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# Facing Death

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**Abstract:** This study is based on my fieldwork on lived religion and beliefs among Roman Catholic native Hungarian-speakers in Harghita County, Transylvania, Romania between 1966 and 2016. In the Roman Catholic communities of my fieldsite, phenomena of modernisation and globalisation, as well as the preservation, recollection and transformation of remnants of beliefs and rituals of traditional religious communities were equally present. By exploring the complex questions of death, dying, the path to the afterlife and the afterlife itself, I was able to record personal experience narratives. In the religious communities under study, the motives for the varied forms of communicating with the dead are diverse and complex: there are dualities of knowledge and faith, reason and emotion; even for an individual, conflicting variations are possible; ready-made frameworks and individual, impulsive, emotional attitudes are simultaneously present and have an effect. The strongest motives are the fear of damnation and of prolonged suffering in purgatory, and the social motives that go with it: the ideas of the cohesion of small communities, families, generations, and the idea of the reciprocal relationship of the living and the dead in the same family. A similar role is played by the teaching of the good death, which everyone tries to ensure for themselves and their family members, even if they often practice "empty" rites. This is a testimony to the Church's role as a constant norm-setter to this day.

**Keywords:** Hungarian Catholics, Transylvania, lived religion, death, dying, afterlife, fear of damnation, reciprocity, ritual fixity

This study is based on my fieldwork on lived religion and beliefs among Roman Catholic native Hungarian-speakers in Harghita County, Transylvania, Romania between 1966 and 2016.[1] In the Roman Catholic communities of my fieldsite, phenomena of modernisation and globalisation, as well as the preservation, recollection and transformation of beliefs and rituals of traditional religious communities were equally present. By exploring the complex questions of death, dying, the path to the afterlife and the afterlife itself, I was able to record personal experience narratives. In these communities, the trends studied were

broadly similar, although personal, narrative manifestations, of course, contained many individual differences.

My argument hinges on what kinds of motivations, personal attitudes and functions facing death has in the lives of individuals and what kind of religious, emotional and societal factors generate and sustain them. In addition to the already vast literature on communication with the dead, I have also been able to draw on important new theoretical insights on some aspects of my topic. These include the experience-centered (Badone 1990; Bennett 1999; Koski 2008) and group-oriented research of the last half century: research on lived religion of small communities (Christian 1989; Stewart 1991; Davies 2007; Gagyi 2010; Bowman & Valk 2012); on belief as lived experience (Gurevich 1992a; Primiano 1995; Peti 2002; Bowman 2003/2004; Naumescu 2007; Katajala-Peltomaa 2020); the study of the relationship of texts and beliefs and various other intertextual approaches (Honko 1964, 1968; Dégh &Vázsonyi 1976; Gurevich 1992b; Hufford 1995; Dégh 2001; Valk 2003, 2008, 2015; Burke 2004; Blécourt 2003; Bowman 2014), as well as "new combinations of source materials and cultural context which offer new insights" (Ohrvik & Guðmundsdóttir 2015: 8; Thomas 1971; Valk 2003); research on the role of emotions (Lutz & White 1986; Metcalf & Huntington 1991; Luehrmann 2018) with a strong emphasis on biblical anthropology of fear, fear of God (Egger-Wezel & Corley 2012; Kruger 2015; Németh 2021), and research on the psychobiological and medical aspects of visionary experiences (Roscher 1903; Parker 1975; Grof 1975; Sabom 1982; Kenneth 1984; Zaleski 1987; Blackmore & Cox 2000; Davies 2003; Rivière 2019).

My data raised numerous problems of interpretation. Given the nature of the subject, I had gathered the relevant data from information I elicited in a collecting situation and gleaned from the textual world of conversations. We know that narrative fictions that spread through oral transmission or in writing and what foklore collectors are told in various speech situations do not always reflect local religious ideas and beliefs alone, or sometimes not at all. They could just as well be carriers, narrative metaphors of concepts that have existed elsewhere or nowhere, or in the distant past, or never although their telling may activate and revive beliefs that have never existed or that were thought to have died. I have attempted to solve the problems presented by having to decipher the belief system from this textual world; however, I do not have sufficient space to detail my methods here.[2]

I also drew on my own studies of religious resilience, which led me to conclude within the broader context of a larger study that the most important sustaining forces of belief and rituals in both lived and official religion in the religious communities studied were:

1) An axiomatic set of beliefs and knowledge, closely related to official church doctrines, offering the alternative views of lived religion. Its main points are: belief in life after death; different versions of the concept of body and soul and their relationship – not in line with dualistic Christian doctrines; death as a process, with transitional stages on the way to the afterlife; this world – the world beyond; the different (ecclesiastical and popular) dichotomies/triads of earth-purgatory-hell; the temporary and final passage between the material and spiritual worlds; the diffuse, transitional, living–dead, human–spiritual forms of humans ("dual beings" who are both human and spirit in one person[3]).
2) Communication is possible between the two worlds: through biopsychologically given, individually various options: dreaming or seeing visions in a state of altered state of consciousness (ASC) (waking hallucination at the border between dream and wakefulness, visions experienced in a hypnagogic and hypnopompic state, total unconsciousness, rigid cataleptic state, "deep trance", during which depersonalization, "soul travel" in the spirit world may also appear) (Arbman 1963: II. 591; Siikala 1982: 104). From the individual's point of view, "encounters" of the same value can occur through the imagination, when a real phenomenon is interpreted as supernatural.[4] Of course, dreaming is not the same psychobiological category as trance (although some people include it among the categories of ASC). From the point of view of the perceiver, however, in some respects, as Peter Dinzelbacher (1981:39) has already emphasized, it is of equal importance. There are significant, revelatory dreams which were considered messages from the supernatural world or visions by medieval visionaries themselves (Meseguez 1963: 34),[5] and therefore, from our point of view, forms of supernatural communication.

   Certain kinds of dreams and spontaneous visions are thus a means of direct communication with religious beings, and in this respect they are a form of communal rites that complement official liturgy.[6] In these communities, most people believed in the reality of an afterlife that could be experienced in dreams, in the reality of deities, spirit beings, and the dead – Christian and non-Christian – who manifested themselves in dreams, and in the importance of the messages of the afterlife manifested in dreams. The normative role of the dream otherworld played an important role in their everyday lives (as Peter Burke characterizes those societies where dreams are seen as a way of gaining insight into the other world – a visual representation of the other world) (Burke 1978: 27). This was still the case in many peasant communities in modern Europe in the 20th century. We can observe the presence in these communities of Harvey Whitehouse's category of imagistic religiosity

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(Whitehouse 2004), the importance of lived, visual experience, the emotional attitudes towards religion, the desire for "encounters", manifested most obviously in dreams and visions.[7] But all this requires traditional knowledge about what significant dreams or visions are usually "seen", on what occasions and for what reasons.

3) The societal factors involved: the importance of family ties in all aspects of the cult of the dead, the public nature of religious practice, discourses on religious experiences, the ongoing normative and controlling role of the Church through the preaching and teaching of local clergy, the reading and writing of popular religious literature, as well as ritual fixity: the retaining power of regularly repeated rituals.

In this article, through some examples, I will outline my research on the motives and personal attitudes of communication with the dead, keeping these factors in mind.

## "THE DEAD ARE ALWAYS HERE, ONLY WE CANNOT SEE THEM"

This claim was stated by an 84-year-old woman in 2003 in Gyimesközéplok, and others have said as much, though mostly with hesitation or with reference to the beliefs of "olden times". However, certain personal experiences or memorates about them suggest that, even if not consciously stated, the presence of the dead is still reckoned with; they are thought to still be monitoring the living, sometimes intervening in their world, and the possibility of meeting the dead at any time during life is present almost to this day. According to some of my data, in crisis situations, the dead can reappear – even many years after the death – offering dreamlike help and comfort to the living. A 65-year-old woman told me in 1998:

> *...I have very often, when I was in great sorrow, or in bitterness, or in great trouble, then, oh, how many times I prayed, and then said to myself, though not aloud, "Oh, come, and if you can, help me, now what great trouble I am in, do you know, do you see."* (CS)

Others spoke of feeling that their departed loved ones were watching over them and protecting them from harm. Again, this underscores the importance of the role of family ties.

The most common of these encounters with the dead seem to be the unexpected appearances of ghosts, usually at so-called haunted places: usually crossroads, boundaries, cemeteries and at traditional times and seasons of the appearance of ghosts. These are souls without status, who do not reach the afterlife and wander in limbo: those who did not receive the rites of integration

into the community of the living or the dead, e.g. baptism, burial; for example, the souls of soldiers who died in battle, suicides, aborted fetuses, babies who died without baptism. Due to the lack of rituals to integrate them into the community they are also excluded from the society of the dead.

Encounters with them at crossroads, at boundaries, in the woods, at night, or at the site of a former war cemetery of soldiers are popular narrative themes, and the narratives also serve as sources of communal entertainment, as well as warnings to avoid sudden death, without receiving the last sacrament. These dead were generally indifferent to people, just asking them for masses, alms for their "redemption" from the in-between, following the pattern of the migratory legends known throughout Central Europe (see e.g. in Müller & Röhrich 1967; Fischer 2010). Despite this, the narrators' genuine fear of their own future otherworldly exclusion was sometimes palpable, especially in accounts of the rites of *post facto* baptisms of miscarried fetuses crying under the window of the guilty mother. According to a narrative about fear of the ghosts of unburied soldiers,

> *...The souls of fallen soldiers must have wandered. ... once they were in Jávárdi, and at night they went to the top of a hill, and someone shouted, and then he shouted back, and then they said something ugly, and he said: "Come here, Berta!".... It was also some kind of ghost. They were so frightened of it.* (75-year-old woman, GY 2005)

In addition to the constant warnings from the church, these encounters and experiences must have stimulated at least the "good Christians" to be more zealous in their duty to care for the dead, to pay for funeral services and prayers and give alms for the dead.

## ATTACKS OF THE DEAD ON THE LIVING

Researchers (especially Eastern Europeans) often distinguish the good dead that is, the community's own dead who can support their families, and the evil, alien dead who attack the community (see e.g. Vinogradova 1999), but in the minds of local Catholics these are not sharply separated, clearly delineated categories. According to my data, the dead are neither good nor bad, but rather ambivalent and often indifferent to the living. Attacks on human communities and their territories are mostly, but not exclusively, caused by anonymous, alien dead.

One of the characteristic manifestations of aggression by the dead who enter the spaces of the living is that they occupy human settlements and draw them under their negative influence. According to a common narrative type, the evil ones occupy a given human settlement and much like poltergeists cause havoc,

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they "spoil" the furnishings, everyday objects of people living there. There are numerous, deeply believed, fearful individual accounts of this phenomenon. According to an 84-year-old woman (talking about the dead who sometimes also appear in windstorms or in the whirlwind):

> *... All of a sudden loud screaming* [...] *it was coming this way from the shack and it went through its door, it threw back the door, and then such a wind, a whirlwind came in, into the shack and it cleaned up the foot cloths, the sandals and that fireplace, that everything was totally dry, the ashes, everything was gathered together. Nothing was left inside. Then they started to pray...* (GY 2006)

Another widespread type of narrative is about the dead calling out the victim, whom they try to snatch, carry with them or lead to death or damnation. This belongs to the so-called *Nachzehrer* beliefs (Schürmann 1990), widely distributed in Europe, in many different kinds of variants which share the axiomatic idea that "the dead take the living with them into death"[8]. According to the Gyimesközéplok and Csíkkarcfalva variant: if they knock or bang at the door at night, it is not advisable to go out, because the dead take those who step outside with them. For example:

> *...some dead person appeared in the form of such a ghost, and sometimes it happened that they lured him outside at night too, and they heard music, and then they went out, and they took him somewhere far in the forest, and there they put him down...* (CJ 1998)

Many spoke about being transported by the evil dead as a personal (dream or vision) experience which they described as a psychic disturbance: disorientation, getting lost. Narratives speak about the taking away of the mind, of wits (a kind of emic category of the soul), while at the same time they are also interwoven with images of bodily snatching, bodily exhaustion, as well as the otherworldly symbol of getting lost.[9]

One of the most common manifestations of the assault of the evil dead is "pressing" while in bed at night ("goes onto him/her", "keeps going onto her/him"). Conceptualizations of pressing are symptom- and reality-based: they can be associated with feeling unwell, experiencing distinctive sensations of pressure, difficulty breathing; they may be connected to nightmares, erotic dreams, and to sleep paralysis. Pressing may appear on the border between sleep and wakefulness and be accompanied by other bodily experiences (trembling, tingling) and vivid auditory or visual hallucinations, and at times even the sensation of flying or out-of-body experiences. As a universal neurobiological phenomenon, the anthropology of religion has documented it among

almost all the peoples of Europe: during these visions "believers" usually sense a locally recognized demonic being, or an assaulting dead person (Kiessling 1977; Hufford 1982; Davies 2003; Rivière 2019). A 42-year-old woman from Gyimesközéplok spoke about it, thus:

> *...I didn't dare to go to sleep, I was so scared to go to sleep, and so I was sprinkling the bed with holy water all the time, and while I was praying I put the prayer book right here, because I was afraid in case I should go to sleep lying in a supine position, and that gave me a dream straight away, and that horrible unpleasant feeling that pressed down on me.* [...]
> (Éva: And what do you think it was?)
> *Evil. Yes, it was evil itself.* (2006)

The naming of the dead as "evil" (*gonoszak*, *rosszak*), "unclean ones" (*tisztátalanok*) may equally refer to the devil or to the diffuse, transitory categories between "evil dead" and devils.[10] This was often also expressed by informants, thus:

> *The devil* [...] *knocks, rumbles, scares people when they are alone* [...], *it's also possible that the dead appear.* (CJ 1998)

Attack by either the devil or by the dead sometimes seem to be alternative explanations of the same phenomenon,[11] both may be present concurrently in the same narrative; for example, a woman from Csíkszenttamás in 2002 spoke about a series of diabolic visions, in one of which her dead father appeared in the shape of the devil, whom she – as is customary with the devil – sent away in the name of Jesus.[12]

The main reason why the dead and Satan's demons from hell diffusely coalesce in the minds of the people of Gyimes and Csík is the vague tenets of the Christian church. The integration of the basically non-Christian notion of "revenants" into Christianity happened along a tortuous route dotted with many debates between religious and secular elites, and among the different Christian denominations – and these debates have basically not been settled to date,[13] thereby contributing to the classification of the assaulting dead as "devils".[14]

Many individual accounts tell us about fear of demons in this context, especially in individual crisis situations, primarily in the case of women in confinement, and the temporary "outcast" state of her newborn, which lasts from giving birth until the church ceremony "initiating" (blessing) women following childbirth and in the case of the newborn, until baptism. Many personal accounts told of the demon beliefs and fears of mothers whose exposure to the assaulting dead was heightened (because of their special state). According to a memorate from Gyimesközéplok:

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> *...it pressed me too, when I was in childbed* [...] *something came in through the door, and lo and behold* [...] *it steps in front of the bed* [...] *Oh, once something was pressing me so much, I could neither breathe, nor lift my hand...* (2002)

Some forms of attacks by the dead can also be interpreted as compensation of the liminal dead for being excluded; possession is an aggressive form of their striving for inclusion through imposing themselves on the community by force. The additional or repeated performance of rites of passage after death may be an important tool of protection against aggressive assaults (for example, a fictive baptism, a "second" burial, or the performance of prayers, or almsgiving with which the liminal transitional beings are reintegrated into their family).[15] All of this indicates that notions of attack by the evil dead and the practice of protecting against them may also have had an important normative role in these village communities and in ensuring good relations between the living and the dead.

## PREPARING FOR A GOOD DEATH – FEAR OF DEATH, HELL, SATAN

Central to religious life in the Catholic communities studied was the idea of being a good Catholic, which flowed through many channels from the ecclesiastical authorities, and which included the aspiration to a good death, and in this context the fear of damnation and hell. These are the basic factors that generate the emotional and behavioural responses to facing death and which in other respects cause people to refrain from committing sins.

Even premonitions of one's own death, portents of death, dreams of death, with their symbolism of death, hell or, less often, heaven, play a *memento mori* role in the life of the individual. In 2005, an 84-year-old woman in Gyimesközéplok said that she believed that the dead often appear to old people approaching death; she often saw her loved ones in her dreams. The most common narrative theme in dreams about death is that if the dead person in the dream gives the dreamer something: apples, water, clothes, etc, this means that he or she "gives life". If, however, he or she asks for something, it means death. But dreams of falling buildings, tooth loss, tooth extraction, known to be portents of death all over the country are also commonly dreamed about and recounted, and many commonplace occurrences (such as a dog howling loudly, an owl hooting loudly on the roof, a fruit tree suddenly drying up, a light suddenly flashing on and off at night) are also interpreted as portents of death. People pay increased attention to avoiding a "bad" death for themselves and their family members, i.e. death without sacraments, and to accepting death with peace and resignation in the hope of salvation. Many of my interlocutors

spoke about these cases with strong emotions, empathizing with the fear of death of their friends and loved ones, and being motivated to pray for them:

> *I trust only in prayers, and in God, and through them that we may not go to hell. And let's help whomever we can, by praying...* (70-year-old woman, GY 2003)

Some prayed every day for a good death, which included avoiding sudden death at night, i.e. the assaults of deadly demons that attack at night. For this purpose, there were many prayers, which only existed in oral tradition, which were recited by older women every night, but especially every Friday during my field research. The conclusion of one such prayer, for example, goes thus:

> *Whosoever learnt this prayer,*
> *Says it in the evening as he/she goes to bed,*
> *In the morning upon waking,*
> *Even at the hour of his/her death,*
> *The gates of hell shall shut,*
> *The gate of heaven shall be opened,*
> *And they shall be carried to blissful heaven. Amen.*
> (65-year-old woman, GY 2003)

The text also refers to the death of Christ on Good Friday; the prayer is to be recited up to three times on Fridays in remembrance of this: "...whoever recites it ... three times on Friday, all their sins are forgiven" (65-year-old woman, GY 2003). A 74-year-old woman prayed for her sick husband:

> *Who knows how he'll get there or where he'll get to or what. It is only for this reason that those of us who can* [...] *should pray.* (GY 2007)

One woman was awakened to the possibility of dying without receiving the last sacrament by her nocturnal feelings of pressure (which she attributed to a demon attack):

> *...I was paralysed. I could not raise my hand.* [...] *I knew how to pray,* [...] *in my mind it was there.* [...] *all the time when I went to bed, all I'd say was: Dear God, keep me from the evil one and bad dreams...* (40-year-old woman, GY 2008)

The good death of a dying family member was assured by putting a consecrated candle into his or her hand. This is about getting out of purgatory as soon as possible:

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> *...when the sick person is dying, he or she is also given a consecrated candle in his hand.* [...]. *So he or she goes to the other world, we were taught that, then he or she comes closer to God sooner,* [...] (70-year-old woman, GY 2011)

Well-known parables and pictorial representations from Christian prints also feed the fear of bad death: these depict angels and devils fighting for the souls of the dead, or souls suffering in the fire of purgatory. An 84-year-old woman saw a photo

> *...belonging to my brother Géza, of how sad the souls suffering in the cleansing fire of purgatory were* [...] *In purgatory, everyone has to suffer according to the amount of sins he or she committed...* (GY 2008)

And whoever goes to hell suffers in eternal hellfire, imagined quite concretely:

> *...I imagine your hand is just barely touched by a spark and you are burnt. And day and night* [...]. *They must burn there for ever and ever...* (84-year-old woman, GY 2008)

I could not record much about the fears of hell of sinners directly, but many stories about them were circulating as parables for righteous living. Many of my interlocutors spoke about these cases with strong emotions, empathizing with the fear of death of their friends and loved ones, and being motivated to pray for them:

> *I trust only in prayers, and in God, and through them that we may not go to hell. And let's help whomever we can, by praying...* (42-year-old woman, GY 2007).

## ON DEATHBED-VISIONS AND NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCES

Some archaic beliefs hold that the soul of a mortal undergoes a special transformation before death. As a semi-spiritual, transient being, he or she can gain insight into the world of the dead, or appear as a ghost to his or her relatives, signalling his or her own death. This view is the basis of the *deathbed visions* that I have repeatedly recorded as personal experiences. In most cases, the dying person sees deceased family members, who call him or her to them. An 88-year-old woman recalled her own experience:

> *It happened to me, it's real. When my husband was very ill,* [...] *he was looking, looking at something, I said, my God, what can Károly be looking at,* [...]. *And I said to him: Károly, what are you looking at? And he says, my mother.* [...] *and two days later he died.* (CS 1998)

The narratives also indicate the close ties with dead ancestors: that the generations whose memories are still alive are part of the family, even after their death; there is also the underlying hope of a family reunion in the afterlife. Some of these personal memories are about a dialogue with dead relatives, in which reciprocity is also expressed: they do not forget the living who also cherish the memory of the dead with rituals helping them to better their fate in the afterlife. According to some of my data, the dying person, or possibly the relatives around her/him, also had a vision of a struggle between an angel and some devils for the soul.

> *I heard from my mother that a man was dying, and was very distraught. Those who were there saw that there were devils beside the dying man, and they realized that the soul wanted to leave, but always withdrew because it was afraid of the devils. And they heard a voice saying, "Jump on his chest, and squeeze the soul out of it!" And one of those who were there noticed that on the top of the oven an angel was sorrowful.* (CT 1996)[16]

These events are perceived as reality by all the narrators and serve as *memento mori* and to relieve fear of death. This is even more so in the case of the dying's visions of the afterlife, or *near-death experiences* (NDE). The locally known framework of this universal phenomenon (Zaleski 1987; Dinzelbacher 1989) is the belief that the dying or the dead should not be mourned too much immediately after death, because they will be "wept back to life"; he or she will come back to life; this is an occasion for the narration of afterlife visions. These short stories are usually very suggestive, and in most cases, they are about a good death, a beautiful heaven. These texts obviously also played a role as parables of the hope for a good death. I quote from 1988:

> *My mother's mother's mother was in such a state of ecstasy. She slept for three days, she always slept. They couldn't wake her up* [...] *when she woke up, her daughter-in-law said to her, "Oh, mother, you've been asleep for a long time." "I did not sleep at all! I was not sleeping, my daughter, but I was in a very beautiful place. I saw St. Elisabeth, Anne, Emerence." She spoke to them. And that she would soon be taken into their company. The next day she died. She fell asleep ...* (CK)

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## AFTER DEATH – COMMUNICATION WITH THE RECENTLY DECEASED

The attitude towards the newly dead is ambivalent – even in cases considered to be ideal by community members. A general fear of death is also apparent in the fear of specific newly dead persons (who in some memorable cases attacked their own family in the form of a malevolent demon), but there are also continuing measures on the part of relatives to ensure the good fate of the dead in the afterlife. It transpires from this that there is a hope that the afterlife of both the deceased and those still living will be in accordance with a good death, assured by mutually taking care of each other. The purpose of communication with the deceased relative is to relieve tensions between the living and the dead, and to reciprocally make up for any shortcomings that may have arisen. The main theme of the dialogues is the journey of the dead to the other world, their fate in the other world, which serves to reassure that the ritual obligations of the living have been fulfilled. In addition, it is important to finalize the affairs of the deceased, which may equally include missed farewells, possible shortcomings in the funeral sacraments, or the completion of unfinished business of the deceased, finding his or her lost objects, counselling, thanking the living and soothing their conscience. My data shows that the two most common themes are that the dead person is looking for a hidden object, or asking for a mass or prayer to shorten his or her time in purgatory. So, reflecting the close relationship between the living and the dead, he or she is concerned with both earthly life and the afterlife.

The communication is manifested in dreams, visions and imaginings, framed by axiomatic beliefs about the body and soul, which seem to be vague and unclear, but this does not seem to bother the people who talk about them. For example: the soul of the deceased does not die at the same time as the body; the dead person who is still lying in the house for three days and the body already in the grave can be communicated with "bodily". His/her soul remains in the house until the funeral, but at the same time it leaves for the afterlife, where it continues to live on spiritually, in its physical reality, etc. It was believed by many that the soul still lingers around the house for six weeks after death, visiting the scenes of its life. According to a story told by an 84-year-old woman, the soul, separated from the body, accompanies the deceased to the cemetery:

> *... when they carry it, the soul takes off somewhere,* [...] *Only that no one could see it. And they go out, they take it out, when they put it in the pit, two beautiful white doves arrive from the east, and two black ravens from the west. And then the angel with the kompona* ['scales'] *do you know what kompona is? It weighs* [...] *the angel weighs whether the good deed is about as heavy as the bad deed. If the bad*

> *deeds outweigh the good ones, then those black ravens, those devils* [...] *they take the soul, they take it to hell. And if there are more good deeds then the soul goes to purgatory.* (GY 2003)

The somewhat ambiguous views of the local clergy also contribute to the contradictory nature of these not entirely harmonious conceptualizations: I myself have witnessed the parish priest's various pronouncements on whether the dead could come back. The official position is that they are not coming back. However, he also stated that the return may also be experienced, but then it was actually the devil that appeared, disguised as the deceased. In one particular case, he even performed an exorcism ritual to cleanse the house. (So even the ambiguous devil doctrines of the Catholic Church influence the picture.)

Other popular narratives are about those who are left behind and wonder about their own future fate. A text from a 40-year-old woman collected in 2008:

> *...when my godmother died, her daughters cried because she was a good woman,* [...] *I prayed for her in the evenings,* [...] *one night I dreamed of her that she had come back from the other world. We had a conversation,* [but she did not touch] *me, because they said it was not good for the dead to touch or kiss someone.* [...] *She had a beautiful white dress that was tied around her waist. And I said, "Well, godmother, what's it like on the other side?" And she said to me, "leave it alone, when you die you'll know." And I said, "Well, well, well, but what shall I say to her daughters, for they cry so hard that she's gone." And she said: "Tell them not to cry, for I'm in a very good place".* (40-year-old woman, GY 2008)

The events of communication with the most recently deceased of the family are said to take place mainly during the 40 days following the death (while he or she is still believed to be close by the family), and then become less frequent as time passes, but some testimonies suggest that crisis situations could revive them (for example, some people prayed for healing to their dead mother who appeared in their dream, while also praying to the Virgin Mary). Often, the later dates of the appearance of the dead in dreams and visions coincided with the date of the 40 days and then the anniversary mass for the deceased's salvation, which was celebrated in keeping with Church liturgy, or with the date of a Mass held for him or her that could be paid for at any time.

The dead of the family may (in rare cases, it seems) act as the attacking dead in the early post-funeral period. At such times, fear of the exclusion of one's own dead can be quite significant. The narrator of the following memorate was "pressed" by her aunt until the latter was buried, and then the series continued by other dead members of the family:

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> *… I was awakened but had not yet gone back to sleep,* […] *I heard the door open, I heard footsteps,* […] *as if someone had come to the front of the bed. And then I just felt that it was so interesting just as when you have the shivers,* […] *such an interesting tingling went through my body,* […] *I could not turn, neither could I move or speak,* [I could not do] *nothing.* […] *Then I thought that, I said, one of them, either my brother, or Jancsi came back. They forgot something, they came back…*
> (50-year-old woman, GY 2006)

As for the dead of the community in general, according to the Catholic liturgy, mass is obligatory for them on the feasts of the dead (All Saints' Day and the Day of the Dead in Catholic practice, Easter and Pentecost in the Orthodox calendar).[17] Anyone can, and many people do, pay for these as a means of shoring up credit for their own salvation; it constitutes part of being a "good Catholic". An ardent Catholic, a 40-year-old woman justified her Mass payments in this way: "… yes, I will die too…" (GY 2006). Another 40-year-old woman said:

> *…I imagine that I too will get this from those left behind. It will be good for me too, when I get there, to have someone do it for me.*
> (GY 2008)

It is clear that it is the ecclesiastical rituals of caring for the dead that keep alive and trigger the non-church views and rituals of visionary communication with the dead; the occasions for communication are facilitated by ritual fixity, several aspects of which are exemplified by these narratives. The importance of fulfilling ritual obligations to the dead is underscored by the same childless woman's fear that her fate in the afterlife will be left unattended. As a solution to this problem, she told about the case of a woman in a similar situation, who regularly paid the priest to say a special prayer for her at the Day of the dead mass for the anonymous dead of the community. The Church also gives special encouragement to prayers for the dead and alms paid for their redemption (to the Church, in fact!) on organised occasions of "full redemption":

> *It was on All Saints' Day that for eight days, from the first to the eighth, whoever confessed, took communion, whoever said this Creed, the Lord's Prayer, the Hail Mary, the Glory could save souls from purgatory. On the radio*[18] *there's Father Selymes, he also emphasizes very often when we can have these full redemptions,* […] *not for my benefit, but for the souls in purgatory who are waiting to be released…*
> (40-year-old woman, GY 2008)

Traditional notions of space and time also contribute to the persistence of these views: the time of the dead (the period between Christmas and Epiphany, as well as the 'week of the dead') and the places of the dead (cemetery, crossroads, boundaries, circles, ritually established by circumambulation) are subject to the periodic jurisdiction of the dead, when they can be embodied as living beings in the earthly world and even evoked by symbolic rites. During these periods, some people were looking forward to the appearance of their dead, and to providing them with food and drinks prepared specifically for them; others feared encounters with the evil dead at marked places; for example with ghosts – who could appear – at the crossroads or at boundaries and attack in the shape of animals, too.

Behind the rituals of alms-giving and caring for the dead, certain ancient notions of fate can also be discovered. Many people stated that the length of life and the time of death were determined by "fate", "luck", God Himself, or by one's predetermined lifespan. For example, a 74-year-old woman told me that she goes to confession and takes communion weekly (on special Friday occasions organised by the priest) so that she is always ready because:

> *The Good God* [...] *ordains the living day, and he gives it, and he metes out death...if he wills us to die by night, we die by night; if he wills us to die by day, we die by day. ...as the Good God has decreed the living day, death must follow.* [...] *when you are born, you have what you have to go through in the lifecourse.* (74-year-old woman, GY 2011)

Related to these views of fate is the idea, already mentioned above, that the soul of those people who "do not die their own death" becomes outcast: they cannot reach the other world: one's "own death" is a death that occurs at the predetermined time.

> *... as long as people have their living days, they cannot go to death.* [...] *and if they commit suicide before that time, they will not be admitted, they will have to ramble around* [until their life time is up] ... (66- and 65-year-old women, GY 2003)

Some people tried to avoid the disadvantages of sudden death by fasting: for example, they fasted for nine Tuesdays in a row:

> *They will fast the same day. No eating until noon. And only a little at noon. They do not strain their stomach. They pray. And it is said that they will not leave the world without the sacraments. They cannot pass away.* (80-year-old woman, GY 2003)

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These negotiated vows (practised not only in matters of death) are as much an ancient feature of the religiousness of the people of Gyimes as the "feared" Old Testament God himself.

## DREAMS, VISIONS OF GUILTY PEOPLE – PUNISHMENTS IN THE AFTERLIFE

The subjective motivation for the images of otherworldly journeys is the archaic, axiomatic belief that the everyday people, as spirits or in their corporeal reality, can also pass into the otherworld of the dead temporarily, even during the "little death" of a dream or vision. The objective reasons for this belief can be sought in both official Christian and apocryphal concepts of the afterlife.

From my data, it seems that especially among older people, fear of death, or at least dreams of journeys to hell, which are dominated by the symbolism of dying, are common; sometimes they see someone (an enemy, an ill-wisher) being punished in hell. In the largest number of hell visions or dreams, sinners or the perpetrators of specific sins were seen to suffer. These are usually educational stories, told as an exhortation to a pious life, as a deterrent. The narrative of journeys to the afterlife may also have been inspired by prayer books and religious chapbooks. In the villages studied, the most striking connection is with the chapbooks and the manuscripts copied from them, including Mary's visit to hell, which are still known throughout the Balkans and among the eastern groups of Hungarians.[19] I also encountered such copies in Gyimes, in the copybooks of women (not only old people!), which they lent to each other and copied from each other.

According to this story, the Archangel St. Michael leads the Virgin Mary into the various "pits" of hell, showing her the varied punishments for each sin. The most serious sins are against the family, children, fertility, secondly theft and murder, but blasphemy, sexual immorality, smoking – especially women's smoking – also occupy a prominent place in the list of sins, followed by a long list of minor offences, such as miserliness, laziness, drunkenness, non-attendance of church and neglecting the duties of pious life (e.g. almsgiving), etc.

Usually the narratives are specific, about a locally known sinner's visions of hell, or perhaps about his own experience of hell. The personalized human-faced, corporal punishments of the known apocryphal story can easily be replaced by concrete cases today. A man who, according to the narrative, had been in hell in his sleep for three days:

> *... on the third day, he woke up, saying* [...] *here was a man who had stolen cows. He took them to Gheorgheni and tried to sell them* [...] *This Laji Suszter leads a grey, stupid cow forever in hell* [...] *He leads it forever, and offers it to everyone, but no one buys it...*

Those who dream up visions of hell often see their own family members or acquaintances punished. For example, husbands who persuade their wives to have abortions are tied up in stables, on all fours, as domestic animals, or women who slander their fellow humans are hanged by their tongues, and so on.

The personal experience of another villager, standing before the judgment seat of God in his sleep, was recalled by an acquaintance:

> *...He slept day and night. And he had a great fever.* [...] *he knew that he must die* [...] *"I also knew", he said, "what sins I had committed, for I had cursed like that before, and how bad I had been"* [...] *then there was a big building, they went up with a ladder, they went up, they had to face the reckoning, there was a big bearded man, there was a great big building, and then a big bearded man,* [...] *he was seated on a big chair, and then they went in front of him one by one, and the one who was good,* [...] *he waved upwards, he went upwards, the other one* [...] *downwards.* [...] *And then he started to go to the judgment seat,* [...] *And he was so afraid that if that door opened, he would go down, because he already knew that he had done wrong.* [...] *He said that he had once gone to the gates of death, and came back to earth healed.* (50-year-old woman, GY 2006)

This "human" God-figure is otherwise typically depicted in stories about punishments for transgressors against work prohibitions on holy days and other prohibitions, as an Old Testament, law-and-norm-giving, justice-giving person who inspires awe, to whom no one ever appeals for mercy or help. The latter functions are fulfilled by Jesus, the Virgin Mary and certain female saints. The God who dispenses justice and determines destiny is rather a source of fear, which means first and foremost fear of death. Fear of one's own death or of hell, either explicitly or implicitly, pervades all forms of communication with the dead.[20]

The narratives also play a role in mediating proper Christian norms, in regulating behaviour: the narratives often conclude with recounting that the person who had visited hell mended his or her ways. A person travelling to hell in a dream by train saw hell open up:

> *... and that they suffer. And what, how much the souls suffer. Oh* [...] *he could not explain what a terrible sight it was.* [...] *the devils were uglier and uglier, they were leaping up,* [...]. *He woke up* [...]*."And so somehow," he says, "I thought to myself: oh my God, we're going to die, and that's not good. I'd better not go to the tavern, I'd better go to church. I go to confession, I take Holy Communion, I live for God."* (86-year-old woman, GY 2008)

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A long-dead member of the community whose faults were much criticized by his wife, was once said to have

> *slept for three days, and when* [...] *he came to himself* [...] *he told his wife* [...] *what he* [...] *had seen, but he said that hell was a terrible place, how they were tormented there, and how they burned, and would never be saved. And then his wife stopped scolding him.*
> (84-year-old woman, GY 2003)

International migratory legends have also influenced local conceptualizations: for example, the legend of abortionists forced to eat their own foetus also appears here as a parable. Metaphors translating the "ineffable" numinous into the language of everyday reality as well as the narrative symbols of the other world[21] are present in the narratives of dreams, which can enter the narrative stock of a community from the outside through international migratory legends and from religious chapbooks as well.

In addition to the chapbook readings, the vivid images of Hell are also influenced by church and monastery frescoes of hellish punishments, painted in realistic detail.[22] Although this is primarily an Orthodox feature (the other world and the Last Judgement were much less frequently depicted in Latin Christian churches), Roman Catholics may occasionally have been able to see these scenes, or at least have been familiar with folkloric tales of the afterlife inspired by monastic frescoes.

The fact that sinners never travel to purgatory, which appears in church literature and liturgy from the 13th century onwards (Le Goff 1981) is a testament to the ancient roots of these stories about hell. This has puzzled some and forced people to attempt to explain: narrators try to reconcile the conflicting doctrines.

## CONCLUSION

To summarise my brief, necessarily incomplete overview, I can say the following: In the religious communities under study, the motives for the varied forms of communicating with the dead are diverse and complex: the dualities of knowledge and faith, reason and emotion; even for an individual, conflicting variations are possible; ready-made frameworks and individual, impulsive, emotional attitudes are simultaneously present and having an effect. The strongest motives are the fear of damnation and of prolonged suffering in purgatory, and the social motives that go with it: the ideas of the cohesion of small communities, families, generations, the idea of the reciprocal relationship of the living and the dead in the same family. The family bond with the dead, the

role of the dead in helping the living to overcome the fear of hell, seems to be a deeply rooted tradition, also lurking in the consciousness of quasi-"un-believers", which may come to life in crisis situations or at the approach of death. The caution against violating religious prohibitions, the guilt of those who transgress them and the condemnation of others, can all be traced back to the ancient motives of the fear of hell. This is a testimony to the Church's role as a constant norm-setter to this day. Fewer and fewer people take seriously the threat of hell for sins, but fears will not be completely allayed as long as Christian supernaturalism lives on. A similar role is played by the teaching of the good death, which everyone tries to ensure for themselves and their family members, even if they often practice "empty" rites. Due to the role of ritual fixity, almost everyone here is still considered a "good Christian". Perhaps the "bad Christians" could be also counted, but how many are true believers remains a perennial mystery to the researcher.

## NOTES

1 At Csíkkarcfalva, Csíkjenőfalva and Csíkszenttamás (Romanian Cârța, Ineu, and Tomeşti, Harghita Co, Romania) 4 weeks between 1986–1988, at Gyimesközéplok (Romanian Lunca de Jos, Harghita Co) altogether roughly 10 months in shorter bouts between 2002 and 2016. From now on I will use the Hungarian names (when they appear in a sentence) or their abbrevations: Csíkkarcfalva=CS, Csíkjenőfalva=CJ, Csíkszenttamás=CT, Gyimesközéplok=GY. In the case of data provided verbatim, I disclose the time of collection, as well as the gender and age of the informant (except in a few cases where I was unable to obtain information about these). I refrain from disclosing the names of the informants out of respect for their privacy.

Ágnes Hesz was carrying out fieldwork in Gyimesközéplok concurrently with me. Especially with regard to the cult of the dead we had many similar observations and conclusions; I learned a great deal from her writings and the data she generously put at my disposal (Hesz 2012a, 2012b, 2020).

2 For a detailed discussion of the problem with respect to the Gyimesközéplok community see my paper: Pócs 2012.

3 Such as humans and their living or dead spirits/alter egos, or fairies, or "animal people", etc. See for example Peuckert 1960, Lecouteux 1992; Pócs 2023.

4 "Kasuale Begegnung" with the supernatural: Honko 1962: 91–126.

5 For example, Pedro Meseguez (1963: 136-182) differentiates between telepathic, prophetic and mystical dreams.

6 As many authors have already stated in connection with religious dreams, among them Jacques Le Goff (1984: 200). Eric Dodds says in connection with the "irrationality" of ancient Greeks that dreams provide an opportunity for encountering far-away people, gods and the dead and for establishing personal contact with the deity (Dodds 1951: 102–107).

7 In this context, I would like to mention the research of Lehel Peti, who deals with these aspects of imagistic religiosity in several studies on the religiousness of the Moldavian Csángó people, spatially close to my own research (Peti 2008). Also in nearby villages in Harghita county, József Gagyi has also dealt with certain aspects of the role of dreams and visions in the community (Gagyi 2010). Both of their studies have provided important lessons for my own research.

8 A related phenomenon is the widespread notion in areas dominated by Roman Catholicism that in the transitional "deadly" period around Christmas and New Year teams of the dead constituted

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by damned souls, or souls in Purgatory, at this time march along "their" roads that they have taken over from the living, and they snatch all living people they encounter on their way. See, for example: Waschnitius 1913; Meisen 1935; Kuret 1975; Ginzburg 1983: 33–68; Schmitt 1994: 135–147, 160–165.

9 A rather widespread symbol in tales, legends: cf. Mencej 2020.

10 Similar categories that have been born of a combination of the demon doctrines of the church and folk conceptualizations are known all over Central-Eastern Europe: they mean souls that are in some kind of relationship with the devil and damnation, for example a dead person who had been possessed by the devil in his lifetime, or often a vampire and/or a soul who had died an extraordinary death, who is wandering and cannot get into either heaven or purgatory, whose figure more or less merges with the devil (in Russian beliefs see e.g., Maksimov 1994: 5–27; Ivanits 1989: 39–49; among Serbs: Zečević 1981: 128; among Romanians: Muşlea & Bîrlea 1970: 163–170). With respect to Hungarian data the "unclean ones" (*tisztátalanok*) of Mezőség are such beings (Keszeg 1999: 91–95, 313–31), and in many places they also considered the attacking dead called "evil ones" *(rosszak*, *gonoszok*) to be half devils.

11 About the diffuse blending of the figures of the dead, devils and the ghost in detail: Stephens 1949; Pócs 2022.

12 Collected by my former student, Ágnes Mondok. She did not disclose the name and age of her interlocutor.

13 The existence of revenants and ghosts already preoccupied the early church fathers, and for a long time the church did not question it. Although St. Augustine (354–430) definitively distinguished between revenants and Satan's demons, their identification with each other took place quite quickly; 3rd–6th century church fathers debated whether the phenomenon was a bad dream or an illusion, or a demonic attack; medieval exorcism formulae were applied to the dead in the same way as to the devil (Franz 1909: II. 549). Reformation in the predominantly Protestant areas of Europe halted this process; the question of ghosts became a weapon in the theological battle between the denominations (see e.g. Brown 1979; Ombres 1984; Paxton 1990; Johnston 1999; Marshall 2002).

14 There are numerous Western and Central European data for the very early diabolization of poltergeist phenomena known from all over the area of Latin Christianity, as well as for the exorcism of ghosts carried out by priests (Thomas 1971: 570; Brown 1979: 34–54; Di Nola 1987; Schmitt 1994: 156–157; Davies 2007: 73–79).

15 For more detail, see Pócs 2019.

16 A widespread Central-Western European vision i.e. narrative; recorded since the 11th century (Dinzelbacher 1989; Uther 2010).

17 About the Latin and Orthodox, 30- and 40-day calendar cycles in Europe: Ranke 1951; Schneeweiss 1961, pp. 103–104.

18 "Mária-Rádió" is broadcast for Hungarian-speaking Catholics in Transylvania, Romania.

19 The vision of the guilty in hell presented by the guide first appears in the 2nd century Apocalypse of Peter (Gardiner 1989: 6–7), and then in the vision of Tundal/Tungdal/Tundalus recorded in 1149 (Gardiner 1989: 252–253; Dinzelbacher 1999: 202); the individual sins and their drastic punishments are presented in the details we are familiar with today. This vision was extremely popular throughout late medieval Europe; it has been translated into at least 15 languages, including several languages of the Balkans. In the Greek versions from the so-called "Apocalypse of the Theotokos" known from the 11th century, the Virgin Mary's journey to hell is intended to win mercy for sinners.

20 As Áron Németh (2021: 179) writes in his summary study on biblical emotions (referring to Egger-Wezel & Corley (eds.) 2012): "Fear is the most dominant emotion in the Old Testament."

21 On the symbolism of the other world, see, for example, Bousset 1901; Patch 1950; Benz 1969: 311–410 ("Die Bilderwelt der Visionen"); Dinzelbacher 1987.

22 On the role of the iconography of hell, see, for example Himka 2006; on the role of iconography in general: Heo 2018.

23 The continued maintenance of the church and priesthood in relation to the cult of the dead and mortuary beliefs is a general European phenomenon; see, for example, Le Goff 1967; Paxton 1990; Valk 2015.

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