Death and Religion in a Changing World

Kathleen Garces-Foley, Editor

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Introduction

KATHLEEN GARCES-FOLEY

This book is a study of the intersection of death and religion in contemporary societies. Students of religion have long found this intersection fruitful for understanding the social behavior and worldviews of human beings. In the nineteenth century it was believed that the origin of religion could be found by studying ancient death practices. While the search for the origin of religion has been replaced by new questions, today scholars continue to be fascinated by the variety, complexity, and vitality of religious responses to death. The intersection between death and religion is revealing, for in the face of death humans have long expressed what we value most and what we believe to be the nature of reality and the meaning of human life. But death is not only an opportunity for an expression of beliefs and values; it is also an arena for making meaning, community, ritual, and myth. As David Chidester explains, "*Homo religious* is *Homo symbolicus*—the religious person is a symbol-using, -owning, and -operating person," and it is through the symbolic forms of religion—symbols, myths, rituals, and traditions—that the finality of death is transcended.[1] Rather than something people turn to in the face of death, religion is enacted or lived out as they, in the words of Robert Orsi, "make something of the worlds they have found themselves thrown into."[2] Faced with a death, expected or unexpected, the living must respond.

What people do in the face of death figures centrally in the following chapters. Death sets in motion a flurry of activity surrounding the body of the deceased as well as the social body. Something must be done with the physical body if for no other reason than that its presence will soon become unbearable. Something must be done about the people who are mourning. Something must be done about the dead person's stuff. These are quite practical concerns that may or may not be imbued with religious significance, but the practice of religious rituals and the reliance on religious frames of meaning in some form in the wake of death continues to be extraordinarily widespread. While religion maintains its primary place in human responses to death, how it is enacted varies considerably over time and space. As the reader will discover in each of the following chapters,

religious traditions are not static systems of beliefs and rituals separable from culture, but dynamic, evolving, contested terrain deeply imbedded in social context. How one enacts religion, which beliefs and which rituals are appropriated from those available in a particular space, time, and circumstance, is the crucial question at the intersection of death and religion.[3]

The purpose of this volume is to look intently at the intersection of death and religion in order to understand how human beings enact, revise, and improvise religious practices in a rapidly modernizing world. It is commonly thought today that the continuing relevance of religion in modernity lies in its therapeutic benefits. This relegation of religion to such a diminished, conciliatory capacity is progressively more untenable as we recognize the continuing power of religion in the modern world. While the therapeutic function of religion is widely accepted in the West, it is clear from the following studies of religious responses to death that religion often fails to fit into its designated therapeutic role. For example, belief in a paradisiacal afterlife may assuage grief, but fears of punishment and the unsettled dead provide no consolation to grievers. Prescribed rituals for mourning and the disposition of the dead can serve as a useful guide, but these expectations may be unclear and contested, not to mention quite onerous to comply with, creating additional stress for the mourners. From the vantage point of death, one becomes keenly aware that religion, and its place in modernity, is far more complicated than first thought.

Within these chapters the reader will find many terms used to describe the formal religious actions that surround death. *Death rites* serves as the most inclusive of these terms since it includes both predeath rites and postdeath rites, those rituals focused on the deceased and those focused on the mourners. Often, the authors use more specific terms, such as *funeral* or *funerary rites, mortuary rites, burial rites, funeral protocols, bereavement* or *mourning rites,* and *memorial rites.* These terms are nowhere strictly defined in this volume and some are used interchangeably, presumably because no single term adequately captures the complex array of religious responses to death. Ritual studies scholar Ronald Grimes distinguishes formal religious rites from the gestures surrounding them, such as weeping or publishing a death notice. In practice, trying to separate what is social custom from religious ritual is quite difficult. The chapters in this book focus on formal, explicitly religious rites—that is, those actions that are intentional and socially recognized as such; however, in doing so the chapters also elucidate the porous boundaries between custom and religion, ritualized action and formal rite.[4]

For our purpose of understanding religion as it is enacted, the category of "practice" is especially useful. In contrast to the rites that are prescribed by God, tradition, or religious authorities, religious practices are what people actually do. Religious historian David Hall explains, "Practice always bears the marks of both regulation and what, for want of a better word, we may term resistance. It is not wholly one or the other."[5] The focus on practice reveals an incongruity between what is prescribed and what is performed. As Juan Campo brings forth so clearly in his chapter on Islam, this incongruity reveals not only the limited ability of religious authorities to define and control religious

practice but the ways in which the physical and social circumstances of death constrain religious practice. Practice also reveals the challenge of identifying what is "prescribed," given that there are always competing claims for the legitimacy of religious authority. Enacting religion means wading through the array of voices—including religious elites, funeral specialists, media experts, and family members—claiming authority to define the appropriate religious response to death. For the religious practitioner, practice involves sorting through the competing versions of how one ought to respond to death in light of the immediate needs and limitations of the particular social context.

Religion is enacted by particular people in particular places at particular times. There is no "religious approach to death" separate from its context. Over time, religious practices change: the way Jews buried their dead at the time of Jesus is not the same as it is today. Across cultures, religious practices vary: Muslims in Indonesia cremate their dead and Muslims in the United States bury their dead. Within religious traditions, doctrinal and ritual differences are copious: Protestant Christians may cremate but Orthodox Christians do not. Culture, class, ethnicity, education, lineage, and gender may all influence how people enact religion in the face of death. Trying to make sense of all these variations is a daunting task. Some would argue that with so much diversity it is erroneous to even speak of unified religious traditions: there is no such thing as Buddhism—only Buddhisms, no Christianity—only Christianities, and so forth. The authors of this anthology take the contextualization of religion very seriously, but they still speak of religious traditions and what binds adherents together. Some religious peoples are bound together through religious authority, some by practices, and some by reverence for scripture, while others do not cohere tightly at all. For example, it makes much more sense to speak of "Hinduisms" than it does to speak of "Sikhisms." In the following chapters there is no easy solution to the incongruity between the categories in which we talk about religion and the way religion is actually lived out. The need to oversimplify in order to relay complex ideas in a small number of pages and the need to resist the misleading neatness of such generalizations coexist in a dissatisfying truce.

While fascinating books have been and will be written on the death practices of past eras, this book is about the present. It is about how the present social context affects the way individuals enact religious traditions that have been practiced for hundreds and, in some cases, thousands of years. In varying degrees around the world, humans have been confronted with significant social changes that we lump together under the name of modernity. Technological and scientific advances, secularization, urbanization, commodification, shifting gender roles, changing family structure, environmental degradation, globalization, and individualism all profoundly shape how we live and die in contemporary societies. A few decades ago electric crematories were unheard of in India, and Muslim cemeteries did not exist in the United States. Religious traditions are inherently conservative, but change they do, and our focus on the contemporary presents a fascinating opportunity to watch how such change occurs through the everyday enactment of religion in the face of death. At the intersection of death and religion, we find a vital tension between tradition and modernity out of which contemporary people fashion

a response to death. This vantage point sheds light not only on the tension between religious tradition and modernity but on the ways in which people have always been forced to make something of their worlds "in, with, through, and against the religious idioms available to them in culture."[6] Those who believe that tradition cannot survive in the modern world will be surprised to learn in the following chapters the tensile strength and adaptability of religion.

This book began in the classroom; at least, that was where I first imagined it. As a doctoral student at University of California, Santa Barbara, I was first given the chance to teach the religious studies department's lower-division course, Religious Approaches to Death, during summer school in 2001. My first foray into teaching made me all the more passionate about the study of lived religion. Unfortunately, while there are several excellent books on religious beliefs regarding the afterlife and prescribed funeral rites, there are few introductory texts that consider how religion and death intersect in social context.[7] In order to teach the course with a focus on lived religion, I needed a text that would contextualize religious approaches to death and update the existing scholarship to account for our rapidly changing world. Developed with pedagogy in mind, the chapters in this book aim to introduce students to the study of death practices, as well as make theoretically rich and original contributions to the field that will be useful to scholars.

There are many ways a book on this topic could be organized, and I have chosen the most obvious: by religious tradition. This choice provides in a single book a comprehensive study of contemporary death practices within the major world religions. The chapters in part I, Religious Approaches to Death, examine how Hindus, Jews, Buddhists, Christians, Muslims, and Sikhs respond to death. In addition, while it would be impossible to take account of the many ethnoreligious traditions that fall outside the boundaries of world religions, I chose to begin the book with a chapter on one indigenous community, the California Chumash. Many religious studies textbooks begin with such a chapter, and this practice has been rightly criticized for relegating native peoples to a historical past tense.[8] Making quite the opposite point, Dennis Kelley shows how the Chumash use death practices to proclaim publicly their continued presence in California and to reclaim traditional practices in ways that respond to the exigencies of death in contemporary America. Kelley's chapter provides a theoretical framework for understanding the tension between the traditional and the modern that resonates throughout this volume.

All the chapters in part I share a similar structure in order to facilitate comparative discussion across religious traditions. To aid the introductory student, they begin with a concise introduction to the religious tradition and its historical death practices and beliefs before turning to the contemporary situation. In looking at the contemporary death practices of religious people, the contributors were asked to turn their attention beyond the West. Several authors were able to use their own field research to do this, and others drew upon existing scholarship. To the extent possible given their expertise, they have shown the diversity within religious traditions by contrasting death practices in two or more regions of the world. The reader may be surprised to find two chapters on Christianity

when the other religious traditions are covered in a single chapter. This decision reflects the dominance of Christianity among the intended audience of the book, namely students in North America, Europe, and Australia. The choice was also a pragmatic one based on the scarcity of scholars able to write on Christianity as a whole. In keeping with the focus on lived religion, all the authors have contextualized their scholarship through the stories of real people. These stories, as Lizette Larson-Miller reminds us, are much more than quaint accessories to scholarly writing. There are no religious approaches to death outside of their lived embodiment in the lives of real people facing real death. Their stories reveal much about the continuing significance of religion, which can be easily missed when scholarship strays too far from the people religion matters to most.

There are many issues arising at the intersection of death and religion in contemporary societies that impact religious traditions in general. In part II, Death in Contemporary Societies, a series of essays examines how death practices in the West have been strongly influenced by widespread social changes such as secularization, individualism, spirituality, public religion, and the prevalence of the media. These chapters provocatively explore the areas of greatest change in death practices in the West and consider their implications for the future of religious response to death. In the concluding epilogue, Evan Berry examines the tension between modernity and religious tradition as it runs through all the chapters and highlights their theoretical contributions. Despite the breadth of this volume, there is much that is not covered. For example, the dying process and the conflicts that have arisen between lifesaving technologies and religious understandings of death deserve much more treatment. The growth of the hospice movement around the world is another area that awaits further study, as does the relationship between belief and practice and changing visions of the afterlife. The reader will undoubtedly add other neglected areas to this list. It is our hope that this study will stimulate much more discussion and research on the complex ways religion is enacted in the face of death in the modern social context.

NOTES

1. David Chidester, *Patterns of Transcendence: Religion, Death, and Dying,* 2nd ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2002), 5.

2. Robert Orsi, "Everyday Miracles: The Study of Lived Religion," in *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice,* ed. David D. Hall, 3–21 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 7.

3. Ibid.

4. Ronald L. Grimes, *Deeply into the Bond: Re-inventing Rites of Passage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 219.

5. David Hall, "Introduction," in *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice,* ed. David D. Hall, vii–xiii (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), xi.

6. Orsi, "Everyday Miracles," 7.

7. Books on afterlife beliefs include Hiroshi Obayashi, ed., *Death and Afterlife: Perspectives of World Religions* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1992), and Christopher Jay Johnson and Marsha G. McGee, eds., *How Different Religions View Death and Afterlife* (Philadelphia: Charles Press, 1991). Books that address both beliefs and practices include David Chidester, *Patterns of Transcendence:*

Religion, Death, and Dying, 2nd ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2002); Colin Murray Parkes, Pittu Laungani, and Bill Young, eds., *Death and Bereavement Across Cultures* (New York: Routledge, 1996); and Authur Berger et al., eds., *Perspectives on Death and Dying: Cross-Cultural and Multi-Disciplinary Views* (Philadelphia: Charles Press, 1989).

8. Michael D. McNally criticizes textbooks on religion in America for confining Native religions to the first chapter, but the same pattern can be found in textbooks on religion and death; see McNally, "Religion and Culture Change in Native North America," in *Perspectives on American Religion and Culture,* ed. Peter W. Williams, 270–285 (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1999).

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I

RELIGIOUS APPROACHES TO DEATH

CHAPTER 1

The Politics of Death and Burial in Native California

DENNIS F. KELLEY

Having received some of my best postgraduate training among Native American communities, sitting around the dinner table, playing with the kids and dogs out in the yard, driving an elder to the grocery, and so forth, I find it important to begin (as one always should) with a story. This story comes in two parts.

Part One—On August 3, 1992, a pipeline owned and operated by Union Oil Company of California (Unocal) just off the California coast at Avila Beach sprang a leak, sending some 600 barrels of oil into the ocean. During the cleanup operations, heavy equipment and helicopters were brought in, using the bluff overlooking what is now called Pirate's Cove as a staging point. In less than a week of operations, the already fragile topsoil of the bluff was eroded at an alarming rate, weakening the cliffs along some of the most beautiful and uncluttered coastline in San Luis Obispo County. The work was also literally uncovering what was once a closely guarded secret: on this small piece of private property sits a space known by the Chumash Indians of San Luis Obispo as *Sextápu*—special for many reasons but primarily because of the presence of ancestral remains.

Over the years, Chumash people had been coming to this place in relative secrecy. Owned by a private landowner but in a "flashpoint" (the no-build zone surrounding the nearby oil storage facility), it is completely void of the trappings of the modern California coast. The no-build zone means no condos, no houses, no structures of any kind could be built here, but also that neither the state nor the county would take over the maintenance or policing of the stretch of beach that lay below the bluff. After years of wrangling, the owner stopped trying to prevent people from descending the trail to the shore, and it became a popular "clothing-optional" beach where dogs were free of leash laws, campfires could be built, and alcohol consumed. There had been an uneasy détente

established between various factions that assumed ersatz ownership of the area, with a loosely organized group of sunbathers and vagabonds forming in order to maintain a modicum of propriety.

However, with the spill and subsequent cleanup damage to the area, the one group for whom this détente had to be reevaluated was the Chumash community. Rapid topsoil loss had exposed the area's true nature, and an unfortunate piece in the local newspaper brought pothunters (individuals who illegally dig for artifacts) and an increased, albeit unwanted, curiosity from regular beachgoers. The subsequent battle between the Chumash and virtually everyone else who had any vested interest in the area brought to light a very uncomfortable fact, namely, that even this decidedly left-leaning, Sirrah-and-Volvo mecca was united in its opinion that the area should not be closed off to foot traffic, regardless of Native concerns. In fact, once the large equipment was gone, the bluff became even more conducive to automobiles, beyond the occasional four-wheel drive trucks that dared to venture off the main road leading to the area, and regulars created a de facto parking area through regular use on the most damaged portion of the site.

It was during my involvement in some of the various attempts at settling the issue that I received a crash course in the application of the legislative quagmire known as the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA). It was also at this time that I heard Chumash elder Pilulaw Khus utter the phrase "the whole damn state is a site!" in response to a contract archaeologist who was given the task of determining the level of Unocal's responsibility for site cleanup. This archaeologist (ill-advisedly, as anyone who knows Pilulaw would attest) took a condescending stance with regard to the boundaries of the "sacred" area, attempting to mitigate his employer's responsibility by claiming that the area damaged by the actual spill was not "site," a sort of academic border-designator between the sacred and the profane. It was, therefore, the portion of the property that contained the human remains that was of archaeological significance, and the sacrality of the area was for the law to decide.

After much wrangling, some of it quite confrontational, San Luis Obispo County requested that Unocal repair the damage to the site. The company agreed (the worst for Unocal was yet to come, as the state ordered it to essentially move the nearby town of Avila Beach, clean up yet another oil spill, then replace the town, which it did to the tune of several million dollars), and the area was covered in fill dirt, boulders placed in order to block vehicle traffic onto the most sensitive portions, and native vegetation planted. The path down to the beach was moved so that it skirted the site, and the circles formed at regular intervals for memorial rituals at Sextápu have several new faces, both Indian and non.

Part Two—A Chumash elder, María Torres[1] passed away on February 13, 2001. Grandma María had become increasingly interested in her Chumash heritage late in life, as many of her generation were underexposed to it as young people due to the stigma attached to being Indian in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As she grew older, she gladly participated in the revival of the Chumash maritime culture via the community's unique plank canoe and its associated traditions. The canoe, called a *tomol,* had become

the catalyst for the increased cultural awareness of her children's and grandchildren's generations, and whenever the paddlers went to sea or there were repairs to be made and ceremonies to be observed, Grandma María was there to give the blessings. Upon her passing, a distinct split in family comfort level with regard to Native burial and funerary practices arose. The key factions were the devout Roman Catholics, for whom their Chumash ancestry was virtually irrelevant, and those more sharply invested in their Chumash heritage to the level of an absolute rejection of Catholicism. The Roman Catholic mission system, after all, had brought misery to the Native population in the area and perpetrated the near demise of the entire culture.

The night before the funeral, the Rosary was said at the funeral home. At this ceremony, traditionally a small, intimate mourning ritual that includes a recitation of the Holy Rosary, there was a brief, unnerving, but also extremely interesting incident. Some family members who identified closely with their Chumash heritage attempted to bring Native elements into the ritual in the form of white sage, both burnt as incense and placed in bundles in the casket. These relatives also attempted to sing traditional songs, make offerings of tobacco, and place handmade objets d'art in the casket prior to burial. Other, more devoutly Catholic family relatives openly objected, and the tension almost developed into open physical confrontation. However, a compromise was reached. The Native elements of Grandma María's mourning ritual were done in private, away from the Rosary Mass, and herbal medicines and burial items were allowed to be placed in the casket.

The following day, at the actual funeral, the rift was out in the open again. The funeral was held at the local mission church, clearly one of the acknowledged battlegrounds with regard to Chumash religious culture, and again, an uneasy compromise was struck. While many attendees very pointedly remained outside the church in the parking lot, the funeral Mass was said inside, with members of the *tomol* crew accompanying the casket both into and out of the church, bearing tomol paddles aloft. Those who were unaware of the discomfort surrounding the whole process were delighted by the way in which both the Native and Catholic spiritual practices were acknowledged. However, beneath the surface lay the real tensions that often pit family members against each other and maintain a level of discord within the Chumash communities—a discord used to justify the lack of a Chumash voice in regional politics.

An interesting contradiction lives between the lines of these stories, and not one that can easily be divided into the cultural differences between Natives and non-Natives. What I see, rather, is the inherent difference between the "modern" and the "traditional." Though this dichotomy is often (and I think mistakenly) seen as merely "ancient versus contemporary," I would argue that it is inherently possible to be both traditional *and* contemporary. However, modernity is, among a great many other things, suspicious of tradition in that traditional culture focuses primarily on values that have been handed down from generation to generation, while modernity tends to privilege the new, the innovative, and the topical. What I will attempt here is an analysis of the very different meanings that death and burial practices have in contemporary Native communities that