Examining Religious Expression via Wording and Symbols on Gravestones across the United States (1920-2017)
Kristina McMahan, Sarah Edmonds, Madelyne Barnard, Rose Bunger, Laura Swinney, Larry Bates, Richard Hudiburg
University of North Alabama

Introduction

Religious messages and symbols can be found in a multitude of places. Research efforts have been undertaken to examine religious advertising (Sheffield, 2006) and evangelism in the classroom (Thiessen, 2012). And in spite of this multitude of ways to display religious messages, perhaps one of the least controversial, most common, and yet least studied is that of gravestones. One of the more common research examinations of gravestones is to examine how they have changed messaging across time. Giguere (2007) looked at headstones from 1720 to 1820 to find correlates with gender, moral, and social roles. Many of the male gravestones emphasized social position, status, and occupation; whereas the female gravestones emphasized motherhood and marriage.

Another method of studying gravestone messaging includes examining it from a regional perspective. One study was conducted in a single cemetery in southern Iran, and focused on the purpose of specific graphical features of gravestones (Parsayi, 2014). Symbols, such as birds and cedar trees, were most common which makes sense due to the religious significance of these objects in that culture. Gravestone messaging has been described as a final message to the world so it’s not surprising that many people use it as a platform to display their religiosity. Wearne (2017) noted that religious wording on engraved epitaphs seemed to give families a sense of peace when experiencing the death of a child. The current study falls underneath the categories of gravestone messaging in time, region, and religious messaging. Researchers took photographs of many different gravestones from cemeteries across the United States. Researchers assessed the frequency, content, and changes in religious symbols and words used on gravestones.

Materials

- Yard Sticks
- Cell phone and Camera
- Association of Religious Data Archives
- Map of Leading Church Bodies & U.S. Catholic Population

Procedures

- Cemetery Selection
- Research Team Education
- Pilot
- Data Collection
- Data Coding

Methods

- Examination of Leading Church Bodies & U.S. Catholic Population
- Map of Leading Church Bodies & U.S. Catholic Population

Results

- One-Way ANOVA:
  - Statistical significance between cemeteries (cities) for religious epitaphs (F = 6.084, df = 990, p = .001)
  - Post hoc analyses (Tukey’s HSD) – several cities differed significantly
  - E.g. Florence differed from 8 cities, Texas differed from 1 city, Ohio differed from 3 cities

Discussions

- This study had a few limitations due to the nature of it. Those include:
  1. We only surveyed 10 cities and only gathered 1,000 headstone photos. Other studies have managed to survey over 100 cemeteries in multiple countries.
  2. Our selection of cemeteries was also not random. As I mentioned, we based our choices on collecting a religiously diverse sample.
  3. The way we chose headstones within the cemeteries was also not random. We needed 10 photos from each decade, so we chose headstones based off of that.

- With the current data, we have a lot of additional information that can be analyzed. Future examinations include:
  - More differences in epitaphs over time
  - Religious wording and nonreligious wording on gravestones

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References