

COLLECTIVE/PUBLIC RITUAL BEHAVIOUR AFTER DISASTERS: An emerging manifestation of civil religion?

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(spoken version)

Through the news media we have all become familiar with the emerging rituals around the deaths of celebrities like Olof Palme, Yitzhak Rabin and Princess Diana. Such public behaviour show striking parallels with an emerging repertoire of rituals performed when disasters (such as airplane crashes, explosions and sunken ferries) have struck a community, a city or a nation. On closer study there is invention as well as imitation and repetition. In this paper I attempt to trace a few characteristics of such rituals of communal grieving and protesting. It appears that within the major phenomenon of recent ritualising, especially sudden unexpected and unmerited death is a moment of collective ritual density. Is this public ritualising an instance of civil religion?

Most of the presentations we have heard during this conference had to do with small groups, with alternative belief systems, with self-chosen identities.

The segment of the religious supermarket I focus on here neither has its own marketstall, nor a list of members. There is no spiritual training there nor an initiation. There is no guru nor disciple.

Being a member of this group just happens upon you: when death comes in the form of a collective disaster. An airplane crashes, a factory explodes, a ferry sinks, a train collides with another train.

Death comes all of a sudden: unexpected, unmerited. Disaster strikes from one moment to another. Some natural disasters, such as floods and hurricanes, are anticipated, but some are not. Who is prepared for an earthquake? Who is prepared for an airplane falling from the sky on a residential area?

When a community is struck by such a disaster, whether it be the group that happened to travel together, or the group that happened to live in the stricken area, it needs to "dispose of the dead". But burial is more than just disposing, it requires rituals to channel the grief, to express social support, to cope with loss, to vent anger.

In addition to private burials the larger community requires a scenario, a ritual repertory to express itself, to commiserate and sympathise. Such rituals are found in the public domain, they are collective expressions of helplessness and vulnerability.

Simultaneously with grief, however, they express a "positive multitude", they express compassion, a moment of sharing and togetherness.

It is remarkable that academic studies have taken up such "positive masses" around the deaths of celebrities like Olof Palme, Yitzhak Rabin and Princess Diana, but have more or less neglected the collective mourning behaviour after disasters. There are a number of critical studies on the phenomenon of public funerals of celebrities, but there is hardly any serious study of the public ritualisation after disasters.

Allow me to make a few remarks on the phenomenon of collective grieving after disasters. I will do so from the point of view of Ritual Studies, a relatively new field in which many academic disciplines combine to study rituals and ritualising. In Ritual Studies funerary services belong to the domain of the so-called rites de passage, rites of passage such as birth, marriage and death, or those rituals that are performed at the axial moments of human life. Or, more popularly said, at the moments of hatching, matching and dispatching.

Culturally a funeral is more than just dispatching, disposing of a dead body. All kinds of new forms of funeral services are being experimented with. Or, as one speaker remarked yesterday: death is big. How-to books on death and dying are booming. Obviously, in Western Europe and Northern America, we are rather uncomfortable with death. In one of the books on death in Africa, *La mort Africaine*, by L.V. Thomas, "an old wise man" from Chaad is quoted as follows: "Les Blancs connaissent toutes choses. Une seule affaire leur échappe: la mort", meaning: Whites understand everything, but there is one thing that eludes them: death.

Both death and dying have recently become a matter of much ritual experiment. Often such experiments are highly immature: clumsy, uncomfortable, too much individualised, jovial, and often a patchwork, a cut-and-paste collage of things borrowed left and right. In our society we are no longer borne by uniform great traditions, yet when we are confronted with death, we ardently wish to make some sense of it. We rack our brains to come up with something original, something fitting, something up to expectation. Something personal yet dignified. But what to do when a whole group of heterogeneous people have to be commemorated?

I will now focus on one particular case. In October 1992 an Israeli cargo plane crashed down on a residential area of Amsterdam, called the Bijlmer. It was Sunday evening, most residents were home, having dinner or watching sports on television.

Some 250 persons were feared dead, but fortunately in the course of one week the number of identified dead was reduced to 43. As this was an area where mostly immigrants lived, some of them illegal, this count has only relative value.

After one week massive public mourning rituals took place. In the morning there was a compassionate procession from the local sports complex to the site where the plane had crashed into the apartment blocks. Some 40.000 people, white, black, and all colours in between, from the same town but also from all over the country, had come to join this compassionate procession which culminated in the laying of wreaths and bunches of flowers by the fence that had been erected around the disaster site.

The procession was dignified but not stately. The town's mayor, the prime minister, and several ambassadors (of Surinam, of Ghana etc.) mixed with the crowd. Some small ethnic groups sang, danced, and drummed while they walked. Children carried bunches of black balloons. There were no banners or slogans. Churchbells tolled all over the country. Flags were flying at half-mast. Television sent live broadcasts to approximately 3.5 million people.

In the afternoon at around 3 p.m. there was a public memorial service which was attended by some 13.000 people. This service lasted 2.5 hours, and offered a mixture of speeches, poetry and music. Some 500 (!) groups had been involved in the organisation of the programme, 36 nationalities and an unspecified number of religious affiliations. The organising committee had put a tremendous effort in letting as many groups, races, languages, nationalities, cultures and religions be represented in the presentation as could be pressed into this service. Several dignitaries spoke, each of them representing a segment of the victims or the government, but also representatives of the afflicted residents themselves. All kinds of music were played, among which a drum performance from and by six different cultures. Some of the speakers used explicit religious texts, but religious sentiments were kept discreetly dimmed.

It turned out that practically unanimously both rituals were received with warm appreciation from all sections of Dutch society. For a moment, one was proud to belong to a multicoloured society. Why? What made these rituals work, what was it in them that struck a highly secularised society as fitting and proper, heartwarming and solacing even? Moreover, on later occasions, when other disasters had struck, and the same repertory of silent procession and public memorial service was repeated, the general

appreciation was never as high as back in 1992. What was the secret which made the eruption of public mourning in 1992 so "successful", so "effective"?

1. Whereas the compassionate procession was only loosely structured, the memorial service was strictly orchestrated.
2. Primary language (prose) was harmoniously alternated with secondary language (poetry), and verbal language was effectually interspersed with musical performances.
3. All sections had a voice: sometimes this sounded in the form of music, sometimes in several languages: Dutch, Papiamentu, English, Hebrew, Sanskrit, Portugese. Religious texts were cited, Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, but no one had the poor taste to speak about God's will or punishment.
4. There were no candles, no crosses, no religious uniforms. There were no slogans or protests. There were not yet any teddybears or other cuddly toys, although among the victims were no less than 18 children.
5. A spontaneous monument arose: the tree that had survived the crash and "had seen it all." After the fences were removed this very tree became the centre of individual and collective grieving. Today, after more than eight years, it is still surrounded by fresh flowers, plants, notes and pictures. Children come and leave their toys there, sing a song, leave a drawing or a letter. Adults tie a balloon in the branches, or a note to the deceased. Yearly, on the anniversary date, there is a procession, there are flowers, there is music. For the residents, the tree has become "our monument."

Up to now I have looked at these phenomena with the eyes of a Ritual Studies specialist. In conclusion, in front of this gathering, let me shift my position to that of Social Studies. Is such public ritualising a manifestation of civil religion?

It appears to me that the answer is affirmative. The way the term "civil religion" has evolved from Rousseau through Durkheim to Bellah, we can now use the term for manifestations of "positive multitudes". Even when such "positive multitudes" are formed on the sad occasions of collective disasters, they are positive in that those who constitute such a multitude value the collectivity as an ideal in itself. Most of those participating have never known any of the victims personally, yet they feel involved, they sympathise, they take part in a thing greater than themselves. Collectively they receive solace from company, the words, the music, the flowers. No heavy religious beliefs are made explicit: what is shared does not consist of scripturally given certainties, but lays open human fragility.

However, wherever massive emotionality is celebrated, criticism and scepticism are always near. From the sidelines we hear critical reflections from all kinds of observers, from journalists, scholars, or those who once lost a beloved and did not receive such media attention. Mass mourning tends to be analysed as a "media-staged event." Yes, there is a wonderful oceanic feeling of civil religious togetherness. Together we mourn the fragility of human life. Yet, for whom is all this effective, and by whom is it performed: it is for and by those wider circles who self-justifyingly dance their ritual mirror-dance of collective grief.

What about those who have personally lost family, friends, neighbours, classmates, possessions, their homes? Psychological investigations into coping with loss show that public attention helps, but ambiguously so. Rituals of public grieving, whether there are any cameras present or not, appear to have their justification in togetherness, in the display of concern and compassion. The phenomenon of publicly expressed ideals, recently to be seen in peace marches and in such marches as the Promise Keepers March in Washington or the White Procession in Brussels, are manifestations of so-called civil religion: a mixture of peaceful resistance and basic ideals.

It is merely a small segment of society that is actively engaged in so-called alternative religious or esoteric movements. But what appear as small stirrings first may later turn into paradigmatic shifts. That is why, in my opinion, the study of small religious movements is so important. At the same time there are mass movements that should be studied as expressions of what mobilises far greater multitudes. The study of collective grieving rituals after disasters may well provide insights into vital trends in the society as a whole. Old rituals are being borrowed, new rituals are invented. The plaza where Rabin was shot in Tel Aviv turned into an experimental theatre of mourning rituals. The site where a disaster struck turns into a ritual laboratory. The huge audience hall where a memorial service is held turns into a cross-section of multicultural, pluriform society. These might well be the places where, increasingly, civil religion is to be found.

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