View metadata, citation and similar papers at core.ac.uk

brought to you by CORE

provided by University of Bath Research Portal

Citation for published version:
Walter, T 2016, 'Judgement, myth and hope in life-centred funerals', Theology, vol. 119, no. 4, pp. 253-260.
https://doi.org/10.1177/0040571X16640217

DOI:
10.1177/0040571X16640217

Publication date:
2016

Document Version
Peer reviewed version

Link to publication

University of Bath

General rights
Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy
If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Download date: 13. May. 2019

Judgement, myth and hope in life-centred funerals

Tony Walter
Centre for Death & Society, University of Bath, UK

Published in ***Theology*** 119(4), 2016

Abstract

Funerals led by a celebrant not representing a faith community are rapidly increasing in England. This article argues that these 'life-centred' funerals have an implicit theology; like Christian funerals, but in different ways, they invite judgement, myth and hope. How should churches respond to this competition? Imitation is problematic, because the 'life-centred' approach is far more than a mere technique to be bolted on to the Christian funeral. The article concludes by sketching some unique resources churches have that cannot be matched by the new breed of celebrants.

Keywords

Funeral, bereavement, angels, family, afterlife

Judgement, myth and hope in life-centred funerals

In in many western countries, funerals are becoming increasingly personalised, 'celebrations of life' as well as, or instead of, a rite commending the deceased to God.[1] In England, the proportion of funerals led by celebrants not representing a faith community has increased dramatically in the second decade of the twenty first century, and may in time come to comprise the majority of funerals – as is already the case in New Zealand. Humanist officiants are determinedly secular, but many independent celebrants reflect the deceased's implicit faith or spirituality. In the meantime, funerals led by a representative of the church now typically include a eulogy or tribute. Common Worship, the authorized Anglican prayer book of 2000, in inviting 'a brief tribute' and offering 180 pages of choices that enable the deceased's individuality to shine through, resembles contemporary civil funerals more than it does the 1662 Book of Common Prayer service's mandatory six pages which offer no scope for personalisation.[2]

This shift of focus from heaven to earth implies a more secular approach, while institutionally the churches are losing ground to Humanists and to independent funeral celebrants. But secularisation is not the only cause of the rise and rise of the life-centred funeral. In nineteenth century Britain and twentieth century America, most funerals displayed the family's economic status: the right number of horses, or the best Cadillac hearse. These were times of rapid social change, from a rural economy to an urban capitalist economy, and status insecurity – not being sure where you fit – dominated. So people used weddings and funerals to demonstrate the family's economic respectability. Since 1945, however, many people's social status has been secure, and does not need the funeral to express it. So in both Britain and America, many middle class funerals became a lot simpler, in Britain perhaps too simple, too bland. From the 1980s, moves to make bland funerals more meaningful have focussed not on the family's material status, but on celebrating the deceased's unique life and character – what might be called 'postmaterial' funerals.[3] Some working class funerals display both status *and* personal character: lavish expenditure plus creative personalisation, a good send off that is both material and personal.

This article asks whether personalisation - paying tribute to the deceased's individuality - is a simple add-on to the Christian funeral. Is there an easy marriage between looking forward to heaven, and looking back at the deceased's life on earth? I base my argument primarily on the 500 eulogies or tributes delivered in an English crematorium by those training to be civil funeral celebrants in the years 2002-2015, and on the tributes demonstrated to them by trainers who, unlike myself, are professional funeral celebrants.[4] I

also draw on my own lifetime experience as a mourner at 45 (mainly clergy-led) funerals. From these observations I conclude that the life-centred funerals led by celebrants not representing a faith community are not theologically neutral, but have their own implicit theology. In particular, they, like Christian funerals, deal in judgement, myth and hope. I conclude by asking how churches might respond.

Judgement

Even for secular people, the end of life is a time for judgement.[5] People entering old age often engage in a 'life review' by which they evaluate their life;[6] falling mountaineers who miraculously survive report their life passing before their eyes; in the light of a close brush with death, especially if it entails a near-death experience, survivors often re-evaluate and change their life; and of course funeral eulogies and tributes assess the life. Evaluating each unique life is perhaps especially powerful in cultures that value individual autonomy and achievement, in which people are expected to make themselves, to 'actualise their potential'. Such a culture may prompt mourners to ponder of the deceased: how, and how well, did s/he live? And in light of the answer, how well do we live?

Eulogies, whether delivered by celebrant or family member, rarely if ever *intend* to pass judgment. Certainly people usually like to conclude that a life was worthy or worthwhile, and celebrants sometimes rose-tint a bit. Though sad, life-centred funerals are typically kind and generous events, especially when the deceased is dearly missed. So the assessment of the life is implicitly or explicitly positive, and kindness may choose to draw a veil over failures and difficulties. But I am interested here not in speakers' intentions, but in hearers' inner responses to the positive portrayal of a loved or respected one's life. Personally, I have been challenged listening to funeral tributes: would my own life stand up to similar scrutiny? Whether other mourners are likewise challenged by some life-centred funerals to consider the worthiness of their own life, if only briefly before repairing smartly to the pub, has not been researched, but it is a question worth asking.

There is, perhaps, a long history to this. In early modern England written deathbed accounts portrayed the dying not in agony, cursing their Maker, but with words of faith on their lips. The reality may have been very different, but these were moral tales written to challenge the living.[7] The modern eulogy may, in effect though not in intention, be similar.

Life-centred funerals are very different from traditional Christian funerals and deathbeds in that there is no mention of sin or forgiveness. Indeed, sin and damnation have been largely erased from Protestant funeral liturgies since the 1920s. Rather, the focus is the

impact on others, how they have benefitted from having known the deceased. Relatively few eulogies focus on achievement in the world of work, still less on money making and material affluence. If eulogies are a litmus test for a society's values,[8] then it appears that in the last judgement of the life-centred funeral we as a society we do not value, or do not claim to value, material prosperity. What then is valued in the life-centred funeral? Overwhelmingly, it is character, and family.

Family. Those currently dying in old age came of age in the 1950s, the decade of 'family Britain'; they are the generation whose marriages often lasted long, succumbing neither to the infections of previous eras nor to the high divorce rates of later generations.[9] Even for younger deceased, funerals are primarily a family affair, as a recent Mass Observation study concluded.[10] Eulogies typically portray the deceased as a devoted mother or a real family man, the surviving family as a proper family whose members love each other despite their ups and downs; family conflicts are papered over, black sheep not mentioned. The deceased's family is on show at the funeral, and generally succeeds in portraying itself and being judged in a good light. The potential fragility of such performances is revealed in some soap opera funerals where the intended display falls apart.

Of course, the funeral director's client and the celebrant's main informant is almost always a close family member. So the family (or at least those members involved in arranging the funeral) is in control - hence perhaps the focus on family more than work, and the portrayal of family love and loyalty.

Myth

A challenge of the personalized Christian funeral is how to link the little story of the person's life with the big story of the Gospel. How to link the unique person with the Christian myth? Quartier has shown how Dutch Catholic priests struggle to integrate them,[11] while Bridgman offers metaphor as a bridge between the two.[12] But funeral celebrant John Valentine has argued that even those life-centred funerals that are entirely secular still must link little and big stories. If the person's life story is to appear meaningful, it must be spun in terms of 'secular myths', the big stories by which society lives. In contemporary English funerals, five such myths come readily to mind:

The just war. Whether abroad or on the home front, those dying in old age today survived the second world war. For some, it was a time to be forgotten. For others, it was a time they would never forget, a time when they grew up, developed character, saw the world, bonded with others; a time that frequently features in funeral tributes. The tributes ignore, or

at most briefly allude to, looting, cowardice, mental disintegration. What made this part of the deceased's life worthwhile, and what helped forge their personality, was their participation in a heroic, just war. They belong to a heroic generation that saved the world from tyranny.

Progress. Many funeral tributes describe lives starting from humble or even harsh origins which end up relatively comfortable – owning the house, car and television that would have been inconceivable to the deceased's parents. By the end of the 1950s, in Harold Macmillan's words, Britain had 'never had it so good'. These tributes do not eulogise materialism, but they do reflect the unprecedented socio-economic mobility of mid-twentieth century Britain as the service sector expanded and millions moved from working class to middle class, and/or their disposable income increased. The myth of 'progress' was believable by millions. So many are now middle class that this level of upward class mobility cannot continue, and environmental and other factors may limit future economic growth. In future, as many people may be downwardly as upwardly mobile – how, I wonder, will their lives be eulogized?

Personal fulfilment. 'Fulfilling your potential' is articulated as a/the purpose of life by many more than have read Abraham Maslow's writings on self-actualisation. The eulogy may be seen as stating what fulfilment meant for the individual. This is a myth for an era of unprecedented longevity. Until the second half of the nineteenth century, longevity had increased little since pre-historic times; in particular, many children and babies died. In such times when life was often short, and possibly also nasty and brutish, judging people's lives in terms of self-fulfillment would have been cruel. Instead, funerals and mourners' diaries revealed the young deceased's virtues and faith, which – unlike self-actualisation - can be displayed at any age.[13] Only in the twentieth century could self-fulfilment come to be extolled as life's purpose.

Family. Regrettably, some children and babies die even today. How is a 'celebration of life' to eulogize their short lives? Enter here the family myth. In the words of many life-centred celebrants, even a tiny baby was loved and gave joy to its parents; it was part of a proper family.

Individuality. Some people's lives do not readily fit any of these myths. But the English have a fifth myth up their sleeve: individuality, eccentricity even. We English value people just for being themselves, however eccentric or even difficult. The antics, the crazy things s/he got up to, such are the stuff of some funeral tributes.

In sum, funeral tributes make the deceased's life meaningful and worth celebrating by framing it within one or more secular myths. Yes, every person is unique, every life-centred

funeral is different, but every such funeral entails myth-making and myth-using, and the varieties of myth are not so many.

Hope

Alan Billings wrote that the backward-facing funeral is 'literally hopeless, for hope is about the future'.[14] But must hope be found in the future? At the end of life, does religion have a monopoly on hope? Can hope be found in more proximate, earthly relationships? Does celebrating the matriarch or the family man make their life meaningful, in turn offering hope to mourners that their lives too have meaning? Does cherishing the deceased's uniqueness offer me hope that people will cherish my uniqueness too?

As well as these proximate hopes, life-centred funerals also offer hope for the future. They proclaim that, wherever the dead may, or may not, now be, they leave a legacy, and live on in us. This is part of Humanism's formal worldview,[15] but also resonates more informally with popular ideas about bereavement and the afterlife.

Bereavement. What are the living to do with the dead? Any culture must answer this question, and two answers – romantic and modern – have dominated Anglophone societies over the past two centuries.[16] Romanticism teaches that love is eternal. As a 1960 Somerset gravestone for an eleven year old states, 'Life is short but love is long'. Bonds of love continue beyond the grave, attested to not only by gravestones, but also by memoriam columns, pop songs, and much else in popular culture. Against this is Freud's idea that we must let go of our emotional investment in the dead, and replace it with new meaningful relationships;[17] this resonates with modernism's faith in the future. Twentieth century mourners were torn between these two conflicting expectations.

The tension continues, but getting on with life, *with* rather than without the dead, is gaining ground. Over the past twenty years, grief counselling increasingly offers this hope. Over the past ten years, social media such as Facebook not only remember the dead but also address them as though still present.[18] Even architecture now no longer demolishes but restores the past: 'letting go' of the past or the dead is no longer seen as essential to progress. So life-centred funerals that envisage mourners going into the future inspired by the deceased and nourished by their love need not, by any means, rely on a humanist philosophy; they simply reflect twenty first century popular culture.

Afterlife beliefs. The most widely held afterlife belief in historically Protestant societies in the twentieth century was soul reunion.[19] Humans consist of body and soul; the body dies, but the soul is eternal. In heaven, the soul is re-united with the souls of pre-

deceased family members. Thus the hope of the elderly widow (of which there were far more in the long-lived, non-divorcing mid-twentieth century than ever before, by a long way) was to join her husband in heaven. Since in the meantime he was inaccessible, this hope was not incompatible with 'letting go', even though he continued within her still-beating heart.

In the twenty first century, a new hope may be observed, widely espoused by younger mourners who, in a society of instant gratification, cannot wait decades to join their grandmother, best friend, or child in heaven. For these younger mourners, often expressing themselves online, the deceased has become an angel.[20] Angels have wings, enabling them to move between heaven and earth, looking after the mourner as 'guardian angel'; if love is eternal, then each lover, the living and the dead, requires agency, and 'angel' is the perfect afterlife image to express this. Whether or not Robbie Williams' song *Angels* is played, the life-centred funeral expresses the same hope as the angel image: we move on in life with, not without, the dead.

Hope on earth. Christianity, especially Protestant Christianity, teaches that Christ lives in us, but that all the other dead are inaccessible, or at best a cloud of witnesses. Contacting them through a medium is prohibited. This theology is not challenged by Freud's injunction to let go of the dead. But the life-centred funeral, Humanism, and a wide range of twenty first century ideas about bereavement and the afterlife all coalesce around the hope of, not Christ, but the family dead in/with us, on earth. This earthly, present hope is what many people today articulate on Facebook and what they want life-centred funerals to express.

How should the church respond?

In Britain, and especially in England, funerals are increasingly being led by celebrants who do not represent a faith community. More and more mourners want backward-facing, life-centred funerals led by such a celebrant. How should the churches, particularly the Church of England, respond?

One response is to try to imitate the competition, to learn the tricks of the trade of these new celebrants, to win back business (and for the CofE, funerals *are* a business) by offering funerals that are both Christian and engagingly personal. This response faces two challenges. One, as I have argued, is that personalization is not theologically neutral, but invites particular forms of judgment, myth and hope with which churches and theologians need to critically engage. The other challenge is that the best non-church celebrants will spend ten hours working on each funeral; for hard pressed clergy to produce funerals of similar quality has resource implications. The Church of England currently authorizes lay

readers, but not other lay people, to conduct funerals, and this restriction needs questioning. It is remarkable how many of those who train to become civil funeral celebrants are active churchgoers. They feel a calling to funeral work, but their church does not recognize this so they turn to non-church training agencies and become independent celebrants. The churches may be losing a valuable lay resource.

The other response is for the churches not to imitate the competition, but to identify their USP – their unique selling point – and offer families what the new celebrants cannot offer. I can see three USPs.

One is the local church congregation, and its potential for pastoral care of both the dying and the bereaved. Death is part of life, and care cannot be left to the professionals - whether doctors, nurses, therapists or clergy. Local congregations are extraordinarily well placed to become the compassionate communities that, increasingly, health care educators and policy makers see as the way forward in end of life care.[21] A second USP is a hope in God and heaven that is not earthly. And a third USP is three thousand years of thinking, tradition and ritual places which give a solidity to ritual and which affirm that, however unique this life and this death, loss is part of the human condition; the mourner is not alone.

Probably, the churches need to respond *both* by imitating, learning skills from the new celebrants, *and* by developing what they as churches uniquely have to offer. Both entail hard, critical work.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to John Valentine and Anne Barber for helpfully critical comments. They bear no responsibility for the final text.

Tony Walter is a sociologist and Honorary Professor of Death Studies at the University of Bath.

---

[1] T. Quartier, 'Personal Symbols in Roman Catholic Funerals in the Netherlands', *Mortality* 14 (2009): 133-146; K. Garces-Foley and J. S. Holcomb, 'Contemporary American Funerals: Personalizing Tradition'. In: Garces-Foley K (ed.) *Death and Religion in a Changing World.* Armonk, NY: ME Sharpe, 2005, pp. 207-227.

[2] G. Cook and T. Walter, 'Rewritten Rites: Language and Social Relations in Traditional and Contemporary Funerals', *Discourse and Society* 16 (2005): 365-391.

[3] T. Walter, 'Secularisation'. In: Parkes CM and Young W (eds) *Death and Bereavement Across Cultures, 2nd edn.* London: Routledge, 2015.

[4] http://www.civilceremonies.co.uk/training/funeral-celebrancy-training

[5] A. Kellehear, *The Inner Life of the Dying Person,* New York: Columbia University Press, 2014.

[6] R. N. Butler, 'The Life Review: An Interpretation of Reminiscence in the Aged'. *Psychiatry* 26 (1963): 65-76.

[7] R. Houlbrooke, *Death, Ritual and Bereavement,* London: Routledge, 1989.

[8] J. Hardy, 'Mourners' Memories', *Theology* 118 (2015): 261-269.

[9] Hardy, 'Mourners' Memories'.

[10] T. Bailey, *Going to Funerals in Contemporary Britain: The Individual, the Family and the Meeting with Death*, University of Bath, unpublished PhD thesis, 2012.

[11] T. Quartier, *Bridging the Gaps: An Empirical Study of Catholic Funeral Rites*, New York: Transaction, 2007.

[12] J. Bridgman, 'Metaphors We Die By: Narrative and Power in Funeral Tributes', Bristol: Trinity College, University of Bristol, 2010.

[13] P. Rosenblatt, *Bitter, Bitter Tears: Nineteenth-Century Diarists and Twentieth Century Grief Theories,* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983.

[14] Alan Billings, 'Why Secular People Still Want Christian Funerals', *Church Times* 4 November 2005.

[15] J. Wynne-Willson, *Funerals Without God: A Practical Guide to Non-Religious Funerals,* London: British Humanist Association, 1989.

[16] M. Stroebe, M. M. Gergen, K. J. Gergen, et al., 'Broken Hearts or Broken Bonds: Love and Death in Historical Perspective', *American Psychologist* 47 (1992): 1205-1212.

[17] Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia' (originally published in 1917). In: S. Freud (ed.) *On Metapsychology,* London: Pelican, 1984, pp. 251-267.

[18] E. Kasket, 'Continuing Bonds in the Age of Social Networking: Facebook As a Modern-Day Medium', *Bereavement Care* 31 (2012): 62-69.

[19] C. McDannell and B. Lang, *Heaven: A History,* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001.

[20] T. Walter, 'Angels Not Souls: Popular Religion in the Online Mourning for British Celebrity Jade Goody', *Religion* 41 (2011): 29-51.

[21] A. Kellehear, *Compassionate Cities,* London: Routledge, 2005.