

# Religious Traditions at End of Life

**Baycrest**

# Religious Traditions at End of Life

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## Judaism

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While there are many denominations within Judaism that hold differing views, Jews commonly believe that holiness can be attained through following the laws and commandments laid out in the Torah (the Old Testament) and interpretations by the Rabbis of the Talmud and later eras (Posqim).

### **When Death is Immanent**

It is traditional to recite the “viddui,” a confessional prayer, prior to or at the moment of death. This prayer expresses the reaffirmation of the dying person’s belief in God and the Jewish people. Please call on your rabbi or a chaplain from Spiritual Care to assist you during this difficult time.

Jews believe that death should occur in the midst of a supportive community. Your health care team will do their best to update you regarding your loved one’s health status, but are not always able to predict this with exact accuracy. For many, being with someone who is dying helps reduce their anxiety, fear and loneliness. It also gives family members the opportunity to say “good bye” and come to grips with the reality of death. If you are unable to remain with the patient, try to arrange for someone else to stay in the room. Others prefer to be alone in order to spare their loved ones additional sadness, guilt or burden. Try to discern and honor their preference.

### **After Death Has Occurred**

When a Jewish person dies, those who will mourn the death should recite the prayer “Dayan HaEmet,” recognizing God’s power as the “true judge.” A rabbi or funeral home should be contacted immediately. According to Jewish law, the body must be interred as soon as practical from the time of death, which means that funeral planning begins immediately. From the moment of death until the moment of burial, a Jewish body should not be left unattended, and the funeral home can help coordinate a “shomer” (guardian) for the purposes of staying with the body. In addition, the funeral home will begin to make arrangements for the funeral service and burial, coordinate with the family’s rabbi or assist the family in identifying an appropriate rabbi, and put the family in touch with the local “hevra kadisha” (burial society) if one exists.

The shomer may be a family member, a friend, or a member of the congregation or hevra kadisha. As the shomer may be required to stay with the body for an extended period of time, it is not uncommon to have more than one shomer or people taking turns acting as the shomer. While the shomer may simply sit with the body, it is traditional for the shomer to recite “tehillim” (psalms).

It is the family’s responsibility to arrange for proper guardian and prayer recitation for the deceased until transferred to a funeral home. Baycrest is not able to provide a shomer. The family or their designate may sit with the body as a shomer. The deceased may not remain longer than two hours on the Apotex/Hospital Unit and must be moved to the Baycrest morgue. The shomer sits in the adjacent room. The family may contact outside individuals or sacred societies to perform this function. Baycrest

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has on-call individuals who may be contacted for such service. Their fee is approximately \$250 a calendar day or part thereof. This is in keeping with standard rates in the community. Each nursing station and the Spiritual Care Department maintain a list of individuals who may be available to sit as shomer. The family must contact the shomer directly to make appropriate arrangements including payment of fees and a means of contact if death occurs on Shabbat or Holy Day. This list is provided as a courtesy to families, but Baycrest cannot be responsible for making any arrangements on behalf of families. Baycrest chaplains are not able to sit as shomrim.

### **When to Hold a Jewish Funeral**

Jewish law requires that the body be buried within a day or as soon as practical from the time of death (usually 24-72 hours after death). However, exceptions may be made in a number of cases, including if there are any legal issues surrounding the death that must be investigated, if the body must be transported from one city or country to another, if close family members must travel far distances to be present for the funeral, or to avoid burial on Saturday or another holy day.

### **Organ Donation**

Organ donation is generally acceptable in Judaism, and is often viewed as a “mitzvah” (religious imperative) if used for immediate transplantation or therapy. However, it is generally not acceptable to donate the body to medical research within the Ultra-Orthodox, Orthodox and Conservative communities. Reform, Reconstructionist and Renewal communities may permit donation of the body to medical research. If there is any question as to whether or not organs may be donated, it is best to consult with a rabbi.

### **Autopsies**

Routine autopsies are not acceptable in Judaism as they are seen as a desecration of the body. In most cases, the family of the deceased may refuse to have a routine autopsy performed. Should an autopsy be necessary for legal reasons, a rabbi familiar with the procedures may be present while the autopsy is performed if possible.

### **Embalming**

Embalming and cosmetology are not generally used by Jews unless required by law.

### **Cremation**

Depending on the degree of religious outlook and observance of the deceased, the rules around cremation may vary. For Ultra-Orthodox, Orthodox and most Conservative Jews, cremation is not acceptable and the body should be buried, intact, in the ground. While cremation is opposed by Conservative Jews, a Conservative rabbi may still perform a funeral for a person who has been cremated. However, in most Conservative communities, the rabbi will not be present for the interment of the ashes. For Reform, Reconstructionist and Renewal Jews, however, cremation is becoming an

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increasingly common practice, and most Reform, Reconstructionist and Renewal rabbis will willingly perform a funeral and interment for someone who has been cremated.

## Preparing the Body

To prepare the body for burial, it must be washed, purified, and dressed. This process is called “taharah,” which refers to both the specific act of ritual purification and the general process of preparing the body. The body should be washed (a process called “rehitzah”) by members of the hevra kadisha. Men should wash the body of a man and women should wash the body of a woman. Once the body is washed, the body must be purified with water. This act, called “taharah,” is executed either by fully submerging the body in a “mikvah” (ritual bath) or by pouring a continuous stream of water over the body. The body is then fully dried and dressed in a simple white shroud (“takhrikhim”), which should be made out of a simple fabric such as linen or muslin. Men may also be buried in a “kippah” (a religious skullcap, also known as a “yarmulke” in Yiddish) and “tallit” (a prayer shawl, also known as a “tallis” in Yiddish).

## Burial Products

Once the body is fully prepared, it is placed in the casket. Jewish law prescribes that the casket, known as an “aron,” must be a simple wooden box, commonly made out of pine, without any metal. In this way, the casket and the body are both entirely biodegradable. Some Jewish caskets may have holes drilled into the bottom to accelerate the rate at which the body will decompose, thus fulfilling the principle stated in the Book of Genesis, “for dust you are and to dust you shall return.” The casket should remain closed at all times with the exception of viewing for identification purposes.

## Viewing, Wake or Visitation before a Jewish Funeral

There is generally no viewing, visitation, or wake in Jewish tradition. Before the funeral service, the family will gather and participate in a rite known as “keriah,” in which a visible part of clothing—such as a lapel, shirt collar, or pocket, for example—is torn as a symbol of mourning. In many communities, the practice has shifted from tearing a piece of clothing to tearing a black ribbon attached to a lapel, shirt collar, or pocket. When mourning the death of a parent, clothes should be torn or a torn ribbon should be affixed on the left side of the chest, over the heart; when mourning all other family members, clothes should be torn or a torn ribbon should be affixed on the right side of the chest. This torn item of clothing or the torn ribbon will be worn throughout the week-long mourning period.

## Where to Hold a Jewish Funeral

The funeral may be held in a synagogue, at the gravesite, or at a funeral home. If the funeral will be held in a synagogue, pallbearers may carry the casket into the sanctuary for the service and out of the sanctuary after the service. However, in many synagogues, the casket will remain outside the sanctuary in a vestibule so as not to be in too close proximity to the Holy Ark and the Torah scrolls contained therein.

## The Jewish Funeral Service

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The funeral consists of prayers, a eulogy, and the reading of psalms. The prayers that are traditionally recited at a Jewish funeral include the Memorial Prayer, called “El Maleh Rahamim,” and the Mourner’s Blessing, called “Mourner’s Kaddish,” among others. Two themes underlie the funeral service: comforting the mourners (“nihum avelim”) and honoring the deceased (“kavod ha-met”).

### Eulogies and Tributes at a Jewish Funeral

There may be one or more eulogies delivered at the funeral service, and they may be delivered by family members or by the rabbi. All eulogies should seek to both praise the life of the deceased and express grief over the death.

### Specific Jewish Funeral Arrangements

Flowers are traditionally not present at the funeral service. Instead, donations are often made to an appropriate charity in the name of the deceased.

### Fraternal, Military, and Civil Rites at a Jewish Funeral

Fraternal, military, and civil rites are generally not performed during the funeral service, though they may be performed at the burial or interment service. Before planning any fraternal, military, or civil rites, check with a rabbi to make sure they are appropriate.

### Interment

After the funeral service, all mourners should follow the hearse to the cemetery or place of interment. At the burial or interment site, the rabbi will say a few prayers, all will again recite the Mourner’s Kaddish, and the casket or urn will be interred. If the body is being buried in the ground, it is traditional for all mourners to place dirt into the grave (usually a minimum of three times), either with hands or with the back of a shovel.

### Post-Funeral Reception

After the interment, there may be a reception at a family home or at the synagogue. Friends or the synagogue community should prepare the consolation meal. Eggs are traditionally served as a reminder of the fragility of life and round rolls or muffins as a reminder that death is part of the cycle of life.

### Jewish Mourning Period and Memorial Events

There are three periods of mourning in Judaism. The first, called “shiva,” meaning “seven,” takes place over the seven days immediately following the funeral. During shiva, the family gathers every day in a family home to mourn and pray. For seven days, family members do not go to work or participate in the routine of their normal lives. Guests are received during this time. On the first day of shiva, a shiva candle is lit, which will burn for the duration of the week.

The second period of mourning is called “shloshim,” meaning “thirty,” and lasts until the thirtieth day after the funeral. During shloshim, mourners will resume many of their daily routines, but will continue

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to recite the Mourner's Kaddish daily. Shloshim marks the end of the formal mourning period and a full return to daily life, except in the event when mourners are mourning the death of a parent. If a parent has died, the formal mourning period lasts an entire year ("shanah").

Shanah constitutes the third period of mourning and the mourners curtail their activities such as dancing, attending entertaining events and other activities which would not be appropriate for someone grieving a parent.

There are two specified memorial events in Judaism. The first, called "yahrzeit," is observed on the anniversary of the death (according to the Hebrew calendar). Every year, the night before the anniversary of the death, a yahrzeit candle is lit, which will burn for 24 hours, and the mourner recites the Mourner's Kaddish.

The second memorial event, called "yizkor," takes place on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, as well as on the holiday of Shemini Atzeret, and on the last day of the holidays of Passover and Shavuot. Yizkor is a memorial prayer service, and mourners will go to synagogue to mourn with the community and recite the Kaddish.

# Religious Traditions at End of Life

## Catholic

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The Latin and Eastern Catholic Churches together form the "Catholic Church" or "Roman Catholic Church," the world's largest single religious body and the largest Christian church, all of which acknowledge a primacy of jurisdiction of the Bishop of Rome.

### **When Death Is Imminent**

When a Catholic is approaching death, a priest should be brought in to administer special rites and Holy Communion to the dying person. Contact with the Parish of the deceased individual should be made as soon as possible to inform the priest of the death.

Funeral, cemetery or cremation arrangements cannot be finalized until the family of the deceased has had an opportunity to discuss personally with the priest the various procedures and rites pertaining to a Catholic funeral and burial. The priest is there to offer guidance and support.

### **After Death Occurs**

After the death, a priest should be contacted so that the necessary rites can be administered and the funeral planning process can begin. It is common for local churches to have relationships with Catholic or Catholic-friendly funeral homes, and the deceased's priest, your priest, or a local priest can point you in the right direction for finding a funeral home.

Once the family chooses the Funeral Home/Director, inform him that the deceased is Catholic. They have a copy of the official guidelines and regulations for a Catholic funeral and burial and will be able to assist you in making appropriate choices.

### **When to Hold a Catholic Funeral**

Funeral Masses may not be held on Holy Thursday (the Thursday before Easter), Good Friday (the Friday before Easter), Holy Saturday (the Saturday before Easter), or Easter Sunday. Funeral Masses are also prohibited on the Sundays during Advent (the period starting on the fourth Sunday before December 25 through December 25), Lent (the 40-day period before Easter), and the Easter Season (the 50-day period after Easter). A Funeral Mass may be held on Ash Wednesday (the first day of Lent), though ashes would not be distributed in the church.

### **Organ Donation**

Though there is some disagreement within the Catholic Church on the acceptability of organ donation, many Catholic leaders have accepted the medical definition of "brain death" (the end of brain function as the end of life) and see organ donation as a final charitable act that one may make.

### **Embalming**



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Embalming is acceptable in the Catholic faith, and depending on the rules of the province and/or the funeral home that you're working with, embalming before the Vigil may be necessary.

## **Cremation**

Historically, the Catholic Church did not support cremation. However, these days it is acceptable for a Catholic to be cremated. That said, most churches prefer that the body be present for the Funeral Mass, meaning that cremation should occur after the Funeral Mass. Remains should be buried in the ground or at sea or entombed in a columbarium, and should not be scattered. If cremation does occur prior to the funeral, it is important to inform the Priest of the Church where the funeral will to be held.

## **Viewing, Wake, or Visitation before a Catholic Funeral**

The Vigil is a prayer service usually held the evening before the funeral. Much like a viewing or a wake, family and friends gather in the home of the deceased, in the funeral home, or in the church to pray and remember the deceased. A priest or deacon usually presides over the prayers, though a layperson with knowledge of the prayers and traditions may preside in the event that a priest or deacon is not available.

## **Eulogies and Tributes at a Catholic Funeral**

A eulogy (or words of remembrance) is not part of the funeral Mass. If there is to be a eulogy, the Vigil is the appropriate time to eulogize the deceased or pay any fraternal or civil tributes.

It is imperative that families seek the direction of the officiating priest if a eulogy is desired. An alternative to a eulogy is a printed souvenir leaflet with biographical and other details of the deceased's life and achievements, which serves as a more permanent keepsake.

## **Where to Hold a Catholic Funeral**

In accordance with Catholic teaching, the funeral service for a Catholic consists of bringing the body of the deceased to the Church, the celebration there of Mass, followed by interment, preferably in the consecrated ground of a Catholic cemetery. Thus, Catholic funerals are held in Catholic churches, though they may also be held in the chapels of Catholic assisted living or care facilities or in the chapels at Catholic cemeteries.

## **The Catholic Funeral Service**

Priests lead the Funeral Mass, and may also lead the funeral liturgy (service). If a priest is not available, deacons may lead the funeral liturgy. If a deacon is not available, a layperson with knowledge of the liturgy and traditions may lead the service. However, only a priest or a deacon may deliver the homily (sermon), which will also serve to remember the deceased by incorporating examples from the deceased's life.

## **Specific Catholic Funeral Arrangements**

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Throughout the service, no matter who is leading, laypeople may participate as readers, musicians, pallbearers, ushers, and in other usual roles. The music played at the Funeral Mass should be appropriate church music; popular or non-religious music is not appropriate. However, the family of the person who died may coordinate with the priest to have special or especially meaningful hymns, psalms, or readings included in the Mass.

### **Interment**

The Rite of Committal is the Catholic interment service, at which the body is finally buried or interred. The Rite of Committal may take place at a gravesite, mausoleum crypt or tomb, or columbarium (in the event that the body was cremated). Family and friends gather together with a priest or deacon to pray over the body one last time. In order to make the burial or interment site a sacred place for the deceased, the priest or deacon will bless the place before the body or remains are placed inside. After the site has been blessed, the body or remains will be committed to the earth. The priest or deacon will then recite more prayers, and then everyone will join in to say the Lord's Prayer.

### **Mourning Period and Memorial Events**

There are no prescribed mourning periods or memorial events in Catholicism.

# Religious Traditions at End of Life

## Protestant

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Protestants are non-Catholic Christian members of any of a large number of denominations, including Anglican, Baptist, Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian, Pentecostal, Quaker and United Church as well as others. While each Protestant denomination has its own distinct doctrines and practices, all revolve around the Christian theme that there is life after death for those who have accepted Jesus Christ as their savior. The funeral ceremony emphasizes the afterlife and is designed to celebrate the deceased person's life through testimonials and remembrances. Protestant funerals may incorporate various customs, depending on the beliefs and wishes of the deceased and the family and the denomination to which they belong or subscribe.

Appropriate expressions of sympathy include sending a card, attending the visitation or funeral, sending flowers to the family home or funeral home, donating to a charity designated by the family, or bringing food to the family's home. Funeral guests should dress respectably, although most people no longer wear the traditional black clothing.

### **When Death Is Imminent**

When a Protestant approaches death, a priest/pastor/minister should be contacted to provide final prayers, rituals or sacraments and to comfort the grieving family.

### **After Death Occurs**

When a Protestant dies, a priest/pastor/ minister should be contacted immediately to help in planning the funeral service and identifying an appropriate funeral home. In many communities, the clergy will help plan and direct the funeral.

### **When to Hold a Protestant Funeral**

The Protestant funeral is generally held at a funeral home or church, typically within three days following the death.

### **Organ Donation**

Most Protestant denominations permit organ donation, while some allow it only for immediate transplantation to save a life, but not for medical research. The most conservative denominations do not favor organ donation at all.

### **Embalming**

Embalming is acceptable in the Protestant faith.

### **Cremation**

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In general, cremation is acceptable in the Protestant faith, and will not interfere with holding a traditional funeral. Cremations, in fact, are increasingly popular in the Protestant community as a whole. The body is typically cremated before a memorial service is held. An urn holding the deceased's ashes, or "cremated remains," may be displayed during the service. However, there are some denominations that generally do not support cremation, and instead prefer that the body remain intact and be buried in the ground.

## **Viewing, Wake or Visitation before a Protestant Funeral**

The option of holding a viewing before the funeral is up to the family of the deceased. The viewing can be held in the day or days before the funeral or immediately before the funeral service, and can be open to all mourners or limited to close family members. It is a common practice for the body of the deceased to remain at the funeral home with scheduled hours for visitation, also known as a "viewing." Depending on the family's wishes, the casket may be open or closed. Visitors may express their condolences to the family, pay their respects to the deceased and visit with other guests. Depending on their ties to the deceased, visitors are welcome to stay for the full viewing period or leave after a short period of time.

## **Fraternal, Civil, or Military Rites at a Protestant Funeral**

As the Protestant funeral service is a religious event, any fraternal, civil, or military rites or tributes should be conducted at the viewing rather than at the funeral. In some denominations, military, fraternal, or civil rites may be performed at the interment site instead of at the viewing.

## **Eulogies and Tributes at a Protestant Funeral**

Depending on the denomination, some congregations allow for eulogies and tributes by family and close friends, so long as those tributes focus on the role of faith, religion, and God in the life of the deceased. More conservative congregations may not allow for anyone other than the priest/pastor/minister to officiate the service, and may not focus on the life of the deceased at all.

## **When to Hold a Protestant Funeral**

The funeral should be held within two or three days of the death. In some denominations, it is customary to avoid burial on Sundays and religious holidays, but a Protestant may be buried any day of the week.

## **Where to Hold a Protestant Funeral**

The funeral can be held at a church, at a funeral home, or at a chapel at the cemetery.

## **The Protestant Funeral Service**

The funeral can either be its own service, or a part of the "requiem," which is a service that includes the taking of Holy Communion. The priest/pastor/minister will preside at the service, which may include the reading of scripture from the Book of Common Prayer, hymns, a sermon, and a eulogy by a close friend or family member. The casket should be closed during the service. If the body is not present for the

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service, a photograph of the deceased may be placed at the front of the room or a memorial service will be arranged. As church customs may vary, it is best to speak with your priest/pastor/minister about specific arrangements. Music appropriate for a worship service may be included.

### Particular Protestant Funeral Arrangements

Flowers are appropriate at the funeral, in a church or at a graveside service. Modest clothing shows respect for the bereaved and deceased, with darker clothing customary but not mandatory.

Depending on individual beliefs, there may be an open or closed casket, or cremation may have already occurred in advance of the funeral service. If there is a burial after a church funeral service, it usually follows on the same day, and is sometimes attended only by family members. Recording devices of any kind — audio, video or photo — can be used with the permission of the family, but are generally discouraged in church funeral services. Food for the family — easy meals that require only reheating — is often offered in the days before and after the funeral service

### Interment

Generally, all guests are welcome to attend the interment. Whether the body will be buried in the ground or entombed in a mausoleum, or whether ashes will be interred in a columbarium or buried in an urn garden, the ceremony will be led by the priest. The priest/pastor/minister will recite prayers and commit the body or cremated remains to the earth.

### Post-Funeral Reception

After the interment, there may be a reception at a family home or at the church. Depending on location and ethnic group, it is often customary for attendees to gather after the ceremony to offer condolences to the family, share memories of the deceased, and provide hospitality for out-of-town guests. If the gathering is held at the home of the deceased's family, relatives and friends will typically supply refreshments.

### Mourning Period and Memorial Events

There is no prescribed mourning period or memorial events for Protestants.

## Eastern Orthodox Church

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The Eastern Orthodox Church, officially the Orthodox Catholic Church, is the second largest Christian Church in the world. The Eastern Orthodox Church is one of the oldest religious institutions in the world. United in communion with the Latin Church before the East–West Schism in 1054, and with the Oriental churches for the first quarter of its history, Orthodoxy spread throughout the Roman and later Byzantine Empires and beyond, playing a prominent role in European, Near Eastern, Slavic, and some African cultures.

### **When Death Is Imminent**

When an Eastern Orthodox Christian is approaching death, a priest should be brought in to hear the final confession and administer Holy Communion to the dying person.

### **After Death Occurs**

After the death, the priest will lead those present in prayers for the release of the soul.

### **Cremation**

Cremation is prohibited in the Eastern Orthodox Church.

### **Organ Donation**

Organ donation or donating the body to medical research is prohibited in the Eastern Orthodox Church.

### **Embalming**

Embalming is acceptable, and may be required by law.

### **Attitude toward Suicide**

Death by suicide is not recognized by the Church, and those who commit suicide may not have an Eastern Orthodox funeral.

### **Preparing the Body**

The first step in the Eastern Orthodox funeral tradition is preparing the body, which includes washing and clothing the body. Family and close friends traditionally perform this act with a priest present. If the deceased was a military veteran, he or she may be clothed in his or her uniform. If the deceased held an official role in the Church, he will be dressed in the appropriate robes. Once the body is bathed and dressed, it is ready to be placed in the casket. The priest will sprinkle holy water on all four sides of the casket and then the body will be placed inside.

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## **Viewing, Wake or Visitation before an Eastern Orthodox Funeral**

Once the body has been properly prepared, the priest will then begin the First Panikhida, a prayer service for the deceased. This marks the beginning of the wake. The wake will last until the body is brought to the church for the funeral service. Traditionally, the wake lasts three days, though it has come to last only one. During the wake, the Psalter (Book of Psalms) is read aloud by family and friends and subsequent Panikhidas are performed.

## **Fraternal, Civil, or Military Rites at a Muslim Funeral**

As the Eastern Orthodox funeral service is a religious event, fraternal, civil, or military rites or tributes should not be conducted at the funeral.

## **The Eastern Orthodox Funeral Service**

After the wake, the body is transported to the church for the funeral service. Traditionally, this transportation takes the form of a procession led by the cross. The priest walks in front of the coffin with the censer and leads the processors in the singing of the hymn Trisagion. Even if there will not be a traditional procession, the Trisagion should be recited at the end of the wake, before the body is brought to the church for the funeral service.

Once at the church, the coffin is opened. Near the head of the coffin should be placed a bowl of koliva, a dish of boiled wheat with honey, with a lit candle on top, symbolizing the cyclical nature of life and the sweetness of Heaven. A crown or wreath with the Trisagion printed on it is placed on the head and a small icon of Christ, the deceased's patron saint, or a cross is placed in the deceased's hand or in the casket. Lit candles should be distributed to all present and should remain lit throughout the funeral service.

Mourners and worshipers should stand throughout the funeral service, during which the priest will lead the Divine Liturgy, say prayers, lead the Dismissal, and recite "Memory Eternal." Holy Communion may also be offered. After the service, mourners are encouraged to approach the casket and "say goodbye" to the deceased, and may kiss the icon or cross in the casket. After all mourners have had a chance to "say goodbye," the casket is closed and removed from the church to the cemetery. At this point, the Trisagion should again be sung.

## **Interment**

Once at the cemetery, a short graveside burial service is performed by the priest. The Trisagion is again recited.

## **Post-Funeral Reception**

After the body is buried, family and friends gather for a reception, where mourners can connect with each other, reflect on the life of the deceased, and eat a meal, called a "mercy meal."

## **Eastern Orthodox Mourning Period and Memorial Events**

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The mourning period for Eastern Orthodox Christians lasts for forty days. Within those forty days, the third day, the ninth day, and the fortieth day all have special significance. After forty days, memorials are celebrated at three months, six months, nine months, one year, and on the anniversary of the death for at least seven years. For close relatives, the mourning period may last for one year, during which widows and widowers may wear only black clothing and will receive Panikhidas regularly. Close relatives may also stay home from work for one week and avoid social gatherings for two months.



# Religious Traditions at End of Life

## Muslim

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In the beginning Islam was divided into three major sects. These political divisions are well known as Sunni, Shi'a and Kharijites (Sufi). Each sect developed several distinct jurisprudence systems reflecting their own understanding of the Islamic law during the course of the history of Islam.

### **When Death Is Imminent**

When a Muslim is approaching death, family members and very close friends should be present. They should offer the dying person hope and kindness, and encourage the dying person to say the "shahada," confirming that there is no God but Allah. As soon as death has occurred, those present should say, "Inna lillahi wa inna ilayhi raji'un" ("Verily we belong to Allah, and truly to Him shall we return"). Those present should close the deceased's eyes and lower jaw, and cover the body with a clean sheet. They should also make "dua" (supplication) to Allah to forgive the sins of the deceased.

### **When to Hold a Muslim Funeral**

According to Islamic law ("shariah"), the body should be buried as soon as possible from the time of death, which means that funeral planning and preparations begin immediately. A local Islamic community organization should be contacted as soon as possible, and they will begin to help make arrangements for the funeral service and burial, assist the family in identifying an appropriate funeral home, and coordinate with the funeral home.

### **Organ Donation**

Organ donation is generally acceptable for Muslims, as it follows the Qur'an's teaching that "Whosoever saves the life of one person it would be as if he saved the life of all mankind." If there is any question as to whether or not organs may be donated, it is best to consult with an imam (religious leader) or Muslim funeral director.

### **Autopsies**

Routine autopsies are not acceptable in Islam as they are seen as a desecration of the body. In most cases, the family of the deceased may refuse to have a routine autopsy performed.

### **Embalming**

Embalming and cosmetology are not allowed unless required by state or federal law. Because of the prohibition on embalming and the urgency with which the body must be buried, it is not possible to transport the body from one country to another. Many Muslims living in Canada have a desire to be buried in the country of their ancestry, and this cultural practice, while acceptable in some communities, is in conflict with shariah. An imam or Muslim funeral director should be consulted if there are any questions on the matter.

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## Cremation

Cremation is forbidden for Muslims.

## Preparing the Body

To prepare the body for burial, it must be washed (“Ghusl”) and shrouded (“Kafan”). Close same-sex family members are encouraged to give Ghusl, though in the case of spousal death the spouse may perform the washing. The body should be washed three times. If, after three washings, the body is not entirely clean, it may be washed more, though ultimately the body should be washed an odd number of times. The body should be washed in the following order: upper right side, upper left side, lower right side, lower left side. Women’s hair should be washed and braided into three braids. Once clean and prepared, the body should be covered in a white sheet.

To shroud the body, three large white sheets of inexpensive material should be laid on top of each other. The body should be placed on top of the sheets. Women should, at this point, be dressed in an ankle-length sleeveless dress and head veil. If possible, the deceased’s left hand should rest on the chest and the right hand should rest on the left hand, as in a position of prayer. The sheets should then be folded over the body, first the right side and then the left side, until all three sheets have wrapped the body. The shrouding should be secured with ropes, one tied above the head, two tied around the body, and one tied below the feet. The body should then be transported to the mosque (“masjid”) for funeral prayers, known as “Salat al-Janazah.”

## Viewing, Wake or Visitation before a Muslim Funeral

When a Muslim dies, the body should be buried as soon as possible after death, thus there is no viewing before the funeral.

## Fraternal, Civil, or Military Rites at a Muslim Funeral

As the Muslim funeral service is a religious event, fraternal, civil, or military rites or tributes should not be conducted at the funeral.

## The Muslim Funeral Service

Salat al-Janazah (funeral prayers) should be performed by all members of the community. Though the prayers should be recited at the mosque, they should not be recited inside the mosque; instead, they should be performed in a prayer room or study room, or in the mosque’s courtyard. Those praying should face the “qiblah”—that is, toward Mecca—and form at least three lines, with the male most closely related to the person who died in the first line, followed by men, then children, then women.

## Interment

After Salat al-Janazah has been recited, the body should be transported to the cemetery for burial. Traditionally, only men are allowed to be present at the burial, though in some communities all mourners, including women, will be allowed at the gravesite. The grave should be dug perpendicular to

## Religious Traditions at End of Life

the qiblah, and the body should be placed in the grave on its right side, facing the qiblah. Those placing the body into the grave should recite the line “Bismilllah wa ala millati rasulilllah” (“In the name of Allah and in the faith of the Messenger of Allah”). Once the body is in the grave, a layer of wood or stones should be placed on top of the body to prevent direct contact between the body and the soil that will fill the grave. Then each mourner present will place three handfuls of soil into the grave. Once the grave has been filled, a small stone or marker may be placed at the grave so that it is recognizable. However, traditionally, it is prohibited to erect a large monument on the grave or decorate the grave in an elaborate way.

### Post-Funeral Reception

After the funeral and burial, the immediate family will gather and receive visitors. It is customary for the community to provide food for the family for the first few days of the mourning period (usually three days). Generally, the mourning period lasts 40 days, but depending on the degree of religiousness of the family, the mourning period may be much shorter.

### Muslim Mourning Period and Memorial Events

Widows are expected to observe a longer mourning period, generally of four months and ten days. During this time, widows are prohibited from interacting with men whom they could potentially marry (known as “na-mahram”). However, this rule may be overlooked in cases of emergency, such as when the widow must see a doctor.

It is acceptable in Islam to express grief over a death. Crying and weeping at the time of death, at the funeral, and at the burial are all acceptable forms of expression. However, wailing and shrieking, tearing of clothing and breaking of objects, and expressing a lack of faith in Allah are all prohibited.

# Religious Traditions at End of Life

## Hindu

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In the Hindu funeral tradition, the body remains at the home until it is cremated, which is usually within 24 hours after death. There, at the service, mourners may dress casually. Black attire is inappropriate and white is preferred. Flowers may be offered, but bringing food is not part of the Hindu custom. There is always an open casket and guests are expected to view the body. The Hindu priest and senior family members conduct the ceremony. Guests of other faiths, as well as Hindus are welcome to participate, but not expected to do so. Using a camera or recorder of any kind is not considered polite.

### **When Death Is Imminent**

When a Hindu is approaching death, a priest (“pandit”) should be contacted and the pandit and the family should gather to be with the dying person. Those present should chant mantras or play a recording of mantras being chanted. When death seems imminent, the body should, if possible, be transferred to a grass mat on the floor. A small amount of water from the Ganges River should be placed in the dying person’s mouth. If this is not possible before death, then these actions should take place immediately following the death.

### **After Death Has Occurred**

As soon as death occurs, those gathered will avoid unnecessary touching of the body, as it is seen as impure.

### **When to Hold a Hindu Funeral**

Preparations for the funeral begin immediately. The funeral should take place as soon as possible—traditionally, by the next dusk or dawn, whichever occurs first. A pandit should be contacted and can help guide in the decision-making process and direct the family to a Hindu-friendly funeral home.

### **Organ Donation**

Organ donation is acceptable for Hindus, as there are no Hindu laws prohibiting organ or tissue donation.

### **Embalming**

Embalming is acceptable in Hinduism.

### **Preparing the Body**

Traditionally, the body is washed by family members and close friends. Many Hindu funeral homes recognize the importance of the family washing the body and will allow the family to prepare the body. If this is not possible, the funeral home may wash and dress the body. For the ritual washing, the

## Religious Traditions at End of Life

deceased's head should be facing southward. A lighted oil lamp as well as a picture of the deceased's favorite deity should be kept by the deceased's head. Traditionally, for the "abhisegam" (holy bath), the body is washed in a mixture of milk, yogurt, ghee (clarified butter), and honey. The body may also be washed in purified water. While the body is being washed, those washing should recite mantras. Once the body is sufficiently cleaned, the big toes should be tied together, the hands should be placed palm-to-palm in a position of prayer, and the body should be shrouded in a plain white sheet. If the person who died was a married woman who died before her husband, she should be dressed in red.

### Viewing, Wake or Visitation before a Hindu Funeral

Hindus generally hold a brief wake before cremation. The body should be displayed in a simple, inexpensive casket. "Vibuti" (ash) or "chandanam" (sandalwood) should be applied to the forehead of a man, and turmeric should be applied to the forehead of a woman. A garland of flowers should be placed around the neck, and holy basil should be placed in the casket. During the wake, family and friends gather around the casket and may recite hymns or mantras. At the end of the wake, before the body is removed for cremation, many Hindus place "pinda" (rice balls) near the casket. At the end of the wake, the casket is removed feet-first and brought to the place of cremation.

### Cremation

Traditionally, all Hindus—except babies, children, and saints—are cremated. Traditionally, the casket is carried on a stretcher and walked to the cremation site, though it is acceptable to transport the body in a vehicle. If a vehicle, such as a hearse, is used for transportation, the eldest male relative (known as "karta") and another male family elder should accompany the casket. It is customary that only men attend the cremation.

Historically, Hindu cremations take place on the Ganges River in India. The family builds a pyre and places the body on the pyre. The karta will circle the body three times, walking counter-clockwise so that the body stays on his left, and sprinkling holy water on the pyre. Then the karta will set the pyre on fire and those gathered will stay until the body is entirely burned. For Hindus living outside of India, there are companies that will arrange for the shipment of the body to India and hold a traditional cremation with a proxy karta.

In Canada, only crematories may cremate bodies. However, most crematories will allow for ceremonies before the cremation and will allow for guests to be present at the cremation itself. Thus, most of the rituals may still be observed. The body should be brought into the crematorium feet-first, ideally with the feet facing south. Those gathered may pray, and then the karta will perform the ritual circling of the body. At this point, the body is ready for cremation, and should be placed into the incinerator feet-first. When the body has been fully cremated, those gathered will return home.

### Post-Funeral Reception

Upon returning home, all family members will bathe and change into fresh clothes. Then the family will gather for a meal. A pandit may visit the family at home and purify the house with incense.

# Religious Traditions at End of Life

## Hindu Mourning Period and Memorial Events

The day after the cremation, the karta will return to the crematory and collect the ashes. Traditionally, the ashes should be immersed in the Ganges River, though more and more other rivers are becoming acceptable substitutes. For Hindus living outside of India, there are companies that will arrange for the shipment of the cremated remains to India and will submerge the ashes in the Ganges.

The cremation of the deceased marks the beginning of the mourning period, which lasts for 13 days. During this time, the family of the deceased will stay at home and receive visitors, though mourning rituals may differ depending on the community. A photograph of the deceased may be prominently displayed, and a garland of flowers may be placed on the photograph. Throughout the mourning period, the rite of “preta-karma” will be performed, which assists the disembodied spirit of the deceased to obtain a new body for reincarnation.

One year after the death, the family will observe a memorial event called “sraddha,” which pays homage to the deceased. The karta will invite Brahmins, members of the highest caste, to the home and provide them with an elaborate meal, treating them as he would his own parents.

# Religious Traditions at End of Life

## Buddhism

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Buddhism is a nontheistic religion that encompasses a variety of traditions, beliefs and spiritual practices largely based on teachings attributed to Gautama Buddha, commonly known as the Buddha ("the awakened one"). Two major extant branches of Buddhism are generally recognized by scholars: Theravada ("The School of the Elders") and Mahayana ("The Great Vehicle"), both of which have subgroups reflecting different teachings or approaches to Buddhism.

### **When Death Is Imminent**

When a Buddhist is approaching death, close friends and family members should sit with the dying person and help him or her feel calm and peaceful. Death is a natural and inevitable part of the lifecycle, and the dying person should be made to accept this reality. Friends and family should help the dying person reflect on his or her good deeds in this life, and the power those good deeds will have over his or her next incarnation. A small statue of the Buddha may be placed by the head of the dying person and "parittas," or protective verses, may be chanted. More generally, the dying person should be made as comfortable as possible before death occurs.

### **After Death Occurs**

As soon as death occurs, family members and close friends should clean and dress the body.

### **Preparing the Body**

The deceased should not be dressed in fancy clothes, but rather in the everyday clothes that he or she would normally wear.

### **Organ Donation**

Organ donation and donating the body to medical research are both acceptable in the Buddhist faith.

### **Embalming**

Embalming is acceptable in Buddhism.

### **Cremation**

Cremation is acceptable in Buddhism. If the body is to be cremated, monks may be present at the crematorium and lead chanting. If no monks are present, family members may lead chanting. Cremated remains may be collected by the family the following day, and may be kept by the family, enshrined in a columbarium or urn garden, or scattered at sea.

### **When to Hold a Buddhist Funeral**

## Religious Traditions at End of Life

Religious memorial services are traditionally held on the third, seventh, forty-ninth, and one-hundredth day after the death, though these days can be flexible if they don't fit into the family's schedule. The services may be held at a family home or at a monastery, and the family may choose to limit the participation to only family members or may invite the larger community to participate. "Dana" is performed, which is an act that purifies the mind of the giver and allows for blessings to be given to the Sangha (roughly translated as "community," and one of the Three Jewels) and subsequently transferred to the deceased.

### **Viewing, Wake or Visitation before a Buddhist Funeral**

If there will be a wake, the room in which the body rests should be calm and peaceful. The body should lie in a simple casket and should be dressed in simple, everyday clothes. The casket should be open for the duration of the wake. An altar may be placed near the casket and may feature an image of the deceased, an image of the Buddha, candles, flowers, fruit, and incense. Chanting may take place during the wake, and may be performed by monks, laypeople, or may be pre-recorded and played at the wake. However, any chanting must be for practical reasons, such as to aid in the contemplation of the impermanence of life, rather than for mere tradition. The wake may last for as long as the family wishes.

On the morning of the burial or cremation, monks should be invited to perform the last rite, chanting which includes "going for refuge" of the Three Jewels ("I take refuge in the Buddha. I take refuge in the Dharma. I take refuge in the Sangha.") and the Precepts. The monks will then chant contemplative verses. After the ceremony, the casket is sealed and brought to the funeral hall or to the crematorium. Family members and mourners may carry the casket to the hearse or transportation vehicle, and should follow behind the vehicle in a procession.

### **Fraternal, Civil, or Military Rites at a Buddhist Funeral**

Local, fraternal, military, or civil rites or traditions may be performed at the wake, so long as they do not conflict with the Buddhist Precepts (murder, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, and intoxication).

### **Dress Code at a Buddhist Funeral**

Mourners should wear white rather than black clothing to symbolize their grief and seriousness.

### **The Buddhist Funeral Service**

The funeral may take the form of a funeral service before burial, a funeral service before cremation, or a memorial service after cremation. In all funeral variations, the service and surrounding events should be simple, solemn, and dignified. The funeral is not an appropriate time to display wealth nor should grief be expressed through a display of wealth.

For the funeral or memorial service, the casket or cremated remains should be placed at the front of the room with an altar placed nearby. As at the wake, the altar may feature an image of the deceased, an image of the Buddha, candles, flowers, fruit, and incense. Any flowers or wreaths given to the family of the deceased by mourners may also be displayed. When entering the space, mourners should approach



## Religious Traditions at End of Life

the altar, bow with their hands pressed together in a pose of prayer, and reflect at the altar for a moment. Then they may sit.

### **Eulogies and Tributes at a Buddhist Funeral**

Monks may be invited to perform Buddhist rites and deliver sermons. Mourners and members of the Buddhist community may also preside over the service and deliver sermons or eulogies. During prayer or the delivery of a sermon, head coverings should be removed. Chanting may be led by monks or laypeople, or may be pre-recorded and played at the service. Mourners should join in the chanting or sit silently. Generally, no one in the space should be sitting higher than the monks and all present should stand when the monks stand. At the end of the service, if the body is to be interred or cremated, family members and mourners may carry the casket to the hearse or transportation vehicle, and should follow behind the vehicle in a procession.

### **Interment**

If the body is to be buried, monks may be present at the gravesite and lead chanting. If no monks are present, family members may lead chanting. Then the casket should be placed into the grave.