Rites of Death and Burial within the World Religions

Teacher Information

Five world religions (Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam) all mark the important events in a person's life such as birth, marriage and death in different ways, but there are often similar concepts. Death sees the close of a human life on earth, and the ritual and beliefs linked to death and the funeral are an important way for the family and friends of the deceased to express their grief and acknowledge the passing. It is often seen as an opportunity to celebrate a person's life and mark their transition to another life or stage, whatever that may be.

Christian Funerals

Christianity covers a broad variety of cultures, crossing all continents. It is estimated that there are up to 220 different Christian denominations and funeral rituals may differ between denominations.

Essentially, the Christian belief is one of resurrection and the continuation of the human soul, which is usually dependent on how life on earth has been lived. Many people call themselves 'Christian' but may not be actively linked with a church, and some churches may decline to hold a funeral service for someone who has not been an active member.

Many churches have specially written funeral services, as well as special readings, prayers and hymns (songs). These will include readings from the holy book, the Bible. Some funerals may include a special service called Holy Communion, Eucharist or Mass which recalls the last supper that Jesus Christ shared with his disciples before his death. At the end of the service, special prayers are said either when the mourners are standing around the grave or if it is a cremation, when the coffin disappears from view.

In some cultures it is traditional to wear dark clothes to funerals and black ties with suits, but sometimes, people prefer to wear bright clothes as a celebration of life and resurrection. A memorial service may follow some funeral services at a later date particularly if the family prefer a simple, private funeral. The memorial service provides the opportunity to celebrate the life of the deceased with a wider group of friends and colleagues. White has also been traditionally considered a colour for Christian funerals. The Pall (cloth for the coffin) is always white.

Jewish Funerals

Jewish funerals are governed by a set of rituals and traditions that particularly apply to the seven immediate family members: the spouse, mother, father, son, daughter, brother or sister.

Some of the rituals may differ according to the different Jewish communities. Every Jewish community has a burial society called a Chevra Kadisha who prepare the body for burial and help make the funeral arrangements. Jewish burials are usually held within 24 hours of death, but may be delayed if immediate family members have to travel long distances. Most Jews are buried in a cemetery and some communities consider cremation a desecration of the body.

At the cemetery, the family and friends congregate in a room with the coffin. A symbolic small tear (Keriah) may be made in the mourner's clothes which represents a broken heart. A eulogy (hesped) is given by the rabbi or close family friend. The Kaddish, an ancient prayer for the dead, is recited in Hebrew and again after the coffin has been interred.

The coffin is taken to the gravesite and it is considered an honour to help shovel in the earth. There is a symbolic washing of hands by everyone and then everyone returns home.
In the evening, the first shiva will take place. This is the time when the mourners stay at home and will be visited by friends and acquaintances. A year of official mourning follows and certain communities will have specific customs associated with the year.

**Hindu Funerals**

For Hindus, death represents the transition of the soul from one embodiment to the next and is the means by which the spirit can ascend its journey. Hindus believe in reincarnation and a Hindu funeral should be as much a celebration as a remembrance service.

Hindus cremate their dead and the burning of the dead body signifies the release of the spirit. The flames themselves are important as they represent the presence of the god Brahma, the creator. The vast majority of Hindus come from the Indian subcontinent and it is often regretted that a loved one has died far away from their homeland and its traditions.

As with all religions, ritual plays an important part. Ideally a Hindu should die while lying on the floor, in contact with the earth. Family members will perform prayers and although touching the corpse is considered polluting, many mourners will need to do so to say farewell.

White is the traditional colour for mourners. If you are attending the funeral of a Hindu friend, it may be as well to ask what is appropriate to wear.

Prayers are usually said at the entrance to the crematorium and may be offered en-route. Offerings such as flowers or sweetmeats may also be passed around and noise is also part of Hindu rituals, which may include horns and bells. The chief mourner, usually the eldest son or eldest male in the family represents the whole family in saying goodbye to the deceased. They and sometimes all the male members may shave their heads as a mark of respect. Scriptures are read and then the chief mourner will push the button to make the coffin disappear, as well as going below to ignite the cremator.

After the cremation, the family may come together for a meal and prayers and begin a period 13 days mourning, when friends will visit and offer condolence.

**Islamic Funerals**

There are two major groups of Muslims: Sunni Muslims and Shi'ite Muslims. Funeral traditions tend to have developed over the centuries, rather than being set out in the religion's holy book - The Qur’an.

Muslims try to bury the body within 24 hours of death if possible. They believe that the soul departs at the moment of death. The deceased is placed with their head facing the Muslim holy city of Mecca.

Ritual washing is performed usually by family members or close friends, usually according to the gender of the deceased. The body is wrapped in a shroud of simple, white material. Afterwards, salat (prayers) will be said for the deceased.

Funerals should be kept simple and respectful and it is forbidden to cremate the body of a Muslim. Muslims are buried with their face turned to the right, facing Mecca and it is customary not to use a coffin. Mourners may throw earth onto the body in the grave. The grave may be raised above ground level and the gravestone should be simple.
There is an official mourning period of three days (longer for a remaining spouse) and this may include a special meal to remember the deceased.

**Buddhist Funerals**

It is estimated that there are up to 570 different varieties of Buddhism. There are few formal traditions relating to funerals and they are essentially seen as non-religious events.

The simple approach and emphasis on the person's state of mind leading up to death have led to a marked increase and interest in Buddhist funerals in the West. Most Buddhist schools of thought concentrate on the spirit or mind of the deceased and agree that the physical body is just a shell. Many also share the Tibetan belief that the spirit of the deceased will undergo rebirth, usually after a period of 49 days.

Cremation is the generally accepted practice in Asia - the Buddha himself was cremated. A simple service may be held at the crematorium chapel at which Buddhist readings may be recited.