HERITAGE FUND

"Hatches, Matches, and Despatches"

Christian customs and practices for birth, marriage, and death

Introduction for teachers and readers

This article is in three parts: Baptism, Marriage, and Death. It describes these events and ceremonies in their broad historical and social context, following Christian practice from the position of an informed onlooker.

The article is suitable for use within and beyond school, in terms of age, culture, and belief. These notes provide some suggestions for its use in an age-appropriate way. The reading age is 12 years plus. Key words, with Christian significance, are in bold text.

For teachers the article enables learning across the aims of Religious Education.

For older school-age children it provides hooks for exploring values, beliefs and identity from a range of perspectives, including alternative religious belief systems across the world and historically.

For younger children, teachers, parents, families and carers, can use the material to help make sense of the physical world and their direct life experiences within and beyond their family and immediate community.

We hope you find this article to be an excellent resource.

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PART 1: HATCHES

The Churching of Women

Across the world, pregnancy and childbirth has always been a dangerous time for a mother and her child. Even in advanced societies like ours, these can be vulnerable times. Worldwide, most religions are closely involved in this stage of the lifecycle.

In Flamstead, St Leonard's Church has always offered the **Rite for the Churching of Women.** In past times this was a small private ceremony, held about a month after the baby was born. In this ceremony the new mother gave thanks to "God and the Holy Mother Mary" for her safe delivery through the rigours of childbirth, and for the continued health of her new baby. The new mother received a blessing and was then reintroduced to the community. This marked the end of her **lying in**, a time when she and her baby were only seen by close female relatives and midwives.

In poor households, "lying in" before "churching" gave the new mother time to rest and recover before returning to everyday work. It would also have given some protection from infection. Even if the child died at birth or before baptism, lying in and churching was still practised. After the ceremony, there was a celebration with friends. The men looked forward to the end of what was known as the **Gander Month,** so called because the men had to do all the domestic work themselves, during lying in, and look after any other children in the family as well.

The Christian practice of churching is based on the ancient Jewish custom of ritual purification after childbirth, as in the purification of Mary, the mother of Jesus, in the Temple in Jerusalem. This is mentioned in the **Gospel of Luke ch. 2, v. 22. The Book of Common Prayer** still provides for churching, but usually as a small part of the main Sunday **liturgy**. It is known as **A Thanksgiving for the Birth or Adoption of a Child.**

Baptisms

Traditionally, baptism, sometimes called "**christening**", was organised for around six weeks after the new baby's arrival. Today baptism is usually performed in a church or chapel. In the past, the local clergy would baptise the baby at home.

If a child is to be baptised, sponsors, usually called "godparents", are asked to protect the child's moral and spiritual welfare and to speak up for them if necessary. Traditionally, a girl is given two godmothers and a boy is given two godfathers. Anyone can be a godparent if they promise to defend and lead the child morally and spiritually until they reach maturity. The Church of England asks that godparents have themselves been baptised.

Traditionally, a baby would wear white robes for the ceremony to reflect their purity and innocence. Sometimes an ornate gown was handed down from generation to generation, but an early

English custom was to re-use a piece of the mother's wedding dress to make a robe for the baby. Another part of the mother's wedding attire would have been a lace trimmed, silk handkerchief, which was then fashioned into a bonnet for the baby to match the robe.

The Christian ceremony of baptism is in memory of **Jesus Christ's** own baptism in the **River of Jordan** by **John the Baptist**. It is a way of joyfully acknowledging that the baby is welcome as one of the children of God. Jesus's baptism is mentioned in three of the **Gospels:** of **Matthew, Mark,** and **Luke**. Jesus's baptism is commemorated on 6th January in the Orthodox Christian calendar, and 19th January in the modern Christian calendar.

Baptisms can be held in private, but are now usually part of a regular Sunday service where the whole congregation can communally renew their baptismal promises and welcome the "new member of the church family". During the baptism service the parents and godparents gather round the font, which contains holy (blessed) water. From the font the clergy leads the adults as they pray and make a series of religious declarations. The priest declares the child's full name, making the sign of the cross on the infant's forehead, usually with holy oil **(chrism)**, and then pouring some of the water from the font over the baby's head, echoing Christ's baptism. Then a special candle is lit to represent the light of the **Holy Spirit** that will be carried with the newly baptised baby throughout their life. This candle may be presented to the family as a keepsake of this happy event. If the ceremony takes place during a Sunday service, the baby may be walked around the congregation or held high so that "the family" can see them. After a cheer and a round of applause for the newest member of the church, the registers are signed to make the baptism official.

Confirmation

Confirmation is the final stage to becoming a full member of the church in many Christian denominations, or branches. Within the Church of England, young people usually become "candidates" for confirmation around 12 years of age. Confirmation is a process for confirming the promises made for them by their godparents and affirming their Christian commitment and belief. After confirmation, people are full members of their church and can join in **Holy Communion** at a service. For Christians this is the most important part of being a member of the Church. The bread and wine that they share with other members of the church community represent the body and blood of Jesus. The interpretation of Holy Communion has been argued about within the Christian Church for centuries. It is called **transubstantiation**.

Candidates attend a short course of study before a **Service of Confirmation**, at which a bishop asks each candidate in turn to step forward and confirm their commitment. They are then blessed and become full members of the Church. This is a rite of passage or a coming of age, a

special time for the **confirmands,** as they are known. Actually, a person of any age can ask to be baptised or confirmed as a member of their chosen church. Really this is all about faith and belief.

PART 2: MATCHES

Weddings

The principle of marrying another person dates back more than 23,000 years, so there are many customs and traditions, both religious and secular, that have been gathered along the way.

In the Christian Church, before a couple get married in a place of worship, they must agree a suitable date with the priest or clergy, and attend counselling sessions to prepare for "the big day". Although it is not forbidden, it is unusual to get married during **Lent** (the 40 days before Easter Day) because this is a solemn time in the church calendar and as a mark of respect no flowers are displayed in church. Some churches repeat this at **Advent,** when Christians wait for **Christmas**. An old saying states that 'if you marry in **Lent,** you're sure to repent!'. For the best time to marry, there is a longstanding view that vows should be exchanged as the minute hand on the church clock ascends upward, towards heaven.

Another old rhyme dictates which day you should be married on. **Monday** for health, **Tuesday** for wealth, **Wednesday's** the best of all. **Thursday** brings crosses, and **Friday** losses, but **Saturday** no luck at all! Sunday is regarded as the Lord's day and marriages do not happen in church on this day. Nowadays, because of the usual pattern of the working week, Saturday is the favourite and most convenient day. However, Friday is rising in popularity, as it is thought to be a lucky day to marry within **Norse mythology.** The word 'Friday' derives from the old Norse, **Freyrs Dag,** the day on which the goddess of love and fertility was worshipped.

On the happy day, the bride arrives a little while after the groom. This harks back to the time when it was the groom's duty to lead his bride into her new life. It is also why he takes his vows first. Usually, the priest waits outside the church for the bride to appear. This dates back to the **medieval** period, when the bride and groom met outside the church and the priest asked them if they were truly willing to be **bound in marriage to one another.** (In Europe, the medieval period lasted from the fall of the Roman Empire in the 5th century, to the start of the Renaissance, in the 15th century, so 1000 years.) Although marriages of that time were arranged by the families, either or both the bride and groom had the right to say that they did not want to be married. The Church would then support them in their decision and would not give in to pressure from their families. (This can be witnessed in the tale of **Christina of Markyate.**)

Brides these days are often married in white since it represents purity, but this only dates back to the mid-1800s and was popularised by **Queen Victoria.** Before that time, you simply wore your very best clothes. White does represent

purity and innocence, as we read for **baptism,** but within the Christian sphere blue is also associated with these attributes, and the **Virgin Mary** is often shown wearing blue robes. The veil is a nod back to earlier times too, when marriages were arranged years in advance. Either the bride might not have 'grown into her looks', or else might be recognised by other suitors and spirited away. The bridesmaids were also there to help conduct the bride safely to the church and were dressed like her to confuse anybody who had “ill intent”.

The old English rhyme “Something Old, Something New, Something Borrowed, Something Blue” is another tradition that many brides like to copy. These days the items listed tend to be things worn or carried by the bride, but the 'old' actually refers to the bride’s past life as a spinster, and the 'new' stands for her future life as a married woman. The 'borrowed' represents the time we have on earth, and the 'blue', as we’ve already mentioned, symbolises purity and was said to ward off evil. The last part of the rhyme is rarely quoted, but concludes “**... and a silver sixpence in her shoe.”** This was the good luck charm that was supposed to ensure prosperity.

The bridal flowers were highly scented in days gone by, when daily bathing wasn't top of the agenda and was thought to be bad for one’s health. Similarly, June is still a very popular month to marry because in medieval times most people, rich and poor alike, had their annual bath or swim in the river in the warm days of early summer and so smelled sweet and fresh.

It was also a custom to include a sprig of rosemary in the bouquet, as ancient Greeks believed that its scent stimulated the memory and would help you remember the vows and promises you made before God. Wealthy medieval families would pay the **Verger,** or **Vierger** (Latin for green), to carry a large bunch of fresh rosemary into church before the bride, so that everyone could inhale the scent and remember their own vows. If you were exceptionally rich, your family would pay for the bunch of rosemary to be gilded with pure gold.

Once inside the church, even now the bride's family sits on the left facing the altar and the grooms on the right. This goes back to when men and women were segregated within the church. It also meant that if the groom carried a sword, he could protect his bride with his left arm and draw his blade with his right.

In an echo back to the **Judaic** roots of the **Christian** faith, medieval wedding ceremonies were conducted under a canopy inside the church. People of the **Jewish** faith still marry under a '**Chuppah'**, and **Hindus** and **Buddhists** do something remarkably similar. The medieval church was much more understanding than we may think: if any children were born to the couple before **wedlock**, they were invited by the priest to stand with their parents under the tent, so that they were instantly legitimised by the marriage. The father of the bride '**gave her away',** as his daughter was his property; at this point the dowry was paid to the bride’s father by the groom. After the exchange of vows and the blessing,

the priest bound the couple's hands together and '**tied the knot**'. This is still done in many faiths, such as **Jewish, Eastern Orthodox, Coptic.** Some modern Christian priests wrap or drape their stole around the couple's hands to signify their **binding in marriage.**

The wedding ring dates back to ancient, **pre-Christian** times, when our ancestors would wear reed rings around their ankles and wrists, A circle has no beginning or end, and therefore represents eternity and the circle of life. We have the ancient **Egyptians** to thank for the ring being moved to the fourth finger (or the third if you prefer to discount the thumb) on the left hand. They believed that a vein, **the vena amoris,** ran from this finger directly to the heart; so there was a convenient and important connection between love and marriage. The **Romans** adopted this custom, first using iron rings, and then gold, as this was pure and never tarnished. When the **Romans** invaded **Britain,** they brought the custom with them and in time we began to do the same. Our **Celtic** predecessors preferred to use iron or sold gold necklaces called **Torcs,** which were made up of many twisted strands ending in two elaborate **finials** that rested roughly on the collar bones.

After the ceremony, outside the church, rice or other grains were thrown, as cereal crops symbolised fertility to our **Roman** and **Greek** ancestors. In modern times brightly coloured rice paper confetti is used, but its origins are still firmly rooted in the past.

Today, weddings have many, sometimes hundreds of guests, but despite encouragement from the church, most weddings, until the early 20th century, were private affairs, with only immediate family present. On the other hand, the celebration afterwards was an occasion that the whole community was invited to, and much eating, drinking and fun was had by all. The origins of the wedding cake are also **Roman.** Because bread was made with wheat it was seen as female and therefore promoted fertility, so the **Romans** would break a small, flat wheat cake over the head of the new bride. All the pieces were than gathered up and distributed among the guests. In time, these evolved into a stack of cakes that the happy couple would share a kiss over. If this could be done without knocking over the tower of cakes or buns, the happy couple could be sure of a lifetime of happiness and good fortune. So the modern tiered wedding cake takes us all the way back to the stacks of **Roman** buns used nearly two thousand years ago!

Congratulations, Mazel tov, toute nos félicitations, herzliche glückwünsche, grattis, Moubarak!

However you say it, well done and may you live happily ever after!

DESPATCHES

Funerals

'To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven: A time to be born and time to die...' and so it goes on. The Bible's **Book of Ecclesiastes** reminds Christians that for all life there is a natural rhythm and cycle. One day they will be called to glory to live in peace with **God the Father**.

Eventually, every living entity must die, and people of all beliefs and none are united in seeking the most respectful and fitting way to mark each other's passing. Although death is experienced by everyone, because of the sadness it generates, we don't like to dwell on it, particularly if the death is unexpected or of someone young.

When a Christian person passes away, the local priest supports the bereaved and helps them plan the funeral. The priest asks about the dead person and helps design suitable readings and hymns. The word **'funeral'** was introduced to the English language by **Geoffrey Chaucer** in his **Canterbury Tales,** but derives from the **Latin** 'funeralia', meaning burial rites. Some of our funerary customs also date back to **Roman** times.

Those who care for the departed want to see that their loved one's funeral is given all possible respect, and this can be seen in ancient **Egyptian** tombs, which contain everything that the dead would need to survive in the **Afterlife**. Indeed, our own **Celtic** and **Anglo-Saxon** ancestors did the same, with grave goods including beer and food, weapons and shields, jewellery and clothes. Some warriors were even buried with their horses and chariots. In modern times, people still like to place personal things in the coffin with their loved ones and this is the contemporary version of what our predecessors did out of love and respect.

The wearing of black clothing at a funeral dates back to **Elizabethan** times and is still seen as the colour of mourning today. After the death of **Prince Albert, Queen Victoria** wore nothing but black for the rest of her life. In **Victorian** times widows were expected to wear their **widow's weeds** (black clothing) for at least two years after their husband's death. In that era it was very common for locks of the deceased's hair to be fashioned into intricately woven plaits and placed into lockets as a memento. Macabre though it may sound to our ears, today companies offer to make the ashes of the cremated into diamonds, so that they can be used in a similar way.

Some ancient customs that were practised until the turn of the 20th century seem odd to us now, but can also be traced back to our **Roman, Greek and Celtic** ancestors. Mirrors, which were seen as magical objects, had to be covered in case the spirits of the dead became trapped in the reflected world. More recently, household clocks were stopped at the time a person died and not started again until after the burial. It was believed that until the burial rites had been duly performed, the soul was held in

suspension: time stood still until after the funeral. Within living memory, the body of the deceased has been washed by the family, or a local midwife, so that they may be clean and fit to meet the **Lamb of God.** Even now, many religions practise the ritual cleansing of a body before burial.

Funeral processions are known in every ancient civilization, but in the United Kingdom, Christians broadly follow the pattern that the **Romans** introduced when they invaded Britain from BCE 55. The **Romans** used paid mourners to weep and wail loudly in funeral processions; until quite recently an undertaker could, if requested, provide a similar service, because loud mourning was considered a sign of high regard for the deceased. Modern processions are often led by the funeral director walking in front of the hearse, probably for a short distance from the deceased's home. This is called **'paging away'** and dates back to the days of horse-drawn carriages. This small courtesy allows the friends and neighbours to pay their respects. In **Ireland** you can still pay for funeral singers to perform **laments or dirges** (mournful songs) at the graveside during a burial.

Most ancient civilizations used flowers when burying their dead. Colourful flowers were found adorning the magnificent golden burial mask of **Tutankhamun** when **Howard Carter** opened his tomb in 1922. It is thought that flowers symbolise the natural cycle of life, in that we are born small and fragile, mature into full bloom, fade and wither, and then die. White lilies are the most prominent flower used within the Christian culture, as in the language of flowers they represent purity, the innocence of the soul and the love of **Jesus Christ.** These days many like to donate the money that they would otherwise have spent on flowers to a charity of the family's choosing. Even this custom dates back to the late **Tudors,** when money and food would have been given to the poor as part of the ritual of mourning. The **Orthodox Jewish and Islamic** faiths do not permit funeral flowers. **Hindu** women lay flowers at the feet of those who have died, while mourners bring offerings of fruit. **Chinese** people use white chrysanthemums as a sign of mourning, and **Sikh** custom dictates that flowers may be used to honour those who have died in that faith.

Sometimes, the person to be buried will be welcomed into a church the day before and will rest there overnight. The priest and the family will say quiet prayers and a **watch or vigil** will be kept. This dates back to **pre-Christian** times when the **'waking (or watching) of the corpse'** was performed. In time this pre-burial ceremony became known simply as a '**wake**'. In modern times this ritual has been moved to after the burial. It used to be believed that if the body was not constantly watched, evil spirits might inhabit it, so a loud feast was arranged, with dancing and sports so that the malevolent beings would be driven away.

From the 13th century, **lich,** or **lych, gates** started to appear at church entrances. These were thatched, open-

sided structures that often had seats built into them. They were also used as places where the deceased rested overnight before burial. The seats were for people keeping watch over the body. The word **lich,** or **lych,** derives from the **Saxon** word for a corpse. The word **'coffin'** ultimately derives from both the **Latin and Greek 'cophinus',** meaning a basket or case. By the mid 1300's the word coffin was used also to describe a pastry case for cooking food in. Today we don't often see the word used in this way.

At a Christian funeral the priest offers prayers of thanks for the life of the deceased and commends their soul to **God's** safe keeping. Afterwards, while reciting prayers, the priest leads the coffin out of the church and either to the burial ground or, in a **hearse** to a **crematorium.** In a church, the coffin will face west to east, as will a grave, to face the **Risen Lord on the Day of Resurrection**. While that's the current reason, the practice actually dates back to **Pagan** times, when our ancestors worshipped the sun as their most important deity. Conversely, if the deceased is a clergyman or clergywoman, in church at least they lie east to west so that they may face their congregation one last time.

The funeral day ends with the wake, to show love and support for the family of the deceased and to share happy memories. Until the early 20th century**, funeral bake meats** (the food served at a wake) always included a ham, which dates all the way back to the funeral feasts of our **Pagan** forefathers. It was seen as proper then to 'bury someone with good ham', meaning that you had provided well for the funeral party.

A well-used **Irish** toast at a wake is ' Let's be glad for the knowing of them, not sad at the going of them! Sláinte!'

As you can see, the founders of the Christian faith were real magpies when it came to cherry picking all the best bits from pre-existing faiths. Christianity really was the 'one size fits all' religion!