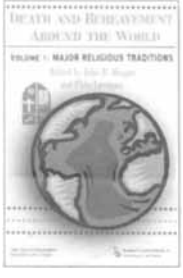
The cosmology of life and death

DEATH AND BEREAVEMENT AROUND THE WORLD
Vol 1: Major Religious Traditions
John Morgan, Pittu Launghani (eds)
Amityville, New York: Baywood, 2002, 206pp. $44.95 hb, ISBN 0 895 03272 4; $33.95 pb, ISBN 0 89503 273 2



Dying perhaps creates the most insurmountable barriers of understanding between cultures and peoples. Yet death and grief are common, universal human experiences irrespective of race, ethnicity, religion, class or wealth. We all die; the majority of us unexpectedly or before we are ready, leaving behind some who will mourn our loss. But the cosmology of life and death, the stories and beliefs which underpin these eternal cycles are manifold, diverse and particular to groups and communities. Living on the same streets of British cities, are families whose understanding of death and rituals of grieving are so different that even neighbourly condolences prove to be massively confusing and at times offensive. Flowers arriving at a house of mourning can cause anguish for some grieving Muslims, for example.

This is why this book, the first in a five-volume series, is invaluable. With so many diverse peoples now sharing countries, cities and continents, it is an inescapable responsibility for global citizens to learn about each other and share these most poignant of moments of life. I never knew how Greek Orthodox people view death. I now know a little after reading the brilliantly written and illustrated chapter by John Chirban in this collection.

My only serious reservation about such 'guides' is that readers may assume cultures are unchanging or that 15 pages is all it takes to know 'outsiders'. They encourage the idea that communities operate as a collective, thus denying that profoundly important human right – individuality. In a mixed race families, for example, death brings many tensions as original families may reclaim the body to take it back to its 'pure' roots, while partners and children may want to mark their created, joint cultural identity which is the antithesis of homogeneity.

The editors are explicitly aware of these dangers, which is good, but readers may not be. Nevertheless, this is an important contribution to the new world order where we have to know more than ever before just to be decent citizens.

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WEB WATCH

Worldwide mourning customs

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Since most countries now contain a number of ethnic and religious groups, it is increasingly important to be aware of the customs of other communities. With this in mind, I have reviewed websites that outline the mourning practices of some of the major religions, though there is such a great range of beliefs within each faith that it is unlikely that any site will represent all the views of a tradition.

The **Muslim** Students' Association at Houston University, part of the USA Muslim Students' Association, has created a site **www.uh.edu.campus/msa** which publishes extensive information about the beliefs and practices of their community. Mourning customs are described in the **Articles** subsite (you may need to access this directly by searching for **www.uh.edu/campus/msa/articles**). Under Janaza (funeral prayers) in the alphabetical listing of articles is a general description of funeral practices. More information is included in a long, question-and-answer article on *fatawas* (religious decrees) for women; apparently many of these apply to men too. Click on Fatawawom and then Contents and look at Sections 6, 'Questions related to funerals' and 13, 'Questions related to the waiting period (*Iddah*) and mourning'. The answers challenge some of the common myths about mourning customs, eg that women should wail over the deceased, by citing religious sources. In this case the quote suggests that wailing actually 'punishes' the dead.

There are a particularly wide range of beliefs and practices in **Hinduism**, but a good account of death and mourning rituals can be read at **www.beliefnet.com** Beliefnet is a huge American site set up by an independent multi-faith e-community with links to numerous **articles** and **features** about Hinduism and other religions. Use the **search engine** on the home page to find the article, 'Rites of Transition: Hindu death rituals', exerpted from *Hinduism Today*, or click on the link to read the whole article.

Articles on **Sikh** funeral ceremonies can be found at **www.allaboutsikhs.com** The home page has a link to funeral ceremonies, accessed by typing these words into the **search engine** near the foot of the home page. The **article** here covers the burial rites and provides a comprehensive description of the steps that follow, including prayers, music, food, gifts and donations for charities and religious organisations.

The **Buddhist** information and education network at **www.buddhanet.net** also has an excellent search engine, sited at the top of its home page. Again, inputting 'funeral ceremonies' brings up a wealth of **information** about all aspects of bereavement in Buddhist culture. For an overview, click on the **Site Map**. It is interesting to note that Buddhists make efforts to 'banish sorrow, loneliness and the fear of spirits by means of music and fellowship'.

The site of the Shaarey Zedek congregation in Michigan, USA, **www.shaareyzedek.org**, provides guidance on the rules and practices of traditional **Judaism**, with links to other Jewish sites. The **Bereavement Guide** can be accessed from the home page via the Guides and Pamphlets button. This explains stages of the bereavement process, one of which is Kaddish, a prayer recited by mourners three times a day for a year after burial, an 'act of looking to the future and all of life with faith and hope, in the presence of grief and despair'. It seems there is plenty of practical and spiritual support for mourners throughout the bereavement process.

Finally, an unusual website, **http://theologytoday.ptsem.edu**, run by a quarterly **ecumenical** journal, *Theology Today*, publishes **articles** on a **wide range of classical and contemporary theological issues.** (NB you need to type in the address as it appears above, omitting the usual www). I was particularly interested in the article concerning a **Hindu-Christian funeral** in Bangalore. Access this by clicking on 'locate' and typing in 'Hindu-Christian funeral'. The dead man, a Hindu, had married a Christian woman, and his funeral was in two parts, reflecting his link to both faiths. Neither Hindus nor Christians regard death as final, rather as a 'deliverance or transition or passage into the mystery of life', but the author ponders on whether the deceased's destiny will be affected by the performance of the two different death rites. He comments that he was pleased to see Christians and Hindus interacting as, in India, the distance between the Temple and Church is 'almost unbridgeable'. You can learn a great deal about a range of thematic issues on this fascinating site by clicking on the Focus Themes button on the home page, or by surfing previous editions through the Explore Archives button. BC