

American Death and Burial Custom Derivation from Medieval European Cultures

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Lynne DeSpelder and Albert Lee Strickland, in their book entitled *The Last Dance*, state the following: "Death is a universal human experience, yet the response it elicits is shaped by the attitudes towards it and beliefs about it that are prevalent in a particular culture. This shared consciousness among its members makes a culture distinct; it gives a particular cast to experiences and the meanings ascribed to them, and death is such an experience." (DeSpelder and Strickland, p. 41)

In teaching an interdisciplinary course entitled *Perspectives on Death and Dying* during the past 13 years, I have encountered a genuine interest on the part of many of my students in the social and culture changes in the United States from the nineteenth century to the present and how those century-old customs have affected and shaped present custom and practice in regard to death, burial, and mourning rituals within modern day culture. In a recent class about two years ago the question arose as to how contemporary customs were affected by ancient and medieval history and practice. I found that I had neither the knowledge nor information at hand to respond. A limited search of the literature available revealed that very little such information existed in an organized fashion related to that particular topic. Consequently, I sought funding for research, and as a result I have spent periods of time during the past two summers (1990 and 1991) researching the topic at the British Library and Museum and at the University of London Library. I have also visited several sites of ancient and medieval burial in various parts of England and Scotland. That research, still unfinished, has resulted in two papers devoted to the topic, emphasizing how archeological evidence from the time which pre-dates the advent of written history through the early historical period of Western civilization, the Middle Ages, and post-Renaissance

periods have all influenced contemporary death ritual and practice in the United States. In these papers and subsequent papers to follow, I wish to identify the social, economic, political, and cultural influences that have helped to shape present day culture in regard to death practices.

Hope of an Afterlife

The Middle Ages view of death in the Western world was one of acceptance, one in which people viewed death as part of the natural law and process of God's law at work in the world. Theologically church teaching gave hope of an afterlife with God in heaven if a person was good and sought God's will through faith. Philip Aries has divided the historical period into two periods or parts. The early period (500-1100) is described as the idea that "All people die." Death was a part of the natural law and process of God, and the person saw him/herself as a part of the group of mankind of God's creation. The later Middle Ages period and beyond (1100-1700), in the Aries scheme, is described as "One's own death." The collective view of mankind by the individual changed to a perception of an individual standing individually and being judged based on his/her own individual "good or bad" life.

In St. Augustine's *City of God*, Book I, Chapter 11, is found the following: "All these ceremonies concerning the dead, the care of the burial, the fashions of the sepulchers, the pomp of the funerals, are rather solaces to the living than furtherance to the dead...The family of that rich, gorgeous glutton prepared him a sumptuous funeral unto the eyes of men: but one far more sumptuous did the ministering angels prepare for the poor ulcerated beggar in the sight of God; they bore him not unto any sepulcher

of marble but placed him in the bosom of Abraham." (St. Augustine, p. 193).

During the Middle Ages burial was either in the ground or in vaults. The body was wrapped in a shroud, knotted at the head and foot. In many cases it was laid directly into the grave, but from an early date stone, wooden, or lead chests were employed. Much importance was attached to the place of burial. Funeral masses were occasions of great solemnity. In descriptions of Middle Age burial we find the source of several contemporary death and funeral practices. These include the use of a specially prepared burial garment, the use of a casket or coffin to be buried underground to protect the body from the elements of nature. We also see the continuance of the ceremonies and particularly the religious rites that had predated the Middle Ages by thousands of years, but these rites have become almost universally Christian/Roman Catholic in nature.

In medieval Britain before the Reformation we find that shrouds were utilized almost universally from the richest to the poorest, although many of the richer classes were buried in elaborate and elegant garments. Even among the poorest class, babies who died before the age of one month were buried in swaddling clothes. The shrouds were usually of linen and were wrapped and tied at the top and bottom. For the poor often a sheet from the house supply was utilized in place of a linen shroud, and the body was put into the grave thusly with the body tied inside the sheet. Some brides even included a shroud in their trousseaus. This was also the case for children. This practice was due to the high death rate of both young wives and babies at the time of childbirth.

At the beginning of the thirteenth century there was a widely held belief within the church that masses said on behalf of the dead would shorten the time that a soul spent in

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purgatory. A funeral liturgy included a mass for the dead. This mass was also sung on the third, seventh and thirtieth days following burial, and to complete the calendar of commemoration on the first year anniversary of the death. (Seventh, thirtieth, and first year anniversary dates are also important in contemporary Jewish mourning ritual.) Sometimes this singing of the masses went on until the tenth year on each anniversary. It also provided a good business from purchases of fresh candles to burn, the renting or purchase of mourning cloaks, and a requirement that an invitation be issued to the poor. It was customary to use poor people as part of the body of mourners. It was good and laudable to remember them at one's death, and the family bought the poor clothes to wear for the ceremonial procession and funeral and fed them a mourning meal.

Poor Clothed, Fed and Paid

Poor people were given a new set of clothing and marched in the funeral procession, often carrying candles. The poor flocked in droves to attend funerals of their social superiors, and they were often given a small amount of money as well as possibly food and drink. Sometimes they were given the smallest denomination of coin, receiving one for each year of the age of the deceased, and sometimes thirteen coins were given representing the number of people present at the Last Supper. Some of the poor made a good living at this and an efficient "telegraph" system of an impending "rich" death developed. There was also a priest's fee to be paid and a donation made to the church. There was much burning of candles, and the funerals were often held at night. The body was sometimes kept for weeks or months because of the fear of being buried alive. Even the poor and the condemned prisoners generally desired a Christian burial. Paupers' funerals were paid for by the parish from a tax or rate levied on all property owners. Food and drink were also provided by the parish at pauper funerals. Even unknown strangers were given the same burial. Food and drink was a vital ritual whereby the community coped with the death, and this continues today. Poores holes or Poores graves were holes or pits dug in the churchyard (due to lack of space). Coffins three or four across and up to six or seven deep were stacked for the paupers. The Poores holes or graves were then filled and another pit was dug.

The business aspect that arose during the Middle Ages can be seen in the fact that some priests left the parish ministry to become chantry priests, those who chanted, sang, or said the funeral masses, thus often gaining a lucrative income for little work.

A charnel house was often maintained in the smallest village church and in large cathedrals. This was a subterranean chamber where bones were placed when disturbed by interments in the churchyard. Burial was nearly always done in the churchyard, and when the churchyard became completely filled with graves, the oldest graves were often disinterred, and the bones kept in the charnel house due to the Christian teaching or belief in the physical resurrection of the body and the consequent necessity that the bones or whatever remained of the physical body must be kept intact in the hope of that physical resurrection. Many so-called crypts beneath churches were these. Sometimes chantry altars were set up in the charnel and priests said masses there. This particular practice ended with Henry VIII's repression of the Roman Catholic Church and was not reintroduced into the Anglican Church until 1873. After the Reformation it was not unusual for these charnels to be cleared and taken over by prominent local families to be used for their own personal burial vaults. There were often parochial guilds and fraternities organized to arrange and service the funeral procession. They kept the parish coffin, the pall, mourning cloaks, candles, hearses, and, for the impoverished, also paid the mass fee to the priest. They also arranged the funeral feast that followed the burial ceremonies and burial itself. The laying out and preparation of the body was the responsibility of the family. Issuing of the mourning candles to mourners began to decline in the early 1500s, but it was reintroduced in the late 1600s for nighttime funerals. A parish coffin was utilized for the poor until the mid-seventeenth century. This coffin was used to "lay out" the body for the wake or watch over the body during the night prior to the funeral itself, and the body was removed at the graveside and generally placed into the ground wrapped in a linen shroud or sheet and covered with dirt. The coffin was used again and again. Mourning clothes were used during the Middle Ages, but their use declined in the late 1500s. A chief mourner was designated, usually a close relative or close family friend. The chief mourner led the funeral processions and was generally the most elegantly dressed of those attending the funeral rites. One's funeral rites depended entirely on one's status. These various practices which were found to different degrees throughout the Middle Ages in Western Europe continued through the seventeenth century.

Beside the coffin, some would eat and drink, some would drink and smoke, and often during a day or two of the "wake" there would be sports and mimical plays held in honor of the dead person. White was the mourning color for bachelors and virgins,

children, and women dying in childbirth. The mourning color for all others was black. The sound of bells was important to mark the funeral, and the bellringers and clergy were paid.

Symbolic Grave Placement

Bodies were always buried in the church or churchyard, and the graves were dug traditionally six feet deep from east to west with the head lying to the west, so a person would rise up with his/her face to the east. The symbolism involved in the placement of the grave was twofold: the biblical teaching that Jesus Christ would return from heaven to earth in a cloud in the east, so the person during physical resurrection on leaving the grave would first be facing Jesus; the second symbolism is that of the setting sun in the west and the head facing west symbolized the end of life. When old graves were disturbed, as was necessary after the churchyard was filled with graves, the old bones were put in the charnel house (or bone house). The practice of burying the dead in the churchyard seems to have begun to decline in the first half of the seventeenth century.

Another common practice of the Middle Ages, particularly among the rich and powerful, was to remove one or more organs, usually the heart, to be buried at the place of death. Sometimes monasteries demanded it, since many of the rich had died in their infirmaries. The body was returned to be buried in the deceased's parish church.

The practice of embalming, carried out to such a high art of sophistication during the time of the Egyptians and then falling into disuse, was revived during the Middle Ages. Dr. Vanderlyn Pine, past president of the Association for Death Education and Counseling, describes it thusly in an article entitled "The Care of the Dead":

"During the Middle Ages the Christian version of embalming included removing some body organs, washing the body with water, alcohol, and pleasant smelling oils, chemically drying and preserving the flesh, wrapping the body in layers of cloth sealed with tar or oak sap, and mummifying in a way similar to the Egyptians. These tasks were performed by specialists who acted solely as embalmers. Apparently, there was relatively little bureaucratic handling of formal arrangements, and most funerary services were kin-provided and essentially personal in nature.

"Leonardo da Vinci developed a system of venous injection for preservation of the dead body to enable him to draw anatomical plates. His method served as an inspiration to the early medical embalmers whose practices later gave rise to many

modern embalming procedures. . .” (Pine, Fulton, et al, p. 274)

Embalming decreased in the late 1500s and early 1600s, and it was not commonly used again, except in the case of royalty and nobility, until the late 1800s.

Embalming seems to have been lost after the Egyptians until it was resumed for royalty and nobility in the late 1200s. Embalming was done on royalty in England from the 1200s to the 1700s. The bowels and heart were often removed and put in a separate container and carried on top of the coffin or buried elsewhere. The body was wrapped, encased in lead, and placed in a wood coffin.

In small towns and rural areas there was often a board placed between two chairs, and the body was draped in a sheet or shroud. During the time immediately prior to the religious funeral ceremony, people passed by to view the corpse which had never been alone since death, with people sitting with the body all night. The shroud or burial sheet would then be tied at both ends, placed in a closed coffin, usually the parish coffin, and the procession set off for the churchyard. Visitation and viewing of the body continue today.

Coffin: A Status Symbol

Coffins were and are status symbols. No thirteenth, fourteenth, or fifteenth century peasant or artisan expected to be buried in a coffin. By contrast, no nobleman would have been subjected to shroud burial in a churchyard. Introduction of the reusable parish coffin in the 1400s was a marked improvement, but it was abandoned in the 1600s due to the Black Death, pestilence and plague. The body of a rich person was often put in a lead body coffin for vault interment, from the 1400s to the 1600s, and then sometimes was put into a wooden coffin as well. By 1700-1725 the funeral furnishing trade was firmly established and supplied coffins.

Among non-Christian pagans of Western Europe in the earlier Medieval period, some idea of a continuing life of the individual after physical bodily death seems universal, though it is often nebulous. It is improbable that the gloomy view of souls of the dead confined to their tombs or grave was ever generally held, and more likely to be have been considered was the idea that death was merely a line between the living and the soul of the dead, wherever it was. The soul journeyed to a far land, either a shadowy and gloomy land beneath the earth (the tomb, Sheol of the Old Testament Jewish tradition, etc.) or, more cheerfully, a happy land beyond the seas (Isle of the Blessed, Avalon, Valhalla, etc.) or in the sky (heaven).

Many practices or ceremonies within the funeral services themselves seem to represent various ways to assist and speed the movement of the dead person into the afterlife. There were also various rites during the Middle Ages to prevent the dead from returning to interfere with the living. Many of these rites, and the mixing of the two generalized traditions of speeding the soul to its place of final afterlife destination and preventing the soul to return to interfere with the dead, can be seen intertwined in the ritualistic dance of the dead practiced from the fourth century until the sixteenth century. Ivan Illich, founder of the Center for International Documentation in Cuernavaca, Mexico describes the dance of the dead as follows:

“From the fourth century onwards, the Church had struggled against the pagan tradition of crowds dancing in cemeteries: naked, frenzied, and brandishing swords. Nevertheless, the frequency of ecclesiastical prohibitions testifies that they were of little avail, and for a thousand years Christian churches and cemeteries remained dance floors. Death was an occasion for the renewal of life. To dance with the dead over their tombs was an occasion for affirming the joy of being alive and a source of many erotic songs and poems. By the late fourteenth century, the sense of these dances seems to have changed: from an encounter between the living and those who were already dead, it was transformed into a meditative, introspective experience. In 1424 the first ‘Dance of the Dead’ was painted on a cemetery wall in Paris. The original of the ‘Cimetiere des Innocents’ is lost, but good copies allow us to reconstruct it: king, peasant, pope, scribe and maiden each dance with a corpse. Each partner is a mirror image of the other in dress and feature. In the shape of his body Everyman carries his own death with him and dances with it through his life. During the late Middle Ages, indwelling death faces man; each death comes with a symbol of rank corresponding to his victim: for the king a crown, for the peasant a pitchfork. After dancing with dead ancestors over their graves, people turn to representing a world in which everyone dances through life embracing his own mortality. Death is not represented as an anthropomorphic figure but has a macabre self-consciousness, a constant awareness of the gaping grave. It is not yet the skeleton man of the next century to whose music men and women soon dance through the autumn of the Middle Ages, but rather each one’s own aging and rotting self. At this time the mirror becomes important in everyday life, and in the grip of the ‘mirror death,’ life acquires a hallucinating poignancy. With Chaucer and Villon death becomes as intimate and sensual as pleasure and pain. . .” (Illich, in Fulton, et al, p. 112).

Reincarnation Attacked by Justinian

Reincarnation, another aspect of the belief that an afterlife exists continues to the present time in most Eastern religions and was also found in Christianity until the early Middle Ages. It seems to have existed in Christianity until it was attacked in A.D. 543 by the Byzantine emperor, Justinian. Reincarnation had been introduced to early Christianity by Origen (A.D. 185?-254?) an early Christian philosopher and writer who developed the complex system of thought. He believed that all knowledge comes from God and finds its highest and most complete expression in Christianity. He had great influence in early times, and was said to have written 6,000 books on religious subjects. He was born and educated in Alexandria, Egypt, and died as a result of torture by the Roman Emperor Decius. The emperor Justinian also attacked many of the other teachings of Origen as well. Origen was considered the most prominent of all the Church fathers with the exception of Augustine. In *De Principiis*, Origen wrote the following:

“The soul has neither beginning nor end. . . every soul comes to this world strengthened by the victories or weakened by defeats of its previous life. Its place in this world as a vessel appointed to honor or dishonor is determined by its previous merits or demerits. Its work in this world determines its place in the world which is to follow this.” (Grof, in Fulton, et al, p. 107)

The concept of reincarnation was also condemned by the Second Council in A.D. 553 in Constantinople; consequently, the concept of reincarnation seems to have been removed as a type of belief in afterlife during the very early Middle Ages.

Burial, entombment, cremation, and other means of body disposal have taken place as long as mankind has existed. Throughout the world three basic methods of disposal have generally been used: (1) by exposure and consumption by scavengers, such as in the Towers of Silence in the Parsees and in some African tribes such as in Nandi in Kenya and among some North American Indians; (2) by burial, the method most familiar to us and the one leaving the most archeological evidence; (3) and by cremation.

Grave goods excavated from graves hundreds and even thousands of years old have indicated an almost universal belief in some type of afterlife throughout recorded history, even in pre-historic times in every culture studied through archeological examination. Neanderthal, Cro-Magnon, and Paleolithic men have all indicated that belief through flowers, food, clothing and tools that have been found in grave sites, just as humankind continues to indicate such a belief today

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through special religious or natural ceremonies associated with the disposal of the body. Consequently, funeral, burial, and other body disposal customs can give us a mirror to view our own reflected practices, traditions, and customs.

Prior to 1500, during the Middle Ages, the cosmos of Western culture was essentially Roman Catholic from the time of post-Roman society. The upheavals of the Protestant Reformation undermined the unity of European Catholicism and its system, but one of the great influences during the time between, the Middle Ages, was that of death, mourning, and funeral ritual during the Middle Ages. The Christian belief of universal resurrection, as so often evidenced in mourning and funeral practice, marked a vast improvement upon the ancient Egyptian belief in the restriction of resurrection to a well-preserved body kept alive through the funeral offering ritual. For the Egyptians life after death was of paramount importance, and they believed that spiritual survival depended absolutely on the bodies' physical survival, so they devoted a great deal of ingenuity into the art of preserving dead bodies. The Christian teaching which arose during the Roman Empire based upon the teachings of Jesus, and continuing into the Middle Ages of post-Roman times, did away with the necessity of physical preservation of the body. Consequently, embalming fell into general disuse until the late Middle Ages when it arose again in a more preservation context.

Funeral as Religious Statement

The means by which individual and societal reactions to death are most often seen is

through the funeral ritual or tradition. The funeral has not only been used as a commemoration of an individual life, it has also been used as a religious statement and as a means of allowing the social group to establish its presence and support. The funeral also serves in the role of ritualistic body disposal. Again, consequently, in our own reactions to death, we can ascertain how our grief and mourning practices have evolved. Why study death, grief, and burial customs from a historical perspective? A quotation from James J. Farrell can probably best answer this:

"Death is a cultural event, and societies as well as individuals reveal themselves in their treatment of death. Historians, therefore, can profitably discover important patterns of social and cultural life by examining ideas and institutions associated with death. By studying death as a cultural event, we add an important historical dimension to those studies of the meaning of management of death by sociologists, psychologists, and social critics." (Farrell, p. 14)

Through the described medieval practices of death, funeral, burial, and mourning practices, we see reflected many of our contemporary practices and traditions. In conclusion, different concepts of deaths and the associated beliefs related to death have contributed to our understanding and experience of contemporary practices. By comparing the situation of a person's death in contemporary western civilization with that of the death of individuals from ancient and medieval worlds, it is possible to ascertain in some ways how and why we view death as we do today.

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