

The figure of the funeral officiant and the history of cremation in the modern era

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Abstract. This paper aims at examining the factors that have favoured the spread of cremation in Italy, such as secularisation, the evolution of religious traditions, and people's desire to enjoy greater freedom of choice in funeral practices. In this context the authors have analysed the figure of the funeral officiant, exploring his relationship with the community and the way in which his presence, and actions, contribute to the creation, during the funeral ceremony, of a greater sense of belonging and support. By analysing the history of cremation in Italy, and the role of the funeral officiant, the authors aim to offer an in-depth perspective on the transformation of funerary practices in Italy, from a cultural and ethical point of view.

Key words: Cremation, funeral ceremonial, Italy, religion, secularisation, funerary culture, death

The management of death between state and Church

In the second half of the 19th century, the European socio-political context was marked by deep divisions between secular and ecclesiastical forces. These contrasts mirrored the deeply rooted ideological, and value, conflicts over the boundaries of the relationship between State and Church (1).

In this context, the very management of funeral rites and cemeteries became one of the main areas of cultural clash, expressing the deep tensions between those who supported a secular vision of death and mourning, and those who attributed a spiritual and religious significance to such practices.

The management of the body of the deceased, and the fate of their soul, were in fact considered elements of exclusive competence by both the Church, and the new agencies responsible for cemeteries, that asserted their own secular conceptions of the afterlife. This strong conflict over the control of funerary practices, and of cemeteries, manifested itself in a variety of forms and contents: in the iconography of tombs, in proposals for both civil and religious funeral services,

and in the choice of burial place. The outcome of these tensions had lasting consequences on the management of funeral rites, and cemeteries, in Europe (2, 3).

The escalation of the debate over traditional burial versus cremation significantly illustrates the conflict of ideologies, and values, that characterised this period (4).

The anti-cremationist camp was predominantly represented by the Catholic Church, while cremation, as a secular practice, exerted its attraction among those who expressed a vision of death and spirituality, alternative to the religious one.

The anti-clerical front spoke of the cemetery as an "enormous rotting carnage", "a hotbed of [...] epidemics", and of the grave as "a bed of worms, a filthy sewer of pestilential exhalations" (5). On the contrary, the Catholic press and publicity used terms and expressions to describe the incineration of corpses, such as "congregation of rotters" of human flesh, "burners of the dead" (6).

In this historical and cultural context, the Holy Office, with the constitution "Apostolicae Sedis" of 1869 by Pius IX, and with the encyclical "Quod sectam Massonum: Humanum Genus" of 1884 by Pope Leo XIII, officially banned the practice of cremation. This

prohibition remained in force until 1963, when Pope Paul VI, considering the danger of heresy and the potential abuse of this form of burial contrary to the faith to have been overcome, authorised the faithful to choose the funeral rites that they considered most appropriate, affirming that “the burning of the corpse does not touch the soul and does not prevent divine omnipotence from rebuilding the body, therefore it is not something contrary to the Christian religion” (7).

The practice of cremation in Italy also faced the consequences of the political tensions of the 19th century, representing a point of clash between the progressive left wing, which promoted it, and the conservative part of the Italian Parliament, which was against it (8).

Noteworthy was the bill proposed by Italian physician and politician Salvatore Morelli, who in 1867 unsuccessfully attempted to gain the attention of the Chamber of Deputies to promote the practice of cremation as a modern alternative to traditional burial, based on principles of hygiene, rationality and individual freedom. However, the conservative’s resistance and the strong influence of the Catholic Church in the political context of the time, proved to be significant obstacles to the progress of cremation as a legitimate practice. Despite the fact that the proposal was not even debated in Parliament, Morelli is still recognised as the first representative of the cremationist movement in the Parliament.

In the Kingdom of Italy, cremation was officially recognised and regulated by two important laws: the Health Law of 1888 and the relative Mortuary Police Regulations of 1892 (9, 10).

The Health Law of 1888 marked a turning point in Italian legislation regarding funeral practices. This law introduced, in fact, important provisions relating to public health and cemetery management, including specific provisions for the cremation of the dead. To further consolidate the legislation and establish operational directives, the Mortuary Police Regulations were issued in 1892, which provided precise and detailed indications on the procedures and requirements for cremation, guaranteeing safety, hygiene and compliance with health regulations.

The introduction of these regulations represented a significant step towards the full acceptance, and regulation, of cremation as a legitimate funeral practice,

allowing people to freely choose between traditional burial and cremation as funeral options. According to its provisions, citizens were granted the option to opt for this burial method as long as it was indicated in a will, or accompanied by a written request from the next of kin. However, this normative indication often represented a limitation. Families, out of concern for breaking traditional and religious customs, tended not to respect the wishes of their deceased relatives. The law also stipulated that incineration, which was to be carried out only within the cemetery perimeter and with the special authorisation of the registrar, had to be preceded by the issue of a medical certificate of death and that the ashes of combustion could be stored in crematorium annexes, in churches or public institutions, but not in private homes. As a result of this rule, all municipalities were obliged to cede ‘free of charge’ an area in the cemeteries for the construction of ‘Crematoria’ (11, 12).

Albeit slowly, the path towards the secularisation of death through the rite of cremation began to gain strength, even if the Catholic Church continued to oppose it, albeit less explicitly and absolutely. Indeed, the fear remained in conservative circles, that cremation could represent a threat to the traditions and dogmas linked to the immortality of the soul and the resurrection of bodies.

According to Tortarolo and Canella, cultural resistance was stronger in Italy than in the rest of Europe due to the presence of the Vatican, which sought to preserve its hegemony over the management of the three decisive moments of each individual’s existence (birth, marriage and death) identifying them as its bastion against secularisation (13).

Nonetheless, the pro-cremation culture spread more and more, also thanks to the action of the first private cremation societies (SOCREM), which united in a League in 1882-1885 and then in a Federation in 1906, worked to obtain formal and legal recognition by the State and to defend the right of every citizen to choose cremation as an option.

These societies have played a significant role in promoting the understanding, and acceptance, of cremation as a legitimate practice. They have provided information on cremation procedures and modalities, seeking to dispel concerns and misunderstandings

associated with this practice. In addition, they have actively supported the need to ensure individual freedom of choice in funeral arrangements.

The efforts of private cremation societies helped pushing the debate on cremation at the national level and creating a favourable climate for gaining legal recognition of the practice, overcoming cultural and religious restrictions that, in the past, had limited its spread.

Despite the constant and firm commitment of SOCREM to ensure full respect for the different beliefs and their respective rituals, for a long time the Vatican held the conviction that these associations had the purpose of “de-Christianising everything, and even the tomb” (14, 15). Such diffidence, also connected to the significant presence of Freemasonry in the ranks of these associations, explains, at least partially, the persistent ecclesiastical hostility towards this practice, branded as pagan. An opposition exemplified by the excommunication inflicted in 1886 by the Congregation of the Holy Office against the members of SOCREM, which (like the one against Freemasons) included the prohibition of burial in catholic cemeteries for those who chose to have their bodies burned (16).

This excommunication was only lifted at the Second Vatican Council, when cremation was considered a legitimate choice, as long as it was not made in hatred of Christian doctrine. This meant that the Church would no longer consider cremation as an action intrinsically contrary to Christian doctrine, but rather as an acceptable practice, provided it was performed with respect and without hostile intents towards the faith.

This change in the Church’s position on the subject has contributed to greater openness, and acceptance, of cremation by Roman Catholics. It has also underlined the importance of considering the meaning, and intentions, behind the choice of cremation, rather than simply considering it as a negative action in itself.

Cultural paradigms of the sacred in funerary rituality

The roots of classical secularisation theory can be traced to the work of sociological thinkers such as Max

Weber and Emile Durkheim, according to whom rationalisation and the advancement of science were the driving force that pushed religious views and practices to the margins of the dominant culture.

These authors argue that modernisation, the diversification of social life, and the growth of religious pluralism have undermined the traditional influence religion held over the functioning of society, relegating it to an increasingly private sphere (17).

The history of death can also be seen, according to the great French historians Philippe Ariès and Michel Vovelle, as the path that led 19th-century Christianity to lose its exclusive monopoly on the final passing (18-21).

The emphasis on the secularisation of funerary and burial practices during the 19th century emerged in the 1980s, with John S. Stephenson, who described death, on the basis of Darwin’s studies, no longer as a sacred encounter between an individual and God, but rather as a necessary event for evolution (22).

This scientific view has profoundly influenced the understanding, and interpretation, of death, shifting the focus from the religious dimension, to the biological and evolutionary one.

The substitution of theology for science is a central element of the theory of secularisation (23). In his fundamental 1994 study, entitled “The Revival of Death”, Tony Walter, one of the principal British sociologists in the field of death studies, reiterated how the modern Western way of dealing with death is the result of the movements of rationalisation, medicalisation, secularisation, and individualism (24). However, especially since the 1990s, the classical secularisation theory has received criticism from both sociologists and historians (25-27). A 2017 sociological study by Anne Kjaersgaard showed how death in contemporary Denmark, commonly considered an irreligious country, is still invested with religious significance (25). This study raises important questions about individual and cultural variations in the way death is approached and contextualised. Despite the processes of secularisation, people faced with death still continue to look to religion for support, even in those cultures that would seem less adherent to religious values. Therefore, it is important to consider the complex dynamics surrounding death and to recognise that experiences

and perceptions can vary widely at the individual and societal levels. While secularisation may have influenced practices and conceptions of death, no sweeping generalisations can be made about how religion and secularisation are intertwined in the way people deal with the final stage of life.

Historians have, in turn, emphasised the continuing importance of religious beliefs and churches in Europe, noting the popularity of Christian rites of passage in 19th-century Europe and their use, even by those who did not consider themselves religious (23).

Social historian Sarah Williams focused on the participation of the working classes in religious rites of passage in London's Southwark district between 1880 and 1939, showing how this participation represented a popular belief system, independent of orthodox religious structures (28).

Cultural historian Patricia Jalland has explored the attitudes of Victorian agnostics in the face of death, reporting their sense of loneliness and isolation in the face of mourning events, due to the religious nature of funeral-related rituals and comfort language (29). Thomas Kselman observed that in Paris, France's capital city considered de-Christianised, over 70% of the population still insisted on a Catholic funeral at the end of the 19th century. He pointed out that this was despite the fact that republican legislation had sought to dismantle the Catholic hegemony over funerary rites (1).

In a recent review of studies published between 2005 and 2015, Hannah Malone concluded that research on the cultural history of death has abandoned the grand narrative of secularisation and Weberian eradication in favour of a path of continuity between pre-modern and modern history, with a persistent sacredness and spirituality of all acts, and events, surrounding death (26).

Both of the cultural paradigms described, however, converge in signalling the importance of rituality, of the sacredness of the moment of passage from life to death.

The private cremation associations themselves, from the very beginning of their activity, had invited their members to carefully plan the various moments of the cremation ceremony, aware that traditional rituals: the solemn funeral, the celebration of farewell

rites in church, and the aesthetic care of the tomb were better suited to guaranteeing the cult of memory compared to what the 'crematorium temple' (cinerary urns, columbaria) could offer at the time.

In other words, SOCREM had understood that innovative proposals, such as that of cremation at the time, do not just need logical-rational reasoning, in accordance with the mental attitude and method of investigation of positivists, and have even less need for the ideological prejudices of their supporters, but rather require non-religious elements and symbols, that can be an alternative to the ceremonies of the Christian tradition, but are also capable of striking an emotional chord in individuals.

The ineffectiveness of the ritual solutions adopted by the SOCREMs in the early days of their activities was, in fact, one of the most significant obstacles to the potential affirmation of cremation, and one of the reasons why the wishes expressed in wills often remained unfulfilled or pending.

More recently, the socio-economic structures and cultural trends of a consumerist and technological society have further determined an acceleration in changes to customs, mores and habits even in the face of death, which have fuelled the economic-business aspect and the so-called funeral market. In this emerging market, the SOCREMs that are members of the Italian Federation (40 in the country, with over 120,000 members), have identified some further fields of action, and the definition of new social aims. Focusing, in particular, on the problem of transforming the set of operations between the handover of the body to the crematorium staff and the collection of the ashes by the relatives, into a genuine secular rite, to ensure the utmost respect for the dignity of the person and the pietas of the survivors, without any discrimination.

Towards an increased diffusion of the figure of the funeral officiant

On the subject of the ritual, too, there is friction between conservative and progressive forces, which nowadays affects the figure of the funeral officiant.

The involvement, at the life's end, of a new officiant figure alongside that of the priest, who used to have exclusive control over the practices, rituals and

content of the ceremonies, was, and perhaps still is, regarded as an act of defiance against the religious authorities.

The multi-ethnic constitution of today's society, and the evolution of new customs, have necessitated increasingly diversified funeral practices that meet the needs of people who desire greater autonomy in planning their farewell ceremonies for their loved ones. In this context, the figure of the funeral officiator, a professional called upon to coordinate ceremonial activities according to the family's instructions (with or without the participation of a priest), has increasingly found its *raison d'être*.

In his, or her, work, this officiant uses secular rites that may include memorial speeches, readings of poems or meaningful literary excerpts, moments of reflection, selected music, projection of photographs, and other creative expressions that commemorate the life of the deceased.

Unlike religious rites, these forms of sacralisation of death can vary greatly from person to person, as they are tailored to meet the specific needs and desires of the family involved, although they all share certain recurring elements that help define the ritual nature of the ceremony and differentiate it from other forms of gathering.

These ceremonies (regardless of preferences, family traditions and culture of reference) all feature a sequential structure consisting of defined, organised, and predictable actions. They make use of symbols, gestures that represent concepts or profound meanings: objects, words, ritual actions that evoke and convey values, teachings, messages important to the community. They involve a community, a group of people who actively participate in the ceremony.

The work of the funeral director cannot prescind from the respect of fundamental ethical and legal principles which represent an essential reference point to ensure the respectful, fair, and appropriate treatment of the deceased, their families, and other participants.

The officiant must recognise the cultural diversity they encounter, and provide an inclusive environment that allows everyone to express their traditions and beliefs, avoiding stereotypes and prejudices. It is important that the officiant respects the wishes of the deceased and, with them, the privacy and confidentiality

of the families involved, by not revealing information acquired during the planning and conduct of the ceremony. From an ethical point of view, the funeral officiant has a responsibility to act with empathy, compassion and sensitivity towards the family and friends of the deceased. This means listening carefully to their needs and preferences, respecting the diversity of religious and spiritual beliefs, and adopting a respectful approach when organising and conducting funeral ceremonies.

Should positions of conflict arise between the ethical principles governing his profession and the specific demands of the clients, they must be able to deal with the issues while keeping in mind the context of great grief in which they operate, and their overriding function as facilitators of grieving processes and empathic and supportive listening.

Training is of fundamental importance in this regard; it must include learning about the funeral traditions and practices of different cultures/religions, knowledge of the legal requirements associated with funeral services, and possession of sufficient effective communication skills to manage the emotional dynamics present during the ceremony and to offer emotional support to those involved.

When we examine the secularisation of funeral practices as a conflictual process, we should distinguish between cultural secularisation and institutional secularisation (30). Institutional secularisation of funerary culture is a policy aimed at removing the control of religious institutions over funeral arrangements and entails the submission of churches to the authority of the state in funerary matters.

Cultural secularisation implies both a decrease in participation in ecclesiastical funeral rites, and a decrease in the power of religious rituals to bestow a significance on death.

During the long 19th century, state-imposed institutional secularisation of burial rites and modes was a polarising process.

Cremation, as well as the figure of the secular burial attendant associated with it, represented the most controversial issue of the 19th century, as a field of active struggles, conflicts and alliances between ecclesiastical and anti-clerical, liberal and radical forces opposed to the Church.

The transformation of collective mentalities, the individuals' ways of being and behaving in their dealings with illness and death, and the reduction of the ideological dispute over how to say goodbye to the deceased are some of the factors that account for the growing popularity of the figure of the funeral attendant. A choice, born within the movements of secularisation and modernisation of society previously mentioned, which, despite everything, has inherited the tensions between opposing ideological, political and religious alignments. Elements that, in the context of the end of life, risk undermining the exercise of good practices in respect of the ethical principles of autonomy and free choice to this day.

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