

‘Our Queen of Hearts’—the Glorification of Lady Diana Spencer

A critical appraisal of the glorification of celebrities and new pilgrimage

Religiosity and spirituality respectively have always been and will be subject to change. The emergence of the manifold forms of new religious and spiritual movements in the last century includes a variety of cult-like veneration of specific individuals, such as politicians (e.g. Mao, Lenin) and modern idols (e.g. Elvis Presley, Princess Diana, Michael Jackson), who are glorified like saints. Devotees gather annually for memorials of their departed idols or travel long distances to visit the tomb, former home, etc. of a specific person to pay tribute to him or her. Due to the motivations of these devotees, the trouble they take, the practices and the tangible emotionality that are connected with this phenomenon, it can be considered a form of pilgrimage. In the following I will present some thoughts about the glorification of celebrities which leads to these considerable forms of cult and pilgrimage, using as an example the case of Lady Diana Frances Spencer (d. 1997).

The death of a princess

Diana Frances Spencer was born on 1 July 1961. Belonging to the high nobility of the United Kingdom, the Spencer family had no material shortcomings, but allegedly the divorce of the parents was fought on the backs of the children. Diana was regarded as a very poor student; after school she started working in a kindergarten. In 1981 she married Prince Charles and became Her Royal Highness the Princess of Wales, a title she lost due to the divorce. She gave birth to two sons, the Princes William (b. 1982) and Harry (b. 1984). Apparently Diana did not get along with the Royal Family and her marriage was not happy at all. She felt neglected by her husband, whom she experienced as a callous and distanced man. At some point, it was revealed that Prince Charles was unfaithful to Diana with Camilla Parker Bowles and Diana

herself confirmed that she had had an affair with her riding instructor. After these revelations the Prince and Diana split up and eventually got divorced in 1996. Diana had not known Dodi al-Fayed very long. She only started seeing him a few weeks before she joined him and his family on a vacation in France, where they both got killed in a car accident on 31 August 1997 in the Pont d'Alma tunnel in Paris, apparently chased by the paparazzi.¹

When news spread about the sudden and tragic death of Lady Diana, people not only in the United Kingdom but all over the world were dismayed.² Especially the otherwise rather reserved Britons themselves allegedly fell into a sort of mass hysteria—also critically referred to as ‘a collective moment of madness’ (Freedland 2007). At least that picture was reflected by the media; they depicted the mass mourning by focusing on emotional outbursts of individuals and sold these as a collective hysteria. Charles Monger and Jennifer Chandler, who observed the situation among the mourners during this first week from a rather objective and socio-scientific perspective, note that they had a different impression; they experienced the situation as ‘one of decorum and gravity’ (Monger & Chandler 1998: 104). Not everybody in general grieved Lady Diana Spencer, but in the first weeks after her death it was not possible to publicly admit this. As Tony Walter argues, this was due to the common social rules that follow any case of death—you simply do not talk badly about the deceased and you respect the grief of the mourners. This was reinforced by the presentation in the media that showed a mourning nation and conjured the necessity to join in the sentiment or be exposed as cold-hearted. (Walter 1999a: 19–37.) In fact, people from all over Britain and partly from Europe made their way to London to mourn and pay their respects to the ‘Princess of the people’. They brought bunches of flowers, cards and letters, teddy bears and the like to deposit in front of Kensington Palace, the former residence of Diana, and in the surrounding area of Kensington Gardens.

The trees around Kensington Palace were transformed into shrines by pinning pictures of Diana or the Virgin Mary and notes on to the trunk, objects were hung in the branches, and candles were lit at the foot. Similar shrines were built on the ground level.

Among the flowers holy pictures were inserted, including those of the Virgin Mary and child, the Sacred Heart, Ganesh and Buddha. There were candles, lanterns and votive lights. The symbolism of the ‘Queen of Hearts’

1 For a detailed biography of Diana Spencer cf. Morton 1998.

2 For example, next to the Britons, the death of Lady Di had a strong impact on the Americans, cf. Griffin 1999, Haney & Davis 1999.



Gifts and flowers for Diana outside Kensington Palace. Photo <http://www.panoramio.com/photo/21353436>.

appeared over and over again. ‘The Queen of Hearts’ was what Diana was called in many of the messages, and the playing card of the Queen of Hearts was attached to several of the bunches.

The messages often expressed a feeling of personal loss and included wishes for the afterlife. They were written by people from different national, social and religious backgrounds. In total they revealed a strong identification with Diana as the wronged wife, one who championed causes which were unpopular amongst the establishment or demonized by popular media. Sometimes she was called a saint or an angel. The messages overall show how much time, thought, and effort were put into them. (Chandler 1999: 135–54; Monger & Chandler 1998: 104–8.) The same observations can be made regarding the entries in the Books of Condolence that were set up all over the country, in the British embassies outside the United Kingdom and on the Internet. In London, at the centre of the sentimental outpouring, people were queuing in thousands at St James Palace waiting to sign one of the books, a wait which would take up to eleven hours, even though forty-two books had been set up by Thursday, 5 September. (Francis, Neophytou & Kellaheer 1999: 119; Jones 1999: 203–12.)

Throughout the week Diana was commemorated in the services of every church in the country, culminating in the television broadcast of her funeral in Westminster Abbey on 6 September 1997, which was attended by approximately 1.5–2 billion people around the world—acknowledged as a global community of mourners (Davie & Martin 1999: 187–93; Leach 1997).

At first glance, the week after Diana’s death in September 1997 could be understood as a comparatively normal reaction to the loss of a very popular person, although most certainly to an exaggerated extent. Apart from that, it showed characteristics of cult and pilgrimage; for example the long waiting in line, the ‘offering’ of gifts, enormous amounts of flowers³ and notes, with explicit religious references and iconography, all-night candlelit vigils, and especially the building of shrines. (Chandler 1999: 147–50.) This impression is reinforced by people having their picture taken, as evidence that they have been there, and especially by the outrage of the people, also reflected in the tabloids, when someone took away items, which ‘suggests that the objects and flowers were imbued with a sort of sacredness’ (Monger & Chandler 1998:

3 By 10 September, the pile of flowers outside Kensington Gardens was five feet (*ca* 1.5 m) deep in some places and the bottom layer had started to compost.

104).⁴ This is confirmed by the fact that the public disapproved of dumping the masses of flowers; instead they were composted and used as fertilizer in a remembrance garden, thus 'renewing the cycles of life, regeneration and re-birth' (Francis, Neophytou & Kellaheer 1999: 124). Furthermore, little thought was given to the presentation of the flowers: most of the bunches were left with their wrappings on. Monger and Chandler argue that it was not about the gift, but about the act of making the offerings, which was directed at the deceased and not at the spectators. This is also reflected in the wording and tone of many of the messages addressing Diana herself instead of referring to her in a third person. (Monger & Chandler 1998: 107.) To Chandler and Monger 'the scene at Kensington Palace resembled a pilgrimage, which the people taking part invested with many layers of meaning. It was an act of remembrance which fused many elements of popular and religious culture.' (Monger & Chandler 1998: 108.)

A Diana pilgrimage tour

The emotional release and sentiments triggered by the sudden impact of death subsided relatively quickly; but Diana remained 'as socially alive as she was physically dead' (Walter 1999b: 272). In the following weeks a rather elaborate form of Diana-pilgrimage developed that still prevails, even though to a smaller extent. After 12 years people are still visiting the stations of Diana's life and leave flowers or a message.

A genuine Diana pilgrimage tour might start in central London, where you can follow the official 'Diana Memorial Walk', which was established by the City of London in the year 2000. For your orientation 90 metal plaques have been embedded into the ground. With a length of 11.8 kilometres the walk leads through several parks, passing three palaces, two manors and numerous places where Diana spent her life—some of them of big importance, others rather insignificant. The tour starts at Kensington Palace, Diana's former residence, and ends at Clarence House, the former residence of the Queen Mother, where Diana spent the night before her wedding. On the way you can visit St Paul's Cathedral, where Diana became 'Her Royal Highness

4 In some cases, people from foreign countries were arrested for taking teddy bears. They were sentenced to approximately one month in jail, but in the end only had to pay a fine. Interestingly, one young man from Sardinia was punched in the face after leaving the police station and the offender wasn't arrested or fined for his assault, cf. Smith 1997.



One of the 90 metal plaques signifying the The Diana, Princess of Wales Memorial Walk. Photo © Maria Vasenkari 2007.

the Princess of Wales' by marrying Prince Charles in 1981, and Westminster Abbey, where her funeral was held. Close to St Georges Square in the district of Pimlico you can take a look—at least from the outside—at the Young England Kindergarten, where Diana used to work until she got married. In Hyde Park the Diana Memorial Fountain, which is the official Diana Memorial, was inaugurated in 2004. Some people think this is not adequate to commemorate the princess and demand an official memorial statue of Diana instead. An unofficial life-sized statue of her and

Dodi as lovers releasing a seagull or an albatross, titled 'Innocent Victims', was set up at London's department store Harrods by its owner Mohamed Al-Fayed, the father of Dodi. Situated on the ground-floor of the same store is a shrine with their pictures, framed by Mediterranean flowers and sculptures; a commemorative plaque and a book of condolence. (Maier 2007.)

Another frequently aspired destination is Althorp, the Spencer family estate, where Diana grew up as a girl and where her remains rest on an island in a small lake marked by a white amphora. Visitors have no access to the actual island; they can only walk around the lake and view the burial place from a distance. It is possible, however, to leave flowers and condolences at a small Memorial temple which was constructed on the grounds. A stronger impression of the princess can be obtained by visiting a museum hosting an exhibition about Diana featuring objects from her early life up until her death. The museum's shop is a temple of commerce, where various memorabilia such as stamps, coins, coffee-mugs, plates, spoons, shirts, teddy bears, perfumed candles, etc. are sold and eagerly bought. (Steuten & Stasser 2009: 11.)

The gates of Althorp are open from 1 July to 30 August. In this way annual gatherings of devoted followers on Diana's day of death, 31 August, are prevented, giving her sons the opportunity to come to the estate and show their respects without any disturbances. Profits from the visitor activity are paid to

the Diana, Princess of Wales Memorial Fund, with a minimum annual donation of 10,000 British pounds. Since it opened its gates to the public in 1998, Althorp has generated over 1 million British pounds for the Fund.⁵

In Paris people take the tour from the Ritz Hotel, where Diana and Dodi spent the last hours of their lives, to the Pont de l'Alma tunnel. Pictures are taken in front of the tunnel and even inside, where taxis or buses which drive through the tunnel slow down to give the passengers the opportunity to take pictures of pillar number thirteen, the exact place where the car crashed. (Krüger 1998.) Some pedestrians risk their lives and enter the tunnel, even though this is strictly forbidden, to make their way to the pillar and leave messages for Diana on the wall. Outside the tunnel on the Place de l'Alma, the 'Flame of Liberty', an exact reproduction of the flame on the torch of the Statue of Liberty in New York, which was actually given to the city of Paris by the *International Herald Tribune* in 1989, has been reinterpreted as a shrine for Diana and became a tourist attraction. On the 10th anniversary of her death in 2007, *The New York Times* reported from Paris that the messages on the marble base of the flame refer to it as the 'Candle in the Wind', which is the title of a song Elton John dedicated to Diana. Nevertheless, some of Diana's admirers in Paris demand a proper statue of her, because the offerings and flowers are taken away and the graffiti is scrubbed off by the authorities. Another suggestion is renaming the Place de l'Alma after her. (Brennhold 2007; Lesoeurs 2005.)

Curiously even the bench in front of the Taj Mahal, on which Diana was sitting in 1992, having her picture taken, has become a kind of memorial stone. People wait in line to have their picture taken on the so called 'Diana bench'. (Maier 2007.)

Taken together these are some of the stations of Diana's life that have been turned into places of worship and tourism respectively. As already stated, they are still frequented, although admittedly to a smaller extent compared with the time shortly after her death. The existence of devoted followers who purposely travel to commemorate or worship Diana is expressed in all the intentionally brought offerings such as cards and bunches of flowers that can be found at these places. Some travellers themselves tend to define their visits to these places as a pilgrimage—and there are reports of individuals and small groups that have even taken a journey from the USA to Europe, solely for their princess (e.g. Fasano 2006). Interestingly, the majority of these admirers

5 Cf. Diana, Princess of Wales Memorial Fund: <http://www.theworkcontinues.org>; Althorp: <http://www.althorp.com>.

are middle-aged and senior women, a fact that could already be observed in studying the Books of Condolence and the psychological impact of Diana's death (Jones 1999: 204; Shevlin *et al.* 1999: 92–4). Women make up about 90 per cent of the visitors and they come mainly from Great Britain, the United States and Australia (Koydl 2007). There are, however, no reliable statistics about visitor activities and it is very hard to distinguish pilgrims from ordinary tourists.⁶ Regarding this distinction, it is convenient to refer to Victor and Edith Turner, who stated that 'a tourist is half a pilgrim, if a pilgrim is half a tourist' (1978: 20), suggesting that there is no possibility to satisfactorily distinguish the motives and behaviour of pilgrims and tourists, because they are both at the same time—the roles are oscillating. In studying modern phenomena like this, we have to consider that we might impede ourselves by the pursuit to name and categorize everything, and remember that the distinction between the 'sacred' and the 'profane' is an artificial one, originating basically in the period of Enlightenment. The veneration of Diana and similar phenomena that feature religiously connoted imagery and practices simply show that these spheres are intermingling and cannot be strictly distinguished from one another.

The glorification of Diana

The deification and glorification of humans is a universal phenomenon. Individuals are elevated to a superhuman level and worshiped as the ideal of humankind—their admirers tend to expect miracles and the worshiped him/herself tends to feel obligated to act as the worshiping crowd expects him/her to do (Steuten & Stasser 2009: 10). This kind of glorification applies to 'traditional' saints and founders of religion. Interestingly, however, in a majority of cases, glorified celebrities resemble a sort of martyrs by becoming victims of unfortunate circumstances. The biographies of celebrities like Marilyn Monroe, Janis Joplin, Elvis Presley, John Lennon, Kurt Cobain, Diana Spencer or Michael Jackson, show that nobody, however talented, fortunate or rich, can escape certain strokes of fate. The experience of the generality of this fact leads to frustration and comfort at the same time. In this context, the glorification and commiseration has to be understood as a grand collective gesture

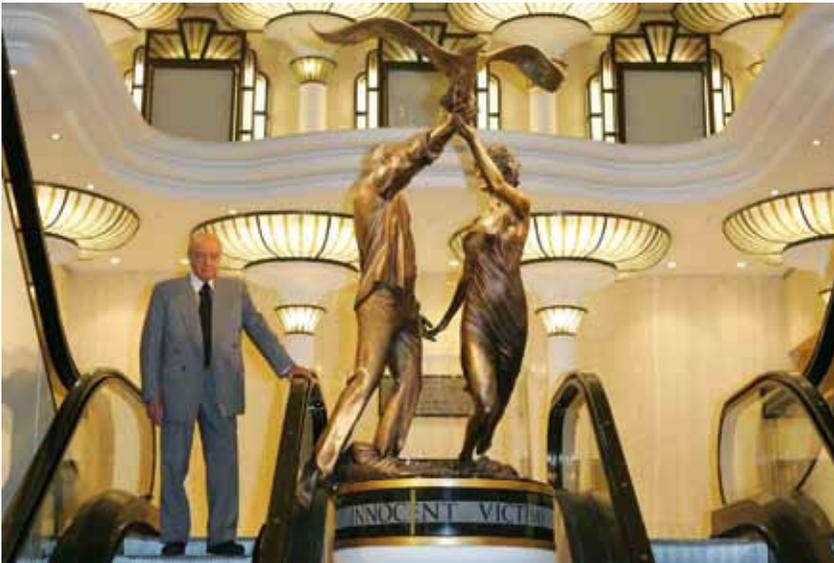
6 For example in Althorp 140,000 visitors were counted when it opened in 1998—four years later there were about 120,000 visitors and by now it is 'relatively quiet' in Althorp (cf. Koydl 2007).

of compassion, which is actually a projection of self-pity and self-victimization in the light of the unpredictability of human life.

In the following I want to illustrate the characteristic qualities of Lady Diana Spencer that, by the means of identification and projection, led to her glorification. Very similar to the case of other idols, Diana's death was totally unexpected and tragic. It happened at an angular point in her life, when nobody knew where she was heading—thus her possible future remains completely open to individual or collective projections and interpretations (Schmitter 1999: 80–1; Steuten & Stasser 2009: 10).

Unlike many other idols, however, multiple roles were distributed to her. Thus the myth of Diana actually consists of several myths; she is able to simultaneously adopt diverse context-sensitive significances, so that there are manifold possibilities for individuals and groups to identify with her and feel compassion (Schirmer 1999: 43–4).

Diana carried some of the attributes of an archetype of perfect womanhood—she was seen as attractive, modest and polite, the very image of a fairy-tale princess. As a wife and mother she didn't act as would be expected of the nobility; she wasn't distanced or cold, but acted just like any other mother. She was seen playing with her kids, eating at McDonalds, participating in a



Mohamed Al-Fayed with the life-sized statue of Diana and Dodi at Harrods. Photo http://www.alfayed.com/upload/in%20memory/memorials/mem_2.jpg.

sack race and so on—she was of the people. Unfortunately she got cast out of the fairy tale by failing to meet the demands of that sort of life, but thus she became an even more important role model for women. She unconsciously personified what is expected of and feared by a woman of her generation; someone who fails to successfully integrate both the conservative ideal of the woman as a nurturing mother, loyal wife and cautious adornment of her husband and the modern ideal of a self-determined, successful, attractive woman in search of self-realization (Habermas 1999: 113–14; Raphael 2000: 90; Schmitter 1999: 68–9). When the problems in her marriage began to show, she didn't hold back her emotions in public, but openly displayed her suffering—she was not shy to show her vulnerability and in doing so she appealed to those who felt equally harmed (Habermas 1999: 111–12). Diana showed that wealth and a noble background do not necessarily lead to happiness; she who seemed to have everything was suffering from depression and bulimia and was seeing a psychotherapist. After she got divorced and cast out of the Royal Family, she was a single mother like so many other women, looking for love and appreciation. Especially women who had experienced similar strokes of misfortune, who had been hurt and deceived, who were divorced and single mothers, could easily identify with those aspects and they loved her for exposing her vulnerability and her feelings, because it was exactly what they felt themselves. (Habermas 1999: 107; Schmitter 1999: 73–5.) Furthermore, women embraced her as a role model for eventually stepping out of the shadow, by getting divorced and breaking away from the Royal Family to reinvent herself as an independent woman (Griffin 1999: 248–50).

Besides her characteristics as a woman, wife and mother which offered possibilities for identification, her public actions were another relevant factor for her glorification. She was responsible for setting up several foundations and she was president or patron of more than a hundred charitable societies. Diana was, and still is, presented as a saint-like gracious, beneficent, and caring woman, who herself deeply suffered, but who still cared for hungry children and victims of landmines, hugging lepers and AIDS patients, sitting down with the poor, with the sick, with the dying. What made her so appealing was her humanity which was acclaimed to be a new form or dimension of charity—she sat down on patients' beds, shook their hands, hugged them and never passed judgment (e.g. in the case of AIDS where patients were usually made responsible for their own mistakes)—it was her authenticity and her closeness to other victims which made her a benefactress and elevated her to a healing saint. (Steuten & Stasser 2009: 14.)

This sort of behaviour and close relationship to the public was in stark contrast to the traditional Royal etiquette. Diana broke with the social and physical distance to the public that she, by tradition, should have obtained as a princess, and she did not judge or accuse anybody but met them with respect. In all she was a very uncomfortable person to the Royal Family, she contrasted with their aloofness and disenchanted them in showing that they were just another neurotic family. Thereby she became a rebel that fought against the British establishment and the outdated monarchy while being their victim at the same time. (Habermas 1999: 109–11; Steuten & Stasser 2009: 13–15.)

Possessing all of these qualities, Diana was compared to Mary as the *Mater Dolorosa*—an innocent mother who revealed her pain and suffering to the people—in the way she was presented to her people. Because of their own frailty and human weakness, both Mary and Diana were sympathetic towards human suffering and showed compassion for the disadvantaged. With her own humiliation, or the staging of it, Diana represented—like a modern *mater dolorosa*—the fate of all the sick and the weak in society. (Steuten & Stasser 2009: 15.)

In this context one might say, that she was a long looked-for female role model or saint that women could turn to and that would give them encouragement. However, the image of the patriarchal construct of the female divine, which elevates qualities like female suffering, forgiveness, nurturing of the disadvantaged, chastity, and so forth, is actually very unfavourable. It represents standards that cannot (and even should not) be met by real women. Thereby Diana herself becomes superhuman and, as Melissa Raphael states correctly, 'reinforces women's sense of spiritual unworthiness, of being *less* than whatever female divinity might be' (Raphael 2000: 96). Additionally, the interpretation of Diana as a modern *mater dolorosa*, glorifies her as a victim, who despite the humiliations she suffered, forgave her tormentors, thus legitimizing the victimization of women in general.

Conclusion

Diana became the screen for manifold and ambivalent needs for identification—supported, exaggerated, and promoted by mass media and commerce—a modern secular saint that fits the unspecific religious orientations of a modern media-focused society (Steuten & Stasser 2009: 15). As the most photographed woman in the world, Diana's image was globally known and

the visual representations were central to the construction of her myth. As an attractive and beautiful woman, Diana was presentable in the media; people liked to see her and she permitted it, sometimes even promoted it and used it to her advantage. She had a symbiotic relationship with the media, which were not just hunting her to get the latest news and pictures, but also helped her to put herself across both as a victim of the establishment and as a benefactress of other victims. Since her engagement with Prince Charles as a very young woman at the age of 18 or 19, the media were constantly reporting about her. The stories of her life are reminiscent of a soap opera and they had a similar effect—Diana became part of the lives of her spectators and many felt deeply connected to her. (Steuten & Stasser 2009: 13.) This conjunction of the masses and the media had great influence on Diana's apotheosis after her death. Following the principle of supply and demand they formed a modern-day hagiography of a saint that people can identify with—unlike the traditional, for example, Christian saints, she is simply up-to-date.⁷

In total the whole Diana phenomenon does not realistically qualify to be put on a level with the cult of the Virgin Mary, but maybe it is (or will be) comparable to the cult of a local saint with a small and specific following—in this case, framed mostly by senior women of Western countries, who do identify with Diana or admire her for her charitable work. It might however be worthwhile to observe future developments of the Diana cult and similar phenomena. Whichever way you look at it, Diana has not been forgotten. Apart from the visitor activities at the places of her life, this is proved by the continued distribution of books, movies, musicals and ballets that portray her, as well as by several websites and especially the ongoing condolences. (Steuten & Stasser 2009: 9.) Besides this, five years after her death, Diana came fifth in a BBC poll asking for the most important person in history (Steuten & Stasser 2009: 11) and in a poll in 2009, asking 3,000 Britons about the dead person they most want to meet, Diana ranks second—just between Jesus and William Shakespeare.⁸

The largest internet presence of her admirers,⁹ featuring the latest news about Diana and anything that is somehow related to her, presented special features of the 12th anniversary of her death on 31 August 2009. On the same

7 Regarding the prominent role of the media, cf. Meckel *et al.* 1999, featuring several articles about the media-promoted formation of a Diana cult; see also Kitzinger 1999.

8 <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstoppers/religion/5474600/Jesus-and-Princess-Diana-lead-poll-of-dead-people-we-most-want-to-meet.html>.

9 www.prinzessin-diana-de; www.princess-diana.com.

website you can find a link to the 'International Book of Condolence' reflecting by daily new entries from people with different national backgrounds that commiseration and admiration prevail. Just recently, on the 12th anniversary of her death, 34 new compassionate entries were made.¹⁰ Very interesting regarding the possible formation and tradition of a cult is one comment from a 13-year-old German girl, who states:

I got to know Lady Di via Michael Jackson—she was mentioned in an article about him. Since I read her name and came to this website, I have cried several tears. It seems to me that Diana was a wonderful woman with a huge heart, always committing herself to the greater good. Thank you Diana, I am sure you made this world a better place! Love, Sarah (13).¹¹

Even though the representative quality of this single comment can be challenged, it shows a considerable change in the perception of a deceased celebrity, and presumably more entries like this can be found in the Book of Condolence. The German girl apparently had not heard of Diana before and says herself that she was deeply touched and moved by the stories of Diana's life. These are actually the selection of myths and legends—a certain image—distributed by the media and the admirers who commemorate her. Diana's own human needs and flaws are gradually blanked out. Thus twelve years after she died, a saint-like, or superhuman image of Diana prevails; the legend of the misunderstood fairytale princess elevated to an ideal of humanity. Isn't that how saints are created? It will be a task of the future to investigate the answer to this question.

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10 <http://www.condolence.princess-diana.com>.

11 Entry No 5170, August 2nd 2009, transl. by author; <http://www.condolence.princess-diana.com> (accessed on 10 September 2009).

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