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The Role of Religion and Culture on Bereavement: The example of the Orthodox Christian tradition

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Literature suggests that scientifically understanding the effects of culture and religion on bereavement is very important in informing therapeutic practice. Current and past approaches to grief have generally ignored this. Is it about time to reconsider?

Bereavement is a complex, multidimensional process, influenced by physical, psychological, social and cultural factors (Kissane, Bloch, and McKenzie, 1997a). As such it has been studied extensively by a variety of disciplines and often in combinations of more than one of these factors. From a psychological point of view bereavement is the reaction to the loss by death of a loved one, and is viewed by the public as the most stressful life event (Homes and Rahe, 1967).

Psychological models of bereavement Freud (1917) in his article 'Mourning and Melancholia' suggested that the 'work of mourning' is to sever the attachment bonds to the 'non-existent object'. This idea of the bereavement process as being some kind of staged 'grief work' has saturated the research literature for much of the past century (Bowlby, 1981; Glick, Weiss and Parkes, 1974; Lindemann, 1944; Shuchter and Zisook, 1993; Stroebe and Stroebe, 1987; Weiss, 1993; Worden, 1991). All the 'staged grief' models describe grief and the associated emotions as normal or abnormal based on 'norms' (i.e. what occurs usually according to the statistical meaning of the term). In Walter's words 'it is therefore the doctor, the psychologist and the statistician who can tell us how we ought to die and ought to grieve', instead of, for example, religion or tradition telling us how (Walters, 1994). Furthermore all the 'staged grief' models assume pathology being a result of a failure to follow the correct path of grief as if there is only one 'right way' to do grief work (Ingram, Hunt and Robson, 2000).

In recent years though the bereavement field has witnessed significant changes and controversies. Reviewers have increasingly acknowledged the limitations of the 'grief work' approach (e.g. Bonanno, 1998; Stroebe and Stroebe, 1991). 'Beginning in the late 1980s reviews of the bereavement literature began to point out the absence of empirical data to support the grief work view' (Bonanno, 2001, p.719). As a result a substantial new body of research has emerged guided by theoretical perspectives coming from other fields like attachment theory and work on stress. Bonanno and Kaltman (1999) gave an excellent account of those new developments in

bereavement studies and discussed the four theoretical perspectives which inform current bereavement research: 1) the Cognitive stress perspective, 2) the Attachment perspective, 3) the Social-functional approach to emotion and 4) the Trauma perspective. Firmly based on the literature they affirmed preliminary support for many of the features of each perspective. Moreover they provided an integration of the most promising elements from each approach that might guide future research. Their integrative perspective elucidated the role of 'contextual factors, the continuum of subjective meaning, the changing representations of the lost relationship and the regulation of coping and emotion'(p.771) (for more see Bonanno and Kaltman, 1999, and for a critique see Archer, 2001). In other words they suggested that bereavement is not about 'working through grief' but more like one's own way of 'living post-loss'. And this post-loss life can be anywhere on a continuum from exactly as it was before loss to an entirely different way of existence, from 'as usual' to 'unbearable' with an infinite number of shades of existence in between. Its position may depend on such contextual factors as age and gender, circumstances and significance of the loss, or social support and cultural influences. It may be determined by a multitude of subjective attributions of meaning from apprehension for reduction of income to spiritual and religious concerns.

From a post modernist approach to bereavement, in the form of a combination of phenomenology and anti-structuralism in its purest form Ingram, Hunt and Robson (2000) argued for the possibility of 'a multiplicity of valid ways for people to make sense of, and live with the experience of loss' (p.72). This way an infinite number of variables are involved in determining valid perspectives understanding loss. Their view is that 'grief work is an idiosyncratic phenomenon which involves individuals identifying their own tasks of mourning, negotiated through the process of everyday living' (p.72). In this sense it is not the failure of 'working through' grief properly that creates pathology. What matters is identifying the variables present in the survivor's relationship with the deceased, their life and philosophy of life, their personality, circumstances, spirituality, religion, culture, etc., that make this particular individual less able to live life post-loss in a meaningful and adaptive way for them. Then our task as the 'other' that is there to support them could be defined as sharing with them or modelling for them the search for a meaningful and worthwhile post-loss existence, if this is achievable at all.

Universality and cultural specificity of bereavement process and outcome A question closely related to the study of bereavement is whether the nature of grief is universal (Stroebe, Hansson and Stroebe, 1993). As documented in their Handbook of Bereavement, grief-like responses have been identified in very diverse societies (the chapters by Averill and Nunley; Lopata; Rosenblatt) and across species (Laudenslager, Boccia, and Reite). However, manifestations of grief in different cultures have been shown to

vary, since they are shaped by cultural factors. Each culture has its own approaches to dealing with loss, which usually involve a core of understandings, beliefs, rituals, expectations and etiquette (Rosenblatt, 1997). As Shuchter and Zisook postulate, every culture evolves its unique beliefs, customs, and behaviours that address the issues associated with death. Rituals develop to deal with the disposal of the body, the incorporation of death into religious ceremonies, the prescribed actions of mourning and official remembrances (Shuchter and Zisook, 1988).

Anthropological studies of funeral and mourning customs are of interest in showing both the universality of grief and the degree of variation from one society to another (Parkes, 1996; Rosenblatt, 1997). However, it is impossible to refer to the bulk of the literature available in this field. For the interested reader the studies of Lutz (1985), Hollan (1992) and Wellenkamp (1988), Brison (1992), Folta and Deck (1988) give a good flavour of the existing literature. They have investigated the grieving emotions on the atoll of Ifaluk, the grieving customs and practices of the Toraja of Sulawesi in Indonesia, and the perceptions and practices in relation to death of the Kwanga of Papua New Guinea, and of the Shona of Zimbabwe respectively. Their findings clearly support the idea that though grief is a universal phenomenon, the associated cognitions, expressions, expectations, practices, beliefs and rituals are widely diverse.

Besides cultural diversity, the evidence suggests that some of the 'ways of grief' appear to be more adaptive than others. The dominant view is that societies which encourage the expression of grief are likely to have fewer problems following bereavement. Support for this view comes from comparative studies such as that of Burgoine's (1988) who compared newly bereaved widows in the New Providence, Grand Bahama with the London widows from Parkes' London study (1970). Those women living in a culture in which overt expressions of grief are expected and encouraged had better health and fewer psychological problems than widows living in London. Similarly, Lovell, Hemmings and Hill (1993) in a comparison of Scottish and Swazi bereaved women showed that, although the Swazis showed more initial tearfulness and distress, they were less troubled by feelings of guilt a year later than the Scottish widows. The researchers' explanation for this discrepancy was that ritualistic crying and saying farewell to a dying relative may intensify feelings of grief during the early days of bereavement but, in the context of a clearly defined period of mourning, may play a part in reducing later feelings of guilt. Along the same lines Rosenblatt, Walsh and Jackson (1976), comparing reports of a stratified sample of seventy-eight different societies note that unrestrained aggression can sometimes be very damaging after bereavement and rituals can be an effective way to control this as suggested by Parkes (1996). On the other hand according to Norbert Mintz, Navajo Indians in USA often repress and suppress death and grief (it is culturally prescribed that the names of the dead are no longer mentioned

when three days have elapsed after a death). Mintz, working with them in a mental-health-clinic setting, postulates that about one third of all patients had a history of the death of a close person within the past year, apparently implying that their culturally prescribed approach to bereavement resulted in increased levels of psychological distress (cited in Parkes, 1996). An alternative explanation to this phenomenon could be a possibly decreased level of social support since a 'forbidden' name creates a taboo, thus a subject off-limits for discussion.

In summary, although grief appears to be a universal phenomenon, the ways of dealing with it a culture or religion prescribes to its members (including thoughts, feelings and rituals) are not only broadly diverse but may also have significance for its outcome.

Impact of religious and cultural beliefs and practices on bereavement outcome Geoffrey Gorer (1965) in his study of grief and mourning in contemporary Britain forms the opinion that the decline in formal religious belief and ritual has itself removed an important form of guidance. His survey concludes that mourning was treated as if it were a weakness instead of a psychological necessity, and that neither help nor guidance in misery was left available to the majority of contemporary Britons. However, research on the impact of religious and cultural norms on bereavement outcome is not conclusive, although it points to a positive direction. In a study by Austin and Lennings (1993), although there is some evidence that those who express a belief in God experience less depression and hopelessness after bereavement than those who do not, there is no evidence that degree of knowledge or commitment to Christian beliefs moderates either depression or hopelessness. In another study mothers but not fathers who had lost a child showed less rumination, depersonalisation, and loss of control if they were church-attenders than if they were not (Bohannon, 1991). McIntosh, Silver and Wortman (1993) found in their study among parents whose infants had died, that greater religious participation was related to increased perception of social support and greater meaning found in the loss. Importance of religion was positively related to cognitive meaning and finding meaning in the death. Furthermore religious participation and importance were indirectly related to greater well-being and less distress 18 months after their infants' deaths.

Religious bereavement rites and rituals have been suggested in the literature to have quite diverse applications and effects as well. For example, Buddhist bereavement rituals have been used as treatment techniques for people suffering from post-traumatic stress (Canda and Phaobtong, 1992). Furthermore, attending the funeral of a psychiatric patient who committed suicide has been suggested as therapeutic for both the family and the therapist for whom it enabled a laying to rest of both the patient and guilty retrospection about treatment (Markowitz, 1990). A qualitative study by

Bosley and Cook (1993) determined the specific 'therapeutic' elements of funeral rituals as 'using memory as a tool of acceptance'; 'affirming faith'; 'expressing emotions'; 'receiving social support'; and 'reconnecting to family heritage'. The researchers conclusion was that 'emergence of these themes indicated that funerals are carefully constructed vehicles for healing that offer opportunities for natural therapeutic intervention' (p.81). Along the same lines Englund (1998) substantiated the therapeutic salience of funerals and spirit exorcism among Mozambican refugees in Malawi. He suggested that it was not so much the loss of the loved ones as the difficulty in observing a full range of rituals that characterised refugees' predicament. On another level Colin Murray Parkes (1996) suggested that the churches could be psychologically helpful to many bereaved people if they would offer a clear lead in prescribing a period for mourning, thus saving them confusion and insecurity in their grief. However, he also notes that 'it is not enough to prescribe a ritual; faith is also necessary' (Parkes, 1996).

Similarly, in a study of the effects of socially prescribed rituals of support to the caregivers of dying patients, Sankar (1991) found that ritual provides a broad context of meanings and routines for securing the doubts and unknowns of individual experience. The way social support is provided plays a key role in the caregivers' transition to bereavement. According to Parkes (1996) a communal expression of sorrow by the ones nearest to the bereaved makes the bereaved feel understood and reduces the sense of isolation he or she is likely to experience. Seen from another point of view, Pennebaker, Kiecolt-Glaser and Glaser (1988) have successfully demonstrated that people need to express both feelings and thoughts about their loss. The authors conclude that active inhibition of thoughts and feelings about a trauma requires physical work and, over time, acts as an accumulative stress increasing the risk of illness and stress-related problems. It is of great significance for the argument for profound changes in traditional African mourning practices caused by the AIDS epidemic. For many communities now lacking the human and material resources to bury their dead according to culturally prescribed mourning rituals, increased psychiatric and psychological problems are evident. Without the means for the community members to grieve their losses deeply and meaningfully it is doubtful that Western forms of grief counselling can bring back the lost balance (Kilonzo and Hogan, 1999).

Death, bereavement and the Orthodox-Christian tradition Overall, the systematic psychological study of religion and culture in relation to bereavement and grief is still in its infancy. Stroebe, Hansson and Stroebe (1993), among others, have identified the need for further systematic and scientific research of mourning rites and rituals, towards the psychological understanding of grief, beyond anthropological and ethnographic charting: 'The diversity of religious cultures poses a great challenge but also provides a rich resource for research attempts to study factors which influence the

psychology of grief' (p.472). However, the diversity and fundamental misunderstandings of diverse religious cultures hamper research attempts to study their impact on the psychology of grief. As a case in point, an example is presented here of a religious tradition very sparsely mentioned in the bereavement literature, and often misunderstood as one more Christian denomination similar to the Western traditions, that of Eastern Orthodox Christianity.

Orthodox Christianity in the world Orthodox Christianity is the predominant faith in much of central and eastern Europe, Russia and Greece, the predominant Christian faith in the Middle East and Northern Africa, and the fastest growing in sub-Saharan Africa (Young, 1998). Out of 31% of affiliated Christians of the world population Orthodox Christians represent 4% (between 250-300 million people). In Europe alone nearly 167 million people are registered as Orthodox Christians. Catholics count 287 million registered followers, while the registered Protestants are 86 million and the registered Anglicans are 24.5 million (Barrett and Johnson, 1998). Unfortunately, Anglophone references to the Eastern Orthodox rites and rituals around death and bereavement in the psychological literature are very sparse, limited and often mistaken (e.g. Parkes, Laungani and Young, 1997; Rees, 2001), with just one or two exceptions (i.e. Jonker, 1997; Warner, 2000).

Warner's account is a description of Russian Orthodox mortuary rituals and associated beliefs (Warner, 2000). The other, more relevant to the present paper, is based on research conducted by Gerdien Jonker in Berlin in 1994-95 investigating the way Greek and Turkish communities respond to dying, death and burial (Jonker, 1996; 1997). The main strengths of this research are (a) its sensitivity to the process of change which occurs as the two minority ethnic groups have adapted to their new society and (b) Jonker's interest and ability in drawing parallels between the two ways of traditional ritualistic responses to death and bereavement beyond and above religious affiliation and beliefs, (she thought there were so many similarities between the two that she identified them as essentially one tradition she called 'the Mediterranean way'). However, her interest is sociological and her accounts are mainly socio-cultural with an emphasis on gender issues, and are thus of limited value to a psychological perspective.

Greek-Orthodox Christians in the United Kingdom Eastern Orthodox peoples in the United Kingdom (UK) can be distinguished according to which jurisdiction they belong to and whether they are first- or later-generation immigrants.
The three main jurisdictions in UK are the Russian, the Greek and the Serbian Orthodox. Between them as well as all other Orthodox Christian churches (i.e. Antiochian, Romanian, Bulgarian) there is little to distinguish one church from another except perhaps the primary language used in the liturgy and the style of music. Slight variations in practice are mostly

associated with cultural differences rather than with discrepancies in religion or religious practices. This is mainly due to the lack of any significant change in the theology, rituals and traditions of the Eastern Orthodox Church for the past 1500 years (Young, 1998).

The first organised Greek-Orthodox community in UK was established in London in 1677. However, it was not before the early 19th century that the numbers of Greek and Greek-Cypriot immigrants in UK started rising and with them the number of churches and communities organised around them (Mettis, 2000). However, it is impossible for one to make an accurate estimation of the exact number of British citizens who have a Greek-Orthodox identity. This is because only Cypriots born in Cyprus and Greeks born in Greece are included as Cypriot or Greek immigrants in the census, and statistics on religion are kept separate. In the early nineties the Greek-Cypriot first- and later-generation immigrants in Britain were estimated to be between 160,000-220,000 people, (Anthias, 1991; Constantinides, 1984; Oakley, 1979). In 2002 there were 116 Greek-Orthodox churches spread in 51 counties throughout England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland (Archdiocese Yearbook, 2002).

Forty-two hundred deaths of individuals born in Greece or Cyprus were registered in England and Wales between 1995 and 2000 (inclusive), an average of 700 per year (Office for National Statistics, 2002). Obviously some of them were visiting British hospitals for treatment; however the majority were first generation immigrants. Migration separates people not only from their place of origin, and often their family and friends, but also from their past and hence their ability to obtain shared memories. Shared memories, in the form of experiences, stories of culture and tradition, or rituals, are important in the structuring of immigrants' responses to loss and bereavement in a foreign environment. 'Thus in the absence of a shared space and a shared past, many migrants turn to the one public institution which is able to recall both: the religious community' (Jonker, 1996, p.188).

Grief and mourning in the Greek Orthodox tradition The Orthodox Christian 'soteriology' (the process of salvation for human beings) is oriented around the incarnation, the death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and salvation is accomplished between a synergy of the gift of God's grace and human effort (Ware, 1996). By His coming in the flesh and His victory over death in His resurrection Jesus Christ provided a way for humans to defeat death. In accordance, the Holy Fathers of the Church (i.e. St. John Chrysostom, St. Basil the Great, St. Jerome) differentiate between two kinds of grief, accepting the one and condemning the other. They accept grief as a result of the difficulty of the bereaved to tolerate the physical separation from the deceased. They suggest that one is entitled to shed tears and feel pain for the physical separation from their beloved deceased, but not for their death (as ultimate and permanent loss and destruction). They condemn grief

resulting from lack of faith in God and in the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, as well as grief stemming from psychological weakness perceived as weak spirituality (Faros, 1981). In other words, the Holy Fathers condemn grief without hope, as proclaimed by St. Paul: 'that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope' (1Thes. 4, 13), or grief because of a pathological attachment. They disapprove of desperation from fear of permanent separation and of finality, since death in the Eastern Orthodox tradition is neither viewed as final nor as separating, except in the physical sense and this only temporarily.

Mourning is acceptable by both the folk and the religious traditions. Tears are not signs of weakness but an issue of necessity for the avoidance of morbid effects on the bereaved. According to cultural tradition the tears of grief are so bitter and poisonous that:

> if they fall on the black earth(***1***), grass will never grow,
> if they fall in the river, the river will go dry,
> if they fall in the sea all the ships will sink
> and if I hold them in my heart I'll come to meet you (***2***) very quickly.
> (Folk Song, cited in Koufos, 1970, p.249).

According to religious tradition even the Most Holy Mother of God, the Virgin Mary (to Eastern-Orthodox tradition the most holy and spiritual of all people) is believed to have cried of grief. She is described, in both folk and religious texts, crying to the point of fainting in her grief for the passion and the death of her Son Jesus Christ (St Gregory the Theologian, 355; Spyridakis, 1972; Faros, 1981).

However, the faithful are expected to cease shedding tears at some point (not clearly determined) and find comfort in faith of resurrection, in their communications with their dead through prayer and church rituals and in hope of meeting with them in the next life. A rough determination of the temporal boundaries of grief can be found in the timetable of the prescribed memorial services.

Funerary and post-funeral rituals in the Greek Orthodox tradition

a) *The Greek wake:* The dead are traditionally kept at home the night before the funeral. Primarily family, and additionally friends and others, remain with the body throughout the night and until the funeral-procession to church the next day.
The women lament till dark falls and start again in the morning. During the night attendants take turns reading from the Psalter by the side of the coffin, while the rest remain nearby, telling stories from the life of the deceased, remembering other dead of the family or talking about other morbid subjects. However, there is always someone who occasionally tells jokes (usually

funny episodes from the life of the deceased) bringing interceptions of laughter to the gathering, hence the Greek proverb 'There can not be a wedding without tears or a funeral without laughter'.

b) *Dirges*: The verbal expression of grief is of paramount importance according to Greek folk tradition. The folk tradition of lamenting is known to have existed since the times of Homer, 8th century B.C. (Alexiou, 1974). The women of the family and sometimes (in some parts of Greece) professional dirge singers sing dirges at the wake (Petralia, 1980). There are standard folk dirges and personal ones made on the spot for the particular dead. The psychological role of dirges is to lead to an emotional outpouring meant to relieve the bereaved of the 'poisonous' feelings of grief (Faros, 1981). A very popular folk tradition, indicative of the popular belief in the necessity and significance of dirges is children singing the laments of Virgin Mary for her son on Good Friday (Faros, 1981).

c) *The funeral:* On the day of the funeral a priest goes to the deceased's home for the second time, the first being the day of the death, to offer prayers for the dead and then head the procession to church. The open (except in rare cases) coffin is placed in the middle of the church facing the altar. The funeral service has a standard form for everybody since the 5th century AD with minimal variations for priests and infants. It mainly comprises of sung hymns and the meaning it communicates unfolds in three parts. The first part refers to the living presence of God, His relationship and love with humans and His paternal care which resulted in the coming of His Son and the Resurrection that saved people from death, concluding with a request for salvation for the present dead. The second part discusses the nature of death as horrific, terrifying but inevitable for every human being, and the nature of earthly life as transitory, delusional and dream like. Also, a series of questions are expressed at this stage about the fate of the dead and the dead 'describes' her present 'lifeless' state in much detail concluding it is worthy of mourning. Finally the third part reminds the bereaved that Christ's death and resurrection brought eternal life to people so that their grief shouldn't be hopeless. It also, reminds them that love never dies and communication between the dead and the living can 'go on'. Finally, it invites the bereaved to kiss the dead farewell as at this point they have to be separated and prompts them to perform a last duty of wishing the dead will find repose by the Lord (Kokkinakis, 1978).

Psychologically, the Eastern-Orthodox funeral service attempts to strengthen the bereaved, while also preparing them (as much as possible) for the pain of physical separation. The first part of the funeral attempts to ameliorate the emptiness brought by the loss, reduce the feeling of loneliness and offer hope to the bereaved. The second part firstly attempts to put the loss in a framework that neither underestimates it nor overestimates it. Also, it acknowledges that death brings grief, and gives permission to the bereaved

to grieve and mourn. Finally, it attempts to prevent the bereaved feeling angry with the dead for dying, by presenting the dead as sharing the bereaved's pain and intercepting to God for them. The third part prepares the bereaved for the actual separation by reminding them of the hope of resurrection, comforting them with the promise of a continuing bond and finally structuring the act of separation in the form of a familiar act of love, a kiss (Faros, 1981).

Following the 'last-kiss' invitation everyone present (traditionally the whole community of the deceased) kisses the dead goodbye and in procession they go to the cemetery for the burial, as in the Greek-Orthodox tradition 'cremation is forbidden' (Archdiocese Yearbook, 2002, p.97) due to deep respect for the body.

d) *The burial*: At the cemetery the coffin is opened again for the last time. The priest offers a few more prayers for the dead, pours some oil and wine on the body in the sign of the cross, as well as blessed boiled wheat prepared by the bereaved and a handful of earth and the closed coffin is lowered into the grave. Finally, everyone throws a handful of earth in the grave before they leave.

'Parigoria', meaning 'consolation', is the meal the family and friends of the deceased partake of at the deceased's house after the funeral, but in Cyprus 'parigoria' is also the finger-food and drink offered to everyone in honour of the departed as they leave the cemetery. It is a form of charity for the sake of the deceased's soul, a 'treat' in honour of the deceased, as well as a comfort for the physically exhausted mourners.

e) *Post-funeral rituals*: *memorial services:* In the Eastern Orthodox tradition memorial services (called 'Mnemossina' in Greek and 'Panihide' in Russian) have been established to take place three, nine and forty days and three, six, nine and twelve months after the death. Thereafter 'mnemossina' are officiated on the yearly anniversary of the death. Additionally, 'collective' mnemossina for all the dead remembered in a family can be performed at certain Saturdays of the year (Psychosabbata: Saturdays of the souls).

According to Church Tradition the function of memorial services is serving the dead, but there is also the perception according to folk tradition that they partly serve the bereaved too. To Church Tradition mnemossina provide the souls of the dead with refreshment and repose (Bakoyiannis, 1989; St John Damascus, 1996). According to folk tradition mnemossina are the opportunity for the living to respond to the 'needs' of the dead for care and communication. For these reasons to pray for the dead (whether during mnemossina or at any other time) is the most charitable action an Orthodox Christian can offer, especially as there is nothing the dead can do to help themselves (there is no repentance in the other life).

For the bereaved, mnemossina serve a host of functions.
(a) First, being an action of ultimate charity and consequently an expression of love, they serve the spiritual growth of the living (St. Gregory of Nyssa, cited in St John Damascus, 1996).
Also they provide space and time for the bereaved to:
(b) grieve openly for their loss (Faros, 1981);
(c) receive support from the community and have the opportunity to reconnect with it, contrary to the psychological and physical separation brought by grief (Faros, 1981; Irion, 1966);
(d) make-up with the dead (possibly repairing a problematic earthly relationship and symbolically asking for forgiveness) (Faros, 1981);
(e) continue to show their love and care to the dead (which can be both satisfactory to the bereaved and beneficial to the deceased) (Faros, 1981); and
(f) ask for the deceased's intercessions to God for their own needs (if the deceased was a faithful and holy person) (St. Dionysios, cited in St John Damascus, 1996).
Additionally functions (d), (e) and (f) are ways for the bereaved to maintain a continuing bond with their deceased loved ones.

An integral part of mnemossina is the ritual wish to the bereaved 'God Forgive him/her', 'Let him/her be forgiven' or 'May God have mercy for his/her soul' for the departed. In this way everyone in a community is symbolically reconciled with the dead while also comforting the bereaved. Especially in cases of an unresolved dispute between the deceased and the living it is advisable that the living visits the grave to offer and ask for forgiveness. This way it is believed that both sides are 'settled' and both benefit in a spiritual way. For the faithful bereaved that experience feelings of anger or guilt in relation to their bereavement this has the potential of a great psychological comfort as it is an opportunity for conflict resolution and settlement.

'Kólliva', boiled wheat often mixed with nuts and sugar offered by the bereaved, after it is blessed by the priest, to everyone present at mnemossina is another feature of the ritual filled with symbolic representations. Wheat and nuts are seeds which when fallen on good earth apparently disintegrate (die) but eventually germinate (resurrect) into new life. Accordingly 'kólliva' act as a reminder and a 'proof' of the resurrection into a new life to follow the death. In traditional terms 'kólliva' are also an offer of food to the dead, who are thought to become 'hungry' and feel deserted if their relatives 'forget them'. On a different level they are one more way for the whole community to partake in the bereaved's offering to their dead, as well as a 'gift in return' for their 'forgiveness' for the departed (i.e. ritual wish 'Let him/her be forgiven' as above).

Finally, mnemossina being spread out in small intervals at the beginning of bereavement and longer intervals as time progresses delineate the progression of grief perceived as more intense during the first year of bereavement and less intense afterwards. However, they also point to a never-ending relationship with the deceased as yearly mnemossina are expected to be officiated 'for ever' as long as the deceased's relatives wish to do so. Importantly, there is no obligation, or pressure for the bereaved to practice mnemossina if they do not wish to do so, or if they are non-believers.

Christian Orthodox tradition and bereavement outcome. As described above, Eastern-Orthodox funerary and post-funeral rituals operate at several levels: liturgical, theological, social, psychological, symbolic and ethno-cultural, integrating these levels in a 'holistic' approach to death and bereavement. They are community functions and not private exercises, which acknowledge the importance of facing the reality of death. They are placed within the context of the mourning process by encompassing a series of ritual religious and culturally prescribed activities beginning before death-if this is expected-and continuing long after it. Also, although continuing a strict tradition they are (and always have been) adapted to ethnic and local traditions and customs without this affecting the theological and liturgical part of the rituals. Additionally, they acknowledge and invite ministries other than that of the clergy as they recognise the responsibility for caring for the dying, comforting the bereaved, praying for the dead etc. to belong to the community (the 'ecclessia') rather than the individual priest who serves it alone. Paul Irion (1991) has identified these exact elements as the common trends of the 'new funeral service orders' in a number of mainstream faith communities that reflect a growing intentional awareness of the psychological and sociological insights into the mourning process. He believes that these elements make the funeral ritual a more effective coping resource for the bereaved.

Psychologically, there are some aspects of the Orthodox-Christian rituals associated with death corresponding to positive predictors of successful bereavement outcome, which seem promising for further investigation. For example they facilitate a strong social support system while also giving the bereaved permission to grieve openly. Both of these qualities are identified in the literature as primary tasks of grief counselling and grief therapy (Worden, 1991). Additionally, they place grief in a time-limited framework, encouraging mourning at its early stages, an approach to bereavement congruent with the basic framework of staged grief-work of the 'grief-work' hypothesis (Klass, Silverman and Nickman, 1996; Lindemann, 1944; Parkes, 1971). However, through the grief process they also foster and encourage the development of a new continuing relationship with the deceased (i.e. a continuing bond) seen as normal and adaptive by a number of theorists and researchers (e.g. Parks and Weiss, 1983; Shuchter and Zisook, 1988;).

Grief specialists have something to learn from an understanding of culturally and religiously informed, hence alternative, dimensions to bereavement.

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Notes:

1.the adjective black here is used as a derogatory characterisation for earth because it (the earth) will cover the deceased and hence form the physical barrier between him and the living.

2.the dead