Promote, oppose, accommodate or compensate?

Four ways religion can interact with society's death practices

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Abstract: The article outlines four ways that religions interact with a society's dominant practices for dying, funerals, grief and mourning. Examples are given of religious *promotion* of practices that may eventually become normative for society; of religious *opposition* to a society's death practices; of subsequent *accommodation*, whether by mourners or their religious leaders; and of how culture may *compensate* if a dominant religion fails to provide adequate rites for mourning. At a personal level, when religious requirements and societal practices do not mesh, and in mixed-religion families whose members disagree over what rites are necessary, grief can become complicated for both individuals and families.

Keywords: Ancestors, burial, cremation, euthanasia, grief, nature

What happens to us after we die? How should we think about death? What do we do in the face of death? How should we mourn? Throughout recorded history, religion has been central to answering such questions (Parkes *et al*, 2015). Religious answers, however, exist not in a social vacuum but within society, not least at and after death (Garces-Foley, 2006). Using a very broad brush, this article sketches four major ways that religions may interact with a society's death practices: promote, oppose, accommodate, compensate. The first and the last chiefly concern how society responds to religion; the second and third chiefly concern how religion (and religious people) respond to society.

The standard way of educating health and care practitioners about religion has been to provide fact sheets about each religion, or books with a chapter on each religion (Parkes *et al*, 2015; Garces-Foley, 2006). However subtly and carefully each religion is presented, the almost inevitable impression is that there is a Muslim or a Catholic or a Hindu approach to death and bereavement. This article takes a different approach, identifying four possible ways that religions may interact with a society's death practices. This may offer some readers frustratingly little information about any one religion's key tenets, but the aim is to steer away from identifying each religion as an isolated or static entity, and to show instead the fluidity and dynamism of religions as they interact with society, with power structures and with mourners. I hope this approach will help bereavement practitioners recognise some religious dynamics to which some clients may be subject.

Religious practices always take place in a local context. Wikan (1988), for example, shows how Muslim mourning rites are very different in Egypt compared to Bali. Likewise, a Presbyterian funeral in Scotland is very different from one in North America – the latter typically including a public viewing of the deceased in an open casket that owes

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everything to American funeral tradition and nothing to religion and which would shock the average kirk member in Scotland. In the past, religion and society have often been much the same thing, but today – either because society is more 'secular', or because more than one religion or denomination are present in the same society – religion and society may be differentiated, with the result that religion becomes a largely private matter.

The relationship between religion, society and culture (Niebuhr, 1951) has exercised Christian theologians ever since Saint Augustine started to write *The City of God* in AD 413, as it has leaders of all religions. It is not only religion and society that interact. Formal theology, a religion's leadership, pressure groups, and the lived experience of everyday religion can all differ in their understanding of death and bereavement. How then do religious practices interact with society's expected practices for dying, funerals and mourning? In what circumstances might this interaction complicate processes of grieving?

With limited space, this article gives more examples from Christianity than other religions, and in relation to only three death-related issues - ancestral worship, cremation/burial, and contemporary ethical issues. The aim is simply to illustrate four possibilities - promotion, opposition, accommodation, compensation – and how each can affect bereaved individuals and families.

Promote

Sometimes religions clearly promote or oppose certain death practices, such as burial or cremation. Historically, Judaism buried its dead. Christianity continued this practice; burning came to be associated with Christian martyrdom and in the Middle Ages with the fires of hell. Christians made a point of burning heretics and witches. Burial 'fits' the doctrine of physical resurrection, with medieval Christian art depicting the dead arising out of their graves on the day of resurrection. Islam, also teaching bodily resurrection, likewise promotes burial. By contrast, Hinduism and Sikhism, teaching reincarnation, cremate, while Buddhism, teaching the karmic conservation of moral energy, generally cremates. Burial and cremation have sometimes co-existed, as in the Roman Empire for several centuries and in the Nordic countries in the early medieval period, but a pattern has often been discernible: Christian, Jewish and Islamic communities buried; Hindu, Sikh and Buddhist communities cremated. Religious minorities within any one community sometimes had to conform to the community norm, often because alternative facilities did not exist; sometimes they created their own facilities. This pattern has been complicated in the twentieth century in historically Christian societies which have proved susceptible to secularisation and now offer a choice of burial or cremation. Eastern Orthodox churches, however, still vigorously oppose cremation, so countries such as Greece and Romania have very few crematoria (Rotar, 2015; Davies & Mates, 2005).

In the months and years after death, many religions including Hinduism, Judaism and both Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Christianity, promote prayers and/or rites for the dead, often on set days in the first year, and annually thereafter. Both private prayer and communal ritual provide bereaved families a vehicle in which grief, memory and care for the dead may be carried – or in some instances, have to be carried, irrespective of personal inclination or emotional need. To give a positive example: a Hindu student of mine - whose alternative lifestyle alienated her from her conservative parents – found that the rituals required after her grandmother's death provided a structure of cooking, eating and gathering that was immensely supportive, enabling her to grieve and re-engage with her family. Performing the required actions helped her, and reassured her parents that she was, after all, a good Hindu girl.

Such rites are not necessarily old, nor compulsory. In the second half of the twentieth century, Buddhist temples in Japan introduced Mizuko Kuyō, a rite in which mothers apologise to their aborted foetus (LaFleur, 1992). The foetus is made visible and tangible in the form of a small 'baby' statue of Jīzo, rows of which now line the entrance to many temples. As with many rites for the dead, whether religious or secular, Mizuko Kuyō generates a considerable profit but seems to help people. Is this exploiting grief, or supporting people in need? Possibly both.

Oppose

Religions can, however, oppose a society's dominant death practices. I will say rather more about this, as it is more likely to complicate grieving, whether within families or between family and society. My examples concern ancestor veneration and some contemporary ethical issues.

After the invention of farming ten thousand years ago and before the emergence of world religions, ancestor veneration – which extends respect for elders beyond the grave – was, if not universal, very common (Steadman *et al,* 1996). Ancestor veneration not only implied a kind of post-mortem existence but, perhaps more importantly, supported patriarchal kinship systems (Walter forthcoming). The *Old Testament* describes how the Jewish espousal of monotheism - in which worship is to be directed solely toward the one true God – rejected Canaanite animist shrines, ancestor veneration and mediums to contact the dead. All these were considered to undermine the worship and power of the one almighty God (Douglas, 2004). Christianity inherited this monotheistic worldview; Islam's monotheism has similar concerns. Islam and Christianity preach that eternal life is available for everybody, contrasting with ancestral status which is often denied to children, women, outsiders and other marginalised groups.

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Over the past three centuries, animism and ancestor veneration, as still practised in much of East Asia, have been seen as 'irrational', 'superstitious' and 'backward' by Western modernisers such as business people, colonial administrators and contemporary politicians who might nevertheless accept doctrines such as Jesus' virgin birth and physical resurrection (Endres & Lauser, 2011). At the personal level, East Asian converts to Christianity or Islam are under pressure from their new religion to reject ancestor veneration, pressure which their unconverted family experiences as rejection of the family (Park, 2010). This is an everyday conflict, but can come into sharp focus after someone has died.

In the African context, Pentecostals in Madagascar teach that ancestors have no place in the Bible, so should have no place today (Phillips, 2006). In Zimbabwe, Pentecostals link the ancestors with moral and economic failure and see their influence as the root cause of poverty in Africa. In this view, whereas ancestors support witchcraft, polygamy, and indolence, the Christian God offers the material rewards of capitalist consumption (Maxwell, 1998).

Autopsies and using corpses and body parts for medical education or surgery have also generated religious opposition. From the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries in Europe, many people believed that cutting up the dead body eliminated its potential for resurrection, so anatomy schools had to resort to devious means to source bodies for their students (Richardson, 1989). Today, orthodox Jews and Muslims continue to have reservations about dismembering corpses, augmented by their tradition of burying within twenty four hours. There are also numerous instances of religion discouraging tears in mourners, seeing these as signifying lack of trust in God – though such prohibitions depend on culture as much as on religion (Wikan, 1988).

In many countries, opposition to euthanasia and assisted dying is often driven by a religious view that life is given by God so humans have no right to take it away. This can underlie both personal attitudes and organised opposition (Cohen *et al*, 2006). The more fundamentalist the believer, the more dogmatic the opposition, as Baeke, Wils and Broeckaert (2011) found in a study of Jewish women. In the USA, euthanasia and abortion are vigorously opposed by fundamentalist Christian and conservative Catholic pressure groups. The 'right to life' – from the moment of conception to a natural death - links the rights of the unborn to those of the elderly and disabled, promoting what its proponents call a 'culture of life' (Troyer, 2013) which they contrast to America's 'culture of death' (a phrase coined by Pope John Paul II in his 1993 encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*).

Abortion and euthanasia have become, in the USA, symbols in religious identity politics. Conservative American Christians' opposition to abortion and euthanasia symbolises their Christian identity and their opposition to 'secular humanism'. This leaves little space for debate, let alone compromise. American women who belong to conservative religious groups and who terminate a pregnancy face, both online and offline, wall-to-wall information from co-religionists that they have sinned and need forgiveness.

Another example of oppositional identity politics concerns Christian converts in Nepal. Nepal is 81% Hindu and 9% Buddhist, so cremation is the norm. Most of the country's 1.5% Christians are Protestant, but though many Protestants cremate in the West, this is not so in Nepal where Christians practice burial as a way to assert their difference. In response, some radical Hindu elements have attempted to deny Christians the right to burial (Sharma, 2011). As one blogger observes:

> Cremation is necessary for Hindus – it's the way the spirit is released to be reincarnated, and having a son to light the funeral pyre insures conveyance to the next life cycle. In split families, it becomes a sore case of contention: a Christian son may refuse to light his Hindu father's funeral pyre, the Christian son insists on burying his Christian mother while the Hindu son's family really wants to cremate his mother instead, and a community may not want a Christian graveyard near them for fear of lingering ghosts. (Tori, 2014)

If American fundamentalists reject abortion to demonstrate their Christian stand for life over and against secular humanism, some Nepali Christians reject cremation to demonstrate that they are Christian, even in a Hindu country.

As well as conflict between religions, there can also be conflict within a religion – which can express itself within the family if different members of the family adhere to different versions of the faith. Many liberal Christians in the USA do not agree with their fundamentalist co-religionists on abortion and euthanasia. African Pentecostals and Methodists are likely to disagree about traditional ancestral rites.

Accommodate

Sooner or later, religious opposition to a society's death practices may be relaxed or dropped, and accommodations reached (Garces-Foley, 2006; Firth, 1997; Bowker, 1991). Some Nepali families find compromises to solve the burial/cremation conflict, and some Nepali Christian leaders are developing a theology of cremation to show how cremation is compatible with Christianity (Sharma, 2011).

As Peter Jupp (2006) has shown, cremation was accommodated rather earlier in England. The Church of England bishops announced in 1944 that 'the practice of cremation has no theological significance' and a few weeks later William Temple, the Archbishop of Canterbury, died unexpectedly and was cremated; thereafter, the established church in England, even if it did not actively promote

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cremation, accepted it. In contrast to the body lying in the ground awaiting bodily resurrection, prompt destruction through cremation fits the idea of an immortal soul released from a now useless body. Not only was belief in an immortal soul more popular in twentieth century England than bodily resurrection (Walter, 1996), but arguably Britons' ongoing participation in crematoria funerals has made the immortal soul even more plausible (Davies, 1990) – practice can influence belief as well as vice-versa.

In 1963, Pope John XXIII pronounced that cremation has no effect on the soul's post-mortem prospects, though it took another generation for Catholic cremation to increase significantly in many countries. The cremation rate is still much lower in Catholic than in Protestant countries, and much lower among Catholics than Protestants within any one country; thus in Northern Ireland, religious identity politics influence disposal choices after death. But the Catholic hierarchy's outright opposition has gone. Eastern Orthodoxy's opposition, however, remains resolute.

In sub-Saharan Africa, where Pentecostals may vigorously oppose ancestor worship, many other Christians manage to combine respect for family ancestors with being, for example, Methodist or Catholic. In Madagascar, where 41% of the population are Christian and 52% practice indigenous rites in which the ancestors' bones are occasionally brought out and turned, one young Catholic priest sees the local ancestors as akin to Catholic saints and their bones akin to the relics kept in many churches (Phillips, 2006). On the American continent, Hispanic death rites – most famously the Mexican Day of the Dead - synthesise indigenous and Catholic practices and beliefs; Catholic prayers for the dead are readily combined with the indigenous belief that deceased members remain part of the living family (Davis, 2006).

In South Korea, there has been a long history of bloody conflict between the church and ancestral religion that in the eighteenth century led to hundreds of Catholics being martyred. In the twentieth century, however, one Protestant church has developed a death anniversary rite that unites Christianity and ancestor veneration - though it is only after several generations of their family being Christian that 'those who could once only utter "my God"… could also profess "the God of my ancestors"' (Park, 2010, p270).

Accommodation to a practice may eventually lead to its active promotion, as in some religionists' contemporary enthusiasm for organ donation.

Compensate

A society's death practices may compensate for what its dominant religion lacks. After the First World War, the established church's failure to cope with the scale of violent death and bereavement prompted a revival of spiritualism (Hazelgrove, 2000; Winter, 1995). A different example to be discussed now in more detail tells us much about what many English people appreciate in a burial ground and find of comfort in bereavement. My main source here is a fascinating but rarely read book first published in 1928, entitled *The Funeral Elegy and the Rise of English Romanticism* (Draper, 1967). The Reformation's ban on prayers for the dead caused Protestant, and especially Puritan, funerals to become much attenuated - little more than a secular act of burying the body. To compensate for their loss of a rite through which to articulate grief, the English responded in various ways. One was a fashion – lasting from the late seventeenth to the mid eighteenth century - for 'graveyard poetry' in which grief was articulated through poignant descriptions of decay in the misty, moss-covered churchyard. This genre of poetry outlasted the relatively short-lived period of Puritan funerals, and became remarkably popular. The most famous of these poems - Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* (1751) – became required reading for two centuries of schoolchildren (including myself in the 1950s). Intriguingly, this genre of popular poetry preceded William Wordsworth by several decades and, Draper argues, underlies the romantic English sensibility about nature. Be that as it may, along with classical paintings of tombs in an Arcadian landscape (Laqueur, 2015), it influenced nineteenth century designs for 'garden' cemeteries in which comfort was offered through careful planting of trees and shrubs (Curl, 1993). In life today, many English people restore themselves in the countryside – whether by visiting or living there - and in death they lie in a symbolic re-creation of that same countryside. Commonwealth War Graves around the world re-create the English garden, 'some corner of a foreign field that is forever England' (Morris, 1997).

Other historically Christian countries that offer nature as comfort at the graveside are all predominantly Protestant. In the twentieth century, Nordic countries such as Sweden and Finland developed their version of the woodland cemetery in which the cemetery feels part of the primeval forest,[1] while at the end of the century Britain developed its own concept of woodland or meadow burial (Davies & Rumble, 2012), as did New Zealand (Raudon, 2011). By contrast, even rural cemeteries in Catholic countries such as Austria, Italy and Spain rely on hard surfaces and often have a distinctly urban feeling (Goody & Poppi, 1994). In countries such as Japan and China, nature as consolation has its own, different, cultural roots (Boret, 2014).

So, much of what the English take for granted as consolatory – in death and in life – emerged to compensate for what the Protestant Reformation lacked: religious vehicles for grief. Might this also be why, as Polish literature scholar Katarzyna Malcecka has found, bereavement memoirs – a form of literature common today in the USA, Canada and

1 http://skogskyrkogarden.stockholm.se/in-english/

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the UK – are lacking in Catholic Poland and Orthodox Romania? Lacking religious rites through which to communicate loss, have Protestants historically turned instead to words – whether poetry or other consolation literature? Is today's bereavement memoir a product of Protestant, and more particularly secularised Protestant, societies which seek vehicles other than religious rituals to (as Shakespeare wrote in post-Reformation England) 'give sorrow words'? Might bereavement counselling also come more naturally to those living in a historically Protestant culture?

Conclusion

This article has outlined four ways that religions and societal death practices respond to each other – promotion, opposition, accommodation and compensation. I do not claim these are the only possible responses. Another possibility[2] is *manipulation* where, for example, a dying political leader may be kept on life support for some extra hours or days to allow a large number of mourners to travel and still fulfil the Jewish or Islamic expectation to bury within 24 hours of death.

Despite the impression given in much teaching about the world religions (Owen, 2011), no religion exists in a social vacuum. In the UK, for example, many evangelical Christians support hospices – indeed St Christopher's Hospice was started by an evangelical Christian, Cicely Saunders. In the USA, however, many evangelicals believe that God created curative medicine, so palliative care which has 'given up' on active treatment is – in their eyes – akin to euthanasia. This view almost certainly owes much to a secular American faith that every problem has a technological solution, even if its adherents see it as a Christian stance. The religious politics of assisted suicide in Britain, by contrast, is driven more by liberal Christian bishops in the House of Lords than by fundamentalist churches outside Westminster (Davies, 2015). Religious death politics - the religious politics of palliative care, euthanasia, abortion and capital punishment – are *very* nation specific. British parliamentary debates on whether to legalise suicide, abortion or assisted dying have, over many decades, been more pragmatic than their American equivalents which are dominated by opposing principles – such as the right to life versus a woman's right to choose (Davies, 1989).

The four ways - promote / oppose / accommodate / compensate – have been illustrated with examples from three kinds of issue. First are contemporary ethical issues, such as abortion and euthanasia. As is clear from the preceding paragraph, people's feelings about these – including those who are grieving a foetus or a euthanised relative – can be explicitly or implicitly shaped by their religious culture, which may or may not be shared by bereavement practitioners. Second is the question of the right way to dispose of and memorialise the deceased. Mixed-religion families can experience conflict over this, while lack of provision for religious practices can add to the burden of loss – not only has a loved person died, but mourners have not been able to bury or memorialise them properly, possibly risking the soul's safety. Third, conflict has featured prominently in missionary endeavours when converts are taught to dispose of their dead in ways that deeply offend their unconverted family – across the globe, monotheism's opposition to ancestor veneration has proved particularly contentious.

Bereavement practitioners know that religion can help grieving people (by providing hope, comfort and/or social support), or can add to confusion and turmoil as religious answers fail to satisfy the existential questions thrown up by grief or as expected social support fails to materialise. Such helps and hindrances occur within religious groups. By showing, however, how religion at and after death exists not in isolation but in interaction with society's death practices, this article adds an extra dimension. Conflict between a mourner's religion and society, or between different understandings of religion, either of which can be experienced as conflict between individuals within the wider family, can complicate things. Whether religion supports or complicates grieving can depend on how the multi-faceted thing we call 'religion' interacts with an equally multi-faceted 'society'. ■

2 Suggested to me by Mansur Ali.

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