

Death Ritual in Modern America: The Norm and a Personal View  
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The way of dealing with death in modern America is rather different from that which prevailed in the past and that which continues to be prominent in some of the rest of the developed world. Over the last three generations, the norm among a majority of Americans has become to elect cremation rather than burial and to forgo the traditional religious rituals of last rites, mortuary viewing, formal funeral service, funeral procession, and burial in a marked grave in a dedicated cemetery. Instead, the choice is for relatively local family and friends to gather for a memorial service highlighting the positive aspects of the life of the deceased, often with a gathering to share food and remembrances after this event. These memorial events are often not held in a recognized religious place [church, synagogue, mosque] and are frequently not conducted by an ordained "minister." With no burial, there is also no lengthy attendance to the grave of the departed, only a private scattering of the deceased's ashes, often corresponding to the directions of the departed which have been shared with immediate relatives. Those who continue to subscribe to the religiously prescribed funerary ritual sequence may look at this new way of dealing with death as rather truncated and crass. On the other hand, and for those subscribing to this new approach, the focus of these events is regarded as emphasizing the importance of life rather than death.

Related to this modern approach to death are 1) material prosperity and improved health conditions, 2) the weakening of both extended family relations and long term attachment to a particular place in a highly mobile society, 3) the substantial reduction among American citizens in church membership and attendance, and 4) the general weakening of commitment among Americans to the literal religious beliefs of the major western religions.

With regard to this fourth factor, those who subscribe to the newer approach to death identify a basic change in worldview as a primary cause for their withdrawal from traditional religious belief systems. This modern worldview incorporates first the collective findings of the physical sciences over the last two centuries. These findings reveal Earth and humankind to constitute less than one grain of sand in the grand cosmic scheme of material things, with this entire

material domain amounting to only 4% of all that exists. This new understanding of humankind's essentially irrelevant place in the cosmos has demolished the Earth centered and human centered perspective upon which the belief systems of the major western religions are based. In this revised view, it is difficult to accept the proposition that humankind is the pinnacle of God's creation and the primary focus of "His" attention. More specifically, credulity for many Americans has been stretched to the breaking point to subscribe to many of the core beliefs of the Christian faith: 1) God sending his son to Earth by way of a virgin birth to offer eternal salvation to one small group of people – the Jews [and by extraordinary extension to all of humankind], 2) God keeping detailed "records" of the behavior of each human on Earth for the purpose of rendering a judgment at death as to whether that person's soul would end up in Heaven or Hell, 3) the Second Coming of Jesus in which the Christian faithful alone would arise from the grave and be transported to a new life on a different plane, 4) The Bible being the divinely inspired scripture defining the absolute and literal truth about creation and the behavior necessary for humans to achieve salvation, in spite of the fact that this text developed from many alternative and very different canons reflecting the views of diverse theologians in different sects. The western codified version of The Bible only settled into place in the 4<sup>th</sup> century. For a text that is assigned sacred, divinely inspired status, modern Americans can hardly overlook the significant role humans have played time and time again in its development.

In light of the modern worldview, Christian theologians have struggled mightily to justify The Bible as a sacred text and the many literal beliefs in it. Some have opted for the symbolic or metaphoric interpretation of many of the more controversial components in the literal text. Others have chosen to select the elements in The Bible that they assert are the essential core of Christian belief and deemphasize the rest. And still others assert that however the view of reality presented in The Bible conflicts with the modern worldview and the application of rational thought in light of it, this pervasive conflict must be ignored and the whole of The Bible accepted on faith. In spite of the media focus on Christian fundamentalist groups and their connection to right wing politics, in modern times, fewer and fewer Americans have been willing to adopt any of the above options for sustaining commitment to the Christian religion. And the same applies with respect to the other major religions of the West – Judaism and Islam.

While adherents to the modern worldview recognize that the major religions support desirable moral behavior among their committed believers, they are also very aware that the differences among the major religions and among the religious denominations/sects of these religions are the source of and justification for some of the most horrendous human behavior – genocide, ethnic cleansing, jihad, and crusade. In withdrawing commitment to religion, many modern Americans see themselves as supporting peace and opposing war. In addition, those subscribing to this modern worldview recognize that ethical behavior is strongly supported in families and other institutions of modern society – universal education and the law. It follows for most Americans that religion per se is not necessary to promote appropriate social behavior within human groups.

What about the importance of religion in supporting a subjective understanding of self and reality – to counter balance the material/objective perspective? Many modern Americans have discovered through exposure to reports of psychological and comparative religious investigations that awareness of and experience in the spiritual core phenomenon of unification – which is at the center of all religions, is attainable without the need to commit to any one literal religious belief system [see for a recent example, Sam Harris, Waking Up: A Guide to Spirituality Without Religion, New York, 2014]. The result is that many in the developed world – including many Americans – have realized that it is not necessary to accept the surrounding belief package of the major religions to retain access to their desirable core elements [social philosophy and spirituality].

The changes in modern American society identified above have contributed to the withdrawal from the old tradition of religiously grounded ritual at death which is designed 1) to assist the deceased in the transition to some form of an ethereal life after death and/or 2) to affirm the deceased's continuing connections to and participation with the social relations of the past – the ancestors.

So, what alternatives have modern Americans pursued?

In the modern American approach to death, the former focus on a religiously oriented way of dealing with death has been supplanted for many by an emphasis on a secular/material, social, or spiritual perspective – or some combination. For secular materialists, the physical world and the intellectual approach to the understanding of life is all there is. At their deaths, from this

perspective individuals can either be regarded as succeeding in life on this basis to some degree, or not. There is nothing more. For existentialists, the material world is important, but the focus shifts to the quality of the individual's relations within the physical, social and natural domains. Death constitutes the end of the individual's opportunity to pursue developing these quality relationships and to share in the benefits of these social and natural connections. For those who are spiritually oriented, the objective/empirical domain of the physical, social and natural world remain significant, but there also exists a subjective/immaterial realm of reality in which humans participate and derive both identity and meaning in life. The spiritually inclined recognize death as the end of physical life, but tend to view life itself in an expanded sense that allows for individual identity to incorporate and share fundamentally in the surrounding social and natural reality. During the individual's life, through development of human intuitive capabilities, this sharing can reach the extent where the discrete physical self all but disappears and physical death becomes essentially irrelevant. In the full-on spiritual sense, the discrete, isolated individual is an illusion to begin with.

When it comes to death, modern Americans trend toward one or the other of these materialist, existential or spiritual perspectives – or some combination. Of course, for most, this trending lacks a developed, integrated “rationale.”

### Personal Point of View

As a modern American, I am not religious in the traditional sense of being committed to the belief system of one of our major religions. Instead, I describe my perspective as being composed of a combination of material, existential, and spiritual elements. I absolutely respect the importance of the physical/material domain of reality and the rational, intellectual mental capabilities that support exploring and benefiting from it. This objective, material dimension of reality is the zone of biological survival and the location of the competitive orientation and behaviors in humans. We cannot get along without it! But at the same time I respect physical reality, I am an existentialist and a social scientist aware of the importance of quality relations within the social sphere and to the natural world. Humans are inherently [even genetically] social creatures that survive by cooperating to provide resources and security for themselves within their groups.

For me, material welfare is only meaningful within the social fabric of life. Quality relations [social and natural] are essential and the human capacity for respect and empathy support these cooperatively oriented connections.

In my view, the dynamic challenge for humans and their societies is first to achieve the proper balance between these two perspectives – the physical/competitive and the social/cooperative – so as to appropriately and successfully address the diverse tasks/issues humans confront – including death.

As a spiritually oriented person, I respect the subjective domain of reality and the ability of humans to participate in it and to benefit from understanding themselves, their societies, and the natural world in terms of it. In my view, spiritual understanding and experience depends on the activation of human intuitive mental capabilities rather than rational intellectual capabilities. And intuitive capabilities can be developed and refined just as the intellectual capabilities can be fostered to better understand and explore the physical/material domain. Expansion of the self to include and incorporate more and more of objective reality promotes perceiving that reality in terms of its connectedness instead of its discreteness. As a result, spiritual development supports cooperation – the “other” as the self. In fact, this is the spiritual basis for morality which religions surround with their complex literal belief systems and rituals. So, as I see it, spirituality supports the cooperative side of the fundamental human dynamic between the competitive and the cooperative, the exclusive and the inclusive, the ME and the WE ways of perceiving and relating within reality. Neither mode is sufficient alone. Both modes are necessary.

Overall, when it comes to death, I understand and respond to it from within a combined material, social and spiritual perspective. And it is my contention that a fundamental dynamic and oppositional set [competitive – cooperative, material – spiritual, intellectual – intuitive, objective – subjective, separate – connected, discrete – unified, individual – social] underlies this collective point of view. Accordingly, at death I mourn the loss of the discrete physical person and the particular social connections associated with this specific individual; but I also celebrate the spiritual dimension of the departed with his or her potential to have always understood him or herself as participating in and becoming one with the infinite. For me, there is always this objective – subjective dynamic in all things, including how we understand and respond to death.

For more on this general perspective and the way I see it applying across our social institutions, see what I regard as my major philosophic work: [Dynamic Humanism: Balancing Complementary Human Perspectives and Mental Faculties; Science and Spirituality, Intellect and Intuition, 2007](#). And for easy access to this work and the application of this perspective in a large number of essays to a wide range of topics, see my website: [[www.dynamic-humanism.com](http://www.dynamic-humanism.com)].