The Funeral Meal: A Significant Funerary Ritual

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ABSTRACT: Historically, a meal in association with funerary ritual has been a reality in many cultural and religious settings. Our society has experienced a gradual demise of formal funerary ritual, with an accompanying psychological and social impoverishment. Both the immediate bereaved and the larger social community can benefit from a funeral meal which functions as a group experience that focuses on the needs of the living. It can be a shared experience in a familiar structured setting which enables the living to do significant grief work. Practical implications and potential problems will need to be taken into consideration.

The problem: “An impoverished rite”

Atop the beans he piled the ham
Atop the cake, the pie.
Take time to stuff, O mourner.
Full stomachs cannot cry.1

These words from a poem by Jeanne Nall Adams allude to one of the rites of passage surrounding death found in numerous cultures, that is, the funeral meal or feast. The anthropologist van Gennep, who subdivided rites of passage into three categories (separation, transition, and incorporation), viewed the funeral meal as a rite of incorporation. Its purpose was

to reunite all the surviving members of the group with each other, and sometimes also with the deceased, in the same way that a chain which has been broken by the disappearance of one of its links must be rejoined.2

That this funeral meal is not just a cultural anomaly is evident in a quick overview of Habenstein and Lamars’ massive volume Funeral Customs the World Over. In their work there is frequent mention of a meal or feast in association with the ritual surrounding funerals. It appears in the funerary rites of such diverse countries as Ceylon, Iran, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Sweden, Poland, Hungary, Rumania, England, and the United States. However, there is tremendous diversity in the form this funeral meal takes. For example, the menu may vary from the simple to the lavish. The meal is often eaten in the home of the deceased (the immediate bereaved family), but the responsibility for the meal may rest with either neighbors and friends or, in some cases, the immediate family of the deceased. The mood surrounding this ritual in one instance may be celebrative and in another quite somber. The meal occurs most often following the burial or cremation, but in some cases it may occur before

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When viewed from the perspective of various religious traditions, one also finds the funeral meal appearing, though again taking a number of different forms. Among some Buddhists it is common to have a funeral feast or banquet following cremation or burial. In a study of Muslim death and burial in a Jordanian village, Hilma Granquist discovered a series of meals following the funeral. Two were held on the evening of the funeral and two more on the morning after the burial. There were also periodic meals during the first year after the funeral. On the other hand, among Hindus the emphasis is upon fasting from the moment a death occurs. Following the cremation of the body, the family cannot cook any food when they return to their home. They must subsist on whatever they can find in their home and must also abstain from salt for three days.

Among Orthodox Jews there is a well-developed mourning ritual which includes a mandatory funeral meal, known either as the meal of comfort or the meal of restoration. This meal is considered to be one with biblical precedent. As one might expect, the funeral meal is also found in the Christian tradition. It appears most prominent in close-knit ethnic groups or communities. James Lapsley, in his study of ethnic practices surrounding death and bereavement in Mercer County, New Jersey, found it to be a significant feature among the Eastern Orthodox communities in that county. The funeral meal is also an integral element in the Amish funerary rites. It is a simple but plentiful meal prepared by friends and neighbors for groups as large as five hundred.

Before we consider the contemporary issues surrounding the funeral meal, one additional factor must be highlighted—that the funeral meal or feast often centered in ancient times upon the deceased. For example:

... in Roman religion the funeral feast was clearly connected with the belief that the dead required nourishment in some way, and that the tedium of their existence in the tomb could be relieved by participation in a feast held by their relatives and friends at their place of burial. These graveside funeral feasts were often riotous and drunken occasions, and the church disliked them for both this reason and because of their implications concerning the state of the departed.

Effie Bendann discovered five motives that figured in these death feasts, four of which involved meeting the needs of or placating the deceased. Moving to a discussion of the role of the funeral meal in contemporary funerary rites, one discovers a troubling general trend. There has been a gradual demise of formal funerary rites in our culture, with an accompanying psychological and social impoverishment for those who experience death in this new context. Thomas Scheff states the problem as follows:

Even in the loss of an intimate through death, modern mourning ritual somehow usually misses what it is supposed to do. It does not give the necessary support. It is truncated. Most human societies have had extremely elaborate mourning