

# Religious and non-religious traditions and beliefs : guidance

The six recognised world religions all mark the important events in a person's life such as birth, marriage and death in different ways. 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 somebody's life and mark his or her transition to another life or stage, whatever that may be. There are also alternative ceremonies available that are not associated with traditional religious; one of the most well known is the humanist movement.

## Christian Funerals

The name Christian actually covers a broad variety of cultures, crossing all continents. In the UK it is estimated that there are up to 220 different Christian denominations, and funeral rituals may differ from church to church. 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. 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 may follow some funeral services

later, 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.

## Jewish Funerals

Jewish funerals are governed by a set of rituals and traditions, which 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. Sephardi Jews originate from Spain and the Middle East and Ashkenazi Jews originate from Eastern Europe and Russia. Whilst Sephardi Jews have a strong communal bond, Ashkenazi may be divided into Orthodox, Conservative and Reform 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 small chapel 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 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 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 towards Heaven or Nirvana. 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 continent and it is often an area of regret 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 and mourners will usually wear traditional Indian garments. 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.

## **Sikh Funerals**

Founded in the 15th century, the Sikh religion has its origins in traditional Hindu beliefs but has its own teachings and central scriptures, which lay down many of the traditions associated with death and funeral rites. While rejecting the theory of rebirth, Sikhs believe in an afterlife, when the soul meets with the supreme soul, God (Akāl Purakh). Cremation is the traditional method of disposal of the body, although other methods may be acceptable. It is usual to go to the house of the family before departing for the crematorium and the

body may be on display. Death is seen as an act of the Almighty and it is written in the scriptures that emotions should be kept under control; so family members may appear detached. On the way to the crematorium, hymns may be sung and once there prayers may be recited and more hymns sung. The next of kin usually will press the button for the coffin to disappear. The ashes are normally scattered in the sea or running water. After the cremation, guests usually return to the family home where there will be more readings and hymns. The mourning period usually lasts between two and five weeks during which time other ceremonies may also be held.

## **Islamic Funerals**

There are two major groups of Muslims - Shi'ite Muslims and Sunni Muslims. Funeral traditions tend to have developed over the centuries, rather than being set out in the religion's holy book - The Koran. 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 Makkah. Ritual washing is performed usually by family members or close friends, usually according to the sex of the deceased. The body is wrapped in a shroud of usually 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. Mourners may throw earth onto the coffin in the grave and any 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.

## **Humanist Funerals**

Humanist organisations exist world wide to serve the needs of the non-religious, evolving as those needs change. The British Humanist Association (BHA) developed from the Ethical Union in 1967. Humanists are non-religious people who live by moral principles based on reason and respect for others, not obedience to dogmatic rules. They promote happiness and fulfilment in this life because they believe it is the only one we have. Humanist nonreligious funeral ceremonies acknowledge loss and celebrate a life without employing religious rituals. They offer a dignified alternative to the traditional funeral service and are made memorable by being personally tailored to each individual situation, with the wishes of the family taken fully into account. A typical ceremony will usually include:

- Favourite or appropriate music (of any kind)
- A welcome and a brief explanation of the ceremony
- Poetry or prose readings
- A 'tribute' to the deceased, mainly biographical, often with short contributions from family, friends and colleagues
- A time of reflection for silent meditation or private prayer
- The Committal or words of farewell
- A brief close, which can include thanks and announcements.

Prior to the funeral, a Humanist officiant will normally visit a family to map-out the ceremony and to form a rounded picture of the subject. At this stage it may also be important for families to freely discuss various options in relation to procedure during the ceremony. Detailed preparation prevents reliance on a standard text or format, and in the days leading up to the ceremony time and care is devoted to writing and compiling a tribute both factually accurate and with the appropriate tone. By this process, each ceremony can be developed afresh with families who welcome the opportunity for choice and personal input. A printed copy of the ceremony is always provided for the family, to send to absent relatives or friends and kept as a memento. Humanist funeral ceremonies may be conducted at crematoria, cemeteries, woodland burial grounds, and other burial grounds (subject to restriction). Memorial ceremonies are more usually conducted elsewhere and after some time has elapsed following the funeral.

However in some circumstances, for example where there is no body or a body has been accepted for medical research, a memorial ceremony may take the place of a funeral.

## **Other Religions and Beliefs**

Information is available on request with regard to the Baha'I faith, Christian Science, Jehovah's Witnesses, the Mormon Church, Zoroastrianism, Rastafarianism and the Afro-Caribbean Community.

# Outline of a secular cremation service

**Duration:** About 20 - 25 minutes is usual, although 30 minutes is allocated for each service at Easthampstead Park.

**Officiant:** This could be a Humanist officiant, member of the family, friend or workmate.

**Music:** Choose music during your entry into the chapel.

## Introduction

Friends, we are meeting here today to honour the life of (Full name), whom we always knew as (nickname). A funeral ceremony is an opportunity to join in taking leave of someone we have loved and respected, but it is more than that. It is the celebration of his/her life and personality and a time to comfort those of his family and friends who are here today and have been affected by his/her death. Our ceremony will be short, simple and nonreligious. Although (the deceased) did not believe in religion, he/she did believe in the good within human beings and felt very strongly about the individuals right to freedom of choice in the main decisions about life and death.

Perhaps you would join me in a few thoughts about life and death. The separateness and uniqueness of each human life is the basis of our grief in bereavement. Look through the whole world and there is no one like the one you have lost. But he/she still lives on in your memories.

Though no longer a visible part of your lives, they will remain a member of your family or circle through the influence he/she has had on you and the special part he/she played in your lives. We know that the value and meaning of life consist in living it and living it well. People who have been a strength and comfort to others and have worked for future generations, deriving fulfilment and satisfaction from so doing, these are the people who bring value and meaning to life.

## The Tree of Life

The death of each of us is in the order of things; it follows life as surely as night follows day. We can take the tree of life as a symbol. The human race is the trunk and branches of this tree, and individual men and women are the leaves which appear one season, flourish for a summer and then die. I too am like a leaf on this tree and one day I shall be torn off by a storm, or I shall simply decay and fall and mingle with the earth at its roots. But, while I live I am conscious of the tree's flowing sap and steadfast strength. Deep down in my consciousness is the consciousness of a collective life, a life of which I am a part and to which I make a minute but unique contribution.

When I die and fall, the tree remains nourished to some small degree by my manifestation of life.

Millions of leaves have preceded me and millions will follow me; but the tree itself grows and endures.

**The tribute:** In this section, the life, the love, the failures, the humour, the accomplishments of the deceased can be described in as much detail as desired. Family members or friends could speak, if they so wish.

**A quiet moment:** A moment of quiet may be included, and those with a religious belief might wish to say a prayer.

**Poetry:** This could be a favourite poem, or a poem that could have applied to the deceased, for example:

**Happy the man, and happy he alone  
He who can call today his own - He who, secure  
within can say:  
Tomorrow do thy worst, for I have lived today.  
Come fair or foul, or rain or shine,  
The joys I have possessed in spite of  
fate are mine.  
Not heaven itself over the past hath  
power, but what has been, has been,  
and I have had my hour.**

**Committal:** A committal does not have to occur, but if desired the words below can be used. Members of the family could say farewell first, by placing a rose or flower on the coffin.

**Would you please stand for the committal.  
To everything there is a season and a time to every purpose on earth, a time to be born and a time to die. Here in this last act, in sorrow but without fear, in love and appreciation, we commit (deceased's name) to its natural end.**

**Music:** A favourite record, tape or CD could be played at this point (or even during the committal).

### **Closing words**

We have been remembering with love and gratitude a life that has ended. Let us return to our own homes and to our work, enriched and inspired by these memories. I leave you with the words of a North American Indian:

**When I'm dead, cry for me a little.  
Think of me sometimes, but not too much.  
Think of me now and again, as I was in life  
At some moments it is pleasant to recall, but not for too long.  
Leave me in peace, and I will leave you in peace  
And while you live let your thoughts be for the living.**

**Music:** Choose for the end - Sit and listen before you leave the chapel, if you prefer.