

## Disposal of the body

### Introduction

How to deal with human corpses has been a recurrent feature within the pages of *Mortality*. This is as might be expected of an aspect of human life that reaches from the depths of individual psychology through the necessities of law and community life into the explanatory realms of philosophy and religion. In fact, there is practically no single aspect of death studies that inevitably engages with as many academic disciplines as human disposal: archaeology passes into antiquity and on to realms accessible to history in tracing concrete human actions, while anthropology and sociology explore the contemporary significance of funerary rites in culture after culture. Philosophy and literary studies are also engaged with the enigma of the human body once it is devoid of that life which animated the person it once was. Psychology embraces the ensuing grief while theology, as the reflective dimension of each religion, gives itself not only to explaining this relation of body and self but also to the practical issues surrounding what to do with the corpse.

At this point the very use of words becomes slightly problematic in that the noun 'disposal' and its verb 'to dispose', despite being regularly used in connection with the corpse, nevertheless feel inadequate or inappropriate. The very notion of 'disposal' seems to indicate a degree of worthlessness in the object concerned and yet, in many cultures, the dead body does retain a degree of worth because of the person it once was. There is, then, a degree of ambiguity and inherent contradiction involved in the corpse and in what is often done with it. That tension of significance is one that manifests itself in a great variety of ways whether in the traditional theological language of funeral liturgies or in the desire for individualized forms of family-designed funerals. In psychological terms, too, it is possible to see a degree of ambivalence in the attraction and repulsion associated with the dead body. This problematic attitude to the dead, which varies from culture to culture and from time to time within each culture, is one that affects the cultural life of death researchers and those, in many societies, who read *Mortality*. With that in mind it is important to be as explicit as possible over the otherwise implicit attitudes surrounding the corpse and what is done with it so as not to assume that 'disposal' raises the same kind of response in every culture, just as within any single society there are some people who may, indeed, see their body as something to be disposed of when they die in as utilitarian a way as possible while others seek some very particular treatment for their post-mortem frame.

The articles included in this collection of contributions to *Mortality* express something of the breadth of possible material concerning the disposal of the human body whilst also, explicitly or implicitly echoing something of the symbolic tension inherent in 'disposal' within the cultural contexts described by each

author. In the very first edition of *Mortality* Gerdien Jonker provides an account of Islamic attitudes to death in the migrant context of Berlin.[1] She draws sharp attention not only to the ‘ambivalence of individuals between ‘here’ and ‘there’ in a geographical sense, but also between the varied customs of Muslims from different cultural and religious traditions. She shows how a funeral is an occasion when the identities of these groups come into a degree of competition and are affirmed through particular practices. She also showed how photography, for example, could come into its own as an important record of the maintenance of tradition and identity by the Berlin-based family members for the wider family in their Islamic homeland. Some of the theoretical issues surrounding the question of ethnic identity in relation to the dominant culture were the focus of Eva Reimers’ clear and instructive exploration of notions of identity and of cultural boundary construction and maintenance set in the context of Sweden but reflecting upon the cases of Chilean and Polish funerals.[2] She shows, for example, how cemeteries, by allowing options for style and the messages inscribed upon headstones allow people to construct and announce their preferred identities, even allowing for a new and multicultural Sweden to emerge through those choices.

The nature of established funerary customs in a country is one significant feature in the nature and kind of adaptation facing any immigrant group. The fact that burial had been long customary in Germany, as in other European countries, made it easy for Muslims to cope with death even if it involved a relatively small degree of adaptation of their own traditional form of burial. In a similar way, for example, the growing number of Sikhs migrating to Europe and North America from Indian backgrounds from the mid-1960s led to established communities whose cultural life was fostered by the fact that facilities for cremation had, by then, become firmly established in most urban areas. In my own article, ‘*The sacred crematorium*’,[3] attention is drawn to the relationship between the crematorium as a distinctive institution in modern society and the experiences people gain at such buildings. It also touches upon the once fashionable theory that it was some form of experience of the dead that contributed to the origin of religion. The nature and impact of cremation upon contemporary life and in relation to burial is drawn out in Florence Vandendorpe’s descriptively rich account of funerals in Belgium.[4] In theoretical terms too, she considers earlier authors and the notions of symbolic impoverishment of contemporary funerals when compared with the past, arguing that symbolic creativity remains active, albeit expressed in novel forms. As to the institution of crematoria, Hilary Grainger’s paper on the Golders Green crematorium[5] is an important and innovative account of the choice of architects and of the architectural style for what was to become one of London’s most influential crematoria.

Although it might easily be thought that, by contrast with cremation and crematoria, cemeteries are ancient institutions Julie Rugg’s paper in 1998 shows how they were relatively recent, by contrast with church graveyards.[6] Her account exemplifies the interdisciplinary nature of death studies by showing how cemeteries relate to history, to the corpse, to personal grief as well as to the landscape. In a further paper considering the question ‘what makes a cemetery a

cemetery?',[7] she adds significantly to our theoretical engagement with cemeteries by furnishing definitions and perspectives that are likely to be influential on future research, as in her typifying of cemeteries, churchyards, burial grounds, mass graves, war cemeteries and pantheons. At the more immediate level of ethnographic research the personal dimension of the use of graves and cemeteries is incisively accounted for by Doris Francis, Leonie Kellaher and Georgina Neophytou.[8] Grounded in empirical research of some 1,500 people in the London area it describes and interprets the nature of visits people pay to cemeteries and to their individual family graves. They emphasise the importance of the interplay between people, their experiences in relation to the dead and the cemetery environment in which part of this emerges.

Both the cemetery and the crematorium serve as transition points for the dead, a transition that is usually accomplished through some form of funerary rite. It was to the nature and the words used in some Christian contexts that Keith Dennison addressed himself.[9] Comparing a period of change in liturgy within the Anglican Church in Wales with the liturgies of the Church of England he draws attention to the tensions involved in relating tradition to contemporary trends and social change as in, for example, the personalising of funeral rites and in the treatment of cremated remains. An entirely complementary aspect of the disposal of the body lies in the hands of funeral directors. In his paper Brian Parsons describes the changing status of family-run funeral directors on the one hand and large, centralised, funeral directing companies on the other.[10] When pondering the future of funeral directing he draws important attention to the growth of pre-paid funeral plans, to the place of women in the profession and to the regulation of funeral directions in terms of qualifications and competence.

Amongst the most important elements surrounding disposal of the body is the law. Stephen White's contribution[11] describes an early case of the exhumation of Henry Crookenden in England, his transport to Milan for cremation and the subsequent burial of his remains in Wales. It goes on to consider the historically significant legal trial of Dr William Price, arrested on the attempted cremation of his dead son, and of his acquittal. Both cases are considered in relation to the Cremation Society of England and its delicate attempts at moving towards the legalisation of cremation within a society that might easily have opposed that move.

White's consideration of the law and cremation, when set amidst the other contributions in this collection of papers from *Mortality*, shows so clearly that social context of the disposal of the dead that touches many powerful social and psychological forces. Together, these demand an interdisciplinary perspective if we are to gain any kind of satisfactory perspective on the place of death in human society. What characterises each of these papers is an excitement in engaging in research that is at an early stage of development and which offers immense scope for the future.

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