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Eschatological Contents of Digital Mourning and Memorial Practices. Theological Perspectives and Insights

But where are you now?
Are you anywhere at all, somehow?
With God and in heaven, as they say?
Have you found peace?
Can you hear us now?¹

Abstract: This article presents and discusses two selected findings of the URPP sub-project ‘Eschatological contents of digital mourning and memorial practices’. Firstly, the hermeneutical task of theological eschatology is stated, and it is argued that digital forms of online mourning and commemoration represent a productive field for addressing this task. On this basis, three interconnected examples are then used to show how digital expressions and realizations of mourning and commemoration can be perceived within theological eschatology.

Dieser Beitrag präsentiert und diskutiert zwei ausgewählte, aufeinander aufbauende Erkenntnisse des UFSP-Teilprojekts „Eschatologische Gehalte digitaler Trauer- und Gedenkpraktiken“. Zunächst wird die hermeneutische Aufgabe der theologischen Eschatologie exponiert und dargelegt, dass digitale Formen des Online-Trauens und -Gedenkens ein produktives Feld für die Bewältigung dieser Aufgabe darstellen. Auf dieser Grundlage wird dann anhand von drei miteinander verbundenen Beispielen exemplarisch gezeigt, wie digitale Ausdrücke und Vollzüge der Trauer und des Gedenkens innerhalb der theologischen Eschatologie wahrgenommen werden können.

1 Introduction

Digital phenomena of mourning and commemorating a deceased person came up at the same time as the World Wide Web became accessible to and useable for a broader public. As early as the 1990s so-called ‘virtual cemeteries’ were estab-

1 Quote of a German online memorial page, our translation.

lished, where users, who had lost someone, could create virtual gravesites to share their grief and to build a virtual memorial. At the end of the same decade and in the early 2000s these phenomena were recognized and described by research, especially within the disciplines of the social sciences (e.g. Geser 1998; Schwibbe and Spieker 1999; Roberts 2004).

Since these beginnings of the widely accessible internet and early forms of digital mourning and memorial practices a distinguished field of researching death online has been established, including widespread phenomena that can also be grasped by the term ‘digital afterlife’, which reaches from online mourning, the digital (re-)mediation of death, dealing with digital postmortem remains to digitally supported pre-mortem end-of-life planning.² Within the comprehensive research on digital mourning and memorial practices in Western societies, historically heavily influenced by Christian tradition, many have noted that people often draw on religiously connotated language and imagery in these practices (Frick 2023; Savin-Baden 2022b, 54; 66–70; Hutchings 2019, 1; 4; Staley 2014, 9; 13–14). Some have also suggested that such practices themselves seem to hold a spiritual dimension, especially due to their predominant mode which can be described as ‘communicating with the dead online’ (Sumiala 2023, 408–409; Lagerkvist 2022, 167–169; 173; 175–176; Walter 2016). However, these constitutive aspects of mourning practices implying traditionally Christian-religiously impregnated imagery are not sufficient to indicate that the practices let alone the individuals performing them are indeed religious ones. Therefore, their religious, spiritual or non-religious status remains at most vague and should not be overestimated or too easily categorized as ‘religious’ (Frick 2023, 153; Savin-Baden 2022b, 70; Lagerkvist 2022, 168; Hutchings 2019, 3–4; Walter 2018, 11; Dürscheid et al. in this volume). This is also why it is debatable whether further religiously informed reflection of digital mourning such as the theological one is necessary or even adequate to the task at hand.

Nevertheless, we have chosen a decidedly theological approach in our project. This approach, however, is not primarily motivated by a supposed religiosity of the objects of investigation; i.e., the practices themselves allegedly being religious, spiritual or nonreligious. Rather, we presume that there is a factual affinity or similarity of mourning practices to certain questions which can be allocated in the theological field of so-called eschatology. While this link of online mourning or other phenomena of the digital afterlife to eschatology has already repeatedly

2 For a processual typology of ‘the digital afterlife’ differentiating between the interrelated *afterlife phenomena* on the one hand and *afterlife managers* on the other s. Lagerkvist 2022, 172–176. For research on phenomena collected under the term ‘death online’ s. Death Online Research Network <https://cc.au.dk/en/research/research-programmes/cultural-transformations/cultures-and-practices-of-death-and-dying/dorn>.

been made (Sumiala 2023, 409; Savin-Baden 2022a, 585; Staley 2014, 17–18), it has not yet been explicitly elaborated and examined in more detail in the context of German-speaking Protestant Systematic Theology we are focusing on.

In addition, we start with the observation from within theology that it is precisely the context of the death of another person which can serve as possible entry point for eschatological considerations (Polke 2020, 401, n. 25; Körtner 2020, 629). More concretely, to develop a contemporary form of eschatology, it has been suggested that theology needs to be attentive towards the verbally processed images which are placed upon the intangible limit of death as well as a potentially imagined beyond (Polke 2020, 395). However, a theological acknowledgement of how the unexceedable limit of death is imaginatively surrounded, circumnavigated and thus also tentatively gauged in contemporary practices of mourning and commemorating the dead is still owing. If it is ‘at the graves’ where theological eschatology finds its exemplary field of probation (Polke 2020, 411; Härle 2022, 606), then it seems necessary to also theologically recognize what is present in the very context of people having to bury, mourn and commemorate someone. Here, digital mourning and memorial practices, which have been present for several decades already but still lack in-depth theological investigation, can serve as an exemplary starting point for this theological task. As digital online practices mostly rest on nondigital offline ones and remain essentially intertwined with them (Campbell and Bellar 2023, 8) the field of online mourning can reveal substantial aspects of how people in our contemporary digital culture (Stalder 2018) in general mourn and commemorate the dead. Many of these aspects have probably been part of mourning and commemoration before, but only become visible or accessible due to their digital condition.

Within the frame of this contribution, it is not possible to unfold and conduct in detail the theological in-depth investigation we pursued in our project. In the following we will merely trace a few elements of this exploration by way of example. In accordance with the explicitly theological approach indicated above, we will first contour in more detail what we conceive as the theological task regarding mourning and memorial practices in the field of eschatology (2). The elaboration of this task further serves as theoretical basis for the then following empirically based investigation and the presentation of some elemental findings (3). The methodology used for this attempt will be described at the beginning of the relevant section. The article ends with a conclusion (4).

2 The Death of Another Person As Exemplary Context of Eschatology

The theological investigation of digital mourning and memorial practices within eschatology on the one hand and within the research field of Digital Religion(s) on the other presents a multilayered challenge due to two uncertainties. Firstly, the religious status of these practices is unclear, and it is not seen as a primary aim of theology to alleviate this uncertainty by evaluating, e.g. via means of empirical research, the (non-)religiosity of certain practices. This is because the theological position holds that the very decisive Christian religious practice, faith, which is the reflexive object of theology, is not purely a practice and can never be certainly determined empirically but only be hinted at. This is also why it is precarious if and how theology can refer to or even integrate empirically describable practices. This already implies the second insecurity concerning the relation of theology and the studies of religion. The latter, which dominate the research field of Digital Religion(s), mostly come from a multidisciplinary background eschewing any denominational commitments and predominantly follow a socio-constructionist paradigm (Campbell and Bellar 2023, 8–9; Sumiala 2022, 511; Grieve 2021, 28; 31; 35–36). Theology, however, cannot in all parts adapt to this approach and paradigm, for the reality it ultimately refers to cannot be exhaustively encapsulated by what is socially construed in practices.

To grasp, and also partly circumvent, these challenges, we have – as mentioned above – chosen a decidedly theological approach. Within this approach, we operate with the basal theoretical assumption that there is an affinity or even a factual *resemblance* and *correspondence* between some bundles of practices, like digital mourning and memorial practices, and some theological topics or questions. Yet, this correlation can only be constructed from a *theological* perspective.

While death represents a classical topic of eschatology, meaning the study of ‘the last things’, the recognition of contemporary contexts of death and what is at stake therein concerning the questions emerging in these contexts as well as how they are dealt with, often remains rather abstract within Systematic Theology. However, a sense that one possible and important empirical context of eschatological considerations is located ‘at the graves’ or in accompanying people who grieve as a task of pastoral care, can still be traced in some systematic theological contributions (Polke 2020, 411; Härle 2022, 606). Furthermore, this context is named as the one in which eschatological propositions are supposed to prove their value and which therefore needs to be included in systematic theological reflection (Polke 2020, 411; Härle 2022, 606). For Christian Polke the hermeneutic

task of the theologian in this probation field is to “critically and constructively return to the meaning” of the “polymorphy of eschatological genres and imagery” in the New Testament as well as of “religious motifs and images, with which an eschatologically tinged consciousness is expressed in our contemporary culture” (Polke 2020, 395).³

This description of a possible hermeneutic task in eschatology is here taken as seminal guideline that in doing eschatology it theologically is not only important to recognize the biblical imagery connected to death and an imagined, believed in or hoped for afterlife but also to consider the imagery which temporarily appears in this context. However, as mentioned above, it does not seem to be empirically possible to narrow down expressions of “an eschatological tinged consciousness” to the ones of “Christian faith or the Christian-pious self-consciousness” (Polke 2020, 395) in advance. Rather, we follow the assumption that it is, in general, the death of others, of those “who have died already and die every day” (Körtner 2020, 629), which urges for the reflection of finiteness (Polke 2020, 401, n. 25) and a potential Christian hope (Körtner 2020, 629; 642; 646) and which therefore serves as an entry point for exploring “eschatologically tinged” expressions “in our contemporary culture”. In the context of death, these expressions will primarily be imaginative and metaphorical, as humans here are deprived from any approaches to secured knowledge and therefore have to resort to modes of the symbolic in order to visualize what essentially cannot be visualized (Polke 2020, 400–402). However, the concept of ‘image’ or ‘imagery’ needs to be widened to deal with mourning and memorial practices as it is not only the explicitly linguistically processed images which are exerted to iteratively surround and thus gropingly comprehend the intangible threshold of death. Rather the forms and realizations of these practices themselves can also serve as representations of the unrepresentable (Stetter 2024, 31; 255–257; 294–295).

In Systematic Theology, which the topos of eschatology belongs to, considering concrete practices based on empirical data is – at least in the German-speaking context – not a given. As sketched, this is because the primary object of theology is Christian faith. Therefore, the plausibilization of a possible theological examination of digital mourning and memorial practices – as roughly outlined here – by identifying the death of others as exemplary source and target context of eschatology and setting out the hermeneutic task hereof already represents *the first finding of our project*. It does not follow a given theoretical basis or specific predetermined methodology but can rather be described as reasoning, encircling and enriching search movement in and from theological eschatology leading to a

3 Any German quotations have here been translated into English.

form of theology which could be characterized as an ‘empirically informed’ Systematic Theology (Henriksen 2019).

3 Empirical Attempt: Addressing, Missing, Locating the Dead

While our first finding concerns the overall hermeneutics and methodological structure of our project, the findings presented in this chapter result from this basic structure. We will first start with a preliminary remark on the methods of our empirical investigation and then turn to some exemplary insights of this procedure.

In order to survey digital mourning and memorial practices as an exemplary site for ‘eschatologically tinged’ images and representations, we collected different sets of data in cooperation with the linguistic project of the URPP P1. Together, we compiled a corpus of the German memorial pages *gedenkseiten.de* as well as a Twitter/X corpus including event-, hashtag-, and topic-based queries. Because these corpora are identical with the ones of P1 more detailed information on these data can be found in their contribution. As grief, when shared online, is nowadays mostly expressed on social media, we have also added a small qualitative data collection on grief posts on Instagram. To do so, we manually collected around 200 public posts which were tagged with the hashtag *#grief* and were accessible via the “explore”-site of Instagram. While all the data used was publicly accessible in very minimally invasive manners, for ethical considerations we will only refer to this data in anonymized ways.

To analyze these data, we have especially drawn on means and analytical concepts used by linguistics such as a linguistically elaborated concept of social and verbal “practices” (Frick 2025) and “patterns (of language use)” (Frick 2023; Tienken 2015; Linke 2011). Although our empirical procedure mostly relied on cultural and media linguistic approaches to mourning practices (Frick 2023; Giaxoglou 2021; Tienken and Marx 2020), we, in comparison to P1, proceeded more qualitatively oriented following our theological research interest asking how death is comprehended within these practices and what (verbal, practical, imaginative) means can be identified that are mobilized to continuously relate to the dead thus tentatively orbiting the limit of death, opening up a potential postmortem perspective and cultivating expressions of an ‘eschatologically tinged consciousness’.

3.1 Addressing the Dead

As already mentioned in the introduction and exemplified in the opening quote from a memorial page (“But where are you now?”), the predominant formal mode of online mourning and memorial practices is to directly address the dead (Lagerkvist 2022, 173–174; 192–196; Walter 2018, 6; 8; Offerhaus 2016, 50; Cann 2014, 122–123). However, this form of relating to the deceased, casting them as living persons by one of the most basic verbal modes of social interaction, the direct address in the second person (“you”), has so far hardly been taken into account when theologically conceptualizing death or a possible beyond of death. The difficulty of theologically recognizing a continuing (Klass, Silverman, and Nickman 1996), though transformed (Mathijssen 2018) bond or relationship of the bereaved towards the deceased can be seen in the reformatory attempt to avoid “meritorious misunderstandings” (Klie et al. 2015, 8) according to which the bereaved could, should or must do something for the salvation of the soul of the deceased (Brouwer 2015, 229; Grethlein 2022, 103–108; Grethlein 2007, 282). Historically, it remains unclear whether and to what extent this Protestant prevention of speaking to the dead was implemented in church services and pastoral care (Grethlein 2007, 286; 289). In contrast, the reformatory impetus advocating divine grace, which is effective in the justifying faith, as the exclusive means of salvation was clearly emphasized in the Protestant theological discourse in the 20th century and denied humans any ability to influence their own salvation or a post-mortem existence. As a consequence of this emphasis, a certain conceptualization of death, which was later referred to as the so-called “whole death thesis”, became the dominant stance on death within the German-speaking Protestant discourse. Because this stance is still effective until today, it can be seen as the main reason for the contemporary theological difficulty to recognize relations of the bereaved towards the dead manifested in direct addresses (Karle 2020, 570–572; Klassen 2023, 10–11).

This thesis consists of different levels, but is mostly grasped as countermodel to the idea of an immortal soul which is assumed to be the essential part of a human being that cannot be destroyed, not even by death (Härle 2022, 634). In contrast, the ‘whole-death thesis’, in alignment with the sciences as well as with the dominant tendency in the biblical scriptures, holds that a human being only exists as inextricable unity of body and soul, which is why, in death, the whole human entity dies, including all experiential human aspects which can be conceived as soul (Härle 2022, 635; Körtner 2020, 638).

Theologically, this conception of death rather emerged as theological by-product of the Protestant-centered understanding of the justifying faith by unconditioned divine grace and has never been strongly defended as stand-alone thesis

(Sacher 2023, 5–6). However, it was advanced to a problematic anthropologically coined definition of death when it was further explained as “the onset of total relationlessness” in the 1970s by Eberhard Jüngel (Jüngel 1993, 145)⁴. Notwithstanding that this definition is based on relationality, it narrows the “enigmatic, indefinable” phenomenon of death (Jüngel 1974, 5) to a seemingly general, objective, unifying anthropological definition of the “*essential nature* of death” (Jüngel 1974, 115). On a positive note, it must be admitted that Jüngel succeeds in taking the radical nature of death, and the irreversibly terminating rupture that occurs with it, extremely seriously with this definition (Wagner-Rau 2024, 200–201). Therefore, the value of Jüngel’s definition should not be underestimated, as it is only the irreversibility of a life having ended with death that makes the grief and pain induced by the death of another person comprehensible at all. However, on the basis of this definition of death, it is hardly possible to theologically acknowledge some concrete and essential practices in the context of death in such a way that they are also able to reveal something substantial about the phenomenon of death and therefore cannot simply be dismissed as improper or denying reality. That this is predominantly not the case when bereaved persons directly address the deceased online (or offline s. Stetter 2024, 200) can be illustrated by another prevalent pattern that also is a major one in online mourning practices and clearly indicates the absence of the dead.

3.2 Missing the Dead

1. You are missing. ❤️
2. You are missing to me / I miss you. 💞⁵
3. I miss you so much ❤️ Just one more time to feel your little body on me, feel your heartbeat, breathe in your smell. ❤️⁶

As it appears to be all too obvious that the dead are missing it seems that little attention has been paid to this pattern which is one of the most prevalent ones in online mourning – especially in directly *addressing* the dead (3. “I miss you”).

On the one hand focussing on the dominance of this pattern in online mourning practices helps to connect these practices to the theological discourse on death in the frame of eschatology – which is our primary aim here – as it corre-

⁴ With this quote we follow the original German text instead of the official English translation.

⁵ In German this pattern is realized in two ways, constructed with two verbs which both translate to the English “missing”.

⁶ Quotes from selected Instagram posts tagged with #grief.

sponds with the strong emphasis on death as a total break-off as stated in the ‘whole death thesis’. On the other hand, this pattern can also serve to contextualize the ‘social presence’ of the dead constituted by online mourning and memorial practices as well as the assumption that, on the long run, the bereaved might be denying that the dead are actually dead because they engage in communicative practices towards the deceased (Grethlein 2022, 235).

In theological eschatology, it is imperative not to promote a simple hope of an ongoing life beyond death, seeing that the Scripture as the original document for Christian faith provides no definite basis for such an overly simplified notion of hope, nor can it be reasonably and candidly stated in the face of death. Therefore, it is an unquestionable strength of the so-called ‘whole death thesis’ that it does not rashly present a Christian hope of eternity and resurrection and thus overhastily circumvent the radical and irreversible rupture happening with death which appears to be the main reason for grief. Rather, it takes seriously the finite limits of the human being represented in dying as in grieving as the “relentless harshness of death” (Laube 2023, 75).

That the harshness of death, as held by the whole death thesis, is foremost constituted as rupture of and in an embodied human life can very well be shown in the verbal pattern of missing the dead. Within this pattern the bereaved often articulate that it is especially aspects of the bodily-physical existence they are missing, such as the voice, the smell (3. “breathe in your smell”), the body heat, the breath or the heartbeat of the deceased (3. “feel your heartbeat”). Although these aspects seem to be very basic ones of the physical constitution of a human being they still can be interpreted as verbal hints to what Thomas Fuchs phenomenologically calls intercorporeality (Fuchs 2018, 46–47). As the relationship to the now deceased was constituted by “an intercorporeal sphere” (Fuchs 2018, 47) it also becomes tangible in online grief that the deceased are now missing as a *somebody* (Lagerkvist 2022, 189). Thus, the “ubiquitous indications of absence” (Fuchs 2018, 43) of the dead are not easily surmounted by addressing them. Rather, this very pattern of directly addressing the dead in order to express the gaping absence of the addressed verbally illustrates the “ambiguity of presence and absence”, which Fuchs posits as “the core conflict of grief” (Fuchs 2018, 51). While it seems obvious that online practices of mourning and commemoration are dominated by practices of presentifying the dead (Walter 2018, 6–7), it helps to stick to this prevalent pattern of simultaneously addressing and missing the dead in order not to pass too quickly by the fact that these practices only emerge as a way of dealing with an undeniable and also often explicitly undenied absence (Walter 2018, 11). The ambiguity of presence and absence as core conflict of grief does not only show how, in grief, “pragmatics undermine semantics” (Stetter 2024, 200) but also functions as display of what essentially constitutes grief. There-

fore, any easy decision of privileging the pragmatics over the semantics or forms of performed presence, communication and agency over the recognition of absence, speechlessness and inability will only partially account for the multiple ambiguities (Stetter 2024, 265–269) which built the peculiarity of relating to the deceased in mourning and commemorating and which are also manifested online.

It is precisely the imposed way of dealing with the death of others characterized by a multifaceted ambiguity of absence and presence and at the same time producing this ambiguity in a practical way, which reveals a certain structural similarity of mourning to religious practices (Stetter 2024, 152–153; Thomas 2023, 75) as they can theologically be described for faith. Additionally, the way in which people in mourning attempt to occasionally manage this ambiguity, to dissolve it and thus momentarily get rid of it, can also be linked to operations constituting the object of eschatology. For while the emotion or experience of grief can phenomenologically be described as nonlocalized and as alienating the grieving person from her previously known world (Ratcliffe 2022, 7–9; 50–56), grief in practices which both express and co-produce it in the first place, is iteratively directed at the dead. This often goes hand in hand with practices of personalizing and locating the deceased tentatively transcending the threshold of death (Stetter 2024, 278–282). Similar to religious practices that refer to a transcendent dimension of eternity in the face of death, these practices are mostly realized by means of presentifying or representing what essentially is absent and unrepresentable hinging on elements which Manuel Stetter, in regard to funerary practices, paradigmatically lists as “the modes of experience of ‘as if’ or Heike Behrend’s pattern of ‘I know . . . , but still’” (Stetter 2024, 244).

On a linguistic level this peculiar structure of ‘as if’ can predominantly be found in metaphors or other forms of visual, non-conceptual language. Returning to the hermeneutic task of eschatology stated above, it is precisely these rhetorical forms that ought to receive special theological attention, provided that it is also assumed that what eschatological statements essentially refer to can only be expressed in a figurative-symbolic or metaphorical way (Krüger 2023, 68; Laube 2023, 76; Polke 2020, 401–402; Körtner 2020, 620–622). Thus, imaginatively locating the dead by and in mourning and memorial practices showcases a sort of momentary ambiguity management (Krüger 2023, 81) which does not necessarily have to be interpreted as affective-cognitive conflict (Fuchs 2018, 52–53)⁷ or dismissed as oversimplifying, reifying vernacular imaginations (Laube 2023, 76). Rather, the imaginative and metaphorical forms of locating the dead as persons can also be

7 Fuchs here draws on an example where this ambiguity actually is experienced as a conflict.

understood as following the very structure of situations which the philosopher Hans Blumenberg characterizes equally by a “lack of evidence and compulsion to act” (Blumenberg 2001, 417). In such situations, of which the death of another can be seen as a paradigmatic one, Blumenberg proposes that humans can only hark back to rhetorics (Blumenberg 2020, 655) of which the metaphor is a significant element (Blumenberg 2001, 416). Therefore, a last example serves to illustrate that in metaphorically locating the dead the ambiguity of death is not necessarily erased but rather precisely sensed and expressed on a very small scale.

3.3 Locating the Dead

An exemplary caption of an Instagram post of a bereaved parent reads as follows:

My dear darling, today you have not been with us for 6 years, but you are always there in our hearts! We miss you infinitely, but we also know that you are up there together with many other children.

The structure of this caption follows the pattern of placing metaphors against the undenied reality of death in an almost paradigmatic way. It firstly addresses the deceased person in an intimate-familiar register presentifying the deceased as a specific person (Stetter 2024, 280–281). Then, it states the reality of the person being dead within a countable time frame of six years as ‘not being with us [any-more]’⁸ meaning a gaping absence of ‘infinitely missing’. Finally, it counterfactually and metaphorically challenges this very reality with the metaphors of the deceased ‘you’ ‘always being there in our hearts’ and ‘up there’ in community with others.

In oscillating between the reality of the person being dead and metaphorically holding on to the person as persisting, this example shows a significant two-fold ambiguity: Firstly, it verbally expresses the above-mentioned ambiguity of absence and presence portrayed as critical in grieving in the dichotomy of ‘not being there/with us anymore’ and ‘being there’, necessarily vaguely referring to a different place implying a different way of being whereas the person seems to remain identical. Secondly, with the metaphorical ‘solution’ of this primary ambiguity a second ambiguity evolves in the parallelism of metaphorically locating the dead “in our hearts” and “up there”. Thus, the metaphors themselves do not only momentarily dissolve the ambiguity but in combination create a new one, show-

⁸ The German text literally adds the very typical phrase of “not being anymore”.

ing that the whereabouts of the deceased is a crucial question in grief that can only be addressed by transiently and iteratively resorting to metaphors or images which are themselves negating to essentially be what they are showing (Krüger 2023, 71).

The parallel use of these metaphors also questions the interpretation that people in grief vernacularly tend to reify the deceased by, amongst other things, decisively locating them in imagined places. Rather, the metaphors used elude any precise determinations which would undermine their metaphorical character. Although metaphorically placing the dead “in our hearts” (Klassen 2023) or “up there” – the latter mostly associated with a cosmological understanding of heaven (Dürscheid and Wüthrich 2025) – appear to be overly conventionalized patterns, it is exactly these images and the practices they are embedded in theology ought finally turn to. The chosen example illustrates that the pattern of locating the dead is embedded in a presentifying pattern of directly addressing the deceased and an acknowledging pattern of recognizing their death and absence while metaphorically still holding on to them in a certain mode of presence. As such it is precisely these conventionally formed images which display a sense of the multiple ambiguities of death and a possible hope beyond death, which also is the prerequisite of any eschatology (Polke 2020, 402). Thus, mourning and commemorating practices inevitably take the death of a person seriously due to the ‘ubiquitous absence’ that constitutes grief and the unsettling condition of missing. At the same time, they show a structure of relating to the dead as persons by metaphorically locating them in imagined places. In this respect, these practices can be seen as a mode of resistance towards ultimate loss and transmitting a sense of transient hope or solace. Therefore, mourning and commemorating practices might accurately be grasped as what theologically has been posited as expressions of an ‘eschatologically tinged consciousness on our contemporary culture.’ As this culture has substantially become a digital one, digital mourning and memorial practices appear to be a productive field where these eschatological expressions or ‘contents’ appear and are to be investigated.

In sum, the examples here presented as a *second finding* show that the communicative practice of addressing the dead, which so far has hardly been taken into account when doing theological eschatology, cannot necessarily be understood as simplistic, essentializing or substantializing practice of the bereaved. Rather, they performatively reveal a multiple ambiguity which tends to be temporarily and partially dissolved by personally locating the dead verbally, mainly realized by using metaphors. As such they might not be a vernacular form of ‘lived’ religion or spirituality, but at least show decisive parallels to religious practices known from the theological reflection of Christian faith. Particularly in presenting and sustaining the multiple ambiguities these digital practices of mourning

and commemorating the dead appear to be a crucial and productive field for contemporary constructions of theological eschatology.

4 Conclusion

In our project we started with the observation that digital mourning and memorial practices have been present for a while but have – at least in the context of German-speaking Protestantism – so far hardly been theologically investigated in more detail.⁹ We traced this lack of examination to several symptoms such as the unclear religious status of these practices, a general hesitation of Systematic Theology towards empirical research and dominating figures of thought in Protestant theology preventing this specific bundle of practices from being taken seriously by many theologians. In contrast, the findings of our project, which were presented here in a highly compact and incomplete fashion, firstly show that there are reasonable indications within the discourse of eschatology which make it at least very plausible, if not even necessary, to theologically acknowledge practices of online mourning and take them as impulses with the potential to reshape certain eschatological notions. Specifically, we identified the death of another person, which is, among other things, constituted and surrounded by practices of mourning and commemorating the deceased as a central context for eschatology. On this basis we set out the hermeneutic task of theological eschatology to especially focus on what is represented and visualized in these practices.

Having established the ground for a theologically resourced empirical investigation of online mourning, our second finding, consisting of several subfindings, shows that there are significant structural elements of digital mourning and memorial practices which might be profitably interpreted as decisive and seminal for contemporary considerations in theological eschatology. While the practices of digitally relating to the dead in general can be understood as existential strivings (Lagerkvist 2022, 193), viewed through a theological lens, they can furthermore be interpreted as expressions of an ‘eschatologically tinged consciousness in our contemporary culture’. As such, they provide necessarily vague, tentative, and transient representations of what essentially eludes any mode of being represented in a more definite way. In this manner, these practices show a movement

⁹ However, this diagnosis – as presented in this contribution – mainly refers to Systematic Theology, whereas in Practical Theology these practices have especially been researched by Swantje Luthe and Ilona Nord (Nord and Luthe 2015).

of dealing with ambiguity which can reasonably be linked to some aspects that are constitutive for theological eschatology, too.

With the intention of grasping these contemporary ‘eschatological expressions’ it seems imperative for theology to empirically learn from the research field of Digital Religion(s) and, in our case, also from (the) linguists (involved) to specifically target these practices *as practices* in order not to fall short of unhinging the images or metaphors embedded therein from their implementation and thus to find what can productively be referred to within eschatology. Conversely, analyzing digital mourning and memorial practices with the help of theological resources can also reveal structures of mourning which plausibilize drawing parallels between them and religious practices. It thus becomes possible to describe these practices as religiously shaped or religion-alike. This parallelization is, however, only conducted in a theologically perspectivized and appropriated manner.

Finally, to grasp our endeavor of theologically investigating digital mourning and memorial practices we might borrow from a subcaption of an article which in a way served as founding paper for the still nascent and explorative field of digital theology. There, Peter Phillips, Kyle Schiefelbein-Guerrero and Jonas Kurlberg framed a central way of doing digital theology as an “[i]ntentional, sustained and reflexive theologically-resourced engagement with digitality/digital culture” (Phillips, Schiefelbein-Guerrero, and Kurlberg 2019, 39) which – as every culture – essentially evolves through the practices that constitute it. For Systematic Theology to participate in this engagement the findings of our project suggest turning to an empirically informed (systematic) theology. This will allow for a broader perspective which does not exclusively consider overarching developments and narratives of a world increasingly permeated with digital technology and media and thus rashly disregard how a digital culture is configured in our everyday lives by concrete (micro-)practices.

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