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THREE WAYS TO ARRANGE A FUNERAL:  
MORTUARY VARIATION IN THE MODERN WEST

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## THREE WAYS TO ARRANGE A FUNERAL:

## MORTUARY VARIATION IN THE MODERN WEST

### ABSTRACT

Why do funeral practices vary between modern western countries? In the mid-nineteenth century, managing the rapidly expanding number of corpses had to be controlled and rationalized, but this control could be exercised by business, the municipality, or the church, leading to three pure types of funeral organization – commercial, municipal, religious – and a number of mixed types. These institutional types interacted with wider cultural factors to create in each country an identifiable national solution to the problem of disposing of the dead in a mobile, urban, modern society. By the late twentieth century, a global demand for more freedom and individuality spawned reform movements, targeting a different bastion of institutional power in each country.

## THREE WAYS TO ARRANGE A FUNERAL:

### MORTUARY VARIATION IN THE MODERN WEST<sup>1</sup>

This article attempts to describe and explain the very considerable variation in funeral practice between different modern western countries. Why in secular Sweden does the church own most of the cemeteries, while in religious Italy they are owned by the municipality? Why are American funeral parlours run for profit, but in France franchised by the state? Why do publicly viewed Irish corpses look dead, but American ones merely asleep? And, given that there is little or no correlation between cremation and lack of space, why has the USA got such a low cremation rate? We may note that national practices are so taken for granted that members of one society are typically amazed and even appalled that neighbouring countries organize the disposal of their dead differently, yet so far there has been very little scholarly analysis of such differences.

In sketching and categorizing such variation, I focus on institutional differences in funeral organization, and examine their relation to wider cultural differences.<sup>2</sup> In particular, I will examine the very different roles played in different western countries by private business, the church, and the municipality. These roles reflect different ways in which various countries modernized in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

By 'funeral organization', I refer to management of the corpse until its final disposition, once medical practices at the hospital<sup>3</sup> or other place of death have been completed. I focus on North America and Western Europe, though occasional reference is made to other countries such as Russia and Australia – hence I am referring to mortuary practices in societies that are predominantly Christian or post-Christian.

#### Literature review: Comparative funeral studies

Analysis of contemporary mortuary variation is not greatly helped by the Anglophone social science literature on death.<sup>4</sup> Most academic writing on the topic (e.g. Blauner 1966; Ariès 1981; Mellor & Shilling 1993; Walter 1994) portrays a modern way of death characterized by rationality, secularization, medicalization, a loss of community, individualization and a consequent loss of ritual. Though this picture can be illuminating, it tends to maximize the differences between modern and traditional societies (often, as Floersch & Longhofer (1997), Hockey (1996), Lofland (1978) and Walter (1995) note, romantically imputing greater psychological health to traditional deathways); and it tends to minimize variations between modern western societies. In this article, however, I argue that there are a number of very different ways in which death has been modernized and in which institutions can respond to and/or promote the secularization, rationalization or individualization of the corpse.

Comparative analysis of funerals across time may be found in a number of excellent historical studies, but the reader is left wondering how other countries compare with the

country being studied, whether it be France (Ariès 1981; McManners 1981; Kselman 1993), the USA (Stannard 1977; Farrell 1980; Laderman 1996, 2003; Wells 2000), or Britain (Gittings 1984, Litten 1991, Richardson 1989). A rare exception is Harding's study of burial in Paris and London (2002). Sloane's excellent history of the American cemetery starts with a page on five basic differences between American and European cemeteries (1991, p. 3), but fails to ask the basic comparative question that almost any informed foreigner enquiring into American burial would ask, namely, why does burial remain so popular for Americans, given the turn to cremation in almost all other modern, secular, Protestant countries? What does burial mean to Americans? So, Sloane provides an informative history of American cemeteries, but by the end of the book the reader still does not know why Americans bury. Prothero's (2001) history of cremation in the USA unusually does entail a number of comparisons with Europe and Japan, so the reader can begin to work out why America is only latterly taking to cremation in significant numbers.

Funerary buildings and monuments attract the attention of architectural historians, most prominently Curl (1993), and architectural critics (e.g. Warpole 2003). As in most architectural history, the analytic framework is of ideas and practices spreading from ancient Greece and Rome, via the Middle Ages and the Renaissance to the rest of Europe and the USA. Connections are made, for example, the influence of Paris's revolutionary Père Lachaise cemetery on Boston's Mount Auburn and on cemeteries throughout the UK and the USA, but there is no attempt at sociological analysis of cross-country differences.

What about comparisons not across time but between modern societies? Morgan and Laungani's five part series Death and Bereavement Around the World (2002-4) does not focus specifically on funerals, comprising chapters that vary widely in both content and quality, and there is no attempt at systematic comparative analysis. The few international handbooks / encyclopaedias of funeral customs (Habenstein and Lamers 1963; Matsunami 1998) categorize and list customs, but entries are of variable reliability and can be based on sources that see less than the complete picture in any one country; they too attempt no sustained comparative analysis. Habenstein and Lamers (1963) perceptively identify municipalization as what distinguishes European from North American funerals, an observation that I develop in this article. But Fulton's review of their encyclopaedia (1962) sees religion as the key independent variable, an impression gained also from other global surveys into funeral practice. Parkes et al's survey (1997) is titled 'Death and Bereavement Across Cultures' but is actually about death rites and beliefs in the world religions. There are also a number of surveys specifically of dying, funerals, mourning and afterlife beliefs in the various world religions (Badham & Badham 1987; Bowker 1991). However, these authors fail to grapple with Wikan's (1988) and Rosenblatt et al's (1976) crucial finding that two societies with the same religion may have radically different death practices. The funeral customs of Presbyterians in Scotland differ radically from those of Presbyterians in the USA, and those of Muslims in Egypt from Muslims in Bali; in each case, mourners have more in common with their compatriots than with fellow religionists in other countries. Cultural and institutional differences amount to more than religious differences, but the literature does very little to tease this out.

There are a number of studies of religious and ethnic variations in mortuary practices within particular modern societies. Firth (1997) looks at Hindus in England; Jonker (1996, 1997) at Muslims in Berlin, Reimers (1999) at a range of minority funerals in Sweden, Oliver (2004) at British retirees in Spain; Kalish and Reynolds (1981) conducted a major survey comparing white, black, Mexican and Japanese Americans; Irish et al (1993) examine a number of ethnic and religious minority groups in the USA; Field et al (1997) look at some comparable groups in the UK. These studies focus on in-migrants, and are in part motivated by the need of health care and death professionals to become more knowledgeable about migrants' post-mortem requirements. Moving from culture to organization, Habenstein (1962*a*) and Pine (1975) compare two different kinds of American funeral parlour. All these authors are at pains to acknowledge diversity within the country of study, but attempt no analysis of differences between countries, especially between modern countries. Exceptions are Myrvold (2004) who compares Sikhs in Varanesi and Sweden, and Laungani (1996) who compares Hindus in India and Britain - though his comparison does not aim to be systematic. One might have hoped that Charmaz et al's 1997 edited collection of eighteen essays, subtitled 'Death in Australia, Britain and the USA' would examine differences between these three countries, but it does not. Instead, several chapters (Kellehear and Anderson 1997; Howarth 1997; Irish 1997) highlight diversity within one country.

And so to the few real attempts at comparative sociological analysis of modern mortuary practices across countries. The best is Goody and Poppi's paper on post-funeral treatment of flowers and bones in Italy, Germany, Britain and the USA (1994); their goal is to analyze cultural differences (rather than to help or romanticize ethnic minorities). A comparative ethnography of modern mortuary rites, sadly unpublished, is Smale's (1985) doctoral thesis on two funeral homes, one in southern England, the other in Newfoundland, which noted significant differences in the role of the corpse and in attempts at professionalization. Christie Davies (1996) has compared American and British attitudes to the corpse and the effects of this on mortuary rites, while Walter (1993) has attempted a cultural explanation of Americans' sentimental attachment to burial in contrast to Britons' pragmatic acceptance of cremation. Pine (1969) briefly compares funeral practices in Bali, Japan, Russia, England, and the USA, not in order to explain the differences but to identify commonalities that may reflect universal human needs. Very different is Metcalf and Huntington's (1991) wide ranging anthropological survey which leads them to problematize American deathways and explain them in terms of American civil religion. Moving from cultural to economic sociological analysis, Clark (2002) tries to explain the very different development of the American and British funeral industries by the differential development of capitalism in the two countries.

One of the finest comparative sociological studies in any field is A General Theory of Secularization, David Martin's (1978) historical/comparative analysis of why secularization has proceeded differently in different western countries. Some death scholars have drawn on his ideas to help explain differences between European countries in the incidence of cremation (Jupp 1993, pp. 132-78) and humanist funerals (Pearce 2001). Pearce argues that humanist funerals are driven not only by humanist ideology, but also by

the historic religious context of each country, so key questions include: is there an established church? a state church? are religions funded by the state? are humanist groups funded?

Finally, the two most celebrated books on the American way of death, by Evelyn Waugh (1948) and Jessica Mitford (1963), though not by academics, were each motivated in part by comparative curiosity; each was written by a Briton bemused, amused, and/or angered by the American way. Each author questioned practices many Americans took for granted. But in each case, the aim was to write an exposé of the American way, rather than to explain differences between it and British ways, so the benefit of comparative analysis is passed up. Rather earlier but in similar vein, Quincey L. Dowd (1921) criticized the commercialization of the American funeral and burial, in contrast to what he saw as the enlightened municipalism of continental Europe.

In sum, there is as yet no sustained attempt to describe, let alone explain, variation in mortuary practices between modern western societies. In my attempt to make a start on this project, I draw on the published literature, supplemented by anecdotal information and observations gleaned in visits to the USA, Canada, Australia, Hong Kong, Japan, Ireland, France, Spain, Portugal, Italy, Greece, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Belgium, the Netherlands, Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Finland. My argument is that the process of modernization led to some common overarching trends, but these have been responded to by very different institutions – commercial, municipal, and ecclesiastical - in different countries, leading to three pure types and a number of mixed types.

#### Modern trends, national variations

As western societies urbanized and industrialized from the late eighteenth century, the population grew rapidly, but death rates did not decline till the latter half of the nineteenth century. As the number of deaths in European and American towns escalated, the time-honoured method of disposal – (often ad hoc) re-use of graves, usually in churchyards<sup>5</sup> – became ineffective. The burial crisis became a major social problem in the cities of all industrializing societies, and each responded in the mid nineteenth century by developing more rational ways of dealing with its dead (Prior 1989; Sloane 1991; Curl 1993, pp.206-314; Rugg 1997), whether through the state taking over death registration from the church (as in England), the promotion of large out-of-town private cemeteries (as in the USA and the UK), or the careful rationalization of the cycle of grave re-use (as in much of continental Europe). Religious concerns were eroded in the face of public health requirements, though not always without a struggle. Further, mobility from country to town, or from Europe to America, detached mourners from traditional funeral customs, leading them to become more reliant on experts to tell them what to do. Everywhere, we find two linked innovations. One is increasing use of technical, especially medical, rationality. The other is the rise of new specialists: registrars, pathologists, funeral directors, cemetery entrepreneurs and managers.

These two processes of rationalization and specialization are well recognized by historians of death. Some have attributed them to secularization, and they certainly do represent secularization in the word's original sense of the transfer of responsibilities from the church to secular agencies (Wilson 1985; Kselman 1988, pp. 328f). Since belief in an afterlife is central to Christian theology, care of the dead has been a key responsibility of the churches - the comparative history of why some countries transferred responsibility of burial primarily to private enterprise, some transferred it to the local state, while some simply rationalized church provision, is likely to prove important in understanding the secularization of Christendom. Other scholars see the hiring of professionals to dispose of the dead as a typically modern denial of death. <sup>6</sup> Or one might extend Elias' analysis of the civilizing process (1978, 1982) to suggest that mourners increasingly detached themselves from such a problematically bodily object as a corpse, and paid specialists to handle it. In addition to secularization, death denial and the civilizing process, we may add urbanization, a high death rate, and geographical and social mobility as possible explanations of rationalization and specialization.

At the end of his encyclopaedia of funeral customs, Matsunami (1998, pp. 193,195) predicts that secularization, rationalization, and specialization will cause funeral customs everywhere to 'develop in the direction of uniformity and coordination'. Careful examination of the evidence, however, suggests otherwise. Although urbanization, high mortality, and mobility led to new death specialists, exactly who in the period 1850 – 1950 succeeded in setting themselves up as specialists varied between countries. In all industrializing countries the state was concerned about the public health risks from dead bodies, but to whom it granted control of the dead varied from country to country. Everywhere, for example, new cemeteries were built on new principles of hygiene, rationality and aesthetics, but who built and managed them varied. There were basically three patterns: control of the dead could be granted to the businessman, <sup>7</sup> to the municipal official, or to a modernized religious bureaucracy. These resulted in rationalizations of death that differed radically in, for example, the USA, France, and Sweden (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Control of the funeral industry: three patterns

| INSTITUTIONAL TYPE | EXAMPLE COUNTRY | KEY FEATURES   |
|--------------------|-----------------|--|
| Commercial         | USA             | Commercial ownership of both funeral directing and cemeteries                      |
| Municipal          | France          | Both funeral directing and cemetery ownership subject to municipal control         |
| Religious          | Sweden          | Church responsible for cemeteries, crematoria and (until 1991) death registration. |



In each pattern, the mourning family is cast in a different role, depending on whether it has to deal with a businessman, official, or priest. The commercial funeral director or cemetery manager casts the family in the role of customer, one offered and able to make choices, though the choices may be manipulated. The municipal official, concerned more with efficient management than with profit, casts the family in the role of a member of the public to be led through the public provision of funeral and burial services. The priest or religious official relates to the family as parishioners; in the traditionally monopolistic ethnic churches of Scandinavia (Lutheran) and the Mediterranean (Orthodox, Catholic), the family is a parishioner simply through local residence; in some countries such as the UK, Jews and Muslims have their own funeral directors or burial societies. Thus we have three types of relationship: businessman – customer; municipal official – member of the public; and priest – parishioner.

There is in addition one minor type. Funeral work can be organized along co-operative lines. Examples include the local cremation societies that, since the late nineteenth century, have operated Italy's crematoria and cremate members. In the early days of the labour movement, in both the USA (Dowd 1921, ch.7) and the UK, burial societies and co-operatives enabled working people to pool resources for burial, while Mexican Americans also had voluntary self-help associations (Moore 1980). From the 1950s in the USA, memorial societies united consumers into groups with the muscle to negotiate cheaper deals with funeral directors. Certain religious groups also provide burial services for their members on a mutual-help non-profit basis, examples being Jewish burial societies (Dowd 1921, ch. 11; Habenstein & Lamers 1963, pp. 191-3) and a number of mosques. Though cooperatives have occasionally been prominent in pushing for innovation (e.g. nineteenth century cremation societies) and reform (e.g. mid twentieth century memorial societies in the USA), and continue to provide services for minority religious groups, in no western country have they been major providers of regular funeral services for the majority population.<sup>8</sup>

So, leaving aside the co-operative model, there are three basic models according to which the modern dead may be routinely disposed of: the commercial model, the municipal model, and the religious model. I must emphasize that these are institutional models. Later, I will discuss the relation between funeral institutions and wider aspects of society and culture – as he talks to a family, the language of a commercial funeral director in Kansas may be more overtly religious than that of a Lutheran minister in Stockholm, and he may be deeply connected to and respected by local churches. The three models are, in the sociological sense, ideal types – models which could, in theory, operate in their pure form, but rarely if ever do. Their purpose, rather, is to describe and explain the complexity and change that characterize the real world. That said, some countries show major features of one model, and in the following section I will illustrate the three pure types with particular reference to the USA (commercial), France (municipal), and Sweden (religious), before going on to look at some mixed types.

## The commercial model

The business model is found in something approximating its pure form in the USA (Habenstein & Lamers 1962; Mitford 1963; Laderman 2003).<sup>9</sup> Apart from repatriating the war dead, maintaining war graves and veterans' cemeteries (Marvyn & Ingle 1999), and running a significant number of municipal cemeteries and a tiny number of crematories (Habenstein & Lamers 1962, p. 589), the American state is not involved in handling corpses once they have been declared dead and handed over for burial by hospital, ambulance crew or coroner. And, though there are Catholic cemeteries, and funeral parlours that serve particular religious communities, many (especially Protestant) churches in highly religious America show little if any interest in looking after the dead body; the mid-twentieth century funeral parlour's fetishizing of the body beautiful, far from being a religious requirement, was a product of the funeral industry. By this time, the commercial funeral parlour had brought almost every aspect of the funeral process within its walls, from registering the death through to holding a Christian funeral to memorial services for cremated remains, to a degree not approximated in any European country (Habenstein & Lamers 1962; Laderman 2003).<sup>10</sup> Registration, for example, is in many other western countries the responsibility of the family and cannot be delegated to the funeral director. Appearing home-like, the 'funeral home' or 'funeral parlour' (both American terms) transferred the body and its viewing from the home to within its own walls. Adding a chapel enabled many funeral services to be transferred from the church to the funeral parlour. Not only could American funeral directors stand as coroners, their backstage facilities enabled doctors to conduct autopsies on the premises (an impossibility in most other western countries). That which in other countries may or must be conducted on medical, family, church, or municipal premises, are in the USA may be and often is conducted in the commercial funeral parlour.

Central to the American funeral is the public display of the body. Embalming, originally developed in the Civil War in order to preserve the war dead for the long journey home, was combined with romantic notions of the beautiful death (Ariès 1981) to create a beautiful image for the mourners, displayed in a fine casket and bedecked with flowers (Cahill 1995; Laderman 1996). By the end of the nineteenth century, developments in embalming techniques required the body to be removed from home to the undertaker's premises; once there, the undertaker was in full control of the body, and hence of the funeral, restyling himself from undertaker to funeral director (Laderman 2003, pp. 1-44). Whatever the symbolic meanings of the displayed American corpse beautiful (Metcalf and Huntington 1991; Cahill 1995; Davies 1997), Mitford (1963) was right that it – along with the casket and other paraphernalia that enhance its display - is central to the economic operation of the twentieth century American funeral parlour.

In N. America, cremation was seen – by both its proponents and opponents – as a cheap option that dispensed with public viewing, and hence with the elaborate casket that was central to the funeral director's profitability. By portraying cremation as tawdry, un-Christian and un-American, and by simply not suggesting it to customers as an option,

funeral directors were highly successful in resisting it. Only in the 1990s, when it became clear that a significant minority of families were choosing cremation, did some funeral directors (such as Kubasek 1990) realize that it was better to make some money out of cremation than none, and began promoting it as an option, preferably to include viewing, a religious service, and a nice container for the ashes (Prothero 2001). Though the rhetoric may have suggested otherwise, the history of cremation in twentieth century America was primarily a matter of money: how to make it (for the funeral parlours), how not to spend it (for some customers).

North American cemeteries are owned by local communities and religious groups as well as by private companies (Habenstein & Lamers 1963, p. 752), but the USA differs from other western countries in the dominance of the commercial cemetery (Sloane 1991). Likewise, crematories are almost all owned and run commercially.<sup>11</sup> After burial or cremation, the focus is not (as in many religions) on the bones or ashes themselves, but on the container within which they lie or are otherwise embedded. Money may be made out of containers. Marketing of expensive hardwood or steel caskets emphasizes their durability and ability to protect their valuable cargo from the subterranean ravages of nature. Funeral directors began to get into the cremation business when they realized they could market a wide range of urns and ways to permanently preserve cremated remains. Exceptionally, for some thousands of dollars, your ashes may now be turned into a diamond, or incorporated into an artificial reef which is sunk under the sea and in time will encourage marine growth and life.<sup>12</sup> That said, the majority of American ashes are still scattered, in a no-container, low-cost operation, despite attempts by the funeral industry in some states to ban scattering (Mitford 1963).

Of course, many American funeral directors and their customers are devout Christians or other believers, and this is reflected in their language and the rites chosen. My point here, though, is institutional: whatever their religious beliefs, their roles are those of businessman and customer.

### The municipal model

The municipal model is found to a considerable degree in France and those other parts of Europe, notably parts of Germany and Italy, influenced by the Napoleonic Code. During the revolution in France (as later in Russia – Merridale 2003, p. 182), funerals were taken out of the hands of the church, and organized by public officials. But they did it so badly that the decree of 23 prairial, year XII (1804) created new structures to ensure decent funerals and burials for everyone. Kselman traces the tensions between state, private business, church and family that ensued in the following century, leading to the reform of 1904, which is still in force. In this reform, city governments were expected to establish their own funeral operation or to delegate this to a single entrepreneur (Kselman 1993, p. 10). The nineteenth century romantic cult of the dead led to a belief that profit seeking should be kept separate from the treatment of the dead (Kselman 1993, p. 289), a view which still holds sway in France despite criticisms that the required local monopoly leads to higher prices and reduced choice (and hence greater control of families by the commercial

franchisee). In Western Europe, Spanish cities have perhaps the most direct municipal involvement, with many bodies going from the city morgue, perhaps via the Catholic church, to the municipal cemetery.

In the municipal model, the corpse is typically made available for viewing, but in a very low key way. Unless the corpse be that of a famous politician or national hero, to be visited by the masses in a national pantheon (Kselman 1988; Zbarsky & Hutchinson 1999), the state has little to gain from elaborate viewing of the corpse of the ordinary citizen. But the more centralized the state, as in France and the USSR, the more likely becomes viewing of the great and the good.<sup>13</sup>

In France, Spain and Portugal, nineteenth century municipalities built and ran hygienic new cemeteries to replace the churchyard (Kselman 1993; Goody & Poppi 1994, p. 163; Queiroz & Rugg 2003), often leading to conflict and occasionally to riots in which priests, the secular municipality, and popular folk religion battled with each other for control of funeral rites and burial rights (Tamason 1980; de Pina-Cabral & Feijó 1983; Kselman 1988). In Germany today, 'bodies, body parts and ashes are to be buried only in public or officially licensed cemeteries that are the responsibility of local authorities' (Merke 2003). In the municipal model, ashes or dry bones have no religious significance, nor is there any interest in profiting from them. Re-cycling of bones in much of continental Europe is simply a matter of managerial efficiency.

### The religious model

The religious model is shown in its purest type in religious minorities, for example Jewish and Islamic, that themselves prepare and dispose of the corpse. For orthodox Jews, it is a religious duty to care for their own dead. What happens to the corpse is determined not by profit as in the commercial model, nor by convenience as in the municipal model, but by religious requirement. Thus all orthodox Jewish corpses are dressed the same, with slight differences between male and female; Muslims need to be buried so they face Mecca on the day of resurrection. Jews may have their own burial grounds, Muslims may have a section within a municipal or private cemetery.

For the population as a whole, however, the religious model is approximated institutionally in Scandinavia, particularly in Sweden where the church takes on many of the functions more often provided in the USA by private enterprise and in many other parts of Europe by the municipality. (The main exception is funeral directing, which remains an independent commercial operation.) Until 1991, the death was registered in the local parish office<sup>14</sup>. The funeral is typically held either in church, or in a chapel within a church-owned cemetery or crematorium; and, if requested, the church has to provide a place, for example the parish hall, for secular funerals. After 2000, the Church of Sweden ceased to be a state church, but it continues to administer 'almost all funeral activities in the country. Only the municipalities of Stockholm and Tranås have assumed responsibility for these activities.... The Church of Sweden is responsible for ensuring the availability of burial grounds for all and of premises that are free from religious symbols for the holding of

funeral ceremonies.’ (Ministry of Culture 2000) Even Stockholm’s architecturally renowned municipal woodland cemetery and crematorium is dominated by Asplund’s famous modernist cross (Worpole 2003). Culturally, however, Scandinavian countries are predominantly secular, with exceptionally low levels of both churchgoing and afterlife beliefs (Harding et al 1986; Davie 2000).

Culturally, the religious model is best displayed in the Catholic and Orthodox countries of southern Europe, along with Ireland. Here the corpse is a sacred rather than a secular or social object, the temple of the soul rather than an empty shell (Synnott 1992), so it is important that it be viewed within the religious setting of the church. Thus in Eire, the body is typically removed to the church the night before the funeral, where it is waked by relatives who stay to look after the body and pray for the soul. This may in part be an attempt by the church to prevent some of the wilder excesses of waking in the home that characterize Irish folklore (Grainger 1998; O’Cruaioich 1998). The open coffin funerals of the Orthodox tradition also dramatically display the body within an ecclesiastical rather than commercial setting.

Protestant Christians, by contrast, tend to separate body from soul; the dead body holds little or no spiritual significance, so viewing the body holds no spiritual significance. For American WASPs, viewing the body is a purely social requirement. In England, the Archbishop of Canterbury accepted cremation in the early 1940s, arguing that what happens to the body is of no spiritual significance (Jupp 1990, 1997). By contrast, the Pope agreed to cremation only in 1963, and only grudgingly; even today the cremation rate in Catholic countries such as Ireland, Italy, Spain and Portugal is far below that of historically Protestant European countries. In both Scandinavia and the Mediterranean, visiting the grave is a religious duty.

In Catholic and Orthodox countries, where the symbolic connection between corpse and soul is clear (Hertz 1960; Danforth 1982), visits to the grave provide an opportunity to pray for the soul. In Scandinavia too, there is a cult of visiting the grave. In all these cultures, visitors typically bring and tend flowers for the grave or mausoleum niche (Goody & Poppi 1994). In rural Greece, the exhumation of the bones a few years later is redolent with religious meaning (Danforth 1982). In Sweden, ashes should by law be buried in the (almost always church-run) cemetery; the family must apply for permission to scatter elsewhere and, though permissions have recently increased, considerable restrictions remain as to where ashes may be scattered. A similar situation pertains in the municipal cemeteries of Germany. These regulations have become part of culture: a German colleague and a Swedish student were both amazed that Britons can do what they like with ashes; my British students were appalled to discover that in Sweden and Germany the ashes are effectively owned by the cemetery.

### Mixed models

Clearly, outside of Jewish, Muslim and other minority groups, the empirical religious examples given above are far from pure: in organizationally religious Sweden, funeral

directing is commercial; in culturally religious Italy, cemetery operation is municipal. Germany also has a mixed model, with municipal control of cemeteries co-existing with a powerful state-funded church.

England is a good example of a thoroughly mixed model. In the typical funeral, a commercial funeral director (Howarth 1996; Parsons 1999) takes the body to the municipal crematorium, at which the funeral service of the non-churchgoing deceased is presided over by a Church of England minister (Hockey 1992). Though burial of the urban dead shifted in Victorian times from the Church of England to private companies and municipalities (Rugg 1997, 2000), in many rural areas today the Church of England retains control of burial in the churchyard and increasing numbers of cremated remains are buried in churchyards. And Britons, along with Americans, have developed a folk religious belief that human remains should never to be disturbed, a belief possibly associated with their horror of bones, skeletons and ghosts, a horror unknown in Catholic Italy (Goody & Poppi 1994). The roots of this British sensibility are unclear. Draper (1967) points to the Puritan ban on extensive funeral ritual, to which the English responded by attaching their emotions instead to the place of the burial – the grave and the cemetery. Along with this folk religiosity, however, there is an institution – the British Humanist Association – that will conduct secular funerals (Smoker 1980; Willson 1989), an option that – though legal - is not readily available in much of the USA.<sup>15</sup> England is at the same time religious and secular, commercial and municipal.

### Institutions and culture

My analysis so far has been largely institutional, but it should be clear from the discussion of the religious and mixed models that cultural factors are also important. Culture and institutions may fit very closely together: in the USA, for example, the business ethic and hence businesses themselves are deeply rooted in American culture. But there is no reason why institutions and culture need fit. Religious symbols typically decorate the American commercial funeral parlour and the British municipal crematorium. Though American society is institutionally secular in its transfer of powers from the church to other institutions, it is culturally highly religious in terms of churchgoing and the power of religious symbols to provide meaning, not least around death (Garces-Foley 2004). So, though institutional power in the funeral is held by commercial interests, the rites that take place in the commercially run funeral parlour or cemetery are typically thoroughly religious. Thus we often find a minister of religion officiating, but on commercial premises (whether funeral parlour or cemetery). In Sweden, by contrast, we may find a secular officiant performing on church premises, reflecting a society that is culturally secular but in which the institutional church functions as an arm of the state. Religious iconography on Swedish graves may be minimal, despite the cemetery being church owned; the opposite is often the case in Italy. (See Fig 2)

Figure 2: Institutions and culture

|                             | <b>Institutionally commercial</b> | <b>Institutionally municipal</b>     | <b>Institutionally religious</b> |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| <b>Culturally religious</b> | USA                               | Italy<br>Spain                       | Jewish burial societies          |
| <b>Culturally secular</b>   |                                   | France (part secular, part Catholic) | Sweden                           |

A full comparative analysis of funerals would need to bring together the institutional and the cultural. For example, in transactions that are institutionally commercial, what customers want is always influenced by culture. Whether they want to pay to view a beautified body, whether they want to buy a religious or a secular rite, whether they want cremation or burial are all influenced not just by the institutions and economics of the funeral industry (as Mitford and other critics would have it) but also by culture, religion and personal values. I will give two examples.

First, viewing the body. This is promoted institutionally by commercialism, as in the North American case where it is the crux around which the economics of the funeral parlour turns. Culturally, it is promoted by Catholicism and Orthodoxy whose funerals focus precisely on prayers in the visible presence of the corpse. The symbolism of the viewed corpse varies, depending on whether its origin is social/economic, or religious. In a Catholic funeral in the USA, therefore, the body is supercharged with meaning – social, economic, and religious. Viewing the body, however, is of no interest to municipal institutions nor to the world view of Protestantism, and hence is not at all central to the municipal funerals of Protestant northern Europe, while in the USA some Protestant ministers have promoted closed-casket funerals (Dowd 1921; Fulton 1961; Bradfield & Myers 1980; French 1985; Laderman 2003). France is different in that culturally it is part secular, part Catholic (Kselman 1988; Badone 1989, 1990), while institutionally funeral directing and cemetery management are highly municipalized. In this context, it tends to be corpses of civic significance that are showcased. So the corpse is central to the commercial model (where it has social meaning), minimized in the municipal model, and has religious meaning in the religious model.

Second, why do some countries tend to bury, others cremate? Here again, both institutional and cultural factors operate. Within Europe, burial is fostered culturally by Catholicism, Orthodoxy, Judaism and Islam, while in the USA it is preferred in the South and by recent immigrants who need a grave to visit and to display that they have ‘arrived’ (Walter 1993). In the commercial institutional context of the USA, burial provides more scope for profit than does cremation.<sup>16</sup> Cremation in the west has become the norm only where there has been state encouragement in the absence of religious or commercial

resistance. Cremation developed fastest in Britain (municipal promotion, an accepting Protestant established church), and Sweden (promotion by the Protestant state church). By contrast, in Italy and Ireland, the Catholic church ensured that cremation remains at very low levels. In the USA, resistance from funeral directors kept the cremation rate very low, and it only rose significantly from the late 1980s when a number of them began to present it as an option. But in the absence of active (local or central) state promotion of cremation, as in Britain and Japan, it is unlikely that cremation in the USA will ever reach the levels it has enjoyed in those countries.<sup>17</sup>

## Reform

So far, I have argued that control of the various stages of disposing of a human corpse may be in the hands of the church, private enterprise, or the local authority, or some mixture of these. All modernizing societies responded to the mid-nineteenth century burial crisis by rationalizing and specializing – but they varied in how they did this. At that time, priests, businessmen and local officials jostled with each other for control of the dead, and in the ensuing settlements between them, particular national configurations of institutional power over the dead were established. These configurations bedded down through to the mid twentieth century. Since then, there has been considerable talk of funeral reform in a number of countries, usually in the direction of greater choice for individual mourners (Wouters 2002). What we find, of course, is that critics and reformers are battling against different forms of institutionalized power, depending on the country and its configuration. In some countries, reformers portray their struggle as that of freeing families from religious conformity, in others from municipal banality, in yet others from the clutches of profit-seeking funeral directors.

Some sociologists argue that, as societies become more modern (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002) and affluent (Hofstede 1997), people and relationships become more individualistic, though Macfarlane (1978) argues that individualism in England the USA long pre-dates the Industrial Revolution. Among death scholars, some historians (Ariès 1981; Gittings 1984) see individualism as a long historical trend of great significance, as do some sociologists (Walter 1994). Whether increasing individualism in mortuary practices is the latest chapter in a centuries' long evolution, or a romantic reaction to industrialism, or a much more recent 'post-modern' reaction (Simon et al 1993; Winkel 2001), there is broad agreement among researchers that contemporary mourners typically want more individual control and choice over funeral rites and body disposal (Garces-Foley & Holcomb 2004). This paper, however, shows why this individuality is protested differently, according to country.

Where the religious model has dominated, reformers have asked why families with a different religion, or none, must hand their dead and/or funeral rites over to the established or state church. Minority religions and humanist groups ask why they do not receive the state funding that some majority religions receive (Pearce 2001). Partly in response to such concerns, in 2000 the Swedish church's ties to the Swedish state were considerably loosened, though the church continued to be the responsible authority for the



funeral system (Myrvold 2004). In Catholic southern Europe, it can be hard to find anywhere non-religious in which to conduct a secular funeral. Though it is outside the scope of this article, we may note that in Japan some now want to replace the elaborately formal funerals required by 'funeral Buddhism' with more private and personal funerals (Breen 2004).

Where the municipal model dominates, there are very different concerns. In Britain, as stated above, there has been a widespread feeling that a twenty minute service in a municipal crematorium, conducted by a priest who never met the deceased, is too impersonal for a society characterized by individualism (Walter 1990; National Funerals College 1998). Significant changes occurred in the 1990s in British funerals, primarily toward more individualized funerals, but also toward woodland burial, in which nature rather than technology dominates (Weinrich & Speyer 2003). As Worpole (2003) points out, an unmarked grave in a wood is as impersonal as municipal cremation, but returning to the one-ness of nature is a more positive symbol for Britons than being sucked into a municipal mass-destruction machine.<sup>18</sup> In the French version of municipal funerals, change comes from entrepreneurs like Michel Leclerc, who in the 1980s attempted to break the local monopolies granted by the 1904 state franchise system. Indeed, the effect of municipalisation on funeral directing has concerned French critics for over a century (Kselman 1993: ch.6). In the USSR, Lane (1981, p. 240-1) reported concern about the impersonality, uniformity and lack of symbolism in life cycle rituals.

Where the commercial model reigns, criticism is likely to come from those who feel that money, or at least excess profits, should not be made out of the dead. This criticism has a long tradition in a number of countries. Steel (1702) and Dickens (1984) are early British literary examples, Mark Twain (1966: 432-41) an American one. Even in more religious cultures, excess profiteering by priests has often been attacked – in late medieval Europe (Gittings 1984), in Banaras (Parry 1994) - and in Japan today there are criticisms of the fortune made by some Buddhist monks in the selling of posthumous names. The most celebrated examples of the commercial critique in the modern West, though, come from the USA – Bowman (1969), Harner (1963), and most famously Jessica Mitford (1963, 1998). With her English distaste for making money, least of all from the dead, she criticized the commercialization of every aspect of the American funeral - though that may not be why she was an immediate best seller in the States. After all, Americans see nothing wrong with business. Habenstein (1962*b*) shows how the mid-century all-American funeral, with its cosmetics and steel caskets and sumptuous Cadillac hearses, was essentially an aesthetic production, a production that Prothero argues became sheer bad taste to a baby-boomer generation that saw itself as post-materialist and environmentalist. Prothero (2001, pp. 210) suggests that 'the secret of cremation's end-of-century success was not that it was cheap but that it was not tawdry.' In line with the thesis that throughout history people have used funerals to establish status (Childe 1945), Mitford's fans – along with earlier funeral critics and more recent cremationists – belong to wealthier families long settled in the USA: they no longer need to demonstrate through an all-American funeral and burial that they have arrived in the promised land. They have little interest in a

gaudy display of social status; rather, they want the funeral to portray individual identity (Kephart 1950; Sommer et al 1985; Garces-Foley & Holcomb 2004).

In talking to funeral reformers in a number of countries, I have been struck by the difficulty they have in understanding the issues faced by reformers elsewhere. My analysis above explains this. Though many reformers share the goal of more personal and individual funerals that reflect the more individualized relationships and identities of late modernity, the systems of sedimented institutional power they are challenging are so fundamentally different that they simply cannot understand the problems other reformers face, nor why these reformers do not have the problems they themselves face.

### Explaining the three types

Identifying and describing the three institutional models and their empirical occurrence is relatively straightforward. Unravelling their interaction with culture is harder. And perhaps harder still is to explain why the commercial model dominates in the USA, the religious model in Scandinavia, and significant elements of the municipal model elsewhere in Europe. The following comprise some tentative suggestions.

Religion. Concerning the role of religion, David Martin's thesis serves us well. Where a Catholic monopoly tied to an absolute monarchy led to an internal revolution, as in France, the modern state emerged as highly secular; through the Napoleonic decree of 1804, this led to heavy municipal involvement in cemetery development in much of Europe, together with municipal control of funeral directing in France. Strong folk Catholicism (Badone 1990), however, led to a highly visible Catholic superstructure being built, literally in the case of the cemetery, on the municipal base. Where historically there were a variety of Protestant churches, or where (as in Ireland, Finland, and Denmark) the key revolution was not internal but a throwing off of foreign domination, then a more accommodating church-state relationship evolved, reflected even in the state authorizing and funding the church to organize burial on its behalf, as in Scandinavia.

The Mediterranean south (Catholic or Orthodox) and Lutheran Scandinavia are mirror images of one another. In the Mediterranean countries, highly religious people accept that the local state owns and runs the cemetery and, in France and Spain, may have considerable control over funeral directing. In Scandinavia, a highly secular people accept that the church arranges burial and cremation on behalf of all citizens – whether they be Christian, atheist, Sikh or whatever.<sup>19</sup> Both the Scandinavian and Mediterranean accommodations seem bizarre to Britons and Americans; this is because they each have different relationships, deriving from different histories, between church and state.

If municipal cemetery provision comes about classically through secular revolutions against a monarchy allied to a monopolistic church (France, Russia), it also happened in nineteenth century England, where a strong state (influenced by Methodists and other religious nonconformists) did not see fit to resource a decreasingly monopolistic Church of England to bury the escalating masses of urban dead (Rugg 1997). Where there

is a monopolistic Protestant church, as was the case until 2000 in Sweden, it effectively becomes a state-funded public utility, not least in providing funeral, burial and cremation services (Davie 2002).

In the USA, religious competition, a weak central government, and legal separation of church and state meant that, apart from in a few eighteenth century towns, the churches' historic involvement in the burial business could never be on a Scandinavian scale. This left a vacuum, easily filled by private entrepreneurs, relatively unconstrained by legislation in a country that distrusts public intervention in routine social arrangements.

Individualism. Taking Hofstede's (1997) individual-collective dimension, collectivist societies are more likely to accept state provision of anything, including funerals. In addition, in much of continental Europe, one finds a high degree, even among mobile people, of attachment to one's home town, which can lead to not only a commitment to travel considerable distances to visit the family grave (e.g. Goody & Poppi 1994, pp. 150-2), but also acceptance of local, that is, parish, control of burial.

In the USA, a more individualist culture accepts the individual customer-salesman relationship, in which personal choice is the rhetoric, if not the reality, on each side. In the UK, there is an intermediate situation. As in other areas of British life, so with disposal of the dead: there is relatively high state involvement (much more than in the USA, somewhat less than on much of the European continent), resented by a highly individualistic people. Hostility in the British media to the arrival in the 1990s of Texan funeral giant, Service Corporation International, expressed both anti-Americanism and the feeling that commerce and death should not be mixed.

Migration. International migration can foster either a religious, or a commercial, model of funeral provision. The migrant to a foreign land may remain, or even become more, religious, as a way of retaining ethnic identity, and this can be reflected in religious organization of the funeral. The clearest examples are Muslims (Jonker 1996, 1997) and Jews in Western Europe, where funeral rites that may previously have taken place within the home are transferred to mosque or synagogue. In Britain, Muslims and Jews have well organized funeral provision within their own community, creating religious enclaves within a society whose funerals are otherwise municipal and/or commercial.

But migration can also augment the role of the commercial funeral director. Unsure of the funeral customs of their ancestral homeland, second and third generation migrants may rely not only on their own religious experts but also on a commercial funeral director who has become an authority in the rites appropriate for that particular ethnic group, and who knows how to effect a workable compromise between ancestral rites and what is practical, legal and respectable in the new country (Jonker 1996; Laderman 2003:155-9). Unsure of how to act and what is appropriate, the migrant family seeks someone on whom to rely; many funeral directors set themselves up as precisely this person. The American experience as a society of immigrants helps explain the power that commercial funeral directors have been able to accrue to themselves; they can respond

more flexibly to other cultures and religions than can a state church or a municipal bureaucracy.

Even migration within a nation, from country to city, can have this effect. In the nineteenth century, rural folk, newly arrived in the booming towns of the industrial revolution, found themselves within a new and acutely status-conscious class system. In Victorian Britain and France, ten per cent more or less spent on a funeral, like ten per cent more or less spent on rent, displayed your status (Morley 1971; Laquer 1983; Kselman 1993). The funeral director guided you through this, and in the process developed all kinds of required funeral paraphernalia for each class of customer. In this analysis, the commercialization of funeral directing is a specific response to migration;<sup>20</sup> immigrant societies such as twenty first century USA, Canada and Australia are constantly regenerating the conditions that throughout nineteenth century Europe led to funeral commercialization. Funerals become cheaper, and consumers gain the confidence to create their own memorial societies (USA/Canada) or arrange funerals themselves (UK) only as, after some generations, they settle into the now not-so-new society.

### Conclusion

In attempting to describe and explain variation in funeral practices between different modern western countries, I have posited a two-stage process. First, in the mid-nineteenth century the church, the state, and/or businessmen rationalized and took control of the rapidly expanding number of corpses, leading to three pure types of control and any number of mixed types. This institutional control interacted with national cultural history to create in each country an identifiable institutional/cultural solution to the problem of how to dispose of the dead in a mobile, urban, modern society. Second, in the late twentieth century, a global demand in rich countries for more freedom and individuality spawned funeral reform movements in many countries, but each had as its target a different bastion of institutional power, whether private enterprise, municipality, or state church. Because of this, it seems highly likely that twenty first century personalized funerals will be enabled through different organizational structures in different countries. In funerals, there are common trends – nineteenth century rationalization and specialization, and twenty first century individualization. But major variations, of both organization and culture, persist. Who organizes and enables the personalized twenty first century funeral will not be the same in Sweden, France, and the USA.

Funerals in the West provide a case study not only in modernization, but also in secularization (in the sense of the transfer of functions away from the church). Control of the dead body and of the destiny of the soul has long been a key component of the power of Christian churches, so their handing control of the corpse over to secular agencies is of no small concern to any account of secularization. What we find are intriguing variations in whom this control was ceded to, which connect with differing patterns of secularization in different countries.

Finally, though religion/secularization is a key part of the story, it is also clear that religion alone does not explain variation in mortuary practices in the modern West. Institutions, and their interaction with religion, are crucial. A culturally highly religious society such as the USA produces a superstructure of very religious funeral rites, built on – even enabled by – an institutional base that is more commercialized than anywhere in Europe. I hope this article’s comparative perspective has provided the basis for a more comprehensive account of national variation in funeral practices.

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<sup>2</sup> I have written elsewhere on cultural differences concerning burial (1993), and bereavement (1999).

<sup>3</sup> For the classic study of these in the USA, see Sudnow (1967).

<sup>4</sup> There is a considerable literature in French, and a modest one in German, neither of which I review here.

<sup>5</sup> In the USA and Australia, some burial grounds were never under church control.

<sup>6</sup> As Kellehear (1984) argues, the term ‘denial’ is of little or no use as a sociological resource. As a sociological topic, however, it is fascinating. Funeral reformers damn the cosmeticized corpse in the open-casket American funeral as a denial of death, while American funeral directors damn the reformers’ closed-casket slimmed-down funerals in the very same terms. In a culture in which psychological health has, for many, become the ultimate touchstone, ‘denial’ is used by all parties as a rhetorical club with which to hit any death practices they disapprove of (Lofland 1978; Cahill 1995).

<sup>7</sup> The male gender is used advisedly. As a number of studies have shown, the mid nineteenth to mid twentieth centuries saw a decline in female deathworkers in favour of the new, and largely male, specialists (Adams 1993; Habenstein 1962: 229), though recently more females are being found among, for example, funeral directors (Laderman 2003) and pathologists.

<sup>8</sup> An exception may be Sweden, where the co-operative Fonus organises about a third of funerals (Habenstein & Lamers 1963: 397; Myrvold 2004). Though the largest group of funeral directors in the UK are ‘The Co-Op’, this effectively functions as a capitalist business.

<sup>9</sup> Canada is very similar to the USA in this respect.

<sup>10</sup> I do not claim this transfer of functions is total. For example, one Californian correspondent informs me in 2004 that in her local newspaper’s obituary over half announced the service at churches rather than funeral homes. And the tradition of church yards in New England and New Mexico remains strong.

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<sup>11</sup> A note on terminology. A cremator is the machine that burns bodies. In the USA, a crematory is the building that houses the cremator or cremators. In Europe, a crematorium is the building that houses not only the cremator(s), but also a chapel or hall in which a public funeral service may be held.

<sup>12</sup> See [www.eternalreefs.com](http://www.eternalreefs.com) and [www.lifegem.com](http://www.lifegem.com)

<sup>13</sup> An intriguing case concerns the popularity of viewing unidentified corpses in the public morgue in nineteenth century Paris. Intended by the authorities as a way of establishing their identity, it became a popular leisure activity in its own right (Higonnet 1984).

<sup>14</sup> Since 1991, at the local tax office.

<sup>15</sup> Humanist funerals are available also in most other European countries, though the nature of their secularity depends on the historic institutional position of the national church (Pearce 2001).

<sup>16</sup> In other contexts, for example Bali and Japan, cremation can be a highly elaborate and expensive affair.

<sup>17</sup> There is no scope to explore this further here, but the obvious explanation that cremation thrives in crowded countries where there is no space for burial does not hold up. There is a poor correlation, both between and within countries, between density of population and cremation. Even where there is a shortage of grave space, other factors must also operate before burial is replaced by cremation. See Walter (1993), Bernstein (2000), Prothero (2001).

<sup>18</sup> One humanist officiant told me that his woodland burial clients object not so much to the banality of the municipal crematorium but to its overly churchy furnishings.

<sup>19</sup> Whether Sikh, Hindu or Muslim immigrants accept the Swedish church's role, however, is another matter (Myrvold 2004).

<sup>20</sup> I do not claim it is only a result of migration. For the Victorian working class in Britain, the fear of being buried a pauper was crucial (Richardson 1989).