

Funerals and How to Improve Them by Tony Walter, Hodder & Stoughton 1990, xi + 306 pp. £8.99 p/b

'Funerals too often fail to do their job of marking the death of a human being. They fail to give public significance both to a life and to the mysteries of death' (p. 281), states Walter in his conclusions; and this book is a thorough opening up of the vast range of questions and issues that funerals touch upon. He attempts to explore the purposes and meanings of a funeral for a wide readership, and succeeds in combining fascinating historical background with sociological, psychological and theological reflection. The book is pastoral and practical as it takes readers through what death might mean for them, and on to how to organize and plan a funeral service (including contracts for retail outlets for coffins!).

The book is arranged in five parts. Part One introduces the subject matter, arguing that funerals are far too often impersonal, hypocritical and bureaucratic. It challenges those who have had disappointing experiences of funerals to take charge and ask for something better. It examines the funeral trade and the effects both of 'modernity' and of the 'national character' on attitudes. Part Two examines the physical, social, spiritual, psychological and economic aspects of funerals, and why it is that the modern world has particular problems relating to each of these and how, in practice, each aspect does not relate to the others. Part Three attempts to answer the questions: What exactly is a good funeral? What is its purpose? Who is it for? What are the ingredients of a good funeral? Part Four looks at what we do to a corpse, where the funeral and disposal take place and how this affects the funeral. Part Five explores some current issues such as do-it-yourself funerals, secular funerals and funerals for babies, and developments in the funeral industry. Walter concludes with some useful appendices containing advice for those planning a funeral, lists of self-help groups, and further reading. The accessible text is enhanced by constant reference to a wide variety of personal stories and experiences.

This book is part of a significant change that may happen during our life-span to the practice of funerals. Can the Churches expect to continue to have a monopoly on funerals, especially if they are sometimes conducted so inadequately? If it follows that how you mark death, as how you live your life, is largely governed by your ultimate faith, surely we need a much richer and wider diversity of models of funeral practice, ritual and liturgy to take this into account. Walter exposes the inadequacy of Anglican funeral liturgy. Put simply, funeral liturgy is failing to care for people. How does the funeral celebrate life, deal with the inevitable range of emotion, or the unfinished business within the network of relationships that a death may cause? Those who are wedded to funeral liturgies that suppress grief, protest and anger, within a 'faith framework' that emphasizes resurrection hope, fail to engage with the reality of two communities' needs around death and bereavement. There is much more work to be done on the relationship of liturgy and ritual of pastoral care if the focus of ministry in this area is to be broader than the decreasing number of people for whom religious faith is meaningful. Walter's book deserves to be widely read and, if acted upon, will have far-reaching effects on the practice of death in the next century.

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