

Aging and Dying:

Legal, Scientific and
Religious Challenges

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criteria would not be weakened, and proof of the proper risk assessment would still be required.

As for the patient, the treating physicians were not at liberty to discuss the current status of her health.

An Aside

It is interesting to note that the discussants were concerned about the issue of empowerment and the role of the patient and local caregivers in the decision making process. It will come as no surprise, therefore, that many involved in this particular case point to the lobbying effort by Senator Tom Harkin (Democrat, Iowa) as the reason for this application's success in the midst of perhaps a dozen similar applications which were not successful. Indeed, the woman and her husband had originally come from Iowa and there was some suggestion that there were friendships stemming from that period. Healy, however, insists that her chief motivation was compassion, not politics. "First and foremost," said Healy, "the decision was a compassionate response to the request of a dying patient." Perhaps the discussants were on the trail of something of serious ethical and moral consideration. The power to make such historic decisions seems to have left the patient in the position of the least involved participant.

3 The Buddhist Minister: Interfaith Sharing of Rituals at the Time of Death

Paul W. Newman

INTRODUCTION

In a multicultural society such as Canada, there are many occasions when rituals can be shared at various times of life by people of different religious or philosophical traditions. These occasions arise in schools, in "mixed marriages", in intentional interfaith dialogues and in communities where passionate concerns about ecology or peace or other social issues are shared by people of different philosophies or religions, and call for shared ritual activities. Some of these occasions for sharing rituals apply as much to aging people as to anyone else, e.g. "mixed marriages" or rituals focusing on ecological or peace issues. The present case study has to do with a situation of a dying person.

Ritual as an anthropological phenomenon in our society may not be as well understood by many people as it perhaps deserves to be. The truths that are deep down most important to people are usually expressed in some kind of ritual form. It may, of course, not be a traditionally religious form. In a

funeral of a member of the Hell's Angels Motorcycle Club, I was fascinated to see a taped rendition of Frank Sinatra singing "I Did it My Way" move the assembled riders to tears in an obviously secular ritual that apparently meant more to them than the Christian funeral rituals which I, as clergy, was conducting.

Rituals may be secular and the sharing of rituals from different traditions also need not be only religious rituals. A case in point is a recent funeral I attended in which the widow of a Christian clergy person organized an appropriate blending of rituals for the memorial service of her second husband who was a lifelong member of the Communist Party of Canada.

Rituals are of central interest to cultural anthropologists. I am not qualified to give anything like a full survey of current anthropological writings on the function of ritual in societies. I can recommend Victor Turner's books, including *The Ritual Process*, (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1969) whose analyses of ritual have gained much credence among current Christian scholars of liturgy.

I wish to introduce the case study of "The Buddhist Minister" by surveying another aspect of the sharing of rituals, namely, some of the current theories about interfaith relations in general.

The sharing of liturgies or rituals is a practical phenomenon that depends for its legitimacy on the theories or ideologies of the particular participants. In actual fact, the practices of sharing rituals often precede the theoretical or theological justifications. Eventually, however, the theoretical or theological questions have to be considered. At the present time there is a virtual explosion of publications dealing with basic questions about interfaith relations that precede and determine such practical issues as worshipping together or

living faithfully in marriage with a partner of a different religion. A brief survey of the most common theoretical stances on interfaith relations will set the stage for considering a case study which deals with the practical issue of sharing rituals in the context of death.

The terms most frequently used to describe theories of interfaith relations are exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism. Proponents of these different stances see advantages in their chosen stance and disadvantages in the other stances. A brief and partial listing of some of the possible "pros" and "cons" of these three stances may help to highlight the differences between them.

Exclusivism is the claim by a faith community of sole privileged access to God or Salvation or Truth or Ultimate Reality. Sole privileged access excludes the possibility that people of other faith traditions may have legitimate knowledge or experience of the saving Reality which is approached or celebrated in genuine worship. It follows that those with exclusivist claims cannot participate easily, if at all, in the rituals of other religions and may be very cautious in allowing others to participate in their rituals without first professing the essential beliefs of the exclusivist tradition.

Christians have often held an exclusivist stance, claiming that there is no salvation outside the church or that there is no access to God except through Jesus. Proponents argue that truth is inevitably exclusive, any belief that something is true necessarily excluding other options. They also hold that exclusivist truth claims provide necessary criteria for discernment of authentic religious or ethical activity. Without such criteria, they argue, there is no way to distinguish between genuine religions and such destructive movements as

Nazism. Exclusivism justifies the fact that conversion from harmful beliefs and practices is sometimes necessary.

Critics of exclusivism point out its imperialistic tendencies. As Jurgen Moltmann succinctly put it: "any kind of exclusivist language eventually and inevitably leads to violence". The history of Christian exclusivist activities *vis-à-vis* Jews, indigenous peoples and those of other religions would seem to bear out Moltmann's observation.

A second stance in interfaith relations is inclusivism. This stance does not claim sole privileged access to God or Salvation; it affirms the possibility that others may know God or Truth and may experience Salvation, but it insists that whatever is known or experienced of God, Truth or Salvation must be consistent with their religious knowledge and experience. People of other religious communities are included in the scope of saving possibilities but only on the terms affirmed by the inclusivist tradition. In this way some Christians will claim that the cosmic Christ is present and active wherever any truth or goodness is found, whether or not the people involved know that it is really Christ who is actually responsible for the virtue or truth in question. Similarly, Muslims are inclusivist when they claim that all babies are born into Islam by virtue of their submissiveness to God. Some Buddhists will speak of the "Buddha nature" which they can see in some people of other religions.

Proponents of inclusivism will point out that their stance enables the sharing of other religions' rituals albeit with one's own editorial interpretation actively involved. Inclusivism can even permit the possibility of learning from other faith traditions, providing that anything learned fits in adequately with the main beliefs of one's own tradition. Inclusivism allows for the possibility of one God or one Ultimate Reality

which is discerned in the terms of one's own tradition but which far exceeds the limits of one's faith community.

Inclusivism enjoys the benefits of having criteria for discernment of false or harmful beliefs and actions. Critics will ask, however, if this is not in fact a form of exclusivism, but one which tends to be paternalistic if not imperialistic or even violent when pressed to the "bottom line".

A third stance in interfaith relations is pluralism. Pluralism recognizes the independent validity of other ways of salvation or other beliefs about God, Truth or Ultimate Reality. John Hick, Paul Knitter and Leonard Swidler are prominent proponents of pluralism in recent Christian publications. Hick and Knitter argue in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1987) that the time has come for exclusivists or inclusivists to "cross the Rubicon" and accept the validity of a pluralistic stance in interfaith relations. They say that there are three "bridges" which invite crossing this Rubicon to pluralism.

The first "bridge" is historical-cultural. Modern historical consciousness includes the awareness that every faith tradition is influenced profoundly by its particular historical and cultural conditions. It would seem to be arbitrary and unjustified to claim that any one historical-cultural tradition has supremacy over all others, certainly not to the extent of having sole privileged access to truth or salvation or even to having the definitive criteria which authenticate or falsify other historical-cultural traditions.

A second "bridge" is the "mystical bridge". This is based on the awareness that the object of religious experience is essentially mysterious and to some extent beyond description. The fact is – according to this view – that all religious ideas of any cultural tradition are necessarily symbolic and,

consequently, both adequate to some extent and also inadequate to express or depict the object of religious experience. It would seem logically possible, if not necessary, that the Mysterious Ultimate Reality could be expressed in different ways and different terms in different historical-cultural traditions. Again, it would seem pretentious for one tradition to insist that its symbols or rituals were exclusively or even inclusively superior to all others.

The third "bridge" is a practical-ethical one. This view entails commitment to the idea that authentic religious belief or experience leads to liberation and the bettering of the human condition for religious participants. It follows that any faith tradition may have independent validity provided that it demonstrably contributes to the human well-being of its adherents and does no demonstrable harm to the well-being of other people or other creatures or of the Earth itself.

Pluralism, reached by any or all of the three bridges, appears to offer tolerance and respect for other religions. It allows for sharing rituals and for genuine open-ended learning from other traditions. Except perhaps for the practical-ethical version, pluralism seems to beg the question of truth and does not provide clear criteria for discerning false or harmful religious beliefs and activities. Critics have claimed that pluralism is not really pluralistic because it depends on certain cultural or linguistic theories or on a "liberation-theology" perspective which is exclusivist or inclusivist in its own way. Some have suggested that pluralism is Western culture's philosophical equivalent of McDonald's hamburgers.¹

1. Cf. Kenneth Surin, "A 'Politics of Speech': Religious Pluralism in the Age of the McDonald's Hamburger" in Gavin D'Costa (Ed.), *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth*

In general, theories about interfaith relations raise the questions of whether humans share a common humanness and whether human beings exist in a common Reality and have relations of various kinds with a common God or Ultimate Truth. The ancient Hindu idea that there are many paths up to the pinnacle of the "mountain" of Truth seems to express the theory of pluralism. Inclusiveness assumes one God or Ultimate Reality while claiming definitive understanding of It. Exclusiveness also claims One God but denies that other humans have any legitimate access to Him or It. The universal fact of human death would seem to have some significance for these theories of interfaith relations.

This very brief survey of theories about interfaith relations barely opens the subject for discussion. It is intended only to provide some background information for consideration of a particular case study involving the sharing of a ritual by members of different faith traditions.

of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1990, pp. 192-212.

CASE STUDY

A professor of Christian Worship is in a Toronto hospital suffering from terminal cancer of the liver. A week or so before he dies his students and faculty colleagues hold a Communion Service at his college and decide to send a delegation to him in hospital to share the bread and wine and blessings of the Communion Service with him.

Just as they arrive at his hospital room, a Buddhist scholar and friend also arrives and asks the professor and his family if he might do a ritual Buddhist chant which is traditionally done to give comfort to persons who are dying. The professor readily agrees. One family member suggests it would be best to wait for the Communion Service to be completed as the student and faculty delegation was expecting to do their liturgy at that time. The Buddhist scholar agrees and the Communion liturgy is begun.

Just before the Communion liturgy is completed with the passing of the peace and the benediction, the professor raises himself in his bed and announces that the Buddhist scholar wishes to do a Buddhist chant for a dying person and asks him to proceed with it. The Buddhist scholar begins with a brief explanation of Buddhist beliefs about reincarnation and its relationship to the life lived by a person and then proceeds to do the chant in Pali for the comfort of the dying person. After he is finished, the professor musters his energy and makes a brief statement about the mystery of death and the Christian hopes for the Communion of Saints. In doing so he affirms the common humanity of people of different faith traditions.

The Communion Service is concluded with the "passing of the peace" and a benediction, the Buddhist scholar being

included and participating actively in the closing actions of the Christian liturgy.

Some Questions

1. Does this case exceed or illustrate reasonable criteria for interfaith sharing of ritual traditions at the time of death?
2. What are reasonable criteria?
3. Are you familiar with other cases involving interfaith sharing of rituals at the time of death?
4. How do theories or stances on interfaith relations contribute to discerning appropriate or inappropriate interfaith sharing of rituals at the time of death?
5. Does the universal fact of human death have any significant implications for theories of interfaith relations, and in particular, for the matter of interfaith sharing of rituals at the time of death?

DISCUSSIONS AND PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

Group 1

This case – related to interfaith traditions – was reviewed. The group began the discussion by recounting a variety of personal experiences which involved cross-cultural issues in health care settings. We then explored some of the ethical and moral issues underlying interfaith and cross-faith worship. This account will offer a relatively unedited account of these deliberations.

Since most learning begins with personal experience, we began by sharing personal encounters which had meaning in our lives. It was recalled by one group member that in his Vancouver Island health care facility, historically, only certain religious rituals were sanctioned. The "old school" administration seemed to be concerned about where you would stop if you allowed unusual rituals to be enacted, and how other residents would be affected if no limits were in place: e.g. if incense, fire, etc. were to be used. It has now been changed in this facility so that people are more free to worship in their own traditions. The group felt that the last several decades have been marked by greater tolerance and openness to interfaith and cross-faith traditions.

Another individual recalled being asked as a nursing student to baptize an aborted fetus, when neither she nor the perspective mother were of Catholic faith, since it was policy in that hospital to do so. The group thought that this was appropriate as long as both the nurse and the mother were aware of this policy when selecting that facility. But the question of how people may worship began to raise questions in the group members' minds.

We began to think of how one would establish criteria for deciding on how people may be allowed to worship. What do we mean by "reasonable" criteria? Who should decide? What happens to the rights of the individual?

The group believed strongly that, in general, it should be the right of the individual to make autonomous decisions about how best to worship.

Another excellent case presented by one of the group members helped to clarify some of the issues involved in giving care to families of other cultures. When a Buddhist man died in a local long-term-care facility, the nurse was asked to touch the top of his head after death to release his spirit for its journey. Since the organization bases its care of the dying on family wishes, simple requests are fairly easily accommodated. But when staff members and clients do not share the same beliefs, it can create some conflict at times. Combining faith traditions and giving care across faith boundaries often means being creative and taking risks.

The case study which we examined involved a request to combine faiths in one ceremony. No one in the group had any objections to the idea of combining faith traditions. In order to adequately address interfaith issues, we did believe that good communication and cooperation between the parties was essential. Freedom to choose was again emphasized – you cannot force interfaith worship onto people any more than you can force any single faith.

We began then as a group to examine our underlying assumptions, values and beliefs about religious practices. For example, the question was posed "Do you have to believe in it in order for a ritual to "work". Some people said no – others yes.

Participating as a believer may be quite different from participating as a professional. One non-Christian in the group said he was comfortable reading the bible to people when asked to do so in his role as a health care provider, even though he did not believe in it himself. It seemed that the main requirement was that the person receiving the ritual be a believer. Another example was given of a minister who was asked to provide a Jewish ceremony at the death of a young man whose body was subsequently flown to Israel. Expressions of deep gratitude were received from the man's family, acknowledging how much the effort taken by the minister had meant to them. We began to appreciate the symbolism of rituals and touched briefly on whether different faiths may have different rituals with similar underlying meanings.

How can someone who holds inclusion or exclusion as a philosophy participate actively in a democratic, multicultural society? Such values no longer seem to fit and, while people have the right to hold them, opportunities should be made available for people to challenge their assumptions.

What do we even mean by a pluralistic society? Do we only pay lip-service to this concept in Canada? The group felt to some extent that many people are not really sensitive to cross-faith issues. All of us are probably guilty of assuming that others share our Christian beliefs. For example, one individual expressed concern that swearing on the Bible is the Canadian way. However, we learned that any religious book is allowed, for example, at the citizenship swearing-in ceremony. Everyone agreed that we could do a lot more to understand others' religious beliefs and practices fully.

One theme which was woven in throughout the discussion was the need to look for common human values and

spirituality. As a global community we see a tendency for unification, acceptance and inclusion between and within faiths. Women are being included in the clergy, gays are gaining acceptance, etc. But at the same time, there is also a reactionary and opposing set of forces which serve to fragment mankind further. Certain groups and peoples are tending to become even more segregated and splintered in their faiths. The return to fundamentalism and neo-nazism may be examples of these reactionary trends.

Not all rituals are related to religion. A pluralist perspective would allow for that. The potential for poetry and music to play significant ritualistic roles was put forward. A number of excellent examples of these were recounted by the group.

The importance of food in rituals was also discussed. A nurse recalled a story involving a mute schizophrenic patient who had been attending group therapy for one year. After a year of silence, on the last day of the group meetings, the leader asked why everyone was eating so much. The mute lady spoke for the first time and said "It's to fill up the hole that will be left when you are gone". The role of food in rituals could be universal.

It was also noted that rituals for burial may be related to historical events. For example, in one African culture the dead body was treated in a certain way in order to avoid passing on diseases. This had been entrenched in the rituals.

Education is going to be important. We need to encourage understanding and sensitivity to other faith traditions.

The group contemplated to what extent physical structures such as mosques and churches influence the potential for the enactment of multifaith rituals. We realized that such structures usually become part of and are integrated with the

over-all set of faith traditions. For example, one person believed that religious beliefs and rules may preclude anyone but a Catholic priest to stand on the altar or sanctuary in a Catholic church. This could make it difficult to introduce different clergy and rituals. Thus, from a very practical perspective, we will need to become more knowledgeable, understanding and flexible.

We acknowledged that our own Native Indian culture is very rich in ritual and faith traditions. Most of us have taken very little effort to get to know their routines – this following their enforced mass conversion to Catholicism. One person's experience was related regarding a native funeral which very naturally involved both Catholic and native rituals, e.g. traditional drumming, the giving of tobacco, the sharing of putting earth in the grave, bone games, the distribution of the deceased's clothing to surviving band members, potlatch meals.

The group briefly addressed the question of whether churches promote interfaith activities? Examples were recalled in relation to weddings, births and circumcision. One member thought that there is a greater variation between individuals in any one faith than there is between faiths. To impose ritualism on non-spiritual persons is not correct. We need to explore each others' personal meanings. One man told of his father's beliefs about death. "We are in prison in the human dimension." And on his dying, "Ask the undertaker to come and get it [my body] when I don't need it any longer. I'm looking forward to my next adventure in another dimension."

One individual commented that if you open up the floodgates to different religions, there may be a risk that you will conclude that they can't all be right so they must all be wrong. This raised the question of what spirituality is.

Unfortunately we ran out of time before we could answer this fully!

Group 2

Several criteria for sharing rituals were identified. Familiarity and acceptance of the ritual by the dying person is essential. Planning for the event is normally very important but spontaneity might also heighten the sense that the ritual was being offered as a gift to the dying person and/or the family. In general, shared rituals must be offered and received as gifts; there should be no manipulation involved or any intention of converting the people receiving the ritual.

There was some discussion of whether or not religious belief tends to strengthen in aging or dying persons. Some in the group reported experiences of older people being more open to diversity and more tolerant than they were at a younger age.

The members of the group shared stories about other occasions of interfaith sharing of rituals by aging people. It was observed that concern for universal realities such as death or care for the Earth were good occasions for interfaith sharing of rituals.

It was also noted that ritual "goes deeper" than simply talking about different faith traditions. Ritual is often experienced as being more powerful than mere words. What is done together in shared rituals seems to have deeper significance.

The group acknowledged that there is widespread ignorance of other faith traditions and agreed that much education is needed in our society, not only in schools but in the training of all whose work involves them in interfaith relations. The importance of education in building mutual

trust among members of different religious communities was emphasized.

The limits of pluralism were explored. While it is clearly important to recognize the possibility of other traditions having independent validity, it is also necessary to be able to recognize that some religious cults or movements are harmful or wrong in what they advocate. The importance of respecting the common humanity of all other people regardless of their particular beliefs was agreed upon.

Finally, it was recognized that in relating to people of other faith traditions or ideologies compassion is of paramount importance.

Group 3

The dying person should have the choice. The Buddhist scholar friend is there to share a gift, not to convert.

The meaning of these rituals was discussed. The service for the dying person is for all present, the funeral is for the living. The choice of rituals needs to be sensitive so as not to offend. (Benefits of Latin services; people didn't know what was said!) The tradition of rituals was seen as supportive, especially in times of crisis.

Some members shared personal experiences such as interfaith funerals (Christian/Jewish) and the conflict and tension associated with different expectations. Ministers, priests, etc. need to be involved with the dying person's family so they can be empathic, sensitive and compassionate.

Discussion also arose about the conflicts between religious groups such as the split in the English church, etc. In B.C., Moslems are the largest growth group. Right wing Pentecostalism is also growing in B.C. Anglicans are coming into the Roman Catholic church. The tension between

religious groups and different rituals was discussed and how rigidity by some religious leaders alienates people.

There is a need for tolerance; interfaith opportunities to respect the human religious experience.

Finally, the group felt that the dying should have their choice of who they wish to share rituals with them.

Group 4

The comment was made that we are often too busy in our lives to make philosophical decisions: death permits focusing.

In the described case study the liturgy is being directed by the dying person. People should respect the dying man's wishes. The melding of two liturgies is perhaps upsetting to some but it is his wish. The two could have been kept separate, but this event should not be considered anything but beautiful because it represents a bond of friendship.

Some people think that the dying person has all the rights, but perhaps we should consider these rituals not only in terms of the dying person, but also in terms of the family. When the question is considered that the dying person's choice might offend family members, that led to a discussion of functional and dysfunctional families, and the point was made that funerals are not going to resolve a family's long-term problems. And while family members may feel uncomfortable in the face of rituals from another faith, this is by no means the only cause of discomfort. Often the problems within a religion are as great or may be greater than those between religions. In general it was felt that the wishes of the dying person should be respected - after death the family takes over: remember *Howard's End*.

Death is something with which the discussants were familiar, and several relevant cases were related. One example considered a Moslem mother's death where her death

was respected in the Moslem tradition, but afterwards the eldest son who had become a Christian asked for Christian prayers for his mother. There was no problem and everyone was proud to see the mother honoured in this fashion.

Thus pluralistic views may inspire two services while the case study reflects the inclusive view recognizing another manifestation of the same god. The question of the endpoints of life after death is not really relevant. The Buddhist chant is performed to aid the transformation from one stage of life to another. It is more than a comfort, it is meant to assist in preparing the person for the next stage of life.

Clergy – it was pointed out – will have to learn to be more comfortable about sharing in the expression of the dying person's religious wishes. Some care facilities may be dedicated to a particular religion; and while that may pose problems, these need not be unsurmountable obstacles.

The point was made that this case might be too academic, involving as it does two well-educated religious people. It was suggested that an alternative scenario might be about a young man returning to San Francisco with AIDS and his friend visits while he is dying. The family might have a different response. That might show that perhaps in the real world things can be very different.

The discussion prompted participants to think about death, wills and wishes, etc. and about the diversity of Vancouver Island's cultural wealth.

COMMENTS

The group discussions apparently included a great deal of sharing of stories from the participants' own experience. Such stories can often get to the heart of the matter more effectively than abstract analysis. They can contribute to a change of attitude or revision of values which may be the most important outcome of any discussion or investigation.

A historian from the University of Chicago has written a book proposing the thesis that North American history can be best understood as a series of "awakenings" and that an awakening is underway in the last quarter of the twentieth century. In *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978) William G. McLoughlin uses an anthropological definition of awakenings to analyse four outstanding shifts in North American history. In each awakening a crisis is identified which causes established values and public policies to come under pressure for change. In the late twentieth century many values are certainly under pressure to change.

In the four previous awakenings it is possible to see a struggle between what might be called the proponents of "old light" and those advocating "new light." In the present time the resurgence of fundamentalism in many religions might be called the force of "old light" whereas the widespread acceptance of pluralism and "New Age" thinking might be called the power of "new light".

McLoughlin observes that in the previous awakenings in North American history the resolution of the crises in each case never represented a complete victory of either "old light" or "new light" but rather a surprising combination of both "old light" and "new light".

If the same holds true for the crisis of pluralism in the late twentieth century it may be the case that ancient traditions of faith might be deepened and remain alive while appropriating or combining in unforeseen ways with elements of other faith traditions or newly emerging beliefs or ideologies. The sharing of rituals by people of different traditions may be one of the characteristic unforeseen elements in the resolution of the pluralistic crisis of the late twentieth century.

As the groups clearly perceived, the sharing of rituals must be a "gift" or an expression of compassion or of caring about a commonly espoused concern. At the same time, as the case study illustrated, sharing rituals can engender and broaden such mutuality, as well as allow it to be expressed. The proliferation of shared rituals in our multicultural society might be one of the most significant contributions which aging and dying persons could make towards the formation of a new era in society, an "awakening" which would shape the immediate future of humankind in our common history.

There is much promise in interfaith dialogue and collaboration. The intentional sharing of rituals is a profoundly important aspect of interfaith relations. The aging and the dying are as able to be agents and recipients of such sharing as any other age group in society. Their wisdom and mature perspectives on living and dying may, in fact, give them more openness and tolerance towards others than some younger people have. It would be a serious mistake to conclude that the future belongs primarily to the young. Our future may owe its biggest debts to the older pioneers of interfaith sharing.