

Culture and Death

Carina Bergouignan

Nova Southeastern University

Professor Jennifer Fieten, CCLS

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“It’s even more true in our popular culture. I ask people if anyone ever brings up the topic of death and afterlife at a party. Of course not, they laugh; people don’t talk about it.” (Mutie. 2013) Movies, tv, books, video games and music all influence how we interpret death. However, one of the main ways we understand, and view death comes from our cultures. Culture is defined in a few ways. According to *Merriam Webster Dictionary*, it is “the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group also: the characteristic features of everyday existence (such as diversions or a way of life) shared by people in a place or time.” Another definition according to *Merriam Webster Dictionary* is “the set of shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices that characterizes an institution or organization.”

In this paper, I will discuss the culture of Scientology as it is currently considered to be a religious group in which the followers live a rigorous life of only being surrounded by those who share the same attitudes, values, goals, and practices. Many also view Scientology to be a cult because of their ways of manipulating individuals through the idea of religion to control and receive money. I chose Scientology not only because it is not mentioned in our text or lectures but because of their particular rituals when it comes to death and dying.

The practices of death in the culture of Scientology is different. Scientologists believe that one is reincarnated after death. They do not think that a physical body holds much meaning. “Scientology views the spiritual self, known as the “thetan” (From the Greek letter Theta), as being the individual, and perceives the body as simply a vehicle by which they interact with each other and the physical universe.” (Scientology Funeral Customs, 2018) This also means they believe that everyone on earth now is billions of years old. According to *A belief in reincarnation series*, “Scientologists often describe death as “moving on to the next level” or “discarding the body.” That’s the way Scientology leader David Miscavige told fellow

Scientists about the death of Scientology founder L. Ron Hubbard at a California ranch in 1986.” During their funeral services, the individual who has passed is talked to directly by the speaker and thanked for their service. They also wish the individual good luck as they celebrate the body transitioning into another.

Scientists follow a book called Dianetics that connects mental health with the body and soul. Their leader L. Ron Hubbard wrote this book. Though this man has passed, Scientists still update the book and sell it to their followers. It is a way to take their follower's money while having them believe that there is new technology giving them hope for their future selves. Scientists read quotes from the Dianetics book when someone passes.

Scientology created the term suppressed person. A suppressed person is one who does not believe in the same things they do. Even if it is family, they must cut that individual out of their life if they are not confirmed to be Scientist. Suppressive individuals are only welcomed into their church to take part in the service if someone near to them has passed. Just like many other cultures at the funeral, they may have a casket, but if one does not wish to have the body present, they continue the ceremony without it.

“The Church of Scientology has always had the firm policy of not diagnosing or treating the sick.” (Church of Scientology International, 2018) The individual who is sick is advised to seek medical advice, but they will then get help with for the trauma they are facing because of their condition. When an individual passes organ donation is an option. Giving others viable organs to allow them to have a longer life or quality of life can be wonderful. Scientists can make their own decision when it comes to organ donation. Though those who do decide to donate are threatened with auditing. Auditing is a process similar to therapy but in the form of question and answer. It is a deep process in which many who have left Scientology say can be

overwhelming or invasive. “Therefore, there may be spiritual repercussions due to organ donation requiring additional auditing in the next life.” (Beyer, 2018)

My cultural views on death and dying stems mostly from my religious beliefs, my background, and experiences. When it comes to religion, I identify and consider myself to be a Christian. I was raised in a Christian home where we believe in God who gave his one and only son so that whoever believes in him through his grace and mercy does not perish but has eternal life. Meaning Jesus loves us so much he died in our place so that we can have a relationship with him. Like it says in the article *The Real Meaning* “it didn’t end with His death on the cross. He rose again and still lives!”

As a Christian who reads the bible there is not much on what to expect on the topic of life after death. What we know is we will be in the presence of God in heaven as believers once we pass away as it states in scripture Luke 23:43. Heaven will be a place where we leave our earthly bodies to be with Christ and glorify him in our new home (heaven) as it says in Corinthians 5:8. We believe that after we die, we are cleansed from our sins. We don’t believe in purgatory or waiting to go into heaven. We believe that if you are a true believer in Christ, we will be with him immediately. In the article *What Happens at Death?* we know “Scripture speaks often of the painful reality that awaits those who do not place their faith in Christ to be rescued from sin. (Matthew 13:30, Matthew 25:41, Luke 12:15, John 3:36, Romans 2:8-9, Hebrews 10:29).” Death is the death of our bodies, and we no longer draw breath on this earth, but if we believe in him, we go with Christ through our souls. When it comes to the difficult topic of the death of a child we believe what is said in Matthew 19:14 “Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.”

My family is also Cuban, and as Hispanics, we want to care for those who are sick or dying. It is in our nature to want to take care of others. Caring for the ill can be difficult especially if an individual wants space as they are passing. Most Hispanics want to be there to comfort and help in any way possible. We are very attached to our families which tend to be large. If one person in our family is suffering, we are all suffering. Women in the Hispanic culture tend to be very sentimental and emotional when family or a close friend passes. Men may feel the same, but they tend to refrain from showing that emotion. Many Hispanics also heavily rely on their faith in this capacity.

Once an individual has passed, there is usually a funeral service with an open or closed casket. If the family is Catholic, there is usually a Mass. The family then speaks on behalf of the individual who has passed. The next day is the burial where you say goodbye one last time to the individual who has passed. They proceed with reading scripture and a few kind words. We lay roses on the casket before it is lowered into the ground. This is how we pay respect to the dead in our culture.

Most Hispanics are Roman Catholic or Christian. “Neris Diaz-Cabello (2004) found that within the Hispanic culture there are a variety of individual and family perspectives on dying and death. Xolani Kacela (2004) identified significant differences between “religiously mature” and less mature people in interpreting their end-of-life experiences” (Kastenbaum, 2018, p.137) I believe this is true. There are “religiously mature” and less mature people when dealing or coping with death and dying.

Growing up I have encountered death and near-death experiences in the family many times. In the past few years, the closest individuals to me that passed were my paternal grandfather's brother, my maternal great grandmother, paternal grandmother, and paternal

grandfather. Most if not all ended up in hospice. “Hospice services can be coordinated across a variety of inpatient and outpatient settings. As a medical alternative, hospice care is important not only because of its strong emphasis on coordination of services, but also because it provides consumer choice and patient participation in the planning of their own care.” (Ehline, 1997)

These were sad times for my family as the majority passed after many medical issues while they were physically and mentally struggling. I learned to be mature and “religiously mature” from a young age.

Many people my age (24) still have a difficult time being mature when it comes to death. I feel like a majority of that has to do with lack of exposure to death. Death forced me to grow up faster and face the idea of death head-on. For example, in the 8th and 9th grade, I was friends with a girl who was adopted and bipolar, and she claimed that as a result from being those things she had this need to commit suicide. I tried to help, but as time passed, she became overly possessive of me. Instead of just wanting to take her own life now she wanted to take mine as well. It became very serious to the point that I could not be alone at school. If I was not around another group of friends I had to be supervised while she was on campus until she was eventually dismissed from the school.

Another experience that helped me confront death was when my father had a heart attack about four years ago. Essentially, he had to be intubated during the process as he pulled out the tube creating 19 days of complications in the hospital. We were told he died several times and they kept resuscitating him. He was unconscious and sedated for days and believed to be brain dead possibly. The doctors thought as time passed that he needed to have a trach put in. My mother decided to go ahead with it, but then the doctor noticed something strange. It had been ten days, and he was not breathing correctly because they left packing inside him from the initial

intubation. Once the packing was out things quickly changed, and after a sepsis episode, he was back to being himself. He did not remember much and needed speech therapy as well as physical therapy. It wasn't long before he was back to living his life. God had other plans for him. I believe everything happens for a reason and brings us closer together.

My mother is a nurse and worked for fourteen years in a pediatric oncology and bone marrow unit. I saw growing up how the life and death of children shaped her. Those children adored her, and while she was pregnant with me, they would even give her stuffed animals to give me as gifts once I was born. Most of these children were terminally ill but knowing my mom was pregnant usually made them so happy and excited. Knowing that makes me feel that even if you're a child and life is being taken away from you there is always new life coming into the world. There is a balance and essentially a peace knowing that.

Just like in every culture there should be a healthy balance when discussing death. I personally have never been to a Scientologist church or had an encounter with a Scientologist. Though I do not agree with what Scientology represents or how they handle themselves, they do have very few technical similarities with my culture, religion, and background. Both cultures allow us to seek medical treatment, and both allow us to be organ donors, both hold funeral services and speak kindly about those who have passed.

We both encounter death and dying but handle them differently. The attitude that is conveyed to me with Scientology is that religion alone and purchasing books they suggest can save you. In Christianity, we understand that we are all individuals with different special needs. We rely on our faith, but we also rely on having a diagnosis and medical treatment for a better quality of life.

Even though we have a few similarities, our cultures are immensely different. Our attitudes toward medical treatment, medical advice, hospice, and palliative care are different. We practice helping others in the Hispanic culture as well as in the Christian religion. This can include making an individual comfortable in their last moments by providing medication and other healthcare services. In the Scientology culture, they try not to intervene with medical care unless it is dire.

In conclusion no matter what an individual's background, culture, or experiences maybe I hope they have access to medical advice, and treatment for quality of life. It is important to engage in conversation about death and bring awareness to different cultures even though we don't have all the answers. Everyone has different views of death and dying as well as the practice and attitudes that it follows. We must respect those views an opinions especially as prospective child life specialist. Our views should take the back seat as we should be putting the views and beliefs as our patients first as we advocate for them. Our job is to comfort those who are terminally ill while respecting their boundaries, being sensitive and providing support.

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