

Editorial

Birth and Death: Studying Ritual, Embodied Practices and Spirituality at the Start and End of Life

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Birth and death are fundamental human experiences. Both life transitions are not only meaningful and profound but can also lead to ambiguous feelings, negotiated in embodied, cultural, spiritual, and ritual practices (Hallam et al. 1999; Kaufman and Morgan 2005; Mathijssen 2018; Wojtkowiak 2020). The liminality and ambiguity of birth and death evoke the need for rituals. Across cultures, rituals accompany birth and death as major life transitions, for instance, by welcoming the child or mother-to-be/parent-to-be through name-giving ceremonies or symbolically transitioning the deceased into the world of the dead. In this edited volume in *Religions*, we explore new theoretical and empirical research on birth and death rituals from multidisciplinary perspectives, such as anthropology, psychology, and religious studies, in order to offer novel insights with respect to lived spirituality and religiosity.

The importance of studying birth and death from an embodied and ritualized perspective relates to several observations. First, all humans are related to their own birth and death and are often involved in the birth and death of others (Hennessey 2019; Schües 2008). But entering the world, as well as saying farewell to loved ones, is not a linear transition. Liminal and ambiguous meanings go hand-in-hand with pregnancy and birth as well as death and dying. Cultural, spiritual, and ritual practices accompany these transitions and also accommodate possible ambiguous states. Secondly, both life transitions are related to spiritual and existential questioning, revealing what matters to us (Wojtkowiak and Crowther 2018). Thirdly, rituals and embodied practices—varying from quotidian story telling, performances, meditation, and beautification practices to initiation rites and funerals—are grounded in the body, senses, and material culture. Gaining insights into embodiment, the physical and material dimensions of spirituality are therefore significant, but they have been underdeveloped in the literature (McGuire 2008). Fourthly, because of changing religious and cultural contexts, shaped by secularization, medicalization, migration, and globalization, the ways in which we frame and give meaning to birth and death are changing and leading to pluralistic and possibly conflicting meaning frames. Rituals at the start and end of life have also been changing (Grimes 2002). Rituals can not only be prescribed by cultural and religious traditions but can also emerge in new post-secular and interreligious contexts through ritualizing and re-inventing traditional rites.

What kind of challenges do we face in changing birth and death contexts? What can we learn about meaning making and spirituality by studying birth and death rituals? How is embodied spirituality negotiated in birth and death rituals? The main question of this edited volume is *what can we learn about notions of embodied spirituality by studying birth and death from a ritual perspective?*

In the consensus definition by Puchalski et al. (2014) spirituality is defined as “the dynamic dimension of human life that relates to the way persons (individual and community) experience, express and/or seek meaning, purpose and transcendence, and the way they connect



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to the moment, to self, to others, to nature, to the significant, and/or the sacred" (p. 644). Systematic approaches to the spiritual dimension of palliative care also reveal the focus on the connection or relation to the transcendent, purposeful, and ultimate meaning in life (Rego et al. 2018). While these approaches are helpful in making clear that spirituality is an important dimension of human existence and meaning, they, in our view, sometimes neglect the bodily, embodied, and material dimensions of spirituality. Therefore, this edited volume explicitly focuses on embodied practices in various cultural contexts to reveal how spirituality takes shape within and among bodies and embodied realities. Such an emphasis on birth and death as embodied transitions sheds new light on our commonsense understanding of spirituality that is somehow "out there" or "within our mind". Studying spirituality from the body always and often implicitly means that material and embodied experiences are shaped by cultural, religious, gendered, and ethnic experiences. Some bodies, such as pregnant, ill, or dying bodies, are treated differently from others. They need special attention and might even be stigmatized. An embodied spirituality implies that the political dimension of embodiment needs to be considered in research (Butler 2009).

Embodied beginnings and endings

Birth and death are both universal *and* unique human transitions. Every human that is born is a unique person and at the same time part of a larger community of previous and later generations (Arendt 1958; Schües 2008). Being a member of a group or society, one is also involved in the birth of others. This can occur directly by becoming a parent, grandparent, aunt, uncle, or any other relation with newborns and can also be understood in a more general sense, for instance, the idea of providing for future generations. Increased consciousness about our ecological footprint, which is increasing in many societies, is motivated by the idea that we have to provide for future generations. Moreover, many cultures celebrate birthdays and a birthdate is an important juridical fact.

Pregnancy, the state before birth and a necessary phase in order to exist, is surrounded by many cultural and religious beliefs and practices across the world. Pregnancy is an ambiguous state, where the future mother or parent is transitioning physically by creating life and birthing the new living being. Pregnancy and birth are very strongly intertwined to bodily and embodied transitions: We come from the body of another human being, which makes our beginning an absolute embodied reality. Looking at spirituality and meaning making from the perspective of birth, thus, not only teaches us about the meaning of the beginning of life but also about the meaning of embodiment. In pregnancy, the dualistic distinction between object and subject is challenged by an embodied relationality. The baby grows within the body of the mother or person who is carrying the pregnancy, revealing a two-in-one subjectivity and pre-subjectivity.

Like birth, death is an "ordinary and everyday as well as life-changing and defining experience" (Woodward and Woodward 2020, p. 1). The ritual engagement with death—that is, with the process of dying and bereavement, and the relationship with the dead—relates to sense making. Rituals and ritualizing equip people in framing their encounter with death and the dead (Utraiainen 2020). On the one hand, they enable people to transcend the finitude of life in social and symbolic ways by creating *connections* "to the moment, to self, to others, to nature, to the significant, and/or the sacred" (Puchalski et al. 2014, p. 644). In rituals, people can (re)establish temporal and spatial relationalities and give expression to their sense of reality. On the other hand, rituals allow people to *set things apart*, such as their emotions, memories, bodily remains, material objects, or relationships with ancestors. By setting apart one's experience with death and the dead (as special or sacred), people can revisit their emotions at an aesthetic distance (Wojtkowiak 2018). Furthermore, rituals evoke a subjunctive mode of potentiality that creates space to affirm and play with what "could be" (Jongsma-Tielemans 2002; Kapferer 2006; Kreinath 2009).

The papers in this edited volume illustrate that embodiment and materiality play key roles in birth and death rituals in five particular ways. First, many authors show that the body is a vehicle for mediating and incorporating knowledge. In her study of death rituals in Assam, for example, Hagjer (2022) illustrates how mourners repeat the physical

technique of *meser*. She argues that this technique is central to safeguarding the passage of the deceased to *damra*, to the social integration of individuals within the community, and to the integration of knowledge through the organization of people's dispositions. Hagjer thus shows that rituals can be understood as bodily techniques that improve the spiritual wellbeing of the ritual participants—both the living and the dead—and that support the integration and routinization of social and spiritual knowledge. Through the act of ritual, spiritual knowledge becomes inscribed in the body, and in that sense, spirituality is always embodied. In their paper on funeral and birth rituals in Russia, [Mokhov and Novkunskaia \(2021\)](#) draw our attention to the importance of transmitting knowledge about “ritual fractures”. Ritual fractures can be defined as challenges that exist in the infrastructure of the organization of a funeral or birth, such as issues with existing rules, legislation, or transport. The authors illustrate that people perceive “ritual fractures” not as problems but as a special form of necessary tests. Ritual fractures carry a symbolic meaning: through processes of meaning-making, people make these fractures significant, meaningful, or even sacred.

Second, a number of papers illustrate how material forms enable the bereaved to give expression to subjunctive futures. Subjunctive futures—futures that could have been—become embodied within rituals and are, thus, made present in the here and now. In their paper on embodied grief and perinatal loss in Australia, [Norwood and Boulton \(2021\)](#) illustrate that not only the personhood of the baby is lost but also a sense of motherhood and sense of self. They argue that through the “thoughtful re-presentation of medical insight into pregnancy and fetal development”, the body of the mother can become part of the distributed personhood of the baby. The body of the mother is, thus, reframed to make the lost baby materially present. A similar observation is made by [Vaerland et al. \(2021\)](#), who showed that perinatal death is often disenfranchised and, therefore, difficult to acknowledge openly. Their study in Norway indicates that “materially grounded metaphors”, which are objects such as scrapbooks and boxes that highlight bonds with the deceased and mark important memories, can help overcome this difficulty, as they enable people to capture the personhood of the deceased and the parenthood of self. The significance of materiality also becomes visible in the article by [Manfredi \(2022\)](#), who analyses tattoos in relation to death and birth as “intimate and self-centred acts” (p. 11) in Italy. Manfredi's interlocutors understand their tattoos as the embodiment of relationships. Tattooing both freezes time, allowing the person to capture a sense of the relationship with the subject-person, and projects a self in the future. By tattooing, specific forms of self and self in relation to the deceased are produced. Such productivities cannot only be understood as memory making but also as forms of meaningful relating. Tattoos physically touch the existential dimension of self, and thus can be understood as embodied forms of spirituality.

Third, several authors show that rituals of perinatal loss create room for a social recognition of the life that has been carried. In their study on perinatal loss in Catalonia, Spain, [McIntyre et al. \(2022\)](#) emphasized that ritualizing allows women to express *both* the life that has been *and* the life that could have been. Rituals surrounding perinatal loss thus not only resemble death rites but also initiation rites. This emphasis on initiation is particularly important in relation to perinatal lives, since these lives are not always fully recognized. In the context of Spain, for example, there are no common rituals for perinatal loss due to the “ambiguity of the Catholic Church's stance on the stance of unbaptized babies” ([McIntyre et al. 2022](#), p. 5). By ritualizing, for instance, by creating personal shrines, marking birthdays, or the beautification of the body, the authors show how women ritualize motherhood and their child's existence. They “make real the life that they have carried” ([McIntyre et al. 2022](#), p. 13) and in doing so acknowledge that life. [Biel et al. \(2022\)](#) also examined subjunctive futures at the beginnings of life, but their study focuses on ritualizing abortion in the Netherlands. In abortion, the ambiguity of pregnancy is stressed: There is a beginning, but it does not lead to a newcomer. Ritualizing was found in symbolic expressions for the imagined child, writing poems or letters to the potential

child, memorializing specific dates in private, and in some cases, sharing these symbolic expressions in a digital community for recognition and community building. Ritualizing abortion negotiates meanings and marks the event as meaningful.

Fourth, some authors investigate ritual origins and the re-appreciation of traditional rituals, such as [Hennessey \(2021\)](#), [Ohaja and Anyim \(2021\)](#), and [Janiak and Gierczyk \(2021\)](#). [Hennessey \(2021\)](#) discusses the role of art and material culture in contemporary rituals of birth and studies the re-sacralization of material objects through art and birth practices in nonreligious contexts in the US. While birth has been much less visualized than death, the here studied material and visual representations of birth show how birth is related to other rites of passages. The new, re-invented objects have origins in indigenous or traditional cultures and [Hennessey \(2021\)](#) asks to what extent the re-appreciation of existing cultural tools and objects reaches cultural appropriation. [Ohaja and Anyim \(2021\)](#) reflect on the ritual culture surrounding pregnancy and birth in various African contexts, such as Cameroon, Ghana, Kenya, and Nigeria. The authors discuss how the uniqueness of the newcomer is incorporated into the community, going beyond embodied persons, and is closely linked to ancestors. The naming ceremony for newborns reveals the intertwinement of the meaning of the baby as a unique newcomer *and* as a member of society, illustrating [Arendt's \(1958\)](#) notion of the plurality of being at birth. The authors argue that ritual practices help women in spiritually connecting to a greater whole and community, giving meaning to this life transition. [Janiak and Gierczyk \(2021\)](#) focus on the absence of ritual knowledge and the need to re-appreciate the former expertise of catholic clergy on death and dying in Poland. Clergy were typically present at the death bed and, therefore, have hands-on experience with dying. Via these teachers, the authors suggest that people can refigure what it means to die well and can learn the art of dying, the *ars moriendi*, once again. By doing so, the authors argue that death and dying can be rehumanized in a post-Christian and secularized society.

Fifth, several studies in this volume offer critical notes to the sometimes simplistic use of the Van Gennepian tripartite distinction of rites of passage in the literature and the Turnerian emphasis on transition as a turning point ([Van Gennep \[1909\] 1960](#); [Turner 1969](#)). [Hennessey \(2021\)](#), for example, draws attention to feminist thinkers who show that while pregnancy is a transition into a new state, birth is more of an intensification of the previous transition than a new transition of statuses. Akin to this, [Ohaja and Anyim \(2021\)](#) show that birth rites are not only expressions of collective joy for the newcomer but also a farewell for the mother. This becomes visible in the practice of burying the placenta and umbilical cord, which is performed with great care and attention for detail. These burial rituals following birth offer new insights into birth as a transition: The birth of a child is welcomed by joy *and* is a goodbye for the mother, the end of a 9-month pregnancy during which the baby has been living and growing within one's body. Furthermore, many papers show that ritualistic practices happen before, during, and/or after birth and death and do not necessarily occur during the "main" rite of passage and do not always follow a linear transition. The studies on perinatal loss from [McIntyre et al. \(2022\)](#), [Norwood and Boulton \(2021\)](#), and [Vaerland et al. \(2021\)](#), as well as [Manfredi's \(2022\)](#) work, on tattoos surrounding death and birth evidence that many people continue to ritualize the (re)integration of the deceased in their everyday lives not only after death has occurred but also long after human remains have reached their final destination (cf. [Hertz \[1907\] 1960](#)). These practices not only include the (im)material absence–presence of the baby as deceased but also of the baby as newborn.

In sum, this edited volume illustrates the importance of an inclusive and critical understanding of embodiment in the field of ritual and spirituality studies. We argue that, in addition to the dominant male narratives that emphasize "climax, conversion, reintegration, triumph, the liminality of reversal or elevation" ([Bynum 1984](#), p. 108), it is imperative to involve the embodied perspectives of tangible other bodies in ritual studies theory, including women, mothers, parents, newborns, and the dying. This does justice to the ambiguity and multivocality of ritual, as well as to the ambiguity of life transitions. Doing so reveals that birth is not "just" a beginning and death is not "just" an

end. Both are closely connected to everything that comes before and after previous and future generations, as well as other rites of passage during one's life. The papers across this edited volume have confirmed that birth and death are fundamental human experiences, that are necessarily embodied and experienced through particular bodies. As Manfredi (2022) aptly describes: "Bodies work excellently to manifest cultural values, social status, or other messages readable by those who share a common cultural background and are aware of their meanings . . ." (p. 2). The bodily transmission of shared cultural knowledge that many authors in this Special Issue have hinted at has implications for our definition of spirituality: We must *explicitly* include the body in our understanding of spirituality. Adding embodiment to the consensus definition of Puchalski et al. (2014) would mean to speak at least of the dynamic, *embodied* dimension "of human life that relates to the way persons (individual and community) experience, express and/or seek meaning, purpose and transcendence," (p. 644).

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