

Article

Buying an Afterlife: Mapping the Social Impact of Religious Beliefs through Consumer Death Goods

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Abstract: Choosing to have a body embalmed, the choice of interment locations and type, including the selection of a particular casket, are all deeply intertwined with various understandings of the afterlife, and views of the body after death. Consumer choices in these cases are often determined by imagined embodiment, and are determined in part by non-rational consumer choices based on religious upbringing and belief. In turn, diasporic and religious identity can be reinforced and solidified through consumer choices that then fulfill religious imaginations of post-death embodiment. This article traces the relationship of two consumer death goods—embalming and caskets—in the contemporary United States, examining both the implicit and explicit relationships these products have with religious worldviews, mapping the social impact of religious beliefs on consumer death choices.

Keywords: embalment; vaults; funeral industry; consumer goods; afterlife; imagined embodiment; Christianity; United States; religious belief; mapping

1. Introduction

In the contemporary United States, the death business is booming, and more and more retailers are moving into the death industry market. Costco and Walmart, two giant retailers, started offering caskets and urns at a discount price in their stores and online in the mid 2000s (Fredrix 2009), with the Internet giant, Amazon, not far behind. Many funeral homes display showrooms filled with sample caskets and urns in order to help consumers make their decisions regarding the final resting place of themselves or their loved ones. However, consumer choices in the marketplace for death goods and services are not solely based on issues of price, status, and availability, but are also heavily influenced by conceptions and understandings of the afterlife, with notions of the afterlife translating into different consumer choices in disposal and interment. Choosing to have a body embalmed, the choice of interment locations and type, including the selection of a particular casket, are not merely consumer choices based on price and availability, but are also deeply intertwined with various understandings of the afterlife, and the views of the body after death. Consumer choices in these cases are often determined by imagined embodiment, and are determined in part by non-rational consumer choices based on religious upbringing and belief. In turn, diasporic and religious identity can be reinforced and solidified through consumer choices that then fulfill religious imaginations of post-death embodiment. Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry, in their seminal article, “The Sacred and the Profane in Consumer Behavior: Theodicy on the Oddysey”, argue for the study of material objects from the point of view of “the sacralisation of the secular from the realm of consumption” (Belk et al. 1989, p. 9), stating that as the world becomes more secular and consumption-driven, consumer goods and choices increasingly reflect values of the sacred and profane. Additionally, the body, itself, can be viewed as a manifestation of the sacred, as it manifests both self and identity, through status, belonging to a community, etc. (Belk et al. 1989, p. 12). Deathcare goods and services both partly reflect and embody

individual and communal understandings and assumptions of the divine, while simultaneously providing practical disposal of the body. However, consumer choices in deathcare goods and services are not solely determined by religious beliefs and proclivities: various factors such as finances, wills, and geographical and cultural influences also influence disposal choices, and the various complexities of consumer choices make it difficult to point to a core factor such as religiosity. Acknowledging these limitations, this article examines the relationship of two specific consumer death goods—embalming and casket choice—with both the implicit and explicit relationships these goods and services have with religious worldviews, and researching the differences of deathcare consumer choices between religious actors of various faiths.

2. The Dead Body: Corpse Preservation Consumer Choices

When people think of death consumer goods, they often think of the most obvious ones—caskets and burial plots—but they often forget that embalment is actually another consumer good offered by the deathcare industry, though it may not be a durable or lasting good. Embalment is often utilized by funeral homes when there is going to be a visitation before the cremation or the funeral service, itself, as it is one way that the funeral home can maximize their control over the corpse, and minimize unwanted noises or movements of the corpse during a viewing or a service. Embalment in the United States is *not* required by state or federal law, though many consumers are unaware of this, and many funeral homes will refuse to offer visitation unless the consumer first chooses to embalm the body, resulting in embalment offered as a default service and product as a part of funeral packages, and many consumers believing that this rule is a legal one, rather than a convenient one. In fact, the Federal Trade Commission requires funeral homes to inform families that embalming is only required when a body crosses state lines. In addition, “five other states—California, Idaho, Kansas, Minnesota and New Jersey—require embalming when the body leaves those states by common carrier (airplane or train)” (Teodoro 2016). Finally, embalment is strictly cultural, and though widely practiced in the United States and Canada, is not a common practice worldwide. Many people mistakenly believe that *not* embalming presents a social hazard, while the opposite is true; the chemicals involved in embalment are extremely toxic, and embalmers are required by law to wear full body protection and a respirator while embalming (Funeral Consumers Alliance Website). However, part of the success in selling embalment to consumers is predicated on the notion that corpses, themselves, are inherently unhygienic and present a danger to society.

The main reason for embalming’s continued popularity in the deathcare industry in the United States is three-fold—(1) it is a service with a wide profit margin, and therefore has traditionally been widely sold as an integral part of the funeral service package; (2) it allows the funeral home to offer visitations and viewings with much more flexibility in regards to scheduling times; and (3) it allows for the pliant cooperation of the deceased so that there are no awkward moments (noises, movement, etc.) of the corpse during the viewing or funeral service itself. These reasons behind embalment (with the exception of number two), however, have been largely under-emphasized, and as a result, many consumers do not actually know the real reasons behind embalming of the deceased, instead opting for embalment as an integral part of the funeral service. In fact, the Funeral Consumers Alliance argues that embalment is treated as the cornerstone of the funeral service package in the funeral service industry, and consumers who choose embalment are ripe for the upsell of other death care goods (Teodoro 2016). Caleb Wilde, popular author and blogger of *Confessions of a Funeral Director* echoes this sentiment, writes, “Morticians have been taught that *embalming* is the *foundation* of the funeral business (Wilde 2017; italics mine)”. Since many funeral homes refuse to hold visitation without embalming the body first, it is the pivotal service that the majority of the other deathcare goods hinge upon. A person who purchases embalment services because of a fear of bodily decay and contamination will be considered an optimal consumer to purchase other deathcare goods that offer ‘protection’ from external decay, such as hermetically sealed caskets and vault liners (the irony, of course, being that bodily decay starts within, not without).

The embalmed body also offers a tie to the imagined afterlife for the deceased, reinforced by language employed by the funeral director regarding the deceased. The deceased is not just a dead person, but a person preparing to “meet their maker” or “passing on” to another dimension. Funeral home workers are encouraged to utilize euphemisms in selling their products to deathcare consumers, while emphasizing the professionalism and medicalization of the funeral industry in such a way that the body becomes ‘acceptable’ for public viewing and mourning consumption. Glennys Howarth writes in her book, *Last Rites: The Work of the Modern Funeral Director* that “If the body is not to be displayed, the funeral director is divested of two key professional tasks incorporated in *decontaminating* and *humanizing* the body . . . (Embalming allows) funeral directors and embalmers . . . to demonstrate their skills in “resurrection” work (Howarth 1996, p. 137)”. Howarth asserts that it is the embalmer’s job to make the corpse appear as though it is sleeping, an altered corpse after death contributing to the imagined afterlife.

2.1. What Is Embalmmment?

Embalmmment drains the corpse of all of its bodily fluids, replacing these fluids with a preservative fluid treated so that it will help make the body more pliant to the touch, slow down decomposition, and bring underlying color to the skin (often the fluids are dyed so as to provide the skin with underlying color). Additionally, embalmmment also means that the funeral home will stuff the cheeks with cotton (they sink after a person has died), wire the mouth shut (so it won’t accidentally open during visitation), place plastic eye caps or more cotton under the eyelids (to round out the eyes and keep the eyes from accidentally opening), arrange the corpse (which sometimes means massaging or wiring the limbs into place), and doing the makeup for a corpse so that its pallor can be made lifelike once again. Additionally, there are small plugs placed in the cavities of the body to prevent leakage or sounds from escaping the body during visitation. Embalmmment is anything if not extremely unnatural and incredibly invasive, and what started as a practical necessity to allow for the preservation of the body for burial has turned into a standard practice in many funerals (Cann 2014).

2.2. A Brief History of Embalmmment

Embalmmment has a long history, from upper class Egyptians several thousand years ago to various royalty and rulers throughout history, but, in the United States, the practice of embalmmment became standard during and following the American Civil War in 1861–1865, when Civil War leaders needed to preserve the bodies of the dead soldiers so that they could be returned home for burial. Embalmmment allowed for bodies to be preserved for their transport back home so that the families could bury their dead. The expansion of the railroad across the United States, the introduction of refrigerated railway cars, and the extensive network of federally funded highways across the U.S. in the next century (Cann 2014) also led to the popularity of the practice of embalming, as families began to spread out across the country, leading to an increased need to delay funeral services and preserve the corpse until the extended family could gather together to mourn the deceased and hold the service.

2.3. Embalmmment Costs

The cost of embalmmment varies widely from funeral home to funeral home, and is generally the most expensive *service* sold. Embalming is considered a separate service from the preparation of the body for viewing, which is usually listed under the category of “other preparations”, and includes services such as makeup, dressing the deceased, and placing the corpse into the casket so that they are ready for viewing. No “other preparations” are needed if the family of the deceased does not choose to purchase embalming, as it is generally assumed that the family will then opt for either direct burial or direct cremation. However, even if the family chooses not to opt for embalming, funeral homes usually charge for refrigeration and preparation of the corpse (Mitford 1998, pp. 54–69). The “special care” listed for autopsies and organ donations are to cover the costs required to stuff and sew up the body when there have been invasive procedures performed on the corpse following death, sometimes also

requiring additional makeup to make the deceased look presentable for a viewing. I have listed two examples of the price lists below from two American family-owned funeral home websites, and these prices are representative of average prices of these services in the northeast corridor.

Peabody Funeral Homes

Embalming: \$875

Other preparations (including cosmetology, dressing, casketing) \$295

Special care after organ donation \$295

Special care after autopsy \$295

Washing and disinfection when no embalming \$295

([Peabody Funeral Homes 2015](#))

Ruck Funeral Home

Embalming \$910

Other preparations \$310

Washing and disinfecting when no embalming \$295

([Ruck Funeral Homes n.d.](#))

Most noticeably, though, is the inclusion of the last service in nearly every funeral home's website, regarding care for the body if one elects to bury or cremate the body without embalming. This service is "washing and disinfecting when no embalming", and a survey of funeral home price lists reveals a fairly consistent charge for the preparation of the body for disposal that seems to nearly always include "disinfection". This service includes the cleaning of the fingernails, washing of the hair, and washing the body with a germicidal solution meant to kill bacteria and viruses. The inclusion of this service on the price list emphasizes sterilization, and implies that the corpse itself is not clean. The funeral home does not merely perform the service of *washing* the corpse, but *sterilizes* and *disinfects* it as well. This implies that death is something contagious and dangerous, rather than natural and commonplace. This is an important point, as the implication is that the corpse cannot be handled by the family and that only the funeral home has both the skills and the materials to actually care for the corpse and prepare them for disposal. This is further emphasized in the embalment statement given on the price list by the funeral home.

Funeral homes in the United States are required by law to let consumers know that embalming is not actually required by law ([Mitford 1998](#), pp. 26–28, 259–60). However, many funeral homes add on to the original statement. One such example is given here:

Embalming is not required by law. Embalming may be necessary, however, if you elect certain arrangements, such as a funeral with viewing. If you do not want embalming, you usually have the right to choose an arrangement that does not require you to pay for it, such as direct cremation or immediate burial. *This charge includes disposal of regulated medical waste and compliance with OSHA Bloodborne Pathogen, Formaldehyde, Hazardous Material Communication and Health and Safety Standards/Regulations.* ([Peabody Funeral Homes 2015](#); Italics in the original).

The first portion of the statement (non-italicized) is the portion all funeral homes are legally required by federal law to include on their price lists. However, the italicized portion of the statement emphasizes the corpse as both unhygienic and even possibly dangerous to both health and safety. As I wrote earlier, though, the only truly dangerous materials are those used in embalment itself. The statement that the funeral home operates in compliance with discarding the OSHA (Occupational Safety and Health Administration) Bloodborne pathogens echoes the earlier implications that the corpse is either dangerous or dirty. In reality, the number of diseases that can be spread through contact with the corpse itself is extremely low (for example, the Bubonic plague, or, most recently, the Ebola virus), and people are more likely to contract diseases from other attendees at a funeral than they are from the dead body itself.

What is important, however, is the emphasis placed on the unhygienic nature of the corpse in an age of sterilization and medicalization. In other words, by (mis)leading the consumer to believe that a corpse must be disinfected through the process of embalment, the funeral industry is able to upsell other products as well. Jessica Mitford touched upon this in her book *The American Way of Death Revisited*, in which she described a funeral director who asserted that “an unembalmed body can only be viewed by the legal next of kin, and then only for a few moments. This has to do with liability of the funeral home for “blood-borne pathogens!!” Mitford goes on to write “(One of the more dazzling flights of fancy; as any pathologist will tell you, a dead body presents no risk whatsoever of infecting the living when there’s no contagious disease.)” (Mitford 1998, p. 202). Given the strong cultural identification of the funeral industry’s emphasis on sterility and medicalization of the corpse, how, and in what ways, do religions contribute or challenge the deathcare industry’s emphasis on the need for embalment and preservation of the corpse?

2.4. Religious Worldviews and Disposal Practices

Despite the supposed practicality behind the increase in the practice of embalment, it is not practiced in some religions—namely, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism, and, yet, it is commonly practiced among Christians (both Catholics and Protestants) residing in North America. This tendency is in part because of religious worldviews, afterlife beliefs, and imagined embodiment, which have been both perpetuated by, and capitalized upon, by the death care industry. This is not to say that all those who embalm are Christians; rather, that the practice of embalment seems to utilize Christian symbolism and language that underscores and privileges Christian rhetoric, to the extent that embalming is largely accepted and practiced in Christian circles (with exceptions, of course—Dutch Reform, Amish Americans, Jehovah’s Witness, and Eastern and Greek Orthodox branches of Christianity, for example, do not practice embalming in their communities; too broad for this article, this paper addresses only the larger sects of Christianity in the contemporary United States). Before moving into an exploration of American Christians and embalming, however, I will briefly explore the religious viewpoints of those who generally reject the practice of embalment (one must note here that, even in embalment, there are exceptions).

3. Jews and Embalment

Jews prefer to bury the deceased immediately and do not embalm the body or condone its viewing, considering it to be disrespectful to the deceased. For this reason, Jewish services for the dead are usually held as soon as possible after the death of a person. Preparation of the dead body proceed according to Ecclesiastes 5:14, in which it is written, “As he came, so should he go” (Funeral Practices Committee of the Board of Rabbis of Southern California n.d., p. 3). Thus, when a person dies, their body is washed and purified just as they were when they were born. *Taharah* is the traditional Jewish act of washing and purifying the body, and is generally performed by a person trained in the traditional Jewish purification rituals. Men wash and purify men and women wash and purify women. Usually, this act includes washing the body with warm water from head to toe, though they will never turn the body face down. The most meaningful aspect of both sitting with the body and the purification rituals performed on the deceased is the communal nature—at no point is the deceased left on their own following their death. From dying to death to burial, the Jewish community accompanies the deceased in their journey. After the body has been washed and purified, the body is dressed in a traditional white shroud, known as a *tachrichim*. Jewish people are never buried in their traditional clothes, but in a white shroud made of linen or muslin. The idea behind this is that all are found equal in death, and therefore no person is deemed better or wealthier. The white shroud is symbolic of equality in life through death (in other words, though one may be materially successful in life, in death, all are dead). In addition, usually the shroud is hand-sewn so that the stiches will easily disintegrate; if the shroud is machine-sewn, usually someone will rip some of the seams of the burial shroud so that it disintegrates easier. The *tachrichim* is so important to Jewish burial custom that if one is not found to dress the body,

then the funeral will be postponed until one can be obtained. Jewish men are also buried with their prayer shawl, the *tallit*, a traditional fringed shawl that is usually used by Jewish men during prayer. Before burial, one of the fringes of the prayer shawl will be cut so that it is rendered ineffective. If the deceased did not own a *tallit*, then usually one is found and provided for the burial. Genesis 3:19 (“By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken for dust you are and to dust you will return”, Holy Bible, NIV Version) states that the proper cycle for the deceased is to return to dust, and, for this reason, it is preferable for a Jew to be buried directly into the ground in a burial shroud.

The Jewish cosmological view of the afterlife varies from branch to branch and person to person, with some Jews believing in a place called Sheol, where all the dead, both righteous and unrighteous, go after their death. Like most faiths, however, individual Jews vary in their understandings of the afterlife. Some have believed in a resurrection, others in reincarnation, while finally, other Jews reject the notion of the afterlife altogether, or simply see it as irrelevant, stating that their purpose is life itself and a relationship with God in *this* life. For most Jews, though, observing God’s command to return the body to dust is also an acknowledgement of God’s role in the Jewish cycle of life from creation to death. Thus, embalming is not customarily practiced in the Jewish community, and is generally frowned upon.

4. Muslims and Embalmmment

Islam also rejects embalmmment, and the deceased is usually buried within twenty-four hours of death, except in the case of practical constraints (such as when the coroner or medical examiner cannot be reached to sign the death certificate, or an autopsy needs to be performed). Like Judaism, in Islam, women wash and purify the female bodies for burial, and men prepare the men, and many Muslim cemeteries also have rooms for the preparation and washing of the body before burial. As in Judaism, there is no visitation or viewing, and embalming is not merely rejected but considered unnecessary, only allowed when required by law. If there is a need to delay a funeral, generally the deceased is refrigerated for preservation purposes, but this is an extremely rare practice. In the Qur’an, it is written “Inna lillahi wa inna ilayhi raji’un” “Indeed we belong to Allah, and indeed to Him we will return” (Qur’an, Surah 2, verse 156), and this verse is recited immediately upon learning of a death. Muslims believe that they all go to a final judgment before God, and one’s afterlife is dependent on the outcome of that judgment. Most Muslims believe that the deceased undergoes an initial preliminary judgment in the grave immediately following burial, with this initial judgement resulting in an interim punishment or reward. This belief partially accounts for the need to bury the dead within twenty-four hours of their death, so that they can have their initial judgement meted out to them (Marshall and Mosher 2014, pp. 25–60). Though less stressed in contemporary Islamic thought, traditional belief dictated that the dead inhabited an in-between world called Barzakh, where one has a temporary body and awaits judgment. There are many different descriptions of Barzakh, and some describe it as a type of Muslim purgatory, where souls can be prayed for and have earthly deeds ascribed to them while waiting for God’s judgment (Afikul Islam 2008). For this reason, it is essential to follow the Muslim rituals regarding the disposal of the dead, for every act on behalf of the dead can affect their judgment in the afterlife.

In both Judaism and Islam, there is no viewing or visitation because it is considered to be disrespectful to God. Even excessive mourning is discouraged as it can be a sign that one has not submitted oneself to and respected the will of God who has decreed the time and place of death for the deceased (Witztum and Buchbinder 2001; Yasien-Esmael and Rubin 2005). Both Judaism and Islam have strict proscriptions prohibiting the cutting of flesh (tattooing for example) and thus invasive practices involving the body are considered violations of God’s creation. This belief thus extends to embalmmment, which is invasive and unnecessary. It is significant that the Jewish and Muslim proscriptions against embalming have not influenced the contemporary Christian tradition.

5. Buddhism, Hinduism and Embalment

In Buddhism, most people prefer to be cremated, and generally, like both Judaism and Islam, the body is prepared and washed, usually in the home of the deceased, and in the presence of family and close friends. The body is then dressed for burial, offerings are made, and the body is prepared for cremation. Given that Buddhist burial rites vary by country and sectarian branch, in Japan, a Buddhist undertaker comes to the family's home to prepare the body for cremation, as Buddhists believe the person's lingering consciousness remains near the body for days following the death. For this reason, absolute respect must be given to the body until it is cremated, as it is treated as though the body is still alive; this is why bodies are not generally embalmed, only washed. Buddhism has many folk tales and ghost stories regarding spirits that come back to haunt the living because proper care was not taken with their dead bodies. When the body is then cremated, the eldest son (or occasionally in contemporary times, daughter) is called upon to light the funerary pyre, or push the crematory button to begin the cremation process. In Japanese Buddhism, the lighting of the cremation flame is considered to be the second and final death (Suzuki 2000).

In Hinduism, as in Judaism, Islam and Buddhism, the body is washed, and dressed in burial clothes for the funerary pyre. In India, it is customary to burn a body near a river, so that the soul has access to the purification and cleansing nature of the water. Hindus living in the United States, however, generally opt to cremate at the crematorium with the close family members present, followed by a memorial service at the temple, and then finally a scattering of ashes in the ocean of the United States, or the ashes are sometimes also reserved and transported back to India for scattering at a later time (Association of United Hindu and Jain Temples 2014). In Hinduism, embalment is generally rejected, and the body is cremated within 24–48 h. In both Hinduism and Buddhism, embalment is deemed unnecessary, as the body is cremated, and the cremation occurs very quickly following the death. Both Buddhism and Hinduism believe in the cycle of life, death, and rebirth, and cremating the bodies allows for practitioners to burn their bodies and free the souls for preparation into the next life.

Buddhism and Hinduism *reject* the practice of embalment, though their reasons for rejecting embalming as a practice vary. It is important, though, to note that the practice of embalming in North America is not strictly based on geographic or cultural tendencies, as Jews, Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists residing in the United States all generally reject embalment in their disposal practices, electing to keep the traditional disposal practices associated with their religious worldviews in spite of living in North America. The practice of embalming then cannot be strictly confined to cultural geography and the socio-cultural influences of American culture. Nor, however, can the practice of embalming be directly linked to Christian belief systems, as Catholics and Protestants in Europe and Latin America do not widely embalm the deceased. The question then remains—why do North American Catholics and Protestants embalm more than their Christian counterparts in other countries, and why does this group, more than any other religious group in the United States, prefer to embalm their dead, even though practitioners of other religions have generally resisted the larger cultural trend towards embalment?

6. The Afterlife and Imagined Embodiment in Christianity

The importance of the embalmed body is that it is simultaneously the actor, and the acted upon, it is the subject and the object, the deceased, yet no longer fully human, dead, yet not-dead. The embalmed corpse, devoid of its organs, and its fluids, stuffed and sewn, is now an actor with a part in a ritual of mourning meant to comfort those who encounter the body in its newly sterilized and purified form. The embalmed body functions as both a realization of the past and a projection of anticipated future. The embalmed body—present—but transformed, operates as a bridge between reality and the imagined, its artificial corporeality reinforcing the place of tension between death and afterlife. If the body can continue to play a vital role in the community without its organs, without its owner operating its body, then perhaps an afterlife becomes possible as well. In early and medieval Christianity, one of the signs of favor with God was the preservation of the corpse. Considered a

miracle, many saints were identified through the lack of deterioration of their corpse, and were labeled as “incorrupt corpses”, the integrity of the skin linked to the integrity of the soul. Incorrupt corpses are known by their sweet odor (the “odor of sanctity”) and their lack of decomposition. Many incorrupt corpses were discovered because of dreams or miracles, and discovered to be intact upon being dug up from the ground. The top feature of an incorrupt corpse is the corpse’s pliability, and they are often placed on display in churches, hands folded in prayer, or even sitting in prayer. Incorrupt Corpses often became some of the more popular figures in the Catholic church, as they gave people a sense of hope regarding their own afterlives. The rotting of bodily flesh was often linked to the soul’s time in purgatory—a visible window into the events going on in the afterlife, and those corpses that stayed intact were believed to be evidence of God’s favor and afterlife (Cruz 1977). The preservation of the body thus has a history in Christianity of being associated with the afterlife.

However, in stark contrast to this view of embodied sanctity, early American Puritans focused on the separation of this life and the next, arguing that death was a natural fact of life, and burials should be handled stoically and as a matter of course. The body was viewed not as an earthly window into the afterlife, but as an impediment to it. Puritan funerals buried the body quickly, as the focus of the funeral service was to bring one closer to God, through the acceptance of his will. In his recent book, *The Sacred Remains: American Attitudes Towards Death, 1799–1883*, Gary Laderman argues that the shift in American Protestant views to the corpse (and the embalmed corpse, in particular) occurred around the Civil War with Evangelical Protestants. He writes,

Evangelicals did not ignore the corpse—it simply began to serve a new purpose, functioning as an instrument for healing the pain of survivors who had to confront the death of a friend or relative. In a culture that was moving away from the stern, dogmatic, and oppressive sensibilities of the Puritan past and toward the Romantic, sentimental, and domestic characteristics of the nineteenth century, evangelicals reappraised how to make sense of death and the dead body. The new religious culture that was emerging contributed to the establishment of four trends in northern Protestant attitudes towards death valorization of the affections of the survivors, memorialization of the dead, augmentation of the spiritual possibilities of the next world, and domestication of the corpse. (Laderman 1996, p. 55).

American Protestant evangelicals thus utilized the corpse as a way to move away from the more austere practices of the Puritans, but the corpse that became center stage in this religious culture was not the decomposing body, but the sterile, cosmetic, and embalmed one. The success of the mortician in hinging the contemporary American Protestant funeral on the embalmed body, however, also created a shift from holding services for the dead in churches to holding them in funeral homes, where the funeral director could more easily perform embalming services, keep the body compliant, control the hours of the services, and charge for additional add-ons. Elizabeth H. Pleck describes the tensions between American Protestant clergy and the modern funeral director in the 1920s and 1930s:

The undertaker wanted the casket to show his work; the minister wanted it closed so as not to distract from the solemnity of the service. Protestant clergy found themselves quarrelling with the funeral director about who would choose the hymns. They perceived a battle between spirituality, simplicity, and family privacy, which they favoured, and display of the corpse, materialism, and public spectacle, which they opposed. (Pleck 2000, p. 195).

The spectacle of the embalmed body also brought to mind the Roman Catholic view of incorruptibility and its relation to sainthood (see Cruz (2010) and Wilson (1983) for more on the process and folklore), challenging more traditional Puritan influences in American Protestant death rituals. Embalming delayed decay, and stressed purity, but the convenience of the embalmed body present as participant in the contemporary funeral has presented its own theological challenges. Proclaiming embalmed bodies as precursors to the resurrected body and signposts to the afterlife that would follow became one way to renegotiate American Protestantism’s role in the contemporary

funeral. A sign at the National Arlington Cemetery on the McClellan gate, constructed in 1871 (and the only gate from the earlier part of this period in the eastern portion of the cemetery that remains), illustrates this claim, proclaiming the relationship between embalming and sanctification, tying these two together with American nationalism and military heroism. It reads, “Rest on embalmed and sainted dead!”

The popularity of embalming as a service in American funerals is not merely the result of cultural forces, or purely interpreted by religious beliefs; both the exponential growth of the funeral home industry as a private industry and the medicalization and professionalization of dying and death are also to be taken into account. In this way, embalming is also an extension of the contemporary trend of death denial, in general. Ernest Becker (Becker 2007) and Elisabeth Kubler-Ross wrote extensively on death denial in contemporary American culture, and its effects on attitudes regarding death. As Joseph and Laurie Braga write in the forward to Kubler-Ross’ book *Death*, “Death is a subject that is evaded, ignored, and denied by our youth-worshipping, progress-oriented society. It is almost as if we have taken on death as just another disease to be conquered” (Kubler-Ross 1997, p. x). Additionally, the privatization of American industry and American Protestant denominationalism has gone hand in hand to create a ripe consumer culture for death-related products and services. American funeral directors have been able to effectively create a cultural rhetoric surrounding death and grief, in which embalming became a symbol of American progress, modernity, success, and the manipulation of time (corpses that can wait on the living vs. the other way around), bodies, and space. Religious notions of the afterlife, the emphasis on the resurrection of the body, and religious notions of purity and defilement, aided the death industry through equating death and decay as not only unnatural and backward, but also dirty, dangerous, and spiritually suspect.

7. Plotting an Afterlife: Caskets and Cemeteries

Casket choices are another consumer death good affected by religious worldviews, and today, there is a rich assortment of casket choices available on the market. Once more commonly known as coffins, the term coffin was changed to casket by the funeral home industry to indicate a box, such as a jewelry box, that holds something precious and of value. In this way, the funeral home industry succeeded in domesticating the term coffin to a term that implied delicacy, emphasizing the preciousness of the contents rather than the ugly reality of the death. Funeral homes have also become more inventive in the last forty years as well, offering innovations on caskets that include everything from interchangeable corners, to casket lid inserts and cap panels, to liner rentals. Innovations in caskets have been popular in the last twenty years with companies like Crazy Coffins (Crazy 2017) offering custom-built caskets that look more like art installations than coffins. Caskets come in a wide variety of materials, ranging from cardboard to metal, and the price variation is equally wide, ranging from hundreds of dollars to tens of thousands. As discussed at the beginning of this article, Internet and retail distributors have also moved into the casket market, with everyone from Amazon to Walmart offering coffins on the cheap. A keyword search on Amazon for caskets returns over 16,000 available choices, with memorial caskets from family to cats and dogs. In this section, I turn to a brief analysis of afterlife beliefs and how they might affect and intersect with consumer choices in caskets (please keep in mind, however, that due to the truncated length of this article, my characterizations of afterlife beliefs are generalizations, and as in all communities, do not account for the complexities and variations found in religious communities).

Finally, I will examine how these casket choices and afterlife beliefs also intersect with burial in cemeteries—since both afterlife conceptions and casket choices often intertwine with final disposal, such as the election of vault liners, or the decision to be buried directly in the earth. Since Buddhists and Hindus generally purchase urns, I will not be discussing them, though one should note that Buddhists often inter the urns in a Buddhist burial ground, while Hindus actually prefer to scatter the remains in water. Cemeteries have undergone many changes in the American landscape in the last two hundred and fifty years. Once occupying a privileged place in city centers, near important

churches and houses of government, many cemeteries have been banished to the outskirts of city suburbs, or dug up, moved, and replaced with a contemporary landscape. Cemeteries are not merely repositories of the dead, but architectural and symbolic intersections of two worldviews—the one of the living, and the hopes and thoughts surrounding death and what it is and should be. The tomb of the unknown soldier at the Arlington National Cemetery serves to reinforce a deeper cultural message that all of the dead who lose their lives in the service of nationalistic interests will be remembered as heroic. Cemeteries also map the world of the living, with religious cemeteries interring their members in sacred ground, while outsiders are buried elsewhere. Finally, cemeteries also reflect class and status, with tombstones and vaults reflecting the status and material success (or lack thereof) of the person who has died. In the United States, most cemeteries are privately owned and run, which means that they have their own rules and regulations regarding burial. In burial, as in life, people often want to be buried with those they identify with—either in class, religious persuasion, or in demographics—and one of the first actions of the many diasporic groups we find in the United States is the purchase of burial ground. Thus, there are Buddhist, Jewish, Muslim, Catholic, and Protestant burial grounds, along with cemeteries that specialize in ethnic subsections of these groups, like African American Protestants and Hispanic Catholics.

8. Jewish Burial and Disposal

Though some cemeteries do not permit direct burial of the body, if a casket must be used, it is preferred that the casket be made of wood with no designs or metal ornamentation. Some Jewish communities contend that even metal nails or brackets may not be utilized in the construction of a casket because metal is the material for weapons of war. Similarly, the inside of the coffin must be plain and unlined with no ornamentation or decoration (Zalman n.d.). The most popular choice in caskets for Jews remains the simple pine box, which generally varies in price from around \$400–\$600. Pine is considered not to be ostentatious, and, because it is natural wood, will allow rapid decomposition in the ground; sometimes, breaking the box right before it is buried is done to encourage even faster decomposition of the bodily remains.

Most Jews have their own cemeteries (when Jews first immigrated to the United States, it was often the first thing they bought) and will opt to be buried there. Jewish tradition claims that all should attend the interment of the body for both psychological and religious reasons (Diner 2004, pp. 245, 346–47). Viewing the final interment of the body is considered the final act of kindness one can perform for the deceased, since it is a kindness that cannot be reciprocated (Funeral Practices Committee of the Board of Rabbis of Southern California n.d., p. 5). Often, attendees to the burial are expected to place dirt on top of the casket if they cannot actually bury the body themselves, and this act is seen as beneficial for both the deceased and the bereaved. Lastly, it is not uncommon for a Jew to request that his casket be broken to speed the decomposition process, if he cannot be buried in a shroud alone.

Unlike some traditions, Judaism prefers to stress the world of the living and not the dead, which generally means that a belief in dead spirits, prayers to the dead, or private conversations with the dead are strongly discouraged because they are believed to be too similar to a worship of the dead. That being said, Judaism stresses the need for a balance “that people should avoid the extremes of constant visitation on the one hand, and of complete disregard on the other” (Lamm n.d.). Thus, some visitation is permitted, particularly on days of distress, anniversaries of the death, etc., as long as these visitations do not occur on a Jewish holy day when one should instead be focused on worshipping God.

9. Muslim Burial and Disposal

Muslims bury their dead in white muslin shrouds following the washing of the body, burying them directly in the ground in the cemetery. The exception to this is the Muslim martyr, who is buried directly in the ground in the clothes in which s/he was killed without being washed first. Muslim martyrs are not prepared for burial because their presence in the afterlife is assured through their sacrificial death, and therefore they do not need the same preparation for burial (remember, the preparation for

burial in the Muslim worldview is for the benefit of the dead not the living) (Tritton 1938). The average Muslim is washed three times by members of the same sex, in the following order: upper right side, upper left side, lower right side, lower left side. A woman's hair is then separated and braided into three parts, and she is dressed in a sleeveless dress and veil (Siala 1996). All bodies are shrouded in three white sheets bound by one rope at the head, two on the body, and one on the feet, and then transported to the mosque for prayers before being buried. After the community recites prayers, the body is then transported to the cemetery for burial. Generally, communities in the United States do not allow for direct burial without a casket (Kopp and Kemp 2007), and thus, in the United States, Muslims will purchase a simple, non-ornamental box, sometimes, ironically, from Orthodox Jewish suppliers of death goods. Because both Jews and Muslims choose to forgo embalment, caskets are closed and simple, and made of biodegradable materials. In some communities, as in the case with New York Muslims, Jews and Muslims have to order their caskets from special communities who provide non-ornate and biodegradable coffins for burial (Malek 2006).

Muslims are generally buried in their shroud (if allowed) on their right side, so that the deceased is facing Mecca. The burial itself cannot take place during sunrise, high noon, or sunset, so generally burials are held in the mid-morning or afternoon. Only men are allowed to be present at the burial itself, and after digging a hole of approximately 1.7 m, the body is inserted by the male members of the deceased's family. The ropes at the head and the feet are un-tied by the men and stones or wood (if there is not casket) are placed on top of the deceased in order to prevent direct contact with the soil that will fill the grave, being careful to keep the deceased on their right side. Practically, this also allows for the dirt to uniformly fill the grave so that it will not collapse in on the body. A small marker is placed as an identity marker and the grave is usually slightly raised above the rest of the ground so that people will not accidentally walk on the grave, but no ostentatious markers may be placed on the grave (Muslim Funeral Services, Ltd. n.d.).

10. Cemetery Costs for Jews and Muslims

The main costs for final disposal among Jews and Muslims in America, then, is the purchase and maintenance of land for body disposal. Buying cemetery land is usually one of the first major purchases of the synagogue or mosque community, though at times, some communities have chosen to purchase small plots of burial land within a larger cemetery already in use, especially if the community is small and doesn't have access to the necessary labor required to assist in burial. Larger communities, like the Muslim and Jewish communities in New York and Washington, D.C., for example, have been able to pool their resources and purchase larger tracts of land dedicated to the exclusive use of that particular religious group (the largest Muslim cemetery in the United States is located in Virginia: see <http://www.amaacemetery.org/>; See this website for a list of Jewish American cemeteries (International Association of Jewish Genealogical Societies n.d.)). Average costs in Muslim cemeteries for burial and maintenance vary according to land costs but remain relatively low. Burial and maintenance for an adult Muslim in the AMAA (All Muslim Association of America (AMAA) (n.d.)) cemetery, for example, are \$1700 for an adult, and \$500 for a child. Jewish burial services vary much more in price and can be much more expensive, as Jewish families are much more dispersed than the Muslim population, but also are allowed to have more elaborate headstones and grave markers, which can elevate the price of the burial quite markedly (see Chevalier et al. 2008, p. 9).

11. Catholic and Protestant Burial

Catholic casket choices highlight the importance of Catholic material culture and underscore the ways in which afterlife beliefs affect consumer death choices. The belief in purgatory, a liminal state for the soul in which one's sins can be forgiven through intercessory prayer and the recitation of the rosary, is reflected in the inclusion of memory drawers and cap panels on caskets. Memory drawers allow for the family of the deceased to include letters, prayers, pictures, icons, prayer cards, and rosaries in a concealed drawer of the casket (although one funeral director I interviewed noted that jewelry and

other personal trinkets were also frequently included as well), allowing the deceased to be buried with items that function as material markers of the grieving community's continued role in praying for the intercession of the deceased (Cann 2017). The memory drawer objects thus reflect the continuing role of the community of the deceased in aiding the deceased person's journey in the afterlife (through prayers and masses given in their name, which aide in releasing souls from purgatory into heaven), and ensuring the enduring popularity of purchasing memory drawers in caskets so that American Catholics may be buried with their material and symbolic conduits of salvation.

These memory drawers have been marketed in a slightly different way among Protestants, with the emphasis placed on the Do-It-Yourself aspects of the funeral, and grieving families encouraged to place personal mementos that the deceased cherished in the drawers. Along with memory drawers, casket lid inserts and cap panels are also popular among Catholic griever, with customizable "scrapbook" style cap panels, that allow for griever to place letters, pictures, prayer cards, icon pictures and other mementos in the cap panel of the casket. These differ slightly from the memory drawers in that they are public and on display (if the casket is open), and therefore the messages might not be as private in nature. Catholic material culture is important to these consumer death choices, as the Catholic view of the embodied sacred found in material objects means that they are much more likely to see a need to give the deceased religious objects that might help them in their afterlife (Cann 2017; Dickinson 2012). The difference here in the ways these casket add-ons are marketed between Catholics and Protestants reveals an understanding in the funeral market with the religious beliefs that drive consumer choices. The inclusion of memory drawers and cap panels also allow for the upsell of caskets, as these drive the price of the basic casket up, and are available for both wooden and metal caskets. Also popular are the customizable corner pieces and magnets added to metal caskets, allowing families to add them to the casket for the service and then remove them as mementos for the family. Many of these pieces are religious icons, but others are messages from the family to the deceased or even indications of hobbies. The most popular corner pieces are angels, praying hands, crosses, messages such as "Beloved Mother/Father", dogs, fish, or even golf clubs. Sold as a set of four, these range in price from \$100 to \$250, and are in addition to the basic casket price.

Caskets, themselves, are also indicative of religious worldviews, as metal caskets, especially those marketed as hermetically sealed, tend to be most popular with those who choose to embalm their dead out of a fear of bodily deterioration, or a desire to preserve the body because of a belief in an embodied afterlife. I would argue here that it is not merely a belief in an embodied afterlife, however, but actually an imagined embodiment, that drives the consumer to choose embalment and hermetically sealed caskets for burial. Ironically, hermetically sealed caskets *increase* the rate of decomposition (though many believe otherwise) because they prevent the air and water, and other natural elements from entering the coffin and the body itself is actually the center of the decomposition process. They do, however, seal any disease and contamination inside the coffin, preventing spread of disease. Following the Ebola crisis of 2014, the CDC mandated that corpses that died from Ebola be buried in hermetically sealed caskets (Center for Disease Control (CDC) (2015)). Thus, these caskets, like embalment, also play on the modern fears of contamination and contagion of dead bodies, and are often marketed in the funeral home industry as the best way to preserve the body.

12. Conclusions

While the Jewish, Muslim and Christian faiths all acknowledge some form of an afterlife, only Christians sanction and accept embalment as a regular (and even important) part of deathcare services. Hindu and Buddhist cosmologies advocate the notion of rebirth, and thus also reject embalming, viewing it as invasive, unnatural, and perhaps, even an impediment to 'good' karma. In comparison to other faiths, the eschatology of Christianity seems to privilege the need for the body to *appear* alive, even if doing so requires highly artificial and invasive means. It is no different with casket and disposal choices. Further studies, surveys and interviews need to be conducted in this area to examine the importance, symbolism, and meaning, of deathcare consumer goods on the

survivors of the deceased, as well as religious communities themselves. Finally, as the green burial movement gains momentum (Hockey et al. 2012), and cremation becomes a more common practice in the United States, more studies will need to be conducted on the religious significance for both individuals and communities.

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