



KEEPING THE FAITH



**A report presented
for Royal London**

By

Dr Kate Woodthorpe
Centre for Death and Society
Department of Social and Policy Sciences
University of Bath

I. INTRODUCTION

The following report seeks to provide a ‘snapshot’ of current involvement and ritual practice across the UK. Specifically it aims to reflect on the role of religious belief in funerals and how this guides and structures post-death activity. As a piece of work conducted over three weeks in the summer of 2016 it cannot provide generalisation regarding the role of religion in UK funerals today. Rather, it aims to shed light on experiences, perceptions, hopes and concerns from stakeholders, representatives from religious organisations and experienced funeral directors.

1.1 SCOPE OF THE REPORT

This report is split into two. The first section reviews events of the last 12 months, including legislative and policy changes in Scotland and the Department for Work and Pensions’ Select Committee Inquiry into Bereavement Benefits. The purpose of this section is to demonstrate that while the issue of funeral costs and their organisation is rising up the political agenda there is still a considerable way to go before there is appropriate and equal advice, provision and support for all.

Following this review, the second and substantive section of the report explores the role of religion in contemporary UK funerals, and specifically the extent to which different faith groups get involved in funeral organisation and conduct. This second section seeks to address the following questions:

I. How do (non) religious groups structure/organise/undertake funerals according to their beliefs?

II. What does this structure/organisation/undertaking look like?

III. What does this tell us about individuals, communities, cohesion and support?

Based on qualitative discussions in the summer of 2016, this report acts as a case study ‘snapshot’ of current funeral practices. It is hoped that it serves as a starting point for wider questioning and discussions about what can be learnt from faith groups and varying responses to death and funerals.

1.2 METHODOLOGY

The first part of the report reviews policy change over the last 12 months. The second part of the report is based on discussions with 14 representatives, funeral directors and celebrants. These discussants were approached using pre-existing contacts, gatekeepers and as a result of their contribution to academic and policy debates. All were briefed on the purpose of the report, and consented to taking part. They were recorded, and subsequently agreed to their quotes being used in this report.

For this project Royal London commissioned three surveys from YouGov. The first was made up of 2,003 nationally representative UK adults aged 18+ who had organised a funeral within the past five years and had used the services of a professional funeral director. The second was made up of a random sample of 1,034 UK adults aged 18+ who had organised a funeral within the past five years and had used the services of a professional funeral director. The third was made up of 203 UK adults aged 18+ who had ever organised a funeral where the deceased was Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Sikh or Hindu. A merged and unweighted file was then produced combining the results from these three surveys together, resulting in a total base size of 3,240 UK adults aged 18+.

2.

THE LAST 12 MONTHS

The last 12 months have seen enormous political and economic change in the UK and abroad. Concerns regarding fiscal security, spiraling health and social care costs, job security, migration, and the sustainability of pensions have continued to grow both here and around the world. In the UK these concerns have come under greater scrutiny than ever before as a result of debates regarding political and financial priorities thrown up in the 2016 UK referendum. Certainly, the last 12 months have seen some of the most turbulent economic and political times since the 2008 economic crisis, culminating in and resulting from the Brexit result.

At the same time the 24/7 news cycle has continued apace, with a journalistic onslaught of concerns regarding the social, political, economic and criminal threats we all face. Local, national, and global uncertainty continues to grow and evolve, with the way of life of in western and industrialised countries, and their relationship(s) to each other increasingly challenged.

2016 has also seen a series of very high profile deaths of well-known politicians, artists and contributors to public life that have resulted in much media discussion about dying, death and bereavement. Within this discussion the purpose and visibility of funerals - or in the case of some individuals, the lack of a funeral - has been central.

It is within this highly charged political, economic, media and popular culture atmosphere that over the last 12 months funerals have been given more public and political consideration than the last decade. Certainly, considerable and laudable effort has been made by politicians in all parts of the UK over the last year to address funeral costs and state support.

2.1 ADDRESSING FUNERAL CHALLENGES

The issue of funeral costs and the sustainability of funerals and associated practices has received more political attention in the last 12 months than in the last decade. In March 2016 the Burial and Cremation (Scotland) Act was passed, receiving Royal Assent the following month. Intending to “provide a modern, comprehensive legislative framework for burial and cremation”¹, this review of the provision of post-death services in Scotland was radical in its scope and purpose. The Act covers burial and cremation provision including the re-use of graves (incorporating the process of consultation and notification, excavation, and the generation of conservation and management plans to ensure sustainability and accountability), funeral costs, the appointment of inspectors, the licensing of funeral directors, and the identification of nearest relative(s) to take responsibility for arrangements. It is quite simply groundbreaking in its vision for creating a more transparent and sustainable system of provision in Scotland, creating clear, shared standards regarding responsibility and service.

While not seeing the same level of change, England and Wales has also seen progress. Following a consultation in 2016, the process of Death Certification will be reformed in 2018, to introduce independent safeguards and consistent post-death registration services across the country. This will be in part funded by the introduction of fees for burial, alongside those that already exist for cremation.

Just as significant, following years of lobbying by public and commercial organisations such as Royal London to review the Social Fund Funeral Expenses Payment, towards the end of 2015 the Department for Work and Pensions Select Committee Inquiry into Bereavement Benefits was launched. Following a consultation phase and a series of evidence sessions, the Inquiry’s report made recommendations that included:

- The negotiation of a standard price for a simple funeral
- The setting out of the components of a simple funeral
- Recognition of the Social Fund Funeral Expenses Payment shortcomings in process and value.
- Copy Scotland’s lead and undertake a cross-departmental review of burials, cremations and funerals.

¹ Explanatory Notes, 2016: 1.

Somewhat disappointingly, the Government's response to these recommendations was timid, with little apparent appetite for setting prices, establishing 'essential' components of funerals, refining how responsibility is assessed, or undertaking a cross-departmental review. There thus remains significant room for improvement in ensuring that there is sustainable post-death provision in England and Wales, with concerns remaining related to:

- The viability and sustainability of the Social Fund Funeral Expenses Payment, which has around a 50% rejection rate and only covers approximately one third of the cost of an average funeral;
- The cost of burial and cremation, in a climate of increased private provision and local authority austerity measures, and the rising cost of cremation – which has long been regarded as 'the cheaper option';
- Lack of regulation;
- The provision of burial space in particular parts of the country;
- Rising funeral costs, that have consistently risen above inflation for more than three decades to increase beyond inflation year on year.

In a policy environment where the focus is on expenditure, a key question that does not get readily addressed is the role of community and religious faith groups in funeral practice. With involvement in funerals by the family and their extended network key to their success², it is therefore essential when building a holistic picture of funerals that communities and belief are included.

² O'Rourke et al, 2011.

3. KEEPING THE FAITH

3.1 BACKGROUND

While the issue of funeral costs has steadily risen up the political and news agenda over the last 12 months, consideration of the role of religion within funerals and how faith communities contribute towards funeral practice has not received comparable attention. One potential reason for this is the difficulty of making generalized statements regarding religious funeral practice in a westernised secular society, where religious belief and practice has to an extent been incorporated into 'non-religious' funerals. In examining the way in which religion, ethnicity and national identity morphs and merges over time, this has been referred to as 'cultural colonisation' where "existing cultures disappear because people become assimilated into the new, dominant culture"³.

Another reason why religion at funerals often gets overlooked is that in the media and academia ideas about 'tradition' are often emphasised rather than 'belief'. This typically pits tradition and custom against personalisation at funerals, presenting funerals as events where the organisers have to decide how much of the service they add their 'personal touch' to, for example through music and readings, and how much 'tradition' they include and adhere to – for example using a hearse, wearing black and so on. Most of these ideas about what

constitutes tradition stem from Victorian and post-war practices, where solemnity and stoicism in the face of death were prioritised, and religion was revered as a source of spiritual guidance⁴.

An emphasis on tradition and Victorian solemnity belies the diversity of religious belief in the UK, and England and Wales specifically. Although there has been a 10% drop over the last decade, the 2011 Census showed that in England and Wales Christianity remains the largest religion, with just under 60% of the population (33m people) identifying themselves as Christian⁵. According to the same ONS report, Islam is the second largest religious group at just under 5% of the population (2.7m people). Around a quarter of the population (14m people) reported that they had no religion. Approximately 1.5% of the population are Hindu, 0.75% Sikh, 0.5% Jewish and 0.4% Buddhist. These figures belie the subtle differences with which people identify with religious groups and what 'being religious' actually means. Our quantitative data showed that when asked about the religious beliefs of the deceased, the biggest group (38%) stated that the deceased had religious beliefs but they wouldn't describe them as 'religious'. Tellingly, half (50%) of people

³ McManus, 2013: 118.

⁴ Jalland, 2013.

⁵ Office for National Statistics, 2012.

who identified as British Christians were part of this group.

Whether or not people regard themselves as belonging to a religious group or ‘practising’, certainly the influence of religious belief and practice at the time of death has been squeezed over the last 150 years. This has reflected a long-term decline in organised religion as a cultural force within the UK, and a sanitizing of death through the growth of modern healthcare.

Thus how people, both religious and non-religious, ‘do’ funerals is vastly under-researched and an under-represented area in the media, with little shared about the opportunities and pitfalls encountered by different faith groups, and by people with no religious belief at all.

At the same time, a neo-liberal self-interest embodied by the baby boomer generation has led to a great many of the UK population ‘looking after their own’ rather than outwardly supporting their community, their neighbourhood and others. Places of worship have been replaced by shopping centres as the ‘cathedrals of consumption’,⁶ where consumers worship at the store counter altar and the material acquisition of goods has come to signify and represent identity rather than belief and

conviction. Away from the shopping centre, what happens when people are born, married and die has evolved from a quest for meaning in light of their faith into a rite of passage that is complemented by a range of services emphasising celebration that can be purchased to reflect the identities of the individuals involved. As a result, those with more resource can prosper and those without can suffer.

So where does this highly individualised, commercial world leave our sense of belonging? Our grounding in the world? What binds us to others? This question of social cohesion has been central to sociology since the advent of the discipline more than one hundred years ago. The rituals that are used at the time of death, in all countries and cultures around the world, are fundamental to this sense of cohesion:

*The universality of death rituals appears to demonstrate that human beings have an enduring need to develop behaviours and symbols which publicly grapple with the meaning of death.*⁷

The question of belonging, binding and cohesion has become ever more pressing as the world has expanded with communication technology, and ways of life are being challenged through political and economic

turbulence. At the same time, the world has geographically shrunk thanks to the advancement of long distance travel, with growing numbers of people migrating around the world and taking their culture and values with them. It is within this context that the ebbs and flows of religious belief continue to develop as people operate as global citizens, taking their faith with them when they move.

Thus there has never been a better time to reflect on the role, purpose, guidance, challenges and opportunities that religious belief poses at funerals. There too has perhaps never been a better time to examine the consequences of having no belief; exploring where people get their sense of validation, meaning and resolve from when they hold no distinct faith and live in a multi-cultural, neo-liberal, market-driven world.

As one of the very few universal facets of life, the need to manage a deceased person remains, whether or not they, or the community around them, were/are religious or not. Along with birth, death does not discriminate according to religious belief. A funeral is therefore a key life event for everyone, and is thus in a unique place to shed light on some of the questions identified above.

⁶ Ritzer, 1999.

⁷ Holloway, 2007: 149.

3.2 WHAT ROLE DOES RELIGION PLAY IN FUNERALS?

3.2.1 The purpose of the funeral

The question of who the funeral is for is one that arose time and again in discussions. Is the funeral for the deceased, their family and closest friends, or the wider community? One significant contributor to this uncertainty is the growing trend in the UK for highly personalised funerals which emphasise the individuality of the identity of the deceased and/or mourners. This move towards more bespoke and highly individualised funerals means that for many people less emphasis is on the fate of the deceased and the community in which they lived, and more on the individual who has died and the individuals who have organised the funeral. This focus on individuality rather than community has the potential to lead to a declining gravitas in funeral services:

I worry that what we're left with in a funeral, we invest a huge amount emotionally and spiritually in an event that has become almost trivial in the way it is performed. The whole thing of 'we don't want to see grief expressed' or 'let's all wear bright colours'. I can see the power of those things sometimes, I don't want to trivialise them, but I worry sometimes that what we're left with at a funeral, there's not a lot of substance there. And I'm not making this an anti-secular funeral thing as I think Church funerals can be as trivial as any other, but I wonder

how we present the gravity of the rite of passage that I think a funeral ought to be. What the answer to that is I'm not entirely sure.

(Reverend Dr Jeremy Brooks, Rector, St Mary's, Beaconsfield)

One reason for this loss of purpose is the decline of religious belief within UK society more generally. This decline has not happened in isolation however. Rather, for many people religion is slowly being substituted for other explanations for death and associated ritual.

For an increasing number of people the NHS has supplanted religion in terms of our core cultural values...

(Professor Douglas Davies, Durham University)

For people of faith the purpose of the funeral and associated activities post-death appears to be much clearer. This is borne of history, tradition, and a shared sense of understanding about the purpose of rite of passage of the funeral:

The most important thing about a funeral is that appropriate things are said about the person and there is respect, about their life, about words of affection, so that mourners are thoughtfully and compassionately looked after before the funeral, at the funeral and after the funeral in the formal periods of mourning, which are very well defined in the Jewish tradition.

(Rabbi Jonathan Wittenberg, New North London Synagogue)

Traditionally for Hindus, its part of the bereavement process. We will want to see the person passed away. We want to see the deceased as they are, in order to detach from them.
(Chandu Tailor, funeral director)

I think the Church of England has generations of experience in knowing how to hold ritual for people, and that ability and experience is really important. We can hold ritual that marks life's key moments. We can hold people's feelings and questions and thoughts at those times. When someone dies life changes, and it gives rise to all sorts of emotions and questions that take us beyond the concrete here and now. The faith based organisations have a huge wealth of experience and thinking to draw on to enable them to be alongside someone at that time. I think the people know they can still trust us to be with them at those moments.

(Reverend Canon Dr Sandra Millar, Head of Projects and Developments, Archbishops Council, Church of England)

Religious faith thus appears to provide a clearer sense of purpose as to the funeral, and the officiants working within these faiths offer a long history of experience, both their own and their organisations, for guiding the content of the funeral service.

3.2.2 What to expect at funerals today

Having uncertain expectations about the purpose of the funeral transforms into unclear understanding about the content of the funeral service itself. This can be most clearly seen in the ambiguity as to what constitutes a ‘secular funeral’, as the UK has seen a shift from ideology-led to person-led funerals, where funerals are ‘customised’⁸ to reflect the identity of the deceased:

People are no longer led by a preconceived expectation of what a funeral should look like. People are led by what they want and what they perceive to be appropriate for the person that’s died... People get a lot more comfort from that, I believe.

(Stephen Nimmo, funeral director)

While there has been a growth in person-led funerals, it was felt by most discussants that there remains a desire for something in the funeral service to reflect the continuity and discontinuity of life and death, and that this would often mean that the family would turn to religious words to try and make sense of the loss of the deceased person:

It’s how you express the continuity and discontinuity. Someone may not believe in the afterlife but still cherish that memory, so there is

continuity. How you hold that, how you honour that, how in a funeral do you make that possible? Rather than simply ‘there is no future’ or the future is somehow in heaven, whatever we mean by that. I think that’s become part and parcel of the area [of conducting funerals]. (Reverend Dr Keith Albans, Director of Chaplaincy and Spirituality, MHA)

People aren’t very sure what a ‘religious funeral’ actually means, but they want something spiritual and for many people that can still be found in the way that is led by the Church of England. (Reverend Canon Dr Sandra Millar, Head of Projects and Developments, Archbishops Council, Church of England)

I’ll meet a family and they will say they don’t want any religion at the funeral. And by the end of the funeral we are singing The Lord is my Shepherd and saying the Lord’s Prayer, not because I’ve pushed that in any way whatsoever, it’s because that’s what they want. It’s very interesting to me what people mean by a religious funeral, because they quite often will say ‘he didn’t go to church but he loved singing hymns, he loved Sunday Praise, or he loved listening to services and singing along to hymns’. And that’s why people will choose a hymn sometimes. People just like to bellow out a hymn. (Su Chard, independent celebrant)

This blending of non-religious and religious funeral content is what funeral director Dr Brian Parsons calls ‘religious infusion’, where words of faith are spoken by both officiants who believe them, and those that do not:

Literally anybody takes the service. There’s the clergy, then there’s celebrants and they fall into a number of categories: those who have been trained, those who set up by themselves, some call themselves ordained when they aren’t, but they all put themselves in a position to lead the service. Which may be quite a degree of contribution from themselves or it might just be topping and tailing the service...

In terms of religious content, it asks the question what is a religious funeral? Some of these funerals are down on the list as C of E but a non-religious person will turn up... The funeral service will contain religious elements, the Lord’s Prayer, a scriptural reading, and sometimes a short address that has a religious overtone to it, but essentially they are people who don’t believe what they are saying, compared to clergy who are ordained and are preaching what they believe. So there is religious infusion and it’s simply because the family wanted that and they wanted someone who could construct the service in the way they wanted.

⁸ Holloway, 2007: 149.

Several discussants spoke of the way in which families would declare at the outset of the funeral arranging process that they categorically did not want God or religious aspects to be included, and then during their conversation with the funeral director and/or officiant would request a hymn, a reading and/or a prayer ‘just in case’. On other occasions, discussants talked about how the deceased would be talked about in terms of being ‘reunited’ with their loved ones, or they would request a vicar to lead the service. These elements are what Anne Barber of Civil Ceremonies calls ‘comforting religion’:

What’s happened, I think, is that funeral directors started suggesting celebrants a lot more, because they are responding to people who say ‘mum was a Christian but she didn’t go to church.’ The celebrant – led funerals have become an opportunity to add some, what I call, ‘comforting’ religion.

An insurance policy approach to the inclusion of religious aspects in funerals, whereby the family include reference to a God or the presence of deceased people, shows that talk of ‘religious’ and ‘secular’ funerals is at best simplistic and at worst misleading when dealing with a recently bereaved family.

A phrase that crops up a lot is ‘we just want a little bit of God’.
(Su Chard, independent celebrant)

I see a whole range of requests. In non-religious funerals where families often want a little bit of Christian input. They sometimes ask for the Lord’s Prayer or a hymn, or something like sending the deceased into God’s loving arms at the end of the service.... It’s very, very common. I often ask why and I get the answer ‘it’s just in case’, a backup plan in case there is God, we’d better say a prayer.
(Marta Wozniak, funeral arranger)

There’s something about not wanting to rule anything out at the last minute, ‘let’s cover all bases so we’ll have the vicar taking the service even if it’s just at the crematorium’. For some people, particularly older people, it feels like the right thing to do, that the vicar should take the service. Something going back to their childhood maybe, I don’t know. Sometimes it is as the request of the deceased, that they do want some church input into the service. I think people like to also hear about the resurrection and the hope of heaven. That death isn’t the end, and those are the kind of things they hear from the church and wouldn’t from a secular celebrant. They know that there is also some kind of pastoral care

from the church, ongoing, going on past the funeral.
(Reverend Rosie Woodall, Bisley Benefice)

One outcome of this ambiguity is that there is very little way of funeral attendees to know how religious (or not) the funeral service may be until they get there on the day. Very similar to contemporary weddings, one of the very few indicators to attendees as to the tone of the service is the location in which it is held: a hall, a church, a synagogue, a temple or a chapel all provide some a clue as to the potential shape and content of the funeral. To further complicate this picture however, reasons for choosing a particular venue are not always connected to religious belief, particularly for more rural communities where the Church is often at ‘the heart’ of the village community:

Some people want to come back and have a church funeral even if they haven’t lived there recently, because it’s a place that’s important to them and to their family. It may be baptisms, it may be weddings, but there’s some kind of longstanding connection to that place, that feels important, that their last action happens in that same place.
(Reverend Rosie Woodall, Bisley Benefice)

The church holds the story of a family, it's a place where families will marry and children will be baptized, it's the place where Granny's funeral was held, and it will hold a story going back generations sometimes. And that's really important for people as well, that sense of 'this is where our story is rooted, in this community'. (Reverend Canon Dr Sandra Millar, Head of Projects and Developments, Archbishops Council, Church of England)

Similar reasons can be found for choosing particular officiants for the funeral; not because of the deceased or the family's subscription to a specific belief system, but because of familiarity and acquaintance:

You seep into your neighbourhood. I don't think people come to me because it's some kind of new way of doing funerals. I think they come to me because I did their Auntie's funeral, it's as simple as that. (Su Chard, independent celebrant)

Thus, when knowing what to expect at funerals we cannot talk unthinkingly about 'secular', 'religious', and 'non-religious' funerals, as the content, location and officiant are being selected according to a wide range of reasons.

3.2.3 When a death occurs

In practical terms what happens to someone and their immediate family and community after they have died depends on the location in which they passed away. Around 50% of people in England currently die in hospital⁹, where they will likely be taken to a mortuary facility and then released to a funeral director. For Christian people, the care of the deceased will typically remain with the funeral director until the day of the funeral. The funeral director will wash and dress the body, store the body, and transfer the body to either the funeral service venue, or the home of the deceased or their family, to commence the cortege procession to the venue. This funeral director-led process can take on average anything from 5-15 days. This is a similar process for people of no religious faith, and for people who die at home.

In some faiths, speed is of the essence. Our quantitative data shows that for Jewish and Muslim people burial within a particular timeframe is important. Those from other faith groups, including Sikhs, Hindus and Buddhists favour cremation, with some expressing a need for the disposal to take place within a certain timeframe.

When a Muslim person dies, the most important aspect is that the burial should take place as quickly as possible. So haste is the most important factor. For us, we feel that if the person has been good in this world they should seek their recompense in the grave as quickly as possible. There is no requirement to bury within 24 hours, there's no place in the Koran or the scriptures that say 24 hours, all it is is as quickly as possible. And by as quickly as possible we mean that if it can be done within an hour, it should be done within an hour. 24 hours should really be the maximum, however we are unable to do that in this country if there is a problem in determining the cause of death. (Mohamed Omer, Gardens of Peace)

I hold a record for doing a funeral in the same day, it's possible providing the family is prepared... on average we look to 3-4 days to conclude a funeral. (Chandu Tailor, funeral director)

There is an appreciation within these faith groups that in some circumstances (a) it may not be possible to bury or cremate quickly, particularly if there are questions regarding the cause of death and/or delays with registering the death, and (b) a stress on speed may cause more distress to the family, and it is therefore advisable to slow it down a little:

⁹ Public Health England, 2016. endoflifecare-intelligence.org.uk/data_sources/place_of_death

We will try and do a funeral in 24 hours. Lots of times we will get a phone call at nine in the morning, someone has died, and we will bury them that afternoon. So we do move pretty quickly. There are other people who say they don't want to go so quick, they say 'my mother's just died, I don't want to be so quick'. So we try to bury as quickly as possible but if you can see it is going to cause stress to them, they say 'no I want to wait a day', that's ok. It's up to them. It's their call.
(Melvyn Hartog, Head of Burial, United Synagogue)

Caring for the deceased is also essential for some religious groups, particularly when it comes to washing and shrouding the body. Two in five (42%) of our Jewish respondents stated that the preparation of the body was undertaken by members of the deceased's faith group. This ritual of washing and preparing the body is called Tahara (purification) and is undertaken by the chevra kaddisha, who are an organisation of volunteers.

For other religious faiths, this care of the body is typically undertaken by members of the family. A third of our respondents who identified as Sikh, Hindu or Buddhist said that a member of the family had been involved in the care of the deceased's body.

Hindus always wash the body. The reason for washing is that we believe that person is now going into God's arms, so when the person has died, Lord Shiva, the final destiny of all souls, the body is washed and dressed in clothes. It is the last memory of the family, how they want them to be dressed. So an unmarried girl for example might be dressed as a bride, because she never got married. Our mourning colours are white, so they might be dressed in white colours.
(Chandu Tailor, funeral director)

Our quantitative data showed that for Muslim people caring for a family member's body is also relatively commonplace.

When someone dies we give an obligatory wash to the body. Then you need to shroud the body, and then you need to have your final prayer for the body, and then you need to bury the body. So they are the four things that are essential for all Muslims.
(Mohamed Omer, Gardens of Peace)

For Muslim people the family do not always care for the body alone however, and sometimes there is a combination of family and funeral director preparing the body,:

The majority of people would undertake the function of the washing, shrouding and final prayer at their local mosque that would

have the facilities for that. There are a number of Muslim funeral directors who would undertake the washing of the body, and the shrouding, and they would then take the body to the local mosque, and then on to the burial ground.

Most people would use a Muslim funeral director, but the difference would be in terms of the process, the family would be getting very involved. It's a hands on approach. So the funeral undertaker would probably be responsible for picking up the body from the hospital, helping the family to get the necessary paperwork. But when it comes to the actual washing of the body, the shrouding of the body, a lot of the family members would want to participate in it. But there are family members who would not feel comfortable participating, and in that case the funeral director will take responsibility and ensure that the proper ritual bath has been given, and the shrouding has been done. So it's more hands on, but most Muslim people would have to hire a funeral undertaker as most hospitals stipulate that they will only give the body to an undertaker. But there are one or two mosques that will provide you with a service free of charge to the community. But most people will go to an undertaker, who will be a Muslim undertaker.
(Mohamed Omer, Gardens of Peace)

This merging of family and funeral director is found within Hindu families too. One reason for bringing in the services of the funeral director is the lack of familiarity of handling a body and the discomfort of dealing with a loved one's body, along with a desire to present the deceased person at their best:

In the past people would die at home and family members, they would do the wash. But what is happening is that people are in a very emotional state and when I'm doing funeral services for my clients I say 'look, I'm a practising Hindu, I do a bit of meditation, and emotionally I can deal with it a lot better, and washing and dressing I can present them a lot better'...

And 95% of my clients prefer me to do the wash and dressing myself, and then they will just come and perhaps do the hair or a little bit of makeup. And to see the clothes, to check they are dressed in the way they want them to be dressed.... There's nothing like a professional finish when it is something we are doing every day and they may only do it once in their lifetime. So there is a mixture of opinions with Hindu families as to who wishes to wash them or not.
(Chandu Tailor, funeral director)

Everybody is a human being, some people can face a deceased's body, some people can't. It is the same as every other aspect of life, some people have a phobia, some people aren't able to see their loved ones in that condition. Sometime the body has decomposed so they feel that they are not able to participate in that. So those are the reasons they may choose to opt out. But we would always try to encourage them to be there for the reason that we believe that it is your father, it is something you should do for them, as a final act. For when they are unable to wash themselves, you as the son or daughter should really be there for them in their hour of need.

(Mohamed Omer,
Gardens of Peace)

In contrast, our survey showed that almost all respondents who identified as British Christian or Secular use the services of a funeral director to prepare the body.

For the vast majority of people once the body has been cared for – be it by themselves or by a funeral director – there will be some form of funeral service. This may commence at the home of the deceased or the family, or it may commence at the funeral venue with the deceased's body in situ prior to the arrival of mourners.

Our quantitative data shows that the number of attendees at a funeral can vary according to religious belief. On average the number of people attending a Christian, Jewish or secular funeral is around 60. The number of people attending Islam, Hindu, Sikh funerals is more likely to be around 100 or more. This suggests that a commitment to the faith group, brings with it a greater sense of community, which manifests itself with greater numbers paying their respect to the deceased.

Once the funeral service has finished, the body may remain in situ if the venue is the crematorium, and if it is a traditional Hindu family they will likely wish to observe the moment the coffin enters the cremator. Many crematoria have viewing platforms for this purpose. Pyres are permitted in the UK as long as they are held in a building with an open roof, at a distance from households and public roads.

The other important thing in England that happens, is witnessing the coffin going in the cremator. We normally witness the coffin going in the cremator and catching alight. That is another closure issue. The moment the coffin catches light, that would be the equivalent to

witnessing the pyre catching alight in India. So that is another form of closure for the immediate family. And then what happens is that certain traditions only start at the family's home. Traditionally for Hindus, the moment someone passes away in the house, food is brought by neighbours and friends and relatives. Cooking starts again in the home the moment a person is cremated. Witnessing the fire, or the moment the coffin catches alight, has a lot of significance to the Hindu person.

(Chandu Tailor, funeral director)

If a burial is to take place the body and the mourners will travel to the grave, where the body will be buried. In the Jewish faith the funeral attendees witness and participate in the backfilling of the grave. For Muslim people only men attend and place the body in the grave, and is followed by three days of mourning.

Many religious faiths have specified mourning rituals that extend beyond the funeral. For Jewish people the period of shiva takes place for a week after the funeral, and involves the local community supporting the immediate family through providing food, company, and prayers:

We have a very strong tradition of shiva, the days of mourning and looking after the mourners. It's very structured in Jewish teaching, and most people find that very, very helpful.

Support would be ensuring the family have food, quite often the community will prepare a rota for food as traditionally mourners stay at home and are looked after by their community and their friends and their wider family. There are prayers each night for a week at their home, after that is over having the opportunity to talk, touch base, see how they are feeling. Particularly in the first year after death and at the anniversary of the death.

(Rabbi Jonathan Wittenberg, New North London Synagogue)

This is followed by marking the anniversary of the death, Yahrzeit. If the grave is attended on that day then a stone is placed on top to show that the deceased was visited.

For Hindu people the immediate family enter a period of mourning for 12 days, where they are visited by others, prayers are said and food is provided by the local community. A further mourning ritual is held 31 days after the death, and one year later the death is marked by Shaddra.

Belonging to a faith thus means that there are further opportunities to remember and mourn the loss of the deceased. Beyond the scope of this snapshot, we can hypothesize that these opportunities are beneficial to both the individuals involved and the wider community supporting them, in terms of psychological well-being and cementing cohesive bonds between community members.

3.2.4 The role of funeral directors

In terms of 'getting it right' funeral directors are typically the facilitators enabling families to make decisions about content and structure. This they do either through educating families about what happens after someone dies in accordance with their religion, or assisting families in determining what should happen when there is no clear-cut religious affiliation. Even when there is a clear-cut religious affiliation, there can be different practices within that religion and it is therefore vital that funeral directors are knowledgeable about religious and cultural variation, unless the family are in a position to direct them themselves:

The Hindu community is quite fragmented, from the north of India to the South of India, you've got to have an understanding of individual rituals, and all the rituals put together

Hindu people can go anywhere. The only issue that will arise is that the family will need to guide the funeral director about what they require, as oppose to going to a Hindu funeral director, who will guide the family how to do the funeral going forward. (Chandu Tailor, funeral director)

When there is no immediately obvious religious affiliation or the family does not have a specific officiant in mind it is up to the funeral director to determine who they should suggest to lead the service. Funeral director Stephen Nimmo describes the process of helping a family determine the most appropriate person to conduct the service:

If you give someone the opportunity to speak, they will speak. So if you sit with a family and say, 'tell me what it is you want, what type of service do you want?' Get them to understand that the service, take away everything I do, it's the service that forms the fundamental centrepiece of the day. It's the moment we come together and remember this person in a space. How often do we do that? How often do we have 45 minutes, an hour, to focus

on one individual? It just doesn't happen, except when they're dead. We're saying let's do the right thing by these people, but we can only achieve that by listening to people.

[I ask] Did your Dad go to church? 'No'. Was he an atheist? 'What's an atheist?' Someone who believes that when you die that's it, the lights go off. 'Oh no, he wasn't that, he believed there was something.' Ok, so for your Dad's unique service, we don't want a vicar because they're too extreme one way, and we don't want an atheist because they're too extreme the other way. And it's my job to see where someone sits in that spectrum.

For those families where there is no clear-cut religious affiliation, the process of determining the funeral content can be repeated and/or expanded with the officiant:

I ask people what are we committing the person to? And often the kettle goes on at that point and they say 'ah, we need to think about that'. That's often the time for me that the whole interview gathers and they really work out what they feel about the funeral rite. And there's been beautiful phrases they've come up with. And that can be the moment that we've gone through secular music, secular readings, and then 'ooh, the loving arms of God. Yes, I think we'll commit them to the loving arms of God'.

And I feel it's their right to be confused and to have as many ingredients that allow that funeral rite to be beneficial to them as they step out into the new. Because that's a massive part of the funeral, to think about what comes next. So if they've used words they feel comfortable with, and if we use words that does epitomise how they can make sense of life and death then there's a familiarity and safety, so I can let these people go with the right words around them. (Su Chard, independent celebrant)

For those people with no clear-cut religious faith a model of funeral 'co-production'¹⁰ is thus commonplace in the UK today, whereby the family and the funeral director/officiant work together to determine what will happen in the funeral service.

3.2.5 Generational difference

One of the most consistent themes to come out of the discussions conducted for this report was that of generational difference. As has been shown already in the reasoning for including particular elements of religious faith in funerals, for older generations tradition and custom guided by religious belief was frequently articulated as a source of familiarity and comfort.

¹⁰ Sanders, 2012.

Several discussants made reference to childhood and the ubiquitous nature of early religious learning throughout a lifetime's worth of rituals.

Differences between the generations has been exacerbated by a knowledge gap when it comes to funerals, as people typically do not arrange many over their lifetime. This has meant that change in funerals has occurred very slowly compared to, for example, weddings; the move from the margins to mainstream for some components of the funeral has not occurred quickly.

Many peoples' experience of funerals is the last one they went to, of course most people don't go to many. And I suppose some of the trends in terms of realising that other possibilities exist have become more mainstream.... For example people participating in the service and the use of different types of coffins, green burials, they've all come on. I think there's been a lot of changes.
(Reverend Dr Keith Albans, Director of Chaplaincy and Spirituality, MHA)

Despite the growth in 'alternative' possibilities in funerals, for many older people born in the inter-war years of the twentieth century, where expectations regarding funerals and the expression of grief was dominated by solemnity

and stoicism following World War One¹¹, the inclusion of faith in a somber service is still the norm.

At the same time, for many younger people some of the religious traditions associated with funerals are increasingly seen as outdated, for example in the exclusion of women in the service. Challenges can arise too when British-born younger people do not feel particularly attached to the countries associated with their religious faith. For example, while it is ideal that ashes are scattered in the Ganges for Hindus, many people no longer choose to take them there and instead will scatter them in water courses in the UK.

The desire to bury and scatter ashes in the country of birth, while maintaining aspects of religious faith in the funeral, has caused some difficulties for some religious groups in some parts of the country. In London where burial space is at a premium, the wish to be buried there has meant that burial spaces are reaching capacity much sooner than anticipated:

One of the major changes we have seen is that the new generation are all British Muslims and have no reason to repatriate the bodies back, they want to be buried in this country because it is their country, and therefore the issues pertaining to

burials is now much more pronounced than it was say ten years ago or even before that.
(Mohamed Omer, Gardens of Peace)

Changing attitudes towards death and funerals associated with younger generations can also lead to the evolution of funeral practice. One facet of funerals and religious practice that is changing is community involvement via technology. This is particularly important for religious groups that wish to conduct funeral services as quickly as possible after a death, where it can be difficult for people to attend. For some Jewish people, for example, this involvement is now possible via funerals being broadcast over the internet.

3.2.6 Community involvement: the importance of proximity

As noted above, whether or not people can be involved in a funeral often depends on their proximity to one another. The extent to which religious practice is upheld in funerals is thus not only generational, it is geographical. The closer that a family, community or religious group live to one another, the more they can play a part in each other's lives, pass on religious practice, share and uphold expectations, and

¹¹ Jalland, 2013.

participate in shared activities. A very good example of this can be found in the Jewish faith where people typically live near their synagogue and can more easily attend a funeral and/or take part in shiva in the seven days following the funeral.

Proximity to one another is also important in terms of education and ensuring that families are not isolated after a death. For those people within a community that physically live near others, it is therefore not surprising that bonds with one another are easier to maintain, and religious custom and practice can more easily be shared between families.

At almost every funeral, when it comes to washing and shrouding, will have someone who has the knowledge of what needs to be done. So it's not a case where the family are left in the dark. Because remember most people only face this situation once or twice in their life, it's not an everyday occurrence. So that's why they need someone with knowledge, who is able to guide the family at the most difficult time in their lifetime.
(Mohamed Omer, Gardens of Peace).

3.2.7 The future for religion at funerals

Religion and belief, and custom and tradition, will continue to play a part in funerals in the UK. What will be interesting in the next 25 years as the baby boomer generation begin to age and die, and the generation(s) born in the 1970s onwards begin to organise funerals, is the extent to which organisations upholding religion will be able to bend and flex to accommodate individual wishes, beliefs and values, and expectations. All discussants of religious faith recognised this in terms of the challenges they faced with encouraging younger generations to engage with belief in death and life more generally.

In this 'snapshot' report of current practice, it is important to recognise that going forward religious belief will evolve and change over time. We cannot draw a line under religious activities and make absolute claims regarding its future.

Most of us tend to think of a religion as a fixed and unchanging set of beliefs, a faith which is exclusive and incompatible with other faiths. This view is fallacious. All of the main world religions have changed in their systems of belief over time and under the influence of the various cultures into which they have spread.¹²

Thus it is important that, similar to when appreciating the ambiguity of religion and secularism, it is acknowledged that religious belief is continually developing, alongside shifting patterns of residence, employment, migration, explanations for death, technology usage and so on. The contribution that religion therefore makes to funerals is not fixed.

Nonetheless, for all discussants, the conviction that having belief could help people, whether dead or alive, in times of need was unswerving:

It must help you in some way, if you have a belief in something... something to fall back on... can talk to someone.... To help and support you.

(Melvyn Hartog, Head of Burial, United Synagogue)

Whether or not people believe in God, the 'just in case' inclusion of reference to faith suggests that others who declare that they do not want God at the funeral might feel similarly.

¹² Murray Parkes et al, 2015: 13.

4. CONCLUSION: ENGAGEMENT, CONTINUITY, FAMILIARITY AND REPETITION

Themes that arose from discussions indicate that for funerals shaped by religious ideology and belief there are clear(er) expectations about ritual content and associated behaviour. Much of this is informed by long-standing and shared histories, often guided by experienced members of the community or funeral directors. This sense of continuity can provide significant comfort at a time of grief. This also enables the family and wider community to engage with the loss that has occurred and experience the sadness of their grief.

A move towards more person-led funerals may run the risk of losing the significance of sadness for many people. Our quantitative data showed that for 4% of respondents the funeral contained celebratory aspects, compared to 19% who indicated that it was a solemn affair. Recovering this significance is arguably something to aim for, to enable families and communities to engage with death fully, to foster a sense of continuity in practice over time, and to provide a uniform framework and clear expectations about the purpose of a funeral.

Let's invest this moment with something powerful. When we're in the crematorium it might be something as simple as encouraging people to go over and say their own personal goodbyes to the coffin. It's encouraging an engagement.

We have to allow grief to be ritualised, and my worry with modern funerals is that they don't allow grief to be ritualised because we want happy occasions and we don't want anybody to be sad. And I think what part of what needs to happen is to recover that ritualised grief, however that could happen (Reverend Dr Jeremy Brooks, Rector, St Mary's, Beaconsfield)

Familiarity, be it with the rituals, the funeral director or the officiant taking the service, can help facilitate this sense of gravitas, alongside a sense of trust and satisfaction for the family and wider community that the funeral and associated practices is doing what it needs to do, for the deceased, for the bereaved and for the deceased's wider networks. Providing cohesion for communities, this can include preparation of the body and prolonged mourning activities before, during and after the funeral.

Person-led funerals, where the focus is on the individual who has died and the individuality of the family arranging and attending the service, do not at present appear to provide a comparable sense of familiarity and repetition. What is lost for the family and network at this important rite of passage requires further examination, including whether the loss of familiarity affects grief experiences and long term health, and whether or not consistency helps with closure.

Certainly, without specific instructions it can be difficult for funeral attendees to know in advance what type of funeral they are attending. This is not to say that the inclusion and amalgamation of non-religious and personalised funeral activities is detrimental to the quality of the funeral or the experience of the family or attendees. What is interesting however is the extent to which the officiant leading the funeral service believes in what they are saying, particularly in the case of 'secular' funerals that often incorporate elements of Christian faith and practice, 'just in case'.

To get as full a picture as possible of UK funerals today religious belief and what it can provide for individuals, families and communities needs further and full examination. This examination needs to include the comfort and familiarity provided by religion, and what constitutes religious infusion. Similarly, secular funerals require further empirical examination.

5.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Kate Woodthorpe is a Senior Lecturer in Sociology at the University of Bath. As a member of the UK's only research centre devoted to the study of death, dying and bereavement, her work has examined funeral costs and practice, cemetery usage and professional development in the deathcare industry.

For more information about Royal London
or this report please contact:

Meera Khanna – PR Manager

Email – meera.khanna@royallondon.com

Phone – 0207 506 6585

Gareth Evans – Head of Corporate Affairs

Email – gareth.evans@royallondon.com

Phone – 0207 506 6715

