

# **Advice on Attitudes to Death and Grieving in Different Faith and Belief Communities**

## **Preliminary Remarks**

The following notes are intended to provide headteachers in Somerset schools with brief background information on the possible needs and requirements of families suffering a bereavement where matters of faith or belief may have an impact. In each case, in relation to death and grieving, brief comments are made about the tradition's relevant beliefs, practices and attitudes.

There is huge variety within all religious traditions, and families will often contain members of different faith and belief communities, so it will always be important to take individual concerns into account. Nevertheless, these general notes may help in showing sensitivity to individual cases and in personal discussions with bereaved family members.

Please see below for more information on the beliefs of:

Christians

Buddhists

Chinese Religions

Hindus

Humanists and those with no specific religious affiliations

Jews

Muslims

Sikhs

Those attending funerals should consult family members on appropriate attire, including headwear.

A list of helpful websites for further information is included at the end of this report.

## **Christians**

### (a) Beliefs about death and life after death

The traditional teaching of the Christian Church is that there will be a second 'Advent', when all will experience a physical resurrection of the body, and Jesus Christ will return to earth to judge the living and the dead. At this time, Christians believe that everyone will stand before the judgement seat of Christ and be judged according to their actions. While they seek to live good, obedient lives, Christians also stress the need for God's forgiveness. They believe that the death of Christ on the cross was a sacrifice for sins. Through faith in him, Christians believe that all their sins are forgiven and they will go to heaven.

Catholic Christians also believe in the importance of regularly attending confession and mass, and in Purgatory - a place of temporary suffering for Christians who have died with unconfessed, forgivable sins.

The final destination for all is generally believed to be either heaven or hell. What heaven is like cannot be described in detail because it is beyond human understanding. It is where, with God and his people for ever, the Christian receives Christ's praise and reward. It is a place of blessing, without sin, pain or death. Hell is traditionally believed to be a place of eternal torment, although some Christians believe it will be an annihilation of the soul, and end of life.

What happens between death and Christ's return? Some Christians believe that they will be with Christ in heaven until being reunited with their physical body at the resurrection. Others, that, as in sleep, they will not be conscious of the passage of time until the resurrection.

(b) Practices associated with death and grieving

Prayers will be said for the bereaved, asking for God's help in giving them strength and encouragement at a painful time. Christian funerals are usually held in a church or at a crematorium about a week after death. They provide an opportunity for friends and family to grieve for the deceased person and give thanks for their life. The body is treated with great respect as there is a tradition that it is the body as well as the soul of the Christian that will be resurrected. Some Christians do not want loved ones cremated for this reason.

Some Christians will pray for the soul of the departed person and those in the Catholic tradition may hold a Requiem Mass as part of the funeral service.

At a Christian funeral, the identification is made between the person who has died and Jesus Christ. The words of St Paul are often recalled: "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:3).

Examples of Anglican and Catholic funerals can be found at:

[www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/ritesrituals/funerals.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/ritesrituals/funerals.shtml)

An interview with a minister explaining what may happen in a Christian funeral and what Christians believe about death can be found at:

<http://request.org.uk/life/funerals-life/2013/07/10/christian-funeral-videos/>

(c) Attitudes to grieving

Faced with adversity Christians often find compelling support in the hope of salvation and of life to come. Many find that prayer helps them through difficult times.

In many Christian communities ordained persons minister to faith members, and at times of tragedy and grief they would strive to support families in the context of the fellowship of the church, providing comfort, solace and practical support.

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## **Buddhists**

(a) Beliefs about death and life after death

Of all religions, Buddhism is the one that concentrates most immediately and directly on suffering. The Buddha's teaching about suffering, however, should not be seen as a pessimistic view of life, rather as a realistic one; all sentient beings experience suffering and all are subject to aging, decay and death. Ultimately, for Buddhists, there is a way out of this suffering, as taught in the Buddha's Noble Eightfold path.

In principle, Buddhists believe that there is no 'soul' that can be reincarnated, rather, there is a 'stream of consciousness' that is reborn time and again until the desires that feed it are 'extinguished' and a state

of enlightenment is achieved.

There is variation amongst schools of thought in Buddhism as to what happens when a person reaches a state of perfect enlightenment and peace so that they pass into nirvana (or nibbana). But the Buddha taught that it was more important to focus on living a moral life with compassion and wisdom than worrying about what happens when we die. When asked about nirvana, the Buddha said that it was “incomprehensible, indescribable, inconceivable, unutterable.”

Nevertheless, Tibetan Buddhists believe that there is a period between dying and being reborn known as the bardo. At this time, with the right practices being carried out on earth (see below), a person’s changing stream of consciousness may be directed towards a better rebirth.

#### (b) Practices associated with death and grieving

Cremation is the most usual funeral custom for Buddhists, as the Buddha’s own body was burnt on the funeral pyre.

For many Buddhists, funerals need not contain specifically ‘religious’ elements and it will be enough to adopt local customs and traditions in honouring a person’s life. For others it will be important to have ordained persons – monks and/or nuns – at the ceremony who may participate by chanting some verses from the scriptures. In some traditions, the deceased person is clothed in the robes of a monk or nun even if they lived their life as a lay person.

In the Chinese (and other) Buddhist traditions prayers may be said at specific intervals (every 7 or 10 days) for up to 49 days depending on the financial circumstances of the family. After 100 days some final prayers may be said. For most Chinese funerals, the practice of recitation of the Amitabha Sutra and the name of Amitabha will be an important part of the ceremony.

For Tibetans, the ordained lamas recite the Bardo Thodol (the Tibetan Book of the Dead) over the dying, the dead, or an effigy of the dead.

A further description of different funereal practices in different Buddhist traditions is found at [www.buddhanet.net/d\\_cermon.htm](http://www.buddhanet.net/d_cermon.htm)

#### (c) Attitudes to grieving

In principle, there is a strong tradition of the importance of the family and community in Buddhism and at times of bereavement family members will come together for practical and moral support.

The Buddha taught that nothing is permanent and that suffering and unhappiness are to be expected in earthy life. Death is the natural end to life and should be accepted as such. The deceased are believed to be passing on to another life or even nirvana and this provides some comfort for the bereaved.

Buddhists would hope to face adversity with an attitude of quiet and calm acceptance and to engage in meditation and mindfulness. It is hoped that this model of behaviour will bring comfort also for bereaved children.

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## **Chinese Religions**

### (a) Beliefs about death and life after death

The most influential religious traditions on Chinese customs are Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism but it is difficult to generalise about Chinese belief and practice. Nevertheless, people of Chinese heritage will often have beliefs about the after-life, including Buddhist notions of paradise (the Pure Land) and Taoist heaven as well as hell-worlds and rebirth on this earth.

The quest for immortality is an important theme in Taoism. In Buddhism, the emphasis is on the quest for eventual enlightenment.

(b) Practices associated with death and grieving

Chinese funerals may involve burial or cremation. Depending on the particular community and age of the deceased there will be prescribed rites and customs to be followed by the family. These may involve a wake, the offering of food, incense and the burning of special funeral money. Scriptural passages may be recited by Buddhist monks or other religious officiants.

A period of mourning may take place. After this time, bereaved family members will usually continue to visit the grave and make offerings, particularly at specific intervals after the death or at certain festivals, such as Qingming.

Photographs of the deceased are often kept on the family shrine at home.

For Chinese Buddhist practices see above.

(c) Attitudes to grieving

Although it is traditional for there to be outward expressions of grief at the wake and funeral, it is uncommon for people of Chinese heritage to want to discuss their feelings about their bereavement beyond the family.

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## **Hindus**

(a) Beliefs about death and life after death

The term 'Hindu' is widely accepted now as referring to an identifiable religious tradition. However, this encompasses such diversity that scholars debate whether it is really an appropriate label. Thus, anything said below must be viewed as very general guidance. Hindus in Britain follow religious traditions rooted in India, and tend to share a common system of values known as dharma.

Generally, Hindus believe that human beings have a divine soul (atman) and that it is the soul rather than the physical body that is 'real'. Every intentional action (karma) that an individual takes is believed to have consequences either in this life or the next life. Therefore, when a person dies, their soul continues to exist and, according to the kind of life they have led, the soul may be reincarnated in another physical body.

The cycle of rebirths only ends when the soul discovers its true nature, interpreted by some Hindus as essential unity with or closeness to God and by others as liberation from delusion (maya). Thus salvation (moksha) is achieved.

(b) Practices associated with death and grieving

In most cases a Hindu funeral will take place as soon as possible after the death of the individual. The

body of the deceased will be washed and it would be usual for ash marks to be applied to the body, under the supervision of a priest, in preparation for cremation. Although cremation is the usual practice, some communities practice burial, particularly in the case of a very young child, and there may be other special arrangements in the case of one thought to be enlightened.

At the ceremony, food and prayers for the departed soul may be offered and it would be usual for a priest to chant mantras and for family members to put flowers on the body, rice in the mouth (as nourishment for the departed soul), and coins in the hands. White is the colour traditionally worn at Hindu funerals. There are some restriction on food at this time for most Hindus, for example, there will not be any cooking in the house until the cremation takes place.

According to Hindu tradition and scripture it is the duty of the dead man's heir - usually the eldest son but not always - to set light to the funeral pyre.

Following the funeral, feasts may be conducted and this may occur every month for a year after the death, and then once annually by the same person who performed the last rites. In some communities Hindus prefer to engage in charitable activities rather than a feast.

#### (c) Attitudes to grieving

Since for Hindus, death is seen as a door to rebirth, there is some solace for the bereaved in the thought that the deceased has not 'gone' forever because the soul is immortal.

During the first week of bereavement, friends might visit the family several times a day for the first week, and relatives stay in the house until the 13th day after the death when the religious ceremonies end.

There will normally be a certain number of days, depending on the community, after which the family is re-integrated into the society. This could be between 13 days or 40 days; the specific number of days corresponding with the social structure of the family.

Readings from the Bhagavad-Gita or other Hindu texts can also provide some comfort for Hindus at this time and for some, where time and finances allow, a pilgrimage to the River Ganges in India, perhaps to deposit the ashes of the departed soul, will help the bereaved to come to terms with their loss.

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### **Humanists and those with no specific religious affiliations**

#### (a) Beliefs about death and life after death

People may not have a practising religion but still have spiritual beliefs and values. In such cases people often choose a civil funeral.

Humanists believe that human experience and rational thinking provide the only source of knowledge and morality and that there is no supernatural world or existence. This material world is the only one we have and death is part of the natural order. Human beings do not have soul or any consciousness that is independent of the body, and there is, therefore, no kind of life after death other than the continuing influence of that person's life in the world.

#### (b) Practices associated with death and grieving

A *civil funeral* might well contain reference to religious or spiritual beliefs, depending on the wishes of

the deceased - if known - and those of the bereaved.

Religious and spiritual beliefs are not part of a *humanist funeral*, though in both civil and humanist cases, it will be usual for the Celebrant to spend time with the bereaved family in order to construct the ceremony felt most appropriate for the individual. This will include selection of readings, choice of music, and tributes to be made at the ceremony from friends and family.

In principle, both civil and humanist funerals aim to acknowledge loss and celebrate a life without employing religious rituals.

Ceremonies can take place at crematoria, cemeteries, woodland burial grounds, and other burial grounds (subject to restriction).

#### (c) Attitudes to grieving

Children and young people who do not have a particular religious affiliation may still of course have profound ideas about life and death and, in the right context, can be encouraged to share them and have them treated with respect. While humanists will not rely on any comfort that may be had from the idea that a person who has died has 'gone to a better place' or a better 'rebirth', there is plenty of scientific and psychological research about the process of bereavement and how people may be helped to come to terms with their loss. The British Humanist Association website contains lists of books to help children cope with grief. See, e.g., <https://humanism.org.uk/education/parents/books-for-bereaved-children/>

Humanists and others may also conduct memorial ceremonies some time after the funeral. Again, these take different forms according to the wishes of the bereaved.

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## **Jews**

#### (a) Beliefs about death and life after death

'Who is a Jew?' is not a straightforward question to answer. People can be Jews religiously, culturally or genealogically and individuals may give different reasons for identifying themselves as Jewish in some way or another. One might still be regarded as Jewish, for example, even after converting to another religion. Thus it is difficult to generalise about beliefs, practices and attitudes that may be held by Jews.

In terms of religious Jewish affiliation in the UK, Jews may attend Orthodox, Progressive, Reform and Liberal synagogues, but there are also many Jews who do not connect themselves with any particular synagogue but who nonetheless regard themselves as Jewish.

Within the Jewish scriptures and commentaries there are plenty of references to the after-life, but these range from a place of darkness under the earth (Sheol) through to a resurrected life for the soul and even, in some traditions, reincarnation (gilgul). Some Jews do not concern themselves overly with what happens after death, preferring instead to focus on the here and now.

#### (b) Practices associated with death and grieving

Judaism teaches that people are created in the image of God (sometimes respectfully written G-d), so when a person dies their body is respected. For example, the deceased's body will normally be ritually washed and placed in a simple shroud. A group of 'watchers' (Chevra Kadisha), usually volunteers from the Jewish community, will remain with the body until burial, which is held the day after death if possible.

Cremation is not normally practised within the Jewish faith; instead the body will be buried in a plain wooden coffin and a rabbi will conduct a simple service that begins with the cutting of a black ribbon. Mourners may also make a small tear (Keriah) in their clothes to represent a broken heart.

Rather than flowers, friends and well-wishers are encouraged to make donations to a charity or Jewish organisation.

At the funeral men and women dress modestly and quite formally - no short sleeves or open-toed shoes; men will probably wear a head-covering (usually provided at the synagogue or funeral home); women are also expected to cover their heads during the service. For an orthodox service a minimum of 10 men who have been Bar-mitzvahed, will be required to make up a 'Minyan'. This is the minimum requirement for prayers.

At the graveside the Kiddush prayer is said in Hebrew and again when the coffin has been interred. The bereaved will each usually add some earth to the grave, and it would be an honour for a friend or acquaintance to be invited by the family to do so. Mourners place small stones on the grave (instead of flowers) and will sometimes completely fill in the grave. Children under 16 do not usually attend the burial grounds.

#### (c) Attitudes to grieving

On hearing of a person's death a Jewish blessing might be said, "Blessed are You, Lord, our God, King of the universe, the True Judge."

After the funeral there is a seven (Hebrew = Shiva) day period of mourning when the bereaved will be visited by friends. During this time mirrors might be covered, candles kept burning and the mourners might not leave their home. Men often refrain from shaving and women from wearing make-up. Mourners will sit on hard chairs, or stand. The Rabbi visits to say the Kiddush prayer.

On the first anniversary of the death, Jews might attend a service and unveil a tombstone. Annually, at the 'Yahrzeit', candles may be lit on the anniversary of a death, though there may be other customs according to tradition. The stone-setting can be held 6 - 12 months after the death. Mourners will attend the burial ground to say prayers and bless the gravestone.

For bereaved families, Jewish communities provide comfort and practical support. For those in need there are specific Jewish counselling services available.

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## **Muslims**

### (a) Beliefs about death and life after death

'Islam' means 'submission' (to God) and refers to the religion revealed to the prophet Muhammad and written down in the Qur'an. A follower of Islam is a 'Muslim', that is 'one who submits to the will of God' (Allah).

Since everything is subject to the will of Allah, the Creator of all, a person's death must be accepted as being within the divine plan. But death is not the end. Muslims believe that when a person dies, their earthly deeds are accountable before Allah on the Day of Judgement. On this day a person is either rewarded and enters a stage of blessing or heaven, or they fall into an eternal hell, which many see as a state of separation from all the beauty in the world.

## (b) Practices associated with death and grieving

As well as Sunni (the majority) and Shi'ite Muslims there are Sufi, Ahmadiyya and other traditions of Islam represented in Britain; and within those divisions there are further cultural variations according to national and other historical factors.

Rituals related to funeral customs therefore vary though there are some fairly common practices. For example, Muslims try to bury the body within 24 hours of death if possible. Cremation is not acceptable to most Muslims as, ideally, the body should be intact for the day of resurrection. Nevertheless, Muslims also believe that Allah can restore the body from any condition.

In preparation for burial, the body is carefully washed. This is usually done by family members or close friends, according to the gender of the deceased. The body is then wrapped in a shroud, usually of simple, white material. Prayers are said for the deceased.

The body is not usually placed in a coffin unless the country's laws require one to be used, and the deceased is placed with their head facing the Ka'ba in Makkah.

Funerals are kept simple and respectful. There may be readings from the Qur'an and prayers will normally be said without prostrations. The body may be committed to the earth with the words, "In the name of Allah, (we bury) according to the Way of the Prophet of Allah" and "From the (earth) did We create you, and into it shall We return you, and from it shall We bring you out once again" (Sūra 20:55).

Mourners sometimes throw earth into the grave.

## (c) Attitudes to grieving

Muslims believe that submitting to the will of Allah brings peace of body and of mind. When there is a death in a Muslim family, children may be told that God gave them life and that same God will take it away when their limited time is up. The belief that the deceased has moved on to a pleasant afterlife can help the bereaved cope with their suffering.

Many Muslims discipline themselves to show no emotion at a death in order to show acceptance of God's will. However, it is more common today to display grief openly and children find support during the mourning period (between 3 and 40 days according to different traditions) when friends visit, bring food and talk in terms of praise about the person who has died.

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## **Sikhs**

### (a) Beliefs about death and life after death

Sikhs believe in one God and in the importance of putting one's faith into action. Although there are different Sikh groups and some variety in cultural practices and political philosophies, Sikhs are keen to stress their essential unity in religious belief.

For Sikhs, death is inevitable but only happens when God wills (hukam). People are moral beings and life after death is dependent on karma (moral actions). The soul may be reborn or reincarnated in a different life form according to how a person has led their life. However, the ultimate goal is liberation and union with God (Akāl Purakh).



Having a human birth is a rare opportunity to turn to God and to do good in the world; in this way final liberation may be achieved. Although it is important to live a good life, ultimately it is the grace (nadar) of God that determines human destiny.

(b) Practices associated with death and grieving

When a person dies, friends and family may visit the family's house before the funeral and the body may be on display. Sikhs are encouraged to keep emotions under control and to remember that the essence of a person is their immortal soul. The body is nonetheless to be treated respectfully and the usual practice is for the body to be taken to a gurdwara or home and for hymns (shabads) to be recited, to bring consolation and courage to the family and congregation. Sikhs usually cremate the body, although if this is not possible, burial or submergence at sea are allowed.

At the funeral, the person's life is remembered through a number of speeches and a hymn is sung that is the same as the one sung before bedtime (the Kirtan Sohila), symbolising the idea of death as like a sleep occurring before awakening to a new world. A final prayer is offered and the next of kin will initiate the cremation or interment. The ashes are later collected and scattered in the sea or nearby river.

After the funeral, guests usually return to the family home or sometimes to the gurdwara, 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, though Sikhs do not generally erect monuments over the remains of the dead.

(c) Attitudes to grieving

Public display of grief is discouraged but Sikh communities offer strong support for bereaved families, especially for children. Financial, social and spiritual help is freely given, without ties or time limits. Believing as they do in reincarnation and liberation, few Sikhs regard death as frightening, and children's mourning is helped by this implicit belief.

Sikhs may receive comfort from the book of Sacred Sikh hymns: "Sing the praises of God and keep love for Him in your heart. Then you will obtain joy in your mind and throw away your pain" (Japji 5).

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**Some websites providing more detailed information about religious beliefs and practices related to death and grieving**

[www.bbc.co.uk/religion/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/)

[www.nhs.uk/carersdirect/guide/bereavement/pages/bereavementsupport.aspx](http://www.nhs.uk/carersdirect/guide/bereavement/pages/bereavementsupport.aspx)

[www.reonline.org.uk/knowning/what-re/](http://www.reonline.org.uk/knowning/what-re/)

[www.ifishoulddie.co.uk/beliefs/](http://www.ifishoulddie.co.uk/beliefs/)

[www.funeralwise.com/customs/](http://www.funeralwise.com/customs/)

Please note that we are not responsible for the content of other websites.