

Matthew Engelke

The coffin question: death and materiality in humanist funerals

**Article (Accepted version)
(Refereed)**

Original citation:

Engelke, Matthew (2015) *The coffin question: death and materiality in humanist funerals*.
Material Religion: The Journal of Objects, Art and Belief, 11 (1). pp. 26-48. ISSN 1743-2200

DOI: [10.2752/205393215X14259900061553](https://doi.org/10.2752/205393215X14259900061553)

© 2015 Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

This version available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/62739/>
Available in LSE Research Online: July 2015

LSE has developed LSE Research Online so that users may access research output of the School. Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may download and/or print one copy of any article(s) in LSE Research Online to facilitate their private study or for non-commercial research. You may not engage in further distribution of the material or use it for any profit-making activities or any commercial gain. You may freely distribute the URL (<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk>) of the LSE Research Online website.

This document is the author's final accepted version of the journal article. There may be differences between this version and the published version. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

The Coffin Question:

Death and Materiality in Humanist Funerals

Matthew Engelke

m.engelke@lse.ac.uk

Bones and corpses, coffins and cremation urns, are material objects. Most of the time, they are indisputably *there*... (Verdery 1999: 27)

The first humanist funeral I attended was in February 2011, at a crematorium chapel in Southeast London. Over the course of the following ten months, I went to fifteen more, as well as six Christian funerals, as part of a larger project on organized humanism in Britain. I was there that first day at the invitation of Johnny, the man who conducted the ceremony. Johnny is a “celebrant”—a ritual specialist, if you will—who works as part of a network of approximately 270 celebrants across England and Wales in the British Humanist Association (BHA). As a BHA celebrant, Johnny provides funerals for humanists, atheists, agnostics, and anyone else who self-identifies, or gets identified, as “not religious.” This category—not religious—is huge and unwieldy. As I came to learn, it got deployed in the funeral trade to describe anyone who did not want their funeral to be conducted by a priest or other clerical figure. “Not the vicar,” is a phrase I heard repeatedly—from the celebrants themselves, from funeral directors and chapel attendants, and from the friends and families of the deceased.

The funeral that day was being observed by Sophie, one of Johnny's colleagues. Afterwards, Sophie gave me a ride to Johnny's house, which wasn't far away, where Johnny and I planned to conduct an interview over a lunch of beetroot soup, bread, and cheese. Sophie's observation was part of a regular process that BHA celebrants undergo of peer review, to make sure that BHA funerals are up to the best of professional standards. In the opinion of many celebrants I go to know, theirs are the best in the business—certainly better than most vicars, many of whom, the humanists claim, never bother to convey something that is true to the person and his or her life.

Sophie thought Johnny had done a very good job. The funeral was for a local man, Dave, who'd spent a lifetime doing maintenance and construction-type work in London, the highlight of which was a spell building sets for a well-known television soap opera. We also learned in the course of the funeral that Dave spent a lot of time in the pub, and on the front of the program that his family had put together (with Johnny's help), there was a picture of him, shirt off, tanned and taut, looking out over a pair of sunglasses with a pint of beer in his hand. There were about 120 people at Dave's funeral—a large turnout of mourners in my experience, but not unusual for someone who dies young; Dave was only 65. Johnny's service for him was based around what he learned spending two hours with Dave's family the week prior. Dave's son also read something out at the ceremony about how much he loved his dad, and Dave's sister, who had immigrated to Australia in the 1960s, sent a letter which Johnny read aloud. These tributes and Dave's life story were complemented by some of Dave's favourite music: Barbara Streisand's "Memories," for the procession in; Joe Cocker's version of "With a little help from my friends" during a moment

of reflection; and Monty Python's "Always look on the bright side of life," which garnered much laughter and smiling, for the procession out.

Johnny is a natural performer. For several decades, well before he became a humanist celebrant, he'd played the blues, and he had firm command of the service that day in the way a seasoned performer could. The key for a humanist funeral, though, is for this kind of command to be minimally asserted. No showmanship is allowed. Unlike many ritual specialists, at least as we find them in the ethnographic record, the role of a humanist celebrant is to be noted for being un-notable; their personality and presence should never eclipse that of the person whose life is being "celebrated." Nor should it index—at least for them—something divine, transcendent, or otherwise outside what Charles Taylor (2007: 539-593) calls the immanent frame: "a 'natural' order, to be contrasted to a 'supernatural' one, an 'immanent' world, over against a possible 'transcendent' one" (2007: 542). Humanists work very hard to make the funerals they provide personal, and individual, as a way of strengthening this frame, all the while underscoring that death means death. Humanist funerals are one among many ways to reinforce what might be taken as the secular-humanist maxim: To thine own self be true. And, as the BHA's motto makes clear, that self comes to a definitive end: "For the one life we have." Humanist funerals are about acknowledging this in a way which is both clear and caring.

Celebrants usually appreciate the chance to watch other celebrants at work. Sophie was impressed with Johnny. What most struck her was how Johnny addressed the coffin. "It was really *brilliant*," she said. "Johnny was so good with that." I had to admit to her that I wasn't sure what had happened, what had been so well handled. "The way he touched the coffin after leading everyone through the farewell," she clarified for me. Johnny had tackled

what I came to realize is a central issue in the humanist approach to death and its commemoration. How should the corpse be understood in the immanent frame? Johnny had tackled the coffin question.¹ [Figure 1]

Beyond Words

The ethnographic record makes clear just how important the presence of the body at a funeral, and what gets done with it, can be. The anthropology of death has, in essence, always been an anthropology of the body, of how the brute facts of mortality, of the body's putrescence and decomposition, get enfolded into social projects of triumph, of life's regeneration (if not resurrection).² This has involved a huge variety of humankind's imaginative cultural expressions, everything from endocannibalism to funeral pyres to the drying out and reburial of bones, most of which are ways in which death is made "good," and thus "a renewal of the world of the living" (Bloch and Parry 1982: 16). Dead bodies are powerful; the corpse is often "an object of solicitude for the survivors at the same time as an object of fear" (Hertz 1960: 34).

In contemporary Britain, presence of the body certainly affects the kind of farewell that funerals are supposed to provide—it affects how the death is made good. There hadn't been a committal for Dave (otherwise very common in Britain) but as with other funerals I observed by Johnny in which that was the case, Johnny did engineer an important moment of closure, in this instance by asking the audience to repeat a set of reflections. This call for repetition was unusual in humanist ceremonies, and probably had more to do with Johnny's background as a bluesman than as a humanist. But it worked:

Dear Dave, Dad and Granddad

We rejoice that you lived

Thank you for sharing your life with us

We cherish the memory of your words

We cherish your friendship

We cherish your love

And with our love

We leave you in peace

Johnny then paused for a moment and continued on his own with the final words of parting:

Without fuss and without fear, Dave has left this world in the same way that he entered it. For the same passage that we all must make from timelessness to life, we must all take—from life back to timelessness. This is the natural order of things and it belongs to the life of the world....

And Dave is now free from all harm, pain and suffering.

Please be seated.

It was this that caught my attention—this ritual speech, this act of incorporation and textbook example of illocutionary force. Johnny was doing what good ritual specialists often

do. He was effecting a change. And those words, those terms: “timelessness,” “the natural order of things,” “the life of the world.” As I sat there during the service, I thought to myself: *Here’s what I can spend my time unpacking! All these words.* This is a vocabulary grounded in precisely the kind of naturalist register associated with the immanent frame—one of “action in secular time” (Taylor 2007: 566) and nothing more.³

Words matter a lot to humanists. And there are important ways in which the public perception of humanism is defined precisely by language; humanists use a carefully crafted public discourse that is meant to show the rationality and reasonableness of humanism and unbelief, and the irrationality and unreasonableness of religion and belief. Within the United Kingdom and the United States, the emergence of the so-called “new atheism,” dominated as it is by such public intellectuals as Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, and Christopher Hitchens, often suggests, both explicitly and implicitly, that humanism, atheism, and secularism are pursuits of the mind—all about ideas; secular humanism is often presented above all like a reasonable language, in line with longstanding stereotypes of Enlightenment and liberal thought.

So as I was cycling through the literature on ritual language during Dave’s funeral, I had neglected to note what so caught Sophie’s eye. After asking those gathered to please be seated, Johnny walked over to the coffin, still on the catafalque, and touched it, very gently, as he might touch the shoulder of a person. In that moment, Johnny was invoking the importance of materiality. Johnny was dealing with the body, with the thing that was “indisputably *there*,” with what Sophie would go on to call “the elephant in the room.”

In this article, I use my anthropological misapprehension to set out some of the ways in which humanist celebrants invoke, draw upon, and situate the stuff of death and the

commemoration of life. This is an article about the material culture of non-religious funerals. In it, I explore what the engagements with and articulations of materiality tell us about contemporary secular-humanist formations. In line with a growing number of scholars (Asad 2003; Connolly 1999; Knott 2010, I want to argue that we cannot understand formations of the secular as purely ideational or discursive; these are the ways secular formations are often presented, but secularities are material. The secular and related modalities, including humanism, are embodied, emplaced, and objectified; they have sensory aspects and cannot be reduced to a catalogue of immaterial ideas or ideologies (see also Hirschkind 2010; Meyer 2012). What the secular is often used to deny is what William E. Connolly calls “the visceral register of being” (1999: 29). Yet things matter to the self-consciously humanist, and nothing more so for the celebrant at a funeral than the coffin and its contents. For the celebrants, this thing—this body in a box—is more an object of fear than an object of solicitude. Or, if not exactly *fear*, at least discomfiture; it is the presence of the coffin that risks the sufficiency of the immanent frame. Because “aside from their evident materiality,” as Katherine Verdery argues, in her own illuminating work on related issues, “dead bodies...evoke the awe, uncertainty, and fear associated with ‘cosmic’ concerns, such as the meaning of life and death” (1999: 31). So: whither the coffin in a secular age?

The British Humanist Association

Before addressing the coffin question and related ones, it will be helpful to say more about the BHA. Constituted as such in 1967, the BHA has roots that stretch back to the nineteenth-century ethical societies in London. The first aim of the BHA is to promote an understanding

of humanism as “an ethical and fulfilling non-religious approach to life involving a naturalistic view of the universe.”⁴ At the time of my research, in 2011, there were approximately 12,000 members of the BHA and 16,000 supporters; the difference between a member and a supporter is that members pay annual dues of £35. (Supporters allow themselves to be e-mailed about the BHA’s campaigns and interests.) In a survey I conducted of the membership, the profile that emerged was of a white, largely male, and well educated constituency. Just shy of 89 per cent of members are “White British” (a census category I used), just over 69 per cent are male, and 72 per cent of members have a university degree; 13 per cent of these degrees are from Oxbridge. Twenty-four per cent of members are also members of a political party, and 80 per cent donate at least monthly to one or more charities, giving some indication that this is a demographic with high levels of civic engagement.⁵ Members of the BHA refer to themselves as humanists, atheists, agnostics, materialists, secularists, rationalists—and sometimes all of the above (even, perhaps confusingly, atheist *and* agnostic). There is not space here to go into the various details and differentiations between these terms and labels; as we might expect there is no “typical” member, and motivations for joining the BHA—for parting with £35—are diverse.

In general, however, members of the BHA have a view of the world in which there is no room for the supernatural or transcendent—no room for “enchantment” in its most well-known, “disenchantment story” sense (see Bennett 2001: 56-90). In Taylor’s terms, their vision of the immanent frame is more “closed” than “open:” these are people “who see immanence as admitting of no beyond” (2007: 550), and even more, as disenchanted moderns for whom agency (what Taylor sometimes calls “power”) resides only in human minds—not bodies and other things (see 2007: 29-41).⁶

Taylor's proposal of the immanent frame and other arguments in *A Secular Age* have been the subject of numerous discussions and debates, as many readers will know. My interest here is not so much to further or refine these debates, which tend to take place in conceptual registers, as to note that his characterizations of the immanent frame work fairly well to describe the outlooks and attitudes of BHA members. Taylor, it turns out, has some anthropological purchase. His "Latin Christendom" is a place—or, better, conceptual space—that includes contemporary Britain. And again, the key here is how "it comes to seem axiomatic that all thought, feeling and purpose, all the features we normally ascribe to agents, must be in minds, which are distinct from the 'outer' world" (2007: 539). That includes (dead) bodies.

For many members of the BHA the most important aspect of its work is its commitment to a classic version liberal secularism. The BHA campaigns on several issues relevant to this political sensibility. Within England, for example, approximately 33 per cent of state schools are faith-based. The BHA runs campaigns to abolish state funding for these schools, and is especially critical of those which reserve places for children from particular religious groups (the Church of England being the largest by far). It goes against what members see as a proper secular settlement.

More generally, engaging in debate within the public sphere is a vital part of the Association's work. The CEO and Head of Public Affairs make regular appearances in the news and newspapers, providing a humanist or at least "non-religious" point of view. The promotion of humanism and the BHA is also done by the Association's well-known supporters, among whom Dawkins is by far the most prominent, although other public intellectuals, artists, and entertainment personalities lend their voices and support (Polly

Toynbee, A.C. Grayling, Terry Pratchett, and Stephen Fry among them). This is, again, one of the main reasons that public perceptions of humanism are shaped by humanist talk: humanists are quintessential members of the “chattering classes,” of people who use language for a living.

The BHA also promotes local humanist groups. The Association wants a grassroots humanism to come up. There were about 60 of these groups in 2011, ranging in size from half a dozen to fifty or sixty members each. Local groups are not technically part of the BHA, and local group members do not have to join the BHA, although there are close connections between them, and there is a member of staff at BHA who devotes a significant amount of time to liaising with local group secretaries. Most groups get together once a month in a pub or community hall to listen to a guest speaker or stage some kind of discussion or debate around political, social, philosophical, and ethical issues. Some of the larger and more vibrant groups also run book clubs, coffee mornings, sponsored hikes, or volunteering schemes (the local group I attended helped run a community soup kitchen).

Ceremonies and Celebrants

BHA ceremonies are a very different kind of work to the policy and public affairs, and are driven for the celebrants I got to know by a desire to give back to the communities in which they live by providing services to people who are not religious at key moments in life. In my survey of the celebrants’ network, only 33 per cent said that the money earned by conducting ceremonies was a necessary part of their household income (a BHA funeral usually about £140).⁷ The work was about helping people. “Helping people,” as Sophie told

me, “allowing them the space to experience a rite of passage which moves you on to the next level of what it is to be human.” The key here as well is that the space be “true” to the person in question.

Members of the BHA have been conducting funerals, naming ceremonies, and weddings for decades, but it is only since the late 1980s that the Association’s members began thinking systematically about such provision, and the professionalization of celebrants has undergone leaps and bounds over the past decade in particular.⁸ Some of the old timers told me, with pride and even indignation, that they never underwent accreditation or training as Sophie and Johnny had; they started doing funerals for people they knew because the people they knew were committed humanists, and it slowly grew from there. Celebrants today describe 68 per cent of the funerals they conduct as “non-religious,” rather than humanist per se. Dave’s family, for example, didn’t know what humanism was, and didn’t care; Johnny didn’t care about that, though, and it was often the case, as I observed, that an entire funeral could pass without any explicit mention of humanism whatsoever, other than that the celebrant was from the British Humanist Association.

Funerals allow the Association to reach and to serve constituencies they otherwise might not. While it depends on where a celebrant works, many clienteles are made up of people who do not have university degrees, or even much in the way of formal qualifications; many clienteles, in other words, have little in common with the BHA’s fees-paying membership. The provision of ceremonies is one way the BHA connects with people who don’t know anything about Richard Dawkins, Polly Toynbee, or A.C. Grayling—and don’t really want to.

I said earlier that there is no way of typifying a BHA member. But if there is one thing that typifies the celebrants, it is that they are less interested in the kind of secular humanism promoted Dawkins and Hitchens than the BHA membership generally. Humanist celebrants tend not to be “new atheists.” They tend to be somewhat less “rigid”—a qualification and perception that plays quite clearly on a certain gendering of thought and action. Indeed, while 69 per cent of the BHA membership is male, my celebrant survey suggested 66 per cent of celebrants are female. I did meet exceptions to the stereotype—including Mary, a vibrant and vivacious older woman, raised Catholic, who thought Dawkins didn’t go nearly far enough in his criticisms of faith. But by and large, the celebrants are humanists who do not feel it is their place to criticize what other people do or believe; celebrants, through their strong commitment to ritual, focus more on the enactments of humanism—its embodiment. Indeed, even Mary felt that new atheism didn’t go far enough in part because of its abstract, intellectualist character. She told me at great length how valuable it would be for humanists to help engineer a mass occupation of the nation’s churches: reclaiming the shared spaces of community had to be part and parcel of any enlightenment project.

Perhaps the best way to put this would be to say the celebrants have a slightly less “closed world structure” (see Taylor 2007: 551), but are no less committed to such an immanent frame than Dawkins et al; they are less focused on ways of thinking than ways of living; less focused on the mind, in other words, and more on the body—on the body’s being-in-the-world, and, indeed, its potentials for shaping that world. As Sophie told me, “the human body is capable of extraordinary things, and the more we can own that, and embrace that and use that, the better.”

The dead human body, however—the material remains of a person—pose a challenge to this sensibility. It is a potential opening, or rent, in the closed world structure. Once the body is stripped of life, even celebrants often run up against the demands of their own humanist ways. Celebrants are perfectly aware that a corpse is “not just any old symbol: unlike a tomato can or a dead bird, they were once human beings with lives that are valued. They are heavy symbols because people cared about them when they were alive and identify with them” (Verdery 1999: 32).⁹ As Verdery argues at length in her work, corpses can be especially affecting. That affect lingers even after life ends.

Some celebrants, and other BHA members, told me that when they die, they are, at best, ambivalent about having their body at the funeral; what they really wanted is a memorial service—focused on memories and words—more than a funeral. Indeed for some of the more “hard-line” celebrants and BHA members, loved ones have been explicitly instructed not to display or present a coffin or even an urn of ashes. The best place for a dead body in this view is not the crematoria chapel but the medical school theater. The right thing to do—the rational thing to do—is turn one’s remains over to science.¹⁰ Humanists are quite free with their bodies in this way, relative to the population as a whole. In 2011, just under 30 per cent of Britons were registered organ donors; the figure for BHA members, according to my survey, was 65 per cent.¹¹ In some cases, it wasn’t only about the support of science and other people but also the smothering of “superstition.” Addressing the body, whether through organ donation or its devaluation in the act of commemoration, got understood as yet another way of pushing this kind of enchantment out of the immanent frame—an enchantment, that is to say, which refuses “the finality of death” (Bennett 2001: 78). I remember one elderly and long-standing celebrant and secular-humanist activist

literally shaking with dismay and disgust over the extent to which human beings have, throughout time and across cultures, revered and attended to the corpse. She told me it wasn't long ago, for instance, that Catholics insisted not simply on open caskets but keeping their loved ones' bodies *in their homes*, on *display*. This is "macabre," she declared—completely baffling to her. (She came from a Catholic family.) If not all celebrants expressed these sentiments, there were nevertheless many who, like Sophie, found the coffin uncomfortable—not because they were uncomfortable with dead bodies per se, but because the presence of the dead body has the potential to frustrate or confuse the proper focus of a funeral. Although they never used this term, the coffin and its contents seemed to harbour all the dangers of the fetish with which we normally associate iconoclastic projects. The worst thing that might happen at a funeral is for this kind of enchantment to break in, for the dead body to be wrongly recognized as an agentic force—for the body itself to become the center of attention and action, to be seen as an actor itself.

At some future point time, the implication—though not outright assertion—of humanist celebrants is that their funerals (and ideally all funerals) will take place without the corpse present. For these kinds of secular-humanists, such a refashioning of ritual would be a sign of humanism's obviation of religion.

In the meantime, celebrants work to be patient, respectful, and understanding about where their clients, and society more generally, are located. Celebrants understand most of the people they serve as betwixt and between worldviews; not religious, but not humanist, either—tending toward closure, but not always fully there. "I am perfectly happy with pick and mix and I think that we have to accept that we're going to have this transitional period while people are so befuddled by the definitions of religion," Mary told me. "And we have

to take our job very seriously as celebrants because we are the ambassadors, we are the people explaining it. Dawkins and all your others aside, they are not out there on a day-to-day basis as humanist celebrants, explaining to ordinary people what humanism is really about.” A sense of progress underpins what celebrants do; slowly, stage by stage, societal attitudes will change—they will *evolve*, as in a good secularist narrative of progress, toward something more reasonable. Over time, in this vision, more and more “ordinary people” will recognize they can do without the body.

What Mary referred to as the “pick and mix” character of BHA ceremonies is one of the most important aspects of this ritual action and the humanist vision. If pushed, though, celebrants would always say that in fact what they offer is *not* pick and mix, inasmuch as they are not simply celebrants for hire who will do whatever the family wants. For instance, every celebrant I met said that they would never say a prayer at one of their ceremonies. If it turned out the family really wanted the celebrant to pray on behalf of those gathered, the celebrant would politely suggest that a BHA funeral might not be what the family was really looking for. (There is no room for prayer in a closed world structure; addressing a mind which, in the humanist view, doesn’t exist, is an irrational non-starter.) There are practitioners in the business, often called “civil celebrants,” who will do “pick and mix” in this way, but BHA celebrants did not identify with them. Most BHA celebrants would, however, tolerate an alternative: the celebrant couldn’t say a prayer, but if someone in the family wanted to, that was fine. I attended one BHA funeral, for example, where the man’s son, a devout Christian, wanted to say a prayer on behalf of his father—even though he knew and respected the fact that his father was a self-consciously committed atheist (and had duly retained the services of a BHA celebrant). The celebrant in question was perfectly

happy to accommodate this; she simply stepped aside while the son offered a (very brief) prayer. The justification for this kind of flexibility is always that, because the prayer doesn't come from the celebrant's lips, the integrity of the humanist's framing is maintained. Not least because of the premium on words in the humanist imagination, this is the kind of situation in which it is extremely important that what gets said is owned by the speaker, in which, as Erving Goffman would put it, "the animator, author, and principal are one" (1981: 145).

Explicit requests for prayers are rare, but the extent to which the celebrants create a respectful space and time in which mourners can express their own views is significant. At the start of nearly all BHA ceremonies, the celebrant introduces him- or herself as a member of the British Humanist Association and says that the ceremony will be non-religious (often "in accordance with [the deceased's] wishes"). The celebrant will then go on to say, however, that later in the ceremony there will be a period of reflection (usually accompanied by music) during which those gathered "might wish to say a silent prayer pertaining to your own religious faith or philosophy" (as Johnny put it during Dave's funeral). Celebrants also often countenance the inclusion of songs and even hymns that have explicitly religious imageries or messages—everything from Eric Clapton's version of "Knockin' on Heaven's Door" to the hymns "Jerusalem" or "All Things Bright and Beautiful," the latter two both fairly common, especially among the older generations, for whom such hymns are said to have a "cultural" rather than "religious" significance.

Funerals in Time and Space

In England, funerals, especially Christian and “post-Christian” funerals, are uniform in many ways.¹² The majority take place in council-run cemeteries with crematoriums, all of which have spaces called “chapels” outfitted with pews, a catafalque, and, in most cases, an organ and certainly now a sound system. These funerals last between 25-28 minutes, unless a double slot is booked in the chapel (for which of course one has to pay more). These uniformities are tied to the political economy of “the death trade,” as people in the funeral business often refer to it; the uniformity is a function of the bureaucratization and rationalization of ritual action in late-modern life. If you spend a day at a council-run cemetery in London, you will observe a continual stream of funerals in the cemetery chapel, orchestrated by the interactions of funeral directors, the chapel attendants, and funeral officiants (whether priest, rabbi, or humanist). In such densely populated places as London, enough people die every day that cemetery chapels rarely stand unused. (It is not unusual to wait 10-14 days for a slot at particularly popular council-run facilities in London.)

The uniformity of funerals is also shaped by the physical spaces in which they take place. Christian or pagan, Hindu or humanist: if you use the local council facilities, the space you get is the same as everyone else. Given the extent to which this space is often framed by Christian symbols—the by-product of an established church—this aspect of sameness poses a challenge for humanists (and others). As a result, one way humanist celebrants try to differentiate what they do is through the material reorganization of the chapel itself. This often means stripping the chapel of its Christian signs.

The crematorium chapel where I observed Dave’s funeral in February 2011 is a significant place in the history of this particular humanist struggle. In the early 1970s, one of the pioneering BHA celebrants, Barbara Smoker, waged a fierce battle with the local council

authorities to remove a heavy brass cross that hung above the catafalque. The council's initial response was that people who wanted it taken down would have to pay a fee; because of its weight, it was a significant operation. After lobbying from Smoker, and a local Unitarian minister, the council relented, and replaced the brass cross with a lighter, hollow one that the chapel attendant could take down without much effort.

This restaging of crematoria chapels is an ongoing effort by humanist celebrants. The first thing that a celebrant does, when he or she arrives at the chapel, is take away or have covered any religious symbols that may be present.

In London, there are three major periods in which chapels have been built: the 1890s, the 1930s, and the 1950s. Chapels built in the 1890s are indistinguishable from "proper" chapels—in fact they *are* proper chapels. And thus the Christian symbolism is often literally built into the walls, windows, and altars. In such cases, there is often little that a celebrant can do to completely purify the space—and purification is, I think, the intent. But they will do what they can. Once, a celebrant and I entered a Victorian cemetery chapel to find a very Christian scene indeed. There was a simple altar, on which stood a brass cross. The altar was backed by stained glass windows of angels and saints, and framed on either side by the Alpha and Omega. Behind the altar itself was a passage from the Gospel of John (14: 6), embedded into the tile work, and used in Anglican funeral liturgies: "The Lord Jesus Christ said, 'I am the way, the truth, and the life. No-one comes to the Father, except through me.'" The celebrant did the only thing he could: he removed the brass cross. Everything else was beyond his power, but even this gesture was important. [Figure 2]

Chapels built in the 1930s are often much more neutral, civic spaces, reminiscent of an Arts and Crafts style, and embedded with symbols of nature and the seasons. In such

cases there is often nothing that needs to be removed, or which can be removed quite easily. Chapels built in the 1950s are quintessentially modernist spaces, and often void of any metaphysical semiotic, or outfitted in such a way that indices of the sacred can be covered. At many such chapels, for instance, the cross on the wall is framed by curtains which can be drawn over it. In one of the City of London crematorium chapels, all the religious signs are portable. I found the storage space for the panoply of symbols that might be needed, including the Christian cross, a Sikh khanda, and the Omkara (sacred to Hindus, Jains, and Buddhists); they were all stuffed behind the organ, out of sight. Most were dusty. [Figures 3 and 4]

The Coffin Question

With indices to a transcendent removed, or reduced, the action that takes place in a chapel during a BHA ceremony is intended to be grounded in a more closed immanent frame. If there is one thing that regularly challenges this intended framing, however, it is the continuing presence of the coffin.

For Sophie, Johnny's approach to the coffin demonstrated the kind of confidence she felt all humanist celebrants needed to have. As she told me:

What impressed me about [Johnny] is that he has found a way of dealing with something that I don't think I've found a way of dealing with yet. I have this awful phrase in my head: it's the elephant in the room. That is how I see the coffin. That's doing myself a disservice to

a certain degree, but, I still have that sense of: *oh, God, should I look at the coffin now when I say this bit, or shouldn't I?*

And I felt, he was very, very natural with it. You know, he found his own way of going over, and touching it and acknowledging it, and I really, really like that. I don't think I've found that myself. ... You know, when I'm talking about the person's life, and what they've done and what they've achieved: to then look at a box, to refer back to the box of, it just doesn't feel right. It's a box. And, you know, the legacy is out there in front of you, in the living, breathing people. But the body is a hugely, a hugely potent symbol.

A "heavy symbol" indeed; the body comes "with a curriculum vitae, or résumé—or several possible résumés" (Verdery 1999: 28). Inasmuch as celebrants addressed the coffin, however, it was always said to be out of respect for the family and friends present. Touching the coffin, as Johnny had done, was never expected. It is not part of any regular humanist funeral practice. Yet other practices and procedures forced the issue. Such a focus could be mitigated if the coffin was placed in the chapel before the service. But in most funerals the coffin is processed in, usually by pall bearers in the employ of the funeral director—burly men in traditional funeral tailcoats who, after placing the coffin on the catafalque, take a few steps back and bow in unison before turning to leave. The celebrant, who will by this point be standing at the front of the chapel, often does the same. When I asked about this, though, celebrants often voiced a discomfort.

During my research I took the three-month training course to become a celebrant (with the BHA's express permission, as well as that of the fellow trainees). The coffin

question was something we addressed. “Ideologically, I’m opposed to it,” said one of the trainers, reflecting on her own approach to addressing the coffin, “but it’s respectful.” Plus, she went on, the funeral director expects it; it’s part of the performance being staged by him. Over and above what families or celebrants want, funeral directors and even chapel attendants play an important role—sometimes wittingly, sometimes not—in determining the extent to which the immanent frame is cast as open or closed.

Another celebrant, Sharon, was opposed to touching the coffin altogether. “I never ever do it,” she told me, “because what is it I’m doing? That’s a body in there. It’s not the person. What we’re about to do [in the funeral] is talk about the person, and *that’s* the person. And one of the things I’m saying [as a humanist celebrant] is that people live on in your memories. *That’s* what I’m saying is important, not that body there. So why would I touch it?”¹³

Other celebrants raised the matter of propriety. Jane, from Suffolk, said she never touches the coffin because it’s “not hers,” and Sonny, from Norfolk, concurred. “If anybody’s going to do that, it’s going to be the family. I didn’t *know* that person.” Even this, though, could cause alarm among the celebrants, because one of the most difficult situations to handle is a loved one who embraces the coffin, who refuses to let it go. I never saw this happen, but I heard many accounts of it, and even of one case of a woman who opened the coffin and embraced her husband’s body. They were Marxists from Latin America—something emphasized in the story, which was shared by a celebrant at a quarterly meeting with other celebrants working in her area of London—and the husband was then buried in Highgate Cemetery (the very resting place of Karl Marx himself, we were reminded).

Two further observations can be made here. The first is that the reluctance or refusal to touch the coffin is best seen not in terms of the body's profanity, but, rather, sacrality, or at least, its recognition as something special. Humanists in the BHA might want a closed world structure, but this does not preclude the possibility of recognizing certain ideas and objects as in some sense sacred. Indeed, even Dawkins feels this way. "There are objects and occasions which invoke in me a profound sense of the sacred," he writes, which include being brought to tears at the Grand Canyon and "moved in a poetic way" by the giant redwoods of California (2004: 135; 137).

The second observation is that the wife of the Latin American Marxist, who was spoken of in matter-of-fact terms as a fellow secular-humanist, was nonetheless "marked," not only in terms of her politics, but her provenance. As a Latin American, and as a Marxist, the coffin didn't necessarily pose the same question. BHA members are not only humanist; they are, by and large, *British*. And they tend to be British *liberals*, not British socialists. This highlights two other ways in which the coffin question gains purchase, ways in which a national habitus, or political habitus, inflect—or get understood to inflect—that question.

The phenomenology of training to become a celebrant is attentive to these dynamics, and despite—or perhaps because of—devaluation of the body in the celebrant imaginary, the training course builds it in. The final stage of accreditation to become a BHA celebrant involves a series of mock funerals, delivered by the trainees. Everything that can be done to approximate a real funeral is done. Dress is formal, and the practice takes place in a cemetery chapel. During the training course I attended, the ten of us on the course took turns, over a day, delivering funeral scripts we had written on the basis of composite lives provided by our trainers. When we weren't acting the part of the celebrant, we had to play

the parts of various mourners, and some of my fellow trainees got deeply into this (playing inconsolable spouses or children; even, once, a jilted lover in the back row). For each of these mock funerals, two of our trainers acted as pall bearers, and commandeered someone's luggage to serve as the coffin, placing it carefully on the catafalque each time we did the full run-through, solemnly bowing to it before turning to leave. Perhaps I was imagining it, but I got the distinct impression each time that their bows were slightly exaggerated, breaking frame to let their humanist sensibilities in.¹⁴ [Figure 5]

By far the most commonly charged moment of humanist funerals (and other funerals in Britain's crematoria and cemetery chapels) is the committal or other formal farewell, such as Johnny's "goodbye" to Dave. In my survey of the celebrants, 71 of 155 respondents said that the committal was the "most important" moment of the ceremony (sometimes with reservations about whether *important* is the correct term; some said "emotional"). As one respondent to the survey put it, "The committal is certainly the most harrowing moment for the mourners and which it is the most vital to get right."

Getting it right is a mix of words and timing, with faith in technology. In most crematoria chapels, curtains are drawn around the coffin on the catafalque; a portal in the back wall is then opened up and the crematorium attendants wheel the coffin off the catafalque, out of sight, to prepare it for cremation. In a few chapels, the catafalque descends into the ground, where the attendants are at work on a lower floor. It is absolutely vital, from the professionals' points of view (celebrants, funeral directors, crematorium managers), that the mourners not see the coffin move off the catafalque. This is the moment when the finality of things sinks in for the living; the dignity of the goodbye is dependent upon the coffin's stand-alone-ness, if you will—its freedom, paradoxically, from

human contact, especially the contact of crematoria workers. Who wants to see a loved one wheeled off by an unfamiliar man in a dark blue t-shirt?

In nearly all cases even the closing of the curtains or descent of the catafalque is mechanical, not done by hand. It is the celebrant's job to push a small button on the lectern/pulpit, which begins the process. The key is to know how long a given chapel's curtains take to draw. The time can vary by up to 15 seconds, which is significant in such a moment. Most celebrants said they would always practice drawing the curtains when they first started using a new chapel. One of the worst things that can happen is for the celebrant to finish what he or she has to say before the curtains are fully drawn, or too long after. Ideally the words and the curtains draw to a close in perfect synch. Then the coffin question is over and done.

Conclusion

In this article I have explored how the coffin has become a locus of humanist efforts to frame immanence. For many of the celebrants I got to know, it was the instability of the coffin's affectual and semiotic potentials that made this such an important question. The coffin's presence challenged the idea that what matters is not the bodies of persons but the memories of them, the ways those persons live on in the thoughts and actions of those they knew. "It's a box," Sophie said of the coffin. And yet, of course, what it contains is "a hugely potent symbol." A heavy symbol.

Humanist celebrants are not about to stage a coup in the funeral business by banning this unstable thing. If pressed, in fact, most BHA celebrants would say that whether

the coffin remains part of funerals for another generation or forever doesn't really matter. If people want coffins, they should have coffins, and it's perfectly possible to be a "proper" humanist and think so. For all the ways in which I've addressed the coffin question here, it is important to acknowledge that it's almost never one the families and friends are even aware of. At the forefront of celebrants' minds is a fitting goodbye to the person in question, of care and concern for his or her loved ones. The coffin question gets posed in car-ride conversations, in celebrant network meet-ups, in training, and, on occasion, on account of the anthropologist (rather than the elephant) in the room. More than the societal or community aspects of providing funerals, what I've set out here tells us about the ways in which certain signs—signs with meaningful materiality—prompt committed humanists to think about the embodied and other material dimensions of being secular.

Humanist celebrants are not, moreover, complete ritual iconoclasts. For the weddings and naming ceremonies that many conduct, the incorporation of things—ribbons; candles; colored sand; bells—is often particularly important. Even at funerals, it is not uncommon to see the coffin adorned with things itself: rosemary sprigs, or skis, or what have you. The celebrants see these props, if you will, as good ways of underlining the symbolic message of what a ceremony is trying to communicate: the coming together of a couple; joy at the birth of a child; the departed's love of the slopes. The key issue is the extent to which various objects and substances might be seen as agentive in themselves, redirecting attention rather than reinforcing an overall message. Coffins themselves, and what they have in them (more than what sits on top of them) run the risk of redirection. But a little bit of immanent enchantment—what Jane Bennett might call "enchantment without design" (2001: 9-12), or being "transfixed in wonder and transported by sense" (2001: 5); or

what Dawkins might recognize as the tearful or poetic—doesn't bother celebrants. As long as that wonder is directed toward this life, and not an afterlife, or other life, or other world, it is perfectly fitting in a humanist ceremony.

All the same, the coffin question matters. It matters because it tells us something about the kind of world, and worldview, humanist celebrants try to make. It's a world which, in the long run, gets closed to the particular form of enchantment that a corpse, as a heavy symbol, as an affectual and perhaps even overloaded sign, seems to invite. And in both life and death, the body is a crucial site in coming to understand the places and times in which certain paradigmatic signs of "enchantment" come down. Or, at least, get covered up.

References

Asad, Talal. 2003. *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press.

Bennett, Jane. 2001. *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Bloch, Maurice and Jonathan Parry. 1982. Introduction: Death and the Regeneration of Life. In *Death and the Regeneration of Life*, eds. M. Bloch and J. Parry. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 1-44.

Connolly, William. 1999. *Why I am not a Secularist*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Copeman, Jacob and Deepa S. Reddy. 2012. The Didactic Death: Publicity, Instruction, and Body Donation. *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 2: 59-83.

Davies, Douglas. 2002. *Death, Ritual, and Belief: The Rhetoric of Funerary Rites*. (Second edition) London: Continuum.

Dawkins, Richard. 2004. The Sacred and the Scientist. In *Is Nothing Sacred?*, ed. B. Rogers. Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 135-137.

Goffman, Erving. 1981. *Forms of Talk*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Hertz, Robert. 1960. *Death and the Right Hand*, trans. R. and C. Needham. Abingdon: Routledge.

Hirschkind, Charles. 2010. Is there a secular body? The Immanent Frame.

<http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2010/11/15/secular-body/>, last accessed August 20, 2013.

Holloway, Margaret, Susan Adamson, Vassos Argyrou, Peter Draper, and Daniel Mariau. 2010. *Spirituality in Contemporary Funerals*. Hull: University of Hull, prepared for the Arts and Humanities Research Council. Available on-line via <http://www2.hull.ac.uk/fass/pdf/Title%20contents.pdf>, last accessed 24 July 2013.

_____. 2013. "Funerals aren't nice but it couldn't have been nicer:" The makings of a good funeral. *Mortality* 18: 30-53.

Knott, Kim. 2010. Theoretical and Methodological Resources for Breaking Open the Secular and Exploring the Boundary between Religion and Non-Religion. *Historia Religionum* 2: 115-133.

Metcalf, Peter and Richard Huntington. 1991. *Celebrations of Death: The Anthropology of Mortuary Ritual*. (Second edition) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Meyer, Birgit. 2012. Religious and Secular, "Spiritual" and "Physical" in Ghana. In *What Matters? Ethnographies of Value in a Not So Secular Age*, eds. C. Bender and A. Taves. New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 86-118.

Quack, Johannes. 2012. *Disenchanted India: Organized Rationalism and Criticism of Religion in India*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Taylor, Charles. 2007. *A Secular Age*. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Verdery, Katherine. 1999. *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies: Reburial and Postsocialist Change*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Walter, Tony. 1996. Ritualising Death in a Consumer Society. *RSA Journal* 144 (April), pp. 32-40.

_____. 2012. Why Different Countries Manage Death Differently: A Comparative Analysis of Modern Urban Societies. *British Journal of Sociology* 63(1): 123-145.

Acknowledgments

Research for this article was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (grant reference RES 000-22-4175). Earlier versions of this paper were presented at University College London, the London School of Economics, Utrecht University, Stockholm University, New York University, the University of Copenhagen, and Edinburgh University. I would like

to thank the audiences at these talks for their helpful feedback, as well as feedback from the editors and anonymous reviewers for *Material Religion*. Thanks, as well—much thanks—to the many celebrants and others who made the research possible.

Notes

¹ The corpse, of course, is not the coffin; the body is not the box. Yet celebrants often spoke of the two interchangeably, in synecdochal relation.

² In anthropology, various overviews and analyses have been provided by Metcalf and Huntington (1991), Bloch and Parry (1982), and Davies (2002), in addition to dozens of more case-specific studies of death, mortuary rituals, and commemoration, as well as the modern ur-text, Hertz (1960).

³ And yet note the mode of address: second person, as if Dave was the addressee. This might be interpreted as an opening in the immanent frame (see discussion below); I'm not sure it is much of one, although there is not space here to focus on the indexicals of immanence.

⁴ See <https://humanism.org.uk/about/>, accessed 19 January 2012.

⁵ The survey was conducted on-line in June 2011. There were 1164 respondents, out of 3000 members invited to reply.

⁶ As Taylor makes clear in his lengthy discussion of the immanent frame, the “closed” option is not the only one—not the only “spin” the immanent frame can have. Within the West, he argues, we all live in the immanent frame. It is “the sensed context in which we develop our beliefs” (2007: 549), and for some (Taylor included) it makes sense “to live it as open to something beyond” (2007: 544).

⁷ The survey of celebrants was conducted on-line in September 2011; it was sent to all of them (approximately 270), and I received 195 completed replies.

⁸ Funerals are the most common by far; of over 8,000 BHA ceremonies conducted in 2011, over 90 per cent were funerals.

⁹ Verdery is right, and one of the most important aspects of her analysis is the boldness with which she addressed the affectual power of the corpse; it is *not* just any old thing. But of course this doesn't mean tomato cans are precluded from becoming "heavy symbols." If it was your great grandfather's tomato can, it might be. And dead birds can certainly be heavy symbols, as the Bororo (or ornithologists) might want to stress.

¹⁰ A recent article by Copeman and Reddy (2012) addresses this same concern in the Indian context, where atheist and rationalist movements have deep roots; see also Quack (2012: 294-301) on "disenchanted death" in India.

¹¹ See "NHS Organ Donor Register hits Record 18 million," 23 June 2011, <http://www.nhsbt.nhs.uk/news/2011/newsrelease230611.html>, accessed 22 August 2013.

¹² See the work of Tony Walter (1996; 2012) and Margaret Holloway and her colleagues (Holloway et al. 2010; 2013) for some very useful discussions of the more general economic, social, and "spiritual" dynamics of funerals in contemporary England.

¹³ Here and elsewhere in the article there have been hints of the ways in which humanists address the classic problematic of the regeneration of life. Although there is not space to address it here, there is a strongly developed discourse within the BHA of people "living on" in two ways: first, the memory of others; second, their genetic offspring.

¹⁴ A celebrant in the Humanist Society of Scotland (another prominent humanist organization in Britain) told me that in training courses she ran, she always borrowed a coffin from a funeral-director friend. It is important, she told me, to have the real thing there.