

Funerals Of the Unaffiliated

By Simon Smith of green fuse contemporary funerals, published in the Funeral Service Times in July 2010

Summary

Many people do not claim membership in any religious congregation, but the vast majority of the “congregationally unaffiliated” continue to mark life events, such as death, through communal rituals officiated by religious professionals. We look at four aspects of unaffiliated funerals: 1. creativity versus standardisation; 2. the process of ritual creation; 3. participation by family and friends; and 4. shared meaning. The findings suggest that despite their informal character, unaffiliated funerals often utilise a standardised ritual structure. By focussing on the life of the person who has died rather than a theological interpretation of death, they articulate shared meaning by emphasising belief in God, personal immortality, and the importance of living a good life according to cultural, rather than religious standards.

Changing funeral practices of the unaffiliated

Over the past few decades funeral practices in the UK have undergone remarkable changes, giving families far more choices and options. There has been a clear shift away from the impersonal, standardised and theologically focussed funeral services of the past. Many aspects of the funeral ceremony come down to personal choice with the opportunity for families to take an active role in choosing the music and readings and eulogising the person who has died. The primary task of the funeral professional today is to assist families in creating such a funeral.

In this era of choices, even though 73% of UK citizens are Christians, only 8.6% of the population attends a Christian church on a regular basis (Brierley 2008), leaving over 40 million people “congregationally unaffiliated”. The unaffiliated are faced with a unique challenge when they wish to plan a funeral: to whom and to what do they turn? They have no connection with a religious minister or a particular denomination, and thus have no prescribed model of how the funeral might look. They are free to create the funeral from scratch and to choose whatever elements are desired. How the elements are chosen indicates whether unaffiliated families are taking the lead as ‘ritual creators’ or continue to rely upon professionals.

The second aspect is with the beliefs and religious themes expressed in unaffiliated services. Funerals provide an opportunity, if not an obligation, to express publicly held beliefs about the meaning of life and death. Often these beliefs are only expressed in times of crisis. What do those persons who claim to be non-religious, spiritual or vaguely religious really believe and what religious or other symbols and rituals do they use to express their beliefs?

With the fragmentation, individualisation and secularisation of society, for many there is no longer a communally shared belief system and the individual now

stands vulnerable to the terror of death – “homeless in the cosmos” (Heinz 1999). Heinz argues, modernity leaves us unable to create meaningful death rituals and what death rituals remain are ineffective and irrelevant, having lost the capacity to evoke sacred symbols and myths to answer life’s deepest questions. On what basis can the unaffiliated funeral create a shared, meaningful ritual? The unaffiliated funeral is constrained only by what the family and friends planning the service deem to be most meaningful. They provide an opportunity to explore the possibility of shared meaning in our highly individualistic society.

The role of funeral directors

The funeral director’s role includes matching the family with the best celebrant or clergy person for its needs. Matching is done by asking the family what they want in the ceremony, gaining a sense of their belief systems, picking up subtle clues about what they do not want and observing the personalities. Matching beliefs means understanding what the family who says “Dad wasn’t very religious” really means and finding the most appropriate celebrant for that. Matching personality means putting the family that approaches the death as a life well lived and with humour with a less formal celebrant who can bring a lightness to a ceremony. Because making a good match is important for the family’s overall satisfaction with the funeral director, it is important to get this right.

Although the actual service is planned by the family and celebrant, funeral directors can encourage the family to think about the music, readings, eulogy, environment and rituals before they meet the minister. Because most people know so little about funerals and what is permissible, many unaffiliated families are a bit blank at first. A well-informed and sensitive funeral arranger is a vital link at this early stage.

There is clearly an overlap between the funeral director’s role with the family and the celebrant’s. Unaffiliated families need a lot of support in the early stage of the process because they don’t have a person to talk to or a tradition to fall back on. The funeral directors can see themselves as working with the celebrant to please the family. With unaffiliated families the “right” way to do the funeral is whatever they want to do, and while directors make suggestions, the final decisions are made by the family when they meet the celebrant.

According to Winkel, H. (1999) the supposed change is described as emerging from so-called post-modern culture. Its characteristics are a higher quota of self-determination and consideration of individual interests rather than following technical guidelines for dealing with death. The quintessence of modern mourning culture is its individualisation. Individualisation is the basic constituent of modern societies, not separating but connecting their members in a new manner of social differentiation. Treating each person as a special and unique being is meant to be an axiom not only within the medical system, but also for the accompaniment of mourning. It means enabling persons to practice rituals or to behave in ways in keeping with their culture and lifestyle. But an intimate, personal atmosphere at the funeral cannot be created by the funeral director on

his own. The involvement of friends and relatives in the arrangement and organisation is necessary, facilitated by the funeral director.

Reitz (1997a; 1997b) characterises this as a synthesis of tradition and modernity expressed in times of transition. In his opinion, coping with rites of passage is basically a duty of the community. And he sees the funeral director as a guide for self-organisation of the bereaved, based on creativity and improvisation. From this perspective funeral homes have to become more familiar with guiding and instructing, leaving the agenda with the family.

Many unaffiliated families are looking for some spiritual or “toned-down” religious element to the service, perhaps a hymn to sing, or The Lord’s Prayer, or perhaps a reading from an Eastern religion, but for religion not to dominate. Sometimes they just want someone to facilitate the service, almost a master of ceremonies role and to hold a safe space in which they can do their own thing. This can be difficult for members of the clergy, not to talk about religion or God and the beliefs they have dedicated their lives too, and it may be unreasonable to expect them to do it. Fortunately there is a growing number of independent and civil celebrants who will reflect the exact beliefs of the family.

Celebrants and members of the clergy who specialise in unaffiliated services make it a practice to meet with the family face-to-face and put aside extra time to plan a ceremony that is personal and meaningful for the participants. This takes longer than planning the standardised service, and it takes longer to write the ceremony too, but most families don’t mind paying a little extra for this vital aspect of the funeral. We may be talking about an extra £100 on a total funeral bill, which to most is quite insignificant given the additional sense of satisfaction and comfort it can bring.

In the unaffiliated service the main focus is usually on the life, beliefs, values and character of the person who has died. Perhaps several people will talk about them, or there may be open spontaneous sharing. Personal objects and photographs may be present, the music and readings carefully chosen as favourites or to reflect the life and beliefs of the person who has died. A special venue may be used, for example a community hall or perhaps home, with the room decorated in a particular style.

Many people “turn off” when Bible and scriptural readings are used, but it is possible to convey theology and spirituality in poems and readings that people will listen to, for example in poetry or the writings of Kahlil Gibran or Rumi (a 12th Century Sufi mystic and the biggest selling poet in the US). It is possible to convey the idea of committing someone to God’s keeping, and an afterlife or universal salvation, through words and readings people generally find more accessible. Most families want a religious message which is subtle and universal rather than explicit or sectarian, a broader message, a spiritual message which conveys the common beliefs of religion without the dogma. Toning down the theological message and God-language at an unaffiliated funeral is more of a challenge for some clergy than others. The mention of them is more difficult for some humanists than others, but most independent and civil celebrants are

comfortable and familiar with this territory. It is the role of the person taking the ceremony to comfort those who are mourning, not to convert them to religion.

Unaffiliated funeral ceremonies often follow the same broad format as standard services: opening words; prayers or words about life and death; eulogy; readings and music; commendation and committal; a closing. The main variations in form are in the addition of ritual actions, such as the placing of flowers on the coffin, candle ceremonies, open space for anyone to speak (time permitting) and the venue used or the decoration of the space. The gathering afterwards may be a part of this additional ritual, with particular food and refreshments.

At many of the unaffiliated services in which I have been involved and witnessed, three main themes were emphasised: the value of the life of the person who has died; the idea of some kind of continuation after death, whether expressed as hope of heaven, or ongoing consciousness or a more specific belief; and the importance of the continuation of living a good and purposeful life for those left behind, now they have been reminded of their mortality.

We come back now to our original themes of creativity versus standardisation; the process of ritual creation; participation by family and friends and shared meaning.

1. creativity versus standardisation – many unaffiliated funerals are certainly recognisable in shape and form when compared with standardised funerals. They differ to the extent they move away from the standardised according to family wishes and capacity to act, and constraints of place and time. But most contain individual and creative elements, which set them apart.

2. the process of ritual creation – because families frequently rely on the suggestions of funeral directors and members of the clergy, unaffiliated funerals often recycle the most commonly used readings and music. However, where the funeral celebrant offers much broader choices, then these differ from the standard to a much greater degree. For example by giving a family an anthology of readings and encouraging them to take a broad view of music, we find a high degree of personal choice and variation. As the demand for unaffiliated funerals increases, and expectations rise, we will certainly see greater variation from the standardised format and content.

3. participation by family and friends – we are seeing a high degree of participation in creating the ceremony and on the day, with family and friends eulogising, reading, singing and playing music, participating in bearing the coffin, lighting candles, placing flowers and other personal rituals. According to Robert Bellah (1985) the modern individual is most comforted by the opportunity to express and assert one's self. Self-expression has become its own ritual, an adaptive strategy for coping with the aftermath of death, functioning in the same way religious rituals do. On the other hand, Tony Walter (1999) argues that ritual must be rooted in community. My observations suggest that many of these funerals are community events, with broader participation, shared meanings and

understandings; the community of those who loved the person who has died coming together, to express their love and their sense of loss collectively.

4. shared meaning – the emphasis on the individual person who has died and on personal self-expression does not take away from the fact that unaffiliated funerals can be full of shared meaning. The expression of universal spirituality and broader religious themes are less likely to exclude people from shared meaning than a standard Christian service. I was struck the other day by how few of the two hundred or so people at a Church funeral for a forty year old woman would even participate in saying the Lord's Prayer, even though it was written in the service booklet. Whilst not constituting a comprehensive belief system, the themes of celebration of life, hope in personal immortality or some kind of continuation of consciousness, and the importance of leading a good and purposeful life provide a meaningful framework through which all who attend can confront the reality of death. Even when families request a non-religious or secular funeral, what they often want is a less traditional service that expresses their universalistic beliefs in a personally meaningful way.

References:

I am indebted to Kathleen Garces-Foley for permission to summarise and paraphrase parts of her article *Funerals Of The Unaffiliated*, published in *Omega*, Vol. 46(4), pp287-302, 2002-2003.