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For salvation of the soul: Rituals before and after death in the Middle Ages (An introduction)

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Abstract

HLAVAČKOVÁ, Miriam – LYSÁ, Žofia. For salvation of the soul: Rituals before and after death in the Middle Ages (An introduction).

The question of death is essential at the level of individuals as well as society, from primitive tribes to high theology, ethics or philosophy. The Latin name for death—*exitus letalis* (natural departure)—implicitly suggests that death in our culture does not mean a definitive end but a mere “departure.” Based on the funeral rituals and myths found in nearly all cultures, almost none considered death to be a definitive end. What part of us departs, to where, in what way? What transcends our death? People in each historical period have had to address questions related to death and in time, developed a whole order of different rituals, ceremonies, myths and ideas embodied in art. No other period has been so permeated by thoughts of death as the Middle Ages. Being a part of everyday life, death was omnipresent, perceived as an inseparable part of the world of the living and the rituals that accompanied the dying person, the burial as well as requiem rites, were not an individual matter, but a societal event. The main aim of the present issue is to examine various aspects of predeath and funeral rituals in the Middle Ages within the context of Central Europe.

In the current biological definition, death is the final, irreversible state that occurs due to irreparable damage to the body, necrosis of brain tissue and the expiry of vital functions—the respiratory and/or circulatory systems for example. Although some parts of the body cease to function only later, modern medical science considers brain death to be the crucial fact for determining a human fatality. A foreknowledge of death and a universal consciousness about the finality of human life is a fundamental sign of mature human beings. The Latin name for death—*exitus letalis* (natural departure)—implicitly suggests that death does not mean a definitive end but a mere “departure,” and in looking at the funeral rituals and myths of ancient civilizations across nearly all cultures, none considered death to be a definitive end. The question of death is an essential matter, at the level of each individual and at the social level as well, from primitive tribes to current high theology, ethics or philosophy. What will happen to us and in what way?

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Where will we go? What transcends our death? People in every historical period have had to address questions related to death and connect them to a whole order of different rituals, ceremonies, myths and ideas embodied in art, which have differed vastly from one civilization to another and also say something about the culture of the given society.

The current monothematic issue of *Forum Historiae* examines death in the Middle Ages, an everyday reality that was close to people and known intimately. From a young age, they perceived and accepted death as an inseparable part of everyday life.¹ Although it was seen as the end of a certain form of life, dying did not exemplify the end of life as such. After its carnal existence, the soul of the deceased was prepared to move on to another world, where a new stage of its existence begins—no longer in time, but in eternity. Concepts and ideas are formulated in the sources in line with this thinking as well. Only rarely is the word “died” (*mortuus est*) used in connection with death; more often it is stated as “departed from this world,” “departed to eternity” or “to the Creator.” The activity of the person dying is reflected in similar expressions, which convey a positive meaning and a sense of death as an active steppingstone into eternity. The dying person’s faith and trust in eternal life, or even the desire for a heavenly homeland (community), are also typically emphasised, sometimes along with fatigue after the long journey on Earth and the desire to be freed from the Earthly world. The Platonic dualism of the body and soul, the idea of freeing the soul from the shackles of the body and the contrast between the imperfect Earth-bound world and the perfect heavenly eternal life, was widespread throughout the whole Christian West.² In contrast to the Christian understanding of death as the transition of the soul to another dimension—to eternity,—death for non-Christians or its enemies was often depicted in a strictly bodily sense, “...*de ergastulo corporis viam univarse carnis egressus est.*”³

1 An important work on the history of dying and death was published by: ARIÈS, Philippe. *Dějiny smrti I. – II.* Praha : Argo, 2000, who chose a diachronic approach. Jean Delumeau preferred a sociologising approach when researching the sources of fear of people in the Western European Middle Ages and Modern Ages, see: DELUMEAU, Jean. *Strach na Západě ve 14. – 18. století I. – II.* Praha : Argo, 1999. Research of the mind in relation to dying and death in the example of the development of funeral rites, the relationship of people to a dead body, the history of the mind in the last moments of life, ideas of the last judgment and an afterlife appear in a whole constellation of historical works, see: OHLER, Norbert. *Umírání a smrt ve středověku.* Praha : H&H, 2001; BORST, Arno – GRAEVENITZ, Gerhard von – PATSCHOVSKY, Alexander (eds.) *Tod im Mittelalter.* Konstanz : Universitätsverlag Konstanz, 1993; DUBRUCK, E. Edelgard – GUSICK, Barbara (eds.) *Death and dying in the Middle Ages.* New York : Peter Lang, 1999; WOLLGAST, Siegfried (ed.) *Zum Tod im späten Mittelalter und in der frühen Neuzeit.* Berlin : Akademie Verlag, 1992; CLASSEN, Albrecht (ed.) *Death in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Time: The Material and Spiritual Conditions of the Culture of Death.* Berlin; Boston : De Gruyter, 2016; DINZELBACHER, Peter. *Poslední věci člověka.* Praha : Vyšehrad, 2004; GRAY, Madeleine. *Deathbed and Burial Rituals in Late Medieval Catholic Europe.* In BOOTH, Philip – TINGLE, Elizabeth (eds.) *A Companion to Death, Burial, and Remembrance in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe, c. 1300 – 1700.* Leiden; Boston : Brill, 2020, pp. 106–131; WENNINGER, Markus J. (ed.) *Du guoter töt. Sterben im Mittelalter.* Klagenfurt : Wieser Verlag, 1998. Reflections on death are also captured in several areas of culture (music, literature, painting), see: HAMETER, Wolfgang – NIEDERKORN-BRUCK, Meta – SCHEUTZ, Martin (eds.) *Freund Hein? Tod und Ritual.* Innsbruck; Wien; Bozen : Studien Verlag, 2007.

2 OHLER 2001, p. 82.

3 Cited according to: *Kronika anonymného notára kráľa Bela. Gesta Hungarorum.* Translated and edited by Vincent Múcska. Budmerice : Rak, 2000, pp. 115–117.

Only at the threshold of eternity, when the Supreme Judge declares a verdict for each soul, will it become absolutely clear whether a person is going to heaven, purgatory or hell.⁴ Eschatological ideas about the fate of the human soul after death also influenced the concepts of a “good” or “bad” death. The people of that time hoped to die a “good death” (*mors bona*), meaning they expected to be surrounded by relatives and heirs and after confessing their earthly sins, to receive the last anointment and to ask everyone for forgiveness. Departure to the next world happened reconciled, as the soul had been taken care of in time and the cycle of life completed. A good death also meant a feeling that the Earthly pilgrimage has been fulfilled and concluded; “satisfied by the days, he exchanged the misery of this vain world for heavenly joy.”⁵ Often a good death was even associated with a joyful expectation, “...he ceaselessly imagined with all his heart and mind the last day [of his life] and yearned to live among the inhabitants of the heavenly fatherland.”⁶

A “good death” is portrayed as one without expressive emotional demonstrations, evoking more the image of a peaceful transition. The sources never allude to negative aspects, such as fear and suffering, defying death, the dying person’s struggle with himself and his condition. Such an emotional—and essentially realistic—presentation of dying is associated more with the death of negative figures and disasters as well, such as epidemics. What is most absent from the sources is a common death, as it truly played out. The more positive the hero of a story is, the more harmonious the description of his dying. Death always reflected what kind of life its actor lived and also foreshadowed his or her subsequent fate after death. Rulers and saints represented a kind of triumph of a good death, and the depictions of their peaceful departure are, paradoxically, a departure from the archetype of despair, which was even expressed by Jesus on the cross when he said: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”⁷ Therefore in a certain sense, the saints die a more balanced and peaceful death than did their prototype Jesus.

The comparison of death to sleep also belongs among the topos of a peaceful and harmonious death. Saint Elizabeth of Thuringia (1231), for example, peacefully died in this way: “Ultimately, in a jubilant spirit, she rested [in the Lord], as if she had sweetly fallen asleep; she bowed her head and passed away in the year of the Lord 1231, freed from mortal pains and in the company of angels and representatives of the saints, she flew to the heavenly kingdom.”⁸

4 DINZELBACHER, Peter. *Von der Welt durch die Hölle zum Paradies- das mittelalterliche Jenseits*. Paderborn; München; Wien; Zürich : Schöningh, 2007, p. 71; DELUMEAU, Jean. *Dějiny ráje, zahrada rozkoše*. Praha : Argo, 2003; RUSSELL, Jeffrey B. *A History of Heaven*. Princeton : Princeton University Press, 1997; BORST, Arno. Zwei mittelalterliche Sterbefälle. In *Mercur*, 1980, vol. 34, no. 258, pp. 1081–1098; TURNER, Alice K. *Historie pekla*. Brno : Jota, 1995.

5 This relates to Prince Géza. *Legenda S. Stephani regis maior*. *Scriptores rerum Hungaricarum tempore ducum regumque stirpis Arpadianae gestarum, Volumen II*. Edited by Emma Bartoniek. Budapestini : Academia Litter. Hungarica atque Societate Histor. Hungarica, 1938, p. 381, c. 5.

6 *Legenda S. Stephani regis maior*, p. 392, c. 16.

7 Matthew 27: 46 and Mark 15: 34; OHLER 2001, pp. 91–92.

8 *De vita et morte at miraculis beatae Elisabeth*. Cited according to: *Legendy stredovekého Slovenska. Ideály stredovekého človeka očami cirkevných spisovateľov*. Translated by Richard Marsina. Budmerice : RAK, 1997, p. 199, c. 4.

Such a death—with sleep passing smoothly into death—is considered merciful still to this day. The idea that death is the brother of sleep was present even in pre-Christian antiquity. The Greek poet Hesiod considered sleep and death to be twin brothers of their mother, Night. Death also conjures the possibility that the dead person is actually only sleeping and lives on in another form and will one day wake up. This idea was passed down about certain rulers who were due to rise up again in difficult times and save the country (Frederick II, Frederick Barbarossa or St. Wenceslas).⁹

The opposite of a good death—a “bad death” (*mors mala*)—happened when a person fell victim to a sudden fatal accident or some other tragedy. People greatly feared a bad death because it meant departing life still burdened with sin—without confession—thus increasing the likelihood of a long stay in purgatory, or worse—hell. As a result, people consciously prepared for death during their lives, an attitude in sharp contrast with contemporary habits. Death scares us so much today that we no longer even dare call it by its true name, which is why French historian Philippe Ariès, arguably the most quoted author on the history of death, refers to it in the Middle Ages as a “tamed death,” contrasting the understanding with today’s perception of death, which he calls “wild.”¹⁰ The inevitability of death brings an uncertainty that is impossible to keep tightly under control, and so today we prefer to push those thoughts out of our minds and lives and into the isolation of care facilities.

While dying today typically occurs in hospitals and nursing homes, out of view of the public or even relatives, during the Middle Ages, it was a ritually regulated and social event.¹¹ Rituals directly related to the hour of death were practiced, especially with the hope of easing the soul’s departure to the “other world.” The interest of the community of believers continued even after the burial of the departed, because the world of the living and the world of the dead were linked by purgatory, where a soul burdened by mundane sins was said to be purified before entering heaven. The concept of purgatory became definitively anchored only in the 13th century, culminating on the level of theory in the work of Thomas Aquinas, while the artistic triumph of this idea is found in Dante’s *Divine Comedy*.¹² Surviving relatives attempted to shorten the time souls had to spend in purgatory in a variety of ways; by obtaining indulgences for them, donating sums of money to serve requiem masses and reciting numerous prayers. Ongoing communication ran continuously between the two worlds. People who personally experienced how the deceased were carefully remembered in prayers for generations could look forward to

9 OHLER 2001, pp. 91–92.

10 ARIÈS 2000, p. 45.

11 WINKLER, Gerhard Bernhard. Die “*ars moriendi*” des Mittelalters zwischen Volksfrömmigkeit und kirchlicher Lehre. In WENNINGER, Markus J. (ed.) *du guoter tot. Sterben im Mittelalter*. Klagenfurt : Wieser Verlag, 1998, p. 5.

12 Jewish and early Christian religion was founded on the possibility of purification from sin in the other world, where the souls of those who died in agony await liberation, though this “place” was not theologically defined. The existence of purgatory was finally accepted as a religious dogma by the Council of Lyons in 1274. In detail, see: LE GOFF, Jacques. *Zrození očistce*. Praha : Vyšehrad, 2003.

being more calm and prepared to meet the mystery of death themselves. They could live and die in the expectation that they too would not be forgotten after death and that the community of the living would remember them at least once a year—on the anniversary of their death.¹³ Expressions of solidarity between the living and the dead in late medieval Hungary are the subject of studies by Monika Tihányiová, *Preparation for the afterlife of the Hungarian nobility according to the preserved medieval testaments*, and Tomáš Fedeles, *Pro salute anime. Holy Mass and the salvation of the nobility in late medieval Hungary*, which focus primarily on the donations of nobles to church institutions, which, for these blessed gifts, members of the nobility expected the continuous holding of Holy Masses for the salvation of the souls of their deceased relatives in return. In the understanding of the time, the larger the sum donated, the larger the number of Holy Masses that would be offered, and the more effective the intercession would be.¹⁴ This may have led to an effort to “do business” with God, but it should be remembered that the religiosity of the time was influenced by archaic forms of thinking and behaviour, among which was the principle of gift and the expectation of a counter-gift (from Latin *do ut des* = I give so that you give).

On the other hand, the death of relatives also placed purely practical tasks before the survivors—burial and the exercising of the inheritance rights of relatives. The role of death in the history of law has not yet been given comprehensive attention in Slovakia. With this in mind, Miroslav Lysý's study, *The legal context of death in the time of the Mojmir's and the Árpáds*, offers useful insight into the dual understanding of death as a legal fact, which as a legal prerequisite, represented the necessary condition for certain legal consequences, i.e.—inheritance. In the context of law, death itself also occurs as a consequence of legal action; it is the application of a legal sanction in the form of execution. Execution was considered in the oldest of law more as a means of healing (a ritual) and only became a means of repression and deterrent against crime in the High Middle Ages. The highest legal consequence was no doubt that which followed the death of a sovereign, as chaos seemed to always threaten anew after the death of a king. Legal codes issued by a ruler were guaranteed to remain valid mainly during his or her lifetime. This is why throughout the Middle Ages, incoming rulers put so much emphasis on confirming the validity of their predecessor's laws.

A king's primary concern on his deathbed was to ensure succession and continuity, as each death of a king meant the potential disintegration of the ruling power, which rested largely on a living and charismatic king. The funeral ceremony was the last chance to demonstrate power and royal majesty,

13 OHLER 2001, p. 54; HAMM, Berndt. Die Nähe des Heiligen im ausgehenden Mittelalter: *Ars moriendi*, Totenmemoria, Gregorsmesse. In HAMM, Berndt – FRIEDRICH, Reinhold – SIMON, Wolfgang (eds.) *Religiosität im späten Mittelalter: Spannungspole, Neuaufbrüche, Normierungen*. Tübingen : Mohr Siebeck, 2010, pp. 474–512.

14 JARITZ, Gerhard. Leben, um zu sterben. In KÜHNEL, Harry (ed.) *Alltag im Spätmittelalter*. Graz; Wien; Köln : Styria, 1986, p. 124.

as Dušan Zupka illuminates based on the example of three Central European kings in the 14th century in his work, *Royal funeral ceremonies in fourteenth-century Central Europe*. The common denominator of the funeral rites presented was that, in the spirit of the political theology of their time, they referred to the immortality of sovereign power.¹⁵

The funeral of a sovereign, like a royal coronation, was one of the most important rituals of sovereign power. Martin Nodl examines the form of the burial of Bohemian and Hungarian King Ladislaus the Posthumous in his study, *The funeral of Ladislaus the Posthumous: Between the profane and the sacred*. Each royal funeral in the Kingdom of Bohemia was a unique ritual accompanied mainly by profane elements, such as breaking and destroying the insignia of royal power (crown, sceptre, imperial apple, seal, banners and flags), with some of these elements (breaking the sword, sacrificing horses or knights representing the king) likely based on pagan models. A royal funeral in the 15th century was a ceremony filled with sacred content combined with rituals with a distinctly profane character, which competed with or even dominated over the sacred aspects. Only the final act of the funeral was played out in a sacred space, in a church, with the participation of the clergy. The burial was also littered with religious ceremonies and prayers.

The body of a king and his subsequent “life” was an important component of a sovereign’s activity. A deceased ruler represented the royal Majesty entrusted by God and was understood to be immortal. Therefore, the burial of kings was governed by complex rites of passage that included preserving and embalming the deceased ruler’s bodily remains. This was not only done for practical reasons, but the length of burial rituals—sometimes going on for weeks—meant the remains were in danger of decomposition. The political “body” of the sovereign also remained symbolically “alive” too. As such in this sense, the king could not die. The well-known phrase “The king is dead! Long live the king!” was then expressed on a practical level, when funeral rites often turned into inauguration ceremonies for the new king.

Embalming and preservation techniques known throughout medieval Europe were used both on the practical and the symbolic level. Daniela Dvořáková looks at the handling of the body of medieval kings and other important persons in her study, *Corpus more regio curatum. When a king dies: Medieval post-mortem care of the body*. Embalming a body after death was once the exclusive prerogative of kings. It began to spread across Europe in the 11th

15 NODL, Martin – ŠMAHEL, František (eds.) *Slavnosti, ceremonie a rituály v pozdním středověku*. Praha : Argo, 2014; ŠMAHEL, František. Smuteční ceremonie a rituály při pohřbu císaře Karla IV. In *Český časopis historický*, 1993, vol. 91, no. 3, pp. 401–446; JAN, Libor. Pohřební obřady za Karla IV. v kostele Panny Marie Na konci mostu. In NODL, Martin – SOMMER, Petr – DOLEŽALOVÁ, Eva (eds.) *Verba in imaginibus. Františku Šmahelovi k 70. narozeninám*. Praha : Argo, 2004, pp. 189–192; SOLYMOSI, László. Szent László király sírja, kultusza és szentté avatása. In KRISTÓF, Lilla Alida – LUKÁCSI, Zoltán – PATONAY, Lajos (eds.) *Szent király, Lovagkirály: A Szent László-herma és a koponyaereklye vizsgálatai*. Győr : Győri Hittudományi Főiskola és Papnevelő Intézet, 2017, pp. 16–39; SOLYMOSI, László. Egy tévedés nyomában: Szent László király somogyvári temetésének legendája. In ILLÉS, Pál Attila – JUHÁSZ-LACZIK, Albin (eds.) *Örökség és küldetés: Bencések Magyarországon I – II*. Budapest : Magyar Egyháztörténeti Enciklopédia Munkaközösség 2013, pp. 151–172.

and 12th centuries as a consequence of elites travelling further and further on distant military expeditions, Crusades or pilgrimages. By the end of the High Middle Ages, embalming had also become a social privilege and a matter of prestige, with the bodies of kings, popes, princes, bishops and members of the highest aristocracy now receiving the treatment. The author examines the individual types of embalming and conservation techniques as well as the funeral rituals of social elites.

A wealth of sources on the funeral rituals of the upper classes of society have been preserved from the High Middle Ages. Those of higher standing also created their own funeral ceremonies, asking to be buried in prestigious spots in a church or near the relics of saints and martyrs because they believed in their powerful intercession and action. The necessity of burying a body in consecrated ground, usually in a parish cemetery or in a church near the relics of a favoured saint, was closely associated with the concept of a good death. On the example of the funeral ceremonies of members of the Hungarian nobility (John Pongrác of Dengeleg, Ulrich of Cilli and Hedwig of Cieszyn) as described by contemporaries, Tomáš Homola clarifies the course of funeral ceremonies and traces their common and different elements in his work, *Funerals and funeral ceremonies of the Hungarian nobility in the Late Middle Ages*. The ideas of contemporaries about what the “ideal” funeral of a nobleman should look like and in what way it was appropriate to inform about the death or funeral of members of the Hungarian nobility are presented.

Although acts of corporal and spiritual mercy in medieval society¹⁶ included “burying the dead” and “praying for the living and the dead,” exceptions occurred during times of plague epidemics, particularly the Black Death, which altered general behaviour towards the dying. People feared being infected and on the advice of the doctors of the time, they chose to flee to a safer environment, even leaving family members behind. It was a long time before established patterns of behaviour returned and people found their way back to common solidarity with the dying. Petr Bystrický’s study *The Justinian Plague in literary sources*, which focuses on the plague through the descriptions of historians Procopius, John of Ephesus and Evagrius, examines this issue. It was the most destructive disaster of the Byzantine Empire, with consequences on demography, the economy, craft and agricultural production, as well as foreign policy, since the largest cities and coastal centres of trade were the most affected, including the capital city, where likely up to half of the population died from the disease. The sudden and unexpected arrival of the bubonic plague, its short incubation period, high mortality regardless of gender, age and origin, as well as the lack of effective treatments and the impossibility of finding the origin or causes of the disease, shook the whole society and left deep scars on the human psyche and public behaviour. In the texts of three period authors, in their testimonies and experiences, as well as on various examples and stories, a whole range of feelings can be identified very well that are no longer completely unknown to us after our own experience with the

16 Matthew 25: 35.

recent pandemic—the initial hysteria and panic alternating with fear for our own safety and that of our loved ones, and the fear that funeral rites and burials will not be conducted. Hopelessness, frustration and apathy came to the surface, and the authors observed not only ruthlessness, indifference, selfishness, refusal to help or the desire of some to enrich themselves from tragedy, but also detailed evidence on cooperation and selflessness between people.

Mass deaths in times of plagues and wars also affected artistic imagination. Thus, death in all its horrors became visible to people in the late Middle Ages via “multimedia” means.¹⁷ Contempt for the Earthly world (*contemptus mundi*), the constant remembrance of death (*memento mori*), as well as the doctrine of the art of salvific dying (*Ars moriendi*) are found in both literary and visual arts. Death was omnipresent, commemorated in epitaphs, gravestones, requiems, religious endowments, cemeteries and cemetery chapels. Several iconographic topics formed in the visual arts reflecting human eschatology in pictorial form. These, in particular, were motifs relating to death, judgment, purgatory and hell, which were represented to a much larger extent than depictions of heaven. Illustrations of hell in wall paintings or in Books of Hours—a type of prayer book—continually reminded people that their behaviour on Earth would decide the eternal fate of their soul. In some Books of Hours, a prayer for the dead was preceded by an image illustrating a funeral or burial. In others, we find terrifying images of Death attacking the living. Such scenes must have been strong incentive for readers to pray.

The tendency to enshrine death in the form of a decaying body or a human skeleton became established in Christian iconography at the end of the 13th century, extending up to the 16th century. Headstones showed varying depictions of naked, decomposing corpses, with clenched fists, gaping mouths and worms wriggling in their entrails. The words on the tombstone epigraph of Bratislava Provost George of Schönberg (†1486) are also eloquent: “Behold, I was once a famous church dignitary, respected by great princes, now I am dirty in the grave, eaten like food by worms.”¹⁸ The Dance of Death (*danse macabre*, *Totentanz*), in which the dead pull characters from all levels of society into the vortex of the dance—the pope, the emperor, but also beggars or children—was visible everywhere and the living were regularly reminded that: “What we are, so shall you be.” For a person of lower status, death was the only socially just phenomenon in their life. Everyone is equal in death, because after death, everyone not only has the same corruptible and decaying body, but also the same chance for the salvation of the soul.

17 Regarding the depiction of death, see: RYWIKOVÁ, Daniela. *Speculum mortis. Obraz Smrti v českém malířství pozdního středověku*. Ostrava : Ostravská univerzita, 2016; CORVISIER, André. *Tance smrti*. Praha : Volvox Globator, 2002. On the late medieval *Ars moriendi*, see: WŁODARSKI Maciej. *Trzy traktaty o sztuce umierania*. Kraków : Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2015; AKRBOOM, Dick. “...only the Image of Christ in Us”. Continuity and Discontinuity between the Late medieval *ars moriendi* and Luther’s Sermon von der Bereitung zum Sterben. In BLOMMESTIJN, Hein – CASPERS, Charles – HOFMAN, Rijcklof (eds.) *Spirituality Renewed. Studies on Significant Representatives of the modern Devotion*. Leuven; Paris; Dudley, MA : Peeters, 2003, pp. 209–272.

18 HLAVAČKOVÁ, Miriam. *Juraj zo Schönbergu: bratislavský prepoš v službách cisára a kráľa*. Bratislava : VEDA, 2015, p. 239.

The uncertain question of the soul's salvation and its afterlife occupied the mind of the medieval Christian with great intensity. At the end of the Middle Ages, the hour of death became ever important for eternal salvation or eternal damnation of the human soul. When French theologian Jean Gerson published his treatise *De arte moriendi* in 1408, he initiated an impulse for creation of the most popular genre of literature of the late Middle Ages. Tracts written by theologians, such as *Ars bene moriendi*, initially served as a basis for teaching priests in the care of the dying, but they gradually became accessible to laymen after numerous translations into national languages. These popular block-print “manuals” comprised of 11 woodcuts provided instructions on how to ready a seriously ill or dying person for death. Readers learned about the five temptations that the devil dangles before a dying person—doubt in faith, despair, impatience, avarice or clinging to one's possessions, and pride—which must be resisted in order to get to heaven. In the contest between the powers of good—God and his court—and the powers of evil—the hellish throng—for the soul of the dying person, firm faith, strong hope, patience, humility and inner detachment from this world were to be counterbalanced. The match was then decided in the eleventh image; the dying man, after having resisted all the temptations thrown his way, breathed his last breath and was taken by angels to heaven.¹⁹

It can be said that in medieval culture, the so-called “final affairs of a person” became a matter of primary importance. Many relevant texts of medieval theologians, mystics and visionaries bear testimony to the fact that thinking about death has always been associated with life. A good life was a daily preparation and one of the essential prerequisites for a good death.

Until recently, death formed a natural part of a person's life. It was not only present physically—it took place closer, literally right before the eyes—and to a much greater degree through so-called demographic depletion, i.e. high child mortality, epidemics, disasters or war. It was even present at the level of individual consciousness. Today, death has not only been removed from us, taken into hospitals and social facilities, but the “sterilisation” of death in the name of the “safety” of the dying has caused the subject to be removed from the conversations and minds of contemporary people. The loneliness of the dying and segregation of the sick in hospitals has become a feature of industrial societies. Making death taboo has thus happened disproportionately fast and in parallel with the development of medicine and health care. Although we are today more likely to die of old age and of natural causes, death frightens us to a much greater extent than it did our ancestors. Social, economic, scientific, political and religious factors have affected the definition of a “good death,” which today means dying at an older age, painlessly and under the supervision of medical professionals, i.e. a death in which we

19 LAAGER, Jacques. *Ars moriendi. Die Kunst, gut zu leben und gut zu sterben. Texte von Cicero bis Luther*. Zürich : Manesse-Verlag, 1996; HAMM, Berndt. *Luthers Anleitung zum seligen Sterben vor dem Hintergrund der spätmittelalterlichen Ars moriendi*. In *Jahrbuch für biblische Theologie*, 2004, vol. 19, pp. 311–362.

do not suffer. Today's comfort leads to a discomfort in the consciousness to even think about one's own death. The natural response to this uneasiness is to push away the everyday awareness of our finitude. This change in the attitude towards death has also affected our attitude towards life and its meaning.