

Individual Views and Global Trends: The Conceptualisation of the Dead. A Case Study

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Abstract: Death is subject to cultural representations; in every culture, there are various traditions, discourses or scripts that help people come to terms with death, dying and what comes next. Individual views, however, never fully accord with cultural frameworks; they are fragmented and full of uncertainties, inconsistencies and contradictions. Therefore, contextual analysis of individual cases would give us a better understanding of how the various frameworks – and other factors – influence individual conceptualisations and attitudes towards the dead and ultimately lead to a more subtle view of the influence the dead have in contemporary society.

Applying the vernacular religious approach, this paper looks closely into the views of and attitude toward the dead of one person, and, through his example, addresses broader questions regarding the formation of individual views and the dead's role in contemporary society.

Keywords: individual conceptualisations, afterlife, relationship with the dead, Hungary

INTRODUCTION

I first met János, a Hungarian man in his late sixties, during a short field trip with students in rural south-west Hungary. When we interviewed him on local religious practices, it became immediately clear that the dead greatly influenced his life. He told us, for example, that he always walked to church “in memory

of my father”, and that in addition to the graves of his closest relatives, he also tended around 70 other graves in the local cemetery, graves of more distant relatives, friends, or people he respected. My impression was confirmed during a series of interviews when he talked about his attachment to his late parents, his regular weekly visits to their grave(s) to have a chat with them and the support they gave him in times of hardship. Yet, when I asked him about the after-life and the otherworld, his answers became rather vague, and he rejected any possibility of communication with the dead or that the dead could return, give signs or make their presence felt. I found the seeming contradiction between his lack of personal encounters with the dead and their prominence in his life intriguing. This paper aims to look more closely into his conceptualisation of and attitude toward the dead and, through his example, addresses broader questions regarding the formation of individual views and the dead’s role in contemporary society.¹

Death is subject to cultural representations (Hertz 2006 [1907, 1960]); in every culture, there are various traditions, discourses or scripts that help people come to terms with death, dying and what comes next. In his comparative study, using Erving Goffman’s framework theory, Tony Walter (2018) identified six frameworks – ways in which the relationship between the living and the dead is interpreted – which he found most representative across space and time: the dangerous dead, ancestors, monotheistic religions, Buddhism, secular memory and romantic love. The first promotes the cessation of any connection with the dead for the sake of both the dead and the living. In the second, the dead continue their existence as ancestors, a powerful group engaged in a reciprocal relationship with the living, where the living must earn the goodwill and support of the dead by offering various gifts. In the third, the dead survive death as immortal souls, keep their personal identity, and – at least in some religions – rely on the intercession of the living for their well-being. In Buddhism, the dead exist without personal identity. In the fifth framework, which had its roots in Protestantism, the dead only live on in the memory of the living, while the sixth focuses on the survival of the emotional bonds with the dead, who continue to exist either as memories “in the heart of the living” or as spiritual beings (Walter 2018: 43–49). Walter assumed there is a chronological order between these frameworks, with the first two being the oldest and the last the most recent, but he also noted that they may coexist and produce syncretistic forms even though some of them, like ancestor worship and monotheistic religions, promote competing ideas. Based on how they relate to the dead, Walter also makes a distinction between ‘care cultures’, cultures that emphasise the importance of caring for the dead, and ‘memory cultures’, which focus on keeping the memory of the dead alive (Walter 2018: 51; Walter 2017: 26–27).

Taking a diachronic approach, Walter identified certain trends that are characteristic of how people relate to their dead in contemporary Western societies.

After a long period of dominance of the secular memory framework, the dead seem to have returned to the living, however, primarily not as entities to be cared for, but as ones who care for the living by supporting and protecting them in various ways. At the same time, bonds with the dead have become affection-based instead of being informed by socially prescribed obligations, and people enjoy greater freedom in choosing how and with which dead they want to maintain a relationship (Walter 2018: 50; see also: Klass 2015: 106).

While seeing the ‘big picture’ is very useful, dealings with the dead in reality are more diverse and nuanced – as Walter also implies (Walter 2018: 53). Individual views never fully accord with cultural frameworks; they are fragmented and full of uncertainties, inconsistencies and contradictions (cf. Bennett 1999; Day 2012; Davies 1997; Astuti 2007: 234–235; Knuuttila 2001: 21; Hesz 2020; Valk 2022: 9–10).² Therefore, contextual analysis of individual cases would give us a better understanding of how the various frameworks – and other factors – influence individual conceptualisations and attitudes towards the dead and ultimately lead to a more subtle view of the influence the dead have in contemporary society.

My analysis follows the vernacular religious approach first established by Leonard Primiano (Primiano 1995, 2012) and developed by several others (see Bowman 2003, 2004a, 2004b; Bowman & Valk 2012). This approach focuses on the individual and argues that instead of being passive recipients of doctrinal teaching, people actively and constantly shape their religious practices and ideas by negotiating them with others. In the case of conceptualisations about and attitudes towards the dead, these others may be family members, neighbours, peers, religious actors or institutions, secular authorities (school, state), and the media.

This paper is based on three semi-structured interviews with János, altogether lasting seven hours, that were recorded over a period of several months. I also conducted an intensive, three-week-long stint of fieldwork in his village in June 2024, when I interviewed thirty people on their relationship with the dead. I used the headquarters of a local cultural association as my base and participated in community events whenever I could.³

In the first section, I introduce János and his village and continue by presenting his ideas about the afterlife and relationships with the dead. Then, I compare his case to the local ideas and the global trends described in the international scholarly literature in order to underscore its particularities.

JÁNOS AND THE DEAD

Apart from a few years when he lived in the nearby small town, János has spent most of his life in his birth village. The settlement, now measuring about 1400 inhabitants, gained regional importance as a railroad junction at the end of the 19th century. By the first half of the 20th century, it was a small regional centre

where people living and working as landless peasants in the surrounding agricultural estates attended church services and sent their children to school. Later, under socialism, many of them moved into the village. While most of the villagers lived off the land before WWII and were employed on a local state farm or one of the nearby collective farms during the socialist era, the number of people working in other sectors grew steadily. However, since the 1970s, but increasingly after the regime change in 1989 and the subsequent loss of job opportunities, the number of inhabitants has declined significantly. As a result, the village has lost more than a third of its population compared to its heyday in the late 1960s.

Denominationally, the settlement has been mixed ever since the second half of the 16th century, with Protestants – mostly Calvinists – outnumbering Catholics until the early 1800s. Calvinist families, however, remained socially more influential even in the minority, as they tended to be more well-off than their Catholic neighbours. The relationship between the two denominations was not without tension; Calvinists often accused Catholics of ‘soul-fishing’ (Simonné Pallós 2024: 45), a term used for attempts at conversion, and according to my interlocutors, interdenominational marriages were frowned upon until the 1950s–1960s. However, as religiosity declined and ecumenism was increasingly encouraged by both churches, religious affiliation became less important, and even though people still know who is a Catholic and who is a Calvinist, it no longer informs their relationships.

János was born in the 1950s as the fourth child of one of the oldest Catholic families in the village. As the youngest son, he stayed in the family home with his parents and still lives in the house built by his paternal grandfather. He trained as a skilled labourer and held various blue-collar jobs before retiring. His forties and fifties were marked by personal and financial struggles, and he had a serious health crisis 15 years ago, hovering between life and death for several days. He is a kind, intelligent, sensitive and sociable person who is actively involved in community life and is a popular and well-respected member of the village community.

Conceptualisations

János identifies as a religious person, and he is one of the few local Catholics who regularly attend Sunday mass.⁴ Like most of his contemporaries growing up in the 1960s, he received a religious upbringing, attended catechism classes, received Confirmation and even served as an altar boy. During the summers, his parents often sent him to spend time with his uncle, a practising priest, so that “he would learn one thing or another”. He stopped attending mass regularly as an adult because of being too busy with life, but always “kept” his religion, as “it never taught us evil”. He became a practising Catholic again in the wake of his illness fifteen years ago, after his doctor told him he should be grateful to God, not him, for being alive.

It may be surprising, then, that when asked about the afterlife, he often disputed or outright rejected key tenets of Catholic eschatology. For example, he repeatedly denied the reality of resurrection, deeming it unrealistic, and called those who believed in it “bigots”:

Well... even right now, there are more than seven billion people on Earth. Now, I don't even know how to count this, that is, from when should we count, going back two thousand years, or what, this resurrection... the planet would be unliveable! It would be chaotic, so chaotic that I think some people would break down or even drop dead because they could not comprehend all the changes. Only if you think about how much the world has developed since the death of my parents 34 years ago, I'm not sure if they could make sense of it.

Some of his other statements also suggest that he considered death the end of one's existence. When I asked him about the whereabouts of his parents, he replied that they lived on in his soul, and, on another occasion, claimed that we have only this life on Earth and that “one should try to live so that it is acceptable and pleasant and good for oneself and for others and try to make a legacy if one can. Be a good human while you are here.” Yet, on other occasions, he would talk about the souls ‘flying up there’ and often pointed to the sky when talking about his parents. But exactly what ‘up there’ meant was somewhat vague and only partially complied with church teachings:

AH: *What happens to our soul after death?*

J: *Well I...it, it, I think it flies up there.*

AH: *But where?*

J: *Well, to God? I don't know. Father, Son, Holy Spirit, that is, well, I don't know, maybe the souls gather by the Holy Spirit?*

AH: *And does everybody fly up there?*

J: *Well, um, I don't know what sins one must commit that..., and if a judge, who weighs [judges] people, and sends them here or there truly exists...? We used to joke that “I don't want to go to heaven because none of my friends are there” [laughs] because, according to people's conception, only the really good souls go there. But who is the judge there who decides which soul is good and worthy of it? That really makes me wonder.*

AH: *And where do the others go?*

J: *Well, to Purgatory?*

AH: *Aha...*

J: *But some might be so bad they would even extinguish the fire there...[laughs] Well, these things...*

AH: *And what happens to the souls in Purgatory?*

J: *Well, I don't know where those souls go. Or all souls fly up, and then the selection is made there? And what do you think?*

As the excerpt shows, János is roughly familiar with the Catholic teachings about damnation and salvation but is rather reluctant to accept the idea of punishment and the authority of anyone – human or divine – to judge who is worthy of redemption and whose sins – or what kind of sins – would exclude someone from the eternal company of God.⁵ According to the doctrine of Purgatory, the souls of people who only committed venial sins or confessed their mortal sins and were absolved but could not fully atone them are cleansed from their sins by suffering the torments of the purgatorial fire. Whether one enters heaven, suffers eternal damnation or goes to Purgatory is judged in the Particular Judgement immediately following death. The living may intercede on behalf of the souls in Purgatory and shorten their sufferings by performing various ritualised acts prescribed by the church: praying, fasting, paying for masses, or giving alms. In return, souls freed from the cleansing fire pray for the living. This system of dependence and reciprocity defines the framework for the relationship between the living and the dead, while the rites of intercession provide tools for maintaining and managing this relationship.

Purgatory was the only realm of the Catholic otherworld that János ever mentioned by name during our conversations – and that only once – although he regularly prays for his parents and had paid for masses for them annually in the first ten years after their death and less frequently since then. However, he only vaguely connected this with spiritual assistance for the dead and saw it rather as a way of remembering or paying them due respect.⁶

AH: *Why do you have to have masses for the dead?*

J: *To make them rest in peace, perhaps? I don't know...*

Or:

AH: *Why do people pay for anniversary masses for the dead?*

J: *Well, out of respect... out of respect for the ancestors.*

The only context in which he hinted that the dead might need spiritual help in the afterlife was when talking about local burial customs. In response to the question of whether it was customary to put something in the coffin, he mentioned that he had placed a small image of the Virgin Mary next to his mother, which he had given her as a present from a popular pilgrimage site because he thought “*it should then look after her*”.⁷

János also rather consistently denied the possibility of the dead returning or communicating with the living, and in this, he complied with the official

church doctrine. However, the idea that one could encounter the dead is present in his local community. While there's not much trace in the village of the otherwise rich Hungarian narrative tradition of the returning dead,⁸ half of my interlocutors reported personal experiences with deceased people, mainly close relatives. These encounters followed the patterns familiar from folklore narratives: they heard noises or the voices of the dead, felt the presence of their deceased loved ones, saw figures of light, the objects around them behaved uncannily, or the dead appeared to them in person or in a dream.⁹ Most of them shared these experiences with close kin or friends but shied away from talking about them with others for fear of being discredited or ridiculed (see also Raahauge 2016: 96; Hayes & Steffen 2018: 168). Some people in János's closest circle had had such experiences and told János about them. One was his sister, who heard strange noises in the house after her husband passed away and understood it as a sign of his presence:

*J: My sister says that for a long time [after her husband died] she heard someone, someone and that it must have been her husband returning, my brother-in-law, and she told me that he was there during the night, "because I heard him" she said... [shakes his head]
AH: And?*

J: I asked her "Are you sure it was him?" [She said] "It was him, it was him, it could be no one else, for sure"...Then I told her okay...so as not to contradict her. Well... I respect her enough not to contradict her, but I don't know, I don't believe in this. God knows...

He sounded somewhat less dismissive of his sister's claim that she heard a knocking sound when her husband's soul departed at the moment of his death – "Well, maybe. What can I say to that? Maybe. I don't know" – but he usually attributed such experiences to fantasy because these accounts, for him, lacked "hard evidence". His experiences while in a coma during his illness only fuelled his uncertainty about the matters of the afterlife. He considered this state to be "halfway to the otherworld" and thought it should have been an opportunity to see what was on the other side.¹⁰ But his visions were incoherent, a 'gibberish' he could not make sense of at all. At the same time, although he was uncertain about the nature of post-death existence and was sceptical toward religious or vernacular imaginations of the otherworld, he hoped that people would be united with their loved ones after death, and he talked about the dead as existing entities, some of whom may, sometimes, have impact on one's life.¹¹

Relationship with the Dead

When talking about János's relationship with the dead, we need to make a distinction between his relations with his late parents and his connections to other dead people. His relationship with his parents fits the continuing bonds model described in bereavement studies (Klass & Silverman & Nickman 1996; Klass & Steffen 2018). He stayed in the family home and was living there with his young family when his parents died a few months apart, both after long illnesses. Although it was foreseeable, their passing was a great emotional shock, and "even though it was 34 years ago, [his grief] is not going away". His strong attachment to them was palpable during our conversations; he talked about them with the utmost respect and love, and often became emotional when mentioning them. He frequently visits their grave, preferably alone, because "then nothing diverts my thoughts, and I can really be together with them". This includes telling them about the ups and downs of his everyday life. He considers his parents his greatest source of emotional support, to whom he can turn for relief; they are his "psychologists", as he once told me. For example, he often mentioned his struggles when renovating the house he inherited from his parents, an undertaking he was forced to jump into without any money, due to the house's poor state:

Well, we ran out of everything many times. We ran out of money, ran out of hope, of stamina, and were desperate, and there were times that I visited [his parents' grave] during the night. I couldn't sleep, my mind was racing: how would it be, where and how would I get the money? One can get very desperate, so I went there, and it always calmed me down. [...] I don't know how many times I went there, and it always soothed me and gave me strength.

And the dead not only helped him by lending an ear in times of trouble. Despite never having a direct encounter with his dead parents and doubting the ability of the dead to return or give any signs, he is convinced that his parents have been actively helping him from beyond the grave:

AH: Do you think that the dead can communicate with us, or they can send us messages [in dreams]. That it somehow comes from them?

J: Well [stays silent for a while], if you do something dangerous, but it turns out fine instead of being a disaster, then they [the dead] must have had a hand in it.

AH: Can you tell me an example? Did this happen to you?

J: Well, when I was rebuilding the house...I don't know what would have happened had they not helped me. Because spiritual support often means a lot more than financial support. Because if your

mindset is not right, for example, if you are ill, doctors could do whatever they can and would still be powerless. If the patient doesn't have a positive mindset.

AH: *How did they help you spiritually?*

J: *Well, they must have looked after me.*

They were also there for him during the time he was ill: “Well, I think, when I was ill, they were surely by my side”; in another conversation, he said they looked after him because “they must have thought I still had work to do”. Their positive influence also manifests when he unwittingly succeeds in something or something turns out better than expected: a job, a family gathering or a surprise meeting with someone; it is because “there must have been an impulse”, “perhaps they somehow guide us from above” or “perhaps they wanted it to happen”. So even if their presence is not overtly experienced in a physical sense, his parents have a positive influence on his life; they act as emotional supporters, help him achieve something and protect him from harm.

János's relationship with the other dead lacks the qualities usually attributed to continuing bonds; it is emotionally less intense and affective, and he never talked about these dead having an impact on his life as his parents have. Nevertheless, it is a relationship that says a lot about his values and personal and social relations.

During his weekly visits to his parents' grave, he usually walks around the cemetery and checks on others as well: more distant relatives, classmates, friends and members of his parents' generation he knew and was fond of or respected. To some, he also brings candles or flowers on All Souls Day.¹² He estimates that he tends up to 70 graves in the local cemetery that either belong to people to whom he was personally attached, or whose descendants left the village or did not have descendants at all. The level of care varies: he provides flowers and maintains the tombstones of the family dead (grandparents, great-uncles and aunts), or, when needed, cleans the headstones of one of his classmates whose relatives live far away. But in most cases, he only treats the surroundings of the graves with weed killers 3–4 times a year, which is nevertheless an important contribution, since according to local aesthetics, the area around a well-kept grave needs to be weedless and raked. He does this on his own initiative and free of charge, out of loyalty, gratitude or reverence. While his attachment to these dead is different from his bonds with his parents in terms of emotionality, intensity and importance, some features are common to both.

Although János does not share certain fundamental official and vernacular religious conceptualisations about the dead, his relationship with them bears some traits of these traditions. One is his strong sense of reciprocity towards the dead. Reciprocity and exchange are at the heart of the Catholic idea of Purgatory, with the living and the dead mutually praying for each other. But in

addition to this spiritual and symmetrical exchange relationship as motivation for the living to intercede for the souls in Purgatory, from the Middle Ages on, there was another, asymmetrical one where the living were obliged to do so in return for their lives, family names, social standing, inheritance or donations (Geary 1994: 77–94; Schmitt 1998: 33; Oexle 1983: 29). One of the earliest pieces of evidence for this are the instructions left to her son by a 9th-century Frankish noblewoman, Dhuoda, where she provided him with a list of people he had to pray for, and also warned him that the amount of prayer should correspond to the amount of inheritance they had bequeathed to his family (Duby 2000: 108–111). Walter considers this an example of syncretism between a monotheistic religion and an existing system of ancestor worship (Walter 2018: 46; and 2017).¹³ If so, the doctrine of Purgatory provided the perfect framework for managing exchange relations between the living and the dead. In turn, this exchange became a significant driving force behind Purgatory-related practices. While mostly associated with religiosity in the Middle Ages, inheritance-based reciprocity remained the backbone of relations between the living and the dead in some vernacular or local Catholic traditions up to the end of the 20th century or even later (Douglass 1969: 133–134; Cátedra 1992: 247–254; Goldey 1983: 14).¹⁴ In the early 2000's, inhabitants of a Catholic Hungarian village community in Transylvania talked about being indebted to their forefathers for the land and houses they had inherited, but especially to their parents for directly passing down property and for raising them. Therefore, they regularly prayed, paid for masses and gave alms – small charitable gifts – for their salvation. They also interceded for those from whom they had received significant help in the past or whose former possessions they were using. The assistance they gave to the dead was proportionate to what they had received from them: a family regularly paid for masses to be recited for an uncle who had lent them money when they were building their home, and a woman also paid for masses for a late neighbour whose oven she used for baking bread, while a man only prayed for a friend whose prayer book he had 'inherited'. Whenever the dead felt that the living were not living up to their obligations, they would remind them through dreams or punish them by causing them harm: illness, economic hardship and lack of good fortune (Hesz 2012b: 182–199).

János echoed similar ideas when he said he felt obliged to care for his parents' graves because they "felt that it was their duty to raise us and make us men. So that's the minimum [we can do for them]". Inheritance was also a factor. When passing by an abandoned grave he spoke critically about people who failed to care for the graves of those from whom they inherited something:

J: Here is my godfather, and my neighbour from the opposite side of the street [is in the other grave], well, they don't have any descendants left, they only had heirs. But it was only the property [that mattered to the heirs].

AH: *Aha.*

J: *Only the property and nothing else...*

AH: *Heirs should... [care for the graves]?*

J: *They ought to, ought to. There's one such, well we passed it [a grave], and there's just a small pile left, hardly anything to see. His case was the same; he left his house, car, a great deal of money, and now he does not even have a cross on his grave.*

Reciprocity is also present in his relationship with some of the other dead. For example, whenever he travels to a nearby town, he visits the grave of a fellow patient he met during the time he was ill. As he said, he “couldn’t avoid his grave” because this man had convinced him to spend time in a rehabilitation centre and had paid the costs of his stay. He also tends the graves of two butchers whose tools he uses – he did not get those as gifts since he bought them from their descendants for a small sum, but he used the word “inherit” when he mentioned them.

There are differences, of course, compared to the medieval or Transylvanian examples. Firstly, instead of providing spiritual aid, he makes restitution for his debts to the dead by paying them due respect and keeping their memory: “we respect them, and I think this is the maximum we can do for them. But they have earned it.” And this respect is most visibly manifested through visiting and maintaining graves. Secondly, the dead would not punish the living if they failed to fulfil their obligations. Tending the graves was, rather, an internalised moral obligation reinforced by social norms and community expectations. Most people I spoke with paid regular visits to the cemetery, kept their relatives’ graves tidy and ensured the flowers were fresh. Many told me they have a flower garden specifically to provide them with flowers for the cemetery. Neglected graves are talked about and frowned upon, and while some people find this social expectation somewhat unpleasant, they try to live up to it nevertheless.

János was the only person amongst my interlocutors who explicitly mentioned reciprocity as a factor in his relationship with the dead and linked the obligation of caring for graves to inheritance or the various kinds of support one received from the dead while they were alive. Reciprocity – the principle that one should always return any assistance given – is a central element of his morality, a principle that guides all his social relationships. As a person with many skills, he often helps others with their chores for free because he knows they will pay him back for his services in one way or another. Mutual help and work exchange permeated local interactions in the past: houses were built in *kaláka*, an informal system of labour exchange widespread in Hungarian rural communities, and people commonly helped each other on a reciprocal basis during harvest times or other major agricultural work. Maintaining a support network based on reciprocity was so important that there are local anecdotes

about people who were barely on speaking terms but still went to help each other during threshing. In contrast, as János complained, today, people prefer money to favours returned, although “there are still some who can see beyond their nose”. He correlates the decline of mutual help and reciprocity as a common value with the growing individualisation and atomisation of the community, which he deeply condemns. By sticking to reciprocity in his relationship with the dead, he emphasises its importance as a moral value.

Another common trait János’s relationship with the dead shares with religious and folklore tradition is the normative influence the dead have on him. Narratives produced and distributed by the Catholic clergy (see Schmitt 1998; Finucane 1996: 55), and a rich tradition of folklore texts, along with more recent ethnographic research (Mencej 2025; Hesz 2012a and b), show that the dead had normative power over the living: they controlled the proper execution of funeral rites, deterred the living from committing sins by revealing their otherworldly punishment, exposed those who committed crimes against them, or punished transgressions of moral and social norms by haunting the living. While nothing of this sort would be possible in János’s reality, his parents are still a normative force in his life and influence his behaviour. For example, they are the main reason why he has maintained an amicable relationship with his siblings:

J: And I couldn't be angry with my siblings. I think everybody has reasons to, for sure, at least once, that [the siblings] did something they shouldn't have done, that wasn't nice. They did. They did. But I couldn't be angry with them, couldn't be.

AH: Why can't you be angry with your siblings?

J: Well, it would hurt them [nods toward his parents' grave] ...

He also still tries to live up to his parents’ expectations. When visiting their graves, he regularly tells them about his children’s achievements – “I always boast about the success of my children. Because they [his parents] would be so proud...”, and he also finds fulfilment in doing something that would please his parents:

J: Whenever I finish mowing or cleaning up the garden, I always remember that my father used to say that he wanted to [be able to] look back from the grave to see if the house was overgrown by the weeds. And then it makes me extra happy, extra happy that, well, he may be proud of me.

AH: Why did he say this, did he think that no one would look after the house properly?

J: Yes, because they were always very keen on keeping everything just so. So that people could see that the house is looked after.

In the continuing bonds model, Christine Valentine calls relationships where the dead approve the actions of the living as mutually affirmative, since the experiences of her interlocutors “validated both the relationship itself as well as the identities of both parties” (Valentine 2018: 233). But for János, the relationship is not only about approval and affirmation, since he also confesses to his parents when something goes wrong: “I always apologise to them for being so miserable or incapable if I fail.” Without ever punishing him for his shortcomings beyond the grave, his parents remained his significant others: he measures himself up against their values and expectations.

On another level and in a different way, other dead people also have some kind of normative role for him. When we walked together in the local cemetery to see which graves he cared for, he frequently mentioned respect as his motive for caring for a certain grave. As he said, “one sees quality when going around in the graveyard” and that there are many “for whom one could raise one’s hat”. He praised these people – usually of his parents’ generation – for being honest, kind, helpful, hard-working, and ready to do things for the benefit of the community: like the old shoemaker who never refused to repair a shoe, was kind to everybody and always talked gently with his wife, the butcher’s wife who always kept the house neat and tidy, or the postmaster and his wife who contributed greatly to the development of the village. He often contrasted these traits with the present state of the village community. Like most of my other interlocutors, he sees the village as declining demographically and economically and complains about disintegrating community life: many people have left, the number of abandoned houses is growing, and the new settlers do not try to integrate. The small benches where people used to gather for a daily chat have disappeared from in front of the houses, people live secluded lives, do not visit their neighbours as freely as they did in the past, everybody is preoccupied with their own lives and welfare, and it is hard to involve people in community events.¹⁵ János has an especially bleak view of today’s society – local and global alike, claiming that animosity, jealousy, dishonesty, ungratefulness and disrespect are now common characteristics. When he pays respect to the dead of his parents’ generation, he respects the values of honesty, integrity, a strong work ethic and sociability. In other words, for him, the dead embody everything that he so painfully misses in present-day society.

CONCLUSION: INDIVIDUAL VIEWS AND GLOBAL TRENDS

How someone imagines and relates to the dead is always a unique combination of different traditions, discourses and individual deductions shaped during interactions with others, or exposure to various content in the time of mass and social media. Just how idiosyncratic it is depends on how much chance one has to negotiate and harmonise one’s ideas with others. What happens after death is not a usual topic of conversation in János’ village, especially not for

men, but as some of his remarks implied, people do sometimes talk about it, even if jokingly. As mentioned before, personal encounters with the dead are usually only shared within an intimate circle of family or friends because many fear they would not be understood.¹⁶

Like most people, János comes across as someone who does not think much about the mysteries of life after death: I often felt that it was only due to my questions that he gave a second thought to certain aspects of the afterlife. While he had arguments against the reality of bodily resurrection and consistently rejected the idea that the dead could come back or communicate with the living in any form, he was uncertain about the whereabouts and fate of the souls after death, sometimes even contradicting himself.

His attitude towards the dead is an amalgam of several of the frameworks identified by Tony Walter: it has vague elements of Christian teachings; the prevalence of the feeling of indebtedness to the dead links it to vernacular forms of Catholic tradition; the emphasis on keeping the memory of the dead echoes the secular memory framework, and his strong emotional bonds with his parents fit into the framework of romantic love. But it does not fully fit any of them. For him, the dead are more than memories; they exist somewhere and affect the lives of the living, but the exact place and form of their existence is not relevant; one is obliged to take care of them driven by the principles of reciprocity but can only do so by respecting them and preserving their memory, mostly through tending their graves; bonds may continue after death with some, but direct communication is not possible with the dead.

Despite their uniqueness, János' views show similar traits to those of his fellow villagers and those described in contemporary Western societies (see Walter 2018; Day 2012; Valentine 2018; Klass & Silverman & Nickman 1996), e.g., their diversity and their detachment from religious ideas (Day 2012; Walter 2017, 2018). A lack of detailed knowledge about the realms of the Catholic otherworld and the doctrinal path that souls may take to redemption is common in the local community. I was surprised by how many of my Catholic interlocutors were unaware of the doctrine of Purgatory and what it meant for the relationship between the living and the dead, even though they had attended catechism classes. This may be due to the poor effectiveness of these classes, the local clergy putting less emphasis on the obligation to spiritually assist the dead, the influence of Calvinism, or other factors that have yet to be revealed.¹⁷ In János's case, his rather pragmatic religiosity¹⁸ could be one such factor, as well as his questioning of the Church's authority in general; while he believes in God, he is increasingly discontent with the Church's growing entanglement with the state in present-day Hungary.

As many have noted, there has been a major shift in the role of the dead in Western societies. From entities with power over the living, and to whom the living had certain obligations, they have transformed into spiritual companions or guardian angels who support and protect the living (Walter 2018: 50;

Klass 2015: 104). As Dennis Klass writes, in the twentieth century, the focus shifted from the well-being of the dead to the well-being of the survivors. At the same time, the notion of the hostile dead attacking and inflicting harm on the living has mainly disappeared (Klass 2015: 106), and if the dead have any influence on the life of the living, it is mostly positive (Goss & Klass 2005).

These features were often linked to the prevalence of individualism in contemporary Western societies. Klass, for example, suggested that the reason why the dead are no longer hostile is that they have lost their normative power over the living. He supposes that this mirrors changes in interpersonal relationships between the living, where the gradual disintegration of close-knit, face-to-face communities with tight social control and high social expectations give people more personal freedom in choosing whom they want closer ties with and cutting unsatisfactory bonds. Similarly, “the living can now modulate which aspects of the relationship continue after the death, much as an individual can modulate which aspects continue after a divorce” (Klass 2015: 106).

Others see individualism as similarly being a driver for the diversity of afterlife beliefs. Abby Day, for example, pointed out that afterlife beliefs for many people are primarily rooted in personal “experiences of sensing the presence of their deceased relatives” instead of abstract religious teachings (Day 2012: 173). Christine Valentine also argued that “the idiosyncratic nature of these relationships may in part reflect a lack of grounding in shared traditional religious or cultural structures” and that “they demonstrate a culture of individualism that respects diversity in how people mourn and remember their dead” (Valentine 2018: 232). There are no dominant frameworks or narratives imposed on people by authoritative institutions like there were in the past; people have access to several frameworks and may choose freely among them.

While these arguments are certainly valid in some social contexts, they do not fully apply to János’s case. Firstly, he clearly has nostalgia for a life with less individualism and more dedication to the community. The values he cherishes – honour, integrity, helpfulness, sociability, reciprocity – are values linked to close-knit, interpersonal communities. And these values are also an integral part of his relationship with the dead: reciprocity as one of the driving forces for keeping their memory and caring for their graves, and the others as the values upheld by the dead people he respected. The fact that he takes care of a large number of graves belonging to people he had various types of connections to also goes against processes of individualisation and shrinking social networks. In a village community that is becoming increasingly individualistic, his relationship with the dead reflects interpersonal relationships of the past rather than the present.

Secondly, we can see that the dead have had a normative influence on him, even though they have never been hostile to him. Their normative role is more indirect. Abby Day argued that continuing bonds are more about preserving the

relationship than the individual (Day 2012: 174); for János, his parents retained their parental roles and the authority that comes with it – except for the power of retribution. His parents, along with some of the other deceased, are also seen as role models, representatives of an ideal social order, which is, again, a normative function.

Thirdly, I think, the reason for the growing diversity of afterlife beliefs is not only the lack of shared grand narratives due to a preference for individual choices, but the gradual disappearance of knowledge shared in local and other types of close-knit communities. Grand narratives have always been challenged by vernacular knowledge (cf. Valk 2022: 15; Hesz 2020). Despite being condemned as superstition by the Church and scientific discourses, the belief in ghosts or unorthodox imaginations of the afterlife was abundant in vernacular traditions throughout Europe. Individual ideas have always differed, but in more traditional, close-knit communities with extended and intensive social interactions, people shared and negotiated their experiences and ideas and thus had the chance to arrive at common understandings. Today, however, even rural communities lack the forums for constructing a shared platform of knowledge about the dead and the afterlife.

What does János's case tell us about the relationship with the dead in contemporary societies? I would argue that his case is interesting because it broadens the scope of research. Most studies focus on people's relationships with their deceased loved ones (mostly working with the bereaved), on people who have had personal encounters with the dead, or on the role of the politically significant dead. János's case fits none of these categories fully, making him an unusual or atypical subject of study.

Following the vernacular religious approach and studying individual conceptualisations holistically within the context of their social environment can reveal the complexity of people's relationship with the dead, and the complexity of the dead's role in an individual's life. János's case shows that in addition to the continuing bonds with deceased loved ones, people may have meaningful relationships with a wider circle of dead acquaintances even in contemporary society, and that personal encounters with the dead are not a prerequisite for their influence on one's life. His case also shows that while relationships with the dead are affected by changing social relationships and values, they do not necessarily reflect them – they may, in fact, represent relationships and values of the past.

NOTES

- 1 The research leading to the results presented in the paper has received funding from the European Research Council grant agreement No. 101095729 (ERC project DEAGENCY). The views and opinions expressed are however those of the author only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Research Council Executive Agency; neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them. While working on the paper I had the opportunity to discuss the draft version with the Deagency project team members;

I'm grateful for their comments and advice. I also express my gratitude to the two anonymous peer-reviewers for helping me refine my paper with their valuable insights.

- 2 Research has attributed this inconsistency to the context-bound, situative nature of individual views (Valk 2022; Lewis 1986; Day 2012: 170), or to the intuitivity (Bering 2022; Hodge 2011; Visuri 2023) or counterintuitivity (Astuti 2007) of beliefs in existence after death.
- 3 I am immensely grateful to the members of this organisation for their kindness, hospitality, and invaluable help during my fieldwork.
- 4 Ca. thirty people attend the Sunday mass regularly, about 4% of the number of Catholics in the 2022 census. For comparison, in the 1970s, three Sunday masses were celebrated: one in the early morning for women and children, one at 11 o'clock for men and one in the afternoon for those who missed the other two.
- 5 One of the reasons for this may be his rather critical stance towards the Church as an institution – an issue I will address below.
- 6 He even implied that paying for masses more frequently is mainly for attention-grabbing.
- 7 It is not uncommon in the community to put something the dead particularly liked – a bottle of spirits or wine, for example – into the coffin.
- 8 For the largest collection see: 'Visszajáró halott' [Revenants] in the Digital Database of Hungarian Folk Beliefs: <https://hiedelemszovegek.boszorkanykorok.hu/tartalom.html>.
- 9 Only one of them was Calvinist.
- 10 Others must have had the same idea since many asked him if he had "experienced anything".
- 11 Following the approach of the Deagency project I take what my interlocutors say seriously, and do not judge if their relationship with the dead is real or imaginary. This will also be reflected in the wording of this paper: instead of using an "objective" or distancing language, I will write about the dead as impactful entities, when my interlocutor talks about them as such.
- 12 He also visits the graves of in-laws and acquaintances in other settlements on All Souls' Day and whenever he happens to pass by.
- 13 Writing about the dead's presence in Catholic communities in mid-twentieth century America, Robert A. Orsi also considers praying for the souls of Purgatory a form of an ancestor cult, although inheritance was not a factor in the relationship between the living and the dead there (Orsi 2016: 195).
- 14 For Eastern Christian examples see: Kenna 1976: 23–28; Danforth & Tsiras 1982: 124.
- 15 To be fair, outsiders like me may have a less negative impression of the village's present community life, as there are several active civil organisations in the village, one of which is a nationally recognised cultural association organised around the local village museum with a highly engaged membership. Nevertheless, loosening social ties and less intensive everyday interaction in formerly close-knit local communities are trends researchers have been reporting for decades (for Hungary see: Jávorski et al. 2000: 999).
- 16 More than one of my interlocutors thanked me for the opportunity to talk about their experiences with the dead.
- 17 According to the priest, the number of masses paid for the salvation of the dead has decreased significantly in the last decades. I did not have access to the official registry of votive masses, therefore I cannot statistically prove his statement, but my interlocutors also had the same impression.
- 18 He praised his priest uncle, for example, for pursuing lay activities (such as working in his vineyard, keeping animals or playing sports) and not being very pushy with spiritual teachings.

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