurisprudence, but most religions apply the country's civil law.

### 2.5.8. Collective funerals

- Collective funerals must remain the exception rather than the rule.
- The rites and prayers are in principle the same as for individual funerals.
- Each deceased person should be mentioned by name and in a separate prayer.
- If possible, each body should be buried separately.



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### **2.5.9. Anniversaries and memorial services**

- All the religions surveyed for this report mark the anniversary of death, except Sunni Islam (Wahhabi).
- The phases in the first year of mourning are sometimes marked by memorial services.
- The cult of the dead or of ancestors can involve domestic or community rites and celebrations.
- Religious memorial services are sometimes combined with national holidays or ceremonies held in the memory of national heroes.



## REPORT

### 3. Introduction

**Those who are dead are never gone:  
they are there in the thickening shadow.  
The dead are not under the earth:  
they are in the tree that rustles,  
they are in the wood that groans,  
they are in the water that runs,  
they are in the water that sleeps,  
they are in the hut, they are in the crowd,  
the dead are not dead.**

**(Birago Diop, *Souffles*)**

Beyond the uncertainty governing our own death and speculations about the mystery of a hypothetical afterlife, what happens to those who leave us, to the dead and their bodies, is the subject of special attention and treatment everywhere.

There are therefore two ways of conceiving and perceiving death and its attendant rituals: from the point of view of the dead and from the point of view of the living. For the former, one would think that everything, or almost everything, has been said. It is not that simple, however, for in some societies what happens to the dead depends to a large extent on the gestures, ceremonies and prayers that the living conduct to help them find eternal peace, reach their final resting place or reincarnate properly. For the living, death marks the beginning of the mourning process, a period that starts with a loss and ends when that loss has been accommodated. Mourning is a slow and often difficult process that implies a metamorphosis, a regeneration of the social body that itself is dependent on the circumstances of the death (whether it was violent, sudden, anticipated, hoped for) and above all on the conditions in which the process takes place (support for those who grieve, the solidarity of family and friends, the symbolization of suffering, the ritualization of the separation, the capacity to transcend the loss).

The peace of mind and health of the living is a factor of properly conducted funeral services and a successful mourning process. Some of those who have passed away, however, do not seem to want to die, and come back to haunt the living. And some of the dead die twice; they are rejected or abandoned, their flesh desecrated, their remains deliberately or accidentally mutilated. They are damned for all eternity. Lastly, some of the dead are reborn, as heroes, saints or martyrs; the crowning moment of their existence occurs at the very instant that they depart from this earth.

Those who die in war, the victims of armed conflicts, sometimes fit into one or the other of these categories of cruel deaths. The missing, the nameless dead on the battlefield, those whose bodies were never recovered, are dead people who will not die: it is difficult for the living to accept their absence. And yet war can also afford a glorious end that is the pride of a nation, a clan and a family.

This study has three sections (see the appended terms of reference):

- a) an anthropological consideration of the issues surrounding death, the mourning process and funeral rites;
- b) a comparative survey of how different religions view death;
- c) a pragmatic approach to humanitarian work, based on the field experience of humanitarian workers.

The study presents a number of sociocultural and religious concepts of death and the meaning of its attendant rites (funeral rites, mourning rites, memorial services). It focuses on situations of armed conflict, internal tension and/or post-conflict periods. It must be emphasized at the outset that death, the status of the dead, post mortem beliefs or eschatological expectations, the possibility of holding a decent funeral, and lastly the conditions in which mourning takes place are the subject of widely varying attitudes and practices.

### 4. Consideration of funeral rites from the anthropological point of view

#### 4.1 Method

This section is the outcome of seventeen texts commissioned from specialists who have gained expertise in funeral rites as a result of their having studied the related themes from the point of view of a variety of disciplines (ethnology, sociology, political science, social psychology, psychotherapy) or thanks to extensive field studies conducted in different parts of the world (see the appended list of authors and texts). To those documents must be added the wide-ranging experience of the authors and their expertise on the issues at hand. This section does not summarize the contributions made, but instead uses them as the basis for a synthetic approach.

#### 4.2 General principles

An examination of the anthropological literature and the appended works brings to light a number of general principles.

##### 4.2.1. Ethnocentrism and stereotypes

First, any approach to the funeral rites of “others” must avoid the pitfall of ethnocentrism, which is often associated with stereotypes (Hostettler, Grange).

Indeed, funeral practices run the gamut from those that most resemble our manner of conceiving “homage” to the dead to those that are most dissimilar. Those that are most similar include the Orthodox and Muslim burials, which roughly correspond to how death is handled in the West (Abdessemed, Monsutti, Rey); Hindu cremations are also close, although they take place in public, in the midst of a crowd that is sometimes hardly “contemplative” (Nieuwenhuys). Among the most dissimilar are the exposure – sometimes wrongly considered the abandonment – of bodies by Tibetan Buddhists and the Kikuyu of central Kenya, the “joyful” funerals of western and central Africa, and the disinterment of bodies in Orthodox countries.

This multitude of practices demonstrates why it is impossible to recommend only one kind of funeral rite. Certain things never vary, however, and they recall the essential points to bear in mind.

- Death is always understood from the point of view of a specific culture. No matter how the corpses are dealt with, funeral rites follow a ritual that often defines the post mortem destiny of the dead. Hence their crucial importance. Non-performance poses a threat to the living, to the dead and to the relationship that may exist between them.
- Although they follow a “cultural” matrix, funeral rituals vary widely from one (sub)group and one event to another. One culture may practice a broad variety of rituals. Familiarity with the customs of one group involves the risk that they will be stereotyped, i.e. that a “tradition” will be imposed that ignores local or historical variations (Nieuwenhuys). Ethnographic knowledge therefore does not suffice; it must be associated with the immediate local reality.
- Failure to respect prescribed funeral rites – something that happens all too frequently in conflict situations – is tantamount to “killing” the dead by denying them a hypothetical afterlife. Often, the dead become evil spirits that haunt the living.

##### 4.2.2. The social function of funeral rites

Secondly, funeral rites obey a general social logic. They can be interpreted in the light of two categories.

###### 4.2.2.1. Rites of passage

Van Gennep, the well-known French folklorist, developed a general theory of rituals (van Gennep, 1909) by establishing the major principles on which numerous rituals are apparently based. There are three periods in the rites of passage that structure human life and organize its phases. A separation period, during which candidates are removed from the group to which they belong; a marginal or liminal period, which is often dangerous and which places them in a sort of no-man’s land; and a period of reincorporation into the group with a new status.

Many funeral rites follow this schema, which can be applied to the rite itself or to the entire period of mourning.

- Death is sudden, and the deceased's next-of-kin are separated from the living. They are prohibited from doing certain everyday things, are sometimes kept in seclusion, have to behave in a certain way, may be considered to bear the miasma of death, etc.
- The separation swiftly becomes liminality, either during the funeral rite itself or during the period of mourning. Those in mourning wear special clothes, their bodies are marked, they act in a singular way that is indicative of their status and keeps them out of mainstream society.
- At the end of the mourning period, a ceremony enables the mourners to be reincorporated into the group: they can remarry, choose from a wider range of clothes, etc.

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### 4.2.2.2. Oblation, separation, reintegration and commemoration

Louis-Vincent Thomas (1) proposes (Thomas, 1985) a slightly different series of phases.

#### 1) The rites of oblation

They “frame” the phase during which death occurs. Indeed, oblation (2) consists in giving those on the point of death the best possible care. Allowing someone who is about to be executed to pray, to meet with a religious official or to smoke one last cigarette is a basic gesture made for the purpose of reintegrating those who did not respect the rules of the group. By performing acts of oblation, future mourners prepare for separation. Once death has occurred, the care is extended to the corpse. Washing the body is an almost universal ritual.

#### 2) The rites of separation

They accompany the separation and limit harmful exchanges between the living and the dead, which arise only when the rites are inadequate or when the death involves a taboo or “borderline” situation. In Europe, the deaths of nursing mothers, non-baptized children and criminals presented “a risk” up until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Separation delimits the territory of the living and the dead, but during an initial phase the living are also excluded. Those who were on an intimate footing with the dead (in particular widows) are therefore also the object of rites of purification.

#### 3) The rites of reintegration

Their aim is to reassure those in mourning about what has happened to the deceased and to reintegrate them into the world of the living. The solitude and precarious status of the dead is no guarantee of moral comfort. The dead are pitied as much as they are feared. It therefore seems more reassuring for the dead to join a community, that of their ancestors.

#### 4) The rites of commemoration

They herald the end of the mourning process and authorize a return to a “normal” social life. The rites of commemoration re-endow the deceased with a positive status: they no longer threaten to “contaminate” the group. The commemoration is often an opportunity to celebrate, to reaffirm the group’s values, thus turning the dead into a tool (political acts of commemoration). The group and those in mourning are released of constraints and can once again conduct social acts: men and women can remarry, other children can be conceived. This central phase of the resumption of the vital cycle of individual and collective social life is clearly marked by renewal.

### 4.2.3. The identity of the dead and the cause of death

The structure of the above-mentioned funeral rites is an important factor in understanding those rites. However, funerals are not just a social function intended to strengthen the group. They classify people by the type of death they suffered and the life they lived.

In many societies, the funerals of newborn babies (Le Grand-Séville, Morel & Zonabend, 1998) are not the same as those held to celebrate the long life of an elder (Nieuwenhuys; Droz, 2002). It is therefore important to adapt the type of funeral to the status of the deceased: man or woman, child or adult, young or old, aristocrat or slave, saint or devil. Those factors often play a decisive role in how funeral rituals are conducted. The deceased are positioned in memory, given an appropriate status and place.

The process of classifying the dead among their ancestors and rendering justice to them is neither simple nor automatic. Indeed, it depends to a large extent on the work done to explain the causes of death; this is the social construction of death that governs the work of the memory.

Thus, not all societies consider death a matter of “happenstance” or the inevitable fate of every human being. As a rule, death must be explained and the “accident” attributed a specific cause (Séraphin). In general, funeral rituals are an opportunity to point a finger at the guilty party (for example, by means of the divination of the corpse in western and central Africa) or to “punish” the deceased and the family for the acts committed by the former. Depending on the place and time, witchcraft or destiny, the will of God or an absurd fate, the desire of the dead to return to the world of the invisible or the horrible spirits that devoured them will be mentioned. In short, there is rarely a simple explanation for death.

Old people who die peacefully in their sleep can hope to see their lives crowned by their funerals. A thief or a sorcerer (Droz, Forthcoming) will not be treated the same as a woman who died in childbirth or a soldier killed on the battlefield. Death classifies people by age, sex or status, and the funeral is often the occasion to judge the dead and their friends and relations.

Establishing the cause of death is crucial for the deceased, the family and the group as a whole. In general, posterity will remember the dead as they are depicted by the funeral rites, which can crown a life of fulfillment, honour a personal sacrifice for the nation, cast opprobrium on a thief, stir hatred for a murderer or witch. Death is often a pivotal point in life.

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### 4.2.4. Representations of the world and of death

While funeral rites can be interpreted in the light of the structures described above, they cannot be separated from their symbolic universe. Social practices are grounded in a representation of the world in which they find support, justification and meaning. Understanding funeral rites requires knowledge – even if only superficial – of the symbolic universe in which those rites are encased.

Again, the diversity of representations of the world and their constant interaction with events, whether during conflicts or in time of peace, precludes any synthesis of their content. It is not without interest, however, to present some major concepts of the world, while bearing in mind the difference between the philosophical representation of the world and what people do with it in everyday life.

In western and central Africa, the world is double. The living are but one part of reality, which also exists in the invisible realm of the replicas of the living and the dead. Death, like birth, is often considered a point of passage from one world to the next. Providing an appropriate funeral is one way of facilitating that passage and of keeping the invisible from meddling in the visible world (Séraphin). The horror induced by certain funeral practices during conflicts is easily understood (Monnier): to refuse a funeral has serious consequences for the living and the dead. Those thus cruelly dispatched wander eternally and disturb the living or become slaves in the invisible world without being able to return to the visible world.

Closer to home, in Europe and the Americas, the Christian concepts of heaven and hell – with the occasional addition of limbo and purgatory (Le Goff, 1977) – give meaning to the prayers intended to facilitate the journey of the soul and shorten its stay in an uncertain place (All Souls' Day, the novena). Appeasing the dead therefore helps make sure they do not disturb the living (Rey, Hostettler, Bacqué, Gauthier).

In India, as in much of Asia, death is part of the eternal cycle of rebirth. Very few escape the cycle by becoming part of a whole (Grange, Pache, Nieuwenhuys). Strict compliance with funeral rites can help the dead break free of the cycle or facilitate a rebirth, and the pious acts of widows help them and their deceased husbands attain a form or purity.

In the Far East and in the Amazon (Taussig, 1987), death is conceived as a journey to a distant land. It is therefore essential to prepare the dead as well as possible so that they encounter no obstacles along the way. Indeed, helping the dead on their journey guarantees that they will not come back to haunt the living (Plattet).

In East Africa, the world of the dead can resemble Hades of the Ancient Greeks. The spirits of the dead travelled there to lead a "life" that only rarely concerned the living. The latter, it is true, sometimes offered sacrifices to the family's spirits, but the dead apparently did little to interfere in the world of the living.

This is hardly an exhaustive list – far from it - of the incredible diversity of concepts of death. It nevertheless serves to enhance understanding that funeral practices must be seen in the light of their specific context if the significance of the survivors' reactions is to be grasped.

### 4.2.5. On the body and "paper"

The presence of the body is not always indispensable for funeral rites (Plattet). In many cases, however, its absence will give rise to problems. An effigy or a symbol can sometimes be used as a substitute and the funeral rites conducted (Bacqué, Monnier, Monsutti). In other cases, a specific ritual or a period of time defined by custom or the law will enable mourning to begin.

A dismembered body is, however, more of a problem. It may be essential to reconstitute the whole body – at times symbolically – in order to guarantee its survival after death. In Bali, for example, concern to keep the body whole can make the living refuse to allow medical personnel to amputate an infected limb (Grange). In France, mutilated bodies no longer require identification by the next-of-kin. In order to prevent a psychological shock, relatives are shown the deceased's possessions or ornaments instead of having to follow the "traditional" procedure (Bacqué).

Death certificates can have a calming effect *in some societies*. However, for them to be symbolically effective the authority delivering them must be recognized as legitimate. Indeed, the effectiveness of a symbol depends on the institution behind it, be it the rule of law, tradition or ancestors. The death certificate therefore cannot be considered THE universal means of prompting the start of the mourning process. A bit of earth (Monnier) or the statement of a relative relating the circumstances of death (Monsutti) can be just as effective in certain cases.

### 4.2.6. Death, a uniting and a dividing force

Funeral rites are not just a means of appeasing the dead and soothing the living, or of classifying or honouring the dead. They are rites of passage that "serve" to establish a new status, but that is not their only function. While it is true that they express the value system of a specific society or group and renew an entire symbolic world, they also – above all? – represent the moment at which a set of social relations and networks is regenerated. They are the circumstance in which conflicts between families or groups break out and are sometimes resolved.

For example, in Argentina the "Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo" have maintained a form of political protest by demanding news of missing members of their families, whose disappearance thus becomes a means of reconstructing the group and mobilizing citizens (Premazzi). In Greece, the discovery of unnamed bodies led to the commemoration of the population displacements that took place in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The event enabled former

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displaced persons to start the mourning process (Rey), thereby reuniting groups in their memory of the tragedy. In Kosovo, the sociability associated with funerals was one of the last to disappear: inability to take part in funeral rites was a harbinger of exile (Changkakoti).

In Algeria and in Kenya, as in many other parts of the world, death is used to political ends. Funerals become a forum for political protest, a place to reassert power, or they provide women with an occasion to act in public and change the relations between the sexes (Abdessemed, Maupeu). In Bali, the group can refuse the family permission to bury the body in the cemetery, thus barring all possibility for commemoration: within the group, conflicts resurge when someone dies. On the other hand, wakes can serve to soothe – or momentarily suspend – conflicts. In Joinville, for example, the neighbourhood's inhabitants meet to grieve over the body and are thus afforded the opportunity to settle longstanding disputes (Soares).

At another level, national funerals or ceremonies of commemoration (for the unknown soldier, for example), reburials of famous people (the transfer of Jaurès's body to the Pantheon, the reburial of the Hungarian ministers executed in 1956) or the cult of relics give vent to feelings of nationalism. They help to reconstruct the nation or to reassert national identity. They also run the risk of sparking the nationalist demands from which many conflicts are born: death can therefore unite the group while fanning the flames of hate.

### 5. Religions and death

This section is based on a dozen interviews conducted among the representatives of Geneva's religious communities. Christianity, in the form of four of its currents, is represented by more religious figures than the other major religions because of the place of the survey. The persons interviewed expressed the theological point of view, the dogma. In several cases, they were reluctant to give specific definitions on points that religious scholars have debated for centuries. Some of them tempered their explanation of official doctrine by emphasizing what was a matter of personal faith to them. The points of view expressed therefore do not necessarily reflect the thinking of the clergy or of the religious institution represented. In addition, those interviewed expressed no opinion on the outcome of the survey or on the convictions expressed by the representatives of other religions.

#### 5.1 Defining "death"

None of the religions consulted considers death as an end in itself. Rather death is "the beginning of eternal life" for **Muslims**, "a doorway to the true life" for **Christians**, a mere change of state for **Buddhists** or **Baha'i**, an enrichment of life for **Jews**, and so on. Death is, of course, the end of life on this earth. But it is usually just a passage, a momentary disappearance or a metamorphosis enabling the being or the spirit to continue its existence in the afterlife, to reappear in the form of a heavenly body or to be reincarnated in another life, with another form, another identity.

##### 5.1.1. The origins of death

In the monotheistic religions (**Judaism**, **Christianity**, **Islam**), death became a part of every human's destiny when Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit and were driven from the Garden of Eden. The **Christian** religions are based on the premise of original sin, death being seen as divine punishment, the consequence of disobeying God. **Islam** tends to focus on the notion of transgression and repent, with God showing mercy to those who recognize his Law. **Judaism**, for its part, associates original sin with man's determination to take the place of God, with death serving to remind man that he is finite. **Haitian Voodoo** has adopted the Christian notion of original sin in a process of religious syncretism.

The Asian religions see no moral implication in the advent of death in mankind's destiny. **Hinduism (Vedantism)** considers the universe as a pulse; everything comes from the source (the womb of the physical and mental universe) before appearing and disappearing. Everything and every being that has been composed shall be decomposed. For **Buddhists**, death is a temporary separation from the body, and the being (or spirit) is reborn in another form and another lifetime. The **Baha'i** believe that death is a law of nature, of the order established by divine wisdom.

##### 5.1.2. The meaning of death

In **Islam**, the faithful must never lose sight of the fact that the life God gave them can be taken away at any time. Death is therefore never a matter of chance. On the other hand, life appears as a sort of trial period that ends with the Divine Judgment intended to make men aware of their responsibilities in this world. **Bahaism** has a similar notion: life is a kind of workshop in which to develop and hone the skills that will be needed in the next life, such as detachment, love for one's fellow beings and integrity. In **Judaism**, during their lifetimes people strive essentially to attain fulfillment while raising themselves up. Death is an opportunity to enrich and purify the being. For **Christianity**, Man was created in God's image and therefore inherited certain characteristics from Him, including knowledge and the freedom to choose. It is via that knowledge and freedom that men can hope to vanquish their own deaths.

In the Asian religions, which are dominated by metempsychosis, death is but one episode in the eternal cycle of life-death-rebirth. Existence is ephemeral and appears to melt in cosmic energy, the common source of matter and spirit. While **Hinduism (Vedantism)** focuses more on continuity, **Buddhism** highlights the non-permanent nature of all things. Both underscore the importance of *karma*, which encapsulates the idea that whatever we do in this life will have repercussions on our next life, that it will condition our next reincarnation. *Karma* therefore gives true meaning to life, beyond successive reincarnations.

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### 5.1.3. Eschatological expectations

In **Hinduism**, although we are dissolved as mental and bodily individuals, there nevertheless persists a state of consciousness, a relatively elevated spiritual form (*âtman*) that predates birth and lasts into the next life. One finds more or less the same thing in **Tibetan Buddhism**, where the dead person's "conscience" remains (in principle) for 49 days in *bardo* before being reincarnated.

In **Judaism**, the *Sheol* appears as a temporary state of suffering and atonement during which the dead person's being awaits the resurrection of the dead. The **Baha'i** believe in spiritual awakening and conceive eternal life in terms of the soul's immortality. In **Islam**, the soul departs from the body after death and travels to the *al-Barzakh*, where it awaits Judgement Day and the Resurrection, when the just will be rewarded with eternal youth and happiness and sinners condemned to hell. In **Orthodox Christianity**, the soul, previously separated from the body in death, will be reunited with it by Almighty God at the time of Resurrection and the dead will be returned to their original form on the day of the Last Judgement. The good will be rewarded with eternal life and the bad condemned to burn in hell. For the **Evangelicals**, after life one either takes the long road to perdition or the narrow doorway to life. The impious await judgement in a place of torment in which they cannot be helped, whereas the faithful, who are reconciled with God, will not be judged for they have already received eternal life. The **Protestants** and the **Catholics** are currently questioning the notions of resurrection, final judgement, heaven and hell (and the Catholics, purgatory), concepts that are giving way to an examination of personal conscience that anyone can conduct of their existence at the time of death. Lastly, in **Haiti**, Heaven is the "country with no hat", a way of saying that the difference between the world of the living and the world of the dead is a matter of detail. The dead are omnipresent in everyday life and the living are in almost constant communication with them. The Beyond, in Haitian **Voodoo**, is therefore the here-and-now, all around us.

## 5.2 Mourning and funeral rites

The way in which death is conceived influences the funeral rites that take place after death and often already before, during the final moments of life. The phases of death can be defined as follows:

- the final moments;
- the laying out and placing of the body in the coffin;
- the funeral, which can itself be divided into three parts:
  - the funeral procession,
  - the religious or funeral service,
  - the burial or cremation;
- memorial services.

### 5.2.1. The final moments

The purpose of remaining with the dying and preparing for death is to ease the passage from life to death. The dying are given a last opportunity to express a wish or to designate an heir. The instants before death are as crucial as those immediately after. Being with and comforting the dying forges bonds of solidarity between those who stay behind and those who are departing. Certain gestures reassure the dying and help them face their departure for the Beyond with greater serenity. **Catholic** priests, for example, administer the "sacrament of the sick" (where they once administered "Extreme Unction"), during which they recite a prayer at the dying person's bedside, anoint his forehead with oil and lay their hands on him; dying people who are lucid are given the possibility to confess and receive Holy Communion, which is called the *viaticum* (or "bread for the journey"). **Orthodox Christians** also administer the sacrament of the sick and Holy Communion. Certain **Protestant** ministers share the "Lord's Supper" (bread and wine) with the dying and lay on hands as a sign of friendship and compassion.

All religions have prayers to accompany those near death. The **Protestants** recite The Lord's Prayer or Psalm 23 of the Bible. The Koran has the Surah *al-mulk* or the Surah *yassin*, which **Muslims** recite to help those on the point of death leave this world. The **Jews** recite certain psalms. **Tibetan** lamas recite a prayer called the "transfer of consciousness", which incites the dying to break all ties with the existence slipping away from them, to cut all connections with the material world.

Significance is sometimes attached to the dying person's physical position. **Orthodox Christians** orient the body towards the east, from where Christ resuscitated will appear. An icon of Christ or a cross is placed between the body's crossed hands. In (Shi'ite) **Islam**, the hands of those near death are placed alongside the body and the feet pointed towards Mecca. The pillars of the faith are then whispered one final time in their ears. It is also considered important not to cry in their presence, so that they can depart in serenity. The same idea is found in **Judaism**, where all superfluous speech or frivolous talk is prohibited.



### 5.2.2. The laying out and placing of the body in the coffin

Religions attach great importance to the laying out, for reasons of hygiene, purification and respect for the body of the deceased, and generally follow local cultural customs. When the body is not laid out by specialists, that task usually falls to the men of the family if the deceased was a man, and to the women if she was a woman. In **Voodoo**, the task is passed from father to son and only the initiated can lay out the body, which they do according to a secret formula.

Traditions that originated in the east (**Judaism, Islam**) generally prefer burials without coffins, dressing the deceased in a simple white cotton shroud. They have nevertheless adapted to local custom and follow the civil laws in force. In Switzerland, for example, **Jews** and **Muslims** bury their dead in coffins (as is mandatory under the law). The aim of the shroud is to put everyone on an equal footing in death. **Islam, Judaism** and **Bahaism** place special emphasis on simple burial rites. The deceased must take nothing with them to the grave: no jewellery, no rings (although the Baha'i wear a ring on which are inscribed the words "I come from God and I return to God"). There must be no signs of ostentation or any exaggerated manifestation of suffering on the part of the mourners, as sadness too visibly displayed could hinder the deceased's journey to the Beyond. The **Christians** and the **Baha'i** bury their dead in coffins. On some Greek islands, however, the **Orthodox Christians** do not use coffins so as to hasten the rate of decomposition with a view to exhuming the body. **Buddhists** also use coffins, often simple wooden boxes. The **Tibetan Buddhists** hold that the coffin must not touch the ground until it is incinerated.

When the dead are not wrapped in shrouds, they are dressed in new clothes that have often been purchased for the occasion (**Haiti, Tibet**) or in outfits worn on special occasions. In **Tibet**, the heads of spiritual leaders who have passed away are encircled with crowns representing buddhas and their bodies are placed in the position for meditation.

Certain religions hide the remains or cover them with a shroud (**Islam, Judaism, Bahaism, Tibetan Buddhism**), others display or embalm them (**Catholicism, Orthodox Christianity, Hinduism, Sri Lankan Buddhism, Voodoo**). The **Protestants** appear to be divided on the issue. They avoid displaying the body, which nevertheless now tends to appear in funeral rites, at least in certain Geneva parishes.

### 5.2.3. The funeral

The funeral usually has three phases, each of which takes place in a different place: the funeral procession from the deceased's home or the morgue; the service at the church, synagogue, temple or mosque; and the ceremony at the cemetery or place of incineration. At each phase, and sometimes during the procession, the participants say prayers. The clergy bless or throw incense on the body or the coffin (**Catholics, Orthodox**). The services comprise readings from sacred texts. The name of the deceased, spoken during the eulogy, is important for the family and the entire community. The name and sometimes the given name (baptism name) evokes the person as an individual, what made him or her special, his origins, what he held dear, his "family", his religion, values and beliefs. In short, his identity in the broad sense of the term. The name is a symbol that stands for the person, the symbol on which the funeral rites will be based.

Between death and the funeral (burial or cremation) a maximum of three days are allowed to pass. In **Islam**, people who die in the morning are buried, if possible, before sunset, the aim being to avoid any decomposition of the body before it is buried. Religious traditions, however, usually adapt to the provisions of civil law: in Switzerland, the law stipulates a two-day wait before the body can be buried or cremated.

In Asia, cremation is synonymous with purification and hence strongly recommended in **Buddhism** and in **Hinduism**. In **Tibet**, however, certain bodies are not cremated but instead cut into pieces and left for the vultures. The sick and small children are buried, so as to ward off ill health or bad luck (see below). In **India**, monks and the initiated are also not cremated but buried or immersed. There are other exceptions, such as in **Sri Lanka**, where the Tamil Tigers bury their dead in cemeteries for political reasons.

Cremation is now also practiced in the West. Not so long ago, however, **Catholics** took a dim view of it, as it could be interpreted as expressing disagreement with the doctrine of the Resurrection of the Dead. The **Orthodox Church** continues to prohibit cremation, for the body and the soul must be reunited at the Great Resurrection of the Last Judgement. **Evangelicals** consider cremation a curse, as do the **Muslims**, who view it as an extremely serious act, again in terms of the Resurrection of the Dead. For the **Jews**, cremation is unthinkable because of the singularity of each being and the sacred nature of the body that has been sanctified by the numerous rites (in particular concerning food) practised throughout life.

Genesis states that man was taken from the ground and that it is to the ground that man shall return. The return is thus seen as the beginning of a labour of metamorphosis and purification. The practice of throwing a handful of earth onto the coffin or into the grave is widespread among all the religions that bury their dead, in particular **Muslims, Jews** and **Catholics**. **Orthodox Christian** priests anoint the bodies of the dead with wine and oil, making the sign of the cross, and cover them with a bit of earth before they are buried. The participants then throw a handful of earth onto the closed coffin once it has been lowered into the grave.

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### 5.2.4. Memorial services

There are two kinds of memorial services: those that take place during the mourning period and those that take place after it has been completed.

#### 5.2.4.1. Memorial services during the mourning period

These are services that mark stages in the mourning process. In **Shi`ite Islam**, they are held on the third, seventh and fortieth day, the latter denoting the end of the mourning period. In **Sunni Islam (Wahhabi)**, memorial services are in principle not a recognized tradition. Variations owing to custom are widely tolerated, however, and some Muslims mark the end of mourning at the fortieth, others at the hundredth day. In **Judaism**, there is an initial period of mourning that lasts seven days, at the end of which the relatives are released of certain obligations (for example, not to work, not to go out, not to change clothes). Another phase then starts, ending on the thirtieth day. The third phase is over after one year, the end of which marks the end of the mourning period.

**Catholics** and **Protestants** usually commemorate the thirtieth day and the first anniversary of death, the latter also usually signalling the end of the mourning period. **Orthodox Christians** hold a memorial service on the third day after death (Christ's resurrection from the grave), the ninth day, the fortieth day, the sixth month, the ninth month and after one year – or at any other time if the family so requests, except on certain dates on the Orthodox calendar (Christmas, Whitsunday, Ascension, etc.). The period of mourning is officially over at the end of the fortieth day.

In **Hinduism**, the mourning process has well-defined phases. The first corresponds to the incineration, the second depends on the caste to which the deceased belonged: it takes place 10 days after death in the case of the Brahmins; 12 days for the warrior class; 15 days for the third caste; 30 days for the fourth caste. At the end of that phase the mourning period is over. In **Tibetan Buddhism**, the first phase lasts 49 days (end of mourning), during which prayers are said every seven days and the first 21 days of which are important. In **Haiti**, the mourning period ends with the return ceremony, which is held on a date jointly agreed by the family and the priest asked to prepare the ceremony. Generally speaking, Haitians also follow **Catholic** rites and celebrate anniversaries of deaths.

Memorial services are intended to mark the gradual end of the mourning period, to help the relatives most affected to bid farewell to the dead. They also provide an opportunity to pay one's last respects to the dead, to pray that their souls will rise to heaven or rest in peace (**Baha'i**), and to remind the living that they are not immortal. They serve as a means of underscoring the difference between life on earth, which is temporary, and eternal life (**Orthodox Church**), prompting the faithful to do good and live according to the precepts of their faith.

#### 5.2.4.2. Anniversaries

The second kind of memorial service comprises anniversaries, feast days for the dead and national memorial services. The mourning period is over, the point is to remember the ties that bind us to the dead, to call to remembrance an event that took place in the more or less distant past and that marked the life of a family or a community. This kind of service also provides the living with an opportunity to meet in memory of the dead, to reaffirm their solidarity and the values that unite them as members of one and the same community, in the sense of *com memorare*, i.e. "to remember with".

In **Buddhism** and **Hinduism**, a memorial service is held every year on the anniversary of the person's death. In **Judaism**, candles are lit on the anniversary of death and people go to synagogue and pray to the memory of the deceased. Every year the **Baha'i** commemorate the martyrdom of the Bab, the ascension of Baha'u'llah and the death of Abdul'l-Baha, the three main figures of the Baha'i faith. Certain **Catholic** families have a Mass said every year on the anniversary of death, especially the ten-year anniversary, and those Masses can provide an opportunity for the family to foregather. There is also All Souls' Day (2 November) – which is not to be confused with All Saints' Day (the feast day of all saints, 1 November) – on which Catholics go to cemeteries to place chrysanthemums (the symbols of eternity) on graves, and Good Friday, the day on which Christ's death is commemorated. **Voodoo** believers are in constant contact with the dead and secret ceremonies are regularly organized among Vodouisants, during which they attempt to enter into contact with the spirits of the dead or to incarnate them (the *guedes* ceremonies). They also visit the graves of the deceased on All Souls' Day as marked on the Catholic calendar.

The **Orthodox Church** also holds a memorial service on the first anniversary of death and in particular on the third anniversary. According to tradition, on the third anniversary the family may decide to have the body exhumed. The bones are then placed in a special container after having been washed with water mixed with wine or vinegar. The container is then reburied with the relics of other members of the family.

The Orthodox calendar has, moreover, two Saturdays devoted to remembering the dead: the second Saturday before the start of Lent (40 days before Easter) and the Saturday before Whitsunday (Saturday being the day of death and Sunday symbolizing the day of Resurrection). In **Islam**, the **Wahhabi** do not commemorate the anniversary of the Prophet's death, but the **Sunni** and the **Shi`ite** do (on the seventeenth day of the third lunar month). Every year the Shi`ite also commemorate the martyrdom of Imam Hussein (*Ashura*) during a 12-day period that starts on the tenth day of the first lunar month. In Iran (**Shi`ite Muslims**), the anniversary of death is marked with prayers and a visit to the cemetery. In addition, a commemorative week is held for the martyrs of the Iran-Iraq war and to mark the anniversary of the death of Ayatollah Khomeini, on 4 June.

Memorial services often go beyond the purely ecclesiastical and at times take on political connotations. This is the case, for example, of national services held in remembrance of those who made the supreme sacrifice on the

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battlefield, of ceremonies for unknown soldiers, and of the “patchworks” ceremony of those affected by AIDS, which takes place in principle every year on World AIDS Day.

### 5.2.5. The meaning of mourning and of funeral rites

All religions attach great importance to the body's presence during the funeral ritual and take great care over the body until its burial or cremation. Funeral rites do not stop, however, with the preparation of the body. They are to be found throughout the period of mourning, whose duration, rites and intensity vary widely depending not only on the religious tradition involved but also on the type of death and the extent to which it was expected. This notwithstanding, the successive phases of the mourning period, the prohibitions that typify it, the ceremonies and eulogies, the anniversaries and memorial services, always aim:

- 1) to mark the separation from the dead person (or create a framework within which to say good-by, to grieve, to stigmatize the loss, the absence, the suffering);
- 2) to facilitate the departure of the dead, to prepare and lend support for their journey into the afterlife (i.e. to help them to reincarnate or return to God, depending on the eschatological concepts involved);
- 3) to strengthen the ties in the community of the living/the faithful, by emphasizing social and familial bonds (that are also at times shared with the dead) of fellowship.

Funeral rites (which include mourning rites as such) are therefore generally speaking aimed at two categories of people: the living and the dead. Depending on the religion's traditions, and sometimes also on local beliefs to which the official liturgy is more or less flexibly adapted, they are intended more for the former or for the latter.

Thus, in **Islam**, **Judaism**, **Bahaism** and, generally speaking, **Christianity**, ceremonies for the dead are intended for the living. The dead have been placed in the hands of God. The prohibitions, the ritual obligations, the prayers are therefore the means for the living to bid farewell to the dead, to join as a family in quiet reflection, to consider their own condition as mortal beings.

Of course, the deceased are not totally absent from these moments shared by the family, friends and relations. The rites also demonstrate respect for the dead. The period of mourning as a whole is an opportunity to remember the time spent with the dead, to recall the values in which they believed. The mourners remain bonded to the dead at the same time as they prepare to live without them.

Funeral rites make it possible to express and circumscribe the pain felt at the loss and to transcend it by means of symbolic gestures and prayers, and a certain asceticism. For example, in **Iran**, **Shi'ite Muslims** once tore off part of their clothes (the collars of their shirts) to symbolize the break. The **Jews** also do this, in addition to establishing numerous prohibitions concerning dress (the mourners may not change their clothes for the first seven days of the mourning period, nor may they wear leather or shoes), food (no wine or meat) and sexual relations (no intercourse is permitted during the first week of mourning). Another aspect is the general prohibition to work during the first part of the mourning period (the first seven days in **Judaism**). That prohibition has been enacted in law in the form of an entitlement to leave that varies from one country to another and with the relationship to the deceased.

In **India**, the mourning period is a time to break with daily routine, a time of penitence that involves numerous prohibitions: men must not shave and must wear a *dhoti* (small loincloth) of unbleached cotton; sexual intercourse, rich foods, meat and alcohol are to be avoided. Failure to meet those obligations can be considered to bring dishonour on the family and on the deceased. The emphasis, however, is on the notion of purification, for death gives rise to impurity (*ashaucha*), which again depends on the dead person's caste or degree of spiritual elevation. In other words, in **Hinduism** funeral rites mark the separation from the deceased and protect the living from the impurity that death entails (because the “subtle body” lingers for some time after death).

**Tibetan Buddhists** attach a great deal of importance to the way in which the deceased evolves after death in the successive phases of the *bardo*. The living have a role to play in the success of the dead person's reincarnation. During this phase, which corresponds to the period of mourning (49 days), the lama helps the person manoeuvre the passage from life to death and after death by reciting prayers grouped under the term “transfer of consciousness” (*p'owa*). The whole family, however, is also invited to perform virtuous acts for the dead. Thus every prayer, every charitable act is supposed to be of benefit to the dead in the difficult moments prior to reincarnation. This amounts to true solidarity between the dead and the living. In **Voodoo**, particular emphasis is placed on this latter aspect. The living have obligations towards the dead. If they do not perform the rites as dictated by tradition, they may find themselves being punished by the dead. This is why a “return ceremony” often has to be performed several weeks or months after the burial.

The link between the living and the dead notwithstanding, it is essential to reaffirm the separation between the two categories, to recall that the living and the dead are part of two different worlds. The funeral rites that frame, mark out and facilitate the mourning process are there to reassert the victory of life over death, the victory of moral and social order over decomposition and the chaos stemming from the trauma of a loved one's annihilation, a victory that the libations performed during funerals only serve to reaffirm and strengthen. It can therefore be considered that the funeral is a fundamentally social rite and that mourning is a collective event through which the community (of faithful, the family, the clan) reaffirms its principles, the bonds that unite it, its solidarity, its identity.

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### 5.2.6. Graves and cemeteries

In **Tibetan Buddhism**, once the deceased have left *bardo* their names no longer have any bearing on reality. Once they have been reincarnated, there is no longer any need to say their names. As a result, there is no trace of the name at the gravesite where the ashes are buried. **Sunni Muslims** also prefer not to inscribe the deceased's name at the gravesite, although **Shi'ite Muslims** do. The gravestone may bear an epitaph in the form of a verse of the Koran. The same happens in **Judaism**, where the grave is the preferred place for contemplation. There is no grave in **Hinduism**, because the incinerated remains of the body are thrown into the water (except in the case of the relics of monks or saints, over which temples or alters are built).

The place where the dead are buried is often of fundamental importance. Sometimes next-of-kin are buried as close as possible to home, even in the courtyard (**Haiti**), but in most religions the dead are buried in a place set aside for that purpose. **Tibetan Buddhists** believe that the dead are accompanied after their cremation by an energy (*la*) that lingers around the grave for several years after death and which must be kept away from the living if it is not to have a negative impact on the family's health.

**Muslims** and **Jews** prefer denominational cemeteries, the former in the belief that it is important for Muslims to be buried among their fellow Muslims. In **Judaism**, the grave is the place where an individual's essence is celebrated, with burial a symbolic act that recalls the spiritual dimension of the being and its identity. In that respect, cemeteries are a matter of both spiritual and political concern.

Except in the case of **Orthodox Christians**, it is not necessary to have a member of the clergy conduct the funeral service. In the **Catholic Church**, the presence of a priest is required only if the Eucharist is celebrated. The same holds true for the **Protestant Church**. The **Baha'i** have no clergy. Their funeral services are conducted by the representatives of the local Spiritual Assembly. **Judaism** does not require the presence of a rabbi, nor **Islam** that of an imam. The clergy can be replaced by well-informed and sensitive people who are familiar with the prayers to be said and able to explain their meaning.

### 5.3 Death in exceptional circumstances

The term "death in exceptional circumstances" refers to death by accident, murder, drowning, poisoning, curse, suicide and illnesses such as AIDS, and does not involve the notions of "good / bad death" that leads to confusion when the topic is discussed with religious figures.

Indeed, the concept of good or bad death varies considerably from one religion and even from one generation to another. In the **Christian** tradition, for example, a good death tended to be one in which death came slowly and was anticipated, for which one had had ample time to prepare. By the same token, in **Judaism** a good death came after a long illness during which the dying person was helped and surrounded by family. In **Islam**, there is nothing worse than dying alone, but to die of a disease, even AIDS, is no shame and is not considered a form of divine punishment. In secularized societies, however, a good death tends to be one that happens suddenly and quickly, without suffering, one that takes everyone by surprise and leaves no time to realize what is happening.

In the monotheistic religions there are no specific rites when death occurs in exceptional circumstances. There is, for example, no ceremony to ward off evil spirits. During the funeral God's forgiveness is requested, but so it is for all believers. The **Orthodox Church** does have an annual service (performed on the second Saturday before the beginning of Lent) dedicated to the memory of those who died in another country, at sea, in the desert, in the mountains, as a result of an epidemic or famine, in the course of battle, etc., and who were not given a decent funeral. In addition, the Orthodox Church refuses to hold funeral services for (acknowledged) suicides. The act of killing oneself is considered an unforgivable sin. The same fate awaits "hypocrites" – those who profess to be Muslim but are not – in **Islam**, as in the case of Iranian counter-revolutionaries. Not only are they not buried alongside other Muslims, during the funeral God is not asked to show them mercy but rather to curse them.

In **Tibet**, there are several rites for warding off an evil spirit or preventing certain kinds of deaths from reoccurring in the same family. For example, the bodies of men who die with no descendants are walled into their homes. There are also special prayers and rites for those who have been murdered, to ensure that other members of the family do not die three days later. In **Haiti**, deaths in exceptional circumstances are associated with the living-dead who haunt all society and condition the rituals surrounding the burial of the "deceased". At the least suspicion, an object is placed in the deceased's hand before he is buried in the grave. He will throw that object at the head of whoever comes to fetch him, turning that person into a "zombie" or "living-dead slave". Sometimes the vital organs (brain, heart, intestines) are removed before the body is buried to make sure the deceased is indeed dead.

### 5.4 The mutilation of corpses

Mutilations are condemned in monotheistic religions because of the sacred nature of the body and the dogma of the Resurrection. In **Islam**, which recommends burial without a coffin, great care is taken to ensure that the earth covering the shroud does not crush the body and that the body can therefore decompose properly. In **Judaism**, if the body has been mutilated (for example during an attack), it is not prepared but rather buried in the same clothes so as not to insult the person and the body any further. The same procedure is followed for **Muslim** martyrs who die in battle, during a  *jihad* , so that they can present themselves before God with their blood, thereby ensuring automatic forgiveness of their sins.

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Generally speaking, in **Islam** any mutilated body is buried with no particular ceremony. It is however, imperative to collect the pieces of a dismembered body and to bury them together. Even a tooth that fell from the dead person's mouth must be placed in the grave. If pieces of the body are found after the burial, they must be **buried next to the remains, which must be neither touched nor disinterred**. If only part of the body is left, such as an arm or a leg, the same ceremonial and burial procedures are followed as for an entire body. In **Islam**, exhumations are prohibited and considered a desecration. They can, however, be authorized for legal or humanitarian purposes (to identify and repatriate the body of a soldier). To that end, the legal opinion of an imam must first be obtained.

**Christians** also take a dim view of mutilated bodies. Autopsies, dissection and the donation of organs are tolerated, on condition that the body is treated with due respect. Mutilated bodies tend not to be publicly displayed, and the pieces are put together again so as to dissimulate the mutilation as best as possible. In **Hinduism** and **Buddhism**, the same procedures are followed for the remaining part(s) of the body as for the whole body.

### 5.5 Missing persons

The position of the religions with respect to missing persons must be viewed from two angles:

- the rites intended specifically for the missing person and the family, i.e. the person from whom no news has been had for a long time, who may be dead or alive, to which is added the question of the spouse's remarriage;
- the rites that are performed when the person's death has been certified but the remains could not be found or repatriated.

In **Islam**, neither the Koran nor the *sunna* (Tradition of the Prophet) contains rules on missing persons. There are, however, rules of jurisprudence relating to the different Islamic traditions. The civil codes of most Muslim countries draw on that jurisprudence to define the notion of "missing person" and its legal repercussions. Generally speaking, **Sunni Muslims** declare persons of whom there is no news dead after four years, a period that is extended to seven years in Iran (**Shi'ite Muslims**), unless the Islamic authorities decide otherwise in a decree (*fatwa*). In that case, the waiting period can be reduced. The spouse can also request a divorce, and can remarry four months and ten days after the divorce. No funeral rite is performed until the death of the missing person has been confirmed or decreed.

In **Judaism**, no rites are performed until the death of the missing person has been established with certainty. When all avenues have been exhausted, the next-of-kin "interiorize the despair that they will not find the person" and the funeral is performed prior to the beginning of mourning. The same holds true for the remarriage of the spouse. The decision to permit remarriage is governed by law, but the rabbi also has a say. The **Christian churches** have no rite specifically for missing people, but funerals are not held for them. The **Catholic Church** is not opposed to holding a ceremony to mark the end of the waiting period, in order to bring the matter to a close and allow the family to grieve. A divorce can also be requested after a certain time, as the Church follows civil legislation in that respect. For the **Orthodox Church**, a divorce can only be decreed after a waiting period established by the local church. The waiting period is seven years in Cyprus, for example, and ten years in Lebanon.

**Hindus** gather as a family to say prayers in memory of the missing person, but no funeral rites are performed without a body. The spouse can remarry without having to obtain a divorce. The matter is negotiated within the family. **Theravada Buddhists** (Sri Lanka) perform no funeral rites if there is no news of the missing person. Remarriage is an individual or family decision taken after one year. The issue is thornier for **Tibetan Buddhists**. In the first place, people disappear because they have been lured by spirits to the mountains. Such people are not dead but enslaved by the spirit. Hence no funeral rites are conducted; instead rituals are performed to ward off the spirit and rescue the person from its clasp. Certain lamas have second sight and know whether missing people are still alive or not, where they are and what they are doing. If no news is had of them, prayers are said and mourning begins. Spouses are free to decide when they want to remarry.

Second situation

In **Sunni Islam**, when death has been certified but the body not found, the "prayer for the absent" is usually said once the person's death has been established with certainty. There is no real funeral service. In **Shi'ite Islam** (Iran), a funeral service can be held without the body once death has been established with certainty. A memorial is sometimes built to hold the deceased's personal belongings. In **Judaism**, once death has been certified and all hope of finding the dead person is gone, the ritual of mourning and affliction can begin. There is no burial without a body, but sometime a stone bearing the dead person's name is placed in the cemetery, a kind of memorial that was frequently used for victims of the *Shoah*. The **Christian churches** hold no funerals in the absence of the body, but a ceremony can be performed or prayers said in memory of the dead, in order to help the family grieve.

**Hindus** perform no funeral rites in the absence of the body, although the family can say prayers. If a person dies far from home and the body cannot be returned to the family, the family purifies itself by means of a ritual bath. In Sri Lanka (**Theravada Buddhism**) the funeral rite is performed as though the body were present, but there is no incineration. The body can be replaced by a picture of the deceased. In Tibet (**Vajranaya Buddhism**) specific prayers are said – even at a distance – for the body to receive a normal burial. In **Haiti**, a funeral held in the absence of the body is barely conceivable since it is believed that the person can one day return.

### 5.6 Collective funerals

All the religions recommend that, whenever possible, individual funerals be held. Of course, collective funerals can be held in very specific cases (such as disasters, attacks, massacres), when the bodies cannot be identified or the event has national significance. From the liturgical point of view the rite tends to be unchanged. The majority of those consulted nevertheless emphasized that collective funerals must be the exception rather than the rule. Moreover, when collective funerals take place the families tend to ask for a more intimate ceremony at the same time (1). Not only do the families feel the need for privacy, there is a spiritual need to ensure every dead person has an individual funeral, because of his or her singularity and the unique nature of the individual soul or spirit and afterlife.

While the funeral service can be public, the actual burial, incineration or passage to another world is part of the deceased person's destiny. Hence, in **Judaism**, for example, the bodies or human remains of those killed in an attack or a disaster must be identified so that they can be individually buried. Only if they cannot be identified are they buried in a common grave; the name of each victim is spoken and a prayer is said for each. Any simplification of the rites amounts to flagrant disrespect for the dead. In **Haiti**, when a pregnant woman dies, she and the foetus are buried separately. If a couple dies, one ceremony is held but they are buried in separate graves. In **Islam**, one shroud and one gravestone is used for each dead person, but one funeral prayer can be used for all (**Shi'ite** and **Sunni Muslims**). In **Hinduism** and **Buddhism**, the concept of *karma* renders any confusion between individual destinies impossible, even though the singularity of the individual tends to be erased in the cycle of successive reincarnations.

### 5.7 Conclusion

In strongly secularized societies, people nevertheless turn to religion when faced with death (their own, that of a friend or relative). Death is a break (both figuratively and literally) in the continuity of existence, and thus also a break in the daily routine that prompts a return to spiritual values. To aid and comfort someone in their despair remains a sacred act. It requires sensitivity and inner strength to share someone's pain and not be overcome by it. Religious figures, thanks to their faith and their knowledge of sacred texts, can help in such moments, by offering a ritual and liturgical framework in which to express and transcend feelings of pain and loss.

## 6. Survey of humanitarian workers

Nine interviews lasting about two hours each with people who had worked for one or several humanitarian agency/ies in regions affected by conflict serve as the basis for this survey of the humanitarian mission when confronted by death and the grief of families who have lost someone in war or in a situation of internal violence. As it would have been impossible to deal with all the problems encountered by humanitarian workers in the field, the authors opted to highlight three topics, or situations, that were mentioned time and again during the interviews:

- 1) the announcement to the family that a loved one has died, the difficulty encountered in transmitting that information with as little pain as possible to the family or persons concerned and the means of making the information credible, in the absence of a body, on the sole basis of an oral or written report;
- 2) humanitarian agencies work in situations of internal violence and armed conflict, which often further destructure the social-cultural environment (families, community institutions, mutual aid systems, communities, etc.), and have to help people in distress return to a semblance of "normal" life;
- 3) the proximity to another human being's suffering raises the problem of the identification by humanitarian workers with the victims of violence and, in particular, the difficulty they have in striking a balance between empathy and detachment.

### 6.1 Announcing death

It is never easy to announce the death of a spouse or family member. It is even more difficult when the announcement is made in the absence of a body, because the family still has a tiny hope that the information is false and that the person is still alive. In such cases, the persons announcing the death may not be believed by the family. In the words of several ICRC delegates: "*They don't believe us until they've seen the body*"; and yet: "*We can't hold the information back*".

There are countless subtle variations in the manner and attitudes adopted to announce death and in the reactions to it. Muslims avoid announcing death directly and instead use metaphoric phrases such as "*God gives and takes as He pleases*" and "*He has recalled his faithful servant*". In many Asian countries, people avoid showing their feelings openly, they avoid public expressions of suffering: to do so would be to demonstrate a lack of *savoir-vivre* and to bring dishonour on oneself. In other places, people cry out their pain, throw themselves to the ground, do themselves injuries in public, for fear that they will be suspected of not feeling enough sadness, or even of being secretly pleased at the death of a relative.

In Colombia, where "*everything is true and false at the same time*", witnesses have been known to state that "*so and so is dead*" whereas in fact he has entered a clandestine militia. Any information (even official) may therefore be false. In addition, in certain contexts anything can be open to negotiation: a death certificate enabling a widow or an orphan to obtain a government pension can become a "business" matter.

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In any event, a death certificate can never replace the body. The announcement of death, especially in situations of collective trauma such as in Bosnia or Rwanda, must go hand-in-hand with the establishment of a structure for listening to and helping the mourners. Associations of the wives or families of missing persons must take part in the discussions alongside the humanitarian agencies and the political or military authorities.

### 6.2 The mourning process and social reconstruction

Mourning is not just an emotional healing process, it is also a process of social reconstruction. Fostering the re-establishment of the civilian population's social, moral and psychological equilibrium also involves talking to and supporting local associations, in particular associations of wives or families of missing persons, and working with all the forces in a society (the local media, the clergy, cultural groups, etc.).

The example was given of the ceremony held on the bridge over the Drina river, in Goradze, in July 1998, during which the widows of Srebrenica threw bread and roses into the water. The ceremony was organized by the associations of wives of missing men, with the support of the ICRC, and was highly symbolic: the Drina flows from Srebrenica to Goradze and bodies were most probably swept past under the bridge at the height of the tragedy. The women's gesture appears as a final farewell and an act of reconciliation (with themselves, with death, with the dead to whom they offered the bread of the journey so that they would at long last find peace in the afterlife).

Many women suffer the same fate in time of war (1): they lose a husband or their source of income or material support, and receive no compensation, no social or government aid. In short order they have to find a way to feed their families and care for their children while coping with the emotional impact of losing a husband, a father, a son, etc. Organizing a funeral, which is often a costly and elaborate affair, becomes an impossible feat for a woman left alone with no means of subsistence. Either the funeral is a hasty affair or it is put off until later. In the Great Lakes region, for example, many of the survivors of the massacres were in no hurry to trace their missing relatives. On the one hand, "*People knew what had happened*" and had no hope that their relatives were still alive. On the other, they had no resources to meet the costs of a funeral should the body be found. In Rwanda, the new government covered the cost of exhuming and reintering the victims of the genocide, thus offering a decent funeral to the dead when the families did not have the means to do so.

National or international institutions, humanitarian agencies and non-governmental organizations can help the families organize their relatives' funerals and complete the mourning process. Indeed, reconciliation starts by giving those most in need, the most sorely tested, the possibility and the means of burying their dead with dignity, of paying homage to them, of giving them the status and dignity of which they were deprived by war and political violence.

### 6.3 Striking the difficult balance between identification and detachment

#### 6.3.1. The "same" and the "other"

The interviews revealed that humanitarian workers identified with the victims of the wars in the former Yugoslavia. All those who went to the region spoke of this.

"This was Europe!"

*"The countryside looked like Switzerland."*

*"The people resembled us physically and culturally."*

*"When we saw old people we'd think of our grandparents."*

Some delegates had visited Yugoslavia before the war and knew the region and its inhabitants well.

The atrocities in Rwanda and Sri Lanka, however, apparently had little emotional impact on humanitarian workers.

"It's a different culture from ours."

*"The people don't easily trust you."*

*"Language is a barrier."*

The exotic setting made it easier to keep one's distance and look on events from the outside: one had the impression of "*being in a film*".

Two situations, two attitudes, that hover between identification (empathy) and detachment (emotional shield). In the first case, the workers identify with the "other-me" (*alter ego*) they resemble physically or live near to (they are our neighbours). The landscape reminds them of home. They are therefore easily carried away by emotion and melancholy, and if they do not take care, soon lose the ability to keep the distance required to realize that they are not in the same situation.

In the second case, workers can use an emotional shield to protect themselves or overcome the shock of war: "the others" become cut off from us. They are not like us:

"We never could figure out what they were thinking."

*"In any case, it wasn't the same culture."*

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*“Their culture seemed like a void.”*

Suddenly, the situation becomes almost unreal. As with a movie, one has the impression of being an outside observer, of not really being involved. A mental barrier goes up that gives the impression of protection and that keeps one detached from the context. One imagines oneself as unaffected by reality.

There is an inherent risk in each case. In the first, the worker can become too involved emotionally, suffer from secondary stress (brought on by the victim’s distress) and lose sight of the mission objectives. In the second, the temptation is to withdraw, which results in the workers no longer taking account of the impact their presence has on the environment in which they are working or of the risk they pose to themselves and to others.

### 6.3.2. Rethinking the situation

Identification and interaction are complex processes (2). We often believe that other people think like us when in fact their cultural markers, codes and beliefs are different from ours. Outward signs such as physical resemblance, which gives an impression of similarity, or dissemblance, which creates a distance and gives rise to exotic imaginings, are to be distrusted(3).

Restoring the balance between empathy and detachment implies rethinking the situations in which humanitarian workers are brought face-to-face with others and communicate with them. To do this, renewed consideration must be given to two fundamental aspects of the humanitarian mission in regions at war or in which there is armed violence.

- the relationship between aid and the victims

The attitude of empathy for the victims is understandable. But it is not reciprocal. The victims will feel admiration or gratitude for those who help them. This observation underscores the barrier that goes up between the staff of humanitarian agencies (in spite of all their good will) and the people they help. Moreover, expatriates, far from being transparent and invisible (like moviegoers) are very visible because they represent the world of power, strength, wealth, etc.

- the objective and the meaning of the humanitarian mission

Because they provide aid to those in dire need, humanitarian workers are doing a job that was once (and often still is) the remit of religious figures: to share the distress of one’s fellow beings, to succour and comfort those who suffer, to care for the sick, to accompany those who are dying, to support grieving families, etc. The point was made by a number of those interviewed: *“We’re considered the harbingers of death”, “messengers of death”*. Humanitarian work therefore preserves a close tie with religious symbolism, with what is sacred and transcendental. Humanitarian workers are considered the modern-day representatives of what is sacred.

### 6.3.3. Ritualizing behaviour and acts

Feelings of ambivalence, doubt as to the meaning of humanitarian action, the emotion provoked by another human being’s suffering and death, must be neither denied nor allowed to pervade the spirit of those who help or to destroy them morally. In spite of their vocation, the religious figures interviewed also ponder the meaning of life, of good and evil, and ask why there is suffering, death, etc. How do they, regularly confronted as they are with people and families having to cope with the trauma of death, strike the balance between empathy (compassion) and detachment? Undoubtedly by constantly reaffirming their faith, the strong, transcendental value that prompted them to take the path of religious devotion, but also by ritualizing their gestures and attitudes. Ritualization is the establishment of a framework for a relationship (mutual respect, rules, prohibitions), it is the clear and specific codification of acts and words (liturgy), it involves practice born of experience and sensitivity based on knowledge of the human soul and of the social environment in which the religious figures work (4). Would it not be feasible, therefore, to ritualize the practices of humanitarian workers? Doing so would make it possible publicly to reaffirm the ethical guidelines they follow and to promote the balance between empathy and detachment.

## 6.4 Conclusion

It is quite likely, as some of those interviewed said, that women are better equipped to deal with the emotional aspects of the relationship to another person’s suffering. Men apparently need to “prove themselves” and seek reassurance by controlling everything. Yet another person’s reaction of despair in the face of a loved one’s suffering and death cannot be controlled. Expatriates can be prompted to flee or withdraw by pain that is too vividly expressed. This may also explain the fragility of some workers when they are confronted with a personal trauma. A degree of emotional protection is needed to cope with war and to continue to care for the living. The balance between openness towards other human beings and recollection of the principles underpinning humanitarian work opens new horizons for dealing with such situations. Dialogue, interaction and exchange are essential to prevent a breakdown (in communication) between those who help and those who suffer.



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### 7. Notes

Notes from section 4:

- 1) The authors refer here to part of Marie-Frédérique Bacqué's contribution.
- 2) Etymologically: the act of making an offering to God.

Notes from section 5:

- 1) This is what happened in Cherbourg, at the funeral service for the Frenchmen killed in the attack in Karachi (8 May 2002). The families wished to bury the men in privacy after the national service held in the presence of the French authorities and the media.

Notes from section 6:

- 2) See M. Turshen, C. Twagiramariya (dir.): *Ce que font les femmes en temps de guerre : genre et conflit en Afrique*, L'Harmattan, 2001.
- 3) See inter alia the work of E. Goffmann on the subject: *La mise en scène de la vie quotidienne*, Paris, Ed. de Minuit, 1979 (2 vols.); and F. Affergan: *Exotisme et altérité*, Paris, PUF, 1987.
- 4) This is an ideal vision that not all religions share.

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### 9. Annexes

#### 9.1 Conceptions de la mort selon les principales religions

|   | <b>Protestant Church<br/>(Reverend D. Roulin)</b>   | <b>Vedantism<br/>(Swami Amarananda)</b>  | <b>Catholic Church<br/>(Father Guy Musy)</b>  | <b>Assembly of God<br/>(Pastor R. Monot)</b>  | <b>Baha'i community</b>   | <b>Orothodox Church<br/>(Dr G. Vachicouras)</b>   |
|---|---|--|---|---|---|---|
| <b>Definition of death</b>                          | The price paid for life, knowledge  | Decomposition of the being, metamorphosis  | Doorway to "true life"  | Separation of body and soul   | Change of state   | Separation of body and soul   |
| <b>Destiny after death</b>                          | Return to the Father / victory of life over death   | Momentary lingering of the subtle body, followed by reincarnation                        | Purgatory (purification) Last Judgement, Resurrection   | Eternal life for the just / judgement and hell for the impious  | Closeness/ distance to God  | Last Judgement Resurrection of body and soul; heaven / hell   |
| <b>Shroud/coffin Laying out</b>                     | Coffin – body laid out in accordance with local custom                                      | Ritual bath (men) new clothes (white cloth) coffin, litter                               | Coffin, new/nearly-new clothes, face made up  | Coffin, body laid out in accordance with local custom   | Body wrapped in a cloth shroud, then deposited in a coffin                                    | Ritual laying out, sometimes embalmed, clean clothes, coffin  |
| <b>Burial/cremation</b>                             | Depending on the wishes of deceased or the family   | Cremation, except monks (body immersed or buried)  | In accordance with the wishes of the deceased and the family                                  | Burial  | Burial  | Burial  |
| <b>Mourning period</b>                              | Variable, in principle 3 days   | Depending on the caste, between 10 and 30 days   | Varies from one family to another - 7 days, 1 month, 1year                                    | Varies depending on local custom  | No particular rules   | 40 days to 1 year   |
| <b>Prohibitions during mourning / what to avoid</b> | No specific prohibitions for the family – avoid prayers on behalf of the dead person's soul | No shaving (men), wear a white <i>dhôti</i> , no meat, eggs, fish, no sexual intercourse | No special prohibitions – avoid extreme formality in the ceremony, do not omit the given name | No particular prohibitions - respect for the corpse- above all do not force the family to do anything | No particular prohibitions - respect the body - simple rites - no cremation                   | Black or dark clothes - no outings or festivities - sober hairstyle   |
| <b>Role of religious figures</b>                    | Guardians of funeral rites, accompany   | Oversee the rites, guide the family, say prayers   | Help the family, prepare the service with it  | Share the pain, stand by the family   | No clergy   | Must direct the funeral service   |
| <b>Death in exceptional circumstances</b>           | No special rite   | No special rite  | No special rite   | No special rite   | No special rite   | No service for suicides   |
| <b>Mutilations</b>                                  | No special rite   | No special rite  | No special rite   | No special rite   | No rules  | No special rite   |
| <b>Exhumation</b>                                   | On request of the law   | If previously buried   | On request of the law   | On request of the law   | No rules  | Exhumation rituals  |
| <b>Missing persons /remarriage</b>                  | Civil law applies   | No rules   | Civil law applies   | Civil law applies   | Remarriage possible after 9-12 months   | Divorce possible after 7- 10 years, depending on the country  |
| <b>Funeral in the absence of the body</b>           | According to the wishes of the family   | 3 days of mourning, ritual bath  | On request  | Memorial service  | No rules  | No funeral service  |
| <b>Collective ceremonies</b>                        | Yes (disasters, war), no special rite   | In principle, no   | Yes, in addition to individual funerals   | Yes, if the families agree  | Yes, if Bahá'i prayers are said   | Given names must be said separately   |
| <b>Memorial services</b>                            | Yes, but not obligatory   | Every year on the anniversary of death   | Requiem mass All Souls' Day (2 Nov.) anniversary of death                                     | No requiem mass   | Anniversaries of the martyrdom of Bab, the ascension of Baha'u'llah, the death of Abdu'l-Baha | 40 <sup>th</sup> day, 6 <sup>th</sup> and 9 <sup>th</sup> month, 1 year, 3 years + 2nd Saturday in the year |

## Mourning process and commemoration

|   | <b>Theravada Buddhism</b><br>(Ven. T. Dammika)                            | <b>Tibetan Buddhism</b><br>(Ven. Lama Mönlam)                                   | <b>Haitain Voodoo</b><br>(Mrs G. André-Merveille)   | <b>Sunni Islam</b><br>(Hafid Ouardiri)   | <b>Shi'ite Islam</b><br>(Vahid Khoshideh)                                      | <b>Judaism</b><br>(Chief Rabbi Guedj)  |
|---|---|---|---|--|--|--|
| <b>Definition of death</b>                          | Temporary separation  | One phase in the continuum of our thought energy                                | Cross to the other side of the bridge, go to the “country with no hat” or the “country with no poverty” | Decreed by Allah, recalled to God  | Start of eternal life  | <b>An enrichment of the being; deep union with the being</b>   |
| <b>Destiny after death</b>                          | Rebirth in accordance with karmic action                                  | Passage to the <i>bardo</i> , followed by reincarnation                         | The dead remain with the living in the form of spirits  | Passage to <i>barzakh</i> , Judgement, Resurrection, eternal heaven or hell      | Passage to <i>barzakh</i> , Judgement, Resurrection, eternal heaven or hell    | Sheol, resurrection – rehabilitation of the body sanctified by the soul  |
| <b>Shroud/coffin Laying out</b>                     | Body washed, white clothes, coffin  | Body washed, new clothes, wooden coffin (crate)                                 | Ritual washing, white clothes, coffin   | Ritual washing, white cotton shroud, no jewellery                                | Washing (3 ablutions) cotton shroud (in 3 parts)                               | Washing, white shroud or coffin, no jewellery, etc.  |
| <b>Burial/cremation</b>                             | Cremation   | Cremation (burial in special cases)   | Burial  | Burial; head turned towards Mecca  | Burial; head turned towards Mecca  | Burial, grave pointing towards Jerusalem   |
| <b>Mourning period</b>                              | 3 months to 1 year  | 49 days   | Depends on the family and the deceased's demands  | 3 days - 4 months and 10 days for the spouse                                     | 3 days, 7 days, 40 days  | 7 days, 30 days, 1 year  |
| <b>Prohibitions during mourning / what to avoid</b> | Do not prepare meals, photos facing the wall                              | Avoid touching the body 3.5 days after death. Coffin must not touch the ground. | Mourning: black for the family, white for the house – the body must not be left alone                   | Avoid ostentatious demonstrations of grief (cries, tears) – no name on the grave | The family wears black; no work for 7 days, the family will not eat for 3 days | 7 days: no work, no change of clothes, no wine, no meat, no sexual intercourse, etc.                               |
| <b>Role of religious figures</b>                    | Intermediary between the dead and the living                              | Help the deceased pass on, their reincarnation                                  | Conduct the ceremony, prayers, speak to the dead  | Can advise, but not required for prayers   | Visit the family, but not required for prayers                                 | Accompany the family, explain, advise  |
| <b>Death in exceptional circumstances</b>           | Signs of mercy  | Burial, walled in   | Ceremony of return  | Prayer for mercy for all   | Mercy, except for hypocrites   | Prayer of mercy for all  |
| <b>Mutilations</b>                                  | The body is not displayed   | No special rite   | Practiced in some cases   | Buried as is   | Buried as is   | Buried as is   |
| <b>Exhumation</b>                                   | No  | In very rare cases  | Very poorly viewed (zombies)  | On religious authority   | On religious authority   | On religious authority   |
| <b>Missing persons/ remarriage</b>                  | No rite / individual or family decision                                   | Up to the spouse  | Usually left to the family to decide  | After divorce, subsequent to a legal decision (1-4 years)                        | Spouse freed after 7 years (unless there is a <i>fatwa</i> )                   | Spouse authorized to remarry if all hope lost – religious decision   |
| <b>Funeral in the absence of the body</b>           | Same rite, with a photo   | Prayers, funeral at a distance  | Impossible  | Prayer for the absent  | Prayers + memorial   | Prayers + memorial service   |
| <b>Collective ceremonies</b>                        | No difference   | No contradiction with an individual service                                     | Yes, but always buried separately   | Same thing – one prayer for all  | Collective prayer, but separate graves   | Say a prayer for each one, name the person   |
| <b>Memorial services</b>                            | 7 <sup>th</sup> day, 3rd month, every year on the date of the anniversary | Every year on the anniversary of death  | All Souls' Day (2 Nov.), <i>guedes</i> ceremony, anniversaries, saints' days, jubilees                  | No memorial services   | 3rd, 7th, 40th day, anniversaries, commemoration of martyrs, spiritual leaders | 7 <sup>th</sup> day, 1 month, 1 year, anniversary of death – prayers for the dead on Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement) |

## Mourning process and commemoration

### 9.2 List of experts

1. Albanian refugees: Nilima Changkakoti; Doctor in Education, assistant professor the Faculty of Education, University of Geneva
2. Afghanistan: Alessandro Monsutti; Ph.D., assistant at the IUED, Geneva
3. Algeria: Charaf Abdessemed; B.A., independent journalist, Geneva
4. Argentina: Beatriz Premazzi; psychoanalyst, member of the *Association suisse romande de l'Ecole européenne de psychanalyse*, Geneva
5. Brazil: Edio Soares; doctorand at the IUED, Geneva
6. Cameroon: Gilles Séraphin; Ph.D., research director with the *Union nationale des associations familiales (UNAF)*, Paris
7. Central Africa: Laurent Monnier; Professor at the IUED, Geneva
8. Greece: Séverine Rey; doctorand at the University of Lausanne
9. Human remains: Jean-Gabriel Gauthier; Ph.D., Doctor of Arts and Doctor of Science, *Laboratoire d'Anthropologie*, University of Bordeaux I
10. India (north): Véronique Pache; Ph.D., assistant professor at the University of Fribourg
11. India (south): Olga Nieuwenhuys; Professor at the Amsterdam Graduate Institute for Development Studies
12. Indonesia: Françoise Grange; doctorand, lecturer, Geneva
13. Japan: Jérôme Ducor; Doctor of Japan Studies, assistant professor with the Eastern Languages and Civilizations Department, University of Lausanne, curator of the Asia section, Museum of Ethnography, Geneva
14. Kenya: Hervé Maupeu; Ph.D., Deputy Director of the *Institut français de recherche en Afrique*, Nairobi
15. Mexico: Ueli Hostettler; Ph.D., assistant professor at the University of Bern
16. Siberia: Patrick Plattet; doctorand at the University of Neuchâtel
17. Traumatic mourning: Marie-Frédérique Bacqué; Doctor of Psychology, lecturer at the University of Lille

### 9.3 List of religious figures interviewed

Reverend Dominique Roulin  
AIDS Ministry, Protestant Church of Geneva

Swami Amarananda  
Director of the Geneva Vedantic Centre, member of the Order of Ramakrishna

Venerable Tawalama Dhammika  
Founder of the Geneva International Buddhist Centre (Theravada Buddhism)

Dr Gary Vachicouras  
Professor at the Institute of Postgraduate Studies in Orthodox Theology, Orthodox Centre of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, Chambesy

Venerable Lama Mönlam  
Geneva Tibetan Buddhist Centre (Vajrayana Buddhism), founder of the *Association d'Aide aux Mourants et aux Décédés*

Father Guy Musy  
Dominican Priest at the convent of Saint Dominique in Geneva

Mrs Mary Berdjis and Mrs Da Silveira  
Members of the Geneva Bahá'i community

Mrs Gladys André-Merveille  
Founder of the *Compagnie des femmes d'Haïti*, Geneva

Mr Hafid Ouardiri  
Spokesman for the Geneva Mosque (Sunni Islam)

Mr Vahid Khoshideh  
Islamic Association Ahl-el-Beit of Switzerland, Geneva (Shi'ite Islam)

## Mourning process and commemoration

Pastor Ronald Monot

Church of the Assemblies of God, member of the Evangelical Alliance of Geneva

Rabbi Marc Raphaël Guedj

Former Chief Rabbi of the Jewish Community of Geneva, current President of the *Fondation Racines et Sources*, Geneva

### 9.4 Terms of reference

1. The aims of the study are:
  - to provide an understanding of cultural perceptions of death; to define the sense of mourning rituals and funeral commemorations in situation of armed conflict, internal violence and/or post-conflict transition periods in different areas of the world;
  - to identify common threads amongst cultures on which it may be possible to base recommendations (best practices) regarding conditions required for facilitating grieving process.
2. To this end and according to religious/cultural tradition in selected communities the study should:
  - describe the rules, rituals or practices of mourning, and their significance for persons, groups, families facing death in situation of armed conflict or internal violence ;
  - explain the role of funeral commemorations in different contexts (socio-political, cultural, religious);
  - determine the importance of the human remains and of its identification to the mourning/commemoration processes;
  - determine the role and importance of death certificates in the mourning process when the human remains are absent;
  - analyze the situations when only partial remains are returned to the families, at different stages and/or long after death has been confirmed, and their consequences on the mourning process;
  - identify any specific practices, in matter of mourning rituals and funeral commemorations, following violent killing or not natural death;
  - determine the role of collective funerals, their differences with individual funerals, and in which ways collective funerals might substitute individual funerals in the mourning process.