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Roadside Crosses and Lovelocks: On revitalising religious ritual practices in secular contexts

Whoever walks one of the famous bridges in Paris, Cologne or Amsterdam cannot help but wonder what it is that drives inhabitants of a late modern world to seal and materialise their private bonds with publicly displayed locks at symbolic places (Hammond 2010). Has the lock on the bridge come to replace the wedding ring in church – to the witness not of a God, but of an anonymous public? Similarly, what does it mean that at the sites of crimes or accidents it never takes long before a multitude of candles and flowers (and teddy bears, if children are involved) prop up; a 'ritual' that can be observed almost uniformly all across the western world? What do the much less spectacular, but more durable crosses and lights at the roadside commemorating the victims of car accidents signify? Why do even the most secular rites of passage for youngsters at the verge of adulthood or at funerals inevitably contain elements of and references to 'transcendent' realities such as 'life', 'the world', 'the cosmos', 'history', 'nature' etc.? Do they establish (certainly very fuzzy, rarely articulated) vertical axes of resonance (Mahdi, Christopher and Meade 1996)?

The idea of this project is to consider such practices and rituals which appear to establish connections of and for life through particular axes of resonance at particular biographical junctures such as birth, maturation, marriage, death etc. These practices always involve particular places (such as bridges), material objects (such as locks, crosses or teddy bears), times and social bonds, which are by and through these practices made resonant (cf. also Descola 2013; Bender and Taves 2012). Drawing on the comparative structure of the IGDK, there are four research areas to be addressed by this project: 1) What are the social and biographical contexts in which we find such practices – and how do they compare across ages? 2) Which axes of resonance are established by and through which practices and rituals – and how are they interconnected and stabilised? The question of repetition is of particular interest here, since in most cases, there is no repetition of the rituals for the main protagonists, but rather strict repetitive rules for the community. 3) What is the relationship between the cognitive and symbolic content and the material, bodily and sensual elements of the established resonances? What is the role of power-structures here? 4) What notions or images of transcendence ('Das Umgreifende', to use Karl Jaspers' (2001) term) are involved or created by those practices? Is such a sense of transcendence historically contingent or inevitable, even if 'beneath' the articulated level? Do those rituals establish a subliminal sense of 'second order resonance' for those involved, i.e. a sense of vibrant connection to life, the community, nature etc. as such?

This project, though taking present day practices as its empirical starting point, systematically involves a comparative perspective that seeks to answer its research questions by an

explorative reference to corresponding practices in Antiquity. For a successful dissertational project, obviously, the respective practices both now and then need to be carefully selected and restricted by the candidate and the supervisors involved.

Methodologically, research will draw on a wide variety of ethnographic and sociological research. Based on the insights and guidelines of Grounded Theory, a triangulatory mixed-method approach including participant observation, expert and biographical interviews and a thorough analysis of documents will be suggested.

References

Bender, Courtney; Taves, Ann (eds.) 2012. *What Matters? Ethnographies of Value in a Not So Secular Age*. New York.

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