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# Doing Death Without Deity: Constructing Nonreligious Tools at the End of Life

## 1 Introduction

A growing body of literature is considering secularity and nonreligion from a variety of scholarly perspectives. In this volume, we see both the diversity of efforts towards secular organizing as well as of the diversity of strategies for researching these topics. To this discussion, we would like to contribute research on nonreligious organizing at the end of life. Nonreligious organizing at the end of life is not new, historically, but the ways in which these actions play out in the contemporary American context are novel and have much to teach us about broader discussions of secularization and the standing of nonreligion in U.S. society more generally.

In this chapter, we use the terms “nonreligious” and “nonreligion” to refer to both the identities and worldviews of our research participants, though we recognize that other authors in the collection are using varying and potentially more specific language. For this project, we collected data from a broad array of individuals in a variety of settings. As such, it was not possible to learn of exact belief structures, identities, or more specific personal information that would allow us to typify our research participants in more nuanced ways. We use the term “nonreligious” as an umbrella term to cover those individuals who identify with various Atheist, Secularist, Humanist, Free-Thinker and Agnostic classifications in this project. A further note on language in this chapter is we are using terms such as “nonreligion”, “religion”, and “science” as generalities within this project in order to frame our discussion, but are sensitive to the notion that the empirical realities of these subjects are far more complex than our labels imply, as noted by Harrison (2006).

Several centuries have passed since the Enlightenment, when religion began to be superseded by science and reason as the primary method for understanding and addressing problems in the natural and social world. Decline in the reliance on mysticism, magic, and God, and the rise of rationalization and intellectualization was referred to as the “disenchantment of the world” (Weber 1905). As explanatory religious frameworks continued to be challenged by science, religion was said to be pushed further out of public and into private life. As modernity progressed, the inclusion of religious meaning and symbolism in the public sphere continue to decline through processes of secularization (Berger 1967).

More recent research has problematized the notion of a steady, linear process of secularization across Western society, noting that the process occurred in segmented, uneven and diverse ways (Martin 2007). Though not occurring in the uniform pattern once theorized, scholars agree that the rationalizing and secularizing of society transformed the whole of social life in the West. That transformation encompasses the social managing of death. Historically, handling the dead was both a personal and public affair with the family in charge of the social and corporeal aspects (i.e., one's body), while the church was in charge of the spiritual aspect (i.e., one's soul). Modernity has seen, in a Weberian sense, the rationalization of the management of dying and death, a trend often equated with secularization (Mellor and Shilling 1993). Death in society today occurs largely outside of public view (Lofland 1978), sequestered from daily life and daily concern, handled by a cadre of death-specialists (Mellor and Shilling 1993). Similarly, the location of the deathbed has shifted in modern times from one's home to institutional settings, primarily the hospital (Kellehear 2007). If death has been professionalized, routinized, and institutionalized, we must ask, "Do these rationalized aspects equate to the secularization of death?" Our research indicates that in American culture, the dynamic is not so simple.

In this research, we examine death and bereavement among nonreligious Americans. Our study emerged from Fazzino's (second author) dissertation work, which examined lived nonreligion in Las Vegas. While in the field, a member of the local atheist group, Betty, died shortly before a scheduled interview. Fazzino was unable to attend Betty's funeral, but learned that when her sister, who is Mormon, closed the service she said, "You know, I don't care what my sister believed. I know she's in Heaven, and when I get up there, I'm going to tell her 'I told you so!'" As a Mormon-turned-atheist, Betty forbade in writing the inclusion of any religious sentiment in her memorial. Nonbelievers in attendance described this as a slap in the face. They were offended by the disregard for Betty's final wishes in her sister's expression of religious sentiments. They also expressed how this event both amplified and delayed their grief. They felt compelled to decide whether and how to respond to the sister, and how they would live with the consequences of that choice.

While talking about this situation, we realized that the intersection of our research areas, religious/secularity studies and death and dying, was fertile ground for research. The events that transpired at Betty's funeral left us with questions about how nonbelievers manage dying and death in a highly privatized religious culture, what resources are available specifically for a nonreligious worldview, and if end-of-life is an area where marginalization occurs. We decided this topic deserved attention, so we chose to investigate further.

In this chapter, we present a qualitative analysis of nonreligious understandings, coping strategies, and organizational efforts towards managing death and dying. We draw from sociology, cultural studies and social justice theories to form a perspective uniquely suited for exploring death and bereavement among the nonreligious in the contemporary American context. Our analysis reveals several key findings. First, we find that our respondents frequently encountered religion at the end of life. While a resource for many Americans, religious language, narratives, symbols and ideas were not helpful to our respondents in coping with their grief, as these cultural forms do not hold the same meaning for nonbelievers as for believers. Beyond this, several respondents noted conflict with theology at the end of life, such as Betty's funeral, in which religious sentiment was imposed on that service against their will.

We also found that death is an area where the nonreligious are disadvantaged by a lack of an institutionalized nonreligious death culture. We find that the nonreligious lack the ready-made "cultural tools," such as ceremonies, rituals, rites, language, and grief resources widely available to those of a religious worldview. Our final finding addresses how the nonreligious have and are producing and disseminating death cultural resources geared specifically to those with a nonreligious orientation. We conclude that, taken together, these challenges both problematize and politicize death and dying for nonreligious Americans. We close by discussing the implications of our findings.

## 2 Brief Review of Literature

In the following sections, we review literature pertinent to our research as well as describe the theoretical concepts and frameworks we use to craft our lens for this research. In the opening section, we discuss how death intersects with religion and nonreligion, and describe how the end of life causes the nonreligious to intersect with religion as well. Following that, we discuss a number of theories for understanding nonreligious organizing from a cultural perspective.

### 2.1 Death, Religion, and Nonreligion

The end of life presents challenges for persons of all worldviews. It is often assumed that dealing with death would be more difficult without religion. However, Seale (1998, 76) situates contemporary death culture by arguing that "modern rationality... [provides]... guidance for a meaningful death that are at least as powerful as those of earlier traditions." For example, from the perspective of

western medicine, death is the failure of the biological systems necessary for one's survival. Medical rites give death a corporeal meaning as a bodily process, which generates a sense of death as something scientifically accurate or knowable. Some research has noted that it is the strength of one's worldview, not the content that matters. Among older adults, strong adherence to atheism operates much like religion does for believers, providing meaning, explanation, consolation, and support when coping with ageing (Wilkerson and Coleman 2010). Perhaps medicalizing death explains differences in psychological distress. Secular caregivers exhibit significantly higher levels of communication about mortality with patients and reported significantly lower levels of fear of death compared to their religious counterparts (Bachner, O'Rourke, and Carmel 2011).

The nonreligious and religious alike must construct meaning to deal with the inevitability of death. Despite being governed by a secular democracy, "the will to religion" (Beaman 2013, 151) permeates American culture, creating a "new normal," or what Lori Beaman refers to as the assumption that all persons are religious and have spiritual needs (Beaman 2013, 151). Nowhere is this more apparent than in the reliance on religion for relating to death. One might say that death is inescapable on several levels. Manning's (2015) research on unaffiliated parents reminds us that meaning-making around the topic of death is not relegated to illness, aging, or some distant time. Death is unavoidable for parents who must answer when asked by their children, "What happens when we die?" As the end of life raises issues of personal philosophy on mortality, interacting with others around the topic of death may bring one into contact with the worldview of another. While the nonreligious do not take stock in religious narratives of post-mortem existence, advancements in technology and medicine raise questions of extending one's life and the possibility of someday conquering death. These scientific narratives offer hope of immortality to the nonreligious, as the potential for these occurrences fit within the nonreligious worldview as potentially possible (Fontana and Keene 2009).

Do scientific advances reduce fear and anxiety concerning death among the nonreligious? Sociologist Ryan Cragun argues that the nonreligious are, in some ways, better at dying than the religious. His national and international analysis of death and dying among religious fundamentalists, moderates, liberals, and the nonreligious found that across all religious categories, the nonreligious were less afraid of death, less likely to have anxiety about dying, and less likely to use aggressive means to extend life (Cragun 2013, 166). Moreover, nonreligious persons also report higher levels of support for death with dignity measures (Smith-Stoner 2007). It appears, then, that perhaps nonreligious interpretations of death lead to differing relationships with end-of-life matters than do religious interpretations.

The impact of religion on the nonreligious varies. For instance, people who do not believe in God with some degree of certainty tend to experience religious environments more negatively than those who do (Speed and Fowler 2016). Many of the narratives compiled in Melanie Brewster's (2014) *Atheists in America* highlight religion as unhelpful when it comes to providing consolation for death. In Bakker and Paris' (2013) study of baby loss, religion was inadequate for helping nonreligious women who suffered the pain of baby loss. Imposed religion, or what Lin (2014) refers to as a bereavement challenge, can often impede healthy grief trajectories. The likelihood that any person will encounter theist sentiments or practices is largely contingent on one's social environment; in this case of the United States. Though not prepared to generalize our findings to national or international contexts, our data indicates encounters with religion at the end of life are common, at least in the contexts we investigated.

## 2.2 Cultural-Justice Approach to Studying Death

In crafting our theoretical lens, we draw on Swidler's (1986) cultural tool-kits, Griswold's (2003) cultural production theory, Young's (1990) oppression theory, and Buechler's (2000) cultural politics. Swidler (1986) conceptualizes culture as a toolkit of strategies and repertoires which comprise a system of meaning through symbols, a set of beliefs, values, and practices, and shared communication. This "toolkit" concept may be applied at the societal level or to smaller groups, such as a bowling team, and may also be applied generally or in a particular context, such as managing end-of-life matters. Griswold's collective production theory synthesizes the micro interactional production of culture through symbolic interaction with the macro-organizational nature of culture, specifically in terms of cultural producers and consumers. From this perspective, culture is not *sui generis*; it is a production. Taken together, these concepts of producing a cultural toolkit allow us to look deeper at how modern nonreligious Americans, much like the secularists in Victorian era Europe who found themselves outside the normative death and dying culture (Nash 1995), are finding ways to construct meaning regarding mortality without the cultural toolkit (Swidler 1986) offered by faith-based traditions.

We must also account for why non-religious individuals so often find themselves excluded from normative death culture, especially when the ways in which Americans relate to death and dying have shifted and vary across time and place (Kellehear 2007). To this end, we employ the concept of cultural imperialism, which refers to "the experience of living in a society whose dominant meanings render the perspectives and point of view of one's group invisible,

while also stereotyping one's group and marking them as 'other.' [It] is the universalization of one group's experience and culture and its establishment as the norm" (Young 1990, 58–59). Participants in our study voiced feeling marginalized and belittled for their worldview.

Cultural imperialism provides a framework within which Christian-centric hegemony and anti-atheist discrimination are situated. Recent research on prejudice toward (non)religious minorities suggests that there has been growing tolerance and/or acceptance for most religious minorities in the US. However, as Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann's 2006 study suggests, the same may not be true for atheists. We argue that there may be other – as yet undescribed – factor(s) that explain the continued prejudice against atheists. Recent social psychological research may have uncovered one such issue. Perceptions of threat have been identified, albeit under-theorized, as a contributing factor in anti-atheist sentiments. Findings delineate three specific types of threat – value threat, threat to cultural worldview, and existential threat that people may experience with regard to atheists (Cook, Cohen, and Soloman 2015; Cook, Cottrell, and Webster 2015). Distrust, disparagement, and social distance have been shown to substantially increase when existential threat was activated by increasing people's concern for death. Likewise, existential concern was increased when people simply thought about atheism (Cook, Cohen, and Soloman 2015). In short, anti-atheist prejudice may be exacerbated in end-of-life situations. This suggests to us that even though death itself may less anxiety-provoking for nonreligious people in comparison to their religious counterparts, feeling marginalized may increase anxiety at times surrounding the end of life.

Finally, the concept of "cultural politics" (Buechler 2000) is used to describe political efforts directed towards the cultural realm, as opposed to efforts directed at the state. In drawing this distinction, Buechler notes that no action is inherently state- or cultural-politics, as elements of both forms are always intertwined. An example would be the green funeral advocates who work to bring ecological reform to the American way of death. Similarly, we believe the ongoing negotiation of cultural meaning at the end of life represents this form of politics, as nonreligious individuals resist defaulting to Christian-centric norms through the creation of explicitly nonreligious end of life cultural tools. The norms which preside over the end of life are inherently political, as they reify some worldviews while marginalizing others. Similarly, efforts to create nonreligious end-of-life cultural tools and repertoire are political, as those projects represent efforts to reform the American way of dying to include spaces and tools which nonreligious individuals will find meaningful. While not inherently critiquing religion, these projects do critique a status-quo in the United States in which nonreligious end-of-life resources have traditionally been scarce.

### 3 Data and Methods

Data for this chapter comes from observations at several monthly events hosted by various non-religious groups, including the Humanists and Atheists of Las Vegas (HALV), the Las Vegas Atheists Meetup (LVA), the United Church of Bacon (UCB), and Sunday Assembly Las Vegas (SALV). Interview data come from informal and focus group interviews. We collected textual data by conducting a series of online searches through search engines such as Lexis/Nexis and Google. We were intentionally narrow, searching only for the terms “death,” “dying,” “grief,” and “bereavement” for all the various nonreligious identity labels (e.g., Atheist; Humanist). We read books by prominent atheist authors, collected blogs, popular print media, video media, and we joined the Grief Beyond Belief (GBB) private group on Facebook. We intentionally did not collect data from that site because of privacy restrictions, but used it instead as a validity measure against which we compared our codes. Our analytic strategy was inductive, following the precepts of grounded theory (Charmez 2014).

For the sake of transparency, it should be noted that both authors bring to this material some insider experience. Fazzino has been involved with organized nonreligion in Las Vegas, as both an insider and researcher, for six years (2010 – 2016). Our collaboration on this project began in March 2014. At that time, MacMurray (first author) began participating in a regular Tuesday night Meetup event, where Fazzino introduced him to the people at the meeting. In this way, Fazzino’s insider status facilitated MacMurray’s entry to the groups, making introductions and both organizing and participating in interviews (as interviewer, not interviewee). Two very active group members had recently died within three months of one another, just prior to MacMurray’s entrance into the field. These events provided a foundation for discussing death and dying with participants. In an attempt to be reflexive about our own standpoint, we would like to mention that we have been actively involved in the creation and dissemination of nonreligious end-of-life cultural tools ourselves, which is part of our focus in this research (the specifics of this project are described in detail in our findings section). Our politics on the matter support the notion of equitable death, in which individuals of any worldview have equal access to the resources which might help them navigate the often-troubling times at the end of life. We view both the subjects of this research and this research itself as contributing to the secular organizing at the end of life.

## 4 Findings

The nonreligious respondents we spoke with typically described death as the end of individual existence. Interpreting death in this way is quite different from traditional religious interpretations. Death is, as one participant told us, “...just different for us.” This difference in worldview may go largely uncontested through much of daily life, but during times of death, varying or even opposing interpretations of what death “is” may come into conflict. As many of the cultural norms for social interaction at the end of life contain theist symbolism, the American way of death often fails to assist the nonreligious. Beyond being of little use as a resource, religious symbolism at times became a hurdle to our participants, as they felt that their worldview was ignored, downplayed or otherwise marginalized.

It appears that the lack of nonreligious end-of-life culture is motivating a variety of individuals to create and spread resources which are meaningful from within the nonreligious worldview. Both in the Las Vegas field and in our broader content analysis, nonreligious organizing at the end of life is an active project. We argue that these challenges and responses problematize and politicize the end-of-life for the nonreligious. In the following pages, we attempt to support and defend this position, providing a glimpse into the lived reality of doing death without deities.

### 4.1 The Inadequacy of a Theistic Death Discourse

Worldviews among the nonreligious are incredibly diverse (Lee 2014). Despite ideological differences, two themes emerged in our data. The first is the inadequacy of religion as a means to manage death for the nonreligious. This finding is supported by prior research (Bakker and Paris 2013; Vail III et al. 2012). Religious answers may bring comfort to religious people, but many nonreligious individuals draw little from these explanations. In some cases, death can lead individuals who had previously identified as religious to question their faith. This happened to one of our respondents, Gina, who prayed for the healing of two ill family members. She recalls:

I grew up in a home that left the option of religion up to me. However, I was sent to a private Catholic school and was exposed to that belief system. For a while it was nice to believe that everything could be fixed by kneeling in your pew and praying your heart out. Then, within the course of one year, an uncle passed away...a few months later my grandfather very suddenly passed as well. While my uncle was wasting away, I was told to pray,



and he would be well again. Obviously, it [prayer] didn't have any effect. Then when my grandfather was in a coma, I was told the same thing. I put all my heart into praying so he would wake up. Again, [prayer] not helpful. After that, I knew. I just KNEW that religion was nonsense, and I would never tell someone to just "pray for it."

Another respondent, Amber, traces her deconversion from Christianity to when she was 11-years old. Her father was sick and her entire family would gather night after night to pray. For Amber, her father's death meant either God refused to answer their prayers or he simply did not exist. She concluded the latter and abandoned her faith. She now sees religion as nothing more than a way for people to deal with their feelings rather than face the truth. This link between experiencing death and rejection of religion is also illustrated in the documentary *Hug an Atheist*. As one woman narrates: "When my husband was hit by the elderly driver, he spent three days in the hospital dying, and I spent a lot of time in the chapel on my knees praying to God that he'd be okay. And, of course, in the end he wasn't, and part of me felt like that was all time I wasted. I should've been by his side. I shouldn't have bothered with the chapel." In all these examples it seems that religion justified time spent looking for divine intervention, which for some pulled them away from loved ones with little time left. In the moment, seeking god's intercession seemed like the right thing to do, but when it failed to work, deep regret ensued.

Although some nonreligious individuals wished they could accept religious narrative to help them cope with death, this does not lead them back to religion. In the same documentary a man speculates about how much easier dealing with his father's death would have been with religion, "It's been ten months since my dad died. In times, I think it would have been a whole lot easier if I would have been a person of faith because it's just so much easier to strike it up to God's will: 'It was his time,' 'He's in the arms of Jesus now,'...Those kind of clichés... that to me felt like a cop-out." The perception that religion, as a means to cope with death and loss, is "a cop-out" is a second pattern in our data. It supports a prominent theme in previous research on non-religion, namely the importance of living authentically (Fazzino 2014; Zuckerman 2015). For the nonreligious, truth (or more accurately their perception of big "T" truth) is more important than mitigating the negative emotions from existential threat. While understanding that neither religious or nonreligious identities are entirely rational choices, we find that death is often a time when one's worldview is put to the test. The unavoidability of mortality forces humans to manage its inevitability in some way. To this end, the nonreligious are constructing their philosophy of death independent of the theism.

## 4.2 Accepting Death as Final End

The nonreligious philosophy of death that emerges from our data is best expressed by our respondent, Joe:

Put as simply as possible, death makes life worth living. By understanding and accepting death, we can understand that our time here is finite, and that this is our only chance of being alive and making the most of it. This isn't just a life you can ruin and then get a second chance after you die. This is it. If you don't want your last moments of existence to be spent considering your regrets, death should be the inspiration to get out there and live your life.

Joe's quote expresses three main ideas that transcend ideological differences among the nonreligious: (1) the cessation of life is death; (2) this life is the only life there is; there is no afterlife or rebirth; and (3) the finality of death makes life more meaningful, not less. Here, we see a connection between how death is interpreted and how that interpretation informs one's personal philosophy of how life ought to be lived. As death is thought of as the final end, the social life of here and now become more important, as one's time is limited by death.

Part of understanding one's identity as nonreligious means accepting the inevitability of death. When we asked, either individually or in focus groups, "What is death?", we heard the same three or four responses repeatedly, most of which were expressed in the same matter-of-fact manner. Death was described as the end of consciousness, simple non-existence, and as a natural process. In one focus group, this question generated a dialogue about fear that we did not expect, but were nevertheless pleased with this direction because of the nuance that emerged – namely the difference between fearing death and fearing dying. Joe again articulates this clearly:

...any fear I have had in the past was of dying, rather than being dead. Some people don't seem to understand the difference. Dying could very well be a terrifying experience as you contemplate the fact that you are coming to the end of your existence. Dying is a process that the living go [sic] through. I can see why many people would be scared of dying, and having to say goodbye to loved ones. But death itself? That's the easy part.

Another respondent, Gino, acknowledges: "As a secular/non-religious person, I would be lying to state that death doesn't bother me. As much as I accept the inevitability of death, it's not something I look forward to and hope to put off for as long as possible." While death, as non-existence, means one no longer feels anything, it is the process of dying or watching others die that is painful. As another respondent, Sheila, explains: "It's like you fear other people's

death more than your own, ‘cuz [sic] it’s like, ‘I’m dead. Whatever. I don’t care!’” Sheila’s point, too, highlights the difference between death and dying.

Dale McGowan, a secular activist and author of *Parenting Beyond Belief*, writes: “One of the things it is important to recognize is that death isn’t easy for anyone. There is a myth that religion quells the fear of death; that if we can only accept the idea of heaven, then we won’t be afraid anymore.” Another secular author and activist, Jerry DeWitte, writes: “When you can truly put yourself in that position and realize that the only thing to fear may be the moments leading up to it, there’s absolutely nothing to fear afterwards. It’s truly accepting death that gives you a new lease on life. It really does.” It appears that both professional writers and ordinary seculars like Joe, Gino, and Sheila, are able to articulate a coherent non-religious philosophy of death.

### 4.3 Nonreligious Conceptions of Life After Death

A common perception is that the nonreligious reject any notion of an afterlife, but this is incorrect. In his 2013 TEDx talk, “The Four Stories We Tell Ourselves about Death,” Steve Cave identified four stories that people employ that allow us to escape death, cognitively at least. The majority of nonreligious people reject the idea of a supernatural afterlife, rendering spiritual and resurrection immortality stories invalid, but this is not the end of the story. Two stories deemed legitimate by the nonreligious are those proposing scientific or symbolic immortality. The former espouses the idea that death can be cured through science. Among those we spoke with, the degree to which this idea was accepted depended on views about whether or not conquering death was a good thing. Consider the following exchange from one focus group:

**Nick:** Will we ever overcome death?

**Mary:** Be able to live forever?

**Nick:** Yes.

**Jimmy:** And would you want that?

**Mary:** Paul Kurtz thinks maybe...

**Jimmy:** Yeah! The singularity...

**Phil:** I think that technology could get us there, you know? We’ve heard about all sorts of advances in anti-aging, however, there’s also a very big problem, and that is, who gets to take advantage of it? And, there’s quality of life to consider, of course, but at the same time, if everybody’s doing it, what’s that going to do to our resources?

**Mary:** Are people going to stop mating? Stop having kids?

**Phil:** And that’s why I personally think if you’re gonna [sic] do it, you should sign a waiver that says you’re not going to procreate and add to the extra shortening of resources.

Given the opportunity, though, would these participants extend life? Responses were mixed. Jimmy opposed the idea for himself for individualistic reasons, namely the loss of doing things he enjoyed and becoming bored. Phil took the opposite stance, stating he would want to live on given the opportunity just “to see how knowledge develops.” Being skeptical of science resolving the problem of mortality and logical about their positions may lend support to our claims that the nonreligious fear dying, not death.

Symbolic immortality, the idea of living on through the legacy one has created in life, was much more common across our data. The following quote from Humanist Manifesto II summarizes this popular view, “There is no credible evidence that life survives the death of the body. We continue to exist in our progeny and in the way that our lives have influenced others in our culture.” Among many who identify as nonreligious, the viable means for achieving immortality is through the legacy established in life. The evidence of one’s existence is found in the contributions that person makes, big and small, in the lives of all those who go on living. Any notion of an eternal life lives only in the memories of loved ones and in how they hold the deceased in their memory, or in other words, is a social legacy.

It is important to note that the legacy story is not exclusive to the nonreligious. The problem death and legacy poses for social media has been the subject of much commentary in recent years. Options for users to name a “legacy contact” who will be granted access to one’s Facebook account in the event of death, along with headlines like, “What Will Your Social Media Legacy Be?” from the Huffington Post, have driven the push to secure one’s virtual immortality. While these options are available to the religious and nonreligious alike, we find the nonreligious have fewer cultural resources to manage and cope with death in general.

#### 4.4 Finding Meaning in Death

The general sentiment among our respondents is that death is an experience that can provide them with meaning, purpose, and peace. Contrary to any conception that nonreligious people have “nothing to live for”, our data indicates that nonreligious individuals make meaning within the parameters of their worldview, through the company of loved ones, satisfying their love for learning, experiencing new things, and taking in the wonders of the world. Mortality is an inescapable part of the human condition, and research has shown that reminders of death activate cognitive defenses and uphold cultural worldviews (Greenberg, Solomon, and Pyszczynski 1997). Applying this idea to our respondents, we

find it easy to understand how death becomes a motivator for making the most of this life, as for them, there is no other.

Our respondents expressed this desire to live life fully. Thus, the way one's spends their time greatly informs their interactions and behavior. Tito explains, "It was the finality of death that motivated me to find peace in my life. Death motivated me to make amends with estranged family members, like my father. I felt like it was such a waste of energy to hold on to all of the anger and hate that was pent up inside of me. I accept that we're all here for only a short time. Ultimately, death is what motivates me to live, love, and enjoy every second of my life." It would seem that quality of life is an important consideration among the nonreligious for determining what it is to have a "good life" (see Toscani et al. 2003).

Tito's quote suggests that one's quality of life is not determined by others' adoration, approval, or by the absence of conflict and pain. Whereas many turn to religion to reconcile the problem of suffering that exists in the human condition, the nonreligious try to accept the reality of life's ebbs and flows. Rather than asking why bad things happen, they focus on how to live in spite of bad things happening. Secular activist and author Ayaan Hirsi Ali highlights this idea, "The only position that leaves me with no cognitive dissonance is atheism. It is not a creed. Death is certain, replacing both the siren-song of Paradise and the dread of Hell. Life on this earth, with all its mystery and beauty and pain, is then to be lived far more intensely: we stumble and get up, we are sad, confident, insecure, feel loneliness and joy and love. There is nothing more; but I want nothing more." To live a good life is to have a high quality of life, which for the nonreligious, is measured by their ability to live effectively, authentically, and autonomously. With this in mind, we now turn to the unique problems death poses for the nonreligious.

## 4.5 Negative Encounters with Theist End-of-Life Culture

The formal and routine processes around managing the dying and the dead have largely been professionalized, rationalized, and thus secularized in the United States. But religion is far from absent. Our respondents reported many encounters with theism throughout their end-of-life-experiences. Both personal interactions and institutional support structures illustrate how nonbelievers experience religion as cultural default at the end of life.

#### 4.5.1 “Your Religion Only Makes My Grief Harder!”

Talking openly about death has long been considered taboo in U.S. culture (Walter 1991). While that is beginning to change, we found a pattern of deferring to cultural scripts when interacting with the bereaved. A common experience among our nonreligious participants was receiving religious condolences. Well-meaning religious phrases, such as “She’s in a better place,” or “His spirit is all around you,” were not interpreted as words of comfort by our respondents, often instead serving as a reminder of their minority status in society. A participant in Hug an Atheist recalled a particular exchange after her husband passed away, “I got a lot of – ‘He’s in a better place,’ and I was like, ‘He was a healthy 32-year-old man in the prime of his life. He was in a pretty good place!’ We had just gotten married, and he had just had a nephew. Things were really good and he was killed.”

In the same vein, our respondents expressed not knowing how to interact in a way that was comforting to religious friends and family coping with loss that was authentic to their worldview. Stephanie explains, “An atheist can’t lie and utter the immortal words: ‘She/he will be in my prayers.’ It would be untrue. It would come across as disingenuous sympathy.” Both the (un)intentional denial of their nonreligious worldviews and lacking a way to communicate support that is both effective and authentic to all involved made social interactions unwelcome and/or upsetting. Here, we see what seems to be an interactional divide across worldviews. As these groups fundamentally interpret death in differing, or even opposing ways, interacting around this topic becomes difficult.

#### 4.5.2 “Here’s to the Hereafter: Last Respects at...Happy Hour?”

As religious toolkits for death are insufficient for the nonreligious, new meanings, understandings, and practices are created, often in times of distress. Those who were previously religious acknowledged this can be a difficult process, sometimes made more so when additional hurdles are present. Fazzino experienced this first hand in the field, despite being disassociated with formal religion for 10 years. When Erich, a 30 something-year old “baconist”<sup>1</sup> passed

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<sup>1</sup> The United Church of Bacon is a legal “church” that utilizes the cultural “bacon craze” phenomena to challenge all abuses of religious privilege and put an end to atheophobia and secularphobia. The organization was started in 2010 by celebrity magician Penn Jillette and a group of his friends, which included John Whiteside. UCB claims no tax exempt status and pay their taxes. By “baconist,” we mean those who are members of the United Church of Bacon.

away, she was challenged by not knowing the norms of an atheist funeral. Consider the follow excerpt from her field notes:

The memorial took place on a cloudy afternoon on the first Saturday in March. I bought a new dress from Ann Taylor because what does one wear to a memorial service being held at the VFW (a veterans' organization and bar)? For all intents and purposes, this was a funeral...a funeral at a bar. I had two choices – casual or classy. I chose the latter. It was the wrong choice. Many in attendance wore their Church of Bacon t-shirt to pay their respects to Erich. Many said he would have wanted it that way. When I saw David Silverman, President of American Atheists, in a suit, I let out a sigh of relief. What the heck was the protocol for an atheist funeral anyway? I didn't know what to expect before I got here and I don't know what to expect now. I'll just follow everyone else's example and go get a drink at the bar.

Erich's funeral was held in a bar, which was unusual to Fazzino initially. While it seemed this space would meet our needs, that would not be the case. Consider, for example, the following conversation between Prophet John Whiteside (veteran, Atheism advocate, and founder of The Church of Bacon -an Athiest organization based in Las Vegas) and Fazzino about the memorial service lead by Whiteside, which Fazzino attended for professional *and* personal reasons, as a member of the group:

When we [United Church of Bacon] had the memorial service for Erich, the bartender told David Silverman and I that they triple booked the room. When she said we triple-booked the room I said, "Oh, I don't believe this. Look, let me tell you something. This is an atheist...you got to close the bar. You got to get these people out of here. This is an atheist funeral and I'm going to talk bad about the military. I'm going to talk bad about Erich's experiences in the military. This is a horrible idea." People from the birthday party using the room before us refused to vacate so we could have Erich's memorial. We waited around for about an hour, and finally Erich's mom comes over and says, "Let's just do it." And so we started. I was very upset...extremely upset the whole time. David did a good job, and Erich's mom did a wonderful job, but I was upset. I was mad! I started blocking the door to the meeting room with my foot, so they're going around the long way to get more beers and they're knocking over flowers. They're doing all kinds of things. Somebody at the front door, and I don't know who it was said, "Would you mind waiting until the memorial service is over?" And the guy said no. That pissed him off. Here we were being civil even though they refused to leave. This is Church of Bacon's first memorial, and they are being disrespectful. Well, that guy from our group made a comment about this guy's girlfriend, then he cold-cocked (i.e. punched) him. The other guy cold-cocked our guy. He made a comment and the reaction of this drunk guy was to cold-cock him. His girlfriend said, "Are you going to let him say that to me?" And then he cold-cocked him. It was my first memorial and there's a fight outside the bar. After the funeral was over, the guy who ran the place, who by the way was just reeking of alcohol...in fact, he's one of the guys who was stumbling around and knocked over flowers. He comes up to us and says, "Yeah, I'm VFW," I

think he says, “I’m the president. I’m really sorry about this, but I couldn’t get my friends out of the room.”

Whether or not those attending the party refused to vacate out of a sense of antagonism towards atheists is unknown. It may be that a bar is simply a difficult place to hold a funeral ceremony. This in itself indicates a lack of institutionalized end-of-life culture, as location and dress were tenuous. Instead, we argue this experience was an outcome of not having a formal space for the atheists to express their grief. As the nonreligious formalize and institutionalize components of the American funeral, such as spaces, presiders, norms for dress, the potential for confusion, disorganization, and conflict with other groups seems likely to decrease.

## 4.6 Organizing Secular Death and Bereavement

If necessity is the mother of invention, then theist dominance on the American way of death seems to be motivating the creation of new cultural forms. Consider this Tweet from atheist comic Keith Lowell Jensen, “When I die, cremate me, put the ashes in walnut shells, close them, and give them to my friends so they can say “Well that’s Keith in a nutshell.” Whether or not this statement is meant literally, we can see the potential for flexibility, creativity, and even humor towards nonreligious death. Without the prescriptive aspects of religious ritual, individuals are able to not only choose once-deviant options such as cremation, but to add personal touches to their death, for the satisfaction of themselves and their bereaved loved ones. The loosening of religion’s dominance of death opens a space for a personal agency at the end of life.

### 4.6.1 Nonreligious Crutches

In “Grief Beyond Belief”, a website intended to provide the nonreligious a space to support one another online, Rebecca Hensler writes:

When you’re engaged in mutual grief support you discover that the emotions you’re having that make you feel crazy are very common and so it really was helpful to find out that I wasn’t the only person who was going around the long way in the market ‘cause I didn’t want to walk down the baby aisle and things like that. Or who couldn’t cope with seeing baby clothes. We do have to accept that someone we love is gone forever. They’re not coming back. We can carry them forward in memory. We can let our own actions be motivated



by our emotions about that person or by what that person taught us. There are a lot of things that we can do that are comforting ...

Nonreligious people are beginning to build their own cultural toolkit to find that comfort. As the retelling of the memorial at the bar indicates, the nonreligious require spaces in which their death practice may proceed uninterrupted. We found the most evidence for the creation of spaces online, in the form of message boards. These forums were created out of a frustration with the ongoing use of religious crutches in other grief and bereavement support boards. Spaces like Grief beyond Belief indicate the value of religion-free discourse for the nonreligious. They offer the following statement of purpose: “The aim of Grief Beyond Belief is to facilitate peer-to-peer grief support for atheists, Humanists, and other Freethinkers by providing spaces free of religion, spiritualism, mysticism, and evangelism in which to share sorrow and offer the comfort of rational compassion.”<sup>2</sup> These virtual places provide a space in which the nonreligious worldview is normative, which counters the Christian-centrism they risk facing in mainstream end of life culture.

As previously mentioned, social norms at the end of life contain aspects of religious symbolism and cultural meaning which are of minimal condolence to the nonreligious in even the best of situations. To move around these impediments, the nonreligious require “crutches,” or what we have referred to as tools through which to express and represent their worldview. We find that a common method for constructing these crutches is through the secularizing of religious crutches. In the following examples, the form of the crutch is borrowed from conventional forms while the content is replaced with nonreligious meaning<sup>3</sup>. This is consistent with prior research on the topic (Engelke 2015; Garces-Foley 2003).

The traditional religious funeral in the West routinely contains elements of eulogizing the deceased. For the nonreligious, this eulogy will be meaningful if the content of the eulogy aligns with their worldview. Discussion of a religious afterlife or being “in a better place” will hold little comfort. Instead, nonreligious individuals craft eulogies from the cultural symbolism that they find meaningful, often drawing on scientific knowledge. The “Eulogy from a Physicist” by Aaron Freeman draws on the knowledge of the physical universe to explain how our energy is not destroyed upon death, but goes on existing in some other form. Here, a sort of after-death-longevity is defined from within the accepted scientific

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2 <http://www.griefbeyondbelief.org/about-us/mission-statement/>.

3 <http://openlysecular.org/toolkits-and-resources/>.

worldview, intending to bring comfort and peace to those for whom religion is unable to sooth. While science has not conquered death, as is hoped for by some, it is providing resources for making-meaning, as the principle of energy conversion serves as the basis for this particular eulogy. Moreover, much of the meaning-making that brings the nonreligious consolation comes in actually celebrating the life of the loved one, not mourning their death.

Another outlet for these creating and disseminating crutches is the Openly Secular Coalition (OS). OS is a national campaign headed by Todd Stiefel from the Stiefel Freethought Foundation, which aims to eliminate anti-secular stigma by normalizing nonbelief. The coalition has several tool kits on a variety of topics for different demographics, and have added two additional resources, created by the authors, on managing and coping with death. These toolkits contain general information for the specific audience they are intended for, such as lists of resources, readings, complicated grief warning signs, and a host of other content, intended to provide support at the end of life. These resources contain things as simple as the types of phrases the nonreligious will find comforting and the types of phrases they will not, on the basis of their worldview.

Finally, the book *Funerals Without God* by Jane Wynne Wilson provides insight into presiding over nonreligious ceremonies. The main purpose of this booklet is help with end-of-life service planning for bereaved loved ones, as well as to help humanists thinking of going through training to become secular celebrants. Another group who may find parts of it useful are funeral directors, primarily when the family of the deceased has no wish to play an active role. By creating and disseminating this resource (Griswold 2003), Wilson has added another symbolic crutch to the nonreligious end-of-life toolkit (Swidler 1986).

These crutches are important for those who preside over death ceremonies, as they accomplish the necessary aspects of the ritual while presenting content that is meaningful to the nonreligious. Based on Fazzino's field notes (as described above concerning attire), normative expectations at atheist funerals are somewhat tenuous. While this provides a certain freedom of expression, this can also increase the potential for uncertainty at an inopportune time there are already high levels of stress and anxiety due to the loss of a loved one. Cultural crutches provide the often taken-for-granted schema of social interaction. With crutches in-hand, those who preside over nonreligious ceremonies have greater tools and resources with which to fulfill their social requirements.

## 5 Conclusion

Our research indicates that, in America, religious cultural tools are of little use to the nonreligious when it comes to managing the end of life. Furthermore, we have seen how differing interpretations of death problematizes and politicizes this already difficult aspect of life. This highlights the importance of creating secular death management infrastructure that is explicitly nonreligious. Such infrastructure will allow nonreligious individuals greater agency, with more resources readily available, and more cultural crutches waiting to be implemented, augmented and/or adapted for personal use. Our findings indicate that the nonreligious are in the process of expanding their cultural toolkits for dealing with death, making them better equipped to confront and cope with death.

While death at the macro level of society has been secularized in a number of ways, through processes of rationalization, medicalization, and the professionalization of the end-of-life, the interaction at and around the death remains potentially contentious, as members of varying (and at times, opposing) worldviews attempt to ritualize death in accordance with their worldview. Secular organizing has already provided a far greater cache of resources than existed even a decade or two ago. The problem of mortality can be thought of as yet another “terrain of resistance” (Routledge 1996, 517), in which an interwoven web of contested meanings, symbols, and ideologies between the religious and nonreligious have politicized the end of life, situating the nonreligious and their struggle for meaning, recognition, and resources within the domain of “cultural politics” (Buechler 2000). On one hand, the lack of an institutionalized death culture affords the nonreligious some freedom to manage death however they see fit, which is often appealing to the nonreligious with their strongly-held secular values of authenticity and individualism. On the other hand, recent efforts to establish a nonreligious death culture by the broader secular movement may unmask a historical legacy of cultural imperialism, as their end-of-life needs have previously been rendered invisible.

As nonreligious end-of-life-tools enter the wider cultural realm, they bring with them the potential to practice death and dying in new ways. If we imagine those instances in which our respondents encountered religion negatively at the end of life, these nonreligious tools bring the potential to overcome negative encounters with theism and to practice death in ways the nonreligious find meaningful. While palliative medicine searches for definitions of a “good death”, we advocate that an equally important concept is the notion of “equitable death”, or equal representation and access to resources at the end of life for all people. Our data indicates that the nonreligious often face an additional burden at death

on the basis of their nonreligion. If our goal is equitable death and dying, then the nonreligious require access to the same cultural crutches which are currently available to religious individuals. We see nonreligious organizing at the end of life as an attempt to carve out a space in American culture for themselves and others who share their worldview, so that when others come to find themselves in similar situations, they have more resources at their disposal. As the nonreligious end-of-life-toolkit is expanded, we hope that nonreligious individuals will increasingly be able to find the resources they need during those difficult times.

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