

Humanist funerals

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Funeral directors need to be aware of the needs of non-religious people. A unique investigation into the subject funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) provides a snapshot of a defining aspect of life - or indeed death.

"The issue of death is one of the most important incidents that all societies deal with," says Dr Matthew Engelke, at the London School of Economics. "I wanted to look at how, in contemporary society, people who do not believe in an afterlife are commemorated at a funeral."

To carry out the research, Dr Engelke focused on funerals provided by the British Humanist Association (BHA). "It was clear that the people who chose these funeral services were not necessarily humanists or atheists. They generally described themselves as 'non-religious', which covered the entire spectrum from absolute atheist to a more general lack of commitment or belief, especially when it comes to organised religion."

One of the most striking aspects of BHA funeral ceremonies is that they strive to be true to the individual, to reflect as best as possible the character, world views and the sensibilities of the person who has died. "The focus is almost exclusively on the person, which is often not the case with the more traditional religious ceremonies" says Dr Engelke.

This emphasis on the individual is an increasingly important phenomenon in modern Western life, suggests Dr Engelke. In many societies, and in ritual ceremonies down the ages, the place of the

individual in the ritual is often the least important consideration.

In humanist ceremonies, being true to the individual is most central. Dr Engelke commonly came across family members and friends who said: "We told the funeral director John did not go to church so we did not want a vicar to take the funeral".

"This gives an intriguing glimpse into the extent to which modern citizens feel it important to express their uniqueness and individuality", says Dr Engelke.

"It is important for [social scientists](#) to look at these key moments in life, as it is through these that we get a sense of the most significant issues that matter to people and understand what it means to be non-religious in a modern British society," continues Dr Engelke. "And I think one of the best places to start is ritual services such as funerals."

Provided by Economic & Social Research Council

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