

The purpose of my research is to better understand mortuary practices of religions other than Christianity in the predominantly Christian South. This interest rose when I noticed the plethora of Christian cemeteries in the South. These cemeteries were almost always across from churches, and I'd come to relate the two. However, as the diversity of America became to impress itself upon me, I began to wonder what happened to those deceased beloved who did not belong to a church. It is possible to inter at a state facility, but where do those with different rituals go; what do they do; does the community allow for them; and how? To answer these questions, I first read relevant literature on both specific funeral practices as well general information on American views of death and burial traditions. Such publications of the latter include Gary Laderman's research (2003, 2009, 1996), James Crissman's *Death and Dying in Central Appalachia* (1994), Yalom's *The American Resting Place* (2008), Lynch's biography as a mortician in *The Undertaking* (2007), and Evans' *Is God Still at the Bedside?* (2011), which explores the dynamics of faith and dying inside the moral consciousness in America.

In addition to reading these and other sources, I was also responsible for conducting interviews with people who practice religions other than Christianity in the South, in regard to mortuary rituals. While it was important for me to peruse academic sources concerning the faith and practices of religions such as Islam, Hinduism, Judaism, and Buddhism prior to my interviews, I had difficulty finding literature that was relevant to any recent cases in America. Once I began to search for articles online and in the Sewanee library, I found that most sources in this case act more as rulebooks than anthropological sources. Many iterate "do" and "do not" sequences, but I was more interested in what people in America actually did, what was important to them, and why. In studying the plethora of academic books on the precise definition of an "American Way of Death," to coin Jessica Mitford's phrase (1964), it soon became important for me to understand how religions other than Christianity translated their faith here, and this required an entirely different strain of research than reading.

While it was not difficult for me to navigate the Sewanee library catalogue or the journal databases, it was much more disconcerting for me to find the people I needed. I started my research, and indeed this also became the city where I acquired most of my information, in Atlanta. My advisor, Dr. Donna Mote, kindly suggested several contacts, who became my first interviewees. After some confusion, I learned that both my interviewees and I were most comfortable asking and answering questions via email. I astounded by the welcome I received.

My first contact was with Mrs. Soumaya Khalifa, the director of the Islamic Speakers Bureau of Atlanta (ISB). She gave my questions and email to several of her colleagues. The information I had scrounged, mostly on the internet, paled in comparison to the answers both she and her colleagues presented me. Considering the delicate nature of my research, I greatly feared offending my interviewees, particularly as I had no prior contact with any of them. I was hyperaware of boundaries to the point where I eventually started to fabricate them, nearly rousing myself to a panic attack each time I called or emailed a new potential contact. However, the answers I were given were both detailed and kind. One man sent a long email concerning the graveyards as well as iterating how community- and volunteer-oriented Islamic funerals are. In addition, another also kindly told me of his experience during his wife's funeral. I am still amazed by how openly these strangers responded to my inquiries.

In addition to ISB, I also personally interviewed the owner of Dressler's Jewish Funeral Care, and was stunned by the attention I received there as well. The thirty minutes I had asked for turned into an hour. I was clumsy and nervous, but I still procured more information in this one setting than I had in the three weeks of research on Jewish funeral practices I'd done earlier. Mr. Dressler also kindly gave me two books, Jewish mourning companions, that the home gives to patrons, to complement my interview.

My other most helpful interview included a lovely woman from the Shambala Meditation Center in Atlanta. To find her, I did a random internet search for Buddhist centers in Atlanta and

emailed those that seemed on their sites to have a community atmosphere, meaning that the groups might consider their participation religious. A few responded that they only met for meditating, but I was soon directed to Ms. Carol. She serves as a meditation instructor at the center, and I interviewed her over the phone. She patiently answered my questions concerning the Shambala Center's strain of Tibetan Buddhism and was overall one of the friendliest, most hospitable people I have met. A few weeks after my interview, I traveled on her recommendation to the Center to attend a group meditation and was kindly given directions over the phone when I got lost. I called her afterwards to give her a report and ended up spending half an hour in the parking lot talking with her husband.

Despite my fears, most the people I interviewed thanked me for my interest in their culture. Their lengthy answers and warm welcome (even over email) humbled me while at the same time giving me a small kick in the teeth for being so anxious in the first place. The experience was not easy. There were many cases where my inquiries went unanswered, many communication mix-ups, and accidents I made in not following-up with the information I was given. I understand now that it takes more than patience to complete fieldwork. Talking with strangers is frightening, especially when one fears crossing unknown cultural boundaries, but there is a balance between patience and perseverance, in accordance with making inquiries and getting answers. On the whole, most my queries were answered, and the experience was both informative and pleasant. However, I know now that I need to work harder to conquer my anxiety if I am going to continue doing fieldwork. My goal is to earn a PhD in folklore studies and become a professor. This career requires that I have the strength to dive into different cultures. I already knew that I have the ability to ask questions, but I desperately needed the practice in finding contacts and conducting interviews on my own. This was an extremely necessary step for me in finding and testing my weaknesses. In September, Dr. Mote has allowed me to conduct a lecture on my research to a World Religions class from the School of Theology. This is also vital to my goal to become a professor.