Dying bodies: bringing mortality home after the Reformation and the Great Transition

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Abstract

Two enormous shifts in history shape Western culture as we know it today: the Protestant Reformation and what historical theologian Ephraim Radner names the ‘Great Transition,’ the health transition that brought modernity its unprecedented low mortality rates and lengthened lifespans. This article explores one geographical location and one specific time – Victorian London – to argue that the lingering effects of the Protestant Reformation and the growing impact of the Great Transition as this relates to the practices and rituals around the dead, particularly the dead child, were partly responsible for the reforms around the dead child in the home. Lydia Murdoch’s account of the rise of the mortuary movement, and her description of the discrimination against Irish Catholics by Protestant elites, forms the foundation for my argument. Rather than limiting the narrative to one of religious and class prejudice, I claim that religious motivation, and not only religious prejudice, worked with growing health reforms in order to bring about these historical shifts.

keywords: death; children; Victorian London; Protestant Reformation; health transition

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Briefly, the narrative can be constructed in this way. Traditional Catholic death was socially meaningful. Protestantism individuated death. Secularization moved death into the realms of scientific rationality where it has been reductively reconstructed in a highly defended medical model. (Yates 2000:219)

So reads one simple narrative of the history of death. In the past, death was an integrated part of the social structures of life. With the Protestant Reformation, death became increasingly individualized. As the world grew more and more secular, science replaced religion, sanitizing death through the new emphases on health, hygiene, and overcoming the limitations of the body. The familiar presence of the dead became more and more a thing of the past, in the name of health and science.

And yet the theological shifts that took place in the wake of the Reformation are more complex than the oft-reported narratives relay. Indeed, the splintered theologies of death following the Protestant Reformation led to confusion about defining death, the place of the body, and the appropriate response to death. This article narrows in on one geographical location and one specific time – Victorian London – to examine the lingering effects of the Protestant Reformation and the ongoing health transition as this relates to the practices and rituals around the dead. I aim to trace these influences to argue that religious concerns, and not only religious prejudice, worked in tandem with hygienic concerns, in order to carry the body outside of the home, with repercussions that can still be felt today.

As historian Lydia Murdoch concluded, ‘The gradual removal of death from the domestic sphere was an uneven process fractured by class and ethnicity’ (2015:379). Similarly, the effects of the Protestant Reformation on the relationship between the living and the dead were uneven, a messy confusion of convictions and concerns. While attention has been paid to the social influences and repercussions of the mortuary movement, less has been written on the religious and moral influences and repercussions of the movement, and how they intertwined with scientific concerns. My claim is that the mortuary movement in Victorian London showcased a fear of both moral and physical corruption, with its proponents believing that too much time spent with the dead would cause an overfamiliarity with the dead, which in turn would undermine moral and religious life. Such corruption was feared to spread from the lower classes to the upper, and from the Catholic to the Protestant, and was mirrored in the fear of contamination through contact with the vapors of the dead.
The need for sanitary reform in Victorian London

Victorian London witnessed changes economically, socially, and philosophically. From shifts in economic structure, to social reform, to new ideas, all impacted the genesis of the mortuary movement of the 1850s. The rise of the middle class in the 1830s, the Anatomy Act of 1832 that allowed dissection of the unclaimed dead by medical persons, the New Poor Law of 1834 that created unions to care for children with workhouses funded by parishes – all were factors in removing the dead body from the living, starting with the homes of the poor.

In the Victorian period, London remained largely Protestant in its piety, and was growing increasingly self-aware of its health and safety shortfalls. Particular concerns around disease and waste shaped this period, giving rise to concerns about how to dispose of human bodies and human waste. In light of the desire to combat illness and infection, the graveyard became an arena for reform (Curl 1972; Houlbrooke 1998; Laqueur 2015; Richardson 1987; Tarlow 2011). As the historian David Pomfret narrated, ‘As cities grew, elites became exasperated by these unsightly and insanitary spaces, where the living mingled with the dead’ (2015:356). At the same time, Londoners desired to show off the wealth and power of their city, and overcrowded graveyards were ruining the view. Such overcrowded cemeteries were met with the solution of relocation: cemeteries were moved from within the city to without, creating suburban dwelling places for the dead. These places were often marked by the wealth of the elite, who could afford personal transportation to bring their dearly departed to the city’s boundaries, where lavish architecture created a new city for the dead (Nash 2000). As we will see, such shifts were not only motivated by a desire to showcase wealth, but also by religious concerns. Remembering and respecting the dead had become the main Protestant values around the dead; by the Victorian period, this method of doing so became the ‘proper’ funeral and burial practice, and to carry out this practice the dead no longer needed to be close to the living.

Cholera took over London in 1832, again in 1848–9, and once more in 1853–4, providing not only a visceral reminder that dead bodies could overwhelm burial grounds, but also that the manner of disposal of the dead could harm the living. Shortly after these waves of cholera, the Great Stink in London in the summers of 1858 and 1859 overwhelmed the city, with the Thames overflowing with waste, both human and industrial. London was dirty, to the growing awareness, discomfort, and alarm of its inhabitants. Miasma theory stipulated that bad air was responsible for the spread of disease; thus, the bad smells associated with rotting bodies and human
waste became intolerable indications of potential infection. Sanitary reforms eventually became fashionable, impacting interior design, art, and architecture (Snowden 2019). In the midst of this growing concern, Edwin Chadwick’s (1843) *A Supplementary Report on the Results of a Special Inquiry into the Practice of Interment in Towns* condemned habits of interring the dead with the living.¹

**Edwin Chadwick’s *A Supplementary Report on the Results of a Special Inquiry into the Practice of Interment in Towns***

Edwin Chadwick was a lawyer and social reformer of the Victorian period, largely responsible for the period’s changes in laws around the poor and around sanitation. Today, his reception is mixed, with some hailing Chadwick as a savior of the poor and a visionary of public health, and others condemning him as a selfish bureaucrat who sacrificed the autonomy of the poor for his own ambition, fame, and fortune (Allen 2002; Joshi 2004).

Chadwick’s report reflected the concerns of the Victorian era – both scientific and religious. The report was extensive, heavily researched, and widely read, attempting to reflect scientific standards, with graphs, charts, and qualitative research. He included comparisons with funerary customs in Europe and America, as well as the early church, in order to emphasize that extramural interment was practiced by Britain’s contemporaries as well as their Christian ancestors. Chadwick also referenced Anglican theologians such as Richard Hooker and Jeremy Taylor, church fathers such as John Chrysostom and Jerome, and scripture passages such as the Levitical purification laws. He interviewed ministers, medical officers, and undertakers. Chadwick’s report layered together both the religious and scientific reasons for removing the dead body from the home. Over and over, often in the same breath, the practice of living in the same room as the dead was condemned for the potential effect on both moral and physical health.

‘From familiarity it is a short step to desecration’: the effects of the dead body in the home

As an example of Chadwick’s emphasis on the effects of the dead body in the home, take his inclusion of a certain unnamed minister’s report. The anonymous minister condemned the familiarity the lower classes displayed toward the dead, a familiarity due in part to interring the body in tight quarters while saving up for the funeral. The upper and lower classes were contrasted, with great indignation: ‘With the upper classes, a corpse excites feelings of awe and respect; with the lower orders, in these districts,
it is often treated with as little ceremony as the carcass in a butcher’s shop’ (Chadwick 1843:S42). The minister continued, ‘Nothing can exceed their desire for an imposing funeral; nothing can surpass their efforts to obtain it; but the deceased’s remains share none of the reverence which this anxiety for their becoming burial would seem to indicate’ (Chadwick 1843:S42). The desire for an ‘imposing’ funeral contrasted with what the minister saw as a lack of respect shown toward the dead body. He diagnosed that the time spent with the dead had led to this discrepancy:

The inconsistency is entirely, or at least in great part, to be attributed to a single circumstance – that the body is never absent from their sight – eating, drinking, or sleeping, it is still by their side; mixed up with all the ordinary functions of daily life, till it becomes as familiar to them as when it lived and moved in the family circle. From familiarity it is a short step to desecration. (Chadwick 1843:S42)

Desecration was detailed in the body being made a plaything, a piece of furniture, and a place to store or hide domestic messes or vices.

The body, stretched out upon two chairs, is pulled about by the children, made to serve as a resting-place for any article that is in the way, and is not seldom the hiding-place for the beer-bottle or the gin if any visitor arrives inopportunely. (Chadwick 1843:S42)

Here, such familiarity with the dead was condemned for an abundance of reasons: it went against propriety; it disrespected the dead; it undermined community life; and, finally, it removed the fear of death that was the last safeguard of conscience and a catalyst toward religion. The minister concluded:

Viewed as an outrage upon human feeling, this is bad enough; but who does not see that when the respect for the dead, that is, for the human form in its most awful stage, is gone, the whole mass of social sympathies must be weakened – perhaps blighted and destroyed? At any rate, it removes that wholesome fear of death which is the last hold upon a hardened conscience. They have gazed upon it so perpetually, they have grown so intimate with its terrors, that they no longer dread it, even when it attacks themselves, and the heart which vice has deadened to every appeal of religion is at last rendered callous to the natural instinct of fear. (Chadwick 1843:S42)

The fear of death needed to be protected, for it was hailed as a touchstone for human morality. Without the fear of one’s mortal end and the judgment that should follow, human society would collapse. Another minister, the Reverend William Stone, the rector of Spitalfields, echoed this concern. The rector provided a detailed explanation of the disorder of parish burials
in London, with schoolboys taunting the priest and the public treating the burial service as a free show. The Reverend Stone pronounced that this too was an effect of interring the body in the home, for if the poor could not respect the dead body in the home, how would they respect the dead body during the burial service?

If the working-classes of a populous city are less awfully affected by the sight of death, from an unavoidable familiarity with it in their own homes, it is to be feared that they and others meet with much to prevent or impair a wholesome sensibility upon it in public; for there the touching associations of a burial, and the sublime spirituality of our burial office are broken in upon by the exhibition of the most vulgar and even ludicrous scenes of daily life. (Chadwick 1843:S88)

If familiarity breeds contempt, as such ministers seemed to believe, the dead body had to be removed from the home for the sake of the moral lives of the poor. The wealthy did not face the same problem, because their homes were larger and they could be interred separately. But in the one-room homes of the poor, the dead body was unavoidable; there was no break from it. As Chadwick’s report explained, again, such contact with the dead had both psychological and physiological effects:

> When deaths occur in this class the corpse cannot be laid out without occupying the space where the family have to work ..., or in the room where they live and eat. This, I am of opinion, has a very debasing effect on the morals of this class of the community, making especially the rising generation so familiar with death that their feelings are not hurt by it: it has also a very injurious physical effect, frequently propagating disease in a rapid manner and to an immense extent. (Chadwick 1843:S34)

Moral, emotional, and physical health depended on removing the dead body from the home. In addition, the propensity of the poor to handle the dead as part of their funerary practice led to the threat of contagion from the corpse, with Chadwick’s report testifying to ‘the frequent exhibition, in a large majority of the poor, of those affectionate attentions to the mortal remains of their relatives, which all are anxious to bestow, and which, notwithstanding the danger and want of accommodation, make them loth to part with them’ (Chadwick 1843:S26).

The constant presence of the dead was also ‘a perpetual stimulus to excessive grief, and commonly a source of painful associations and visible images of the changes wrought in death, to haunt the imagination in after-life’ (Chadwick 1843:S40). Infection could be emotional, mental, and spiritual, as well as biological:
The spectacle is protracted hour after hour through the day and night, and
day after day, and night after night, thus aggravating the mental pains under
varied circumstances, and increasing the dangers of permanent bodily injury.
The sufferings of the survivors, especially of the widow of the labouring classes,
are often protracted to a fatal extent. To the very young children, the greatest
danger is of infection in cases of deaths from contagious and infectious disease.
(Chadwick 1843:S40)

Losing respect for death and the dead, stirring up grief, infecting the living
– all came out of keeping the body in the home. The weak needed to be
protected, and women and children were raised as examples of those who
suffered most from the practice of interment. Chadwick offered that all
such affliction could be avoided by the solution of greater use of mortu-
aries, and changes to funerary customs that would speed up the burial
process by allowing for mass graves and extramural burial.

Sanitary concerns were only one of the contributing factors to reforms
around the burial of the dead. As Chadwick’s report showcased, moral, reli-
gious, spiritual, and emotional concerns played a role as well. The religious
concerns of what to do with a dead body – and what a dead body might
do to the living – also played a role. Historian Thomas Laqueur argued
that sanitary reform alone could not be held responsible for the anxious
removal of dead bodies in Victorian London by comparing the treatment of
the dead body to that of human waste. He provided an impressive rattling
off of calculations to determine how much excrement (mostly human and
horse) found its way into the streets at the time, and concluded that if Lon-
doners were truly just concerned about sanitation and smells, they would
have dealt with this kind of waste first, or with the same attention they paid
to dead bodies. (For those interested, Laqueur’s ratio ends up being about
2000 tons of dead bodies to 160,000 to 320,000 tons of human feces in the
London of 1840.) Laqueur then asked why dead bodies caused so much
fear, concluding that part of the concern had to do with smell, and part of it
had to do with the impropriety of crowded graveyards. As Laqueur noted,
neither of these were new problems: dead bodies have always smelled,
and burial sites have often become crowded at different points in history
(2015:563–6). In order to explain how religious motivations added to the
sanitary motivations around the interment of the dead, we must turn to the
dual forces of the Great Transition and the Protestant Reformation.

The ‘Great Transition’ and the Protestant Reformation

The reported relationship between religion and science often poses the
two as adversaries, but in the context of Victorian London they worked
together: one providing the theological permission to remove the dead from the living, and the other the scientific grounds for doing so. Rather than a simple substitution of the sacred for the scientific, the two realms shared a somewhat symbiotic relationship (Strange 2011). In Victorian London, newfound concerns of hygiene separated the living from the dead, both in their homes and in their burial practices. The combined effects of religion and science on practices around the dead in Victorian London can be seen as the repercussions of two enormous shifts in Western culture: the ‘Great Transition’ and the Protestant Reformation.

The Transition, according to sociologist James Riley (2001), demarcated the historical shift toward a rapid increase in life expectancy and a drop in the infant mortality rate due to the improved availability of vaccinations, sanitation, and other medical innovations in the West. Such medical innovations allowed average life expectancy to rise from thirty-three years in 1800 in Europe to almost eighty only two centuries later. Child mortality rates, however, for both the wealthy and poor, lagged behind even as life expectancy increased, and infant mortality rates were even higher in urban, overcrowded settings (Strange 2011). It was not until the late nineteenth century that the new medical means of vaccines and sanitation brought with them a jump in life expectancy, saving the lives of mothers and children in childbirth and reducing child mortality rates overall. This first jump in life expectancy was unprecedented and would not be eclipsed until later in the twentieth century, resulting from increased distribution of both wealth and healthcare, as well as further medical advances (Riley 2001:1–57).

**Protestant Reformation in England**

The theological roots of what to do with the dead in Victorian London extend as far back as the beginnings of the Protestant Reformation in Germany and the corresponding English Reformation. For today’s scholars in the West, regardless of whether they think of themselves as religious or not, such a thought experiment requires effort, the intentional work to think outside of the modern situation where religion works as a private affair, with beliefs as varied as the individual, and where religious freedom serves as the rule of the day (Ozment 1992:3). Furthermore, the violent antagonism between Protestants and Catholics in the past remains difficult for contemporary scholars in the West to understand, given the contemporary emphasis on tolerance, religious tolerance itself being one of the effects of the Protestant Reformation.
The impact of the Protestant Reformation was idiosyncratic in each country where it took root, and its lingering effects shaped how these countries approached death (e.g., Koslofsky 1999; Seeman 2019). In England, historian Peter Marshall claimed that the effects of the Protestant Reformation in England actually centered on concerns around the dead. In his book, *Beliefs and the Dead in Reformation England*, Marshall summarized what he called ‘the paradoxical argument’ of his book: ‘that profound concerns about the status of the dead were at once a powerful motor, and an effective brake, as English society journeyed uncertainly away from the medieval past’ (2002:316). Marshall went on to complicate the typical narrative of the Protestant Reformation where the connection between the living and the dead was neatly and precisely detached. Instead, the Protestant Reformation’s effects were enormous and far-reaching – ‘this was a seismic event, a revolution of sensibilities’ – and, as such, was consequently not constricted to the celebration of private grief but continued to reverberate in communal settings: the church, the public square, and the broader culture (Marshall 2002:309).

As Marshall noted, theologies of the dead were founded on the question of purgatory and intercessory prayers for the dead. Marshall combated the various displacement theories that simply replaced intercessory prayer, beliefs in purgatory, and the payment of indulgences with other practices; he describes such theories as containing ‘lively insight’ but restricted by a functional view of religious belief, where religion merely functions as a balm to grief or provides tidy explanations for what would otherwise be inexplicable (2002:313, 316). And as historian Ralph Houlbrooke noted, commenting on the desire to bury the dead near family, or with increasingly lavish graveclothes and the like, ‘It is tempting to ascribe this growing solicitude for the corpse to inability to intercede for the soul’ (1998:370). The temptation of such an interpretation lingers still – the temptation to diagnose, as Houlbrooke notes, when one can only hazard a guess: ‘One can only speculate how far these practices were due to the sublimation or transferral of impulses of solicitude previously expressed by care for the soul’ (1998:374). Despite new Protestant teachings about the dead, the English still sought to somehow do right by their dead, both for fear of provoking the wrath of ghosts and out of love and respect for the dearly departed (Tarlow 2011:19–22). Folk practices reflected this untidiness, blurring superstition and leftover Catholic tendencies in what Helen Frisby describes as the moral economy of funerary practices (Frisby 2015).

Doing right by the dead in Protestant England brought a new urgency to connect with the dead through memorialization. In Marshall’s telling, the practice of memorialization was not a new practice replacing the old
practices of praying for the dead, but an old practice shifting to physically look more Protestant. In the past, memorialization through physical reminders invited the living to remember to pray for the dead and advocate for their release from purgatory. Such reminders included statues, plaques, and graves, as well as liturgical markers such as specific prayers, the ringing of bells, the lighting of candles, and the singing of requiem masses. Now memorialization continued through the physical markers alone, and funeral sermons replaced the liturgical practices as a way to remain pious and respectful, honoring the life of the dead. The connection between the living and dead grew into one of solely memory and honor, rather than memory and honor which led to intercession. The living no longer asked the dead to intercede, in prayers to the saints, nor did the dead compel the living to intercede on their behalf, through various attempts to release them from purgatory. The rearrangement of the relationship between the living and the dead laid the foundation for other shifts to come.

In rearranging the relationship between the living and the dead, Protestants and Catholics found themselves at odds. And in parrying Catholic criticisms, Protestants were obliged to explain their practices and provide a rationale for them, further cementing these practices of memorialization. Memorialization was to become an important theme of the Protestant English, even as the theological foundation for this practice was developed, in part, in defense of the new Protestant version of practices to remember the dead (Marshall 2002:311). As a result, the practice of caring for the dead as theologically understood could be viewed as partly reactionary, defined by what it was not: Protestant, not Catholic. Finally, even this Protestant–Catholic opposition must be nuanced, as recent scholarship has insisted. Rather than being a neat break between a Catholic piety and a Protestant one, yearned for by the laity and immediately practiced and celebrated by all, historians such as Marshall have demonstrated that the build-up and aftermath of the Protestant Reformation was a messy affair of lingering beliefs, rituals, and practices. As we shall see, this tension between Protestantism and Catholicism remained present in the Church of England, impacting the culture of England through the novels written and read, the individual experience, and the legislature put in place around the living and the dead (Lutz 2015; Nixon 2004; Styler 2010; Vejyoda 2003; Wheeler 1990).

**The Victorian poor**

With the removal of purgatory and intercessory prayers for the dead, English society had two ways of paying their respects: a proper burial and
appropriate grieving. For the poor, both were difficult to afford. Historian David Pomfret hypothesized that the emphasis on memorialization was practiced by elites and the rising middle class, who desired ‘to project their earthly status into the afterlife through an array of new burial practices and material cultures of mourning.’ Thus, the new metropolitan cemeteries became the locus for such displays of status, and ‘these desires gave shape to an increasingly elaborate set of rituals, monumental funerary architecture and extravagant mourning practices.’ Pomfret explained that ‘through this “cult of death”, rising middle classes expressed aspirations for a kind of “temporary” immortality – achieved through memorialization.’ A consequence of this was ‘the commercialization of death on a grand scale’ (Pomfret 2015:356). Pomfret’s reading, however, minimized the desire to honor the dead, a desire shared by both the rich and poor, and a desire that was religiously motivated. Caring about a proper burial and the grieving process was not a desire limited to the upper classes, nor one only motivated by perpetuating status.

Honoring the dead was made complicated by the many challenges faced by the working class. In Victorian London, the poor had to fight the life and death effects of their poverty on three fronts: first, the complicated struggle to merely stay alive. Once dead, their surviving families faced the second struggle to avoid the shame of a pauper’s burial, or the third shame of dissection and thereby no real burial at all. Families and friends would take up collections to avoid the former, and would keep the body in the home until they could raise funds, with the added benefit that the decomposition of the body might mean that it would not be fit for dissection. Such practices fueled the zeal with which sanitary reformers approached the removal of the dead from the home, even as other reforms such as the Anatomy Act and New Poor Law contributed to the desire to keep the body in the home, for both legislative actions led to pauper burials or the dissection of the poor.

The poor sought to avoid the shame and stigma of either a pauper’s burial or dissection. The alternatives to a pauper’s burial were not much better, involving overcrowded cemeteries where bodies could be piled together, chopped up to make room, or even burned (Jackson 2014:120–5). Clergy did not always show up for these burials, with prayers sometimes said days later over bodies already interred. Historian Julie-Marie Strange (2005) has detailed the funerary and mourning culture of the working class in Victorian Britain, describing the need for burial insurance, and the comparative shame of the common grave of a parish burial compared to one that the family paid for themselves. The pauper’s burial included the briefest of collective funeral services, with the dead buried naked without family
necessarily present, in a cheap coffin and an unmarked collective grave; the starkness of such a burial provided a deliberate contrast to the ceremony and honor of more esteemed clients (Richardson 1987:274–5, 277–81).

The other shame of dissection can partly be explained by the fact that, in the past, only convicted criminals would have been available for dissection, as a kind of further punishment for their crimes. With the Anatomy Act, any unclaimed bodies were now available. Such persons tended to be impoverished citizens who died in the poorhouse, the street, or the hospital. Thus, the dissection of the unclaimed poor meant that ‘what had for generations been a feared and hated punishment for murder became one for poverty,’ with the wealthy again reaping the benefits, this time of advances in medical reform as a result of the experiments conducted on dead bodies of the poor (Richardson 1987:xv, 43).

As Laqueur also pointed out, there was a certain irony in Chadwick’s campaign against the habit of keeping the dead at home, while simultaneously supporting the new practice of keeping the dead on a dissecting table through the Anatomy Act (2015:595). Both practices targeted the poor, one taking the body out of the home, the other allowing for the unclaimed dead to be snatched up for the anatomy classroom. Laqueur indicated that the threat of miasma seemed to be dismissed when a poor body was on a dissecting table and not in the home. While the hypocrisy does seem evident, such an interpretation does not also recognize the additional concerns of Chadwick and the ministers he references, namely, that the dead body in the home was not healthy for the family, in terms of both their grief or moral formation, as well as this aforementioned concern of physical infection.

Laqueur’s critique of removing the bodies from the home only to put them on a dissecting table seems to ignore the growing compartmentalization between the private and public sphere; here, the distinction is between the home and the university’s anatomy classes. Thus, the theological and hygienic concerns worked in tandem in the home, protecting the morally susceptible, with the morally susceptible defined as those who are more easily influenced, that is, those designated as ‘the weak’: women and children, but also the working class in general. In contrast, in the public sphere the dead body was becoming defined as either something in the same category as bodily waste, to be tidily disposed of, or a scientific object to be studied. The evidence of this identification with waste is present in the fact that sanitary reform was concerned with dead bodies – and not just bodily waste or garbage. Again, this transition to the dead body as object was not neat and tidy, but factored in ethnicity, religion, and class.
By 1875, the Public Health Act stipulated that the law could remove dead bodies from the home at their own discretion, for fear of the spread of disease as well as the potential impropriety of the dead body in the home. On the ground, this meant that the families of the poor had to send their dead away, whereas those with wealth and means could still inter dead relatives in separate rooms. The disparity of wealth made it difficult for those without means to honor the dead as they saw fit, even as the legislative reforms were put in place for the protection of the living.

The overlap of religion and science in Victorian London, as demonstrated by Charles Kingsley

Victorian London did not experience the same kind of privatization of religion that we have today: the public followed theological debates between ministers, Sundays were spent church-hopping to listen to the best preachers of the time, and, as we have seen, public health reports could include references to the Old Testament and church fathers. At the same time, preachers spouted forth on manners of public health from the pulpit, further displaying the overlap between religion and science.

As an example, one might turn to Church of England minister Charles Kingsley. In his writings, both public and private, Kingsley was profuse in his enthusiasm for modern science, and this enthusiasm continued beyond the grave: he left instructions for a green burial with an unsealed coffin that could return his remains to the ground (Hamlin 2012). He spoke on the themes of scientific reform allowing for prolonged and improved life. He even wrote about these themes for children, as depicted in his popular book, The Water-Babies, published serially in 1862–3. While The Water-Babies is a story about the death of children, it was also written as a defense of the work of Charles Darwin. In his sermons, Kingsley advocated for the need to combat cholera by committing to cleanliness, no matter what the cost. He furiously pointed out that the spread of this disease could be attributed to the indifference many feel toward the poor, who are the ones who suffer most acutely:

When … the Sanitary Commissioners proved to all England fifteen years ago, that cholera always appeared where fever had appeared, and that both fever and cholera always cling exclusively to those places where there was bad food, bad air, crowded bed-rooms, bad drainage and filth – that such were the laws of God and Nature, and always had been; they [the English] took no notice of it, because it was the poor rather than the rich who suffered from those causes. (Kingsley 1852:176–7)
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Kingsley’s writing was peppered with such proclamations, condemning the rich ignoring the plight of the poor, while also displaying a paternalistic attitude toward the working class who needed to be educated toward sanitary reform.

In his lectures, fiction, and sermons, Kingsley referenced both science and theology. He explained that there was no theological excuse for accepting God’s will in such suffering when these illnesses could be prevented by the human effort of committing to hygienic practices, which must be taught to the masses (Kingsley 1880:49). Kingsley especially emphasized the impact that cholera had on children to provide dramatic emphasis to his argument – and preached on the theme three weeks in a row, later publishing these sermons after another return of cholera in London. He employed the image of tossing pearls on a dunghill to describe the wastefulness in allowing a child to die when the means to allow them to live are obvious (i.e., sanitary reform) (Kingsley 1880:354–5). And repeating a refrain, Kingsley concluded with an appeal to national pride. The lower classes may be poor, but at least they were still English, and thus worth saving (Kingsley 1880:355–6).

In his life and writing, Kingsley demonstrated the overlap between religion and science, and the favoring of a Protestant worldview over and against a Catholic one. He is best remembered today for antagonizing his contemporary John Henry Newman into writing a defense of why he left the Church of England to become Catholic. Kingsley also showcased the patriotism of this era, tied with a national church: the Church of England. Such concerns shaped sanitary reform, weaving together religion and science, and faith and prejudice.

Murdoch’s Victorian London: discrimination against Irish Catholics

The poor were not the only ones impacted by the mortuary movement. As historian Lydia Murdoch explained, the move toward interment particularly affected poor Irish Catholics in London, who practiced the custom of funeral wakes. Murdoch’s argument centers on the figure of the dead child in the home, and specifically the dead child in the home of the poor, who saved up for a funeral while their dead children decayed in their bedroom. Her research explored the rise of the public mortuary in Victorian London as the place to store the dead, as the homes of the poor were considered unsatisfactory places of interment for the dead, especially for a dead child. Murdoch detailed how sanitary reform removed children from the homes of the poor in the name of health and propriety. Often, these poor were Irish Catholics, and Murdoch’s account argued that the upper- and
middle-class Protestant removal of the dead from the homes of the poor became a form of discrimination against the Irish and the Catholics. Protestant elites could afford different burial practices, literally and theologically; poor Irish Catholics could not. The shift to increasing medicalization of the dead was one literally afforded by a class optic, one that poor Irish Catholics were practically and thus existentially without, but nevertheless increasingly socially and legally subject to.

While such discrimination against the Irish population was evidenced through Chadwick’s report, the scope of the sanitary report also tackled the question of the poor more generally, as we have seen. And while Catholicism was rarely directly mentioned in Chadwick’s report, the Irish were specifically described, mainly because of their behavior during wakes. The tone of Chadwick’s report betrayed a Protestant bias, condemning the social excesses of the wake. Within the homes of the poor, the Irish were specifically singled out: ‘Amongst the Irish [the body] is retained till after the wake, which “is open to all comers” as long as there is anything “dacent to drink or smoke”; implying that such wakes are less about the care for the dead or grieving and more an excuse for a party (Chadwick 1843:S26). In addition, no attention was paid to the hygienic dangers of the dead. Again, the Irish were singled out:

Amongst the Irish, it does not signify of what disease the person may have died, it is retained often for many days, laid out upon the only bed, perhaps, and adorned with the best they can bestow upon it, until the coronach has been performed. Thus fevers and other contagious diseases are fearfully propagated. (Chadwick 1843:S26)

The respect shown for the dead here – ‘laid out upon the only bed’ and ‘adorned with the best they can bestow’ – is only briefly mentioned in between the condemnation of their lack of hygienic concern. The tenderness for the dead seems evident, although perplexing for their Protestant witnesses. The relationship between Protestant elite lawmakers and poor Irish Catholics showcased another effect of the Protestant Reformation: the division between Protestant and Catholic and the lack of understanding between the two. The Irish Catholic care for the dead during interment and the collective nature of celebrating the wake only provide fodder for the criticism of sanitary concerns, as well as the implicit moral concerns.

The relationship between the living and the dead

Historian Thomas Laqueur admitted that he naively had once wanted to study the history of ‘the meaning of death in post-Reformation Britain,’
before discovering that this would be an impossible task. ‘Archives are repositories of the dead,’ he explained (Laqueur 2015:14). Rather than attempt such an ambitious project, this article has attempted to evoke the theological context of what happened to separate the living from the dead, exploring the factors of the Protestant Reformation and the Great Transition as they relate to the practices regarding the dead in Victorian England. This movement is marked by the influence of the Protestant Reformation upon the social shift toward a self-consciously more medical and sanitary way of life.

The question of the relationship between the living and the dead lingered long after the Reformation. Even with Protestant theological reforms, the dead still had an impact on the living, although now such an impact often seemed negative and particularly mediated through the presence of the dead body. The presence of the dead body potentially effected grief, over-familiarity, moral and religious failings, as well as contagious sickness and death. Thus, the interment of the dead became a question of literal and figurative cleanliness. The practice was done to stave off corrupting the living, both physically and morally. This theme repeats throughout Chadwick’s report: the presence of physical waste and corruption mirrors – or even leads to – moral corruption. Specifically, too much time with the dead leads to too much comfort with death. Comfort with death, in turn, leads to disrespect for the dead, lax morality, and irreligion. Because the concern here was based on the dead overstaying their welcome, the wealthy were at first exempt. The wealthy could afford to keep the dead body in the home, for they had the means to inter the body in a separate room, minimizing the exposure the living would have to the dead. The division between the living and dead could occur through the separation of rooms and, more and more, through the rise of the public mortuary movement, further entrenching this division between living and dead and private and public.

As Marshall explained with regard to the pre-Reformation era, beliefs and practices around the dead were multifaceted, with competing influences. These paradoxes found their epicenter in the beliefs around purgatory, where, ‘within its orbit,’ Marshall wrote,

spiritual, social, economic and political interests were endlessly intertwined. As a cultural and social presence, the dead hovered in the spaces separating a succession of shifting polarities: allegory and realism; remembering and forgetting; particularity and collectivity; self-interest and altruism; fear and hope; the spiritual and the material. (Marshall 2002:46)

These themes of polarity and paradox did not find their conclusion in the Reformation, but continued to play out as we have seen within Victorian
England, where the rituals around the dead showcased both wealth and poverty, running the gamut between elaborate graves, lavish funerals, and decaying bodies in the bedroom. Even as such extremes took place, the common theme was that of memorialization: seeking to honor the dead through elaborate graves, through their removal from the home to the safe, contained places of the state, or seeking to keep them in the home, so that they would be close until a proper burial could be afforded. The cultural shift to place the dead outside of the city, and away from the living, exemplified the increased sense of the dead as separate entities for whom no more could be done but a proper burial. And in the name of commemorating the dead as precious and valuable, the dead became sectioned off from greater society.

The relationship between the living and dead still included a responsibility of the living to bury the dead honorably. Burial remained a matter to be conducted with propriety as the only act left to offer the dead by the living. As Chadwick referenced in his report, citing a seventeenth-century theologian,

all this, which constitutes the last office of the living, ‘to compose the body to burial,’ should be done, and that it should be done well and ‘gravely, decently, and charitably, we have the example of all civilized nations to engage us, and of all ages of the world to warrant:—so that it is against common honesty, and public fame and reputation not to do this office.’ (Chadwick 1843:S262).

Despite all the changes in the relationship between living and dead, a proper burial remained something owed to the dead, and was desired by both the rich and poor, the Protestant and Catholic, even as expectations of what burial should look like differed and shifted to separate the living from the dead more and more.

Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury, once explained that historical research is fueled by change, or, more strongly, revolution (2005). Only when things look different than before do we want to explain the shift and see what it looked like before. He details two pitfalls: the danger of seeing those who came before as exactly like us, or, seeing our ancestors as completely different. In exploring the complex causes and effects of the mortuary movement, we see the complex causes and effects of removing the dead from the living in our own era. The Great Transition evidences the impact on mortality rates such sanitary measures have given society, and although longer lifespans are to be celebrated, something else may have been lost. The fleshed-out theological import of such shifts requires further study, but I will end by drawing on the insights of historical theologian Ephraim Radner.
As Radner explained, the phrase ‘the Great Transition’ can be used because of ‘its history-defining character that therefore implies a curtain drawn on the intrinsic limits of human life itself’ (2016:23). The multi-faceted implications of death being curtained off, and the implications of death being drawn out of the home, and out of the sacred spaces of the church and the parish graveyard, are still to be studied. One implication of the removal of dead bodies is the sectioning off of human mortality from everyday experience, for both good and ill. As society continues to journey ‘uncertainly away from the medieval past’ (Marshall 2002:316), we continue to map out what has been gained and what has been lost in our distancing from the dead.

About the author

Kira Moolman is an adjunct faculty member at Wycliffe College at the University of Toronto. Her current research focuses on the stories we tell children about death, using an interdisciplinary approach that weaves together theology, literature, and history. This year she also received a grant from the University of Toronto to collaborate on an interdisciplinary response to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health; this project combines music composed and performed by graduate students at the Faculty of Music with poetry written and performed by Kira.

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Notes

1 In this article, Chadwick’s report will be referenced according to the section being cited rather than the page number.

References


