Ahmed Zeineldin, *al-Mawt Bayn al-Mujtamaʿ wa-l-Thaqāfa* [*Death Between Society and Culture*] (Doha/Beirut: ACRPS, 2024), pp. 223.

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Research on death emerged early in Europe, particularly within the framework of the history of mentalities. In contrast, Arabic scholarship on the subject remains limited. Among the most notable recent contributions is *Death Between Society and Culture*[1] by Ahmed Zeineldin. The first section of the book explores people's aversion to the subject of death, which is framed as a perplexing enigma. Zeineldin demonstrates that this reluctance reflects the early institutionalization of religion and the emergence of the rational man, marked by entrenched ceremonial practices, which shaped premodern rituals of social organization.[2] The author emphasizes the importance of circumstances and modes of engagement with mourning and burial rituals, and contends that death can only be logically interpreted through the imagination – "the aptitude that produces religion and mythology".[3]

In the book's second section, Zeineldin discusses "deceased intermediaries", which analyses the formation of the imaginary of death, whose forms and symbols have retained their continuity. He describes the phenomenon of righteous saints (*al-Awliyāʾ al-Ṣāliḥīn*), outlining its historical evolution and arguing that it is particularly characteristic of the Maghreb, where "[the saints'] prestige and sanctity take shape while they are alive, or shortly after they die".[4] He next examines Iraqi Ashura rituals, which he concludes that they possess a distinctively bloody character.

In the book's final section, Zeineldin examines what he terms "sacrificial death". He addresses the question of immortality through death, focusing on martyrdom (i.e. suicide operations) by the Romans and early Christians, and later by Muslims. The book concludes that death encompasses a wide array of meanings and that, despite humanity's advancements in science and philosophy, the reproduction of the dead remains a part of our social world via the collective imaginary.

Zeineldin approaches death as a universal social phenomenon that intersects with science, culture, religion, aesthetics, and economics. He draws on anthropological tools to offer a condensed overview of key scholarly works on representations of death through deceased intermediaries and sacrificial death in mythological, Islamic, Christian, and Greek heritage. His comparison operates on three levels: represented death, death via deceased intermediaries, and sacrificial death. Through this comparison, Zeineldin underscores the centrality of the "imagined encounter", as if death leads only to the symbolic.

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[1] Ahmed Zeineldin, *al-Mawt Bayn al-Mujtamaʿ wa-l-Thaqāfa* (Doha/Beirut: ACRPS, 2024).
[2] Ibid., p. 15.
[3] Ibid., p. 14.
[4] Ibid., p. 114.

Zeineldin studies death within society and culture, drawing on the most important ideas that imbue death with meaning (including people's attitudes to and conceptions of death) based on parables, religion, and folk culture. He offers a nuanced comparison between the Mashreq and the Maghreb, examining their conceptions of death, rituals, and ritual dramatization of the entire funerary process: from the moment of passing away, to the integration of the deceased into the afterlife, and finally to the reassimilation of the living into the worldly realm.

The author defines the meanings of death as complex, obscured, and terrifying to the living. He underscores the importance of rituals in providing reassurance against the cruelty and absurdity of death. The inescapable certainty of death, coupled with the uncertainty surrounding its timing, manner, and aftermath, creates dynamics of symbolic interaction with this invisible occurrence.

Zeineldin treats death not as a biological fact, but as a sociological one. He argues that once funerals are theatricalized, death is humanized, gaining what he calls "universal social dimensions", encompassing the symbolic, aesthetic, cultural, religious, and everyday aspects of social life. Moreover, death intersects with authority because it transforms into a process of investment *par excellence* within "political conflict and tangible economic advantages".[5]

The author infers that religion originates in coming to terms with death. This explains why grave visits and traditional funerary rituals have endured despite social changes that have, to some extent, disrupted the bonds between death and the deceased. Furthermore, death is increasingly experienced as an individual rather than a collective event today. People interact with death in isolation from their families, particularly in private clinics, where informing families and coordinating the removal of the body require delicate handling and procedural clarity.

Zeineldin argues that laws have been enacted to regulate death-related practices, graveyards, and burials, just as modes of consolation and commemoration (such as obituaries in newspapers) have changed. Zeineldin also contends that economics in general extends beyond production to encompass a symbolic economy of death. This is evident in new social systems for managing death, such as life insurance, funerary goods, and burial costs. Moreover, death is closely tied to money through inheritance after death, which can serve as a means of social validation. Celebrations also "invest the sacred for deployment in the economic and social domains (such as vows, food, and exchange of animals)".[6]

Zeineldin also emphasizes that death is deeply intertwined with "issues of society and human development; it is an intricate field of study within the history of mentalities, as it is approached in Western universities. In recent decades, the study of death (thanatology) has advanced to the point of inclusion in the curricula of many foreign institutions".[7]

The author concludes by concurring with Zygmunt Bauman (1925-2017), that all cultures are "ingenious instruments for concealing, or beautifying, the face of death such that it becomes tolerable to look at or coexist with. Whether death comes in an abbreviated, adjusted, or transmitted form, it cannot be banished entirely from human life. Perhaps the fundamental fear of death is the prototype of all other kinds of fear".[8]

While approaches to death lie beyond the scope of empiricism, Zeineldin examines it within the contexts that shape its representations and the way society interacts with its mysteries. He investigates

[5] Ibid., p. 198.
[6] Ibid., p. 122.
[7] Ibid., p. 15.
[8] Ibid., p. 17.

a "taboo"[9] or "unthought" (French: *impensé*)[10] topic, understood as part of human behaviour. Adopting a phenomenological lens, Zeineldin understands death by describing the meanings of social reality and lived experience, thus lending his study a distinctly subjective dimension. However, this subjectivity also surfaces in his treatment of particularities of the Maghreb. Moreover, he overlooks some enduring rituals, such as the *arbaʿīn* (a commemoration observed 40 days after death), which is not practised across all Muslim societies.

The author discusses coping with death through an anthropological framework, situating death "within a particular social context subject to cultural perspectives constructed by educational and religious means, which vary between environments and according to the status and class of the deceased. Distinction is made between rich and poor, relative and stranger".[11] Zeineldin's decision to address a taboo subject through a qualitative, comprehension-based, Weberian approach is commendable in its boldness. But the book would have benefitted from integrating qualitative and quantitative data to more effectively illuminate how key variables relate, such as the ways in which Arabs die and whether death rates differ between men and women, or between urban and rural populations. In addition, while much qualitative research has been written on death as a concept, ritual, and belief, the author leaves unaddressed the potential for scientific progress to demystify death or to reconceptualize it as a form of life. He could have also explored further how death is now experienced and mediated through virtual reality.

After outlining the sociocultural aspects of death, Zeineldin turns to regional scholarly contributions "because of its close connection with the function of religious shrines of saints and righteous individuals, and the way this relates to political liberties".[12] However, he only briefly alludes to Radouan Rabhi's work[13] despite the accessibility of online material dealing with death, ranging from Quranic verses, the Prophet's Sunna, and juristic reasoning to folkloric sources. Furthermore, the author does not take full advantage of the opportunity to apply a hermeneutical lens to doctrinal inclination, particularly concerning the different types of death and the associated local customs.

Zeineldin touches on several important themes in passing – such as death's intersections with globalization, economics, authority, sexuality, childhood, and old age – without exploring them in depth. One notable omission is the digital mediation of death, with technology having become a locus of consolation and remembrance that may be termed "the Thanatos of the digital age" (*Thanatos à l'ère du numérique*).[14] This research area helps us understand whether or not digital platforms have changed our perceptions of death and the deceased. To that end, I would argue that they can indeed change perceptions and rituals concerning death, such as suicide, its theatricalization on social media, and digital tributes.

One of Zeineldin's most important contributions lies in his observation that the West has sought to push death out of the public sphere, "confining its outward manifestations to the shallow crucible of healthcare facilities, hospitals, or family homes. Meanwhile, major funerary rituals with theatrical dimensions have remained present in our societies".[15] However, this binary overlooks the extent to which European societies

[9] Michel Vovelle, *L'heure du grande passage chronique de la mort* (Paris: Gallimard, 1993), p. 103. Louis-Vincent Thomas echoes this view, writing that "death will become as sex was in the past: the primary taboo of the contemporary world". See Louis-Vincent Thomas, "Les sociétés devant la mort," in: *Encyclopaedie Universalis*, corpus 12 (Paris: Encyclopaedia universalis France, 1985), p. 668; Monica Charlot, *Vivre avec la mort* (Paris: Editions Alain Moreau, 1976), p. 211.

[10] The "unthought" is "no more than an accumulation of what is unthinkable [*impensable*] at several successive historical junctures, for reasons religious, political, social, or otherwise". See: Mohammed Arkoun, *Islamic Thought: A Scientific Reading*, Hashem Saleh (trans.) (Beirut: Centre de Development National, 1987), p. 18.

[11] Zeineldin, p. 22.

[12] Ibid., p. 16.

[13] Radouan Rabhi, "Horizons of the Historiography of Death in the Far Maghreb," *Anthropologia*, vol. 3 (March 2016), pp. 51-61.

[14] Didier Moulinier, *Eros et Thanatos à l'ère du numérique: Suivi de, Remarques sur le Virtuel* (Paris: Editions Les contemporains Favoris, 2015).

[15] Zeineldin, p. 23.

also theatricalize death rituals, particularly on occasions such as All Souls' Day (2 November) or in the commemoration of the victims of terrorist attacks. These societies employ the theatricalization of death as a vital means of reassuring the living. They maintain symbolic interaction with the deceased as a strategy for coping with loss – as a pedagogy of mourning to overcome sadness and come to terms with death. At the same time, it is essential to consider the effect of modernity and science on shaping a civic discourse around death, which, according to Edgar Morin,[16] consists of moments of silence, commemoration, memorials, euthanasia legislation, and protective measures against global pandemics like Covid-19.[17]

Despite the author's reliance on important research in Arabic and other languages, a greater openness to French scholarship, particularly that of Jean Ziegler and Jean-Didier Urbain, as well as that of Maghrebi scholars like Belkacem Tababi and Raja Ben Slama, would have enriched its analytical scope.[18] While these authors discuss some of the issues Zeineldin addresses, they arrive at different conclusions and use different methods. This divergence underscores the need for further research on death that draws upon interdisciplinary approaches.

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[16] Edgar Morin, *L'homme et la mort* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1970), p. 57.

[17] Louis-Vincent Thomas, *Mort et pouvoir* (Paris: Editions Payot, 2010).

[18] Belkacem Tababi, *Death in Egypt and the Levant, vol. 1: Demographic Catastrophes during the Mamluk Period* and *vol. 2: Death Rituals in the Mamluk Period* (Tunis: La Maison Tunisienne du Livre, 2014); Raja Ben Slama, *Death and Death Rituals in Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī and Muslim* (Tunis: Sud Editions, 1997).