

Jewish and Christian Perspectives on Death

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Abstract: Jewish and Christian perspectives on death are examined in this thematic essay, and emphasis is given to Christianity, the area of the author's expertise, with comparisons to Judaism within each of the topics to be explored. The essay examines the origin of death, living while dying, dying and the dead, and, finally, what is thought to be beyond death. Importantly, Judaism and Christianity look forward to the coming of the Messiah, the anointed one (Judaism) or his return. This messianic outlook means that what is beyond death is not only personal or communal eternal life, but, more centrally, the reign of God throughout the whole of reality. The case studies explore examples of Christian and Jewish traditions, including syncretism with Indigenous religions and perspectives from other world religions.

Resumen: En este capítulo se examinan las perspectivas judías y cristianas sobre la muerte. Se da énfasis al cristianismo, el área de especialización del autor, con comparaciones con el judaísmo dentro de cada uno de los temas a explorar. El ensayo examina el origen de la muerte, el "vivir muriendo," el morir y los muertos y, finalmente, lo que se piensa que hay más allá de la muerte. Es importante destacar que el judaísmo y el cristianismo esperan la llegada del Mesías, el ungido (judaísmo) o su regreso. Esta perspectiva mesiánica significa que lo que está más allá de la muerte no es sólo la vida eterna personal o comunitaria, sino, más centralmente, el reino de Dios en toda su extensión. Los artículos aquí contenidos exploran ejemplos de tradiciones cristianas y judías, incluyendo el sincretismo con las religiones indígenas y las perspectivas de otras religiones del mundo.

Religion and Death

It is often argued that the origin of religion is fear, especially fear of forces beyond human control and particularly death. From ancient thinkers, like the Greek philosopher Epicurus (341–270 BCE), to Enlightenment thinkers such as Scottish philosophers David Hume (1711–1776) and Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), and Bertrand Russell (1872–1970), the origin of religion and ideas about the gods and an afterlife originate in the fear and wish-fulfillment of death. God is to be worshipped and obeyed in order to diminish fear and relieve guilt, or rituals and practices are meant to provide relief from fear and its causes. Whether or not that is a sufficient explanation of the origin of religion, there are good reasons to doubt it. The fact remains that the world's religions do provide realistic responses to the fact of human death. However, it is also true that the religions insist that death is not the final word or the meaning of finite reality. Whether in Hindu ideas of rebirth (Figures 5.1–5.3), Buddhist ideas about Nirvana as extinguishing the fire of desire and releasing the person from the cycle of suffering, Christian conceptions of Heaven as union with or vision of the Divine, or belief among Indigenous religions in the power of ancestors to aid one in the present life, religions hold that death is not the ultimate horizon of human existence. This double perspective must be kept in mind as this essay explores death in Judaism and Christianity. That is, religions realistically face the fact of death and yet also insist that it is not

the ultimate truth of human existence. It is this double perspective on death that allows one to compare and contrast religious traditions.

I emphasize Christian perspectives on death, the area of my expertise, and compare to Judaism within each of the topics to be explored. Of course, every religious tradition is exceedingly complex, with many different beliefs and practices internal to and shared between religions. Given that reality, a comprehensive treatment of Judaism or Christianity, much less their comparison, is impossible. Accordingly, I will examine the origin of death, living while dying, dying and the dead, and, finally, what is thought to be beyond death. Importantly, Judaism and Christianity look forward to the coming of the Messiah, the anointed one (Judaism) or Christ's return (Christianity). This messianic outlook means that what is beyond death is not only eternal life, but, more centrally, the reign of God throughout the whole of reality.

The Origin of Death

Judaism is more a religion of practice, unlike Christianity with its many creeds and doctrines. Life is valued by Jews almost above all else. The Talmud, the basic compendium of Jewish *Torah* (law or teaching), even states that, since all people are descendants of one man (Adam), to take a life is like destroying the world. To save a life is to save the world. Death as a





Figure 5.2. Devotion to a Hindu deity is one way to travel the path to *moksha*. Deities Shiva and Parvati (FM 89225).



natural process has meaning, then, in the context of a profound affirmation of life within God's plan for the Jewish people. *Chevra kadisha* (Jewish burial societies) are associated with synagogues and both ritually clean and dress deceased Jews for traditional burial customs and to protect bodies from desecration (see Zoloth in this volume). Not all Jews believe in life after death. Here complexity is found in the tradition. Orthodox Jews do affirm life after death, while Reform Jews may not. Conservative Jews hold both views on life after death. These differences reach back in time to the clash between the Sadducees and Pharisees during the Second Temple period (second century BCE–70 CE) with the destruction of the Temple. Sadducees denied the resurrection of the body and so denied an afterlife, while the Pharisees affirmed the resurrection of the body. For Jews who do believe in an afterlife, one gains such life through doing good works for others (*mitzvah*), as taught in the *Torah*. Those that deny an afterlife believe that one continues in the memory of the people. In the Hebrew biblical texts, there is no mention of heaven or hell but rather She'ol, a dark underworld where all of the dead go.

In Christianity the origin of death is due to the sin of Adam and Eve, eating from the forbidden fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (see Wali in this volume, on Guna *Molas*). Adam and Eve are exiled from Paradise (the Garden of Eden) to live and die in a world marred by sin, that is, disobedience and separation from God. Death enters the world through sin. This is decisively different than Judaism and is why Christians believe in a savior, Jesus Christ, who redeems people from sin and reconciles them to God and one another. Western Christianity, decisively influenced by the thought of St. Augustine of Hippo (396–430 CE) holds that because of Adam's and Eve's first "Original Sin," every human being inherits the guilt of that sin and its consequences. Orthodox Christians also believe in Original Sin, but people only bear its consequences, foremost death, and not Adam's and Eve's guilt. Nevertheless, Christians do not believe that death was part of God's creation but enters the world through sin, that is, disobedience and unbelief in God. However defined, "original sin" is passed on from generation to generation in the reality of death and for the Christian in guilt. In either case, no human being is born without original sin and thus the fact and reality of death. In this way, death is seen as the "final enemy" that will, in the end, be destroyed by Christ, as St. Paul put it in 1

Corinthians 15:25–26. Christ atones for sin and with his resurrection from the dead is the victory of God over death for the sake of humanity. Baptism and entrance to the Church and a life of love is how one participates in Christ's atonement for sin. Christianity also has a conception of a "second death," that will be explored later in this essay.

Living While Dying

In human life, living and dying are intimately related even as people have various ways of existence. A person dying from cancer might be vibrantly alive intellectually or spiritually. Someone dying from a disease that has robbed them of their mental capacities, might, nonetheless, be physically sound. This means that living while dying, which people are always doing, is not just a physical process but, much more, a deeply moral and spiritual one. Given that Christianity and Judaism acknowledge and insist on the reality of death in human life, they also necessarily provide ways to live even as people are aging and dying. For Christians, this means "walking in the ways that lead to life," which include adhering to the Ten Commandments, doing works of love, participating in church life and the sacraments, and having an abiding faith in God through Christ and the Holy Spirit. In this way, a Christian's living toward death is enfolded within the life of the Church, the body of Christ in the world. Albeit in different ways, Jews and Christians link the challenges of living a mortal life to the importance of the moral life. Both value membership in a community, the Church, or the Jewish people.

For Christians this membership begins with the sacrament of baptism, a ritualized death when one is then raised into new life in the body of Christ as the Church. Christians may differ on the forms of baptism and whether it is for infants or adults, but all Christians affirm baptism because Jesus Christ himself was baptized. The Christian life is then sustained by the worship and sacraments of the Church, although Christians differ on the number of sacraments. Protestants typically celebrate baptism and the Lord's Supper or the *eucharist*. Catholic and Orthodox Christians celebrate as sacraments: baptism, confirmation or chrismation, penance, marriage, the *eucharist*, ordination, extreme unction (anointing of the sick and dying), and last rites shortly before death.

Figure 5.3. The Hindu deity Vishnu (FM 150432).



5A The *Chevra Kadisha*

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Of all the ritual acts that are a part of the community life of a commanded faith tradition, none is as little known as the work of the *chevra kadisha*, or the Jewish ritual burial society. Operating in every Jewish community, the *chevra* is a selected group of women and men who prepare the body of the dead according to rabbinic tradition with a liturgy based in the Song of Songs and a practice that forces the abstract discourse of death and the afterlife into intimate, tangible detail of embodiment (Madsen 1998). The laws of ritual burial are straightforward: every Jewish person is to complete his or her life in the same way: washed clean, with a specified amount of running water poured from the hands of her *chevra*, gently patted dry, dressed in simple unbleached linen shrouds, sewn by hand, *tachrehin* (Lamm 2000). The same for all, the rich, poor, powerful, and powerless: unembalmed, unadorned. Each is wrapped in linen with small handfuls of dirt from Mt. Scopus in Jerusalem, placed at their heart, eyes, and womb, lifted into a pine box made without nails, the lid closed and a candle lit on the top, and watched until carried to the grave (Epstein 1995). Women prepare women, men prepare men, all in silence, never turning their backs to the body of the dead (Diamant 2001; Epstein 1995). The term *chevra kadisha* is an Ashkenazi one (Sephardic Jews refer to this as the *lavadores*, those who wash). The concept of a separate grouping that is assigned to this tradition is referred to in the Babylonian Talmud.

Participation in the *chevra kadisha* is a “hard mitzvah” that is “not for everyone,” noted one participant from a small community (Zoloth 1998). Yet it is this very secrecy and sense of utter responsibility that makes the act obligatory, and in the framing of the performance as chosen, ritualized and mandatory, a social contract is created in which role-specific duties emerge. It is a feature of the act itself that makes these role-specific duties an ethical gesture and not merely an act of faithfulness (Light 2013). The people who perform the act must not be related to the dead person, nor can they be *students* of the deceased. They must be strangers, yet they must enact the most primal of interactions: the primate bonding rituals that mark the beginning of the first human relationships at birth. These include skin-to-skin touch (or, since the AIDS epidemic, skin-to-glove), grooming, and the face-to-face gaze. It is precisely these behaviors that are initiated at birth by all of humanity, and it is these acts that are re-created by the strangers toward the *metah*, the dead one, at the moment of transition from death to burial, light to darkness, being to unbeing.

The act of the creation of the *chevra kadisha* represents a critical moment in how a community relates to the divine (Epstein 1995). Note that the mediation of the death

process is simple, and in the hands of the laity (Abeles and Katz 2010). Unlike Egyptian religions, which in important respects centered around the ritual preparation and celebration of death, Jewish law ensures that all will be afforded a burial and that the act of burial is linked to the larger notion of a human order. Priests (*cohenim*) are forbidden to touch the dead, further ensuring the democratizing thrust of the practice. In most communities, members are secret, known only to one another. Yet it is clear that, at least in some historical periods, the society consisted of a rotational membership, affording each with the opportunity to confront death (Ochs 2017)

As one community participant noted: “It is true that it is hard work. It means dealing with blood, lifting the body, twice, once onto special boards to be washed, once into a coffin. ‘How can we go on?’ I sometimes think, in the middle. But this is a task that we must complete, and when we are done, she is pure, the body of the dead one, transformed. After we close the lid, we take our gloves off, and we ask forgiveness, in silence, from her. We are sorry, our human selves, we are tired, we are clumsy, we drop things, we are sorry beloved stranger, please forgive us” (Greenhough 2002; Ochs 2017; Zoloth 1998).

The act of the *taharah* is the taking of the body of the dead and returning it ritually to a human and particular self (Mitntz 1999). Let us reflect on what precedes this. In many cases, death in modernity is a battle lost. Death is seen as the problem, the structural enemy that is engaged by the moral gesture of medicine itself. But medicine is both a moral gesture and an act in the marketplace economy. Hence, when the body is no longer a patient, with all that status entails, it is discarded by a certain prestigious sector, whose attention no longer is repaid. The body then is treated as though it has returned to an animal state. It is wrapped, refrigerated, and handled in this way.

It is at precisely this moment, the moment one would turn from in the secular word, the *chevra* are reminded that each person is made in the image of God—and then they recite verses of love and praise of the beautiful, sensual body: hair, eyes, breasts, thigh, verses from Shir haShirim (Madsen 1998). A stunning moment: the poem of desire at the moment of distance. These are the only words spoken aloud during the *taharah*.

Oh, your hair is like the most fine gold, black and
curling, oh heaps of dark curls are as black as a raven.
Eyes like doves beside the waterbrook, bathing in
milk and fitly set.
Cheeks like a bed of spices, towers of sweet herbs
Lips are roses dripping flowing myrrh.
Arms are golden cylinders set with beryl

Figure 5.4. *Chevra kadisha* silver ritual ewer, for water to clean the body of the deceased (TJM-f3589_1).

Body as polished ivory overlaid with sapphires
Legs are pillars of marble, set upon foundations of
fine gold
You are like Lebanon, as rare as her cedars
Your mouth is most sweet, and you are altogether
precious
This is my beloved, and this is my friend, daughters
of Jerusalem.

The first gesture of the *taharah* ritual is the creation of a different tangible relationship, a ritual and temporal space in which the body is named, with the Hebrew name of her child-self, and invited to the act of care by the community (Figures 5.4–5.5). Her utter inability to respond means that the act will have no direct benefit to the participants. In fact, it is given as an example of working beyond the line of the law. She will be washed of all the last indignities of dying, and she will be re-dressed in the stylized garments unchanged in shape or construction since the first century: a tunic and a shirt, a bonnet for her hair. The *metah* is turned gently to dry her back, her belly, her legs, the childbirth marks, her scarred knee. She is dressed in the simple clothes, twisted bows and knots of cloth shaped so they will look like the letters of God's name *shin*, four turns of the knot, *dalet*. And the still body stands as the *yod*. She is lifted in the arms, placed in the coffin, her blue hands in the plain white muslin.

The body of the dead one, the *metah* is a body that is as much as can be possible, pure, irreducible body. Because we only know the Hebrew name of the *metah*, and because she is a total stranger to us, naked, without title, clothes, or history, we receive her without the trappings or illusions of power, or linkages to politics, rationality of history. Hence, she will be reconstituted by the ritual itself. Because this act is done in silence, and its perimeters are not subject to negotiation, it is an example of what Pierre Bourdieu (1977) describes as “a dialectic of objectification and embodiment” that make it the locus for the coordination of all levels of bodily, social, and cosmological experience. She may have died as a body, ravaged by the travails at the nexus of modernity, medicine, and illness, but she will be buried as a Jew, in exactly the ritualized body of the Jew thousands of years previous to her particular story, thus relinking her, and the ones who prepare her, with the mirrored, replicated selves.

But the body of the *metah* is not the only ritualized body—the bodies of the *chevra* become ritualized by the process of *taharah* as well. It is the series of physical movements, ritual practices that spatially and temporally construct an environment organized according to schemes of privileged opposition. The construction of this environment and the activities within it simultaneously work to impress these schemes upon the participants. For example, there is tension between pollution and purity, death and love, blood and water, nakedness and clothing, the poetry of the liturgy and the starkness of the directions (place the feet toward the door); all of which potentiates the essential contradiction: the *chevra*, alive and the *metah*, dead (Friedman 2013). In asking the question about

whose obligation it is to care for the bodies of the dead, we begin to understand why the act of caring for the dead one transforms us. Rather than reifying the horror of death, the work ritually prepares us to face death nobly—one of the key tasks of a human life. It is one of the tragedies of modernity, that in our eagerness for the triumphs of medical science, we no longer witness birth and death first hand, so live as if the great mess and tumult of endings and beginnings of life are subjects best handled in a separate, clinical arena. But the concept of the *chevra* as one in which each is obligated to participate deconstructs such a distance. The vulnerable nakedness of the *metah* imposes a great lesson of death—that possessions are, in the deepest sense, pointless, and that what is left to you is literally the company of community, the last hand that will touch you will be empty of all but the moral gesture of *chesed*.

The *taharah* offers an extreme and final comment on the oddity of the American culture of the body. The members recite the Song of Songs over their work, a passionate liturgy of love as they clean a dead, often aged, broken body, and come to see it as beautiful and pure by virtue of their account and attention. Every beautiful body will lie at some point as this body lies, naked, dependent on our love. The *chevra* are the last ones to see the vulnerability of the breasts, the belly-house of the children. Their task is to remake this body one last time, to one last time create human order over the chaos of death, without obscuring it. This is what love does, allows for the essential core self to be intimately and nakedly gazed upon, and seen in all of its vulnerability, and found utterly and completely beautiful (Ochs 2017). The *chevra* see, when they see the *metah*, a double visage, themselves in the darkest mirror, their own death.

It is at the *taharah* that the sense of the utter otherness of the stranger is most strongly felt. The gaze toward the beloved stranger cannot be returned (Lamm 2000). Silence surrounds her narrative, and it is at that moment, in the fictive, imagined, and internalized conversation that one is unable to remain entirely discreet. For the power of the work of the *taharah* is that the participants must touch the person and make her the center of intense and highly detailed activity. The act is not over when one is bored, or tired, it is only over when all details are perfectly complete (Marwell 2001). And this intense focus on the utterly other reveals in the encounter that a moment of radical recognition—this one will be you. Otherness is both total, and as vanished, because while I may never really be the other that I meet, the powerful one or the vulnerable one, except in my moral imagination, I will in fact be exactly this other at some point. And the one who is other-than-self is not faceless. Each by each by each, the dead will be carefully dressed, and the encounter will underscore the uniqueness of each. The other is irreversibly herself and irretrievably gone, but is incontestably you, as well, because you, too, will be certainly dead as she is (Friedman 2013). What the actions of the *chevra kadisha* offers is the inescapability of the recognition that this is the road for all of us.

The quiet act interrupts the social order. It is the unchosen nature of the event, the torn fabric in the middle of our lives, that is then repaired by faith and by solidarity alone, stitched together by hand like the shrouds of the burial *tachrehin*, that makes a human life possible again (Bar-Levav 2003). The *chevra kadisha* leave the stranger and go back into the night and their lives knowing the *metah* is accompanied by their mundane, commanded, moral gestures, a small good act, knowing she is illuminated by a small candle and that a witnessing member of the community will stay by her side all until the morning, and her burial. Death is transformed by the smallest acts, and by the lifting of the body into the air, the tying of her bonnet just so, the buckets, and the wood.

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While there are some differences between Orthodox Christians and Western forms of Christianity, the point is that life is to be lived within the embrace of these communal forms of grace; that is, divine forgiveness and empowerment through the Holy Spirit. This is why all Christians celebrate the two "dominical sacraments," baptism and *eucharist*. Just like baptism, Christians differ on how to understand Christ's presences in the *eucharist*. Some hold that it is a commemorative meal, while others, like Catholics, believe in the real presence of Christ's body and blood in the elements of the sacrament (bread and wine). But, again, all Christians celebrate the Lord's Supper or *eucharist* because it was instituted by Christ in his last meal with his first disciples before his crucifixion. In fact, many Christians hold that the sacrament is a "foretaste" of the heavenly banquet that will be enjoyed in the afterlife (Heaven).

Christianity has been known, but has not always been lived, as a religion of love. One is to love God and one's

neighbor as oneself. Jesus even taught to love one's enemy, and so, *in extremis*, to love the threat of death itself (see, Matt. 5:43–48). As Martin Luther taught, in his treatise, *The Freedom of a Christian*, one is caught up in union with Christ through faith and poured out in love for the neighbor. Rightly conceived, the Christian has their life in Christ, who conquers death, and the neighbor who lives while dying. To love thy neighbor as oneself (see Mark 12:30–31 and Matt. 7:12) means to love and do for others in their living as you would want to be loved and treated, a principle taught in some form by virtually every world religion. Salvation, or overcoming the breach with God and thus hope for eternal life, is keyed, in different ways, to the life of faith, hope, and love (I Cor. 13:13). Differences arise among Christians on two points. First, Protestants believe that one is justified, made right by God, through faith in Christ, while one is still a sinner (Rom. 5:8) in this life. This faith is then to flow forth in love and the hope and trust of eternal life. One can grow in holiness, sanctification, but one is nevertheless justified as a sinner. In Catholicism and



Figure 5.5. *Chevra kadisha* silver ritual comb and nail pick, used to groom the deceased individual (TJM 2012-91_1-2).

Orthodoxy, the process of salvation includes doing good works, taking the sacraments, and through God's grace eventually being given the Vision of God, the Beatific Vision in Catholicism or divinization (*Theosis*) among Orthodox Christians. Despite these differences, and others, all Christians believe that divine forgiveness and empowerment for life is a gift from God; it is grace through Jesus Christ.

Jewish practices take place within the community, its rites, laws, traditions, and holy days. The Jews are called by God to help mend the world and be a light to the world about the Lordship of God. In this way, *Torah* and its laws are a gracious teaching of how to live up to dying and to do so in freedom amid an often hostile world. For the practicing Jew, this means following the 613 commandments of the Law (*Torah*).

Mitzvah refers to these commands to be performed as a religious duty. They too include alms giving, aiding the poor, the outcast, and the widow, and following the Ten Words or Ten Commandments. In this way, the moral life of a Jew is seamed into the religious practice of the community. Following the Law is to choose life and not death. As it is put in Deuteronomy 30:19–20:

I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, ²⁰loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the Lord swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

5B The Guna, *Molas*, and Religious Syncretism

Alaka Wali

Field Museum

The Guna people of Panama are renowned for their determination to remain autonomous in the governance of their homeland, for their art as manifest in the *mola* textiles used to make women's blouses, and for their creative blend of spiritual practices meshing their preconquest beliefs with Christianity. The Guna (a population of over 50,000) live principally on islands off Panama's Caribbean Coast and on the mainland in the Darién region. These regions are demarcated as *comarcas*—territories governed by the Guna under their own system of political leadership. The largest *comarca* is today called Guna Yala, and comprises the San Blas Islands and a strip of land on the Caribbean coast. Many Guna also live in Panama's cities, but often travel back to home villages. A smaller group lives on two different *comarcas* in the interior of Darién province (cf. Wali 1989 for details on these communities). Their economic system is a mix of self-subsistence through cultivation of small plots on the mainland strip and fishing, and income generation through the sale of handcrafts and coconuts, tourism, and wage labor. The system of government has been well documented in the ethnographic literature (Howe 1986; 1998). Each village has hereditary chiefs and attendant officials who enforce decisions and norms developed in consensus at nightly gatherings of all the villagers in a special lodge. Guna Yala is governed by an overarching body—the Guna General Congress—comprised of all the leaders of the villages, who elect three chiefs to represent the whole *comarca*. Although Panama's government imposes some laws on the *comarca*, most of the laws and norms are determined at the local level and by the Guna General Congress.

Women are not usually in positions of political power, but exert influence in both daily life and in village-level decision-making through their economic contributions and participation in the village gatherings. Guna women's commercialization of the *mola* textile has been a significant aspect of Guna Yala's economy since at least the mid-twentieth century. In 1964, women across several island villages formed a cooperative to sell their textiles and, at its peak, about 2000 women were members (Tice 1995). The trade in *molas* spread into the international market, and the *mola* became iconic of Guna artisanry.

The *mola* is a component of the traditional women's blouse. Typically, two *mola* panels are sewn together and attached to a yoke at the top and a ruff at the bottom. For commercial purposes, many *mola* textiles are sold as individual panels. The technique of making *molas* is sometimes referred to as "reverse appliqué" and involves layering cloth, cutting out patterns, and embroidery. The earliest designs were geometric patterns, probably reflecting body-art designs that preceded access to cloth in the nineteenth century. Women then started to innovate, making patterns that reflect local flora

and fauna (Ventocilla, Herrera, and Nuñez 1995), local events, and noted figures. Eventually, as Guna gained access to magazines and other visual media, women drew inspiration from pictures, copying images or improvising to meld together older designs with new themes and motifs. The textiles are recognized for their brilliant use of color combinations, their often symmetrical designs, and for elements of whimsy and humor that are infused into the clothes. Guna women are proud of their craftsmanship, and critique each other frequently on the quality of the embroidery and the freshness of the design. Although there are no rigid rules for the creation of patterns, *molas* often have a symmetrical design, reflecting an aesthetic that strives for balance as well as expressions of the relation between person, nature, and the cosmos (Fortis 2010; Salvador 1997).

Museums in Europe and the Americas started collecting *molas* in the late nineteenth century. An early collection was made for the Göteborgs Etnografiska Museum in Sweden by Erland Nordenskiöld, one of the first ethnographers of the Guna. Other collections can be found at the National Museum of Natural History of the Smithsonian and the National Museum of the American Indian. The Field Museum's collection ranks among the most significant both because of its time depth (from 1919 to 2017) and because of its size and variety. The collection has both full blouses and separated *mola* panels. It also contains patches and other objects that have *mola* designs. In total the Field Museum's collection contains 513 *mola* textiles—81 full garments and 437 blouse panels. *Molas* comprise about half of the total collections from Panama (ethnographic and archeological). The earliest materials were collected by Mr. G. L. Fitz-William, a chemical and mining engineer from Hammond, Indiana, sometime in the early 1900s and accessioned into the museum collection in 1919. The next large accession came from the purchase at a railway auction and was accessioned in 1965. In the late 2000s Field Museum staff brought in another substantial number of contemporary *molas*. Thus, the collection represents an opportunity to understand how design motifs and styles have changed over time.

The diversity of designs and motifs in *molas* makes it difficult to discern any overarching themes (Marks 2014). However, religious motifs are popular subjects for Guna women. *Molas* with churches, religious figures, and scenes can be found in museum collections. As with other Indigenous people who have been subject to missionization in the aftermath of the Spanish conquest, the Guna accepted Christianity but retained their own cosmology and belief systems. Christianity took hold systemically among the Guna in the early twentieth century when one of the chiefs on the island of Nargana invited a Jesuit priest to start a school for boys. Later, a Protestant missionary also came to the

island. As Christianity spread, it was not universally embraced, but tolerated. More often than not, women probably included religious themes in the *molas*, not out of religious dedication but because they liked the story or because it conformed to their aesthetic principles (Figure 5.6). This is manifest in the *mola* depicting Adam and Eve displayed in the exhibition. The *mola* embodies the symmetric principle, balancing Adam and Eve. Note that the tree is more palm tree than the conventional apple tree of biblical lore. Except for the most religious among the Guna, the concept of “original sin” and the expelling of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden was probably not taken seriously or treated as a reason to be “reborn” in Christ (for the Guna creation story, see Chapin 1997).

Guna death rituals are elaborate rites of passage through which the dead continue to an afterlife attended by food and belongings needed in everyday life. Guna women designated as specialists lead the mourning, chanting and keening over the dead wrapped in a shroud and placed in a hammock usually well into the night. The deceased is then carried to the mainland cemetery and placed in the ground in the hammock. Sometimes a hut is erected over the grave and food is left there. In sum, the Guna have maintained a strong sense of identity and retained cultural practices that allow them to maintain pride in their art and belief systems. They continue to defend their autonomy in the face of pressures to accept national norms and practices.

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Rabbi Hillel (ca. 110 BCE–10 CE), one of the founders of the *Mishnah*, is noted for saying, “If I am not for myself, who will be? And being only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?” That is, one has duties to self, and our humanity is expressed in how we treat others. Further, one should not delay in these duties. This teaching is grounded in the Jewish and Christian conviction that human beings are created in the image of God. As stated in the Talmud (Sanhedrin 37a): “Whoever saves a single life is considered by scripture to have saved the whole world.” This shows the great importance of life and death in Judaism, and the reason Jews are called to mend the world. Living while dying has then intertwined religious and moral duties such that living as a faithful Jew is imitating the goodness, justice, and mercy of the divine Creator. Life is not simply preparation for death; it is, as with Christians, a calling to a distinctive way of life within a community.

Judaism and Christianity, like most religions, are intensely aware of human fragility in living while dying, human fault, and propensity to do evil and wrong. Christians explain these negative features of human beings in terms of original sin, variously understood. Many Jews hold that evil started with Adam’s and Eve’s disobedience to God’s will and command. Evil then became a human propensity that does not need an external temptation to sin and can be overcome by following *Torah*. This belief is rooted in scripture. After God destroys all living beings, except Noah, his family, and each type of animal in the Great Flood (Gen. 6:11–9:19) because of human sin and evil in order to begin anew, “the Lord said in his heart, ‘I will never again curse the ground because of humankind, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth’” (Gen. 8:21). However explained, the propensity for evil and wrongdoing seems to be a human trait found in all times, all places, and all people.

Figure 5.6. Guna *mola* textile of the original sin: Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (FM 190472).





Figure 5.7. *Parinirvana* Buddha sculpted in soapstone by students from the Royal University of Fine Arts in Phnom Penh ca. 2015 (courtesy Mitch Hendrickson).

5C Death and the Reclining Buddha

Mitch Hendrickson

University of Illinois at Chicago

The passing of the world's great religious leaders often becomes a transformative event that galvanizes their ultimate message for future followers. Jesus' death and subsequent resurrection, celebrated today by Christians at Easter, reinforces the nature of his sacrifice to die for others. Over half a millennium earlier, in what is now northern India and Nepal, the death of the Buddha represents an equally important but philosophically different perception of what dying, the "afterlife," and living means.

The Buddha's story describes the transformation of Siddhartha Gautama, a prince of the Shakyas kingdom, who rescinds his elite life to become a wandering ascetic focused on understanding the nature of existence and finding an escape from suffering (*dukkha*) and the cycle of rebirth (*samsara*). His teachings, initially passed on orally by monks and centuries later recorded in Buddhist texts, focus on several key events during the Buddha's life: his enlightenment, where he finally grasped the means to escape *samsara* at Bodhgaya; his first sermon, where he shared his teachings (*dharma*) at Sarnath; and finally, his death (*parinirvana*) at Kushinagar. Unlike Jesus, who died violently on the cross at the hands of the Romans, the Buddha passed peacefully in a cave after eating a meal of tainted pork or mushrooms at the age of 80. The record of his death captured in the *Mahaparinirvana Sutra* explains how the Buddha's enlightenment at Bodhgaya allowed him to follow the Noble Eightfold Path in this last life and escape the cycle of rebirth and suffering (Figure 5.7).

The Buddha's final death addressed a fundamental philosophical issue in ancient South Asia. Unlike reincarnation, Buddhists recognized that there is no individual soul (*atman*) and rebirth is merely a transmission of essences between lives (Becker 1993). An apt analogy is to see life as like passing a flame from one candle to the next. The ultimate goal is to extinguish the flame that connects these essences to the physical world and enter into the state of *nirvana*, or nothingness. While later branches of Buddhism evolving in East Asia focus on entering into "heavens," they are not the same as the Western view where one's "self" ends up after living a good and proper life on Earth.

The Buddha's ultimate passing had spiritual and physical impacts across South Asia. His cremated remains were initially divided into eight parts and interred within stupas, mound-shaped monuments which became important pilgrimage sites for those who wished to be in his "presence." Centuries later these remains were unearthed and divided among thousands of sites throughout India and were ultimately disseminated across Asia. A replica of one of the most famous Buddha relics interred in the Temple of the Tooth at Kandy, Sri Lanka, is still annually paraded on the back of an elephant during

the Esala Perahera festival to commemorate the arrival of Buddhism to the island nation. While using his corporeal remains appears to stand in direct contrast to the idea of "nothingness" and lack of self, it shows how the Buddha's death continued to breathe life into his faith and spread the word of the *dharma*.

Images of the Buddha himself did not appear—for philosophical reasons—until several centuries after he walked the earth (DeCaroli 2015). The typical form of Buddha is very familiar to anyone who has visited an Asian art exhibit: meditative, seated figures with hands in various gestures (*mudras*) that represent important events in his journey. While the meaning of each hand position is often lost to the casual observer who lacks a deeper understanding of the religion, the image of his death—known as the reclining Buddha—is much more easily recognizable: a robed man, eyes peacefully closed, lying on his right side with his right arm underneath his head and his left stretched out along the top of his body. Examples of this motif commonly appear in carved reliefs and paintings, but is it the creation of colossal statues that signifies the importance of this event. A 14-meter/46-foot-long image made from brick recently dated to the third century CE at Bhamala in Pakistan represents the earliest known example of such larger-than-life representations (Hameed, Samad, and Kenoyer 2020). Colossal reclining Buddhas literally grew in popularity and size as the religion spread eastward within Asia. *Parinirvana* imagery was widespread in China by the fifth century but reached new artistic heights and meaning in the seventh century at the Mogao Caves near the famous Dunhuang monastery (Lee 2010). The numerous reclining Buddhas were carved directly from the rock inside individual caves—the largest of which spanned 17 meters/56 feet in length—to recreate both the event and the space where the Buddha died. In fifteenth-century Cambodia, the Khmer remodeled the entire western façade of their eleventh-century Hindu Baphuon temple to create a 70-meter/230-foot-long reclining Buddha. This act seems to mark the state's official transition to Theravada Buddhism as its sole religion and shows the relationship with spirituality and politics in the past (Leroy et al. 2015).

Reverence for the *parinirvana* image continues today and is most stunningly found in Jiangxi Province, eastern China. Carved directly into the mountain, this *parinirvana* image measures 416 meters/1365 feet long and 68 meters/223 feet high and represents the single largest image ever created of the Buddha's passing. The reclining Buddha displayed in this exhibit lies in stark contrast to the massive examples created throughout Asia's rich history. Hand-crafted by a local Cambodian artist, this small stone image represents a long tradition of capturing this important moment and, like

Buddhism, is available to anyone who wishes to obtain it. In the home of a Buddhist, it could sit in a small shrine, head oriented to the north, facing the direction of the setting sun. In the home of a tourist it may be placed on a shelf as a souvenir that is enjoyed for its peace and tranquility. In both cases, it acts as a remembrance of an important journey into the unknown. Like the Christian cross, the *parinirvana* image symbolizes both the end of a spiritual leader's path and a reminder of all that was accomplished to reach that point. In this way death is not the end but provides an essential way of understanding how to live.

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However, as adherents of religions of justice and mercy, both Christians and Jews hold that repentance is crucial as people live while dying. This is a time that includes ritual practices, prayers, self-examination, and confession of one's sins. Christians begin the yearly Lenten season of 40 days with the imposition of ashes in the shape of a cross while the priest or pastor says, "Remember you are dust and to dust you will return." One is to live in the Lenten season with a constant sense of one's vulnerability, fault, and mortality. For Jews, God, who is merciful, offers people the chance to consider the wrong they have done and repent. This takes place yearly during the Days of Awe, a ten-day period between the Rosh Hashanah (marking the creation of the world) and Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement). Again, living while dying is hardly just a physical process; it is a moral and spiritual journey.

Dying and the Dead

To understand human life as a moral and spiritual journey with the reality of death in view means that Jews and Christians also have beliefs and practices about dying and the dead. The mention before of the sacraments of Extreme Union and Last Rites clarifies how Catholic and Orthodox Christians treat the dying. Yet, in fact, funerary customs and commemorations of the dead differ among cultures within the Catholic or any other Christian communion: the Day of the Dead in Mexico (see Amat in this volume), All Hollow's Eve and All Saints Day worldwide. Nevertheless, death is set within the sacramental life of every Christian church because of *eucharistic* celebration of Christ's passion, death, and resurrection and, therefore, new life over the sting of death. So too in most churches, one trusts and believes that believers will be part of

the cloud of witnesses in life eternal (Heb. 12:1). As noted before, this takes place through baptism into new life of the Church, participation in worship and the Lord's Supper, faith in Christ as the savior, and a life of love and service. The cloud of witnesses, not only one's loved ones, are to aid the Church in times of travail.

During the late Middle Ages in the West, there appeared two texts called the *Ars Moriendi* (The Art of Dying). These gave practical instruction to people on how rightly to prepare for a good death and the experience of dying, as well as aid for those attending to the dying. This began a series of works by important thinkers, such as Erasmus and Luther, and reached an artistic peak with Jeremy Taylor's two volumes *The Rules and Exercise of Holy Living* (1650) and *The Rules and Instruction for Holy Dying* (1651). This tradition of reflection was meant to guide the dying person, to provide consolation, and to face threats to their conscience because of lack of faith, despair, or spiritual pride. The tradition also details prayers for the dying and other instructions for those helping the dying person. While contemporary society has a highly medicalized view of death and dying and often removes the dying from intimate contact with home and family, this Christian tradition understood dying and death itself as moral and spiritual realities. The tradition of *Ars Moriendi*, in its various forms, was meant to aid the dying in their final journey from this life to the next.

Among Jews, there are also rituals and practices that surround death and support the dying. Most importantly, the dying person should not be left alone but surrounded by family and others. There must be time and support for a confession of sin,

and time to reconcile with those from whom the dying person is, for whatever reason, estranged. Since God is merciful, it is never too late to return to God. Further, the last words of the dying persons should be the central statement of Jewish faith, the Shema: Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One (Deut. 6:4). When death does come, there are practices of mourning that last a year and include *shiva*. “Sitting *shiva*” is a term used to describe the action of Jewish mourners. During the seven-day period of *shiva*, mourners receive condolences and sometimes sit on stools or boxes as a sign that the mourner has been “brought low” at the death of the loved one. With the death of a parent, the “Mourner’s Prayer,” or Kiddish, is recited collectively so that no mourner is alone, and it is also an affirmation of Jewish life and faith.

Because of the central affirmation of life as well as human dignity by Jews and Christians, it is hardly surprising that each tradition has long, complex debates and competing reflections on many topics related to death: abortion, justified war and killing, suicide (assisted or not), euthanasia (passive and active), and capital punishment. It is not possible to engage all these debates other than to note the basic affirmation of the goodness of life even with the realities of death, sin, and evil and thus a bias against unjustified killing, flowing from the command “Thou shall not kill” (Exod. 20:13) and works of love and good deeds for others.

Mention of the cloud of witnesses identifies a common trait among Jews and Christians, that is, the idea of martyrdom. A martyr is a witness for their religious conviction, the God of the Jews and the Triune God of Christian faith. In Judaism *kaddosh* means “[a] holy [one],” and there are many examples in the Hebrew Scripture as well as throughout Jewish history. The six million Jews who died during the Shoah, the Holocaust, under Nazi terror are the *kedoshim*. Likewise, Christians in the early Church died under the directions of Roman emperors and even now face persecution around the world. Jews have suffered throughout the centuries, from the Spanish Inquisition and other times and places to this day. Each tradition has specific directions for determining martyrdom. More importantly, the reality of martyrdom sheds light on Christian and Jewish ideas about death, namely, the physical death is not the greatest threat a human being faces, but, rather, the betrayal of the religious community and the denial of the God from whom one receives spiritual and physical life. Again, human life is understood to be a spiritual and moral journey in company with and for others to manifest love and, for Jews, to mend the world.

Beyond Death

As previously noted, Jews and Christians believe in a Messiah, albeit differently, and thus the ultimate triumph of God over forces that oppose and thwart the divine rule, including human sin and evil. They also believe in an afterlife, variously conceived. Christians hope for eternal life with God in “Heaven,” conceived in different ways. For much of Christian history, the Church taught “extra ecclesia nulla salvus,” that is, outside of the Church there is no salvation. Even today some Christian churches around the world engage in missionary work to save the souls of nonbelievers. Conversely, there are many contemporary Christians and churches who believe in universal salvation, holding that God’s love is for everyone. St. Augustine, one of the major early Christian thinkers who influenced much of Western Christian thought, taught that God’s punishment for sinners was to allow them to continue in what they love, that is, their sin that cuts them off from divine love and others in which true human felicity is to be found.

The idea of the afterlife in traditional Christian and Jewish thought and practice also meant that one could be eternally cut off from the divine, the source and ground of life. Called the Second or Eternal Death, these are “souls” forever separated from the divine and often related to punishment, the Lake of Fire, in the Book of Revelation, or more generally “Hell.” In the Jewish Bible there is no mention of Hell, but just *She’ol*, a shadowy place, the Pit, where souls await judgment. Analogous ideas are found in other religions. The Egyptian Book of the Dead details how the heart of the dead will be weighed on a scale against Maat, the personification of truth and world order, by Thoth, the ibis-headed recorder of the gods. If the heart balances with Maat, the person will be admitted to the afterlife, if not it is devoured by a terrifying creature. Hindus hold that until one is enlightened in seeing that *atman* and *brahman* are one a person is condemned to a cycle of rebirths, commensurate with one’s spiritual goodness, until enlightenment is achieved. In Buddhism there is no eternal heaven or eternal hell and no God who decides reward and punishment (see Hendrickson in this volume). Nevertheless, they do hold that greed, anger, and ignorance are the causes of human evil that stop people from reaching enlightenment. Beings are thereby born into heaven or hell, as conditions of life, according to their *karma*, that is, the good or evil deeds. Here too one sees, across vastly different religious traditions, that death is not only a physical fact but is linked to the spiritual and moral condition of human beings. In this way, the religions proclaim the victory of good over evil, of enlightenment over illusion and suffering, of heaven over hell.





Figure 5.9. Skeleton figure from Capula, Mexico (FM 343421).

5D Day of the Dead

Álvaro Amat

Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art

I am a Mexican immigrant and practicing orthodox Catholic. I celebrate many things at the same time on the Day of the Dead (Sayer 1994). But my mom, who was raised in Spain with Cuban ancestry, had her own personal reasons to dislike the Day of the Dead. For her, the Day of the Dead was a dark and disturbing tradition. Therefore, we did not follow any of the practices as a family. In a way, I grew up as an external observer who longed to join those traditions in any meaningful way, happy when any of my friends allowed me to be part of their family celebrations. I remember vividly the sugar skulls, or *calaveras* (Mack and Williams 2015), with my friends' names on them and I remember the hope that one day I would have my own sugar *calavera* with my name on it.

When I was very young, the images of *calaveras* and *calacas* (skeletons) scared me, and during the holidays of Día de Muertos in Mexico, *calaveras* are everywhere. Images in printed and TV advertising appropriating or imitating the art of José Guadalupe Posada, creator of famous images like *La Catrina*, would flood streets and homes. Decorated *calaveras* would emerge, populating the shelves and tables of markets and stores of traditional folk art. I was particularly disturbed by the figures of skeletons or *calacas* performing everyday activities (Figures 5.8–5.12). To cope with my fear, I used to run around the house with my fingers pulling my mouth horizontally to show my teeth like a *calavera*. This scared my younger siblings, and we would all end up running around the house, laughing and scaring each other, playing *calaveras*. In a way, we were doing what Day of the Dead accomplishes: sharing the fear and mocking death to make it part of life. I eventually got used to the *calavera* as ubiquitous in the Mexican cultural and artistic landscape. As a young aspiring artist, I greatly enjoyed visiting archaeological sites and the Museo Nacional de Antropología to appreciate the mastery of the great Mesoamerican artists and their geometrically stylized representations of skeletons, *calacas* and *calaveras*. From my art professors in high school and college, I learned to appreciate the art of José Guadalupe Posada and became an admirer of Mexican and popular graphic arts, appreciating the creative representation of human skeletons and skulls for social critique and dark humor.

Many of my friends had *ofrendas* at home and visited their relatives' graves to clean them, bringing flowers and making *ofrendas*. In school, each year we created big collective *ofrendas* dedicated to some famous person, usually someone who had a big impact in our culture who had died recently. Most of the time this would be a Mexican celebrity or artist, but sometimes the passing of an international figure would take over, for example in the year John Lennon was killed we created Beatles-inspired *ofrendas*. But at home we didn't have *ofrendas*, or at least that's what my mom thought. When my dad passed away, and not knowing that my mom did not follow any of Day of

the Dead traditions, some of my dad's friends used to bring home some of his favorite cigarettes, food, and beverages to the house, hoping that we could place them in their name on an *ofrenda* dedicated to him. My siblings and I, in collusion with the maid, secretly placed these items with some of his things (his pen, his watch, his lighter) hidden near his photo on the entrance table, with some flowers placed nearby elegantly, so my mom would not identify this arrangement as an "ofrenda."

For me it is hard to distinguish where the Catholic feast begins and where the pre-Columbian tradition ends. The three-day celebration/veneration of the dead includes prayer, two masses, a visit to the cemetery, *ofrendas*, *calaveritas*, *Pan de muerto* (bread of the dead), *cempasuchil* flowers (Mexican Marigolds), costumes, and *fiestas*. These three days are all enveloped in the unique beauty of the Day of the Dead and the solemnity of the Catholic religion. However, secularized celebrations like Halloween have also jumped into the mix with the intensely spiritual practices of our pre-Columbian and Catholic legacy. For me, it all comes together in a seamless celebration. I saw Halloween invade Mexico as it penetrated our culture. I used to visit rural Estado de México, bordering Morelia, during Halloween and the Day of the Dead holidays, which had become a strange week-long celebration. People would go "trick-or-treating" for three or more consecutive nights, singing "Queremos jalagüi" (We want Halloween) as well as "Me da para mi calaverita?" (Do you give me [something] for my little [sugar] skull?). It was a continuous procession of kids wearing homemade costumes of Superman and Spiderman with rubber masks of the current president on top, escorted by adults wearing traditional Mazahua attire, and carrying large plastic *calaveras* as baskets for candy, money, or used as lanterns.

Now that I live in the USA, Halloween has become more important because of my Americanized children, but also because I am fascinated by cultural cross-pollination. Halloween invaded Mexico, but the Day of the Dead invaded Halloween in return; for example, the way in which *Catrin*as have been integrated into the repertoire of American Halloween costumes, or like that James Bond movie that portrayed a fictional Day of the Dead parade with giant *calaveras*. Those parades didn't exist when I was growing up in Mexico, but now they have emerged as part of Day of the Dead celebrations all over Mexico. The invasion goes both ways, back and forth.

As an immigrant and as a father, Day of the Dead has gained significance and meaning. I still celebrate both the religious feasts and the cultural traditions together. I don't see any conflict or separation between them. On All Souls Day (*Día de los fieles difuntos*) on November 2 we commemorate the souls of the departed that are in purgatory for their purification. That night I

feel particularly connected to my own departed family members and friends. For me, this is when prayer and celebration is most intertwined with the Mexican traditions, and it is more intimate and personal. Since I cannot visit any of my ancestors' graves because they are all buried far away, I make *ofrendas* to remember them here at home. I started placing a small *ofrenda* on the mantel in my house in Illinois, with photos of my wife's and my own family's *muertitos* (beloved dead ones), some of their possessions, favorite foods, yellow flowers, and candles, all under an image of the Virgin Mary and a crucifix. I taught my children to cherish and celebrate these feasts, trying to keep this tradition alive. As I have become more "at home" with having my own traditions and accepting my own heritage, I have made these *ofrendas* larger and more complex, with levels representing Heaven, Purgatory, and Earth. This year I started incorporating a small skull image, a symbol of *memento mori* and at the same time as a *calavera*. I plan on adding more *calaveras* into my artwork and being more intentional in creating these

ofrendas through the years, hoping to bring my children and their families into these meaningful and beautiful traditions.

For me, these are days of prayer and remembrance. Many of my Mexican friends believe that their loved ones in some way come to visit and join them to celebrate with their favorite food and drink. I don't personally believe that the souls of the dead physically visit us. During those Days of the Dead, I pray to God that He lets my beloved ones be more present in my heart. The practice of the Day of the Dead and its traditions help me feel closer in spirit with my beloved departed, but also serve as preparation for my own death. I hope this helps those around me to be more prepared as well.

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Figure 5.10. Skeleton figure of ceramic from Oaxaca, Mexico (FM 343441).







Figure 5.12. Ceramic skeleton figure from Central Mexico (FM 341964).

Scriptural texts represent “heaven” in various ways, ranging from something like the Garden of Eden, a Heavenly Court surrounding the divine, or a New City and New Earth (Rev. 21:1). In sum, “heaven” is that condition in which God’s will is done, and human fulfilment found. It is for this reason that Christians pray to God in the “Lord’s Prayer” that “Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” While physical images may be used to imagine heaven, it is a spiritual reality that exceeds the physical reality that is marked by joy, love, and creativity, but also suffering, sin, and death. Like many contemporary Christians, modern Jewish thinkers often shy away from hard-and-fast conceptions of Heaven, Hell, and judgment and prefer to speak of sin as separation from God and the community. More importantly, Christians and Jews insist on the mercy and love of God such that all human beings have inviolable dignity and may share in the blessing of this life and even the life to come. Given the priority of life found in these religious traditions, it is not surprising that the deepest dread is not physical death, but, rather, to be separated from the divine source of life and goodness that can and does happen to the living and perhaps the dead as well. This is also why, as noted above, these religions face the challenges of living a mortal life by stressing messianic

hope, the importance of the moral life (*Mitzvot* or the life of love), and membership in a community, the Church, or the Jewish people.

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Social Endurance beyond Human Death

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Field Museum

Abstract: This thematic essay considers how the death of an individual reverberates through human social networks and groups. The authors explore how societies endure in the face of individual mortality and how those challenges vary depending on who specifically died and how the social group is organized. The essay transitions from a consideration of death in mobile, small-scale populations to larger human aggregations that were organized in different ways. For example, the death of a leader has been characterized by markedly different cultural patterns and practices depending on the nature of leadership, legitimation, and succession. The case studies explore examples, from the origins of social memories to the roles of different monuments to the dead that reflected the links between leaders, their forebearers, and their followers.

Resumen: Este artículo explora cómo la muerte de un individuo repercute en las redes sociales y los grupos humanos en que este se insertó. Los autores exploran cómo las sociedades resisten y hacen frente a la mortalidad individual, y cómo los desafíos varían dependiendo de quién específicamente murió y cómo está organizado ese grupo social en particular. Este artículo revisa desde una consideración de la muerte en poblaciones móviles y de pequeña escala hasta las grandes comunidades humanas que se organizaron de maneras diferentes. Por ejemplo, la muerte de un líder se ha caracterizado por ciertos patrones y prácticas culturales marcadamente diferentes según la naturaleza del liderazgo, su legitimación, y su sucesión. Los artículos aquí contenidos exploran múltiples ejemplos, desde los orígenes de las memorias sociales hasta los roles de los diferentes monumentos erigidos en honor a los muertos que reflejaron los vínculos entre estos líderes, sus antepasados, y sus seguidores.

During 2022, the US death toll from COVID-19 passed one million. Of course, global totals and the many additional “excess deaths” tabulated by nations around the world portend a human impact even much more severe (Adam 2022; Schreiber 2022; Yong 2022b). Virtually every death leaves a personal void for some or many survivors, depending on the social networks that the deceased belonged to and the extent of their contacts. The ramifying effects—grief, mourning, ritual enactments—from the death of a military and political leader like General Colin Powell extend much more broadly than for most other citizens. Nevertheless, almost every death ignites a social response among those left behind, although the scale and specifics vary widely. Here, we briefly explore why death for our species has always been such a trigger for social response, albeit taking various forms. We ask why these repetitive practices become so encoded, enduring in human traditions and even materialized monumentally on landscapes? We also focus on underlying factors that underpin how and why these reactions vary depending on particular social contexts and the specific roles of the deceased.

Among the living, funerary rituals and interaction between the dead and their earthly descendants are ubiquitous; some researchers even argue that communication with deceased antecedents is a human universal and a key to understanding the underpinnings of religion more generally (Steadman,

Palmer, and Tilley 1996, 63). “Of all sources of religion, the supreme and final crisis of life—death—is of the greatest importance” (Malinowski 1954, 47). Ritualized mortuary activities take a wealth of different forms, and not every death receives an equivalent or as ritually full response. Yet it is worth pondering why funerary rituals and correspondence with the dead are such a fundamental aspect of humanity’s cultural practice in the past and present (Jong 2016; Steadman, Palmer, and Tilley 1996)? In the archaeological record, funerary behaviors provide some of the earliest material evidence for human ritual behaviors (Pettitt 2011), as with the tomb of King Tutankhamen, among the most stirring and memorable windows into our species’ past (Nilsson Stutz and Tarlow 2013).

Although humans generally have a sizeable capacity for selfishness, they also are exceptionally good cooperators. No other animal cooperates with non-kin at the scales that humans do, and in various global regions people established large-scale cooperative arrangements and dense social networks that extend back more than ten millennia. Death, especially sequential or mass death, leaves holes in human social networks and can undermine interpersonal institutions, creating grief and malaise (Yong 2022a). “For those grieving, even more normal times don’t feel like old times” (Lee 2022). In other words, at death, gaps in social networks are opened, and people respond in different ways. Steps may be taken by those who do