

Islamic Rituals for the Dying and Deceased

This is part of our Diverse Expression of Grief series, written by Hilary Dockray. This article is intended as an educational piece to share other cultures' beliefs around death, grief, and the afterlife. By examining other cultures throughout our history, we can see how our current-day thoughts surrounding death and grief may have been shaped and gain insight into our current understanding of these matters.

Basic Elements of Islam

Islam, like Christianity and Judaism, is a monotheistic religion that traces its origins back to Abraham. It considers Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and certain other figures also notable in Christianity and Judaism to be prophets of God, but holds Muhammad as the last and most significant prophet of God.

Born in about 570 CE, Muhammad did not begin developing what would become Islam until 610. He soon began to preach to the public and gain followers, who recorded the verses he received from God until his death in 632. These verses recorded over the last 22 years of his life comprise the Quran, Islam's primary religious text. Additionally, many stories that also appear in Christian and Jewish religious texts, such as the Bible and the Torah, also appear in the Quran in similar forms.

Included in the Quran and the foundation for Islamic life are the Five Pillars of Islam, which consist of five basic acts that are obligatory for followers. These five acts include pronouncing the Islamic creed that there is only one God and that Muhammad is the messenger of God (Shahada), daily prayers performed five times a day (Salah), the giving of alms (Zakat), fasting during the month of Ramadan (Sawm), and making a pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in one's lifetime if one is physically able to (Hajj).

Another significant religious text of Islam is the Hadith, which is sometimes also referred to as Sunnah. While the two concepts are closely intertwined, they can be understood as follows: Sunnah denotes the Islamic practice that Muhammad lived by and taught to others, and the Hadith is comprised of sayings from Muhammad that support the practice of Sunnah. The Hadith both adds to the Quran as well as clarifies teachings within the Quran.

Today, Islam is the world's second largest religion, with nearly 1 in 4 people in the world identifying as Muslim. Approximately 25% of people who are Muslim reside in South Asia, 20% in Southwest Asia, 15% in Sub-Saharan Africa, and 13% in Indonesia. Significant minorities of people who are Muslim can also be found in Russia, China, and the Americas. The two most practiced denominations of Islam are Sunni (75-90%) and Shi'a (10-20%).

Islamic Rituals for the Dying and Deceased

Most followers of Islam practice special rituals for preparing the dying and the deceased. The Talqeen is performed for those who are dying to ensure they are spiritually ready for the journey into death. The person leading the Talqeen says to the dying person:

In the name of Allah and on the creed, religion and faith of Rasulallah (apostle or messenger of God). O! Allah, ease upon him his matters, and make light for him whatever comes hereafter, and honor him with Your meeting and make that which he has gone to better than that which he came out from.

After those who are present have the opportunity to share their own prayers, the person leading the Talqeen then encourages the dying person to recall the Shahada before taking their last breath: *I bear witness that (there is) no god except Allah; One is He, no partner hath He, and I bear witness that Muhammad is His Servant and Messenger.*

Once the person has passed away, the next step is to perform the ghusl, or the washing of the deceased's person body. The ghusl can be done by most adult family members of the same sex as the deceased. After the body is washed, it is then enshrouded, typically in plain, white cloth.

The funeral that follows the washing and shrouding is guided by the Salat al-Janazah, the Islamic funeral ceremony and prayer set. In addition to family and close friends, adults from the local Muslim community who are able to attend should be present, as it is considered an obligatory duty to do so. The deceased's body is lain out in front of the Imam leading the ceremony, and those present for the funeral line up in an odd number of rows before the deceased's body. The Imam then guides a set of prayers that are as follows:

Allahu Akbar prayer, said by Imam and then echoed by those present: *God is Greater*

Sanaa prayer, recited only by the Imam: *In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful. Praise be to God, the Lord of the Universe, the Compassionate, the Merciful, Sovereign of the Day of Judgment! You alone we worship, and to You alone we turn for help. Guide us to the straight path, the path of those whom You have favored, not of those who have incurred Your wrath, nor those who have gone astray.*

Allahu Akbar prayer, repeated: *God is Greater*

Durood prayer, recited only by the Imam: *Allah, we ask You to raise the rank of Muhammad, and have mercy upon the Al (family, friends, and everyone else present for the funeral) of Muhammad, as You raised the rank of Ibrahim (Abraham), and the Al of Ibrahim. Verily, You are the One Who deserves to be praised and thanked, and the One Who is glorified. O Allah, we ask You to bless Muhammad, and the Al of Muhammad, as You blessed Ibrahim, and the Al of Ibrahim. Verily, You are the One Who deserves to be praised and thanked, and the One Who is glorified.*

Allahu Akbar prayer, repeated: *God is Greater*

Dua prayer for an adult (varies for age and sex), recited only by the Imam: *Allah, grant forgiveness to our living and to our dead, and to those who are present and to those who are absent, and to our young and our old folk, and to our males and females. O Allah! Whomsoever you grant to live, from among us, help him to live in Islam, and whom of us you cause to die, help him to die in faith. Grant especially this dead person your ease, rest, forgiveness and consent Allah, if he acted well, then increase for him his good action, and if he acted wrongly, then overlook his wrong actions. Grant him security, glad tidings, generosity and closeness to you. We seek Thy blessings, Thou art the most Merciful.*

Allahu Akbar prayer, repeated: *God is Greater*

Salaam prayer, recited by everyone present: *May the peace and mercy of Allah be upon you.*

After the Salat al-Janazah prayer set is completed, those present may line up and observe the deceased person for a final time before moving to the burial ground. The deceased is laid on their right side by male family members in a dug grave, preferably facing towards Mecca. As the dirt is beginning to be thrown into the grave by hand or by a shovel, the person doing so should say:

*Out of it We (Allah) created you,
And into it We deposit you,
And from it We shall take you out once again.*

Reflections

I came away from studying these rituals deeply appreciating the care and respect that the dying and deceased are given as they transition from life into death. The Talqeen is done to ensure the dying person is spiritually ready for their journey into death; the family gently cares for the person's body once they have died; an Imam and members of the community gather together to pray for the deceased; and then the family lowers the deceased into the ground, with a few last words that again connect the person's life and death to their spirituality.

Caring for a person through their journey into death is not unique to Islam, however; many cultures, faiths, and groups around the world carry out memorial and funeral rituals that often bear many resemblances to those of Islam. It is very likely that throughout your life you have participated in one or more memorial or funeral services to honor someone who has died. The fact that performing memorial and funeral rituals seems to be an apparent human need does not make these rituals any less profound, however. They are often deeply personal, spiritual, or both, and can be some of the most beautiful goodbyes we give in our lives.

About the Author:

Hilary Dockray came to know The Christi Center through her full-time field internship as a graduate student from The University of Texas at Austin's School of Social Work. Her favorite hobby is writing, so she is delighted to continue to advocate for the understanding of grief and those who grieve as a guest blogger for The Christi Center.

Here are just some of the links I used to research for this entry in the Diverse Expressions of Grief series, and where you can also learn more about Islam and its rituals and prayers for the dying and the deceased:

Background on Islam:

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islam>

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Muhammad>

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quran>

The Talqeen:

<http://www.srvic.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/GhusulDuaas.pdf>

Salat al-Janazah and the Islamic Funeral:

<http://www.scribd.com/doc/2534816/The-Janazah-Funeral-Prayer-Burial-In-Islam>

<http://www.janazahservices.com/salataljanazah.htm>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islamic_funeral

<http://christicenter.org/2013/03/islamic-rituals-dying-deceased/>