



Contemporary Attitudes to Death and the Implications for the Conduct of Funerals

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1. Who has traditionally conducted funerals in Scotland?

Historical precedents are crucial in understanding current attitudes to death and funerals. An historical survey of funerals since the Scottish Reformation in 1560 provided the first surprising discovery, viz. that ministers did not conduct funerals until the latter half of the nineteenth century. There has never been a prohibition in the laws of the Church of Scotland to prevent anyone conducting a funeral, but it is certainly not commonplace currently. However, in a clergy-dominated church there must inevitably be more involvement of the whole people of God, and in practical terms this is beginning to be encouraged to assist a full-time ministry which is fewer numerically and consequently overburdened pastorally. Nevertheless, this is no innovation.

For many years in Scotland there was a reticence for ministers to conduct funerals for fear that this should imply that prayers be said for the dead, which was contrary to the Reformation spirit. The Calvinists viewed as crucial the need to prepare the faithful for death, but deemed it unnecessary to permit anything which might be regarded as superstitious or Roman in the funeral rites. The Book of Discipline, as well as proscribing the singing of Mass and other liturgical chants, also discourages other forms of singing along with preaching and reading, fearing that such practices of the living may be regarded as being for the benefit of the dead. Although it is true that Knox preached at the burial of the Good Regent, such clerical participation was not the norm.

A century later, little had changed, with the Westminster Directory for the Public Worship of God still insisting on no ritual at the time of burial. Indeed, it is even less specific than Knox in the 16th century concerning any clerical role. More specifically it suggests an important role for

the friends of the deceased. Although there are occasional examples of something akin to a liturgy, such as the ‘Montrose Form and Manner of Burial’ (dated prior to 1581), the Covenant proved fatal to them, such that by 1641 there was no religious service at all at funerals. Traces of devotional exercises at the coffining of the dead sometimes did occur, especially where a minister was present, but the funeral itself was still done without clergy, as otherwise anything savouring of Popery might be suspected.

Ministerial participation evolved in the most unlikely manner. From the 1830’s and 1840’s prayers were offered as grace for refreshments before and/or after funerals. Often the coffining was a social occasion with refreshments, with grace being said, and was probably the precursor to the later recognisable funeral service in the house with Scripture readings and prayers. If more than one minister was present, then two prayers were offered – once before and one after the distribution of the cake, wine, and whisky. Post-funeral gatherings required similar strengthening of the faithful due to inclement weather and again required grace to be offered. From these practices developed the modern clergy-dominated funeral, although there remained throughout the nineteenth century a suspicion of eulogies, the only thanksgiving tolerated being directed towards the Almighty.



2. Funeral rites in Scotland since 1945

Not until the publication of the 1940 Book of Common Order did the Church of Scotland set out the kind of funeral services which were approved. Until the union of 1929, those orders which had been approved (viz. ‘Prayers for Divine Service’, 1923 and 1929, along with the Book of Common Order 1928) and unofficial productions such as ‘Euchologion’, were the product of a divided Church following the schism of 1843. This 1940 book was to become regarded as possessing great authority, and was widely used and consulted as the mainstay of orthodoxy in liturgical and practical matters. Although revised in 1979, it was not until the 1994 publication ‘Common Order’ that it was truly supplanted, as Common Order followed the 1940 rather than the 1979

model. Thus until the middle of the last decade it was probably the 1940 publication which was most influential.

(a) *The Venue*

The rubric for the first Order for the Burial of the Dead in the 1940 Book indicates that it is intended for use in church or in the house of the bereaved. In the years immediately following World War II the practice of holding a service in the home was commonplace, whereas it was rather unusual to have a church funeral. It may be that the historical consciousness in a hitherto Presbyterian Scotland is probably still aware that it has never been the custom to have funerals in church, although there would probably be utter ignorance as to the reason. Furthermore, the contemporary influential role of undertakers has often superseded that of the church, and may help explain why an increasing proportion of funerals is now in funeral parlours. However, many clergy who are only too happy to marry couples in church often show a marked reticence to conduct funerals in church, except for those who display commitment to God by their regular attendance at public worship. This is a curious anomaly, in that a higher percentage of people wish to have some kind of religious funeral than those who wish to have a religious marriage. It may further be argued that the venue of the church is more appropriate than the funeral parlour, in that the former celebrates life at baptisms and weddings, whereas the latter is singularly associated with death. The same may be argued against the crematorium being the sole venue for a funeral.

(b) *The Music*

The 1940 book simply suggests that the service may begin with the singing of a suitable Psalm, Paraphrase, or Hymn, whereas the 1994 book suggests specific points for singing. A new factor today, however, is the suitability of the music played before and after, and even during the service. Ministers are put under enormous pressure to permit the playing of the deceased's favourite songs, and these are often non-hymn-like in tone, dynamics and style, but often given an aura of mysticism

by the bereaved. The current author has had requests for the like of “O Danny Boy” (the Londonderry Air) for someone from a Northern Irish background, and “The Toon o’ Arbroath” for a local citizen, both of which are typical of the avant-garde choices from the new *liturgia desiderata*. The explanation is undoubtedly that the drift away from the Church in Scotland has resulted in the majority of the population having little or no acquaintance with hymns or psalms. A colleague recalls being rather pleased when asked by a non-church family if they could have the hymn “How Great Thou Art” at their loved one’s funeral. When he responded affirmatively, he enquired why they had chosen this fine hymn, and was given the reason: “Because he (the deceased) was just a great man.”

(c) Scripture Sentences and Liturgy of the Word

Both the 1940 Book of Common Order and the 1994 book (First Order) begin with appropriate Scriptural sentences, with the latter offering a greater variety. Each, however, contains a non-canonical source, the book of Wisdom. This would certainly have been unthinkable for previous generations in Scotland. Even the Euchologion, considered progressive in its time, would not have dared to suggest the use of an Apocryphal book. Furthermore, the 1994 book encourages longer extracts to be read later in the service from the third and fourth chapters of Wisdom. Only the 1979 book suggests the saying of the Creed.

(d) Prayers

Whereas the 1979 book reaffirms the traditional phraseology of the 1940 book, it does have a brief reference to confession, and the 1994 book has a longer prayer which is confessional in tone, but unfortunately no words of absolution are given, unlike the 1979 book. An interesting change occurs, however, in the later editions of the 1940 book, where the words in the middle of the second prayer are changed from “... (we thank thee) ... that *he* is entered into the rest that remaineth for Thy people” to “... and we pray that *he* may enter into the rest that remaineth for Thy people.” In the first editions, that part of the prayer

is thanksgiving for a *fait accompli* whereas in the latter editions it is a petition – praying for the dead. The 1994 book has no qualms in saying “Rest eternal grant unto *him*, O Lord. And let light perpetual shine upon *him*.” Nevertheless, there are various examples during the twentieth century of disputes concerning praying for the dead. For example, in 1977 the Presbytery of Kincardine and Deeside questioned the advisability of a prayer prepared by the Church of Scotland’s Committee on Public Worship and Aids to Devotion to celebrate the Queen’s semi-jubilee in which the following prefaced the Benediction —“God, grant to the living grace, to the departed rest, to his Church, the Queen ...” However, many today would argue that such prayers for the dead both edify the believer and the Church as a whole. Perhaps more surprising than all the old arguments is that none of the books promotes the *Nunc Dimittis*, which is surely extraordinarily appropriate for those who have given of themselves in serving the Church (although it is offered as an option in the first order of the 1994 committal).



3. Universalism and Funerals

Even in an age of rapidly declining church membership, the average Scot feels that he belongs, intrinsically or extrinsically, to the Church. Due to the parish system there does not seem to be a clear-cut dichotomy between the ‘churched’ and the ‘unchurched’. There is a common perception that it is God’s business to forgive all his children and after death take them to be with him, thereby relying on a theocentric hope rather than a more specifically Christocentric soteriology. The terminology utilised at funerals encourages this, and the 1994 book in its first order asserts boldly that “we have entrusted our *brother N.* to God’s merciful keeping.” The prayer which follows reiterates the confident assertion —“keep us united with our loved ones ... from whom in death we are not divided.” Most ministers would fear that they were being judgmental were they to use a completely different liturgy for the ‘unchurched’ and those who are ‘non-practising’ Christians. However, one contemporary scholar argues that the Church is remaining true to its heritage of distinguishing between the elect and those who are not, between the visible and the invisible Church, leaving the demarcation

to Almighty God. The Book of Common Worship for the Presbyterian Church USA links death with baptism and with Holy Communion, but that is in a country where people consciously choose to be members of particular congregations. In Scotland, however, it is not always clear whether the deceased has been baptised or has participated in the Lord's Supper. Thus the theological content of funeral services in Scotland is more likely to concentrate on soteriological issues and a God who is both omniscient and all-merciful, rather than on sacramental lines, as is the case in the USA.



4. For whom is the worship of the funeral service?

Traditionally all Christian worship must be offered to God even though addressed to people. Calvin bemoaned the danger of being emotionally moved by music, thereby detracting from the worship of the Almighty. The danger of much modern worship is of glorifying the performers rather than edifying the worshippers and glorifying God. Even the greatest composers such as J S Bach and J Haydn appended the words “*Soli Deo Gloria*” and “*Laus Deo*” respectively on their works to remind themselves of the great divine gift they had received.

The funeral service is, of course, a wonderful evangelical opportunity and in that sense is directed towards the mourners. It is also practical, allowing the mourners to deal with unfinished grief from previous bereavements by linking us immediately with continuing inner pain which may have been suppressed, enabling this to be done in a manageable ritualised manner. However, the funeral must be conducted on the *ecclesia's* own faith terms, as to do otherwise would mean that there is no *ecclesia* and the funeral is not a Christian funeral. The increasingly common fashion of requesting funerals that are life-centred on the deceased and are thus not Christocentric perhaps should indeed, with encouragement, be conducted by ‘non-clergy.’



5. The Soul in Christian (and Greek) thought and the Resurrection of the Body

‘Soul’ and ‘resurrection’ are two of the most commonly employed words in any discussion relating to the afterlife, and as such the author discusses them in depth. Oscar Cullmann in his work “Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Body?” depicts the orthodox theological position. The immortality of the soul is a Platonic idea, rather than a doctrine which emanates from the Scriptures. The whole Christ event, his life, death, resurrection, and ascension, is rooted in *Heilsgeschichte* and is inconsistent with the Greek belief in immortality. The ‘soul’ which so frequently occurs in the Bible is not *per se* immortal, but is only so through the resurrection of Jesus and through faith in him – i.e. where God gives it new life through a new creation. Death’s power is removed through the victory of Jesus over death, but his resurrection is not itself the state of fulfilment for the believer – that state of fulfilment remains in the future on the ‘last day’ when there will be a resurrected body, a new act of creation by God.

A more modern approach is that by Nancey Murphy, who insists that humans do not have an immortal soul because the nature of the interaction between a non-material soul and a physical body and brain is unclear. She contends that to have a separate entity within dualism which is the soul, there must be some sphere of agency within human mental and physical activity, not accounted for by our neurocognitive systems, which in turn must interact with our ongoing thinking and responding in some way. In place of the traditional concept of dualism, as the body/soul concept is usually called, Murphy believes that there should be an understanding of the human person rooted in what she calls ‘nonreductive physicalism’. By this she means that a person is a physical organism that possesses higher-level mental traits which emerge from, but are not reducible to, complex lower-level physical processes in the brain. It is nonreductive because the physical organism cannot be completely explained in scientific terms. The person is a physical organism whose complex functioning is capable of higher

capacities, such as conscious self-awareness and relatedness, as well as supervenient capacities for morality and spirituality not present at basic levels of organism. When she talks about souls, she is talking about whole persons'— body, mind, and spirit, and instead of saying that we do not have souls, she would prefer to say that we are souls.

Nancey Murphy believes neuroscience has in a sense completed the Darwinian revolution by bringing the human mind/soul as well as the human body into the sphere of scientific investigation. In recent centuries, the great majority of theologians have taken the reality of the soul for granted, whereas contemporary philosophers are almost unanimous in their rejection of any notion of the soul, and Murphy's work makes an important contribution to the continuing debate about the nature of the soul.



6. Local project – Questionnaire on Attitudes to Death and Funerals

460 people completed a local questionnaire, and of these there was almost an equal balance between those who claimed church affiliation and those who did not – the differential was within 5% and this was a matter of good fortune rather than a deliberate policy. 62.6% of respondents were female and 37.4% male. What follows can only be a few of the interesting findings of the survey.

65.7% of females and 54.1% of males claimed to believe in an afterlife. Of those who claimed church membership, 73% of females and 74% of males claimed so to believe. These latter figures are rather disturbing on what is a fundamental article of faith, and may point to the need for contemporary apologetic teaching among those who form the nucleus of congregations.

The concept of the immortality of the soul is very much the predominant belief concerning an afterlife. It was almost entirely coupled with the belief that 'we are safe in God's hands'. Together these accounted for 52.5% of the entire sample, rising to 69.2% among church members. Even taking into account a wide margin for error, these figures are very

similar to earlier major UK surveys and follow the same trends. The longevity of the belief in the ‘immortal soul’ is remarkable. Only 4.3% of the general sample believed in a future resurrection, with the figure rising just a little to 5.1% of church members. One conclusion is that Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians chapter 15 needs to be expounded more, with its emphasis on the resurrection of the spiritual body, and greater clerical care is essential with the word ‘soul’.

When asked if our lives simply came to an end, the word ‘obliterated’ having been deliberately chosen lest there be any doubt about what was meant, 13.5% of the general sample agreed with this assertion, dropping to 5.5% among the church populace. Most other UK surveys tended to be about 33% of the total population, and the local figure may be explained by the conservative nature of a small town, where departure from the church’s teaching tends to be less dramatic or sudden.

The author was surprised at the percentage of 7% who believed in reincarnation. Although this is below the 12% of other UK studies, it is nevertheless in an area where those of Oriental background and descent form only just over 2% of the population. The most likely reason is that this is a by-product of the system of Moral and Religious Education in our schools. That this is so is indicated by the fact that it was largely students in the 18 plus age-bracket who positively indicated their belief in reincarnation. Since the national guidelines were set out in 1992, some 40% of the curriculum in primary schools is based on Christianity, with 60% based on other world religions and moral development. The relevant document is excellent but it may be argued that its celebration of non-Christian festivals may leave a memorable mark on those children who do not come from Christian homes and have not direct access to Christian teaching through Sunday Schools. The likelihood is that where the church has failed to make any impact, the credibility of another religion and pleasant early memories of it render it more attractive than Christianity.

71.6% of church members very much believe in reunion with loved ones after death, compared with 43.6% of non-church people. This can have pastoral repercussions. For example, it is highly unfashionable,

due to the vast numbers of war dead, to dare suggest that some of these may not have reached the bliss of paradise, another trend towards a universalist position. Thus a decrease in the number of sermons and church teaching on judgement may have helped encourage belief in an automatic reunion after death.

Most people claimed that funerals are helpful – 83.8% of church members and 69.2% of non-church people. Part of the reason may be found in the answer to the next question in the survey, where just over half of the people, both church and non-church, responded that they actively wished to help organise the content of the service. For example, 68% of church members and 61.2% of non-church respondents wished to have poems and prose as well as Scripture readings. Is Scripture seen as insufficient or confusing? It is much more likely just another example of the secularisation of funerals even among church members— a rare example of the pseudo-romantic among normally reserved Scots.

There was almost total unanimity with regard to the playing of favourite music before and after funeral services. Even within the service itself, 56.6% of church members and 80.8% of non-church people demanded to personalise the service with favourite music. The request for more personalised funerals seems to permeate the whole spectrum of beliefs.

Concerning the venue for funerals, there was a marked reluctance to use funeral parlours, only 11% of church people and 19% of non-church interviewees requesting them. However, in practice, about 60% of funerals conducted by the author are in parlours. It is possible that when arranging details, the bereaved person will be only too happy to have the whole matter completed as quickly as possible, and many may unwittingly agree when the parlour is offered, although undertakers should be more careful to offer all the alternatives. Over 70% of church members and almost 30% of others indicated they would wish to use the church premises. The latter may seem surprising but it may be a simple request to use the extensive accommodation churches provide.

44% of church people said they would opt for cremation and 38.8% burial, whereas 39.5% of non-church individuals would opt for cremation and 32.5% for burial. Of those favouring cremation, 45% of church people said they would scatter remains at a favourite spot, compared with 61% of others. 30.2% of church respondents preferred burial of the remains, and the comparable figure for others was 15.4%. The general feeling seemed to be that ashes, unlike a body in a grave, are non-personal and it did not matter what became of them. The high incidence of belief in the immortal soul encourages the view that ashes are irrelevant, whereas the burial of a corpse may conceivably be related to resurrection, even though most seem ignorant of Paul's teaching on the subject.

61% of church interviewees and 45% of non-church respondents knew that anyone could in theory conduct a funeral. This is probably attributable to the fact that a well-known local figure regularly conducts funerals, though not himself a clergyman. Furthermore, 58.3% of church and 27.5% of non-church people claimed they would insist that it be a clergyman who conducted a family funeral. This difference is reflected in practice, as nearly all the funerals conducted by the aforesaid gentleman are indeed for non-church members.

Concerning the request for a relative or friend to take part in the funeral service, 54% of church members assented to this and 70.9% of others. Here again there is an indication that many wish to have more personalised funerals rather than the traditional straightforward liturgy.

The question as to whether respondents had ever prayed for someone after his/her death demonstrates that the old fear of praying for the dead is itself buried. 79.1% of church members said they had done so, and 60.4% of others. It is indeed doubtful whether more than a handful of interviewees were even aware of the historical theological problem.



7. Conclusion

There does indeed seem to be a trend towards secularisation of funerals, with their control passing from the Church to funeral directors, a process aided by the increasing popularity of cremations, away from the immediate vicinity of ecclesiastical buildings. There is also much evidence to suggest that the bereaved wish to take control of organising these last events, although today most would consider themselves ‘spiritual’ rather than ‘religious’. This term ‘spiritual’ has been promoted by the upsurge of interest in New Age groups. That which is pragmatic, therapeutic and environmental is often preferred to traditional Christian ritual. The worry of many clergy is that there could be an impasse between life-centred and more traditional Christocentric funerals. It is certainly difficult to imagine how the dogmatic secularist on the one hand and the traditionalist on the other could be reconciled. However, astute clergy may succeed in a little flexibility and employ prayers of thanksgiving whose aim is to invoke memories and have the effect of a eulogy, but in a way more acceptable to the officiator. New strategies and more involvement of the whole people of God, both in officiating and participating, are far from impossible and perhaps indeed benefits to all may ensue.

Further Reading:

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Appendix 1

Please **CIRCLE** what you think is the appropriate answer.

1. Please indicate whether you are male or female
Male / Female
2. Are you a member of any Church?
Yes / No / Don't know
3. How often do you attend Church?
Weekly / Fortnightly / Monthly / Seldom / Never
4. Do you believe in some form of life after death?
Yes / No / Don't know
5. What do you believe happens after death? Circle more than one if necessary.
Our souls survive and pass to another life
We are obliterated i.e. we come to an end.
We are safe in God's hands
We await a resurrection in the future.
We are reincarnated, i.e. we come back as someone or something else.
Some other idea of afterlife
Don't know
6. Do you believe you will be reunited with your loved ones after death?
Yes / No / Don't know
7. Do you find funeral services helpful?
Yes / No / Don't know
8. Would you wish to organise the content of a family funeral service?
Yes / No
9. Would you wish all readings at a family funeral to be from Scripture or would you wish a favourite poem or piece of prose to be read instead of or as well as Scripture?
Scripture only / Favourite poem only / Both Scripture and poem
10. Would you wish some favourite music to be played before and after the service?
Yes / No / Don't know

11. Would you wish any non-religious music played during the service?
Yes / No / Don't know
12. Would you prefer a family funeral service to be in the Church, in the Funeral Parlour, or all of it or part of it at the Crematorium or at the graveside? Circle one or two categories as appropriate. _
Church / Funeral Parlour / all at Crematorium / partly at Crematorium / all at the graveside / partly at the graveside / Don't really mind which.
13. Did you know that a funeral can be conducted by anyone, i.e. – it does not have to be a minister?
Yes / No
14. Would you insist that a family funeral be conducted by an ordained minister or would you permit a competent non-clergy person to officiate?
Have to be a minister / don't mind it being a competent non-clergy person.
15. *Would you wish a close friend or member of the family to take part in the service, no matter who is conducting it?*
Yes / No / Don't know
16. Do you or have you ever prayed for a member of the family or for a friend *after* the person has died?
Yes / No
17. Generally speaking for your own family and friends do you prefer burial or cremation?
Burial / Cremation / Don't know
18. If any member of your family was to be cremated, what would you wish to do with the remains?
Have them scattered by crematorium staff privately.
Scatter them privately yourself at a chosen spot.
Have them buried in a cemetery.
Unsure what to do with them.
Doesn't apply as there would not be cremations in my family.

Thank you for your kindness in helping with this questionnaire.

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