

Why Religious Traditions And Ritual Should Be Encouraged and Maintained in Funeral Service

by Jarrod M. Krieger

Editor's note: The following article was the first-place winner in a 1997 essay contest conducted by the Jewish Funeral Directors of America, based in Lynn, Massachusetts. The annual contest is open to all students enrolled in a college of mortuary science. Author Jarrod Krieger was a student at the Simmons Institute of Funeral Service in Syracuse, New York. Reprinted with permission of Krieger and the JFDA.

"Whether religion be true or false, it must be necessarily granted to be the only wise principle and safe hypotheses for a man to live and die by."

—Tillotson

From the time we are born, and throughout our lives, we are constantly evolving through important changes in the life cycle. Through experience with our parents and family and education through school, we learn about religion and traditions passed on through the generations. When we reach these important changes or events, we usually acknowledge them with rituals, or rites of passage. Often, these rituals have religious meaning associated with them. As we follow these traditions and rituals throughout life, we need to conclude life with the same sacred rituals that we started.

The life of a person is the bridge that connects the events of birth and death. Birth is usually greeted by much anticipation, joy and gladness. By contrast, death usually is accompanied by sorrow, fear, distress and uncertainty. All over the world, people have religious traditions and rituals for every occasion of the life cycle, whether it be birth, marriage or death. From bris and baptisms, to bar/bat mitzvahs and communions, to weddings, to last rites and Vidui (Jewish confession), religious customs are the key to preserving these life events.

Why then should we encourage religious traditions and rituals in the funeral service, an event that occurs after the life cycle ends? There are several reasons, including religious practices of the deceased, spiritual

continuity, expectations from family members, familiarity and comfort for the bereaved, and fear of the unknown and its consequences.

Before we go further, we should define rituals. "Rituals are symbolic acts which societies consider holy and objects of sacred concern. Rituals give dramatic expression to the ideals by which a group or society lives and which it seeks to spread among its members.

Rituals are also the bases of unity within the group, although at the same time, they permit diversity of interpretation."

Rituals also help provide a formal pattern of behavior to guide an individual during confusing or chaotic periods of transition.

Many cultures have a formal ceremony to "send off" the soul of their loved ones to the great unknown. A funeral, as we know it, is a ritual that has guidelines outlined by the culture or faith, that facilitate salvation for the dead and healing for the bereaved. "Funeral rituals are rituals of binding and release. While they bind mourners together in their common grief, they are facilitating separation from the one who has died." The funeral process serves as the final religious ritual in one's life. It is a time where family and friends join together to pay respects and to honor the life of the deceased. A funeral is the one event in the life cycle that is not a celebration or simcha. When a birth or marriage occurs, there is celebration in anticipation of a wonderful future. The total opposite is true of a death. With a funeral there is sadness and uncertainty. Religion helps ease the situation and comforts those coping with the loss. Belief in one's religion brings hope and anticipation that their loved one is going to a better place, a place their religion has described as being peaceful and wonderful. Religion also brings hope for the family members that they may one day be reunited with their loved one either in heaven or by way of resurrection.

When survivors participate in rituals, not only are they helped by others, but they are also provided with an opportunity to help themselves mourn." Those who are participating in the death ritual are, by their actions, acknowledging the reality of the death. Each aspect of

