CONCERNING FUNERALS

The Practice and Theology of Funeral Rites in the Church of Scotland since 1945

(Widespread lessening of Christian commitment coupled with an apparently little-diminished desire for religious funeral rites raises many questions for, and places a heavy burden on, many of the decreasing complement of clergy and on the, as yet, small band of lay helpers. We offer here a first extract from Ian Gough's longer doctoral paper bearing as title the subtitle above. That paper opens with an historical survey which, for reasons of space, will not be reproduced here. Much of the ground which it covers was dealt with on these pages in 1997 by Colin Williamson in his fine Presidential Address, 'A Sense of the Fitness', to which reference may helpfully be made by those wishing to know more of the chequered history of funeral rites in post-Reformation Scotland.)

The Venue

The rubric for the first Order for the Burial of the Dead in the 1940 *Book of Common Order* indicates that it is intended for use in church or in the house of the deceased, whereas the 1994 publication *Common Order* does not specify the venue, although it has suggested words of committal for both the graveside and the crematorium. In post-war Scotland the practice of holding a service in the home was commonplace, but this has diminished greatly, such that the present writer, who conducts between eighty and one hundred and ten funerals per annum, has had no request for a funeral in the home since the 1980s. The perception that this practice is much rarer in the twenty-first century is shared by most of his colleagues, although there seems to be a regional variation within the nation. In the industrial belt of Scotland this practice still occurs regularly, but not to the extent of former years. It is difficult to explain the reason for this lingering vestige of former years, but it may be that in areas where

there is a large Roman Catholic population (mainly in the industrial belt), there may still be an adverse reaction to anything which may seem in any way 'Romanising'. Even the practice of holding a funeral in church would still be regarded there by many as such an example. The historical consciousness in a hitherto Presbyterian Scotland is probably still aware that it has not been the general rule to have funerals in church, though there would probably be utter ignorance as to the reason. For those in the past, especially in the centuries after the Reformation, this was for theological reasons, but in contemporary circles it could be explained sociologically; for most would have little knowledge of the theological and historical perspectives of bygone generations. The point must also be made that families can often wish to have a funeral conducted in exactly the same way as for previous generations, as far as the memory permits.

Furthermore, the contemporary influential role of undertakers has often superseded that of the church, and may also explain why an increasing number of funerals throughout the nation are now held in funeral parlours. Indeed, this may help explain why even in the industrial belt of Central Scotland, the parlour is replacing the home as a venue. The practical matter of the deceased's home having a limited capacity for mourners must also be a factor. Thus the Order for the Church or the House is often in practice more likely to be an Order for the Funeral Home. Nevertheless, there is another curious anomaly with regard to the venue for funerals. Most parish ministers are happy, and, indeed, encourage couples to marry in church, but many show a marked reticence to conduct funerals in church except for those who display commitment to God by their regular attendance at public worship. This is especially curious in that a higher percentage of people seem to wish to have some kind of religious funeral than those who wish to have a religious marriage ceremony. It may further be argued that the venue of the church is appropriate for funerals in that church buildings also host the celebration of baptisms and weddings, both of which celebrate life, whereas funeral parlours are only associated with death. The same may be argued against the

crematorium being the sole venue for a funeral:

> One problem of the crematorium is that it is used just for death; by excluding the ongoing life of the local community, major sources of comfort and hope are excluded.[1]

However, it undoubtedly is the case that there is a trend towards secularisation and a diminishing role for the Church in initiating and organising funerals. This may in part be because many choose to have the funeral home as the main venue, although it may plausibly be argued that some indiscreet undertakers have an opportunity to put undue pressure on the bereaved to use their premises out of desire for selfish financial gain.

The Music

The 1940 book simply suggests that the funeral service may begin with the singing of a suitable Psalm, Paraphrase, or Hymn, and this is usually the norm for those who are active church members. The 1994 book is helpful in its suggestions that the singing should be at specific points during the service, but this is generally understood as being arbitrary. It has always been accepted also that the music played by organists as voluntaries before and after the service should be hymn-like in tone, dynamics, and style. However, over the past few years there has been a newer and more unconventional trend, where ministers are put under great pressure to permit the playing of the deceased's favourite songs. These may consist of pop, country and western, rock and roll, heavy metal, jazz, classical opera, and other varieties, usually played on compact disc, at both the beginning and end of the service. Indeed, sometimes the request is that they be during the worship itself. From the writer's own experience, requests

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1 T Walter *Funerals and How to Improve Them*, Hodder & Stoughton, London 1991 p.189.

such as "O Danny Boy" (The Londonderry Air) for someone from a Northern Irish background, or "The Toon o' Arbroath" for a local citizen, are some of the avant-garde examples from the new *liturgia desiderata* by many. It must be emphasised that songs like these are, almost without exception, requested to be sung only by non-Church people or lapsed members. However, requests for favourite non-religious voluntaries by the organist are commonplace, even by practicing Christians.

The reasons for this demand for 'secularising' funerals are complex. Undoubtedly, the main explanation is that in Scotland, the drift away from the Church has resulted in a majority of the population having little or no acquaintance with psalms and hymns which the regular church-going public regard as standard. At best, familiarity with hymns probably numbers little more than six. On an autobiographical note once more, it is not unusual to be asked: "Could we have that hymn... you know... the one about the shepherd boy?" – when what is meant, of course, is the twenty-third Psalm. A colleague also recalls being rather pleased when asked by a non-church family if they could sing the hymn "How Great Thou Art". When he responded in the affirmative, he enquired why they had chosen this fine hymn for the funeral, and was given the reason: "Because he (the deceased) was just a great man". Many other examples could be given to illustrate the ignorance of the population at large with regard to hymns. This latter comment, of course, begs the question as to whom the family thought the worship was addressed, and we shall look at this later (*vide infra*), as it impinges on what is expected at funerals within the context of worship.

Scriptural Sentences and the Liturgy of the Word

The service in the 1940 *Book of Common Order* begins with appropriate Scriptural sentences. These are taken from the Psalms, Deuteronomy, the Gospels and a non-canonical source, the Book of Wisdom. It is,

to say the least, rather surprising that there be material included from this Apocryphal Book of Wisdom. This would certainly have been unthinkable for previous generations in Scotland. Even the Euchologion, regarded as very progressive in its time, would not have dared suggest use of anything from the Apocrypha. This particular book, Wisdom of Solomon, has never been regarded as canonical in the Reformed tradition, although it is regarded as deuterocanonical in the Roman Catholic Church. Though a book of the Greek Bible, placed between Job and Ecclesiasticus, and called *Liber Sapientiae* in the Vulgate, it is not a book of the Hebrew Bible. The forefathers of the mid-twentieth century Church of Scotland would be perplexed and dismayed by these sentences being included in the *Book of Common Order*, even though the actual words quoted are totally in keeping with the whole tenor of the service. As one commentator states:

> There being no other clear expression of the hope of immortality in the Old Testament makes it the more essential that words from Wisdom III be read, as a prelude to the New Testament.[2]

The 1994 book has a greater variety of Scriptural sentences to introduce the service than the 1940 book, and also suggests the same passage from the Book of Wisdom. Furthermore, it also encourages that longer extracts be read later in the service from the third and fourth chapters of Wisdom. The 1994 book has double the number of suggestions for readings compared to the 1940 book, but interestingly, it is only the 1979 book which suggests the saying of the Creed.

Ian Gough

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2 F Franklin *The Annual of the Church Service Society*, J&G Innes, Cupar 1965-70, vols. 35-40, May 1968 p.33.