1 Introduction: Death in Context

Death can often be associated with an aura of objectivity. It is considered a universal phenomenon, the fundamental constant of human existence. Certainly, what death means, how societies deal with the finitude of life, and how humans react emotionally to the loss of someone, will all vary. The meanings associated with death depend on social settings and cultural contexts: the ways in which death is articulated are based on sociocultural conventions; local legislation impinges on ways of treating the dead; the abundance of different conceptualizations of the afterlife points to the diversity of how death is construed; and even the feeling of sorrow is less an anthropological fact than a socially and culturally determined variable, both in terms of mourning and in terms of grief. Hence, the putative objective fact of death never occurs detached from the sociocultural practices that shape its experience. Death is always death-in-context (Robben 2018).

In this regard, the role of the funeral is important. The set of actions funerals entail embody significant aspects of how a social formation deals with death: how death is imagined, processed, and felt emotionally. In Germany, within the field of Practical Theology over the past decades, funerary culture has received an increase in attention. There are three reasons for this increased interest. Firstly, the large-scale membership surveys commissioned by the Protestant Church in Germany, initially conducted in the 1970s, have continuously provided strong evidence for the relevance of funerals (Bedford-Strohm and Jung 2015). These findings stimulated further research on funerals and other rites of passage. As a result, a distinct branch of practical-theological theorizing has emerged. Secondly, analyzing rites of passage has proven highly instructive. As study of the funeral not only requires trans-sectoral research integrating classical practical-theological subdisciplines such as homiletics, liturgics, and poimenics. It also points to an area of action in which the traditions of the church intersect with individuals’ religion, and the culturally circulating vocabularies of the spiritual. Indeed, life transitions can be regarded as religiously productive contexts of experience. Death in particular notoriously challenges people to ask for meaning or to deal with contingency and is therefore also addressed explicitly as a religious topic by many people (Bedford-Strohm and Jung 2015, 491). Deeply connected with the lived religion of individuals, their biographies, and cultural imaginations of death, social changes have an immediate impact on the ecclesial funeral practice. This alteration of the Christian burial as well as the German funerary culture as a whole has become a topos in recent years and is a third reason for the deepened research on death rites. Such changes arouse scientific curiosity, call for new under-
standings of ‘what is going on’ and demand the development of perspectives by means of which religious actors can reflect on their actions.

It is against the backdrop of this discursive setting in the German context, that I am reflecting on funeral practice. Such reflection is, of course, always influenced by one’s own personal experiences of funerals. In addition, my descriptions include participant observations that I was able to conduct during field research at a funeral home in southern Germany. For four weeks I had the opportunity to accompany the funeral staff and to observe how they deal with the deceased and the bereaved.

In what follows, I have chosen to emphasize the funeral practices of the Protestant Church. This, of course, is not possible without addressing the plural funerary cultures in which they are embedded. In fact, as a theory of lived religion, Practical Theology should not be reduced to funeral rites of organized religion. Rather, it has to reflect the broad field of death-related practices and to explore its religious dimensions.

2 Dynamics in the Field

2.1 Tendencies

The current dynamics of funerary culture are diverse and emerge at various levels. To gain a first idea of these changes, it is helpful to concentrate on some rough lines of development.

In the wake of modernization, treatment of the dead has experienced an increasing professionalization. An expert culture has evolved around death, shifting processes from within the private sphere to the institutional environment of the health care system; and funeral specialists support the bereaved as well. This increased contact with public institutions and professionalized agents has been constitutive of the encounter with death. Within this expert culture, however, distinctive alterations have occurred. Promoted by the hospice movement, for instance, or the rise of so-called alternative funeral directors, a kind of counterculture has been established aiming at a more autonomous reappropriation of the funeral, and a new involvement of the bereaved in its process as a whole (Lüddeckens 2018).

The institutionally underpinned ‘re-privatization’ process bears upon a further tendency in the funeral field. As with other areas of life, the ‘last things’ have also become individualized (Meitzler 2016, 138). This touches not only on the notions of death or the choice of interment, burial sites, and ceremonial rites, but above all, on the specific criteria that guide these very choices. As thanatological studies prove in many ways, a funeral is often arranged in such a way as to represent the remembered personhood of the deceased, as well as the kind of relationship the bereaved have maintained with the dead person. The funeral is understood as a practice that will reflect something of the specific way of being in the world of the be-
reaved and of the deceased. It has become an eminent medium of (post mortal) identity construction.

Such personalized funerals demand and evoke a diverse set of options. Indeed, funerary practice has become differentiated. Anyone who has to arrange a funeral today will face a number of questions when sitting in the consultation room of an average urban funeral home: earth burial or cremation, cemetery or forest resting place, pastor or religiously unaffiliated speaker, live music or sound system. This list goes on. It indicates that on the one hand funerals are less and less defined by given matters of course, and that on the other hand, the ecclesiastical funeral is located in a field in which several actors are operating.

A great proportion of the knowledge guiding people’s decisions concerning funerals derives from the media. New forms of media offer a variety of possibilities of quickly informing oneself and making direct comparisons between options. Certainly, it is not information that is the most relevant factor of the digitization of the sepulchral. More important is online communication which opens new spaces of grief and remembrance. Virtual cemeteries or social network memorials explore languages of bereavement which differ from established expressions of grief and allow for a redistribution of agency in respect of mourning (Cann 2016, 105–131).

These tendencies are connected with a number of phenomena each calling for further comprehensive studies. Hereinafter, three of these phenomena are singled out selectively.

### 2.2 Concretizations

#### 2.2.1 Funeral Homes

Within the field of funerals and funeral care, there are a number of different actors. It is funeral directors in particular who have gained prominence in recent years. Their work once used to focus on the transportation of the dead, the preparation of the corpses, and the selling of coffins, but now their range of services has expanded considerably. Correspondently, most funeral directors see themselves as experts in ritual and as grief counselors, or, as the owner of the funeral home I gained insight into put it: “What we do is actually a sort of life counselling.” The modern funeral home therefore integrates functions which for a long period had typically been attributed to religious institutions, with their practices of spiritual care and liturgies of death.

Regarding the funeral ceremony itself, the funeral directors’ “performative agency” (Krüger et al. 2005, 20–22) does not involve consulting alone. They are directly responsible for the basic constituents of the ceremony. This applies to the spatial environment, especially when the ritual proceeds in the mourning hall of the funeral home with its specific architecture and figural accouterment. This also applies, however, to the “spacing” at other locations (Löw 2016, 134–136). Alongside florists, the funeral directors create a ritual space by arranging candles, wreaths, and other ritual
items such as personal mementoes provided by the bereaved or large-sized portraits of the deceased, which are frequently placed on a scaffold next to the coffin or urn. Even though these material components do not unfold their ritual effects beyond their practical usage, they cannot be regarded as mere décor. As ritual and material studies show, place, space, and objects have an important effect on the ritual experiences of participants including their spiritual dimensions (Hallam and Hockey 2001).

The emphasis funeral directors have placed on questions of grief work not only lead to an expansion of aftercare services and a new ethic of counseling; the re-ritualization of caring for the dead, too, calls for exploration. Indeed, the corpse has been revalued inside the funeral industry. As I was able to witness at the funeral home I worked for, many funeral firms actively promote encounters with the prepared dead body and offer in-house rooms for this purpose. They account for these intimate contacts as constitutive of a wholesome grieving process and even ascribe religious qualities to them. The corpse turns into an “intermediator of transcendence” (Kahl 2013).

Although this enlargement of services cannot be reduced to economic principles alone, the practice of the funeral directors is of course shaped by the commodification of death (Akyel 2013). This does not only mean that a funeral has its price, but that the funeral field is determined by entrepreneurial behavior including service consciousness, advertising strategies, product innovation, content profiling, or customer orientation. A customer role is adopted by the bereaved, too, when they use the services of independent ritual guides and funeral speakers (Lüddeckens 2018, 112). In Germany, the number of such non-ecclesial funerals has been growing. Not least due to the entrepreneurial logic of their action, they contribute to a handling of the funeral that is quite different from the ways a traditional institution is used to operating in the funeral context.

2.2.2 Virtual Bereavement

With the spread of the internet, new spaces of mourning have emerged. They represent a broader process resulting in an unbundling of burial site and grieving place, although online memorials frequently comprise various references to the gravesite. Of course, virtual bereavement is regularly entangled with offline mourning practices (Offerhaus 2016). Nevertheless, it is precisely the potential distance from other areas of social life which makes virtual practices attractive to many mourners. Such spaces provide them with the possibility of gaining visibility as mourners even when the social environment commands the end of grief, or if their mourning is not acknowledged due to other socially established regimes of feeling (Doka 1989).

In the following, a short example will illustrate some aspects discussed in the current discourse on virtual bereavement. It refers to a memorial site S. created two days after her husband died on the 16th of October 2014. The site presents an
obituary, pictures, and videos, and allows visitors to sign a book of condolences or to light a candle and leave a message. In the context of the fourth anniversary of her husband’s death S. writes:

‘four years … / for four years you have been with the angels / and it seems to me that it had just happened […] / for you it has been a release from all of your pain / for me it has been the loss of my big love, / the love of my life / I miss you so much / I will always love you.’ [16 October 2018]

‘Congratulations on our fourth wedding day. / I hope you had a nice day up there / I miss you so terribly. […]’ [10 October 2018]

‘After almost four years you have already been living in another world, I still love you as in the beginning when we met and I miss you more with each day that goes by but with each day that goes by I come closer to you I’m looking forward to seeing you again […]’ [30 July 2018]

There are three remarkable aspects. Firstly, the language employed is deeply personal and emotional. The motives of love and of missing, which also belong to the standard discursive repertoire of traditional obituaries, where they are commonly used in coined phrases, are accomplished in an informal and emotionalized manner. This, secondly, is due to the pragmatic character of these posts. It is the dead person who is addressed; the posts stage the deceased as a direct dialogue partner. The mourning practice evident here centers on the maintenance of “continuing bonds” – a key concept in recent thanatological research – rather than alluding to a successive detachment from the deceased (Klass et al. 1996). Thirdly, in just a few words, the messages convey a specific imagination of the afterlife. The deceased is situated in ‘another world’ populated with ‘angels,’ a world with consistently positive connotations promising ‘release’ and ‘nice day[s]’ which will also be the place for a future reunion of the now separated. This topography of the beyond draws upon repertoires of popular afterlife myths that feed on Christian tradition. Certainly, these vocabularies are appropriated autonomously, and, more importantly, are not used to profess an abstracted, general belief in the hereafter, but to interpret experiences associated with the loss of a particular person. Borrowing a phrase from Claudia Venhorst (Venhorst 2013): The eschatology noticeable here is a ‘lived eschatology’, embedded in lifeworld practices of grieving and related to a specific person.

2.2.3 Disaster Rituals

The previous examples have focused upon practices which are not directly affiliated with the organized church. The third example will now refer to a field of action in which the religious institutions adopt an important function besides their classic funeral rites. In the wake of several disasters that have shaken broad sections of German society in recent years, Practical Theology has started to address the role

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churches play in public rituals following such catastrophes (Kranemann and Benz 2016).

Where death assumes the form of a disaster there is a need for social practices which allow for collective remembrance and sympathy. As well as spontaneously emerging grassroots memorials, it is through official commemorations that a society will respond ritually to a tragic event (Post 2016). In Germany, these ceremonies are mostly performed as ecumenical services organized by the Protestant and Catholic Church and frequently combined with an act of the state in some way or other. It is in this ceremonial encounter between the ideologically neutral state and Christian churches, that the specific liturgical challenges of post-disaster rituals become apparent.

Situations of disaster can call for a language in which the secular state is not versed. Churches, however, are still considered social actors with access to such a vocabulary. In the case of a commemoration which firmly addresses civil society, this vocabulary has to be converted into ritual practices appealing to a pluralized public. Gestures, singing, symbols, readings, and orations result at best in an overall context that opens a space accessible not only to an inner-ecclesial milieu but also to the relatives of the victims, whatever their worldviews might be, and to a compassionate society being confronted with the fragility of human existence and social order. It might indeed be this shared experience of contingency which induces disaster rituals. Catastrophes like the Germanwings crash in 2015 threaten the fundamental trust social life is based upon and call for a reassurance of solidarity and its meaning.

The memorial service held in the Cologne Cathedral after the Germanwings disaster contributed to this function. A small wooden angel bearing the motto ‘to hold and to be held’ was handed to different representatives sitting in the pews: to a relative representing the bereaved ‘as a sign of condolence;’ to the Spanish Minister for the Interior representing the Spanish victims’ kin ‘as a sign of our attachment;’ to the French transport minister representing the people who helped the bereaved in the French Alps ‘as a note of thanks,’ and so on.²

This act can be read as a ritualized attempt not only to assert the value of solidarity but to enact it. What had been challenged by the catastrophic event became visualized and transposed into an emotionally touching, or – to cite Durkheim (Durkheim 1995) – an ‘effervescent’ scene. Not only did the wooden angel symbolize holding by means of its shape, the people offering this holding held an important function, as ‘the angels surrounding us.’ However, and this is the interesting point here, the angel offered further symbolic traces: verbally presented as a symbol for deceased loved ones, its shape also resembled a cross. It is through the ambiguity of the symbolic act that diverse functions of a memorial service can be transferred. The shared values of a social formation are performed, drawing on symbolic images

² Cf. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wZZ3XKIy1_0 (30.11.2021)
from a Christian vocabulary to describe death, yet all the while being open to multiple interpretations and meaning making.

3 Dimensions of the Ecclesial Funeral

The ecclesial funeral is part of this broader sepulchral culture and has to be approached against this background. In particular, there are three perspectives guiding the practical-theological discourse on funerals: It is regarded as a form of pastoral accompaniment; it involves interpretative practices framing the experiences caused by death; and it is a ritual performance making the radical transitions associated with death perceptible (Roth 2007). These aspects cannot be isolated from each other; they are entangled and together constitute the process of the funeral.

3.1 Listening to the Bereaved

This already applies to the preliminary conversation the minister will have with the bereaved relatives of the deceased. For a short time, the minister literally enters the lifeworld of the bereaved and becomes a transient entity in their grieving process. This meeting will not be utilized to expound a supposed authoritative meaning of the funeral, or to advise the bereaved of the stipulated order of the funeral liturgy, rather, the encounter with the religious professional can become an occasion for the bereaved to attempt to make their own interpretations of their situation and to participate in the design of the ritual.

The meanings articulated within this conversation with respect to death, the life of the deceased, the relationship to them, or the bereaved person’s state of mind, do not commonly take on an elaborated form. Instead, they end up being embedded in for example short narratives, bodily expressions of emotion and sorrow, the showing of a photograph. In short, they are incorporated in the whole practice of meeting the pastor on this specific occasion. In this sense, the entire encounter can be understood as what Alois Hahn (Hahn 1995) has called a ‘generator of biography.’ With this concept he tries to account for the insight that addressing oneself does not stem from a ‘natural instinct,’ but bears on particular ‘institutional inducements.’ These situational contexts do not only facilitate practices of self-reflection, but they also shape them. They determine their pragmatic function, semantic focus, and factual media. There are several typical structures shaping the interpretations communicated here: time limitations; apprehensions over the portrait of the deceased being respectable; the encounter with the pastor itself – who, despite his or her attentiveness and care, may well still be regarded as part of an institution; the focus on the preparation of the ritual, to name but a few concerns.

Regarding the preparation of the funeral service, this preliminary conversation is the place for negotiating performative agency. Who has the right and power to decide
on the ritual is not fixed. Rather, it has to be negotiated and renegotiated. Consequently, the agency of the pastor should not be regarded as something fundamentally corresponding to her due to ecclesial authority or social conventions. Instead, it should be regarded as something that arises from the encounter with the bereaved, through companionship and competence regarding matters of ritual. Ritual competence is distinct from acquaintance with the ready-made liturgical scripts and their implementation. It comprises knowing diverse repertoires of ritual actions, the ways in which they work in the mode of their performance, and how they can be made productive for the needs of the people asking for the ritual. Ritual competence therefore always means to work with the people involved, through the process of “co-constructing” (Kelly 2008, 66 – 117).

The dialogue prior to the funeral touches on all three abovementioned dimensions. Their entanglement results in both an encounter in its own right, experienced as helpful by the bereaved, and in a conversational situation facilitating a ritual that can be experienced as personalized.

3.2 Funeral Oratory

Discursive practices are key elements of dealing with death. The laudatio funebris has a long history involving an abundance of different manifestations (Eybl 1996). And today the rhetoric of death still ranges from obituaries to sermons, as well as postings in the realm of virtual grieving.

As empirical findings show, the funeral sermon itself can be performed very differently (Weyel 2015). In all its variations, however, it might be concerned with the configuration of three basic relations: It refers to the dead and addresses the living by combining biographical and eschatological perspectives and performing individual spiritual and public cultural functions.

Whoever rises to speak in the context of a funeral faces the challenge of articulating a specific life. As with every biographical work, this articulation is an interpretative endeavor and as such, is constructive in nature. In the interest of meaning-making, the retelling of a life makes selections, sets relevancies, and establishes intelligible relations. The funeral oration is itself such an interpretation, transforming the course of the deceased’s life into a meaningful, coherent story. As a biographic realization of a life that has come to an end, this interpretation takes place in an eschatological perspective. The funeral oration is concerned with the ‘last things’ not in the sense that it formulates a conclusive interpretation immune from being augmented, corrected, or challenged by other interpretations, but in the dual sense, that it claims meaning for a finished life and thus is confronted with the question of how to imagine a post-mortal future. Whereas traditional Christian imaginaries of the afterlife are not usually focused on individual biographies, the foregoing observations have indicated that current references to the beyond are often bound to the deceased person in question. This gives rise to the homiletical challenge of associating tradi-
tional images with the individual person in such a manner as to yield personalized eschatological images (Quartier 2011, 129–142), or, alternatively, of “reinventing” vivid and maybe “bold” images out of the biographic contexts of the deceased (Grimes 2000, 275–282).

The biographical and eschatological interpretations do not take place in a sphere of free expression but are located in a specific communicative setting. They are addressed to a certain audience. The number of participants should not obscure the fact that the audience of an ordinary funeral ritual is diverse and, above all, that the funeral is quite similar to a disaster ritual, in that it takes place within the heterogenous context of culturally circulating patterns of construing death and reconstructing life. Hence, in addition to a word of comfort for the directly affected, it also contributes to a public understanding about the finitude of life (Weyel 2015, 124). This does not mean that the oration has to loosen its relation to the particular bereavement or has to seek refuge in abstract assertions. On the contrary, the understanding about the finitude of life occurs through the medium of interpreting a particular life. The oration is at once referring (to the historical life of a person) and exemplifying (a ‘general’ that can be adopted) (Stetter 2018, 181–206). It opens a space of self-interpretation by interpreting the life and death of another and thus reflects the structure of self-understanding in general which does not consist in a monologic introspection, but always proceeds via a “detour”, as Ricoeur (Ricoeur 1991, 80) puts it.

### 3.3 Ritualizing Death

The funeral oration is part of a set of complex ritual practices. Due to its distinctive communicative possibilities, it can be distinguished from other segments of this “set of doings and sayings” (Schatzki 2002, 73). However, it should not be seen in isolation. Indeed, inspired by recent ritual studies, Protestant Theology has reasserted the ineluctable relevance of the performativity of the funeral. Through acts of stylizing, dramaturgical arrangement, and setting framing cues, a sphere of action is put forth that suspends everyday behavior and opens a space in which the transitions associated with death can find a condensed expression (Platvoet 1995, 33–34).

As practice, the ritual is thereby more than just an expression of preexisting feelings or a representation of ulterior meanings. The experience provoked by death and the interpretation bestowed on it are integrated in the practices being performed including its material dimensions: the artefacts, spaces, and bodies present.

In the case of the funeral, it is the corpse itself that ranks high in the “hierarchy of ritual things” (Bräunlein 2014, 247). Covert in the coffin or cremated in the urn, the dead body is the performative center of the funeral. However, one may assess the agency of things more precisely, the corpse can be regarded as a ‘participant’ of the funeral practice, shaping its actions as much as its actions influence its impact (Hirschauer 2004). In the ensemble of ritual objects, the coffin or urn is positioned in
such a manner that it catches the attendants’ eyes, as it is ordinarily placed in the center. At significant moments in the funeral, the celebrants face the coffin or urn, for example when the pastor enters the scene, moves to the urn, and bows in front of it. The funeral ritual often (but not necessarily) entails practices that mobilize the coffin or urn: the coffin may be solemnly processed in by pall bearers; the urn is carefully carried out maybe by one of the mourners; if the interment follows the funeral the coffin or urn leads the mourners to the burial site where it is lowered slowly into the grave.

Even this description demonstrates that ritual dealings with the coffin or urn give the corpse a special, if not sacred status. Coffin and urn are not dealt with as if they were mere wooden or ceramic containers. They are dealt with as if they embody something beyond the object: the presence of the deceased person. By means of its practices related to the corpse, the funeral ritual thus confers the deceased with a specific presence and thus produces a space in which both the invisible ‘last passage’ of the deceased and their relation to the bereaved can be experienced.

The example of the corpse indicates that it is the actual ritual practice involving discourses as well as objects, spaces, and bodies, that constitutes the experience of death and its interpretation in the funeral performance. The interpretation is not something additional; and the feelings are not simply expressed (Scheer 2012). They are inherent in the complex practical arrangements. Moreover, the example gives emphasis to the central meaning of the actual person who died. Whatever the funeral tries to provide for the mourners, whatever it contributes to a cultural understanding of the fragility of life and an imagination of the hereafter in general, it achieves that only through its relation to the death of a unique person.

4 Conclusions: The Funeral in Context

As the preceding considerations indicate, it is not only death that is a contextual phenomenon. Three concluding remarks shall concretize this aspect once more outlining some consequences this contextuality has for the practical-theological research on funerals.

As seen, the ecclesial funeral is located in a field that is occupied by various actors. There are the funeral directors, who understand the funeral as a spiritual and ritual service for the customers; there is the growing presence of independent ritual designers promising individualized ceremonies that meet the needs of the mourners; and there are the bereaved themselves, claiming authority in questions of funeral design and exploring autonomous ways of grieving and remembrance. Against this backdrop, funerals are an instructive case for reflecting on the church and its practical-theological understandings. The funeral obviously requires a conduct that is in tension with a church, regarding itself as an institution by analogy with the state. Conversely, vocabularies of market and competition seem inadequate, too, to describe the current social place of the church and its self-understanding properly.
To gain more clarity here, it seems necessary to me not to map the field by means of strong preconceived categories such as ‘ecclesial’ / ‘non-ecclesial’, ‘religious’ / ‘worldly’, ‘traditional’ / ‘alternative’ or ‘institution-based’ / ‘independent’. Rather, the field of the funeral should be researched as a common field describing its various forms, following the routes of its diverse actors, and exploring similarities, differences, and mutual ritual transfers.

As has become clear, the ecclesial funeral is situated in the sense that it is motivated by particular biographic situations, bound to the loss of a unique person, and performed in specific practical settings. Consequently, the religious implications of funerals, too, become accessible only in this embeddedness. Practical-theological research can therefore consist not solely in applying general concepts of religion to funeral practices. Rather, these theoretical preunderstandings Practical Theology naturally relies upon are at best shaped in such a manner as to stimulate empirical research by providing a conceptual framework that helps to uncover relevant phenomena and interesting relations, thus allowing for instructive questions as well as unexpected findings. With respect to the funeral, this means that concepts of religion focusing primarily on beliefs and a “catalog of immaterial ideas and ideologies” (Engelke 2015, 32) are not really capable of revealing the religious dimensions of death-related practices (Kjærsgaard 2017, 113–114). In the case of funerals, religion has to be explored as something that is deeply entangled with biographic experiences, that show up in narrative constructions of a completed life and in acts of transcending, that are mediated by the deceased, and that are produced in practices integrating discourse as well as objects, spaces and bodies.

Finally, the ecclesial funeral can be regarded as a contextual phenomenon insofar as it is only one part in the grieving process of the bereaved, as well as in the overall context of death-related practices. Given that a funeral cannot be detached from this broader context, a Practical Theology of funerals should actually unfold as a Practical Theology of death-related practices. In dialogue with other thanatological studies, it refers to the sociocultural practices that generate death, and what it means for us, focusing on its religious dimensions as well as its ecclesial involvements.

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