

# *Mortuary Management*

with Funeral Monitor

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# Life After Religion

## Will a Godless America Be the Death of Funeral Service?

By Erin Smith

**H**ow often have you sat across from a grieving family who says they aren't sure about having a funeral because "Dad wasn't religious"?

If you are the funeral home owner in a small town, do people refer to your funeral home as the "Catholic" funeral home, the "Lutheran" funeral home, the "insert-religion-here" funeral home? Do *you* refer to your funeral home this way?

We sponsor church bulletins. We give away religious calendars. Our halls and arrangement rooms have paintings and posters with Bible verses. We have Bibles displayed in our foyers. And what is wrong with this? Nothing.

Except Gallup polls taken in the United States over the past years show an ever-declining membership in churches and synagogues, with 70 percent belonging in 1999 and 63 percent in 2009. So, I would ask about the others — those who do not identify with a religion, or those who claim agnosticism, humanism or atheism — how is your funeral home working to service them?

You may live in a "Christian" community and do not see this as a problem, but the United States as a whole is becoming more secular with each passing decade, not just large metropolitan areas. If you look at your business five years, 10 years in the future, what do we see? And how can you focus the marketing of your business to take this trend into account?

Americans, like their European counterparts, are becoming less religious. For the first time in its history, the 2001 Great Britain census asked participants for their religious preference: 14.81 percent claimed no religion at all. The question was asked on the 2011 census as well. Preliminary results will be released in September 2012, and, in keeping with the overall trends in Europe and other western countries, the number answering "no religion" is not expected to decline.

The pattern is the same in the United States. In Gallup polls, participants were asked, "What is your religious preference — Protestant, Roman Catholic, Jewish, another religion or no religion"? In 1999, eight percent answered "no religion." In 2009, that number rose to 13 percent. As with Great Britain, these numbers are not expected to go down.

For those same years the National Funeral Directors Association (NFDA) shows U.S. cremation rates rising from 25.04 percent in 1999 to 36.86 percent in 2009. We see a rise in cremation rates in Great Britain as well: 70.71 percent in 2001 and 73.15 percent in 2010 according to the Cremation



Society of Great Britain. One cannot argue there is a direct correlation between secularization and a rise in cremation rates.

The rise of cremation all over the world can be attributed to many factors: land use, focus on energy with the "green" movement and cost — with the latter being the only thing funeral home owners can control. But another reason for the rise in cremation rates could be that more and more people don't want a funeral service, see no need for a funeral service and aren't "religious." This is where funeral directors can help reverse the trend.

Of course, I'm not talking about cremation with memorial service or even cremation with a graveside service. I'm talking about direct or immediate cremations. We are with these families for one, maybe two hours, and may only see them one more time when they pick up the urn.

At the large Midwestern funeral home where I worked, our cremation rate was around 65-70 percent, with direct cremations making up about 30-40 percent of that. Those are pretty impressive numbers. But you don't need another funeral home's numbers to prove your direct or immediate cremation rate is going up. You don't need another funeral home's num-

bers to know that some members of the community simply do not see the value in your services.

Funeral service as we know it may not survive this secularization of America, but funeral service can evolve to embrace this secularization. If we as funeral service professionals allow the value of our services to be linked directly with a religious ceremony, trouble is not far away.

Thomas Lynch, the eloquently spoken Michigan funeral home owner, poet and writer, has often stated that we, the living, have an obligation to “see the deceased to where they need to go.” This is a social and emotional ceremony as much as it is religious. Lynch does not believe this applies just to the procession to the cemetery, but to the crematory as well, if there is no cemetery. He has rarely been turned down when offering for families to come to the cremator with the body and says he has never had anyone say, having done it, that they wish they hadn’t.

Lynch has created a new tradition for the families he serves. He has tied this tradition not to a particular religion, but to a way for them to say goodbye, a way for families to grieve with others who understand how they feel and, most importantly, a way to see the deceased to where they need to go.

We can do some fairly simple things to make the funeral ceremony more relevant to those of no religious faith. Keep printing the religious calendars, but do a smaller run of non-religious calendars — have them side by side in your foyer. Make sure you have a selection of non-religious poems for the inside of your memorial folders. Keep a list of meeting halls available in your community for a non-religious ceremony (remember, it is not uncommon for the public to associate your funeral home with a church). Also, keep a list of clergy and other officiants who are willing to perform non-religious ceremonies. Build relationships with these men and women as you would the clergy at the local church. And finally, like Lynch, can you think of a meaningful tradition you can help create for your less religious families?

Beyond the basic, you may think about hosting events in your funeral home. Even groups as unlikely as the American Business Women’s Association or a local driver’s education class will get the public in your doors, shifting the perception of your business from the exclusive to the inclusive. Invite speakers of different faiths and beliefs into your funeral home and invite the public as part of an educational speaker series. Make connections with leaders in the spiritual community. Just

as their religious counterparts, these leaders are advising people about death and the funeral ceremony. Perhaps the most important thing you can do is train your staff — and yourselves! — how best to professionally explain the importance of the funeral. If we cannot articulate its importance, how can we expect others to?

If you live in a community where this secularization is a rising trend, consider taking more active measures. Hold grief support groups specifically designed for the non-religious. If you have two chapels or visitation rooms, consider removing all religious references from one of those rooms.

What I offer are just suggestions — you live and work in your community and know it best. Even if you do not see this as a problem, you must agree that funeral service is changing and the most important thing we can do is educate the public on the value of our services. Cremation has been the most common way of bypassing most of what the funeral home has to offer, but even do-it-yourself funerals are on the rise, with legislation being passed in several states to help families do this — from “designated agents” making the removal to families applying for their own burial-transit permit and death certificates.

Change is coming. So the next time a grieving family isn’t sure about having a funeral because “Dad wasn’t religious,” what will you say? *MM*

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