Overview

Different traditions, beliefs, and practices surrounding death are common to all cultures and religions and have resulted in conflict regarding anatomic dissections and postmortem examinations. In addition, such views have been said to have hampered scientific and medical discovery in past years.[1] Persons from more westernized or diverse environments tend to have less cohesive connections with traditions, religion, and beliefs, and have a greater acceptance of autopsies. However, non-westernized, less diverse cultural groups have more unified traditions, beliefs, and practices surrounding death, and they more frequently have religious issues related to autopsies.[2]

Although cultural or religious beliefs are often cited as a reason for opposition to autopsy, most religions and cultures find autopsies acceptable either based on the individual's beliefs or special circumstances.[3] Certain religions outright object (eg, Islam and Judaism) in that bodily intrusion violates beliefs about the sanctity of keeping the human body complete, although religious doctrine does not in of itself strictly forbid autopsies. Instead, it is a matter of interpretation of the doctrines which have changed over time.

Christian Scientists do not outright object, but autopsies are not advocated. Buddhism, various Christian sects (eg, Anglican, Church of England, Church of Wales, Episcopal, Church of Scotland, Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Baptist, Methodist), Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, Free Church (Salvation Army, Quakers), and Jehovah Witness doctrines do not state an intrinsic objection to autopsies.[4] Shinto, Taoism, and Confucianism do not prohibit autopsies. In addition, Hindus have no intrinsic objection to autopsies, but their belief is that all organs must be returned to the body, and those who practice Sikhism believe that the funeral must not be delayed. Not surprisingly, views about autopsies often parallel views about organ and tissue donation.

Religious objections to autopsy occur in both medicolegal- and hospital (clinical)-based autopsies. For clinical autopsies the purpose is generally to investigate the cause of death and extent of natural disease, and consent must be granted by the next-of-kin in order for an autopsy to occur. When permission for an autopsy is declined for any reason, including religious objections, the autopsy is not done.

The process is different in cases that fall under medicolegal jurisdiction. The purpose of the medicolegal autopsy, which may or may not be part of a death inquest, can be to identify the deceased, document the nature and distribution of injuries, correlate whether the nature and distribution of injuries is consistent with a history or eyewitness account, reconstruct events related to the death, determine other diseases or injuries that may have contributed to the death, and collect trace materials that may help ascertain the manner and cause of death as well as solve crimes.[5]

In medicolegal cases, a death inquest and/or autopsy is ordered by a legal authority (most commonly a medical examiner or coroner), and permission from the next-of-kin is not sought although expressed opposition from the next-of-kin is viewed and dealt with on a case-by-case basis. A number of cases in which an autopsy was protested on religious grounds have been shown to have hampered or obstructed investigation of deaths, including...
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those of a suspicious nature.[1, 6] Such challenges result in inconsistencies between the autonomy for an individual (patient or family) and that of an authority (justice and law enforcement). These have resulted in public policy and legislation restricting autopsies to cases in which there is a compelling public necessity and often require a court order to proceed in the least intrusive way possible.[1]

See also Autopsy Request Process.

Islam

Islamic religious practices are most prevalent in the Middle East, Northern and Western Africa, Central and South Asia, Indian subcontinent, and Malay Archipelago, and centered in Eastern Africa, the Balkan Peninsula, Russia, Europe, and China. Although the Qur'an (Koran) does not directly discuss autopsies or postmortem examinations, Islam contains many important doctrines which do.

When contemporary situations challenge Islamic law, scholars known as hadith are sought out to publish a fatwa, or legal opinion. The fatwa are not binding, and several can exist regarding one issue. These interpretations, therefore, can range from more literal views of the laws to liberal, modern interpretations.[7] The main issues in Islam involving autopsies are not different from other religions: autopsies delay burials, cause harm to the body, and remove body parts. The benefits are the same also: autopsies can lead to scientific advances, important medical diagnoses and enhance education, among many others.[8]

Muslims undergo several rigid traditions following death. The eyes and mouth should be closed and the limbs should be straightened. The body should be faced toward Mecca, if not already. The body is washed and draped in a specific manner. Several family and community members travel to the deceased and participate in the mourning process. Muslims are always buried without embalming and are never cremated. The deceased should be buried as soon as possible, usually within 24 hours, and the burial should be as close to the site of death as possible, preferably within 1-2 miles. Family members do not eat until the deceased has been buried. Females never attend funerals.[8]

It is therefore clear why autopsies are not encouraged in Islam tradition. First, a postmortem examination would inevitably delay the burial. The Sharia, the book of Islamic law, states that the importance is "in order to bring the dead person closer to what God has prepared for him/her," and to bring God's servant closer to Him.[7] A decayed body is considered repulsive to others.[8] Finally, a rapid burial is beneficial to the community: if the deceased was a good person, then it will be a good deed to hasten his or her journey to God; alternatively, it would behoove the community to free themselves of a bad person as quickly as possible.[7]

There are a few reasons that are reasonable to delay the burial. Egyptian Rashid Rida's fatwa of 1910, entitled "Postmortem Examinations and the Postponement of Burial" was published in al-Manar, a weekly, and then monthly, journal. Rida was a well known scholar and politician at the time. He described that a risk of a hasty burial is that the person may not truly be dead. This, he realized, was especially true in the setting of drowning or being struck down during a storm. Therefore, it is beneficial to wait on an official medical examination. Finally, it may take time to obtain camphor (kafur), which is the special turpenoid solution used to clean the body. Hence, Rida had determined that there are reasons to postpone burial, and this has led to expansion of his ideas to include medical examination for various reasons.[7, 9]

The Sharia encourages retaining the body in its original form and keeping it as close to the site of death as possible, both of which would be violated by performing an autopsy. Transporting the body to the laboratory may cause physical damage and move the body far from the site of death. The scholar Abd al-Fattah stated that a body that has lost its human form has lost its dignity, which is a serious sin.[7] However, the Sharia contains a few exceptions to this as well. It explains that if a person had swallowed money which belongs to someone else, it is acceptable to retrieve that money out of the deceased person's abdomen in order to pay his debt, thereby preventing harm to his heirs. Additionally, if a woman dies during pregnancy and the fetus is believed to be alive, some sects of Islam believe that it is proper to remove the fetus with an incision.[9]

The Prophet Muhammad stated that "to break the bone of a dead person is like breaking the bone of a living person" (Sunan of Abu Dawood) which has been extensively interpreted in the fields of autopsy and organ transplantation. Some believe that this means that the deceased can still feel pain.[10]
**Maslaha** is the Islamic principle of "public benefit." It states that when the benefits outweigh the damages, the beneficial approach should be taken. This has wide interpretations and definitely has been used to support the practice of autopsies. H. M. Makhluf's landmark *fatwa* was published in 1952 and represents the Sunni school of thought regarding postmortem examinations. He explained that a doctor is only fully educated when he understands the body inside and out, thereby making human dissection necessary for thorough medical education.[9] He also stated that advances in medicine are supported by the themes of the Sharia. This is an interpretation of the Sharia's ideas about not performing religious duties if health will suffer.

According to the Sharia, people are encouraged to seek medical help when needed and not to exhaust their bodies by performing religious duties. Makhluf even went so far to legitimize voluntary donation of bodies to science. Contemporary Islamic society is sensitive to criticism regarding lack of medical advancement and falling behind Western medicine; therefore, these arguments are taken seriously by the public.[7] However, some believe that animal autopsies should be sufficient.

The Fatwa Committee at al-Azhar of 1982 also based their allowances on maslaha: autopsies should be permitted if medical students will learn from them, if justice prevails, and if contagious diseases are controlled. Still, the examination should only take place when necessary and include only relevant body cavities. For instance, in the case of a forensic evaluation for potential murder, if the murderer confesses and is willing to take the proper punishment, then the autopsy is not necessary.[9]

In 1972, the Arab Republic of Syria determined situations in which a postmortem can be performed -- if doctors believe that an examination will be socially useful and the deceased was not opposed when he was alive, or if 3 degrees of relatives do not oppose it. Additionally, the government can overcome objections by the family if the postmortem is used for scientific reasons or to prevent an epidemic.

Egypt's law states that an autopsy can only be performed when there is suggestion that the death was caused by foul play. The Saudi Arabian laws describe a rigid pathway beginning with the doctor's requirement to report a death which is thought to have occurred due to poison or a crime. The doctor must describe the wounds which led him to this belief, and this information will be passed onto a forensic expert, who will perform an external examination of the body as well as any accompanying objects (eg, clothes and personal objects). If the expert deems that a full internal examination is necessary to identify the cause of death, he must obtain permission from the authorities.

In Qatar, the permission of relatives is not necessary if an autopsy is performed for reasons of justice or pathologic diagnosis; however, authorization from the Sharia court is needed for the latter as well as if an autopsy is performed for teaching purposes, in which case the family must consent. A male doctor may not perform a postmortem on a female patient unless it is for teaching purposes or if no female doctor is available.[9]

It is generally agreed that an autopsy on an unidentified person following a severe accident is warranted and does not violate Islamic law. Additionally, when the law of the land requires that an autopsy be performed, the Muslim should comply but inform the coroner's office so that arrangements may be made to proceed quickly.[10] In Islamic countries, when consent from the family is needed, the order of priority is as follows:[9]:

1. Father, son, mother
2. Brothers and sisters, wife, grandfather, grandsons
3. Cousins of paternal and maternal uncles

See also Autopsy Request Process.

**Judaism**

Judaism is predominately practiced in Israel, North America, and Europe, and it is based on the Torah, which consists of the 5 books of Moses. The Torah is known as "written law" and believed to be written by God and given to the Jews at Mt. Sinai. The Tanach, known to non-Jews as "The Old Testament," includes the Torah as well as 2 other important sections. The Talmud, known as "oral law," is a collection of rabbinic teachings. The Tanach and the Talmud are the central texts for current Jewish law, known as halacha.

*Pikuach nefesh* translates from Hebrew as "saving of human life." It is perhaps the most important commandment
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in all of Judaic law. *Pikuach nefesh* renders all other laws permissible if a life is saved. Jews, therefore, are obligated to do anything necessary to save another life, even if it means disregarding other Jewish laws, with some exceptions (eg, murder, suicide). Thus, the fact that autopsies can save other lives supersedes other prohibitions. However, permitting autopsies is definitely not a clear-cut issue, and much debate surrounds the issues of desecrating the human body, delaying burial, benefiting from a dead body, and not being able to bury the body in full.[11]

First, saving lives under the commandment of *pikuach nefesh* is interpretable. Some recommend that only autopsies which would save the life of a specific, currently ill person should be permitted, whereas others believe that autopsies for future gain (medical advances) should be allowed as well. Rabbi Yechezkel Landau, an 18th century scholar, disagreed with the latter because of the slippery-slope phenomenon: if autopsies are permitted for future gain, there will be no end to the exceptions to the prohibitions. Now that we are in the age of technology, some rabbis admit that, most likely, somewhere in the world, there is a person whose life may benefit from nearly any autopsy. Additionally, most rabbis would agree that autopsies performed to contain an epidemic may be permitted. Similar arguments based on *pikuach nefesh* have been made in the realms of organ donation and abortion.[12, 13]

Jewish people believe that the dead body should be treated with respect. The prohibition to desecrate the dead is known as *nivel ha'met* ("desecration of the dead"). It is based on a passage from the Torah, which describes treatment of a hanged criminal: the corpse should not be left on the tree; it should be buried the same day. Additionally, the Torah states that the human body must be respected because man was created in the image of God. "Let Us make man in Our image..." (Genesis 1:26) It is accepted that the body itself is not physically an image of God, but the body contains the soul, or *neshama*, which was created in God's image. Therefore, the body remains holy even following death.[13, 14]

Rabbis have widely interpreted the definition of desecration and reasons why human dissection should or should not be considered a violation of the holiness of the body. Some base their conditions on the intent of the dissection. Others believe that any procedure done on a live person is not a desecration and, therefore, can be done on a dead body. Still others believe that continuing the dissection that a non-Jew started is allowed for a Jewish physician.[15] Following death, the body should be laid on the floor. It should never be left alone. To prepare for burial, the body is wrapped in a simple white cloth and placed in a simple coffin. The reasons for the simplicity are so that a poor person would receive the same treatment as a rich person. Embalming, cremation and open casket ceremonies are forbidden.[13, 14]

Benefiting from the dead is prohibited in Jewish law. However, what defines a benefit is heavily debated. Medical education is commonly thought of as a benefit of human dissection, so this is controversial for Jewish people. Some rabbis believe that the act of watching an autopsy is not a benefit received from the dead body, whereas participating in the autopsy might be. Others say that the act of dissection is not a benefit, but learning and understanding are, and these are not derived from the cadaver. Most rabbis agree that one may not receive financial compensation from an autopsy under this prohibition.[15]

The commandments *k'vura* (burial) and *halanal ha'met* (leaving the dead overnight) are the basis of customs for a rapid burial. "...Thou shalt surely bury him the same day..." (Deuteronomy 21:23) However, the Talmud states that it is proper to delay burial "for the honor of survivors," which may include "to honor the dead, or to bring a casket and shrouds." It goes on to state that as long as no shame is brought to the deceased (as a criminal hanging on a tree overnight would be), then delayed burial is not forbidden. Also, because this passage refers to treatment of a criminal, some rabbis believe it should be limited to them. Other means of destroying human remains would then be allowed.[15]

Interpretation of the Talmud by Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki (known by the acronym Rashi, 1040-1105) suggests that as long as no disrespect to the body is shown, delay of burial is permitted. The burial may even be delayed several days if the reason is to increase the dignity and honor of the deceased. Therefore, in cases where an autopsy would honor the family or the patient, it may be accepted, even though it may violate rules regarding desecration of the body. Fulfilling the patient's expressed or assumed wishes would honor him/her and is therefore considered an acceptable reason for an autopsy if medically necessary.[12, 13]

The Jewish term *olam ha-ba*, or "the world to come," refers to the world following the Messiah. When the Messiah comes, it is said, righteous people will be resurrected and allowed to live in the world where the righteous will
"sit... and enjoy the radiance of God." (Talmud Berachot 17a) Participation in olam ha-ba is merit based: righteous people will achieve a higher level of peace, whereas wicked people will achieve a lower level, and they may need to undergo a short period (less than 12 months) of a purification process. Jews believe that this standard is held for people of all nations and religions.

Following death, the soul (perhaps partially) leaves the body and enters heaven. When resurrection takes place, the soul will reunite with the body. Therefore, complete burial is required by the Talmud. This fundamental Judaic principle has caused great debate regarding organ donation, donation of the body to science, and autopsy. In addition to preparing the body for the world to come, the act of burial avoids disgrace to the deceased (as it prevents others from seeing the decaying body) and it acts as atonement to survivors. Thus, if a dissection does take place, all fluids and parts should be returned to within the body cavity. This is particularly difficult in the setting of cadaver dissections for medical education.[12, 13, 16]

Jews believe that the body belongs to God. Therefore, it is questioned whether the person has the right to decide what is done with it following death.[17] Although not encouraged in Judaism, many rabbis agree that if the person willed or sold his body to medicine, the autopsy should be permitted, as this person did not view this as a desecration. Some still implement conditions requiring inclusion of only body parts that would lead to an unknown diagnosis, or conditions which limit the amount of time until burial (ie, prohibiting use in an anatomy class because this would delay burial by several weeks). There are many rabbis who agree that a Jewish person does not contain the right to donate his body in such a way.[15]

In recent history, rabbis have debated whether autopsies should be permitted or not, with no real conclusions. In 1922, Polish medical schools required for admission that Jewish students provide Jewish bodies to dissect. Polish rabbis were questioned and unanimously prohibited autopsy for several years. However, autopsies continued to occur on Jewish bodies, despite these rabbinic conclusions.

In Israel, the controversy about autopsies sparked a serious public and political uprising which lasted several decades. The opening of Hebrew University’s medical school was delayed for 22 years because of the issue of human cadaver dissection. In 1928, a professor who suffered from an infection willed his body to medicine and was autopsied with the approval of the Chief Rabbinate in Jerusalem. Such autopsies continued to be performed (rarely) with the patient’s family’s permission.

In 1947, Hebrew University opened Hadassah Medical School and asked the Chief Rabbinate to explore the idea of autopsy. An agreement between the Chief Rabbinate of the State of Israel and Hadassah Hospital stated that autopsies are not to be done routinely, because they are a desecration of the human body; however, there are 4 conditions in which they are allowed: (1) the autopsy is required by civil law, (2) three doctors determine that the cause of death cannot be determined without an autopsy, (3) three doctors believe that an autopsy will help save the life of others with similar illnesses, and (4) if a hereditary disease is in question, which may affect relatives. Additionally, autopsies for medical education were permitted as long as the patients voluntarily donated their body for this purpose and all organs and body parts were eventually buried.

When Israel became a state in 1948, it adopted these conditions as laws. In 1953, the Israel Knesset (Parliament) passed the controversial Anatomy and Pathology Law, which expanded the allowance of autopsies (to include, for example, organ transplantation).

The law of 1953 did not specify if the final decision to perform an autopsy lies with the family or the medical authorities, and a set of amendments was later added for this reason. If the deceased did not leave written consent for an autopsy, the next of kin may refuse. If no family is found, the community organization Chevra Kadisha, which helps prepare bodies for burials following Jewish procedures, may object to the autopsy as well. Finally, if the body is unclaimed, it may be donated to medical education. Physicians were still able to proceed with autopsy if 3 doctors deemed that a diagnosis could not otherwise be made, but this led to accusations of physicians abusing this aspect of the law.

In 1962, the new deputy minister of heath Yitzhak Raphael was given the responsibility of reviewing this law. Following several committee and even more subcommittee meetings and hearings with many experts, recommendations were published:

- An autopsy can be performed to determine the cause of death if it will save lives or obtain organs for transplantation to a specific recipient(s).
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An autopsy will not be performed if the patient had expressed this choice during their life or if their specific relatives object to it, unless not establishing the cause of death may bring harm to the public or family, or if medical error may be the cause of death (which may lead to more deaths if not uncovered).

Additionally, a control committee was established to contain a rabbi, a Christian clergyman, and a doctor. These suggestions were not fully incorporated into law. Medical professionals enjoyed the freedom they had to perform autopsies without family consent and believed that if this freedom was removed, autopsy rates would drop dramatically.

To appease the public, the laws were rewritten in 1965 in an effort to balance the power of decision making. The revision was widely accepted in the medical community but disliked by religious factions. Hospitals continued to perform autopsies, overriding family members' wishes for certain reasons. Public outcry continued with demonstrations and threats. In one case, the family of an autopsied patient stormed the hospital, causing much physical damage as well as harm to hospital personnel. The Ministry of Health responded by spreading a circular that no patient who refuses autopsies should be admitted to the hospital.

In response, the Chief Rabbinate of Israel published a radical statement: "Autopsy in any form whatsoever is prohibited by the law of the Torah. And there is no way to allow it except in a manner of immediate danger to life..." He added that any autopsy must be approved by a rabbi. This extreme statement incited more uprising among the Israel public and in Jews around the world. Although physicians suffered violent threats, they continued to perform autopsies against family wishes. People were afraid to be admitted to Israeli hospitals for fear of dissection. By the late 1970s, however, practice had changed and autopsies were no longer being done without family consent, and an amendment to the Anatomy and Pathology Law was passed.[15, 18]

In general, autopsies are currently permitted by Jews. The overriding principle is *pikuach nefesh*, or the obligation to save a life. A life is considered one at hand, which in this age is any person all over the world, and it includes future relatives of the deceased who may benefit from knowledge about a hereditary disease.[18] Autopsies should be limited to only relevant body parts, and care should be taken to return as much of the body as possible. Additionally, autopsies should be done promptly in order to allow for a rapid burial. Some families may request that a rabbi preside over the autopsy.

Hinduism

The main practice of Hinduism is in the Indian subcontinent, Fiji, Guyana, Trinidad, Mauritius, Suriname, Bali, Australasia, Northern America, and Southeast Asia. Hinduism is more a philosophy rather than a religion and is believed to have originated around 3000 BC in the Indus Valley.

Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism grew out of Hinduism and hold some of the same fundamental beliefs including those regarding cremation. It is believed that cremation ushers the soul into the next world or its rebirth into the next life. Hindus believe in a cycle of rebirth and redeath. The central tenet is that of a unitary life force or Supreme Being called *Brahman* that has "no form nor shape, is timeless and eternal, and is believed to pervade everything (animate and inanimate), and everything is it."[19] Hindus also believe in *karma* (actions leave an imprint on the mind and soul) and that humans are ignorant of the fundamental unity of the cosmos and therefore should seek actions that lead to enlightenment of the immortal soul, referred to as *Atman* or *Self*.

For Hindus, the purpose of life is to exit the cycle and enter a state of extinction of passion. Family members must provide a smooth journey to death, because death is not viewed as a finite event. The soul leaves the body during death but is still aware. Therefore, Hindus believe that an autopsy may be disturbing to the soul.[20] A disturbed spirit could reenter the body and not continue life, or it could become evil. In order to appease the soul, mourners pray, and a funeral is held by a priest before cremation. The ashes are spread into a holy body of water.[21] However, Suami Bua stated "In the Vedic Age, dissection and mutilation of body were considered detrimental to the fulfillment of life. Yet, if we consider that once the spirit leaves the body, the lifeless body has no karmic obligations, then it may be okay."[22] In summary, Hindus avoid autopsies but comply if necessary by law.[23]

Jainism also believes in karmic philosophy with the main goal of attaining freedom from a cycle of life, death, and rebirth. Their belief (*Nirvana or Moksha*) is that by practicing the right faith, knowledge, and conduct, the soul can attain liberation or enlightenment from pleasures, materialistic possessions, and other sins. Jains also believe that
life on earth is not finite but instead a continuum of the cycle of life, death, and rebirth.

The Sikhism belief is that there is one God without form or gender. Sikhs believe that by living a virtuous and dutiful life by following the teachings of gurus (teachers), meditating on God at all times, and doing acts of service and charity, this will lead to the realization of this God and thus break the cycle of birth and rebirth.

**Buddhism**

Buddhism consists of 3 major divisions with distinct practices and beliefs. Theravada Buddhism is practiced in Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, Laos, Burma, and Sri Lanka, whereas Mahayana Buddhism is practiced in China, Japan, and Korea, and Vajrayana Buddhism is practiced in Tibet and Japan. In the United States, less traditional Buddhist practices include Soto Zen and Tibetan Buddhism, of which the largest groups are concentrated in the Chicago area. Great cultural diversity also exists among Buddhists, although all believe that illness and death are natural events and should not be feared, although relief of suffering and clarity of consciousness are important. The Buddhist priest's role is to assist the individual in making decisions in accord with his or her individual temperament, conditions, and understanding.

According to Buddhist theory, "death occurs when the body is bereft of three things: vitality (ayu), heat (usma), and sentiency (viññana)." There is debate whether these criteria coincide with that of modern medicine. Buddhists believe that the body is a shell for the spirit. A main Buddhist teaching point is that one should not be overly attached to his/her body; inevitably, it will deteriorate with age and then cease to function. The spirit remains following death and is reborn. Where it is reborn is dependent on the person's kama, which is a result of his/her past actions. Following death, the body should be highly respected, so that the spirit can concentrate on achieving enlightenment. For this reason, the body should not be disturbed for 3 days or until a religious leader has determined that the soul has left the body. At this time, most Buddhists will be cremated.

Because of the benefits of autopsies, such as educating medical professionals and determining diagnoses, Buddhists generally believe that autopsies are a form of compassion that help preserve life. Bringing justice to a criminal is also honorable, so autopsies can be done when there is a question of natural versus unnatural deaths. Although Buddhists believe that the body should be treated with great respect and it is not proper to desecrate the body, these views about autopsy rely on the intent. The intent of postmortem examination is not to harm the body. Waiting until the soul has left the body is the only major contingency when performing an autopsy on a Buddhist.

**Christianity**

Europe, the Americas, Oceania, Sub-Saharan Africa, Philippines.

**Roman Catholicism**

The first human dissections were done by the Greek scientist Herophilos (335-280 BC). King Ptolemy, successor to Alexander the Great, granted permission to perform autopsies in his multi-religious city of Alexandria, in Egypt. The autopsies were often open to interested people.

Herophilos uncovered several imperative truths regarding human medicine. Although his works have all been lost, most lived on by future anatomists such as Galen (also known as Aelius Galenus, 129-199 AD), whose principles dominated medicine for centuries. As a Roman physician and philosopher, Galen was not allowed to perform human dissection, so his knowledge stemmed from dissections of monkeys in addition to learning from Herophilos's findings. However, he described a need for human dissection in *On Anatomical Procedures*. This book was translated to Latin in 1531 and significantly helped persuade the Catholic Church to permit autopsies, as his theories did not question the teachings of the Catholic Church and were therefore taught in medical schools.

Following 200 AD, religious and legal laws made autopsies unlawful. In 1153, the Church banned mutilation of dead bodies during the Council of Tours in France. This was aimed at preventing the common practice of eviscerating Crusaders' body parts for transport back to Europe, but it contained implications for anatomists. Although extremely rare and still widely unaccepted, systematic autopsies were started again during the 13th century, in Italy, which the Vatican allowed.
Mondino de Luzzi published the first modern anatomy text based on these public autopsies in 1316; the subjects were mostly executed female criminals. The Renaissance continued to witness an enormous amount of medical advances. Many attribute these to the invention of the printing press, which allowed for spread of news without control of the Church. In 1531, Galen’s On Anatomical Procedures was translated into Latin and published. This publication uncovered Galen’s unknown desire for human dissection in the language of the Church.

Andreas Vesalius (1514-1564) corrected many of Galen’s misunderstandings of medicine by conducting dissections on executed criminals. Of the several anatomy books he published, De Humani Corporis Fabrica is the most well known. Pope Sixtus IV (1471-1484) allowed dissections by students, and this was followed by a similar statement by Pope Clement VII (1523-1534).[26] The Catholic Church had shifted their belief to devalue the dead body in an era when the thirst for new knowledge ruled.[27]

Vesalius eventually became the personal physician of Roman Emperor Charles V and Spain's Philip II. Although the Catholic Church had begun to accept the idea of autopsies, new Protestant rule made it even easier for such examinations to occur. For example, in 1565, London’s Royal College of Physicians was granted permission to dissect human cadavers.[26]

On the other side of the world, an autopsy was performed for religious reasons in 1533. Siamese twin girls were autopsied in Espanola (now the Dominican Republic) in order to define if there was one soul or two. The girls had been individually baptized, and the postmortem examination confirmed that there were indeed 2 souls. This was based on the finding of 2 complete sets of internal organs -- most importantly, the liver.[26]

Today, Catholics accept the value of autopsy and generally agree with its use for medical education, organ transplantation, and determination of diagnoses. It is considered an act of charity to perform an autopsy in order to help others.[11]

**Protestantism**

The Bible’s overall view of the human body is that of uniqueness and divine inspiration, while acknowledging that it contains the limitations of physical matter. The Bible states that the body is made "of dust from the ground" and is a "tent" or "clothes." (Genesis 2:7, 2 Corinthians 5:1-5:5) Therefore, Christians believe that the body is a mortal housing for the soul. However, God "breathed into his nostrils the breath of life" in order to make man, which makes the body a "heavenly dwelling." (Genesis 2:7, 2 Corinthians 5:4)[28]

In most sects, Christians believe that death is when the spirit leaves the body, based on the passage "...the body without the spirit is dead..." (James 2:26) Just before his death, Jesus prayed "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!" (Luke 23:46) Ecclesiastes 12:7 states "and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it."[29] Jesus referred to the afterlife when he stated that "many will come... and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 8:11) The idea of the spirit leaving the body to an afterlife is again referenced in 2 Corinthians 5:8: "We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord."[30]

God is considered to have taken away physical immortality when Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden.[30] The Bible acknowledges human decomposition in its statement "unto dust thou shalt return." (Genesis 3:19) However, Christians strongly respect the dead body and undergo several rituals surrounding death, as set by the examples of the burials of Sarah and Abraham.[28] Although there are not specific limitations during autopsies of Christians, the body should always be handled with respect.

**Jehovah's Witnesses**

The religion of Jehovah’s Witnesses is based on the Bible, mainly the translation named New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures. The religion is ruled by a group of elders termed the Governing Body, the origin of which is unclear. In the late 1800s, a group of students formed Zion’s Watch Tower Tract Society, which was the basis of the formation of Jehovah’s Witnesses. Although Witnesses bear similar basic ideas as other Christians about God and the Bible, they do not celebrate Christmas or Easter. It is believed Jesus Christ was God's son and was sinless at birth and remained so throughout his life. Jehovah's Witnesses consider themselves but not others Christians, and likewise most Christians do not include them in the religion. Alternatively, Jehovah's Witnesses...
have been considered by some to be members of a cult.

Jehovah's Witnesses do not believe in hell. Righteous souls are resurrected at the time of the Armageddon, of whom 144,000 will go to heaven, and the remainder of the righteous will remain on an earthly paradise representing the Garden of Eden. Evil souls will be annihilated.[31]

Ecclesiastes 9:5, 10 states, "But the dead know not any thing." The soul is mortal. Jehovah's Witnesses interpret death as a state of pure nothingness -- not even sleep. No thoughts are perceived, no work is done; the dead is conscious of nothing.[32] All future life for that person is based on a hope of resurrection. During resurrection, it is believed God will form a new body and soul for that person based on His memory.

Their bodies are the creation of Jehovah God; therefore, the main obstacle for Jehovah's Witnesses regarding autopsies is mutilation to the body. A Jehovah's Witness should agree to the autopsy when required by law, but the next of kin may request that no organs be removed and that the body be treated with care.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

The prophet historian Mormon completed a book of golden plates containing the revelations of many prophets. The book resided in a hill for several centuries. The resurrected being of Mormon's son, Moroni, appeared in front of Joseph Smith, instructing him to find the golden plates in 1823. He translated them to English as the Book of Mormon, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was founded in New York City in 1830. The Old and New Testament as well as the life of Christ are also central to the Church of Latter-day Saints.

Mormons believe in 3 phases of life: before the human form we are spirit-children, followed by life as a human on earth, and then eternal life with God. Following death, the body and spirit reunite to be resurrected into the afterlife. There are 2 forms of afterlife: Paradise for the righteous and Spirit Prison for the evil. Spirits from Paradise visit the Spirit Prison, where they can teach the gospel; if the unrighteous repent, they may be able to move to Paradise. Therefore, the purpose of life on earth is to prove that one is worthy enough to spend his or her afterlife with Jesus and God. Death is an honorable part of this life. Mormons are encouraged to be buried, although cremation is not forbidden.

Regarding autopsies (as well as organ transplantation), Mormons are invited to choose what will give them a feeling of peace and comfort. Most will ask the Lord for inspiration in these decisions.[33] The Encyclopedia of Mormonism (1992) states, "It is one of the methods whereby both those who die and those who examine them contribute to improving the quality of life and health of their fellow human beings."[34]

Christian Science

Christian Science is a belief system rooted in the idea that God's creations are spiritual rather than materialistic. Mary Baker Eddy wrote Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures (1875), a textbook that is now the main document of the religion. Her inspiration came while she was healing from an injury and read a passage in the Bible about Jesus's cures. She believed that Jesus's way of healing could be continued in modern life.

Christian Scientists' views of health care set them apart from many other belief systems. They prefer to separate the physical from the spiritual, and this applies to all other parts of life as well. They believe in a specific form of prayer which is meant to spiritualize thought. Although there is no specific prohibition from using modern Western medicine, they are taught that it is best not to mix the two, as spiritual healing and material healing may counteract each other; thus, Christian Scientists will first turn to prayer before attempting cure through medications or surgery. When seeking modern medicine, Christian Scientists will often discontinue their involvement in spiritual healing.[35]

Christian Scientists believe in an afterlife -- what we refer to as death is considered to be just a continuation of the immortal spirit. Death is only a belief, and the religion believes that death doesn't actually exist (although Christian Scientists admit that the physical being ends). In another book by Eddy (a chapter called "Is there no death?" in Unity of Good), she states "Because God is ever present, no boundary of time can separate us from Him and the Heaven of His presence; and because God is Life, all Life is eternal." She goes on to state that "Human beings are physically mortal, but spiritually immortal."[36]
There are no specific rituals surrounding death. Funeral and burial matters are up to the individual's wishes. There are no prohibitions against autopsies for Christian Scientists, but in general they are averse to participating in Western medicine practices. Because God is believed to be the only true healer, Christian Scientists may not see the benefit of a postmortem examination. Autopsies should therefore only be done in special circumstances in accordance with the deceased person's wishes.[37]

Confucianism

Confucianism (China-Chinese folk religion), Shintoism (Japan), Taoism (China-Chinese folk religion), and Shamanism do not prohibit autopsies.

Confucianism may be thought of as more of an ideology than a religion, with a tremendous impact on Chinese life and culture. Confucius (551-479 BCE) is considered a great scholar and sage who never claimed divinity. Temples built for Confucius are not places of worship, but rather community centers for special occasions, especially Confucius's birthday.

Confucius handed down 9 ancient Chinese works that are the bases of the beliefs in Confucianism. Jen is the ultimate principle, translating to "love" or "humanity." Followers of Confucianism live by the ideal, "Do not do to others as you would not want done to yourself." In addition, charity, justice, propriety, wisdom, and loyalty are the 5 main principles to live by.

With regards to death, Confucius was often criticized for not discussing the matter. He believed that we should focus on the present day and not attempt to seek an afterlife, that one should lead a life with his/her own mission from heaven. Modern-day China remains nearly silent about death.

Burial is the custom in Confucianism. The body is washed and dressed in coarse clothes. Food and significant personal belongings are buried with the person in a coffin. A willow branch represents the person's soul and accompanies the funeral procession, and then is then placed in the family's altar, where it installs the soul of the deceased.[38]

Some historians believe that the Chinese conducted autopsies before the time of Confucius, as their medicine was far more advanced than other empires. Confucius taught that the body was sacrosanct and touching the body under certain conditions was unholy, so autopsies did not agree with his teachings. Confucius also taught that bodies belong not to oneself but to one's parents. Taking care of the body is a way of showing respect for one's parents and, therefore, all forms of mutilation to the body was not aligned with cultural values. The Tang Legal Code, China's earliest recorded law code, condemned destruction of bodies.

In modern times, however, followers of Confucianism do not prohibit autopsy.[33] In spite of this, the Chinese suffer from a serious shortage of bodies to dissect for medical education. In response, several agencies have enacted public outreach initiatives in order to teach the benefits of body donation. Some incentives have been started in order to show families that the gift represents the giving of a life, such as inviting the family to plant a tree on the campus of Nanjing University. The Education Center for Medical Ethics at the university also retains personal effects of the cadavers, such as letters and photos, which show the devoutly respectful nature of the gift. A large 2004 study of the thoughts of Chinese revealed that approximately one third of the population is willing to donate their bodies to medicine.[39]

Native Americans

In the United States, at least 558 tribes/nations are federally recognized, and over 100 more have applied for recognition.[40] The primary religious or spiritual affiliation of Native Americans may be traditional or Christian, or they may practice no religion at all, depending on the individual or tribal affiliation. Spirituality is central to their identity, although belief systems vary widely among tribes/nations and geography. It is believed that people and nature are interconnected, and that all animate and inanimate (eg, water) forms of life are sacred and have a spirit. For some, illness is considered an imbalance among the spirit, the mind, the body, and social interactions.[41]

In general, most Native American cultures embrace the present, with some avoiding discussion surrounding impending death and/or contact with the dying. Some tribes (eg, Hopi) value maintenance of a positive attitude,
with sadness and mourning done away from the dying.

Care of the body varies with the culture and/or beliefs. There is a preference for naturalness and home care, but for some tribes (eg, Navajo) a cultural taboo surrounding death exists. Some traditional practices include turning or flexing the body, sage or sweetgrass smoke, or other types of purification.

Most Native Americans believe that death is a natural part of the life cycle. Specific rituals are carried out with the intention of letting the spirit safely cross over to the other side to join with ancestors. Organ donation and autopsies are viewed as desecration of the body and generally are not desired.

Conclusion

For pathologists involved the performance of autopsies, it is useful to have some understanding of the different cultural and religious beliefs likely to be encountered surrounding death and how those views influence decisions about autopsy. The cultural and religious diversity of the population in the United States and abroad has increased in part due to the ease of immigration into various countries. Certain rituals and practices surrounding death are common to all cultures and religions and influence whether or not an autopsy is done. Although certain cultures and religions do not advocate for autopsies, most do not have outright objections to autopsy. In general, most views about autopsy parallel attitudes about organ and tissue donation, which can vary not only by religions, but within religious sects and beliefs within different countries.

Religious objections to autopsy pose a particular dilemma for medical examiners/coroners in that such objections can be in conflict with laws to investigate circumstances for certain classes of deaths. In most instances, strong consideration is given when there are objections to an autopsy and in only those cases with a clear and convincing reason are autopsies done. As a result of such conflict, some states have enacted legislation that restricts the power of the state to demand an autopsy, often requiring the courts to intervene in the decision to proceed. Several states have passed "religious objection" laws that grant the right for persons to attempt to prevent an autopsy from being done by signing a certificate stating that the autopsy is contrary to their "religious beliefs."

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