Chapter 4
Post–Mortem Practices in Muslim Populations: Guidance for Funeral Directors, Healthcare Practitioners, and Medical Examiners

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ABSTRACT

The chapter introduces the reader to the main post-mortem rituals in Islam, specifically pre-burial rituals of washing, shrouding, and preparing the body for burial, funeral customs, and the actual burial process. It outlines issues of concern for Muslims including the practices of embalming, autopsy, and organ donation. The chapter also discusses contemporary challenges facing Muslims living in Western countries attempting to adhere to traditional Islamic post-mortem practices and ways that Muslim communities and services providers are addressing these challenges.

INTRODUCTION

Muslims, like many other religious minority groups, maintain distinctive post-mortem practices that differ in varying ways from other cultural or religious groups within Western societies. Funeral rituals and attitudes towards lengthy or invasive post-mortem practices are mostly shaped by religious beliefs (Sheikh, 1998). Most of these beliefs and practices are standard, though there are some variations based upon a Muslim’s cultural background, country of origin, or socioeconomic status.

The goal of this chapter is to describe traditional Islamic post-mortem practices including pre-burial rituals and standard funeral practices. The chapter describes areas where traditional post-mortem practice differ from the norms in many Western countries, and how these differences can be reconciled.
or addressed. Issues discussed include 1) differences in burial preparation (washing, preparation and wrapping of the body), 2) timing of burial, 3) traditional funeral rites, and 4) actual burial processes. Western practices of embalming, use of coffins, the issue of autopsies, organ donation, and gender norms regarding handling of a body will be covered.

The chapter will present some of the current challenges facing Muslims in meeting the needs of their communities regarding adherence to Muslim post-mortem practices. After describing prescribed Islamic post-mortem practices the chapter will focus on changes and accommodations that occur, and ways to increase sensitivity to the needs of Muslims among professionals in the funeral industry, physicians, medical examiners, and cemetery workers. Training new generations of Muslims residing in Western countries in funeral practices, ritual washing, and prayers, and providing knowledge to professionals working in those services is an increasing need. The rise in refugee and immigrant populations, especially in Europe, also demonstrate an increasing need for accurate knowledge and skills regarding post-mortem practices.

BACKGROUND

The Islamic view and definition of death is clearly outlined in the Quran. Passages from the Quran support a definition of death as biological decomposition, in which the body becomes dust and bones. In Chapter 37 verse 16 the Quran states: “When we are dead and have become dust and bones, shall we (then) verily be resurrected?” Death is also defined as the time at which the soul leaves the body: “No, when your soul reaches your throat, and the people around you say, “Who can help?” and you realize your time has come, and your legs are put one over the other, on that day your soul, to Me, will come” (The Quran Chapter 75, verses 26-30). Thus, death involves both the departure of the soul from the body, and the process of decomposition of the body. The recognition that death involves both the soul and the physical body informs Muslim approaches to death and dying. Muslim beliefs regarding life after death also play an important role in the shaping of death rituals. Islamic theology notes that after death there is life in the grave that occurs prior to resurrection and judgement regarding placement in heaven or hell (Vitkovic, 2018). Thus, the grave and all of the rituals surrounding the grave including burial and funeral prayers are an important part of the transition from one stage to the next.

Though the Quran talks about death and dying and life after death, there are no explicit statements that specifically guide post-mortem practices. Muslim post-mortem practices have mostly been established through the hadith, which are the words of the Prophet Muhammad that were gathered into volumes by his followers. Collectively, the Quran, hadith, and Sunnah (actions of the Prophet Muhammad) form the foundation for Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh) and Sharia law. In Islam there are two major branches, Sunni and Shia, and there are some differences in burial rituals between these two branches. In addition, there are four schools of fiqh within Sunni Islam. These are the Shaafi, Hanafi, Maliki, and Hanbali schools (Bakhtiar, 1996). Each of these also have minor differences. An example of this when it comes to post-mortem practices would be whether a man or woman can perform the ritual washing for their deceased spouse. Followers of a specific fiqh will prefer to use that fiqh to dictate both minor and major life rituals. Most fiqhs are practiced within a specific region. For example, the Maliki fiqh is followed by peoples located mostly in North Africa, West Africa, and some Middle Eastern Gulf countries. Hanafi fiqh is more commonly followed throughout South Asia. As Muslims from various regions migrate and settle in parts of Europe, North America, and Australia, minor differences in practice derived from fiqh
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