

‘Funerals aren’t nice but it couldn’t have been nicer’. The makings of a good funeral

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Abstract

There is growing comment in both academic and popular writing about the shape and content of funerals today, with general agreement that we are seeing marked changes with a growing trend towards secularisation and personalisation. Despite this, there is as yet relatively little systematic research on the topic. This article reports on a study funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council UK into spirituality in contemporary funerals. This qualitative study centred around case studies of 46 funerals in the north of England and gathered data from observations of funeral arrangement meetings as well as the funeral and semi-structured interviews with bereaved families and funeral professionals. The way both sets of participants engaged with the funeral and its constituent elements in an active process of meaning-seeking, meaning-creating and meaning-taking was closely aligned with contemporary understandings of humanistic spirituality. There was, however, little evidence of adherence to formal religious belief systems or wider philosophical frameworks amongst the bereaved families but considerable evidence of drawing on religious tradition and specific beliefs to locate personal meaning-making. The authors conclude that the funeral remains a significant ceremonial event which is psycho-social-spiritual in character and purpose.

Keywords: funerals, spirituality, religion, ritual, deceased, funeral directors, celebrants,

Introduction

There has been renewed public interest in funerals in the UK over the past decade. From the subdued funerals of the mid-twentieth century, the early part of this century has seen a steady expansion in the types of funeral and options available. For a society which supposedly avoids discussing death, we have shown ourselves surprisingly interested in one of the central events around an individual death. Academic and popular commentators are agreed that funerals in late modern Western societies reflect similar trends of personalisation, secularisation, consumer choice, and individual stories in place of traditional meta-narratives (e.g. Cullen, 2006 Cullen, L.T. 2006. *Remember me. A lively tour of the new American way of death*, New York, NY: Harper Collins. ; Gill & Fox, 2004 Gill, S. and Fox, J. 2004. *The dead good funerals book*, Ulverston: Welfare State International. ; Holloway, 2007 Holloway, M. 2007. *Negotiating death in contemporary health and social care*, Bristol: Policy Press. ; Long, 2009 Long, T. (2009, 6 October). The good funeral. *Christian Century*, 20–24. ; Loyalka, 2005 Loyalka, M.D. (2005, 17 November). Putting the fun in funerals, *Business Week Online*. ; Quartier, 2009 Quartier, T. 2009. Personal symbols in Roman Catholic funerals in the Netherlands. *Mortality*, 14: 133–146. ; Ramshaw, 2010 Ramshaw, E. 2010. The personalization of postmodern post-mortem rituals. *Pastoral Psychology*, 59: 171–178. ; Schafer, 2007 Schafer, C. 2007. Post-mortem personalization: Pastoral power and the New Zealand funeral director. *Mortality*, 12: 4–21.). Thus funerals today are presented as serving the needs of the bereaved, rather than commending the departed; as celebrations of the life lived rather than symbolically marking the passing on; as personally customised tributes rather than an acknowledgement of the individual existence within a wider existential frame for understanding life and death.

This process began with a reaction in the 1980s against the impersonal way in which many religious funerals were conducted (Littlewood, 1992 Littlewood, J. 1992. *Aspects of grief. Bereavement in adult life*, London: Routledge.) and the meaninglessness of the Christian liturgy for the majority of mourners (Bowman, 1975 Bowman, L. 1975. *The American funeral*, Westport, CT: Greenwood.). However, the rise in ‘DIY’ celebratory funerals has brought with it new disquiets: that the abandonment of traditional ritual has left mourners unable to express or manage their grief (Coward, 2002 Coward, R. (2002, 10 April). The problem with grieving. *The Guardian*. ; Valentine, 2006 Valentine, C. (2006). Academic constructions of bereavement. *Mortality*, 11, 57–78.); that an obsession with customer satisfaction leads to a mistaken interpretation of the funeral as a retail rather than existential event (Lynch, 2004 Lynch, T. (2004, Summer). Funerals-R-Us: From funeral home to mega-industry. *Generations*.); that funeral directors increasingly exercise their pastoral power to determine the parameters of ‘healthy grieving’ (Bremborg, 2006 Bremborg, A.D. 2006. Professionalisation without dead bodies: The case of Swedish funeral directors. *Mortality*, 11: 270–285. ; Schafer, 2007 Schafer, C. 2007. Post-mortem personalization: Pastoral power and the New Zealand funeral director. *Mortality*, 12: 4–21.); and that ministers of religion feel threatened by the rise in influence of the funeral director (Emke, 2002 Emke, I. 2002. Why the sad face? Secularization and the changing function of funerals in Newfoundland. *Mortality*, 7: 269–284. ; Laderman, 2003 Laderman, G. 2003. *Rest in peace. A cultural history of death and the funeral home in twentieth century america*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.) and struggle to incorporate personal meanings without trivialising (Long, 2009 Long, T. (2009, 6 October). The good funeral. *Christian Century*, 20–24. ; Quartier, 2009). Contemporary ceremonies are depicted as spiritually barren with human services professionals failing to recognise the spiritual needs within the funeral of many cultural groups (Collins & Doolittle, 2006 Collins, W.L. and Doolittle, A. 2006. Personal reflections of funeral rituals and spirituality in a Kentucky African American family. *Death Studies*, 30: 957–969.).

In parallel to these changes taking place in funerals has been a growing debate about the nature and place of religion and spirituality in contemporary society (King, 2001 King, U., ed. 2001. *Spirituality and society in the new millennium*, Brighton: Sussex Academic Press.). Increasingly termed ‘humanistic spirituality’ (Holloway et al., 2011 Holloway, M., Adamson, S., Mcsherry, W., & Swinton, J. (2011). *Spiritual care at the end of life: A systematic review of the literature*. Retrieved from www.dh.gov.uk/publications) and espoused by a range of perspectives including secularists, contemporary definitions highlight the pursuit of meaning and purpose; a sense of relatedness between oneself, other people and one’s environment; an integrated sense of self which may be termed ‘wholeness’; and experiences of transcendence which infuse everyday life. This discourse emphasises personal expression, life-enhancement and individually customised meanings over handed-down, traditional religious belief systems, all of which may or may not involve belief in some external power or divine being (Holloway & Moss, 2010 Holloway, M. and Moss, B. 2010. *Spirituality and social work*, London: Palgrave Macmillan.). It is becoming apparent that seemingly secular practices may constitute new forms of religiosity and spirituality (Heelas & Woodhead, 2005 Heelas, P. and Woodhead, L. 2005. *The spiritual revolution: Why religion is giving way to spirituality*, Oxford: Blackwell. ; Davie, 2007 Davie, G. 2007. *The sociology of religion*, London: Sage.).

These two parallel trends – the changing nature and significance of funerals and a growing discourse concerning a broader ‘spirituality’ – have important implications for the ways in which we ‘manage’ death in contemporary society.

The study

This qualitative study of 46 funerals took place predominantly in the north of England. Data were collected through: observation of the pre-funeral arrangement meetings with funeral directors and (where permitted) celebrants; observation of the funeral; a post-funeral family interview; in phase 2, interviews with key informants (funeral directors, celebrants and others involved in the funeral industry) including some outside of the study area who contacted us following media exposure. The sample of funerals was, with a few exceptions, obtained through one large funeral directors company. Initially, sampling was on a convenience basis dependent on the throughput of funerals. However, data collection and analysis were concurrent using processes of theoretical saturation and constant comparison to ensure internal validity (Charmaz, 2006 Charmaz, K. 2006. *Constructing grounded theory. A practical guide through qualitative analysis*, London: Sage.) and as the research progressed, the funerals accessed through the one funeral company offered few new themes. After 40 of the target 50 funerals, we therefore sought out only funerals which differed in type from those already studied, in effect those of different faiths and different secular approaches. Our Project Advisory Group members facilitated access to British Humanist Association (BHA) funerals (the humanist funerals to date having been conducted by independent celebrants), the local hospice put us in touch with one family and research team members used personal contacts to reach others. The research fellow was involved in all parts of the study; other members of the team variously undertook observations and interviews. The research fellow observed the pre-funeral meetings with the funeral director and where possible the celebrant, following which two researchers observed the funeral. About 10 days after the funeral, the research fellow contacted the families and interviewed one or more members at home. For the majority, but not all, of the funerals, all three parts of this data collection were completed (Table 1). In Phase 2, the 29 key informants were interviewed face to face or by telephone (Table 2).

Table 1.

Table 2.

Two thirds of the funerals were conducted by a religious celebrant (Table 3) and in a similar number the deceased was aged over 70. A consequence of the recruitment method, with particular funeral directors' offices being keener to participate than others, was that a significant number of the deceased and their families came from large council housing estates. The majority of funerals were attended by a moderate numbers of mourners (20–60); one funeral had only four mourners and three over 120. The age range of those attending each funeral was generally from those in their twenties to the very old with middle aged predominating. Only 14 funerals included teenagers and in only 7 were younger children present. All funerals included both sexes although there were more men at some and more women at others. Ten interviews were with men, 17 with women, 7 with husband and wife couples and 3 with mother/daughter pairs. The age range of those interviewed was approximately 40 to 80, most being middle aged. The participants were from a wide range of backgrounds but showed little discernable difference in willingness to participate. Families were keen to take part in the research, partly because, 'it might help others' and partly because, 'the deceased would have liked that'. It was clear in some of the interviews that some subjects welcomed the research as a way of giving importance to the deceased, in adding a sense of the deceased's immortality and recognition of his/her importance to other

people as well as the immediately bereaved. A process of staged consent was followed whereby families could opt out at any stage or consent to only certain parts. ¹

Analysis

The fundamental question which this project aimed to illuminate was how meaning is sought, ascribed and expressed through the funeral, and whether and for whom and through what forms, this can be termed ‘spiritual’. However, the ethnographic method used to explore this central question produced a wealth of rich qualitative data on all aspects of both content and process of the funerals studied. ² Observations from the pre-funeral meetings and the funerals informed data collection in subsequent phase(s), both as common themes and specific features (for example, if a family declared they were not religious but opted for a religious celebrant and chose a number of religious features for the funeral, they might be asked about this in the interview). Systematic computer assisted coding (NVivo) was used to initially code in detail to free nodes, first line by line and then by focused coding (Charmaz, 2006 Charmaz, K. 2006. *Constructing grounded theory. A practical guide through qualitative analysis*, London: Sage.), the actions observed, perceptions of the actions by the actors, the meaning ascribed to the actions, reflections on religious beliefs and conceptions of spirituality, and indications of such beliefs expressed indirectly through readings and music chosen (Figure 1). This enabled detailed interrogation of these data (both as one complete data set and within sub-sets) and repeated iterations of developing themes. Analysis was conducted thematically and by topic across the complete data set and within and between participant groups using a combination of grounded theory to consider how and why families construct meaning and actions in the funeral and narrative analysis to consider recurring words, themes, events and actors (Doucet & Mouthner, 2008 Doucet, A. and Mouthner, N.S. 2008. What can be known and how? Narrative subjects and the listening guide. *Qualitative Research*, 8(3): 399–409.). Analysis included a limited quantification of funeral type and responses in order to provide an indication of the extent to which themes were widespread or limited to particular individuals or funerals. Reading, thinking and discussion within the interdisciplinary team resulted in new lines of questioning and contributed to the development of four broad themes:

1. The importance of form and structure and the patterning of informality;
2. The need for symbols and ritual and symbolic and ritualistic representations of emotions, beliefs and values in behaviours and practices;
3. The distinctiveness yet interdependence of actors and roles and the use of presence;
4. The relationship between religion, spirituality and meaning.

Table 3.

Within each of these themes are located a variety of sub-themes, including those commonly remarked upon such as the use of music (Adamson & Holloway, 2012a Adamson, S. and Holloway, M. 2012a. “A sound-track of your life” – music in contemporary UK funerals. *Omega*, 65(1): 33–54. ; Caswell, 2012 Caswell, G. 2012. Beyond words: Some uses of music in the funeral setting. *Omega*, 64(4): 319–334.), all of which bear detailed consideration in their own right. However, the purpose of this article is to do justice to the comprehensive picture which the study produced through conveying a holistic sense of what these funerals in one north-east corner of England were all about. In so doing, we are able to corroborate much

of which is anecdotally known about contemporary funerals, but, more importantly, to reach behind immediate modes and expressions to deeper and underlying purposes and functions.

There were two features common to all the funerals which seemed to define their essential character and purpose. First, it was an event which the different participants came together to 'stage', almost as actors in a drama with the narrative being the story of the deceased's life (Davis, 2008 Davis, C.S. 2008. A funeral liturgy: Death rituals as symbolic communication. *Journal of Loss and Trauma*, 13: 406–421.). Second, the funeral was used to try and make sense of the relationship between life and death (Ramshaw, 2010 Ramshaw, E. 2010. The personalization of postmodern post-mortem rituals. *Pastoral Psychology*, 59: 171–178.). Within both of these we suggest important new insights. In contrast to opinions that one group of participants is gaining ascendancy over others - for example, that funeral directors are dictating the shape of the funeral (Laderman, 2003 Laderman, G. 2003. *Rest in peace. A cultural history of death and the funeral home in twentieth century america*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.) or that mourners are 'reclaiming the funeral' (Walter, 2005 Walter, T. 2005. Three ways to arrange a funeral. Mortuary variation in the modern West. *Mortality*, 10: 173–192.) - we found that each had a clear sense of the part they play and their reliance on others. Rather than accepted wisdom that today's funerals are about celebrating the life rather than focusing on the death, we found that making sense of the relationship between life and death was an important pre-and post-requisite to the life-centred funeral.

Form, structure and the patterning of informality

Whatever the age or status of the deceased, the number of mourners or setting, the funeral emerged as a significant event in which families spent time, energy (physical and emotional) and care in order to 'get it right', as well as considerable reflection afterwards on what the funeral had achieved. The brief period between the death and the funeral was characterised by intense planning and preparation in which choices and decisions had to be made. Not everyone had done this before, and for these families in particular the role of the funeral director was important in guiding them through the process. The same process of working together generally characterised the interaction between the celebrant and the family in deciding the elements of the service: 'I get a picture of what they want to say, what they want to do, and then I weave around that words and liturgy' (Christian celebrant). Some celebrants were at pains to check out with the family what they were planning to say and do, this civil celebrant saying that she would make repeated visits, '...just to get it right for them' (Civil celebrant).

Ceremony

This careful preparation and 'rehearsing' came together on the day in a funeral service which had the form and content of a ceremonial event, irrespective of the degree of informality adopted in tone. There was a remarkable similarity of form across all the funerals, with the funeral address being the centre piece (except in the funeral for a Catholic priest where it was important but embedded within the Mass) and without exception including a eulogy celebrating the life of the deceased. This was the case whatever the 'religious' or 'secular' shade of the funeral. Celebrants made conscious use of the service structure to manage the dynamics of the occasion, seeing these in emotional, social and/or spiritual terms according to their religious or philosophical persuasion:

I believe that the Christian funeral service has a structure which is helpful to people.
(Christian celebrant)

... there's a kind of cadence to the whole thing. There's a sort of serious bit at the introduction ... And then there's the story, which often has some light moments ... and then you have a period of reflection which goes right down in terms of mood ... and the committal which is the most sort of solemn and serious part of it. And then after the committal you lift it again and send people out to a more upbeat note. (Humanist celebrant)

Some Christian as well as humanist celebrants saw the progress of the funeral service primarily in terms of a therapeutic event in the grief process:

... the family to move on ... through the grief of loss, to acceptance. (Christian celebrant)

Music, readings and poems were used to 'punctuate' the ceremony and manage the emotions. Celebrants thought it important also to provide space for personal reflection. Generally this was through music, almost invariably chosen by the family:

In the middle of the service I think it's important for people to sit back and listen to a piece of music which has got meaning and memories for them and at the end of the service too.
(Humanist celebrant)

Such interludes were also used to 'manage' the different beliefs of mourners, as well as the different relationships between each mourner and the deceased, the celebrant inviting them to remember the deceased in their own way and say a prayer if they so wished.

The clothing worn by all participants contributed significantly to the creation of a ceremonial event. For religious ministers their dress was one of the more overt features reinforcing the ceremonial aspects, vestments being symbolic and sometimes richly coloured. All celebrants wanted to dress appropriately for the particular occasion and humanists might include a colour which was symbolic for the family. For example, one wore a pink scarf because pink was the deceased's favourite colour but she emphasised that it was always important for her to be dressed 'appropriately':

I'm making some kind of respectful contribution, but I don't think it's at all appropriate for the celebrant to be wearing a, a football shirt.

Mourners almost universally wore sombre colours, whether the style of their dress was formal or informal and might include additional symbolic items such as a rugby team's scarf. Dress was therefore chosen as something which was deemed appropriate and signified respect for the deceased, and was something the bereaved could *do* for the deceased:

(*Mother*) always commented how...I look my best in a suit....and that's how I respected my mum. (Funeral 17)

In two cases offence had been caused by someone dressing in a way that was deemed inappropriate – a Rabbi in a shocking pink coat and a brother wearing casual clothes.

Care was also taken over what the deceased should be dressed in, sometimes with a view to mourners viewing the body in the chapel of rest, but always because it *mattered* how the deceased was presented at their final social event:

We bought him a new suit ... He didn't own one but he went out in style. (Funeral 27)

This man, a delivery driver, had left instructions for the funeral director:

He loved his job and had to stop working because of his cancer and he'd got a brand new set of UPS uniform in his wardrobe for when he died and, "you'll put me in that".

The use of ritual and symbols

Tradition and ritual

Part and parcel of any ceremonial event are prescribed behaviours which in the traditional religious funeral take the form of rites and rituals. Only in the funeral of the Catholic priest did we see a fully ritualised event, but this did not mean that these funerals were devoid of ritual (Davis, 2008 Davis, C.S. 2008. A funeral liturgy: Death rituals as symbolic communication. *Journal of Loss and Trauma*, 13: 406–421. ; Ramshaw, 2010 Ramshaw, E. 2010. The personalization of postmodern post-mortem rituals. *Pastoral Psychology*, 59: 171–178. ; Schafer, 2007 Schafer, C. 2007. Post-mortem personalization: Pastoral power and the New Zealand funeral director. *Mortality*, 12: 4–21.). We observed three categories: ritual belonging to a religious service; ritual employed because 'traditional'; and emerging patterns of behaviour which take on the characteristics of a ritual. These categories were not mutually exclusive. In most instances different traditions and 'cultures' sat easily alongside each other, for example, the introit liturgy being intoned to a background of pop music. One family with no formal religious beliefs requested that prayers be included because 'traditional' and what their mother would have wanted. Sometimes the failure to observe the correct tradition caused distress, for example, Jewish mourners being unable to convey the coffin to the grave because the trolley was in a locked prayer room; Jehovah's Witnesses were disturbed by the cortege through the cemetery to the graveside as making a show around the dead body is contrary to their beliefs. Some religious celebrants tailored the ritual according to the degree of religious observance of the deceased.

Behaviours which seemed to take on the characteristics of a ritual were mainly focused on the coffin and seem to indicate a growing trend, often led by younger people and gaining momentum amongst the mourners. We observed people touching, caressing, bowing and waving to the coffin at over one third of the cremation funerals, more commonly when the curtains were left open. There was a mix of spontaneity and rehearsed behaviours. For example, it was part of the routine 'script' of some of the humanist celebrants to invite people to face the coffin at the committal and to come up and touch the coffin at the end of the service; in response to this, one principal mourner moved into the centre of the aisle and executed a formal 'military' bow before turning smartly and walking briskly out. The other mourners for the most part followed suit. When asked at interview whether this had been planned he said it was entirely spontaneous and was surprised to learn that others had followed his lead. At another funeral an elderly couple returned to the chapel and followed the grandchildren's lead of spending time touching the coffin. Our key informants agreed that these behaviours are increasing but had different views as to what they represented, whether

making a connection with the deceased, taking their leave, or an attempt to find a substitute ritual for discarded religious rites.

One widow said,

It was nice yeah because it just showed that everybody else wanted to have their last, ... moment with him. (Funeral 8)

An important point in all the services where more formal language and rituals were employed was the committal. Religious celebrants used the liturgy with a formal and sometimes dramatic tone and might make the sign of the cross or lay a hand on the coffin. Humanist celebrants tended to have their personal set form of words. Families were conscious of the committal as being both important and emotionally difficult, and some made specific requests for the celebrant to say particular things – for example, that the deceased would be re-united with loved ones, or, conversely, not to introduce any religion. There are strong echoes here of Davies' (2002) contention that rhetoric is used as 'words against death'.

Symbols

Ritual and ceremony were closely tied up with symbolism. Symbols were of different types and used by both celebrants and mourners, but with different functions. In religious ceremony, symbols are introduced to reinforce or represent a particular aspect of faith (Quartier, 2009 Quartier, T. 2009. Personal symbols in Roman Catholic funerals in the Netherlands. *Mortality*, 14: 133–146.), and likewise, the secular celebrants in this study tended to introduce symbols to convey their philosophy of life and death. The common symbol used most frequently by both was the candle. Candles were used by religious celebrants to represent the resurrection light illuminating the darkness of death and as a broader representation of hope irrespective of religious belief; by secular celebrants as an artefact contributing to the ceremony; and by families as a personalised symbol evocative of the essence of the deceased:

She was a great candle person... So we had candles and just flowers on the coffin. (Funeral 46)

In general, families tended to use particular artefacts or motifs as symbolic in terms of their memories and representation of the life lived rather than as 'stand alone' symbols representing a particular concept or belief. Consequently, if the symbol chosen by the celebrant did not also have personalised meaning for the mourners, it did not operate as a social symbol because there was no consensus of meaning (Bourdieu, 1991). One humanist celebrant liked to use the poem 'Four candles for you' and to light four candles as she did so, but this man commented:

The candles meant nothing to me either way ... it may have meant something to others. (Funeral 10).

However, at another humanist funeral the family embraced the idea with each mourner lighting a candle (Funeral 42). In another, candles were lit simultaneously at the funeral in England and by grandchildren in Australia, and functioned as both a powerful symbol and symbolic act, which the minister interpreted for the mourners:

In spirit we can unite together... The flames are steady, they are living flames... They take away darkness. (observation notes from Funeral 34)

Actors, roles and presence

A ceremonial event is only partially predetermined, however, and the part played by each participant contributed significantly to the sense of it all coming together on the day. We identified distinct roles for the funeral directors and celebrants, of which they themselves were very conscious. Equally significant were the parts played by the mourners and also the deceased.

Funeral directors

The funeral directors in this study were quite clear about what their role was, and their views were variously echoed by celebrants and bereaved families. First, the funeral director's role was seen as pivotal. Funeral directors expressed their overall aim as being to ease the whole process for the family – making the arrangements, ensuring everything went to plan, getting through the day. Some celebrants added that it was really important for the funeral director and celebrants to work as a team.

Funeral directors distinguished three core functions arising from that aim to carry the burden for the family. First, to offer guidance to the family; to act in a caring and pastoral role (Bailey, 2010; Bremborg, 2006; Dyson, 2008 Dyson, G. 2008, 25 June. Funeral directors can bring much to bereavement care. *Nursing Standard*, 22(42): 33; Lensing, 2001 Lensing, V. 2001. Grief support: The role of funeral service. *Journal of Loss and Trauma*, 6: 45–63.); to facilitate and direct proceedings. They variously positioned themselves along this continuum, from orientation towards the pastoral role,

My job and my brother's job and my sister's job is to put our hand out and say, come on, I'll hold your hand.

to the functional:

In my view we are undertakers because someone rings us up and asks us to arrange a funeral then we are undertaking to do that for, for that family. (Funeral director 5)

It was the balance of having full information and being supported in making personal choices which people most appreciated:

...having a funeral director like Jane who is... willing to just do whatever people want and is willing to contribute ideas as well. (Funeral 42)

Celebrants

Conducting the funeral was the celebrant's central task but this required for all a preparatory meeting with the family. Some celebrants also undertook post-funeral follow-up in the form of a visit, card or telephone call. The pre-funeral meetings varied considerably in length and also subject matter and some secular celebrants had several meetings or phone calls with different family members. All celebrants wanted to find out about the deceased and the family in order to construct a eulogy which was both appropriate and sympathetic to their

wishes. Where a set liturgy was to be used, less time needed to be spent on constructing the funeral service, although the family's wishes and choices were accommodated where possible. Some ministers of religion regarded the meeting as a pastoral opportunity and responsibility and might offer to say a prayer with the family, offer a contact card and sometimes also an invitation to attend church the following Sunday.

The celebrant was generally very much in control of this meeting, making suggestions and asking questions. This resulted in a process of 'guided choices', where a number of options or suggestions might be put to the family within the framework either of the religious ceremony chosen or the (secular) celebrant's interpretation of what the family wanted:

...take them through the service at what point various different things can happen, so ... they've got choices and they feel a part of what's going on. (Christian celebrant)

Those celebrants who invested considerable time and energy in making the preparations with the family emphasised the importance of listening and were concerned to check that they had got it right. Some prepared a written script which could be checked with the family and kept as a memento afterwards.

The belief framework for all the funerals was evident in the way the funeral was conducted and fell into four types: (i) a set liturgy, with varying amounts of personalization in the address; (ii) focused on the life of the deceased but still offering comfort and hope through religious ideas; (iii) independent humanist and other secular celebrants who focused primarily on the life of the deceased but would include familiar religious elements such as the Lord's Prayer if the family so requested; (iv) British Humanist Association celebrants focused entirely on the deceased, except for brief references to the humanist philosophy and/or to eco ideas but would include a period of quiet reflection which could be used for private prayer.

The main impact of these differences was the extent to which focus on the life of the deceased *constituted or was one element in* the service. So, for example, the Jewish Reform Rabbi devoted her address to a full eulogy; the funeral for the Catholic priest embedded a eulogy of his life as religious calling within the Requiem Mass; the Jehovah's Witness elder began his account of the deceased's life with her conversion and a full theology of sin, redemption, death and resurrection was expounded throughout the service; a Quaker reflected that the funeral is a thanksgiving of the contribution made by the deceased to the Meeting before thinking more generally of the grace of God. Most Christian ministers saw their job as balancing celebration of the life with being faithful to their own religious commitment. This contrasted with the celebration of the life *being the funeral* when led by a secular celebrant, perhaps couched within the humanist philosophy of life and death:

...can I serve that person well because...that relates to what's important about having a funeral in the first place. (Humanist celebrant)

An experienced funeral director reflected that this did result in a different 'feel':

The emphasis is, is on the personal with the Humanist...whereas quite often the vicar's a little bit for factual.

Another subtle difference emerged in the way in which the task of leading the funeral was perceived and exercised:

And so my job is then to, to lead them ... to hold the congregation captive. (civil celebrant)

The Imam leads the, the proceedings but we all do ... pretty much the same thing except he leads what we're doing. (Muslim informant)

A corollary role for most of the celebrants was to offer comfort and support and for clergy this often extended into pastoral visits after the funeral. There was general consensus that the celebrant also has a pastoral responsibility, although one funeral director reflected that he thought ministers of religion offered more 'comfort' than humanist celebrants, and this was also our observation from the content of the services. In rare cases they were prepared to extend this beyond broad sentiments of God's love and caring:

It was about a two and a half hour counselling session basically, and it was a blessed moment for him and for me because I was there for him. (Christian celebrant)

The mourners

One of the changes often referred to in modern funerals is the extent of participation in the service of family, friends, work colleagues and representatives of the wider community. For the immediate family, this participation began as they made the arrangements with the funeral director and jointly constructed the service with the celebrant. One civil celebrant acknowledged:

The more they give the more I can give. If ... it's like getting blood from a stone it's never going to be the best service in the world.

We did not see many family members delivering the tribute or giving a reading. In a couple of cases this had been the intention but on the day the family member did not feel able to do so and asked the celebrant to read for them (Nelson, 2011 Nelson, J. 2011. Parting words. *Massachusetts Review*, 52(1): 82–90.). Less gruelling but nonetheless active participation took such forms as: bearing the coffin; joining in hymns and prayers; approaching and touching the coffin; lighting candles; interaction through nods and verbal responses with the celebrant; applause for those who read; playing musical instruments; laying flowers or scattering soil at the graveside. Some families felt that all mourners had contributed simply by being there and the significance of this should not be underestimated. Even the smallest funerals included friends and neighbours and close family members took great satisfaction in sharing the occasion with a wider community, although often surprised at who turned up. This father said of his son's funeral, 'You don't realise how many people you touch in your life.' (Funeral 35). Some mourners had travelled considerable distances, including across the world. Others were unable to be there for a variety of reasons, but they had been in contact and were appreciated as part of the 'community of mourners'.

The deceased

What bound the mourners together in 'making' the funeral was their relationship with the deceased and the role of the deceased in the creation of the event became very apparent. Hallam et al. (1999 Hallam, E., Hockey, J. and Howarth, G. 1999. *Beyond the body. Death and social identity*, London: Routledge.) refer to the social process by which the dying person becomes a corpse and bereavement literature attributes to the funeral the function of addressing loss. However, the *social space* between the death and its immediate aftermath,

during which the funeral takes place, is largely passed over in the literature. In our study, the 'deceased' occupied this space in ways which were quite different from either their preceding status as a dying person (Valentine, 2007 Valentine, C. 2007. The 'moment of death'. *Omega*, 55(3): 219–236.) or their subsequent status as 'lost loved one'. Principally their influence was seen in determining the shape and content of the funeral and the family took great satisfaction from feeling that the deceased would have liked it.

Davies (2002 Davies, D.J. 2002. *Death, ritual and belief*, 2nd ed., London: Continuum.) suggests that rather than this motivation stemming from 'respect for the dead' it is linked to fear and a desire for the living to be left alone. In our study there was a strong correlation between general satisfaction with the way things had gone (expressed as 'nice') and feeling that it had been as the deceased would have wanted. Often this desire to 'please the dead' was linked to specific elements in the funeral, such as choice of music reflecting a favourite piece or genre.

For example, this family placed a packet of cigarettes in the coffin because, 'I'm sure he is thinking about his cigs' (Funeral 20). This sister could not remember the name of the flowers the deceased liked and commented, 'She'll be looking down on me and saying ...' (Funeral 38). The curtains were to be left open at another funeral because, 'she would never forgive us – she would want to be watching.' (Funeral 25). Another family made a special request for the cortege to follow a route along the street where the deceased had formerly lived, because she always liked to go past the 'old house'. This woman had liked flowers and her son asked for them to be put in the chapel of rest before the funeral, 'just to make it a bit nicer for her in there.' (Funeral 17).

A considerable number of stories were told in which the bereaved claimed to have seen or felt the deceased's presence. For example, one man showed us a photograph of what he claimed was a face that appeared at his window at precisely the point when his mother's body was moved from the hospital mortuary. Others described specific help given as they struggled with a particular task. Others referred to the deceased coming to them as 'guardian angels'. There are many accounts which document bereaved people's continuing experiences of the deceased's presence (summarised in Bennett & Bennett, 2000) but the notable feature of our accounts is their portrayal of the active role played by the deceased in the period between the death and the funeral, influencing its shape, watching and approving the proceedings and intervening to help with practical problems in the disruption caused to the bereaved's life by their departure. This is enshrined in Jewish thought, where the deceased is thought to be still aware and not at rest until after the funeral, 'and must be given full attention.' (Jewish informant). Evidence of the bereaved maintaining the social relationship after death (Hallam et al., 1999 Hallam, E., Hockey, J. and Howarth, G. 1999. *Beyond the body. Death and social identity*, London: Routledge.) and theories of 'continuing bonds' (Klass, 2006 Klass, D. 2006. Continuing conversation about continuing bonds. *Death Studies*, 30: 843–858.), focus on ongoing socio-emotional mechanisms employed by the bereaved for accommodating the loss. Our data suggests the altered but active agency of the deceased in the management of their own status passage (Van Gennep, 1960 van Gennep, A. 1960. *The rites of passage*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.).

The relationship between religion, spirituality and meaning

Religious or humanistic beliefs were to some extent implied by the choice of celebrant and implicit in the readings and music chosen, but discussions about belief occurred in only four

of the funerals studied – with three religious celebrants and one secular. Jewish and Muslim respondents reflected that they have no need for a preparatory meeting because the format for the funeral and burial is prescribed and derived from their faith and associated rituals – ‘...it’s not one we can make up type of thing.’ (Muslim informant). Whereas the form of the service was of great concern to celebrants, the families focused on content and their concern was that the funeral should be a *meaningful event*. Meaning might be found in celebration of the life, or in locating their bereavement experience within some wider philosophical-religious framework (Lloyd, 1996 Lloyd, M. and Holloway, M. 1996. Philosophy and religion in the face of death and bereavement. *Journal of Religion and Health*, 35(4): 295–310.), or, for the majority, in both.

The process of making meaning

Personal meaning-making was a feature of all the funerals studied but unlike Neimeyer (2001 Neimeyer, R., ed. 2001. *Meaning reconstruction and the experience of loss*, Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.), who recounts a therapeutic process of dealing with grief through *meaning reconstruction*, we observed a three-stage process – meaning-seeking, meaning-creating and meaning-taking – of imbuing the funeral with meaning in order to manage the transition to a new relationship with the deceased. Thus the focus of the families’ meaning-making was re-connecting, maintaining connections and finding new forms.

Meaning-seeking was evident in the ways in which families made choices in their arrangements for the funeral, for example, the music chosen, style of coffin, flowers, readings and personally customised symbols or symbolic items. Music was particularly important and not always for the lyrics alone (Adamson & Holloway, 2012a Adamson, S. and Holloway, M. 2012a. “A sound-track of your life” – music in contemporary UK funerals. *Omega*, 65(1): 33–54.). Broadly speaking, all the choices were made for one of two interrelated reasons – to celebrate and convey the essence of the deceased, and to thereby maintain a connection with them. Thus, whether it be a piece of music, a style of doing things or a particular motif or artefact, these choices might variously convey the essence of the person, act as a reminder, or confirm the relationship between the deceased and the bereaved.

Funeral directors had a significant role in helping to *facilitate* meaning through enabling choices. Celebrants were clear that their job was to jointly *create* the service which met the family’s needs: ‘to help the family to put together a ceremony which has meaning for them.’ (Independent celebrant).

This co-creation of meaning (Kelly, 2008 Kelly, E. 2008. *Meaningful funerals. Meeting the theological and pastoral challenge in a postmodern era*, London: Mowbray.) extended beyond operationalising the families’ choices. It involved sensitively listening to and interpreting what they were sometimes struggling to express, as well as reaching behind their expressed wishes to higher levels of meaning. For the humanist celebrants this primarily involved contextualising the celebration of *this* life in an awareness of shared humanity, some using language like ‘the great human endeavour’. Celebrating and giving thanks for the life, remembering and creating further memories, and paying respect and tribute to the deceased were all important. Religious celebrants also paid attention to these aspects but for them it was important also to draw out religious and sacramental purposes. Whilst recognising that families chose a religious celebrant for a variety of reasons, religious celebrants reflected that it was part of their task to place the death within a supportive framework of faith.

The purpose of offering these philosophical/religious frameworks was in part to enable families to find something positive within the funeral. Celebrants, funeral directors and families identified a number of emotional and psychological functions fulfilled by the funeral which imbued the proceedings with added purpose. Saying farewell, providing comfort and support for the bereaved, providing permission to move on, were interwoven with other features of meaning-making:

Its purpose was to say goodbye to someone in the best possible way ... it had a reflection on her life, the happy times, and I think it sent people away with the right lasting memories of someone ... it gives you the chance to ... pay your respects ... it did all of those things. (Funeral 22)

A Muslim informant suggested that the funeral could prompt a revaluing and re-orientating towards finding sources of meaning and purpose:

... It's a constant reminder that life isn't forever and sometimes you know it... pushes you towards doing more good.

Finally, the social and community functions of the funeral provided a further tier of meaning. Families used phrases like 'a decent send-off', 'a rite of passage', and commented on the importance of people coming together. The strength of this feeling surprised us, since the modern tendency is to view this aspect of the funeral as significant only in terms of identity and for migrant communities (Olwig, 2009 Olwig, K.F. 2009. A proper funeral: Contextualizing community among Caribbean migrants. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 15: 520–537. ; Reimers, 1999 Reimers, E. 1999. Death and identity: Graves and funerals as cultural communication. *Mortality*, 4: 147–166.).

It was in the interviews afterwards as families reflected on the funeral that it became evident how, and usually for what reason, *meaning-taking* had occurred. Usually this related to the operationalising of their personal choices. This man reflected on the lyrics of a particular song chosen together with his partner before she died: 'Nothing more to say on that. It was just very, very meaningful for me.' (Funeral 10).

Sometimes also they were struck by something which the celebrant did:

It's very much up to the Rabbi to bring ... anything into the Service which basically brings ... meaning to the Service... as she knew her very well she was able to give an absolute... brilliant eulogy. (Funeral 45)

Others found meaning in the affirmation of religious faith:

I think it was a confirmation of, of my, my faith really... as the sort of positive aspect of death. (Funeral 46)

Conceptualising death

Important as personal meaning-making was in all the funerals, there was another, underpinning aspect to their 'sense-making'. This proximity with death seemed to have focused people's thoughts on how they conceptualised death and its relationship to life. We found a wide range of beliefs about death which clustered into five categories: those

contained within a religious faith; those espousing a materialist position; those reflecting dualist notions of the body and the soul; those conceptualizing death as transition from one form of life to another; and those which conceived life and death as a whole and fitted with eco-spirituality models (Zapf, 2005 Zapf, M.K. 2005. The spiritual dimension of person and environment: Perspectives from social work and traditional knowledge. *International Social Work*, 48(5): 633–642.). The majority held to positions which were neither firmly religious nor wholly secular. The notion of transition was strongly linked to the possibilities of reunion in another life. For a number of respondents this was the belief that they held onto most strongly, often reflected in the songs chosen for the service. For this son, the nature of any afterlife was itself not important, but the notion of reunion was fiercely asserted:

So erm, where do they actually go, bloody hell... I don't know... my mum's maybe got a smoking room up there ... I don't really know. But erm I do believe that they do come together. I believe that they do come together.

Spirituality

To return to the initial and core research question, these two aspects of the funeral – the creation of a ceremonial event, and the funeral as a vehicle for sense-making - came together in expressions and articulations of spirituality which chimed with popular contemporary definitions. In her summary of the core common elements which run across the multiple definitions of humanistic spirituality, Holloway (2012) has added the recognition that spirituality is seen and experienced in *behaviours and practices*. Hornborg (2012), from her fieldwork in Canadian Mi'kmaq reserves, suggests that it is this which distinguishes the Mi'kmaq's spirituality from Western notions: 'spirituality is largely based on practice: on rituals and everyday life practices' (p. 265). Likewise in this study, despite its Western location, bereaved people persevered in trying to distinguish a dimension which was more than their emotional response, and although they admitted they were struggling to 'put it into words', they were able to express their spirituality in *what they did*.

We drew six broad conclusions concerning the evidence of spirituality in contemporary funerals. First, we found considerable evidence of beliefs, cognitions and practices which broadly correspond with contemporary understandings of spirituality. Second, there is significant evidence of the need to engage in personal meaning-making. Third, personal meaning-making processes and practices may be consciously linked to recognition of spirituality and spiritual experiences. Fourth, we found little evidence of adherence to formal belief systems but considerable evidence of people drawing on religious tradition to imbue the funeral with meaning and as a vehicle for spiritual experience. Fifth, ritual is an important element in social, familial and individual behaviours and helps to imbue the death with meaning for the community, the family and the individual. Finally, in the co-creation of meaning, the extent to which bereaved individuals and families take or find meaning within the religious or philosophical stand-point of the celebrant or other overt spiritual framework, stems from their own religious or philosophical starting point. This is interesting because our study also demonstrates that their 'spiritual perspective' or 'worldview' (Holloway & Moss, 2010 Holloway, M. and Moss, B. 2010. *Spirituality and social work*, London: Palgrave Macmillan.) does not automatically dictate their choice of celebrant.

The unique individual mix of perspectives, beliefs and practices is best illustrated by a selection of the pen pictures taken from the case study research notes:

- ‘Roman Catholic. Lavish – horses, expensive coffin. Coffin at home. Talking to the coffin. Music secular songs with life associations. Ideas about reincarnation.’
- ‘Salvation Army though “not really religious”. Appreciated service. Music popular religious/secular. Coffin ritual. Some ideas about afterlife.’
- ‘Humanist. Secular music. Importance of respect. No belief in God but ideas of reincarnation, something outside the material.’
- ‘C of E with prayers, sentimental religious poems and popular songs. Minister talked about being reunited after death. Also probably his choice of poems.’
- ‘BHA humanist service. Deceased and wife believed in humanist philosophy but wife expressed feeling that this did not rule out spirituality. Specific comments about spirituality. Wife had been brought up in free churches and been to a RC school.’
- ‘Service led by spiritualist friend – beliefs important to the family. Secular music and readings but with spiritual elements – reincarnation. Reference to afterlife – moving on to next phase of enlightenment.’
- ‘Reform Jewish service with burial. Traditional prayers. Eulogy important. Jewish culture important to daughter but unsure about religious belief.’

In these pen pictures are echoes of perspectives on the state of belief evoked by Davie’s original suggestion of the concept of ‘believing without belonging’.³ One central question concerns the mismatch between the apparent survival of belief amidst declining religious practice, which some sociologists have consistently argued will inevitably reconcile into full-blown secularism (Bruce, 1995 Bruce, S. 1995. *Religion in modern Britain*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. ; Bruce & Voas, 2007 Bruce, S. and Voas, D. 2007. Religious toleration and organisational typologies. *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 22(1): 1–17.). Davie’s response that the picture in respect of more heterodox belief is much less clear-cut, notably, ‘those beliefs which relate to the soul and to life after death’ (Davie, 2007 Davie, G. 2007. *The sociology of religion*, London: Sage. , p. 140) is borne out by this data. However, her suggestion that another trend is ‘belonging without believing’, operating as ‘vicarious religion’ in which a relatively disconnected but appreciative majority broadly identify with a religion pursued on their behalf by an active minority of believers, is neither an accurate or complete account of the ways in which religious resources were used by the bereaved families in this study. As outlined, rather than passive meaning-taking they actively sought and created meaning through their own unique mix of resources from which they were able to take meaning.

The deceased ‘continuing’

In contrast to the difficulties in articulating their ‘spirituality’, the families had no difficulty in explaining the reasons for their choices of form, content and symbols. These variously connected to the theme of ‘continuing’, one which the celebrants made considerable use of. Bereaved people demonstrated a surprising mix of spiritual beliefs and humanist philosophy, sometimes in direct contradiction, as this man, who had opted for a humanist funeral as a deliberate rejection of religion, exclaimed, ‘...she is physically no longer on this earth ... Spiritually she’s still here, oh my word!’

As outlined in the previous section, a significant number of people talked about the deceased ‘continuing’ as a *physical presence*. Also prevalent was the idea of the deceased continuing in *memory*. This was distinct from remembering because it implied a continuing relationship.

A third theme was the deceased continuing in the *legacy* left behind. A fourth, popular with celebrants and expressed in the words of songs and poems, was the deceased continuing in the *love* still held for them. Some celebrants combined a number of these ‘continuing motifs’ and this seemed to be particularly powerful for the bereaved as highlighted by this woman:

...one thing that I remember was that (minister) gave thanks for erm, Betty’s legacy of love and light... yeah, she was a light to a lot of people. A beacon.

Although at no point did we specifically introduce the idea of these ideas equating with spirituality, some respondents made this link themselves:

I do think there is something more spiritual about ..., you know, what people do leave behind. (Funeral 42)

Conclusion

This study of 46 funerals in a north-east corner of England suggests that the contemporary funeral is a psycho-social-spiritual event. Parkes (1990) Parkes, C.M. (1990). Foreword. In T. Walter (Ed.), *Funerals and how to improve them*. London: Hodder and Stoughton.) comments that the funeral is an illogical act for rational people yet remains remarkably preserved in all societies. The reason for this surely lies in the enduring individual and social need for the living to manage the transition from life to death. This incorporates the emotional and psychological impact of a lost relationship, but equally important is the rite of passage in which the deceased person, temporarily afforded the social status of ‘the deceased’, becomes a corpse which is buried or cremated. Thus, a *physical procedure* – disposal of the body – is encapsulated in a ritual *social process* – the funeral – which demands a *philosophical response* on the part of the individual concerning the relationship between life and death. Moreover, each of the physical, the social and the philosophical elements are redolent with emotion. This is the essential link with the central question of this research - to what extent do contemporary funerals have a spiritual dimension, and in what ways is this explored and expressed? Contemporary understandings of spirituality combine physical, social, philosophical and emotional responses to the question of what it means to be human (Holloway & Moss, 2010) Holloway, M. and Moss, B. 2010. *Spirituality and social work*, London: Palgrave Macmillan.). Likewise, the funerals in this study combined taking meanings which have deep personal resonance with meaning which is experienced in community and is located within wider religious, quasi-religious and philosophical frameworks, including transcendental elements. Our data points to a spiritual dimension in the funerals studied which is multi-faceted, evidenced in behaviours and practices as much as in beliefs articulated, not particularly systematised, and shows considerable individual variation but also developing patterns, forms and emerging rituals.

It is commonly said that funerals today are changing. Most commentators point to the celebration of the life rather than commending of the departed as the key change and these funeral directors and celebrants pointed to changes in the way they understand and do their ‘job’ today which stem from this shift in focus. However, both sets of funeral professionals also discussed the fact that the funeral has to help people find meaning at a time of existential challenge (Harrowood, 2009) Harrowood, L. (2009–2010). Measuring spirituality, religiosity, and denial in individuals working in funeral service to predict death anxiety. *Omega*, 60(2), 129–142. -2010). Reflecting on contemporary funeral trends in America, Garces-Foley and Holcomb (2006) Garces-Foley, K., & Holcomb, J. (2006). Contemporary American funerals:

Personalising tradition. In K. Garces-Foley (Ed.), *Death and religion in a changing world*. New York, NY: M.E. Sharpe.) suggest that personalised funerals are, ‘better suited to contemporary social changes, like religious pluralism, declining community ties, and spiritual seeking that characterise contemporary American society’ (p. 208). We would suggest that it is this particular form of meaning-making which is at the heart of the contemporary funeral – indeed, lack of meaning has been found to contribute significantly to mourners’ distress (Hayslip et al., 2007 Hayslip, B., Booher, S., Scoles, M. and Guarnaccia, C. 2007. Assessing adults’ difficulty in coping with funerals. *Omega*, 55(2): 93–115.). Like Garces-Foley and Holcomb (2006 Garces-Foley, K., & Holcomb, J. (2006). Contemporary American funerals: Personalising tradition. In K. Garces-Foley (Ed.), *Death and religion in a changing world*. New York, NY: M.E. Sharpe.) we contend that to see contemporary funerals as exercises in individual self-affirmation in which tradition and traditional sources of meaning are left behind, is a gross over-simplification of the personalising trend. However, instead of *meaning-taking* derived from handed-down beliefs, forms and rituals, this study found a process of *meaning-seeking and creating*, which results in meaning-taking only after each unique funeral has been created and taken place. It is this active participation by all actors in the co-creation and enacting of the funeral as a meaningful event which was at the heart of the funerals we studied.

In summary therefore, we conclude that contemporary funerals do indeed have a spiritual dimension. We remain unconvinced by critics who assert that the concept of humanistic spirituality is too amorphous and embracing to be of any use (Gilliat-Ray, 2003 Gilliat-Ray, S. 2003. Nursing, professionalism and spirituality. *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 18(3): 335–349. ; Paley, 2008 Paley, J. 2008. Spirituality and secularization: Nursing and the sociology of religion. *Journal of Clinical Nursing*, 17: 175–186.) since no alternative frame is proposed for exploring and understanding the particular combination of elements which repeatedly are seen together in empirical studies (Egan et al., 2011 Egan, R., Macleod, R., Jaye, C., McGee, R., Baxter, J. and Herbison, P. 2011. What is spirituality? Evidence from a New Zealand hospice study. *Mortality*, 16: 307–324.) and to which sociological analyses, of themselves, cannot do justice (e.g. Voas & Crockett, 2005 Voas, D. and Crockett, A. 2005. Religion in Britain: Neither believing nor belonging. *Sociology*, 39(1): 11–28.). Not least in this regard is the existential challenge of death, to which philosophers have responded with conceptualisations ranging from positive assertions of death as ultimate freedom, to death as removing from life all meaning, with the mysteriousness of death occupying the centre neutral ground (Lloyd, 1995 Lloyd, M. and Holloway, M. 1995. *Embracing the Paradox: Pastoral Care with Dying and Bereaved People*. Contact Pastoral Monographs No 5, Edinburgh: Contact Pastoral Limited Trust.). Waschenfelder explains Comte-Sponville’s ‘atheistic spirituality of everyday life’, in phrases which echo with humanist celebrants in this study:

To use (atheism’s inevitable) despair as an impetus to live life to the fullest, since this life is all there is ... to nurture a *spirituality* that has at its heart ... silent reverential awe before the mystery of being, before the fact that there is something rather than nothing (Comte-Sponville 2007:101). (Waschenfelder, 2012 Waschenfelder, J. 2012. The world suffices: Spiritualities without the supernatural. *Journal for the Study of Spirituality*, 1(2): 171–186. , p. 177)

To represent funerals today as solely life- and person-centred celebrations is both partial and inadequate and does a disservice to the complex psycho-social-spiritual processes involved. Our study showed clearly that meaning transforms and transcends the ordinariness of life and

the challenge of death, and it is that *process* of meaning-seeking, creating and taking which shapes these personalised funerals:

There is often a sense of serving a higher meaning ... but that meaning is not nearly so well defined ... it's spiritual but it's not defined. (independent funeral director)

It is this which makes for a 'good funeral'.

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Notes

1. Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Hull's Ethics Committee. For methodological issues see Adamson and Holloway (2012b).
2. For further details of the study see Holloway et al. (2010) Holloway, M., Adamson, S., Argyrou, V., Draper, P., & Mariau, D. (2010). *Spirituality in Contemporary funerals: Final report*. University of Hull.).
3. Grace Davie herself is uncertain of when she first coined the term 'believing without belonging' (Keynote address, 2nd International conference of the British Association for the Study of Spirituality (BASS), 17 May 2012).