

Death, Burial and the Timings of Funerals

Scholarly approved article

From observations of living close to, or within the variety of Muslim communities that are present in the UK, when the death of a Muslim occurs family, relatives, friends and community generally go into overdrive due to a long-held belief that burial of a deceased person must take place immediately. This usually means on the day the death occurs or, at the very least, the following day. Any delay beyond this is seen as lacking in understanding of death in the Muslim tradition and the community can be vociferous in their condemnations of delaying burial beyond this time limit. The understanding for this is based on what is considered a *Sunnah*, a practice of the Prophet Muhammed, during his lifetime. Of course, it is advisable to bury the deceased as soon as it is possible though, since we live in the UK, there are certain requirements that must be adhered to when dealing with death and burial. During the time of Rasul, peace and blessings be upon him, it was essential to perform an immediate burial due principally to the much warmer climate in that geographical location which resulted in an immediate process of decomposition and, with none of the modern methods available to us today, burial could not be delayed. This therefore was a *Sunnah* of convenience and practicality since it was in response to a situation that could not be otherwise avoided and was practiced even before the advent of Islam.

Unlike in warmer climates, the colder climate of the UK can slow down the decomposition process. Most purpose-built Mosques that have *Janazah* facilities, where the deceased can be washed and shrouded for burial, include cold storage rooms where the body of the deceased can be preserved until the burial arrangements can be made. This means there is a little more flexibility in terms of the timing of burial without compromising health and sanitation standards. Though Islamic teachings emphasise the importance of prompt burial, they also allow for flexibility in cases where legal requirements or logistical constraints exist. Muslim scholars recognise and fully appreciate that adhering to local laws as well as attendance at a funeral is important, and the religion itself allows for accommodations in such circumstances.

Converts to Islam are often perplexed by the immediacy of burial and find it difficult to appreciate when, in contrast, they are taught to pause and approach the event with sensitivity and care for everyone involved, most especially family and living relatives. Here we would like to explore, for the benefit of the convert community, the context of time, region, climate and regulations, both religious and legal and how all of these aspects impact us when death occurs, particularly when it is one of our fellow converts to Islam who has passed away.

A deceased person may pass away at home or in hospital after a long illness, or suddenly due to an accident or a natural death. In every case there are legal procedures to be followed. The deceased will not be released for burial until the death certificate has been issued by a doctor who is confident no foul play exists. Where a coroner's report is deemed necessary it will delay the process of issuing a death certificate. The community must exercise patience

and wait for this to be secured before funeral arrangements can be organised. It is vitally important not to bombard the family of the deceased with unnecessary questions about the funeral since they will simply not know the details and their grief will only be exacerbated by such unnecessary pressure.

Generally, a death certificate will be issued within 24 hours of the death - sometimes earlier - within hours even. If the deceased is a convert to Islam, it is not enough that the Muslim community are aware of the death. It is the responsibility of all of us to ensure their immediate, and very possibly significant non-Muslim family are informed, if they are not already aware of the death. There may be a will that will indicate where and how the deceased wishes to be buried, a task we should all attend to in life and not procrastinate over (Please see section relating to wills), which will hopefully indicate burial to be according to Islamic rites. Some families, who are harbouring ill will for the fact that their family member converted to Islam, may wish to cause some trauma and delay at this point demanding the deceased to be buried according to the family's faith, being the faith the deceased was born into. This must be dealt with the greatest of tact and sensitivity and will require legal knowledge of the matter.

Families tend not to stay in the one place and, due to employment opportunities and cost of living, may live considerably far away from each other, even in other countries. Being present for the funeral of a loved close family member is one of the emotional needs that is naturally prevalent in society generally, not least in the Muslim community. Assisting family members whose dearest wish it is to attend a family funeral may necessitate delaying it ...maybe a day, two days or even three. Arranging time off work, making travel arrangements, cancelling meetings etc all require time and, being reasonable costs little when it comes to accommodating family and maintaining good relations.

Educating the convert Muslim community about the Islamic requirements and cultural norms regarding death and burial in the region is crucial. Establishing clear communication with local mosques, particularly those that have *Janaza* facilities, meeting with mosque representatives as a means towards arriving at an understanding of the specific needs around the burial of Converts to Islam that will require the sensitive inclusion of non-Muslim relatives and careful planning can help dispel misconceptions and reduce panic to a minimum.

Mortuary facilities can be utilised to temporarily store the deceased's body while legal processes are completed, ensuring that religious, practical and legal considerations are all respected. It is important for our Convert Muslim communities to provide support and education to the non-Muslim families of the deceased. This includes emotional support but also guidance on the religious procedures and timelines involved in the burial process.

Scholars across various Islamic traditions recognise the importance of adapting to local laws and circumstances. This flexibility is in line with the broader Islamic principle of "*fiqh al-aqalliyat*" (jurisprudence of minorities), which allows for adjustments to accommodate the needs of minority Muslim communities living in non-Muslim majority countries. This application is even

more important when it comes to the Convert community, who find themselves as 'a minority within a minority,' and the particularly unique needs such a status involves.

In summary, while the tradition of immediate burial has its roots in historical practices and warmer climates, contemporary circumstances require a balance between religious teachings and legal and practical requirements. It's important for Muslim communities to be aware of and educated about the legal procedures in their respective regions, allowing them to navigate the process of death and burial with respect for both Islamic tradition and local laws. By being well-informed about the legal requirements and cultural norms of their region, and by fostering clear communication and education, panic and misunderstandings can be alleviated. This approach ensures that the transition of the deceased is respectful, dignified, and in accordance with both Islamic, local laws and the sensitive and practical needs of the families involved.

PLEASE NOTE: A funeral, like all rites of passage, requires organisation and timing is essential for ease of delivery and ensuring everyone, particularly those whose contribution is often overlooked, such as the grave digger for instance, is respected. Everything therefore should come in on time and, depending on whether the deceased has left a particular outline for their funeral or the family wish to add certain details such as obituaries to be read etc., timing and punctuality is essential towards meeting the respectful use and needs of the Mosque and graveyard, graveyard officials and those attending the funeral, from both near and far.

And may Allah guide and protect us all.

Batool Al-Toma

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