

# Funeral Rites across different cultures



*Responses to death and the rituals and beliefs surrounding it tend to vary widely across the world. In all societies, however, the issue of death brings into focus certain fundamental cultural values. The various rituals and ceremonies that are performed are primarily concerned with the explanation, validation, and integration of a peoples' view of the world.*

***\*Please note that there is diversity within religions, and there are also many regional variations. The document is a general guide to funeral rites and traditions within the religions discussed.***

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## Introduction

## Cultural/Religious Background

To understand and support Newcomer families within an educational setting it is important to be aware that there may be differences between expected and accepted social and cultural norms in Northern Ireland and those of the family you are supporting. The cultural and ethnic diversity of individuals may sometimes be forgotten or overlooked by service providers, with an assumption that Western cultural ideals are always correct.

A non-western approach to mental health issues, family support, death, education, or child development may be very different from approaches adopted in Northern Ireland; therefore, it is important to appreciate the differences when developing an individual support plan for children and to be aware of the reasons why people respond to different situations in different ways.

## An understanding of death and dying in world religions

Unfortunately, a number of Newcomer refugees and asylum seekers will have experienced family loss. It is important to have an awareness of a family's background faith or secular perspectives in order to be able to talk to and understand what a child may share with you in relation to death and the traditions relating to religious ceremonies. Having an understanding of what they believe and how they may respond when there has been a death in the family or community can help the school to plan for and show support and understanding to the family.

How much a child understands about death or what happens after a person has died can depend on how the concepts are explained within a family or community. How children react to a death within the family or their community will be reflective of their cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

The information noted is generalised to be representative of the religions mentioned, please note that funeral service rituals, traditions and ceremonies vary between sects and subsets of all religions.

## Funeral customs and death-related rituals:

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## Buddhism

There are over 200,000 Buddhists in the UK. Many are born into the faith as members of immigrant families from Sri Lanka, Thailand, Myanmar, Tibet, China or Japan.

Buddhists believe that they live a succession of lives; *samsara* is the word used to describe the endless cycle of birth, death and rebirth in various states (e.g. human, divine, animal, etc.) and in many different planes (e.g. happy, unhappy). Life in *samsara* continues until the believer attains an enlightened state of permanent, lasting happiness called *nirvana*: the ultimate goal of all Buddhist practice. Death is seen as a prelude to existence in another state. According to Buddha's teaching, no state lasts forever. The plane of rebirth is determined by a person's karma, which is the sum total of wholesome and unwholesome actions performed in previous existences. In order to reach enlightenment, the Buddha's teachings, called the Noble Eightfold Path, should be followed. Until this state is reached, we continue circling on in *samsara*.

Buddhists place great importance on the state of mind at the moment of death. When death is imminent a monk is called to chant from religious texts, or relatives may introduce some religious objects to generate wholesome thoughts into the person's mind, because the last thought before death will condition the first thought of the next life.

One, two or three days after death, the body is either buried or cremated. At the funeral monks lead the congregation in the traditional Buddhist manner, offering respect to Buddha, the *Dhamma* (his teaching), and the *Sangha* (the community of enlightened beings). Following this, the congregation accepts the *Five Precepts*, which are guidelines for – and commitment to – the leading of a moral life.

If a cremation takes place, it is traditional for a nephew of the deceased to press the button that draws the curtain on the coffin and consigns it to the furnace. Sometimes the ashes are kept in an urn, which may be stored in a monument built specifically for this purpose; alternatively they may be scattered.

Immediately after the death, friends and relatives observe a period of mourning. This is done symbolically by observing a certain amount of austerity and frugality in the house of the dead person. Mourners may, for example, wear plain white clothes, abstain from wearing jewellery, eat simple food and not indulge in entertainment.

Relatives and friends direct their efforts above all to assisting the deceased in his or her journey through *samsara*. By performing good actions such as unselfish generosity, they generate 'merit', which can be transferred to benefit the deceased. This is the primary way of showing one's gratitude and paying respect to the dead. This act may be repeated three months later and then annually thereafter. In addition to benefiting the deceased it also brings comfort to the bereaved.

Before the end of the first week after death, a member of a monastic community may be invited to the house to talk to the surviving members of the family. They will usually remind the bereaved that everything is impermanent, that nobody can live forever, and death is inevitable. Buddha, however, cautioned his followers that expressions of grief may be damaging to one's mental wellbeing, causing pain and suffering. He said that grief does not benefit the departed one, nor does this benefit the griever.

When someone within the community dies:-

- A small statue of the Buddha may be placed by the head of the dying person and protective verses may be chanted
- Once a person has died, the body should not be touched or disturbed in any way as it is believed that the soul does not leave the body immediately after breathing stops
- Once the body is cold it can be prepared for burial or cremation
- On the morning of the burial or cremation monks are invited to perform the last rite
- The funeral usually takes place 3-7 days after the death
- Children may have a concept of reincarnation

## Christianity

*Christianity* is over 2,000 years old and is one of the world's largest religions. Christianity originated in Roman-occupied Judea (an area that is now part of Israel). Christian beliefs centre on the life and teachings of *Jesus Christ* proposing that he is Divine, the son of *God* and a teacher who performed miracles and preached kindness, generosity and forgiveness. The *Bible* is the holy book of the Christian faith. It contains the *Old Hebrew Bible* and the *Christian Bible*. The most important day of the week is Sunday, 'The Lords Day' a day when no work should be done.

In the first couple of days after someone dies, it's traditional for friends and family to gather either at the church, funeral home, or family home for the wake (also called the vigil). This takes place before the funeral.

A minister/priest typically leads the wake. Prayers are said for the person who has passed away, and people read from the bible or recite the rosary. There may be other readings, songs and poetry, and people usually read eulogies and share fond memories of the departed. The wake gives family and friends a chance to come together, comfort one another, and mourn before the funeral mass and committal.

Some Roman Catholics or High Church Anglicans transfer the corpse to their church on the evening before the funeral; following the ritual reception of the body into the church, it remains there overnight. In some parts of the country, however, the coffin is brought to the house before the funeral for a day or two and transported from there to the church. The next morning a funeral service or requiem mass is celebrated during which the priest or minister wears black vestments.

The final ritual in Christian burial is the graveside committal where the priest or minister leads the mourners in prayer as the body is lowered into the grave.

Instead of burial, some Christians may choose cremation. The ashes of the deceased may be scattered in a Garden of Remembrance or elsewhere. Alternatively, they may be placed in an urn and interred in a cemetery. Some families keep the ashes at home. If the ashes are to be scattered in a Garden of Remembrance, the family may choose the garden and the precise place of dispersal, and if they wish, they may return a few days later to witness the scattering of the ashes.

When someone in the community dies:-

- Many families will pray or read from the Bible when they know a person is going to die
- A priest or minister may visit so the dying person and their family can receive support, Holy Communion and or the Sacrament of the Sick
- People may visit the family home to pay respects two or three days before the funeral
- The Service usually takes place 3 days or more after the person has died depending on the type of Committal.

- Christians can be buried or cremated
- The family will decide if children attend the funeral
- Children may have a concept of heaven and angels watching over them

## Hinduism

Hindus follow the religion of *Hinduism*. It is one of the oldest of the world's major religions and is almost 4,000 years old. Hinduism originated in India. The *Vedas* are a collection of hymns written between 1500 and 700 BC that form the basis of Hinduism. Hindus believe that the universe was created by one God, *Brahman*. *Brahman* takes many forms or incarnations.

The three main forms are called the *Trimurti: Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva*. *Brahma* is the creator, *Vishnu* the preserver and *Shiva* the destroyer. 5 Vedas are written in *Sanskrit*. Hindus worship many gods depending on their family and background. Most Hindus have a shrine in their home where they can worship (*puja*) individually or with their family. Hindus can also worship in a *mandir* (temple) where they are led by priests and teachers known as *Brahmins*. (Ways of Seeing II)

In the Indian tradition the life of a person is viewed as a pilgrimage from birth to death. When alive a Hindu is said to pass through sixteen stages, each dedicated to God. The first step is before birth and the last step is the ceremony of cremation.

Karma teaches that people who have done good deeds will be re born into a better life than before. People who have not led a good life or have committed evil deeds will be born again as outcasts or animals. The belief of re-birth is based upon the conviction that the soul is immortal and indestructible

When someone within the community dies:-

- After the body of the deceased is washed and wrapped in a white shroud it will be placed in a coffin and taken to the persons home
- The cremation usually takes place within 24 hours of the person dying
- Family and friends will pray at home before a service at the mandir(temple)
- A lamp may be lit and placed near the head of the body and incense may be burned in the room
- It is not appropriate to wear black to a Hindu ceremony
- On the third day after cremation the ashes of the deceased are collected and scattered in a significant river or a place that was important to the person
- In general children are included in the ceremonies surrounding death
- Children may have a concept of reincarnation

## Judaism

*Judaism* is one of the oldest religions with one God (*Yahweh*) and it has over 13 million followers. It began in the Middle East nearly 4,000 years ago. The *Torah* is the holy book of the Jewish faith. The most important day of the week is the *Sabbath* (*Shabbat* in *Hebrew*), a day when no work should be done. The Sabbath starts at sunset on Friday and continues until sunset on Saturday to remember the seventh day of creation on which God rested. Jewish people worship in *Synagogues* and their spiritual leaders are called *Rabbis*.

Unless death occurs after sunset on Friday, in which case the burial is postponed until Sunday, the Orthodox Jewish tradition prescribes that funerals should take place within twenty-four hours. Professional undertakers are involved since all arrangements are made through the Synagogue. The body is dressed in a white shroud (*kittel*), which is then placed in a plain wooden coffin. Men are buried with a prayer shawl (*tallith*) with its tassels cut off.

The Rabbi is sent for as soon as death occurs. He or she returns to the house of mourning an hour or so before the funeral is due to start to offer special prayers for the deceased. Close relatives of the dead person usually gather at the house of mourning, dressed in old clothes from which a piece is ritually cut as a mark of grief. Traditionally this torn garment is worn throughout the seven days of intensive mourning (*shiveh*).

When someone within the community dies:-

- Someone must stay with the deceased person from the time they have died until they are buried
- The burial should take place as soon as possible after the person has passed away, usually within 24 hours
- The body must be cleansed and made pure. This ritual, purification, is a most important requirement of Jewish law
- Cremation is forbidden in Judaism
- After the burial mourners may choose not to shower, wear leather shoes or jewellery or shave for one week
- It is important for people to visit the home of the mourners, to bring food and offer support during the seven days after the burial
- The family decide if children are to attend the burial
- Children may have a concept of dead people living in a spiritual afterlife



## Islam

There are approximately two million people in the UK who are of the Islamic faith. This group is composed mostly of families originating from the Asian sub-continent.

Muslims follow the religion of Islam. A *Muslim* is someone who submits to the will of *Allah* (God). Muslims follow the five basic duties reflected in the *Five Pillars of Islam*. Islam originated over 1,300 years ago in modern-day Saudi Arabia. The *Qur'an* (Koran) is the holy book of the Islamic faith. It is believed to be a record of the exact words that Allah delivered to the *Prophet Muhammad* by the Archangel *Jibril* (Gabriel) over 1,300 years ago. The Qur'an is written in Arabic. The most important day of the week is Friday, when Muslims gather together to pray in a building called a *mosque* led by a religious leader called an *Imam*. (Ways of Seeing II)

There are many cultural variations within Islam, however in general terms Allah created life and humankind is the highest form of creation. On the day of judgement people of the Islamic faith are accountable to Allah. On this day a person is rewarded for their earthly deeds and they enter heaven or they are punished and will go to hell.

When someone within the community dies:-

- Family members will come together when a relative is dying. They may recite verses from the Qur'an beside the persons bed
- The ceremony will take place as soon as possible after the person has passed away, usually within 24 hours
- In the majority of cases the body will be taken to the funeral directors. The body will be washed either by family members or a member of the Muslim Community
- The body will be laid out and the head turned onto the right shoulder and then positioned to face Mecca
- The body is wrapped in plain white cloth and laid in a coffin and taken to the family home for people to pay their respects
- Family members may attend a service at the mosque and family and friends will come together to support the family of the deceased
- Cremation is forbidden in Islam
- It is generally accepted that relatives are to observe a 15 day mourning period
- Angels play an important role within the Islamic faith. One belief is that, at the time of death the angel Azra'il will be present at the side of the person dying to receive their soul as it leaves them
- Children may have a concept of a spiritual afterlife in paradise

## Sikhism

Sikhs believe that birth into the faith is a result of good 'karma'. Death is the door to union with God. The cremation is a family occasion attended, as far as possible, by the close relatives of the deceased and friends.

Prior to the funeral the body is washed and clothed by the members of the family. The dead person is attired with the symbols of the faith known as the 5K's – *Kesh* (uncut hair), *Kanga* (comb), *Kara* (steel bangle), *Kachs* (shorts) and *Kirpan* (short sword) – and the turban for a man and sometimes a woman. On a route to the crematorium the deceased is taken to the gurdwara where a *rumalla* (a square or rectangular piece of silk used to cover the Guru Granth Sahib) is placed on top of the shroud. At the crematorium, prayers (*Sohilla* and *Ardas*) are said. The button is then pressed by a close male relative, usually the eldest son of the deceased. The next day, the ashes are collected and then – in both India and Britain – taken to a designated area of running water and immersed. In Britain, after the funeral, the mourners go back to the gurdwara and wash their faces and hands. In India, for reasons of personal hygiene the mourners bathe after the body has been cremated on the funeral pyre.

Beginning on the day of the death, adult relatives, or if they are unable to do so *grathis* from the gurdwara (people who perform readings), usually take part in a complete reading of the Guru Granth Sahib (the Sikh holy book) at the home of the deceased or at the gurdwara. This reading is usually spaced over a period of ten days, and close family members, including children, would usually be expected to be present throughout. At the completion of the reading, a passage from the Guru Granth Sahib about belief and practices regarding death is read, followed by *kirtan* (songs in praise of God); the prayer *Ardas* is then said, followed by the sharing of *karah parshad* (specially blessed sweet pudding) and the eating of *langar* (a communal meal). If the deceased was the head of the family, the oldest son is given a turban to symbolise the taking of responsibility for the family.

When someone within the community dies:-

- The body is washed and clothed by members of the family and attired with the symbols of the faith. The body is then wrapped in a plain white sheet or shroud, and a *rumalla* placed on top.
- The body will be cremated and the ashes will be immersed in running water at a designated area. Sikhs in the UK sometimes take the deceased person's ashes back to India.
- Both male and female relatives attend the cremation. They then return to the gurdwara or home of the deceased to read the Guru Granth Sahib. At the end of the reading, and after *kirtan*, *Ardas* is said, followed by the sharing of the *karah parshad* and *langar*.

## Humanism

Humanists believe that they only have one life and that they should make the best of it.

Humanists experience the same feeling of loss and sadness at the death of a loved one as anyone else does. But they accept death as the natural and inevitable end to life. They do not believe in any kind of life after death but believe that we live on in other people's memories of us, in the work we have done while we are alive, and in our children.

There are no specific or obligatory rituals to be followed either by the bereaved or by those who wish to express their condolences. An expression of sympathy, an acknowledgement of the bereaved person's feeling of grief and the offer of a listening ear are more likely to be appreciated than any suggestion that the deceased has gone 'to a better place' (which may contradict what the family believe). Humanists may choose to be cremated or buried and the ceremony can take place anywhere, though it is most commonly held at a crematorium where, if possible, any religious symbols will be removed or covered up.

At a humanist funeral the ceremony is intended to celebrate the life that was lived. The humanist funeral officiate will have spent time with the bereaved relatives and together they will have planned a ceremony that properly honours the person's life and, hopefully, brings some comfort to everyone who attends as they are reminded of how their lives have been enriched through knowing the deceased. At the funeral, the officiate will talk about the person's life and what they achieved and it is usual for family members or friends to read personal tributes. The ceremony may also involve suitable readings, poetry or music.

When someone within the community dies:-

- Humanists will accept death as the natural and inevitable end to life. They do not believe in life after death, but rather that people 'live on' in other people's memories of them.
- There are no specific or obligatory rituals to follow at deaths or funerals
- Humanists may choose to be cremated or buried, and the ceremony can take place anywhere. If possible, all religious symbols (e.g. at a crematorium) are removed or covered.
- The funeral ceremony is intended to celebrate the life that was lived and properly honour that person's life. Through readings, poetry, music and personal tributes from family and friends, attendants are reminded of how their lives have been enriched through knowing the deceased.

### References:

Ealing Critical Incident Guide; Funeral Rites across different cultures (2021) [www.egfl.org.uk](http://www.egfl.org.uk)