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Introduction

WHAT HAPPENS at a funeral for someone who believes that this life is all we have? Who concludes that when the last breath is drawn, we have reached our end? Who asserts that we must rely on reason and each other—not God, or the promise of an afterlife—to achieve our potential and define our time? Who identifies, even if sometimes with frustration or ambivalence, as *not religious*? What work does such a funeral perform? And what can such funerals tell us about the values, commitments, and lifeways of such secular and humanist people?

An Honest Death addresses these questions. Based on long-term anthropological research in London, it focuses on a network of humanist celebrants, a small but dedicated group of some 300 people across England and Wales who conduct funerals for unbelievers. These celebrants are part of a larger organization known as the British Humanist Association. The BHA's mission is to support "non-religious people who seek to live ethical and fulfilling lives on the basis of reason and humanity."¹ For the celebrants, this means getting up each day and setting out to usher in a world in which people embrace the facts of our finitude. They want people to face death with that honesty. One of the BHA's mottoes is: "for the one life we have." It would be difficult to overestimate the significance of this motto as a rallying call. At life's end, humanist celebrants help families commemorate the death of a loved one in a this-worldly fashion. Humanist funerals. Funerals for atheists. Non-religious funerals. Funerals without God. "Simple" funerals. Funerals that are "all about the person." Or sometimes just "not the



FIGURE 0.1. Just One Life. Image courtesy of Humanists UK.

vicar.” An increasing number of people want this range of options, and the celebrants aim to provide them. This is deathcare that the BHA sees as helping to realize the principles and promises of the Enlightenment.

In often moving detail, Thomas W. Laqueur has reflected on the fact that we cannot seem to leave the dead alone: “their historical, philosophical, and anthropological weight is enormous and almost without limit and compare.”² “The work of the dead,” as he puts it, always demands attention. Funerals are a key part of this work. Funerals point to what matters within a given time or tradition, even when, as here, they have an unenchanted stamp. My central assertion in this book is that humanist funerals can enrich our understanding of the secular tradition rooted in the European Enlightenment. By “secular tradition,” I mean, along the lines of Hans Blumenberg and Talal Asad, a particular configuration of ontological and epistemological claims, claims that shape understandings of life, knowledge, time, and values.³ These claims are often traced through intellectual and social histories of the Renaissance, Reformation, and Enlightenment, the analysis of modern political and legal structures, and so on.⁴

Yet what I observed in my fieldwork is how they are also embodied and felt in the work of the dead. The particular way in which funerals help us understand the secular tradition, then, is in the extent to which

they mark its embodiments and materialities. And what could be more material than death, than the dead? For humanists, the secular surfaces in gut reactions to the presence of a coffin, or a cross on the wall; in what gets said by whom at a funeral; in the music that plays during a moment of reflection; in the handling of paperwork for a will; in steeling one's courage when death is known to be near. Secularity is instantiated in the ashes of cremation; in the celebrant's voice and physical presence; in handshakes in the receiving line in a garden of remembrance; in the regulation of bodily functions; in choices of dress and self-presentation. As Ann Pellegrini asks, "what does secularism feel like?"⁵ It's an important question to which we must attend.

The first answer that most humanists would give to this question is: not much! Secular people and traditions have been remarkably resistant to embodied groundings in the world. Members of the British Humanist Association treat the embodied and material aspects of life with a strong dose of suspicion. Their first appeal is to a rendering of the Enlightenment's gains in which reason rules. For them, to be secular is above all a matter of thought, not feelings. It is about ideas, not things. This is life's end, then: daring to know and fine-tuning the powers of reason. At the same time, the humanists are passionately (yes, passionately) committed to acknowledging that the powers and potential of our brains run up against the hard limits of biology. We are not in control of time. So this is life's end, too. Life *ends*, in other words. We die. Reason rules; except for the fact that we die. We are defined by mind, but also the secularity of the body—which is to say, the body in time. We must face these facts with honesty. What's more, this attention to the material includes commitments to joy, pleasure, care, love, and grief.

Crucially, though, all this can only matter *because* life ends. Mortality is not a problem for humanists; it is the key to our potentials and purpose. As one humanist philosopher declares, "any life worth living must be finite."⁶ Meaning and the experience of fullness are dependent upon the finite nature of sentiments, of the experiences of love, loss, pleasure, and pain. And this complicates the hyper-heady bent of the secular sensibility. Simply put, then, what we have here is a simultaneous commitment to, and tension between, a certain kind of rationalism and a

certain kind of materialism. In the ethnography to come, we will see a tension between reason and matter play out again and again.

The people I write about in this book don't have a lot of ritual in their lives. They don't particularly want it. They have become committed over time to their individuality and autonomy (good Enlightenment values) in ways that make communal or set scripts feel awkward at best, and sometimes even offensive. When a loved one dies, however, or someone faces up to their own imminent or inevitable passing, there is a desire for *something*. Something fitting for them.

What does that look like? It's simple enough to provide a quick sketch.

So: Let's say it's just before two o'clock in the afternoon. (It doesn't have to be the afternoon; it could be the morning. It is almost certainly a weekday, though.) The mourners who have gathered outside a crematorium chapel are invited in to take seats. At 2:00 pm sharp, recorded music begins to play. It might be a cello suite by J. S. Bach, it might be a song by the Beatles. Men in morning suits process in, down the center aisle, carrying a coffin, which they place on a raised platform (this is called a *catafalque*). Following them is the humanist celebrant and the immediate family (known as "chief mourners" in the funeral trade). The celebrant is probably wearing a black suit—unless the family has asked for something else. The music winds down and the celebrant takes her place behind the chapel lectern. The family sits in the front row. The celebrant begins by saying:

In keeping with Mildred's outlook and with her family's wishes, this is a non-religious, humanist ceremony, and, as a member of the British Humanist Association, it is my honor to have been asked to take this ceremony today.

This is followed by a minute or two of philosophical reflections on life and death and, nearly always, a carefully wrought portrait of the person who has died. Then come two or three personal tributes, from a spouse, a child, a close friend. Sometimes, if these loved ones don't feel able, the celebrant will read tributes on their behalf. Then the celebrant calls for a moment of reflection:

Please use this time to be with Mildred in your thoughts. To seal all that you have had together, all that she has given and will continue to give you.

Over the next two or three minutes, music plays: Mozart perhaps, or Bette Midler. As the music fades out, the celebrant returns to the lectern and announces that now is the time for saying farewell. This is called the committal:

We commit you, Mildred Spark, into the cycle of living and of dying, and into the richness and the smiles of our memories. The fact of death cannot destroy what has been given and so with all our love, we thank you for the gifts of your life. And with our acceptance and our deepest respect, we now let you go.

As the celebrant is speaking, curtains start to draw around the catafalque until, in timing with the celebrant's words, the curtains are fully closed. Shifting registers slightly, she thanks those gathered for coming and conveys, on behalf of the family, an invitation to join them in the crematorium's garden of remembrance and, following that, the reception at a nearby pub. Should anyone wish, donations to Macmillan Cancer Support are being collected in the deceased's name. Then a third piece of music starts up (sometimes irreverently upbeat, sometimes not) and the celebrant and family file out, followed by everyone else. It is now 2:30 pm.

And there you have it. A life in thirty minutes. But where does this ritual half hour come from, and what is at stake?

The British Humanist Association

Before we get immersed in the flow of humanist funerals, before we can turn to the cares and commitments of the celebrants and the people they serve, it's important to have some sense of the BHA and the larger context of the freethought movement. There is a history behind all of this, even if the type of funeral I've just sketched is still relatively new.

The British Humanist Association's roots stretch to 1896, when a number of Victorian ethical societies came together to form the Union

of Ethical Societies. These ethical societies had been started in the preceding decades by men and women disillusioned with religious faith and religious institutions. Testimonies of members highlight a range of reasons for why they joined, from disbelief in the Bible, to upset over the privileges and prejudices of the Established Church, to, in one case, outrage over hearing a minister declare from the pulpit that an unbaptized infant was damned to hell.⁷ But if these ethicists didn't want the moralities and metaphysics dominating church and temple (liberal Jews were an important constituency), they did want something of the corporate spirit that defined organized religion. In some instances this included a robust form of ritual life, complete with "secular hymns." The key was to animate this form with a force that was wholly immanent and not deliberated upon in what they took to be unscientific and illogical ways. The initial aims of the Ethical Union were: "By purely natural and human means to assist individual and social efforts after right living. To free the current ideal of what is right from all that is merely traditional or self-contradictory, and thus to widen and perfect it."⁸

By the late Victorian era, what is often referred to as the freethought movement had been developing in institutional form for over half a century. It took inspiration from the published works and social action of such figures as Thomas Paine, Auguste Comte, and J. S. Mill. As the historian Susan Budd puts it, the secularists, rationalists, freethinkers, and ethicists expressed "varieties of unbelief."⁹ There was no single mold. Some were drawn to socialist ideals, some to the liberal agenda; some confined themselves to high-minded deliberations, others only practical causes; some wanted to maintain forms of ritual life associated with Christianity and Judaism, others to throw them over. But there was a good deal of overlap, too, especially around certain Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment traditions of thought. This is reflected in their public culture. Among them, these groups published periodicals with titles such as *The Reasoner*, *The Agnostic Annual*, *The Truth Seeker*, and *The Secular Review*. A constellation of commitments and key terms was taking shape. It was in 1851 that George Jacob Holyoake, one of the giants of the movement, coined the most significant of these terms: "secularism." He used it partly with respect to the ideal of a separation

between church and state—the National Secular Society, which still exists, was founded in 1866—but more broadly referring to a “code of duty pertaining to this life, founded on considerations purely human, and intended mainly for those who find theology indefinite or inadequate, unreliable or unbelievable.”¹⁰ It is a definition that still resonates for the humanists I got to know through my research.

The Ethical Union was reincorporated as the British Humanist Association in the mid-1960s.¹¹ This was done to signal a new emphasis on practical, political concerns, rather than intellectual discussions and secular “worship.” The “code of duty” still held, expressed from the 1960s more pithily as being “good without God.” But in the 1950s and 1960s, humanists were at the forefront of campaigns to reform the laws and attitudes concerning abortion, euthanasia, adoption, and divorce, all of which were informed by what they saw as long-standing Christian privileges and mores. The BHA also started a counseling service, a housing association, the Agnostics Adoption Society (to counter the dominance of faith-based providers), and non-religious funeral services. As the editor of one humanist periodical put it, “what people were worried about in the twentieth century was not the authorship of the Pentateuch but ‘antiquated laws which hold up common-sense reforms in regard to divorce, euthanasia, abortion, and so on.’”¹²

By the early 1990s, the BHA had shrunk in size and influence, with membership dwindling to a few hundred from a peak of several thousand. Its public presence also waned, and those early versions of public services folded. Times got so tight the BHA had to sell its property in South Kensington. (Since that point, the BHA has rented its offices—first on Gower Street, in central London, which is where I conducted my research, and more recently on Moreland Street, not far from Islington.) According to several of the longest standing members I spoke with, one view in the 1990s was that this slide into marginality was a sign of secularization’s success. Whether or not they were articulated as such, humanist ideas were becoming the societal norm. Diane Munday, who had been involved with the BHA since 1962, and who gained national renown in those years for her work on abortion law reform and women’s health, put it to me this way: “In the early days we were the devil, and

the devil always has the best tunes.” The BHA was in the news regularly, because members’ views, and commitments, offended common sense—at least of the establishment. By the 1990s, that was no longer the case, certainly on issues such as abortion, divorce, and adoption. “We were just irrelevant,” another long-standing member and executive told me. “Because, you know, the church continued to decline.”

By nearly all measures, church decline has continued in Britain throughout the first decades of the new millennium.¹³ All the same, the fortunes of the BHA swung up once again, first after 9/11, but then more dramatically a few years later, with the rise of the “New Atheists.” These things are connected. *The God Delusion*, published in 2006, by Richard Dawkins, and *God Is Not Great*, published in 2007, by Christopher Hitchens, became bestsellers. For each, the clash of civilizations animates their polemics. On one level, this was framed as the West versus the Rest, but more generically their cause was for Reason over Faith, and they had as many disparaging things to say about Christians as about the Muslim Other. Related concerns in British society were also cropping up, including a push by some evangelical Christians to legitimize creationism and question the scientific basis of evolution by natural selection. For a certain kind of secular humanist, then, the first decade of the twenty-first century generated a renewed cause: a perception that the advances of science and secularism were being undermined by religious fundamentalisms both near and far. This concern crystallized a realization that the cause of humanism had *not* become irrelevant. Some battles had been won, but others still needed fighting. At the turn of the twenty-first century, faith-based schools were still a major part of the public education system; twenty-six Church of England bishops still sat, by right of station, in the House of Lords; euthanasia was still illegal; funeral provision was still dominated by the Church of England; and the nation had a Prime Minister, Tony Blair, with an uncharacteristically strong (and publicly professed) personal faith. These were the makings of an organizational renaissance. When I started my research in 2011, the BHA had 12,000 members (paying annual dues of £35) and a further 20,000 on the rosters designated as “supporters” (which means they had signed up for the email newsletter and other



FIGURE 0.2. The queue of people outside the Exams Schools in Oxford, before an event with Richard Dawkins and A. C. Grayling. Photo by the author.

communications). By 2024, the Association had over 100,000 members and supporters.¹⁴

When I first started my research, the BHA was shaped in significant ways by the appeal of New Atheism. Richard Dawkins was extremely influential. He was also actively involved in his role as a BHA vice president. I quickly lost count of the number of times members and supporters told me they “came to humanism” through Dawkins’s books or public campaigning. He was a celebrity, and could easily draw a thousand people to an event. People often crowded the stage when he was done speaking, asking him to sign their dog-eared copies of his books.

On one occasion, I witnessed a man visiting London from India plead with a BHA staffer to let him meet Dawkins backstage—*just one picture, please!* Another time, when I was at dinner with Dawkins, the restaurant proprietor asked for a picture, too, and prepared us a complimentary, off-menu dish of sweet rice topped with cherries.

Another twenty-first century change that long-standing members highlighted for me was the BHA’s shift to being a more professional organization. Even in its heyday of the 1960s, the Association relied

almost entirely on an informal network, with only a couple of salaried staff. By 2011, the BHA had ten full-time staff members, and the position of General Secretary had been changed to Chief Executive Officer. Andrew Copson, the CEO, who was appointed in 2010, and with whom I worked closely, initiated a raft of changes, many of which have been realized over the past decade-plus. Three of the most significant include: (1) the development of systematic fundraising efforts; (2) diversification of the membership and Board of Trustees; and (3) expansion of the BHA's community services and outreach. We will have occasion to touch on each of these in what follows. Symbolically, these developments culminated with a public rebranding of the Association. In 2017, the BHA started operating publicly as "Humanists UK." Copson explained the rebranding to members and supporters:

Humanists UK represents not just a new logo, but a totally new, friendly look that captures the essence of humanism: open, inclusive, energetic, and modern, with people and their stories placed first and foremost in all our broad and varied work.

The ideas and values we represent have an even prouder and still longer history than this: the thinking and doing of humanists stretches back to the European Enlightenment and has its antecedents in the ancient cultures of Europe, China, India, and many other places.¹⁵

Throughout the main period of my research, the "thinking and doing" of humanists took place in three main areas of work: campaigning, local group organization, and non-religious ceremonies. While this book focuses on the funerals, all three areas of the association's activities are interconnected and we will have occasion to discuss some instances in which the campaigning and local group activities overlapped with the provision of funerals.

Campaigning. For many members of the BHA, the most important aspect of its work is its commitment to a classic version of liberal secularism, including (a) the separation of church and state and (b) the insistence that religion be a "private" matter. The BHA campaigns on several issues relevant to this political sensibility. Take the case of faith

schools, which I have already mentioned briefly. Within England, approximately one-third of state schools are faith-based. They receive public funding—as much as 90 percent of their annual budgets. Yet many are allowed to use admissions criteria that favor children from particular religious groups. The Church of England is by far the largest such provider.¹⁶ State schools in England are also required to hold “collective worship,” regardless of whether they are faith-based or not. Parents have a right to opt their children out, but it can be a fraught process. The BHA campaigns to abolish state funding for faith schools, and also works to reform the nature of the collective worship, including the promotion of humanist assemblies as a complement to religious perspectives. Some BHA members joined the Association on account of faith schools. As parents, they had experienced firsthand the frustration of the primary-school admissions process, or bridled at the pressure and expectation to have their children join in collective prayers and hymns.

More generally, engaging in debate within the public sphere is a vital part of the Association’s work. The CEO and the Head of Public Affairs made regular appearances in the news and newspapers, providing a humanist point of view on any given social or ethical issue. The promotion of humanism and the BHA is also handled by the Association’s well-known patrons and members, among whom Dawkins was by far the most prominent during my research, although writers, artists, and entertainment personalities lent their voices and support. These included: Polly Toynbee, A. C. Grayling, Stephen Fry, Salman Rushdie, and the late Terry Pratchett. After he was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s, for example, Pratchett became an outspoken campaigner for assisted dying, producing a high-profile documentary on television about clinics in Switzerland, and the difficulties that Britons faced in realizing right to die legislation.¹⁷

Local Groups. The BHA promotes local humanist groups. The Association wants a grassroots humanism to flourish. There are about sixty of these groups, ranging in size from half a dozen to fifty or sixty members each. You can find them across the country, from Devon to Durham and beyond. Local groups are not technically part of the BHA, and local group members do not have to join the BHA, although there are close



FIGURE 0.3. In 2011, the BHA helped organize the March for a Secular Europe in central London. The banners here indicate the range of secularist causes. Photo by the author.

connections between them, and the Head of Membership spent a significant amount of time 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. (Andrew Copson was always keen to speak to local groups, to foster ties with the Association.) Some of the larger and more vibrant groups also run book clubs, coffee mornings, hiking trips, or volunteering schemes. The local group I attended regularly helped run a community soup kitchen on the premises of a Unitarian Church. (Property owned by the Quakers and the Unitarians was sometimes rented by local humanist groups—they could countenance those traditions—although the majority met in the function rooms of pubs.) Other groups focused on prison outreach, overseas development projects, and social and emotional support for the elderly.

Non-religious ceremonies. In addition to funerals, Humanist Ceremonies™ (the official business moniker for the celebrants' network)

provides weddings and naming ceremonies. All three are supported out of a belief that rituals are central to the human fabric, that rituals are not “religious” activities but human ones marking significant rites of passage. As one staff member told me, “all societies have rituals” and it’s just a “human trait.” As he also stated, “people, at the important times in their lives, need to come together for that collective action.”

Funerals are by far the most popular ceremony provided by the BHA. The network of celebrants delivers about nine thousand funerals each year, but only a few hundred weddings and even fewer naming ceremonies. Part of the discrepancy lies in the fact that neither weddings nor naming ceremonies quite meet that “need” referred to. Celebrants regularly observed that the birth of a child just didn’t seem to push secular people toward public recognition over and above a first birthday party or baby shower. For weddings, the issue was often more logistical: in England and Wales, humanist weddings are not legally recognized—despite repeated campaigns and hard lobbying by the BHA. If a couple wants a “non-religious” wedding they must use the local council registrar. So if they want a specifically humanist wedding it’s going to be a second ceremony, and most people just don’t want to expend the trouble or the cost of that.¹⁸

In recent years, the ceremonies work has been complemented by support for humanist chaplains in the Armed Forces, the prison system, and the National Health Service. I accompanied Andrew Copson to some early meetings with both military and prison officials in 2011, which grew into a significant initiative within the prison system. (He is still pushing for the military.) In 2016, the BHA set up “Humanist Care: The Non-Religious Pastoral Support Network,” to spearhead this work. The group now has a full-time member of staff, the Director of Humanist Care, who coordinates training volunteers to work in prisons, hospitals, and universities to “provide pastoral care to the non-religious, a group of people who have historically been overlooked in this area.”¹⁹

I did fieldwork in all three areas of the association’s work. I spent most of 2011 based daily in the BHA’s offices on Gower Street, which occupied the whole of a Georgian terrace house. I shadowed the CEO, attended all-staff and one-on-one meetings, interviewed staff and

visitors, went out for drinks, and even attended the staff Christmas party—an event laced with irony, as you might expect (and culminating in a lengthy karaoke session). This focus on the professional staff of the BHA also took me to Parliament, a prison in Winchester, an army base in Somerset, and many other locales in and beyond London: schools, a hospice, university lecture halls, lots of pubs, the Royal Society, the Royal Society of Arts, the Athenaeum Club. During this same period, I joined a local humanist group, which I call the “Thames Path Humanists,” participating in their monthly meetings at a local pub, as well as their special events and the committee meetings of its officers. Over the period 2012–2018, I continued follow-up fieldwork with both the BHA and Thames Path, made easier by the fact that I lived in London. During this time I visited several other local groups to observe their meetings or participate in specific activities, such as community days and, in one case, the running of an “ethical jury,” at which the group reflected on the dilemma facing one member whose grandmother was allergic to her cat.²⁰ I also spoke at some local groups, sharing the insights of my research.

When I started my research, I thought I might write a comprehensive ethnography: something that focused on all three aspects of the Association’s work in equal measure. But as the initial year of fieldwork unfolded, I became increasingly gripped by the funerals. Simply put, funerals were the messiest area of the BHA’s work. Wonderfully messy, from an anthropological point of view. I do mean this as a compliment. And the focus itself is in no way discounting the other areas of humanist advocacy, all of which are important, and some of which I have written about elsewhere.²¹ (In any case, as we’ll see, the different areas overlap.) But funerals are where the values and commitments of humanism came into sharpest relief; they are also important sites of interaction, and in nearly all cases bring a humanist vanguard—the celebrants—into relation with broader publics. It’s important to underscore here that Humanist Ceremonies are not only for card-carrying members of the BHA. They are for the broad swath of people who identify in one way or another as “non-religious.” This is an absolutely dreadful term, it must be said. *Non-religious*. As much as anything else, it signifies the slow pace

of linguistic change—the shortcomings of language in capturing the complexities of life in a secular age. Death, and grief, are likewise always escaping the language we have. So yes: humanist ceremonies are wonderfully messy and testament to the fullness of existing.

Who Are the Humanists?

Who were these new millennium humanists, these 12,000-plus people who parted with £35 to become paid-up members of the Association? To begin with, it might be helpful to present some numbers. This is part of a sentiment; humanists like numbers. Facts and figures. I once gave a public lecture in London, in which I focused in great detail on the life stories of two humanists.²² After the talk, a BHA member—he was a medical doctor—came up to me and said, “That was great, thanks. Are you also doing work based on actual data?”

It was partly in anticipation of such questions that, for the first time in my anthropological career, I issued quantitative surveys as part of my research. Just as much, though, it was because these people were in fact something of a social-scientific black box. The study of organizations and people who self-identify as secular, humanist, atheist, and other non-religious designations is on the rise across the social sciences and humanities; this is in no small part because the organizations are.²³ But in 2011, there weren’t many background figures to draw upon. In the UK, some demographic and quantitative work had been done in the 1960s,²⁴ and resources like the Mass-Observation project,²⁵ gathered around the time of the Second World War, are also instructive. Reading further back into freethought history makes it clear that “New Atheist” polemics are not entirely new; they often bear a remarkable similarity to those of some Victorians.²⁶ Charles Bradlaugh (1833–1891), known as “the secular bulldog,” could have given Dawkins a run for his money any day, when it comes to a talent for diminution and anti-religious quips. But “the nones,” as social scientists are now saying (Question: Your religion? Answer: None) have been on the rise in the past couple of decades, certainly in terms of voluntary organization, and I wanted some baselines.²⁷

To gather the most basic demographics, I used the same categories as the UK National Census. This revealed that 69 percent of the membership was male, 96 percent was White British or Any Other White, and the modal age range was 56–65. I asked other questions that add to the picture. Seventy-three percent of members had a university degree, for example, with approximately 13 percent of these coming from Cambridge or Oxford. Fifty-three percent said that “humanist” is the best label for their worldview, with “atheist” at 35 percent and “agnostic” at 2 percent; one person wrote in “Catholic Zen Buddhist,” another, “Roman Catholic Humanist,” and another, “I don’t find such labels useful.” Sixty-five percent of members were registered organ donors, 67 percent had a will, and 13 percent were vegetarian or vegan. Eighty-seven percent either agreed or strongly agreed that a woman’s right to choose is the most important factor in determining whether to have an abortion. Eighty-eight percent supported embryonic stem cell research, while only 17 percent of members opposed animal testing in medical research. Eighty percent donated monthly or annually to a charity, with cancer charities and those focused on human rights and international aid most common. Fifty-five percent wanted to replace the monarchy with a republican constitution. Seventy-two percent of the survey’s respondents had read Dawkins’s *The God Delusion*.

It is useful to have this snapshot of numbers and views. We will come back to some of them in the chapters to follow. For now, I want to make a couple of broad observations. The first is how, taken together, the demographics and social/political views pinpoint the tension I have highlighted between simultaneous commitments to rationality and the material. The BHA is a voluntary association that attracts highly educated, self-identified unbelievers with strong commitments to science and liberalism. Their views on medical research, abortion, organ donation, and even the monarchy weave together specific understandings of bodies, reason, autonomy, and the social contract. These are views in which, on the one hand, bodies are just bodies and, on the other, bodies are integral to the march of rationality and progress. The second point I want to make is how, against this backdrop of a traffic in different forms of embodiment, the BHA’s demographics could

hardly be more *unmarked*, in the social-scientific sense: white, male, older, and middle class. In this one sense, at least—an important sense—we can argue that a majority of the BHA's members do not have to consider their bodies as much as persons and groups who are otherwise socially marked.

The lack of diversity within the membership, and the question of humanism's unmarked assumptions, have become more pressing within humanist communities over the past decade.²⁸ One aspect of this, which stuck out to me from the get-go, having been trained in anthropology, concerns the historical connections between the Enlightenment and empire. As David Scott puts it perfectly succinctly, they “developed hand in hand.”²⁹ In its New Atheist versions, secular humanism can sound a lot like the kind of “civilizing” project associated with the Victorian gentleman. In *The God Delusion*, Dawkins says things like: “Children, and primitive peoples, impute intentions to the weather, to waves and currents, to falling rocks.”³⁰ This language could be taken straight from some nineteenth-century armchair ethnology, in which the infantilization of non-Western peoples was tied up with a particular understanding of reason and “how natives think.” In *God Is Not Great*, Christopher Hitchens ends the book by citing “the need for a new Enlightenment” and referring to religions as “the forces of barbarism.”³¹ The whole framing is essentially that of a social evolutionism—again, old-school Victorian science and moralism. Hitchens's prose is also marked by a treacly colonial nostalgia: “Bombay . . . used to be considered a pearl of the Orient, with its necklace of lights along the cornice and its magnificent British Raj architecture.”³² Anyway, he doesn't really mean “new” Enlightenment. He means a newly reinforced Western Enlightenment. (This was obvious in his post-9/11 politics.)

New Atheists put all religious traditions in their sight lines. But in my fieldwork experience, there were often extra doses of animus directed toward Catholicism and Islam. The anti-Catholic sentiment was often strongest from members who grew up in Catholic families. One prominent celebrant and humanist campaigner, Barbara Smoker, made no bones about her seething frustration and even disgust over what she saw as the sexism of the Church, and its sex-shaming, too. She also called

Catholic wakes “macabre” and spoke about practicing Catholics as if they lived in a fog of savage-like superstition. Another celebrant, Mary, who grew up in Ireland, told me she used to tell God to fuck off. “The thought of him spying on us, even when we’re in the toilet with our knickers down, you know, seemed too horrible.” Other BHA members who came from Catholic families said similarly disparaging things, not only about the Church as an institution, or with respect to the priesthood, but in terms of Catholicism as a kind of intellectual disability.

The criticisms of Islam, on the other hand, tended to come from people who had no familial or cultural connection to Islam. It came from the New Atheist types who supported a post-9/11 struggle for the triumph of reason and civilization (as they understood them). “Ex-Muslims” in the BHA, and those with Muslim cultural backgrounds of one sort or another, actually tended to find some of the attitudes and opinions they encountered within humanist circles offensive and reductive.³³

To be sure, not all BHA members took this approach. In fact it often led to tensions and debate. At one of the BHA’s annual general meetings—which bring together hundreds of everyday members each summer to hear presentations from humanist scientists, philosophers, and human rights activists—a patron of the BHA, who was a former Member of Parliament, presented what he called a “secular manifesto.” He set out a classic liberal stance, based on (1) maximizing the freedom to express religious belief within the limits of the need to protect the rights and freedoms of others; (2) ending religious privilege for the Church of England; and (3) the total separation of church and state. To emphasize his commitment to tolerance, and counter any charge that his manifesto could be seen as anti-religious, he cited the reasonableness of constructing mosques in Britain’s towns and cities—something that had often met with resistance in the public square. Secular liberal democracies, he said, are the best guarantor of such freedoms. But his advocacy for a commitment to toleration provoked a mixed reaction. In the Q&A session, one man stood up and said, “I have spent my life with immigrants and religious minorities. You can have a situation where Muslims get money from Saudi Arabia to build a mosque, and why

should local people who have lived there generation upon generation have this imposed?" The former MP begged to differ: "to be rational and consistent," he said, "means not to discriminate." Another member of the audience joined the pushback, though, calling for a ban on burqas—an issue that had been hotly debated across the English Channel in France. "When in Rome," he said, "do what the Romans do!"

At the 2014 World Humanist Congress, which was held in Oxford and organized by the BHA, Dawkins was interviewed by Samira Ahmed, a prominent journalist and a fellow humanist. (Ahmed later served on the BHA's Board of Trustees.) The theme for the Congress was "Freedom of Thought and Expression: Forging a Twenty-First-Century Enlightenment." The session featuring Dawkins, full to the rafters with delegates, was held in the university's stunning Sheldonian Theater, on a warm and sunny afternoon. Ahmed pushed Dawkins on several points, including his views on Islam and controversial remarks he had recently made about date rape and pedophilia. When she asked him about Christianity and Islam in comparison, he stopped just short of saying that it might be necessary to keep Christianity as a "bulwark" against Islam, before citing a verse from Hilaire Belloc: "Always keep a-hold of Nurse / For fear of finding something worse." Later in the conversation, Ahmed cited a recent tweet Dawkins had posted—"Date rape is bad. Stranger rape at knifepoint is worse. If you think that's an endorsement of date rape, go away and learn how to think"—and asked if he regretted saying it. "I don't regret it as much as you want me to say I regret it," he replied, to rolling laughter and lengthy applause, before going on to argue that it would be "logically absurd and pernicious" to contest his statement. He went on to draw a parallel point between "relatively mild pedophilia" and "violent buggery."³⁴

So Dawkins got some laughs at Ahmed's expense. But even his admirers would often pull away from what they saw as his most provocative statements. While the flame of the civilizing mission was kept burning, in my experience most members of the BHA preferred to emphasize a liberal position of "color blindness." They reasoned that they did not see race, gender, or other forms of identification as relevant or even on the table for discussion. They saw what they were doing and how they

thought as “rational” and not in any way racially or otherwise marked; they condemned forms of discrimination such as racism and sexism, and certainly with respect to the latter tended to cite religious traditions as chief culprits for its endemic presence. And racism was seen as totally incompatible with humanism. Once, when I was with a group of celebrants, one of them said the only funeral he had ever turned down was for a former Rhodesian soldier. The others understood this rejection perfectly. There was no scandal here, no debate to be had. You could not be a humanist, they knew, and a white supremacist at the same time. Celebrants and many other BHA members also pointed to the legacy of humanist campaigns for social and political reform, such as women’s suffrage, the legalization of abortion, and the anti-Apartheid movement. In a sense, being “socially progressive” was taken for granted and the norm within the BHA. I often heard BHA members, including Dawkins, reply “of course” when asked if they were feminists, for example, or environmentalists. The implication was that such a commitment was the logical conclusion for an enlightened person and, therefore, almost went without saying. “How could one not be a feminist?” as Dawkins put it at the World Humanist Congress. “It’s obvious,” he stated.

Still other humanists, including some BHA staff, trustees, and patrons, as well as most of the celebrants I got to know, argued for working proactively to counter individual and structural forms of racial and gender bias by expanding the variety of humanist lifeways and sensibilities on offer. Sometimes quietly, and sometimes openly, they pushed back against the New Atheist sensibilities, which they saw as unjustifiably aggressive and too rational for their own good. These members did not think you could just assume right thinking on matters of social justice, or claim to be colorblind. As the legal scholar Patricia Williams might explain it, they recognized the colorblind stance as “a dangerous if comprehensible temptation to imagine inclusiveness by imagining away any obstacles.”³⁵ Another way of saying this is that they did not deny the importance of bodies.

I want to make two further remarks here, each of which will be enlivened in the ethnography to follow. The first stems from recent academic work on the history of secularism, which has pointed to the ways

in which being “secular” is never as neutral, or colorblind, or culture-free as it purports to be.³⁶ In short, “secularism is not the universal discourse emanating from the European Enlightenment, but is in fact multiple.”³⁷ That means its formations have specificities, and that it cannot operate (even when one wants it to) as some trans-historical rationality and truth. It is always marked—even and especially when it’s unmarked. The second observation is to note the common impetus humanists have toward disembodied such problems as racism and sexism. Whether it is a matter of “the obvious” and learning “how to think,” à la the New Atheists, or imagining away the obstacles, à la the colorblind, the secular impulse is to remove the thing: to dematerialize the challenge. Again, not all humanists make this their final move. But it’s the move that this tradition of secularity is predisposed to take.

What about the celebrants, more specifically? In a separate survey of the Celebrants’ Network, some distinguishing points emerged. We will have a chance to consider some of the survey findings throughout the book. In terms of basic demographics, though, two things stood out that I want to highlight for the current discussions. The first is that the celebrants were slightly whiter (98% vs. 96%) and older (48% in the modal range of 56–65, as opposed to 24%) than the general membership. The second is that the Celebrants’ Network inverted the gender ratio; whereas two-thirds of the general membership was male, in the network two-thirds of celebrants were female.

Celebrants did not actually dwell much, in conversation, on this gender mirror image, although they often seemed to conclude that it should not be surprising to see more women in the Network. Funerals are care work, and care work is gendered, and that social problem of stereotyping has yet to be overcome.³⁸ Where gender did come up, a bit, was in the sometimes quite scathing critiques of New Atheism, especially because of the extent to which it defined public perceptions of humanism in the 2010s. To many celebrants, the New Atheists and their large band of admirers were chauvinistic and mansplaining intellectuals. In interviews and informal discussions, however, celebrants tended to level their critiques of New Atheism in terms of class and cultural elitism—not gender (though for some, the gendering of intellect and reason was

part and parcel of this). “Your Dawkins and all your others aside,” the celebrant, Mary, said, “they are not out there on a day-to-day basis as Humanist celebrants, explaining to ordinary people what Humanism is really about and how important we believe the rite of passage ceremonies are.” Another, Michael, explained it in more colorful terms: “Outside the M25 [i.e., Greater London], who *the fuck* are the BHA? Most people don’t read the *Guardian*. . . . And our nice, cerebral, middle-class colleagues in Gower Street make a very fundamental mistake if they think it’s any different.”

Ordinary people. Most people. The nice, cerebral middle class. There was a widespread recognition among the BHA’s members that it was a middle-class association. Mary’s reference to “ordinary people” is a point of contrast; what she meant is working-class people, and she was often strident in our conversations that the BHA should not succumb to “classism,” which for her meant a certain snobbery toward people who do not read the work of Oxbridge professors (or attend university—although she had).³⁹ More generally, and also in line with what Mary says, nearly all of the celebrants I spoke with championed their work as reaching beyond the middle-class constituencies who joined the BHA or supported its policy campaigns. It is definitely true that, as a space, humanist funerals were much more diverse in terms of class backgrounds than, say, a local humanist group meeting, or any given BHA event held in central London.⁴⁰

According to Mike Savage and the team of sociologists who conducted the 2011 Great British Class Survey, “more than two-thirds of people resist class identification” in Britain.⁴¹ The humanists’ bucking of this trend is ironic, because the resistance is explained by the sociologists as stemming from the embrace of what humanists value deeply: commitments to individualism and autonomy. As Savage writes, respondents to the GBCS understood class as a “highly loaded moral signifier, one that contaminated cherished notions of meritocracy, openness and individuality which they held dear.”⁴² Britons, it seems, do not want to reinforce blanket designations. Neither do the humanists. But they do talk about class at a meta level when expressing concern about the reach of their own association.⁴³

By stating “middle class,” members of the BHA definitely meant to capture something about economic standing. But even more it was about social and cultural capital. It’s about being financially “comfortable” (which is not necessarily the same as well off) but also about listening to BBC Radio 4 and, yes, reading the *Guardian* (or other broadsheets—that is, not tabloid papers). What was most notable, in my experience, is the extent to which humanists tied class (economic and cultural) to educational attainment. And remember that 73 percent of BHA members have a university degree. That is phenomenally high: twice the national average.⁴⁴ This in itself could serve as the key to a treasure trove of data through which any social scientist might explore what Pierre Bourdieu called “cultural pedigree,” or what Richard Hoggart once explored, from the standpoint of the working classes, as “the chains of cultural subordination.”⁴⁵

While celebrants felt they did a good job of reaching beyond the middle class, many were concerned about the racial homogeneity of the Network and their clienteles. When I started my work in 2011, there were no Black celebrants. And in the Celebrant Survey, the whiteness of funeral clienteles came through in answer to a question about their makeup. “All my ceremonies have been for white British citizens,” said one respondent. “Mostly white,” said another. Another: “Very rarely do I perform a funeral for different races.” And another: “Sadly almost always white.” This was echoed among the celebrants with whom I worked more personally.

By 2016, two Black celebrants had been recruited. One of them was Clive Aruede. Long settled in London, having been born and raised in Nigeria, Clive joined the BHA in 2012, after coming to a personal realization that he could best define himself as a secular humanist.⁴⁶ Clive had grown up in the Roman Catholic Church. For a time, he even served as a Eucharistic minister. But as his children started growing up and began asking those proverbial “why?” questions, Clive felt increasingly unable to hold a religious point of view. “I had to make that choice,” he told me. “Did I believe in religion or did I believe in science? I chose science.”

Clive had also joined Central London Humanists, one of the local groups (the largest, in fact). He felt welcome, he told me. But he was

also puzzled. “There were hardly any Black people there,” he said. He and one other Black member eventually decided to form an affinity group called Black Atheists, which became the Association of Black Humanists. Clive and his colleague didn’t want to replace the Central London Humanists or BHA. But they were convinced that more minorities would join the humanist cause if there were dedicated spaces for them. Still, “one or two people said, *why are you starting another group, why are you being divisive?*” Clive told me. They did not see the value of a specific form of outreach; they took the “colorblind” approach. The leadership at BHA was on board, however. Andrew Copson lent his full support to the Association of Black Humanists. Copson has also supported such groups as the LGBT Humanists and the Defence Humanists, which focuses on military personnel and their families.

Against the “cerebral” bent of the general BHA membership, celebrants saw themselves as offering a crucial alternative to the dominant stereotype. This alternative hinged on a greater recognition of the embodied aspects of humanism. Within humanist circles, the difference was often discussed in terms of the need for a “soft” or “softer” atheism—*itself*, of course, often a feminized and feminizing term.⁴⁷ One BHA member I got to know, Brian, asked Dawkins about this in the Q&A at his session with Samira Ahmed; what did Dawkins think of the “softer” side of humanism? “I’m sure it’s important to many people,” he replied.

In one respect, the constitution of contemporary humanism turns on a simple question: does the body matter? In line with the argument I want to make about the premium that humanists place on reason and the immaterial, the default position is “no,” or, at least, “it ought not to.” Yet as we’ve touched on here, many members of the BHA insist that it should, not least the celebrants. We are going to see how the most “of course” thing about a funeral is not “learning how to think”; it is, rather, coming to terms with the demise of the “thinking thing” altogether—the Cartesian *res cogitans*. We can now turn back to the matter of death.

On the Death Trade

There were 484,367 deaths registered in England and Wales in 2011.⁴⁸ I went to the funerals connected to twenty-two of them. Sixteen of these were BHA ceremonies; the other six were Christian (four Anglican, one Roman Catholic, and one for a charismatic Christian). This is hardly representative of the national picture; most funeral services are still conducted by Christian clergy, although the number of non-religious funerals is on the rise. In 2011, Co-operative Funeralcare, the largest provider in the industry, estimated that 10 percent of the funerals they directed were humanist, defined as a “focus exclusively on the deceased, celebrating their life, their personality, and their achievements.”⁴⁹ Research in 2009 by the polling firm ComRes suggested that this figure was going to grow. Asked the question, “What sort of funeral would you like?” 17 percent chose the reply, “A non-religious funeral, without any references to God included.”⁵⁰ And grown it has. In 2019, Co-operative Funeralcare commissioned one of the most exhaustive studies of funeral practices and their customers’ attitudes over the previous decade. The Co-op found that only 10 percent of clients wanted a “traditional religious funeral” and noted in particular “an increase in families requesting that celebrants conduct funerals, as opposed to religious leaders.”⁵¹

The BHA is one of many organizations that offers celebrant services. Others include Civil Ceremonies, Ltd. and the Association of Independent Celebrants. What distinguishes the BHA’s ceremonies from these other groups is the BHA’s explicit commitment to non-religious parameters. Exactly where those parameters lie is a subject of some discussion within the Network. For some BHA celebrants, playing a hymn at a humanist funeral is acceptable in certain circumstances; for others, it is not. In any case, all celebrants agreed that their work was defined by a humanist ethos, meaning the decision to include or exclude some potentially “religious” or “spiritual” element was driven by a primary commitment to humanism—not the absolute right of the family to determine the content of the funeral. Where these two did not align, a celebrant would politely suggest the family seek the services of

another provider. This is how BHA celebrants differentiated themselves in particular from other providers. For civil celebrants, the primary commitment is to doing what the family wants; they do not weigh in on the metaphysical questions.

Like any industry, the “death trade,” as it’s often referred to by insiders, has its infrastructures and norms. Most funerals in England and Wales take place in publicly run, council-based crematorium chapels, like the kind I sketched in brief at the start of this introduction. These chapels are often situated within public cemeteries, where burials still take place. Overall, though, in 2011, 74 percent of body disposition was through cremation, a figure that rose to 80 percent by 2023.⁵² Within the BHA’s provision, most celebrants told me the figure was even higher, with roughly nine out of ten humanist ceremonies involving cremation. There are thirty-three local government councils in London, and the provision of facilities for funerals is only one of the many services they oversee (alongside public housing, libraries, trash collection, schools, etc.). In many cases, a given cemetery and crematorium form a joint venture between several councils. Each cemetery/crematorium has a board, comprised of the councilors, but day-to-day operations are run by a professional staff.

The very existence of these cemeteries and crematoriums can be read as a chapter in the history of secularization. Over the course of the nineteenth century there was a shift in English burial practices, with the churchyard giving way to the public cemetery, and with it, a loosening of the grip of the Established Church, and religious institutions more generally, over the realm of the dead.⁵³ These newly created cemeteries became foundation sites for the emerging secular order—understood here in a political sense of being “neutral.” As the population grew, and as urban centers mushroomed, burial sites were dearer and harder to come by. Politically committed Non-conformists blocked efforts by the Church of England to claim newly consecrated ground for itself, and thus emerged burial sites organized more along the lines of a “society” than a closed “community.”⁵⁴ In its early formation, then, “the cemetery represents freedom of religion for the dead.”⁵⁵ More than this, though, the cemetery’s emergence—and appeal—reflected changing social

sensibilities, including the cult of family. In its Victorian phase, the cemetery became “a place of sentiment loosely connected, at best, with Christian piety and intimately bound up with the emotional economies of family. In it, a newly configured idolatry of the dead served the interests less of the old God of religion than of the new gods of memory and history: secular gods.”⁵⁶

This secular advance continued with the emergence and development of cremation. The human practice of burning the dead is of course neither new nor necessarily irreligious. Even within the context of nineteenth-century Europe, some of cremation’s strongest proponents were Christians. Some Protestant groups in particular came to see it as a good thing, “the rapid release of a spirit from its fleshly prison.”⁵⁷ All the same, when it comes to the technology of industrial ovens, situated underneath or behind the tranquil space of a purposefully built chapel, “cremation was another instance of the march of progress through the mobilization of scientific knowledge.”⁵⁸ And it did meet resistance within the Anglican Church (especially the high church) and, for longer, among Roman Catholics, with one of the main theological arguments against it being the importance of the body’s integrity for the Day of Judgment and resurrection.⁵⁹ But cremation was legalized in Britain in 1884, and the first crematorium in England opened in 1885. The Cremation Act of 1902 helped further seal its legitimacy, even if it wasn’t until the 1960s that cremations started to outnumber burials. Indeed, in 1903, there were only 477 cremations in the United Kingdom.⁶⁰

When Britons think of dealing with death, this is often the backdrop for it: the local cemetery, with a pleasant chapel where loved ones can gather. In many cases, the enduring appeal of the Victorian age colors this image: an old-fashioned hearse, maybe even horse drawn; the undertaker and staff dressed in morning suits and top hats. Just as readily these days images of the “unique” funeral can spring to mind, where everyone is asked to dress in hot pink, or wear their favorite rock band t-shirt. We are also seeing the rise in popularity of burying or spreading a loved one’s ashes in a special place—the Norfolk Broads; the top of Snowdonia; the family garden allotment—which has further opened up the imagination of what’s possible.⁶¹ “Natural” burials, too, are on

the rise—the disposition of remains in a woodland, without a coffin—as are funerals held at home, and the popularity of death doulas. It is all part of what’s been dubbed a “death-positive” movement or, in the academic literature, “the new death.”⁶²

None of this, however, is relevant to the official register of death in Britain. While a funeral or scattering of the ashes might be the most important part of the process to the family and friends involved, what matters to the state is the paperwork. Death is the domain of doctors, and on some occasions, coroners and lawyers, punctuated by the signature of the next of kin on the right forms. This is another aspect of death’s secularization: the passing of authority from the priest to the doctor, such that the priest’s role becomes so much cultural dressing.

And cultural dressing it is. Keep in mind: No one *has* to have a funeral. Or a certain *kind* of funeral. There is nothing from the legal point of view that necessitates the presence of any particular type of ritual officiant or, for that matter, funeral director. A funeral does not make you legally dead, in the way a wedding ceremony makes you legally married. A wedding ceremony in England and Wales must include an exchange of vows, and, as noted earlier, it must be overseen by an officiant recognized by the state; that does not include humanist celebrants (except in Scotland). But anyone can conduct a funeral, as far as officialdom is concerned: a priest, of course—but that is a “private matter”—or an accredited humanist celebrant, or even an unaccredited one. In theory you could hire a clown to conduct a funeral. And this is not the only *laissez-faire* aspect in the British context. When it comes to disposal of the ashes, one of the reasons this practice has gained in popularity in Britain is because the law does not require ashes to remain at the cemetery, as it does in such countries as Belgium, Germany, and Sweden.⁶³ It is even possible to collect your loved one’s body before the funeral and transport it to the crematorium yourself. You don’t need to spend a lot of money on a funeral director’s hearse. To be sure, most people do use the professional services. They would much rather spend their money than their time on such aspects of the process.

The officiant (priest, humanist celebrant, clown) is but the pivot in a larger system of people. At the front end is the funeral director and their staff, including the arranger (the person who does most of the legwork in organizing the event and processing paperwork), chauffeur, and pall-bearers; at the back end is the cemetery/crematorium manager, chapel attendant, and technicians who run the cremators, or “retorts,” to use the industry language. Unless there is a family vicar or something like a family celebrant (it can happen, as we’ll see), the funeral director usually suggests an officiant to the family.

Funeral directors are the most significant figures and gatekeepers in the death trade. They are the ones who maintain storefronts on high streets, offices into which anyone can walk. These are sometimes called “funeral homes,” although not many have their own chapel facilities; they tend to use the public cemetery and crematorium chapels in the vicinity. To this day many funeral home storefronts are decorated with a Victorian aesthetic, and many are still run as family businesses, though this tradition has been declining over the decades. In 2011, the average cost of a basic funeral in the UK was £2,910. In 2023, it was £4,141, with London being the most expensive: £5,171. These costs do not include the “send-off” (often held at private homes or pubs), legal fees, or burial costs (such as headstones).⁶⁴ It does include the fee for the celebrant, which ran between £120 and £150 in the BHA Network.

To Thine Own Self Be True

Conway Hall, in London’s Red Lion Square, is the historical home of the South Place Ethical Society, one of the oldest freethought groups in Britain. Today, Conway Hall is something of a general headquarters for humanist and secularist groups: a crucial place for lectures, meetings, and conferences.⁶⁵ On the wall above the hall’s main stage, Polonius’s advice to Laertes, from William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, is written in sky-blue text: TO THINE OWN SELF BE TRUE. This famous phrase stands at the heart of the humanist sensibility. More generally still, it captures a modern premium on the interlocking values of freedom, autonomy, and sincerity. *To thine own self be true*. This is what gives humanist



FIGURE 0.4. Conway Hall Stage. Photo by the author.

ceremonies their legitimacy and what fuels their appeal. For an increasing number of people, it sets the standard by which a funeral should be judged. Does this ceremony reflect the person we knew? Is it fitting for them—for us, indeed, as loved ones? Is it right and good?

It's when funerals go wrong that we best see the importance of this sensibility. It often takes nothing more than a kind of default Anglican funeral to trigger these anxieties over trueness to self. For a certain type of person who is not religious, the Anglican default does not work. I heard dozens of variations on this theme over the course of my research. Here is one that's representative of the funeral gone wrong:

A father dies. The family is distraught. They arrange things with the funeral director, but mostly defer to his choices and suggestions. "Yes, that's fine." "Okay." "I'm sure that will be fine, thank you. Thank you so much for your help." They don't manage to get across that dad was an unbeliever—that the family as a whole doesn't go in for God. To the FD, what comes across is "culturally Christian" and he arranges for a local vicar to take the service. Nothing too full-on, mind you, just one who does the minimal level of metaphysics. The day comes, the hour comes. There is a man at the front of the crematorium chapel in a dog collar and vestments. He speaks of heaven, he speaks of Jesus. It's all standard liturgy,

(continued...)

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